

unpack my heart

reflections on my practice

annalisa urti

thesis supervisor:

natasha soobramanien

second reader: simon pummell

the piet-zwart institute

master of arts in fine art and design:

lens-based media

I know you will be angry at me for speaking to you like this in public
but you left me with no other choice.

Sharon Hayes, *Revolutionary Love: I Am Your Worst Fear, I Am Your Best Enemy*, 2008

introduction: a love letter

Amore mio,

I know this one will catch you off guard. It's been a while since the last time I wrote to you. I guess I needed some space, a little piece of mind I could call *my own*, after the overwhelming writing experience that invested me from the day we parted. Now that I emerge from it for a second, I realize writing to you doesn't feel as familiar as I expected. I wrote about you so much that I simply exhausted your mystery and you slowly became a projection of my desire rather than your own person. We both underwent a metamorphosis in writing. I transformed, too. Every word I wrote undermined my identity and put in crisis the laws of the world as I knew it. I thought I lost everything but the words I couldn't help myself from writing. I composed a myriad of missives with them. They were addressed to you, to my mother, to God. I never planned on sending them, I was just trying to give a place to the pressing **urgency** of writing about us. In doing so, I hoped that perhaps, one day, I would have looked at it with a deeper understanding. I hoped that, maybe, if I didn't resist it, the very same overabundant writing experience that threatened to eat me alive would have given myself back to me anew.

And so I wrote obsessively in my notebooks every single day from August 2019 to August 2020 to the point that I grew obsessed with writing. Things go round and round. I now see more than mere obsession in what used to be my daily practice. Maybe, a religious aspect moving alongside it. I wrote the same words

over and over again just as the faithful repeat the same formula when they pray the Rosary: they hold a grain of the necklace between their fingers and repeat a precise sequence of prayers five times. The Rosary is composed of sixty prayers in total. When one prayer is over, the fingers slowly move to the next grain until the Rosary is finished. Somebody told me it's a powerful prayer for peace. It's almost a paradox, the idea of a multitude of people restlessly praying for peace. It suggests that peace isn't just something to *ask* and *look* for but also to *work* for. I found that writing, alongside any other act of creation, helps to gain **critical distance** from what inspired the same act. I can't tell whether it's fully appropriate to compare critical distance to peace, but critical distance could be the initial step that leads to the second one.

Word by word, I created a place from which I could communicate and create repetitively as in a plea to God. I moulded your absence on paper. I gave it a register and structure. It felt like mourning. I was grieving for you. The more this feeling spread, the stronger I wrote. I found joy in that pervading act of creation and decided to give up any resistance to it. The reality of you and what you meant to me was charged with a significance I could not help to respond to. *Writing* was my response.

In November, I started selecting some of the missives I wrote in my notebooks, translated them from Italian to English, and named them *Lacrime d'inchostro* (Tears of Ink). The rudiments for the creation of a book project had been set. The title comes from the lyrics of the rap song you sent to me on that August night of 2019. I was lying on the broken, squeaky bed against a wall of the living room at my grandmother's place in the South of Italy when I got your message. It was your way to say *goodnight*. I stole the title of my book project from the only thing you left behind when you walked away.

As the selection of translated missives grew, I became more aware of the personal and intimate nature of those texts each passing second. I realized I had never written anything so revealing before, especially intending to *share it*. I wasn't sure those writings could have ever been accessible to anybody else other than me:

could anyone stranger to the story that once saw us *tight* one another *relate to it*? Or was I doomed to tripping over self-referentiality? In other words, was it all **just** about **me**?

Trying to find answers to these questions, I resorted to the *visual language*: in January 2020, I started interrogating my writings with the medium of *video* and so *Domani ti dimenticherò meglio* (Tomorrow I will forget you better) was born. As for the project of *Tears of Ink*, it was an attempt to open up that intimate material by provoking it, this time with images.

Translating represented the biggest challenge I faced, although it became a fundamental method for the development of my research. To make the original unsent letters understandable to the English speaking community of my class in Rotterdam, I had to depart from the comfort of *our mother tongue*. It wasn't an easy *shift*: the real-life experience that inspired the original missives was decoded in Italian. Translating it to English gave me the impression of *hacking it*. Suddenly, I looked at our native language as I never did before, trying to find a weak spot in its security system, my security system, to break in.

If this repetitive translating process brought a broader audience closer to the project, it is true that it also pushed you away from it, away from me. I remember vividly when you asked me over a message never to make any work about you. I promised I wouldn't have. As obvious as it is, I didn't keep my promise. At least, I didn't keep it long enough. As you removed yourself from the dialogue we began when we met, I became an orphan of an interlocutor. But I still had full rivers of words to share, deep abysses of sentences to explore. If I couldn't navigate them with you directly, perhaps I would have found a way to do so with what you meant to me. I guess staring at the void of your absence was simply not enough.

