

Harriet – The Blog of the Poetry Foundation
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Deterritorializations: Patterning and Incongruities

By JEN HOFER

I think of language as an animate non-object that is also an object (a shape) yet is also an ether (an idea that permeates). I think of history—especially structural histories—as repeating and mutating patterns, reanimated across time and culture and bodies to provide a backdrop, or an overlay, or a dissonant harmonics.

I've been contemplating reanimation of supposedly defunct things or ideas, not least because I co-curated (with Andrew Beccone and Aurora Tang) a Highland Park Branch of the Reanimation Library; it opened this past Sunday at Monte Vista Projects.

The Reanimation Library is a small independent Presence Library based in Brooklyn and open to the public. (Presence Library is a mistranslation of the German word for Reference Library, Präsenzbibliothek. It is employed because the library is a non-circulating collection that exists in the physical world.) The Reanimation Library is a collection of books that have fallen out of routine circulation and have been acquired for their visual content; the images in the books usually illustrate now-defunct ways humans understand ourselves and our place in the world. Outdated and discarded, these works have been culled from thrift stores, stoop sales, and throw-away piles, and given new life as a resource for artists, writers, cultural archeologists, and other interested parties.

The Reanimation Library was established in order to

- + build a collection of resources that inspire the production of new creative work
- + pan for gold in the sediment of print culture
- + draw attention to the visual and textual marvels in seemingly ordinary books
- + encourage collaboration among human beings
- + call attention to the generative potential of libraries
- + contribute to our cultural commons and gift economy
- + explore pathways between digital and analog worlds

We invited a range of artists to make works in response to or inspired by books from the Highland Park Branch; these works are exhibited alongside the Library. Katie Herzog's piece is a photograph of a page from the book *Marriage in a Changing World*, held in her hand. The presence of the hand provides scale, perspective, humility. Those words — “scale,” “perspective,” “humility” — floated into the fragmented notes I took in pencil on

grey scrap paper as I saw Cauleen Smith's hand appear at the edge of an archival image in her film *Black Utopia LP (For Sun Ra)* at REDCAT last week.

“The substitution of one thing for another can sometimes represent
a concept more effectively than the thing itself.”
—Cauleen Smith

...the instruments are not only just instruments.
The people are the instrument.
—Sun Ra

Cauleen Smith's works are not translations (perhaps transpositions, illuminations, or annotated correspondences?) and Sun Ra, most intergalactically animate of performance forces, hardly needs to be reanimated—or possibly his works are entirely reanimation, the renegotiation of structures of restriction and limitation into modes of transit to vast reimaged landscapes and spiritscapes.

This music came from nothing,
The void, in response to the
burning need for nothing else
For nothing else will do
For something elseness.
—Sun Ra

What happens when we reanimate an animate thing? A translation does not bring a defunct thing into present use; it reanimates an already animate series of interconnected forces and impulses. And it sometimes (often?) animates resonances that might have been latent—or perhaps even absent—in the original. A translation reanimates hollow spots in the language being translated into, exposing potential for elasticity or “something elseness” that might otherwise go unnoticed if it weren't for the prodding of linguistic oddness translation can enact. Here is one node where translation practice and innovative writing practice might usefully intersect: how can writing within a language (rather than across languages—or is all writing in some way “across languages”?) approach the something elseness translation awakens in the language being translated into?

(When I say “translation” in that last sentence, I mean “seam-ridden translation,” as opposed to the putative (and somewhat punitive) goal of translating seamlessly—more on my enthusiasm for language-snags later.)

Reanimation is a substitution across time. A thing (or image) is not the same thing in a different context, yet it is the same thing. Translation substitutes one thing for another, and is no substitute. The world is what it is and shimmers just on the edge of being able to be

something more, something different, something beyond. The instruments are instruments and are something other than instruments. Nothing else will do for something elseness.

[<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/04/deterritorializations-patterning-and-incongruities/>]