

Gallery 4

ENN OG AFTUR SCHON WIEDER ONCE AGAIN Hlynur Hallsson

Text by Dr. Craviv Boyd.

Hegel's objection to prefaces reflects the following structure: preface/text – abstract generality/self-moving activity. His acceptance of prefaces reflects another structure: preface/text = signifier/signified. And the name of the “—” in this formula is the Hegelian Aufhebung.

– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface” to Of Grammatology

Within the limits of its possibility, or its apparent possibility, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But, if this difference is never pure, translation is even less so, and a notion of transformation must be substituted for the notion of translation: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We shall not have and never have had to deal with some “transfer” of pure signifieds that the signifying instrument—or “vehicle”—would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language. (Pos 31)

– Jacques Derrida, Positions

For the unthinkable, as we can easily show, is not structure in the absence of the center (for we see all the time that this absence is constitutive of structure; this is what Derrida shows); rather, the unthinkable is structure or ensemble thought independently of any tension between itself and some absent origin. The unthinkable is a tone.

– Fred Moten, In the Break

Hlynur Hallsson is an Icelandic artist who works with text. Text appears sprayed in the public sphere (urban landscapes) and sprayed or installed in the semi-public sphere (an exhibition venue, a gallery, a museum or an artist residency). The textworks are negotiated with permissions and obligations to social contracts that the artist is a part of. Hallsson’s texts are handwritten or more precisely hand sprayed letterforms executed with cans of spray paint, and the works switch languages, most frequently the text works form a triad of Icelandic, German and English. The message of the words in a language isolated from the triad is not a direct translation of words that follow in the other languages, rather it could be viewed as divergent opinions, aspects of a contested topic or place markers for a point of departure that often remains unstated or implied by the words themselves. Often, when taken together, the triplet textworks have their meaning or message complicated and reinforced by one another: one could recall the cumulative effect of viewing all the narratives of Rashomon together before drawing conclusions as to how a man died.

Text collage—words sourced from the World Wide Web, a ubiquitous source of information and disinformation—is a tool frequently used by Hallsson. Text collage is a central tool and method for institutional critique used in the iconic performance lecture by American artist and visual arts professor Andrea Fraser (1965-) in Official Welcome (2001). For that lecture, Fraser cannibalized speeches made on grand occasions celebrating the art world, and, over the course of her effusive congratulatory monologue, she became more erratic and unhinged, eventually disrobing before her audience and becoming an “objectified” stereotypical living artwork. Fraser strings together the utterances of well-known public figures and erases their provenance, while at the same time establishing an entirely novel context for the strings of words, paragraph fragments, sentences and non-sequiturs to be heard and interpreted. This early work of Fraser has parallels with some of the Dadaistic methods of collage that Hallsson deploys: the stripping away of public speech by known figures from their source of reference and juxtaposing the words in space to achieve at times humorous, thought-provoking and jarring effects. The texts, or rather words, are context specific, chosen by Hallsson due to topical concerns in the public sphere or the public discourse that are particular to the site(s) where he is exhibiting.

In the early 2000s, while on residency in Marfa, Texas, Hlynur quoted statements about the then U.S. president George W. Bush, and Osama Bin Laden, as the “war on terror” was beginning. The spray-painted words were visible

from the street through a storefront window and the gallery space was illuminated at night. Some Texans were offended by the statements in the gallery space because the work was critical of ‘their’ president, Bush having been the former governor of Texas prior to his 2000 election. The complaints of members of the public in turn led to pressure on the gallery space. Hlynur decided to remake the work into an action between Hegel’s Aufhebung, a total negation of a term in order to build a new concept, and Derrida’s relève, a turning-back to an original concept without its utter destruction, leading to the nuance of difference: creating a new statement by the transparent process of cancellation of a previous statement or term.

More recently, at the Oslo Biennale, Hallsson expanded his repertoire of working languages by supplementing the languages he works with. For the case of the ambitious Oslo Biennial project, the aim was to better target, represent and speak to newer minority populations of Norway, and to create a register of minoritarian languages spoken and understood in present day Oslo. This also included the use of indigenous languages of the Sápmi peoples. Hallsson’s textworks appeared amid a Nordic capital in the process of demographic change, and his work was tailored to be responsive to that change. The result was a project in seven sites scattered across the city in which Polish and Lithuanian take space, along with Norwegian, English and Icelandic. Dari, a language spoken amongst Afghan people, and Somali are further included languages, instances demonstrating the increasing global reach and attraction of a city like Oslo. Sápmi, the language of the indigenous peoples of the north—peoples who were historically disenfranchised, forcibly relocated and pressured to assimilate culturally into a more majoritarian or essentialist Norwegian identity—took up space in the public sphere of the capital city. This set of works was a departure for the artist, because he is now using or writing letters and words in languages that he does not speak himself. In a sense, this returns the letter forms themselves into concrete graphic elements of design, which an artist is free to experiment with and balance on the space of a public wall.

For the current exhibition, Hallsson has made two new textworks, both in three languages: the first work denotes shifts in language with the colors blue (Icelandic), red (German) and green (English) and revolves around a definition of genocide; the second work is in all gold letters without the distinction between the same three languages and revolves around the so-called “black gold” of gas and the capitalist interests that support its production. In addition to these spray-painted murals, the artist is exhibiting photo works of his travels in Europe, which are captioned in Icelandic, German and English. The captions convey the same meaning in each language and they reference the image in turn in a factual and descriptive way. However, these captions are personal and not quite the full descriptive text or alternative text that is used for images on the web for visually impaired people. Thus, Hallsson is playing with the space between meaning culled from a photograph and the language used to frame it.

When asked what are three non-“art” words to describe his work, Hlynur replied, “communication, samskípti, bewirkung.” This is telling. The words reinforce the content and crux of Hlynur’s practice: that is, partially to create evocative pieces that contain the capacity to register differently for speakers of different languages, works that generate exchange not in the sense of monetary transaction but in the dynamic social sphere, and to change or catalyze elements, to cause into being.

Hlynur Hallsson’s praxis of selecting a trio of quotations also inspired me to select the cluster of thinkers quoted at the beginning of this text: Hegel, Derrida, as filtered by Spivak, and Derrida as filtered by Moten. I believe that Hallsson’s practice generally falls into what Moten calls the “ensemble”: thinking with and through other thinkers. Hegel and Derrida are introducing a dialectic, a method that will then fold in on itself, collapse and inform Moten—among many others. Aufhebung, différence, ensemble is what in my assessment contributes to an understanding of *ENN OG AFTUR, SCHON WIEDER, ONCE AGAIN*, an exhibition that will shift meaning and message in the audiences minds, testing and conversing with their collective experiences of contemporary art and ordinary language.

GOTT AF PESSU. D
RAUM FÜR RUHE U
DENHEIT MIT DER
JOIN THE MILLIONS
AUS AND ABSTIERT