Isa

chapter one: an obsessive writing machine

I believe a little man is spying on me from my phone. The more I browse the deeper we get to know each other. We're pretty similar, this little fellow and I, predictable creatures at our best. We never minded being predictable. He knows what I like best and does his best to make my navigation as smooth as possible. Surfing the world of customized suggestions that he creates for me every day is like wearing a cozy, warm blanket. And I like the feeling of being home.

He writes about me. He writes about me, constantly. He takes note of each decision I make, however big or small, without any discrimination. Every little thing seems crucial to him. He keeps a record of all the pages I access while browsing and the time I spend watching the same digital ob-

ject. I am his only interest. There's a certain tenderness embedded in his obsession with me. Curiously enough for such a quirky element, he's also a shy character. He won't ever dare to ask me what I'd like to see directly – I think that would make him feel terribly exposed. Only, he notes down every single move I make when we interface each other and deciphers me as if I was the most captivating riddle of all time.

One night, I was having trouble falling asleep. The man in my phone thought he'd keep me company and timidly suggested we watch a video together. It was from TED Talks and had the cheesiest title ever seen: *The art of being yourself*, by Caroline McHugh. Obviously, I watched it all. In the first ten minutes, an elegant, slender mid-

dle-aged woman with a marked Scottish accent talked about the first time she reflected herself into a **true mirror**. A true mirror, or non-reversing mirror, presents its subjects as they would be seen *from* the mirror. In other words, looking at one's image in a non-reversed mirror would feel similar to looking at oneself from someone else's eyes.

As I was listening to the woman speaking, an image of my childhood came back to mind: I was sitting at my grandmother's pale-yellow kitchen table in a working-class district in the South of Milan. The table was almost entirely covered with piles of fabrics, an ochre tape measure, and a ridiculously long wooden ruler. At the other head of the table, right below the window, a heavy menacing sewing machine. Under the table, a thick heap of textiles and boxes. There was a vague though persistent smell of camphor mixed with that of the food in the air. I must have been no older than 5 years old. I was observing my hunched grandmother setting the edge of the table for dinner. Then, I observed her serving food. I pondered her hands, so similar to tree roots. Then I glanced at

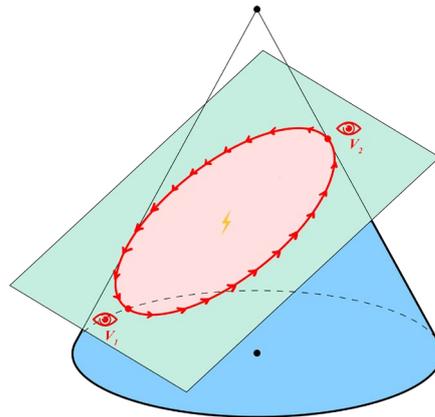
mine resting at the cold-iron border of the table, frowning. As she finally sat, I observed the light of the lamp refracting on her white hair in imperceptible rainbows, the severe high forehead crossed by fine wrinkles, her nose, her lips, her light green eyes. I pondered her figure as I pondered the objects that populated the room, free of judgement. She became an object of my observation; I became a minute purely *observing machine*. I lived it as a revelation, the revelation of the eye: I was present with her in the room, and I could *see* her. It was like discovering her anew in perception. And as my eyes were running all over my grandmother's figure eating her meal, I wished with all my being to know how *she saw me*: was the light of the lamp drawing rainbows in my hair as well? Did my hands recall an element from the natural world as hers? Did my skin have texture such as the fabrics'?

I thought my grandmother's perception of me only belonged to her and her alone and longed to squeeze myself into it. It was nothing I could have found in a common mirror. A mirror has no perception or thinking about one's appearance. It doesn't look

for resemblance, for it has no memory of the world it reflects. It just reflects. What I desired so heartily was my grandmother's secret key of reading of my appearance. Even more: the *feeling* of looking at me *from the outside*, as if in a true mirror. That possibility carried a certain excitement within. In the TED talk mentioned above, McHugh claimed that facing the non-reversing mirror for the first time was one of the most disorienting experiences of her life. "Disorientation" is a term that would be commonly perceived as negative. It recalls a realm of confusion and loss.

The image of herself McHugh found in the true mirror wasn't as reassuring as the one she used to meet every day after washing her face in the morning. Looking at herself as with another's eyes undermined what she thought she knew about her own face. But what's fundamental about this phenomenological crisis is that she couldn't have found her true image anyway else. Confronting the true mirror meant looking *for* herself, not *at* herself (McHugh C, 2013). I picture this dynamic as an ellipse where two confronting subjects coincide with its

extreme vertexes. One must mysteriously depart from oneself in order to face their true nature.



