

## Through the Mirror of Translation: Aishan Yu's Recent Works

A small stream of water is coming out from a tap, and yet, a comb with static electricity bends its trajectory of flow. The image in Aishan's *I=0.999999999999999... (I)* is almost a photogram—from transparent to milky-white, the gradient tones of the running water, the tap, the comb, and the hand are seemingly the result of this simple science experiment being recorded directly without a camera onto a piece of light-sensitive paper. However, traces of pencil dust dirtying the white paper on its edge elicits the truth, that it is a drawing of a black-and-white photograph inside a vintage children's book. This is where Aishan's translation starts. The translation is intermedial, crossing the boundary between photography and drawing and yet proceeds back to the photographic effect of negative imaging.<sup>1</sup> The slow process that this highly detailed drawing demands bears the same qualities as the normally lengthy procedure of translation, both as means of configuring transformations within the mind's eye and the subject's phenomenological understanding of life.

Drawing calls out the unconscious, the ghost image embedded in the artist's inner self. In *I=0.999999999999999... (I)*, Aishan's longstanding interest in the phenomenon of shadow is played out, albeit unconsciously, in this photogram-like image—for the physical essence of a photogram is exactly the interplay between light and the shadows of the objects upon the photosensitive surface. Only when the pencil dust smudges out the dazzle of light from its edge will the viewer's mind be pulled back from the phantasmagoria of this eye-deceiving trick. Operating somewhere in-between the almost right and not quite, this uncanny drawing turns the scientific truth into an enigma.

Nevertheless, the artist reconsiders the postwar strategy of using found imagery as an anti-subjective act and questions again the concept of originality by using drawing—usually considered as a highly subjective means of art making—to mimic found photographs through a process of what she calls 'translation'. 'I have to run my hand over these old photographs in order to understand them.' For Aishan, drawing is like gently touching the surface of her object. Early photographs were unable to present the original scene in full due to the long exposure time and other technological imperfections of the camera, but it is precisely this blurred, colourless surface that invokes the artist's desire to 'touch'—through the intensity of her gaze. Drawing is a bodily experience: 'as I draw, my pencil touches the paper, so does my hand.'<sup>2</sup> Unlike painting, drawing is indeed a kind of creative experience that is far more intimate and personal for Aishan. It is a site of ceaseless phenomenological

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'intermedial translation' means translating across media. See Mieke Bal and Joanne Morra, 'Editorial: Acts of Translation', in *Journal of Visual Culture*, April 2007, p 7.

<sup>2</sup> See James Elkins's email exchange with John Berger in *Berger on Drawing*, ed. Jim Savage, Ireland: Occasional Press, 2005, p 106.

interchange between the object of encounter and the drawing subject via the intense gaze. Meticulously weaving her image, the artist makes an autobiographical record of her discoveries from the process of copying, and as such, the drawing becomes a powerful cure for the defect of distance.

While the artist travels back in time, setting up a dialogue with the ghost subject within these histories by means of her replicas, she makes a mark on the edge of the black-and-white imagery as if to reclaim the presence of herself. These coloured marks don't lament distance, instead, they are traces of the here and now. They function as footnotes, at once adding information to the imagery at the centre and interrupting the viewer's reading of the work. The marks signify the author-translator's agency within the work. The semiotic structure between the marks and the translated imagery mirrors the act of translation as a hermeneutic and experiential process. The marks operate within the works as 'parergon', supplementing the represented photograph but never being part of it.<sup>3</sup> After Rousseau's division of the drawing (the delineation the contours) as life-giving part in the work and colour as a supplement, Kant adds to this notion by pointing out the frames of paintings as *parergon*—a kind of marginal existence that marks the limit between the intrinsic and the extrinsic.<sup>4</sup> Any framing device in a painting, be it the curtain, the drapery, or a window, can be considered as parergon. Hence, the green mark that seemingly imitates the trajectory of a ball hitting a wall and bouncing back ( $I=0.9999999999999999... (4)$ ) or the blue mark that seems to mimic the shape of the distracted water stream turned up-side-down ( $I=0.9999999999999999... (1)$ ), are running their parergonal function of the frame.

Sometimes the mark functions as a dagger, putting at risk the perfection of the realistic drawings. In the  $I=0.9999999999999999... (3)$ , a woman is gazing into a mirror as if trapped in this pensive moment of the ever-shifting interchange between the mirror image and herself. However, a hint of red paint startlingly invading this image like a dagger's blade, threatens to tear apart the drawn image's slow motion and to break the spell that the mirror image casts on the enchanted female subject. Likewise, the neon 'marks' that are shining almost obscenely at the very edge of the exhibition space are a pure shock to the spectator. They are like a joke, so detached from the greyish tone of the show that the viewer feels lost when discovering their abrupt existence at the corner. The sense of disorientation is a temporal one, resulting from a dramatic shift in the viewing experience of the nostalgic drawings after historical prints to the razzle-dazzle of the neon lights that register modern times. As

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<sup>3</sup> For more on parergon, see Jacques Derrida, 'the Parergon', in *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), pp. 3-41.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Owens, "Detachment from the 'Parergon', in *October*, Vol. 9, 1979, p 45.

such, the tension between the two layers of temporalities of the quick marks and the slow drawings grows outside of the frame into the exhibition space.

But are the marks really ‘quick’? They may have actually come after the long meditative process of drawing, as the result of this pensive accumulation. Aishan’s art asks us to interrogate the problem of translation as ‘ $1 = 0.9999999999999999\dots$ ’, an act of crossing boundaries via the gaps, the fissures, and the interstices that are situated in between. Especially in the process of cultural translation for the artist as a migrant inhabiting a non-native cultural environment, the uncertainty of whether meaning has been successfully conveyed and transferred always comes with communication. The marks bear the struggle and weight of translation. Aishan’s work is an analogy mapped by this specific method of human communication. It is also an effort to bridge art with an unexplainable quality and the laws of nature proven with varying degrees of mathematical rigour. The painting *Translation I* may have been created to be a mirror image of its drawing counterpart or vice versa, however, something is lost midway. Aishan’s work is a signifying structure: after all, everything is bracketed under the umbrella of  $1 = 0.9999999999999999\dots$