

Translate Me a Drawing: On Translating Images in the Digital Age

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Many years ago, in the predigital era, having to prepare a portfolio of my works, I took fifteen of them to the studio of a well-known photographer in a neighboring city. I was told to leave them there and return a week later. When I came to collect the photographs they all seemed good except for one image, a reproduction of a very delicate and somewhat blurry abstract oil painting. I held the photograph in my hand, amazed at what I was seeing, the page was white. The photographer said, “your work is an oil painting, and this is a print on photographic paper. This involves translating one technique into another and not every image is translatable.” I gathered the photographs and my works and left the studio angry. It took me a long time to understand the important lesson I had learnt that day.

In the years following the arrival of the smartphone my attitude to images began to change. I started working in drawing, a medium that until that time had not been part of my artistic practice. The drawings were based on photographs selected from my smartphone’s photo gallery, which presented a “non-hierarchical archive” comprising everyday images I took, images I received via social networks, and saved internet images. Most of the drawings were done in a sketchbook roughly the size of a smartphone.

Drawing translates the photographic image, yet unlike in oil painting, the images remain slight, thin. The following act – translating drawing into digital medium – allows creating a visuality that maintains their intimate aspect and, to a certain extent, solves the issue of their display, by showing them online.

The internet translates the images into a slight medium, by doing so, eliminating their materiality and scale, while strengthening their narrative elements which compensate for the lack of certain visual properties. In physical exhibition spaces, this same principle works in reverse.

Quite quickly the “solution” presented a central question: how can I return and translate the graphic, slight image from the sketchbook, which circulated on social networks, into an image with presence in a concrete exhibition space? To do so, I had to understand the essence of the act occurring in this process. Boris Groys claims that “the digitalization turns visual art into a performing art, into the art of performing. But to perform something is to interpret it, to betray it, to distort it. Every performance is an interpretation and every interpretation is a betrayal, a misuse.”¹

I do not consider the transition from low-tech to digital, from material to virtual, from physical to “ghost-image” an act of performance that moves from original to copy, from the thing-in-itself to its “appearance”. For me, this is an act of translation. In my practice, the digital photograph becomes a drawing in pen on paper, the drawing on paper becomes a digital image; the digital image is printed on paper and this paper I cut and later on photograph. In this way, the image moves from medium to medium until the origin becomes insignificant. Involved here is an endless act of translating that is not concerned with the image’s genealogy, but with how the acts of image transformation allow additional readings layered with meanings and contexts.

On that day at the photographer’s studio I saw the look of a mistaken translation of an original. Without understanding it at the time, I grasped that translation, is an act that can create movement between images, and that in the gap remaining in this process, there is space for a new image to appear.

¹ Boris Groys, From Image to Image File and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization, *Art Power*, (2008), p. 85.