I stared at the little man in my phone in awe, considering the amount of information this little one must have collected in time to learn how to read me so well. A consistency and methodology such as these could easily be defined as obsessive and disturbing. In a way, they were. But there was also a certain romanticism to it. Here, obsession and disturb were the vehicle towards a deeper comprehension of my own character.

The little man in my phone looked at me as if I were really getting somewhere with all that thinking and remembering of mine. He was not the

only one who got captured in a never-ending flux of words, he knew that much. I myself had written and written and written to the point where eating and sleeping became just pauses from writing. There was a need, an urgency at the core of all that writing I produced last year which resonated with the concept of the true mirror.

By writing, one looks *for* oneself, not *at* oneself.

chapter two: an overwhelming writing experience

Tears of Ink was born in August 2019 without me having a clue. I spent a week at my family house in the South of Italy and I would have gone back to Milan the day after. I was sitting alone outside of a bar right in front of the promenade. My black notebook was staring at me from the table beside a can of Lemon Soda. The wind was gentle, the crashing of the waves subtle. My golden cross necklace was timidly swaying back and forth underneath my chin. Images, conversations, and feelings from the past week were gathering behind my eyes. I had just said goodbye to my love. A few minutes earlier, she ran outside the hotel she was working at and crossed the parking lot to kiss me one last time. It was so rapid I almost didn't realize it happened. She did not look at me but turned back and rushed away. She had

left as quick as she entered my life. I stood alone in front of the hotel owner's Golf under the fig tree in silence, then I slowly moved to the bar I was now sitting in. I opened my notebook, grabbed the pen, and wrote a letter to my grandmother:

22/8/19

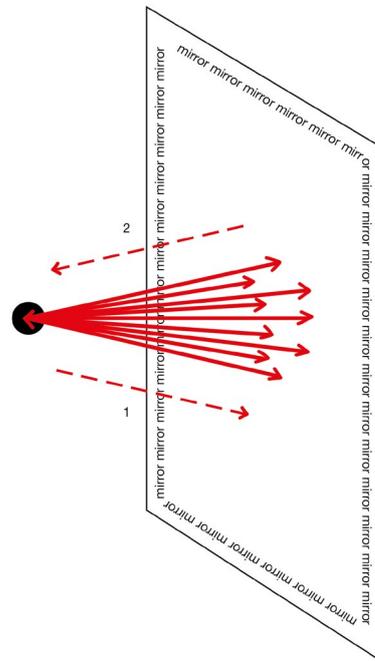
18:01

I wonder, what did you think of me when I decided not to resist her anymore?

Perhaps you turned your face away from us in surprise, your heart swelled with breathlessness as you didn't know what would have become of me, too. I wonder if you didn't suspend your love upon me when I sunk my face in the groove of her neck, in that spot where the heart beats. I wonder if you didn't withhold your grace upon my life until the day that I'll repent for all this. [...].

As I was writing the letter, I felt a third party had just shown up: a *reader*. A virtual reader as immaterial as present reading from over my shoulders. It was a presence I never experienced before in writing, especially not in journaling. Keeping a diary has its foundation in the act of writing to oneself. It is like observing one's image while having a monologue in front of a mirror: even though the eyes cover every inch of its flat surface, a mirror can't do anything but returning the gaze to the sender, unaltered. The words of the monologue won't please, scratch or upset its nature as they would do with an audience. Unshakable, a mirror will only mimic the reflected subject. However, writing a letter *to* someone brings a whole new dynamic to the table. It welcomes the reality of another, who can do everything but simply reflect the object of their observation. They will absorb the other's message, process it, and communicate their response. Above all, writing a letter to somebody different from oneself opens up to the possibility of receiving an *answer*. Thus, the sender prepares themselves to *listen* and accepts the risks of an equal dialogue. This way, writing is not so different from pray-

ing. The faithful too recite their prayers to God and try to catch the signs of his reply in their everyday life. Perhaps, it is for this very reason that while I was writing the first letter of *Tears of Ink* on the 22nd of August 2019, its recipient naturally turned from my grandmother to God, the highest reader.



The mode of address of the love letter and the rise of the reader in the dynamics of my writing created a space to look *for* myself in the process of grieving for the end of my love story. It didn't matter how overwhelming the feelings described in the letter

were for me; the possibility to be simply overheard helped me gaining *critical distance* from them.

I kept writing letters to different recipients in my notebooks for a year. Within those letters, I questioned what had happened over the summer like a broken record. It seemed like nothing else really mattered. It totally monopolized my attention and creative force to the point where I felt I wasn't interested in working on anything else. Nothing seemed as genuine as those writings, or as urgent.

I had never worked with material so emotionally charged before. The biggest challenge became then to open it up to an actual reader without tripping over self-referentiality. I was looking for a method, a system that would have prevented me from losing myself in the realm of sentiment. Paradoxically, constancy, repetition, and systematic obsession have paved the way.

chapter three: writing as an obsession

I came across a book. It was one of the most disturbing, provocative reading experiences I've ever had. The form of the letter adopted by the author, the poignant emotional intensity of the text, and the pervading autobiographical nature of the book hooked me. The confrontation with *Tears of Ink* was as natural as inevitable. *I Love Dick* (Kraus, C, 1997) somehow offered me that so craved external point of view on my personal research. An understanding glance from someone who had walked on a path similar to mine before.

I love Dick is a collection of love letters written by writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus to her husband's acquaintance Dick Hebdige. At the beginning of the book, Kraus had been mourning for the failure of her last 16 mm film

project *Gravity&Grace*. The fact it could not come through any festivals' selection she applied for made her feel unable to communicate, or deprived of a place from where to communicate. It's in this voice-less state that she first met Dick at a sushi bar in Pasadena together with her husband Sylvère Lotringer. The instant connection to Dick awakened a lively creative force in her she shared with Sylvère. The spouses started writing letters to Dick confiding their stories, their reflections about their marriage, their doubts regarding their careers, and most profound fears and desires as if Dick could really *listen*. The idea was to make an art project of some sort but mostly to keep that renewed creative force roll with no limitations.

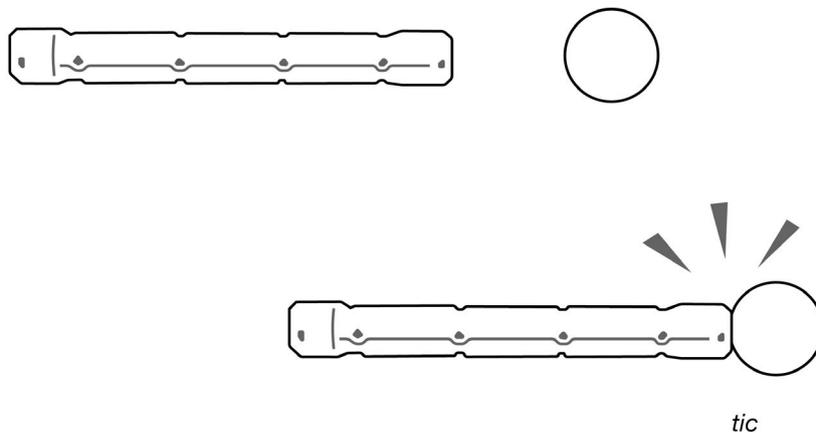
Dick is the recipient of each letter

and an omniscient reader. Even though Chris and Sylvère tried to reach out to Dick in real life to make him acknowledge the project, he won't ever be as responsive as Kraus wished. But Dick's reluctance to actually step into it only pointed out that he was not the real foundation of the project. Only the spark that lit up the fuse. Sylvère seems to come to this conclusion earlier than Kraus as we can see in one of the commentary-pieces that space out the letters:

S: Chris, I already told you he wouldn't call. [...] We have taken the decision for him. Deciding on his thoughts. [...] In a sense Dick isn't necessary. He has more to say by not saying anything and maybe he's aware of it. [...] By not calling, he's playing right into his role (Kraus C, *I Love Dick*, 1997, p. 43).

And I wonder what that *role* is.

Can it be possible that the connection Kraus felt to Dick functioned as a magnet to which all the dormant-real-self of the author couldn't help to respond? When I was a kid, I loved playing with Geomag magnets. It was a very popular game in Italy back in the first decade of 2000. The magnets usually came in boxes of variable dimensions and were of two types: the bars and the metal balls. The bars were charged positively at one end and negatively at the other. The metal balls were conjunctions for the bars. I remember the amazement, the vague sense of satisfaction, and the excitement that followed the moment a bar and a metal ball finally stuck together. That ravishing little phenomenon always came with the sound of a *tic*. That is how I picture the role of Dick into Kraus' project: all the magnetic charge was already there in the author



(the Geomag bars) but it is only after the meeting with Dick (the metal balls) that *building* and *creating* becomes possible. It's almost as if the author's self expanded to the erotic-intellectual connection to Dick. And although the book is a slavish transcription of real life happenings, so much soaked in biting sensuality, I have the impression that Dick was only the pretext for a journey that transcends the specificity of the author's experience. The letters are objective evidences of this journey.

Now, if Dick helped Kraus to fathom the depths of her deepest self, how was she able to gain the critical distance necessary for her very intimate writings to become *relatable*?

Letter by letter, Kraus gains a critical view of that real life experience she decided to put into words. Building and creating are key aspects of each act of creation and they were surely predominant in the overflowing writing experience Kraus got caught in. But there was also another aspect just as radical and fundamental as the other two embedded in each letter written to Dick: *destroying*. Anna

Watkins Fisher, Assistant Professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan, wrote about the **parasitical** aspect present in Kraus' work. She speaks of it as a subversive "manic maneuver" able to crash the pre-imposed system of patriarchy that sees women as subordinate to men (Watkins Fisher A, 2012). Although she frames her discussion from a feminist perspective, I find her point of view extremely transposable and helpful to understand the act of destroying as vehicle to gain critical distance. She writes:

By Kraus's hand, the proper name *Dick* becomes *dick*, through a process that Derrida terms *emajusculation*, his play on the emasculation of the *majuscule* that is the capital letter (Gaston 2005, 111). It is through this *capital punishment*, the castrating force of writing as a kind of cut reflected in the gesture of *the letter*; that, in Kraus's work, *Dick* is separated from his personality, leaving behind only *the dick* – the phallus that is the paragon of masculinity and vulgar slang used to name its most (in) sensitive member" (Watkins Fisher A, *Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle*, WSQ, Vol. 40, No. 1/2, VIRAL 2012, p. 226).

By attacking Dick as an alien parasite, even privacy-wise, Kraus breaks the barriers between reality and fiction. In this realm of *fictionalized reality* Dick goes through a process of depersonalization. It's as if Kraus' letters devitalized Dick's system to invigorate hers. As the author will declare herself: "Dear Dick, [...] I guess in a way I've killed you. You've become Dear Diary..." (Kraus C, *I Love Dick*, 1997, p. 74).

If we have identified the act of destroying as a path to gain critical distance, thus to create, we still haven't figured out the weapon by means of which such destruction was possible. My thinking here is the literary strategy of *oversharing*. Kraus prose is unforgiving and rich of so much detail it forces the reader into a voyeuristic act. She *writes-with-no-resistance* about each and every aspect of her relationship with Dick. Love, obsession, desire, and sex are over-described, over-processed within a register so similar to the spoken that doesn't know any sense of prudishness. By abandoning herself to language so shamelessly and generously, Kraus breaks down the barrier between writer and read-

er. **Intersubjectivity**, that product of shared experiences, knowledge, understandings, and expectations (Oxford Reference) is finally established. Throughout the author's words and her choice of rejecting conventional genre patterns to live up to, Kraus founds the most intimate relationship with the reader. This way, her writings become relatable.

I read *I Love Dick* keeping these questions in mind: what did the author do of this very intimate material? What literary strategies did she undertake to open it up to the reader? Did the book cross the threshold of self-referentiality? Or was it able to overcome it? The same questions that raised while working on *Tears of Ink*. *I Love Dick* became my friend, an invasive and quirky friend, for it called me out and question the roots of my own writing project as a true friend would have done.

But if in Kraus' book the literary strategy of writing-with-no-resistance opened the way to intersubjectivity and critical distance, *Tears of Ink* went under a further process: that of **translation**.

chapter four:

translation processes

in my practice

Tears of Ink was the first project of what would have become a cohesive and coherent body of work. The same life experience I first tried to catch on paper further transformed each time I revisited it, or questioned it, as in the closest of dialogues. Its development could be seen as a story of *migration*: from the land of intimate perception to that of writing; from the solid materiality of the notebooks first written in Italian to the later English translation saved as a Word document on my laptop's memory; from the aesthetic experience offered by the texts-as-text to their rendering in video. At every stage of this journey, I had the impression the life experience at the root of my latest work *understood itself deeper*. Through the open confrontation with the reality of different languages, *verbal* and *visual*, I gained a critical point

of view on that very same experience. The key factor for the whole metamorphic process to happen, the vital in-between each phase, is the **act of translation**. Translating, adopted as a systematic method in the development of my research, breached the hermetic intimacy of what was only accessible to me through memory at first.

As mentioned above, the earliest translation to which *Tears of Ink* was subjected, the first great migration, was from real-life experience to text. A text in Italian, to be precise. The shapeless cloud of thoughts in which I was innerly wondering, finally inhabited the space of my black-Moleskine-notebooks. Reading them back was like confronting another being able to listen, see, and speak. The pale space of the page functioned as an enormous

flat ear capable of catching the subtlest vibrations of my heart. The fine lines printed on each page were the eyes through which the notebooks observed the emotions hidden behind my facial expressions. And the thick minuscule handwriting each page was covered with was the diary's voice. This primary act of translation was the first step towards the conquering of a public dimension of the project. If it had existed exclusively on private terms first, it found a new external body to confront me with now. Thus, translation is not to be intended as a mere reproductive – usually pejorative of the original work – process. I speak of translating as a *highly transformative act*. In *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer. Theory, Practice, Activism* edited by Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl (2017), Michela Baldo, teaching fellow in Translation Studies at the University of Birmingham, writes about translation as a *subversive linguistic phenomenon* able to decenter a pre-imposed consolidated order (Baldo M, 2017). In this perspective, translation appears as a matter of *processing* rather than simply registering the given – or original – information. What was looking at me from my di-

aries was not the mechanic record of the mourning process I was going through after being separated from my love, but rather a reprocessing of the same on paper. In reprocessing, there might be some **loss**, or rather *diversities*. But is that loss even a limit to the development of a work?

Although I read overabundant richness in this dialogue between real-life experience and its translation in writing already, that richness was now indeed still confined to the object of my notebooks. Once again, it was through translation, this time *linguistic*, that it was possible to breach the predominantly intimate dimension of my diaries to a more openly public one.

I'm now going back in time to that very first letter I wrote to my grandmother in my notebook on August 22, 2019. Back then, sitting outside that bar in front of the promenade, I didn't question the possibility to write in any other language than Italian for a second. As I had the compelling urgency to put on paper what had happened to me that summer, it felt natural to use the language my thought runs faster

with: my mother tongue. There was so much to write, and I didn't want to lose any of it. I felt my right hand was in a race against the disarming speed of my thoughts. In a way, my hand couldn't afford the luxury of thinking if it wanted to keep up with all the thinking in my head. There I was, sitting on a black plastic chair at a black plastic table, a half-empty can of Lemon Soda trembling in the wind, thoughts so vibrant bolting out of my head, my open black-Moleskine-notebook softened by the salty air, and a racing black Bic pen, which couldn't resist the urgency to write:

Cos'avrai pensato di me quando ho deciso di non resisterle più?

It had its own *music*. Those words, in that precise original order, *sounded right*. But as I kept writing in Italian after moving to the Netherlands for my studies, it was clear as daylight that I was still the only one who could access those writings. The texts *breathed in* as I opened my notebooks and *breathed out* as I closed them. That was the beginning and the end of it. As I wrote so obsessively for so long, it came a point where I had the

feeling *I*, as well as my writings, could only breathe in when I opened my diaries and breath out when I closed them. I'm not suggesting the Italian language is suffocating. I'm madly in love with it. Only, the primal intimacy that binds me to my mother tongue, added to the already intimate content of the writing material, was preventing me from gaining a critical point of view on what I expressed in writing. I was still too close to it and I was trying to gain a wider view.

In *This Little Art* (2017), Kate Briggs, writer and translator of two volumes of Roland Barthes's lecture notes at the Collège de France, analyses the relationship between an original text and its translation to another language. That linguistic difference, or *shift*, would generally be perceived as evidence of a less prestigious state, that of the translated version. This last one will thus bear a *loss*, if only for a new wording different from the original (Briggs K, 2017). What would invest a source text of that almost mystical aura Briggs describes in *This Little Art* is the impression of *necessity: necessary words in a necessary order*; "The right words in the right order, as

Virginia Woolf puts it so simply in her talk on craftsmanship, delivered over the radio in 1937. These necessary words, in this necessary order” (Briggs K, *This Little Art*, 2017, pp. 41-42). As if the reader couldn’t have the words of a book written any differently. But Briggs doesn’t seem to consider translations as only second-class-works-of-art. And neither do I. On the contrary, the seditious transformative power of translation would be a powerful tool for a greater understanding of an original work.

By translating my notebooks’ writing material from Italian to English, by changing those *necessary words* in that *necessary order* with that *necessary sound*, I questioned the core of that very necessity: what made the original words feel *right*? What were they in fact expressing in their original state? The moment I adopted translation as a method in the development of my research, a true dialogue with the project of *Tears of Ink* began.

For instance, let’s go back to the first line I wrote in Italian on that August summer evening:

Cos’avrai pensato di me quando ho deciso di non resisterle più?

After some thinking, its final translation to English would be:

I wonder, what did you think of me when I decided not to resist her anymore?

When I pondered this second version, I suddenly became aware of a characteristic peculiar to my mother tongue: the specification of the gender. In Italian, every word has a gender. We have female and male articles and pronouns; it’s possible to determine the gender of each substantive and adjective by looking at the last vowel of the word (*a, e* for female; *i, o* for male). Even when the letters in my notebooks were addressed to a *tu* (you), the gender would then be emphasized by pretty much every other element of the sentence, even the littlest, such as the pronominal particle *le* in *resisterle*. On the contrary, the English language offers the possibility to specify the

gender only if wanted. In the English version above, I could have easily substitute her with *them*, for one thing. It was an authorial decision to choose the female pronoun over *them*. Again, it was a necessity.

Translating helped me reflect on the dynamics already in place in my native language. Yes, there is a loss consequent to translation. The words change. Their ordering, their sound, their *temperature*; everything changes. But for the purpose of the development of *Tears of Ink*, that loss was as necessary as every other element in the list. Even more, it's only after I started translating some extracts from my diaries that they found a name: *Lacrime d'inchiostro* (Tears of Ink). A name, a title, an *identity*. The process of translation transformed a bunch of missives into a *project*. And now, when I read back the original version in Italian, I feel the need to change the wording again. That's because the English translation had its necessity, too. As Briggs writes in her *This Little Art*:

[...] literary translation, as a labor of changing words, and changing the order of words, is always and from the

outset wrong: its wrongness is a way of indirectly stressing and restressing the rightness of the original words in their right and original order. Translation operates, then, as a kind of vital test: an ever-renewable demonstration of the literary value of the novel in German. Which is one way of saying that literature, that quality we call the literary, simply cannot do without translation as a means of repeatedly reaffirming it (and when the words of translation matter in turn, when we feel, in a translation, that it must indeed be these necessary words in this necessary order, the translation has become literature too) (Briggs K, *This Little Art*, 2017, pp. 41-42).

Thanks to translating, I gained *critical distance*, a level equal to the project's from which to ask and wait for an answer. This is indeed what I mean by critical distance: the agility and freedom to question one's work, no matter how close to the author.

Now, it's hard to say what version of *Tears of Ink* is the original: if the Italian hidden in my notebooks or the English translation that pushes me to reconsider, reprocess, reedit the first one. I'm not sure that that does even matter. What I know is that the method

of translating activated a new circle of questions that made my research grow.

The third translation to which *Tears of Ink* was subjected is the one from the *verbal language of writing* to the *visual one of video*.

I had already mentioned how obsessed I grew with this writing material. Well, I was not exaggerating. In Rotterdam, I was the first one to get to the studio in the mornings and the last one to leave in the evenings. My fellow students found me writing at their arrival and still writing when they left. I became one thing with my notebooks. This project monopolized all my creative forces.

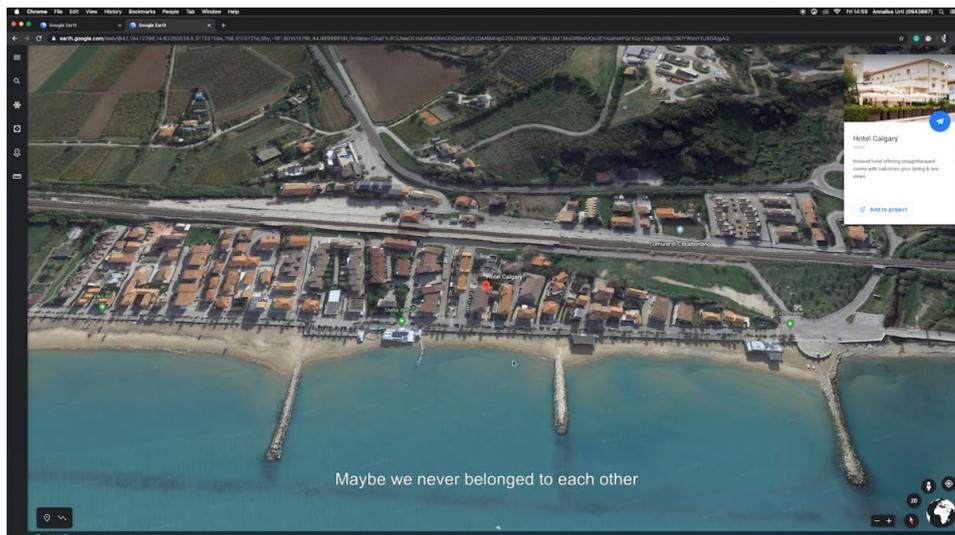
One day, I was working on the drafting of a *Reader* with two fellow students. It was about how images affect our perception and understanding of the world surrounding us. We all three ended up in front of a laptop, tinkering with Google Earth. One of my teammates was showing us all the places where she had lived since she was born: India, United States of America, Germany, Netherlands. She told us stories about her life in

each country she migrated to. A lively conversation about displacement in relation to the definition of one's identity began. It's no surprise that my thoughts instantly ran to what had totally absorbed, shaken, and challenged my own identity from the beginning of the academic year. And so, in order to reciprocate the generosity of my teammate's words, when she pulled back on the chair and moved her hands away from the keyboard, I said *let me just trace my love story for you*. I typed the town's name in and pondered its aerial view. Then I virtually wandered through the streets, the promenade, the reeds of bamboo, showing to my peers all the places that witnessed the birth of the love story I was so obsessively writing about. I had never tried to visualize it before, but the language of Google Earth seemed to be a good interlocutor in the development of my research. A new refreshing point of view. I wondered what would have happened if I used an extremely factual, and familiar to most, language as that of Google Earth to tell a story so personal, so revealing, so close to me?

And so *Domani ti dimenticherò meglio* (Tomorrow I will forget you

better) was born. A 3 min video made by recording a virtual journey on Google Earth. My voice-over accompanies the viewer throughout the film. I'm reading an extract from my diaries. It's in Italian, English subtitles at the bottom of the frame. The video starts with the still overview of a little town by the sea in the South of Italy. After a few seconds of silence, the voice-over breaks in to say: "*Forse non ci siamo mai appartenute. Siamo state di tutti quelli che non dovevano sapere*" (maybe we never belonged to each other. We were of those who didn't have to know). The direct mode of address of the love letter is thus preserved. As the voice-over keeps

speaking, the cursor crosses the software's interface all the way down to the bottom to grab the icon of a little, orange man. Once the icon gets positioned in a central spot of the town, the viewer is dragged into a street-view of the same. Soft landscape sounds of the street and the sea approach the viewer, gently. They're now in front of the main facade of a modest white hotel by the promenade. The cursor keeps pointing out, scrolling, grabbing, and moving the interface of the software as the director of a film decides where to convey the viewer's attention. Only, in this case, the voice-over happens to be the director of the video and is live broadcasting a meta-virtual-cinematic

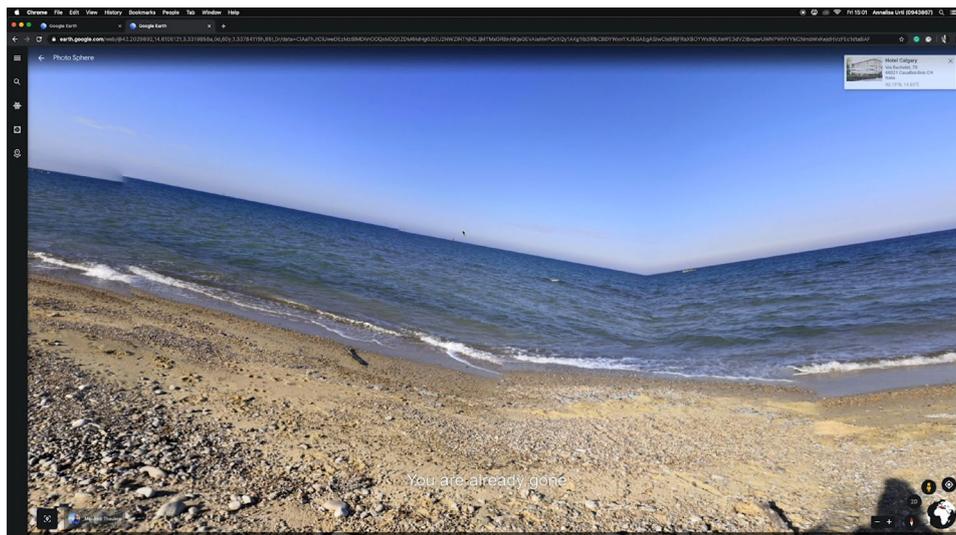


experience. The cursor is then an immediate effect of the director's thinking.

Once again, the viewer gets pulled out to the overview of the town. The environmental sounds that surrounded them earlier get quiet. The narrating voice keeps addressing that mysterious other, though it feels more as if they were talking to themselves and no one other than the viewer was listening. Is the viewer the actual recipient of the voice-over's words? Words of love, words of loss, words of longing and memories. At times, the cursor moves tenderly on the screen as a human hand would do on a lover's

cheek.

The images provided by the software are sharp, extremely factual, more or less detailed depending on the area of the globe explored. But the spherical panoramas uploaded by the users of Google usually present optical distortions and glitches. This characteristic of Google Earth's visual language breaks the illusion of aseptic, factual reality that is able to provide. In fact, Google Earth's aim is to register reality, mapping the world's territory accurately rather than representing it. At the same time, the 360 degrees views uploaded by the users are everything but realistic. As mentioned before,



frequently, these images happen to be distorted as it's possible to see in the last scene of the video: the line of the horizon is broken in the center of the interface and tends downwards. Within these errors of transcription, or *loss of information*, the software becomes visible. It's a dynamic similar to the one that I experienced while translating *Tears of Ink* from Italian to English: by adopting a different language, the mechanics already in place in my mother tongue were suddenly highlighted. This is something I noticed about language on a broad scale: verbal or visual, it has the tendency to disappear behind what they vehicle or represent. But it was precisely the glitches in the spherical panoramas that resonated with the emotional charge of the memories I have of the very same place. On the other hand, the visual language of Google Earth, so different from the source material in *temperature*, brought new air into the original project.

I have the feeling I learn something new about it at each act of translation. The different languages I adopted in my research enriched it more by contrast than by assonance. I had never been so grateful for such a large number of discrepancies and disagreement.

Until next translation.

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