

Adriana Alves

Lost in Translation, or Drifting Among Words

Whereas, before the request of writing this text, I used to go to my office at the same institution responsible for this publication four days a week, including Wednesdays, I now sit at home at my second hand Scandinavian dining table that is far too large for my living room, with Al Jazeera on the background, even though it is Wednesday. I did not hesitate when asked by my colleagues whether I wanted to write a paper based on the writings of a renowned South American art critic, in fact from my own country. Obviously, the thought of spending time researching, writing and, moreover, of breaking my routine – being able to work in my living room, even on a Wednesday, sitting at my over-two meters long Scandinavian table – just the idea, the possibility of doing it, was far too thrilling for me to refuse.

The renowned art critic, curator and professor who I then only knew through a few English translations, had published most of her work solely in Portuguese, my language, the fundamental component of my rational thought. A compilation of books and a few other publications containing most of her writings within a period of fifty years became my summer and evening tasks. Is it necessary to mention that online book shopping in Latin America, particularly South America, and specifically Brazil, is not exactly what one would call 'internationally oriented'. The few online shops making deliveries to Europe do not accept payment through international bank cards, so, after innumerable phone calls and emails, I realized the limitations of this potentially globalized technological achievement, online shopping, and asked my mother, a retired lawyer with an accentuated interest in modern art and crafts, to buy me the books. The retired lawyer, my mother, my closest rival in art discussions—a person whose hobby is sculpting human-like figures, particularly busts, and adapting Miró and Kandinsky paintings to porcelain dinnerware—in addition to two other volumes, purchased two sets of the compilation; one set for herself and one set for me. Over a month after agreeing to write for this publication, the research material arrived at the post-office, which in reality means that the package arrived for pick-up at a supermarket not far from where I live. As I started reading, I was, of course, impressed to find out that already decades ago, she, the renowned art critic, curator and professor, distinguished herself by systematic critical reviews on internationalism and curatorial practices by addressing the ways artists from the then so-called 'Third World' were represented in international shows set up in the then so-called 'First World'.

Sitting by my dining table, Scandinavian design, bought second hand, really a bargain, but far too large for my living room, with Al Jazeera on the background, trying to focus on the writings of the renowned critic, my thoughts keep moving to a friend of mine, a brilliant guy, who insists on making aesthetic remarks on the sound of my native language, Portuguese. I've almost spent half of my life in Norway and even though Norwegian is my everyday language, I just can't figure out the world without Portuguese. This friend of mine, one of the most musical people I know, he used to say that Portuguese, my language, the very fundamental structure of my thinking... well, Portuguese, he said, is Latin's answer to Dutch. I like the sound of Dutch—it probably reminds me of Portuguese. I hardly ever disagree to a great extent with this friend of mine. Certainly, my objectivity can't be claimed in this matter, since Portuguese, my native language, is, as I've said, what I consider to be the underlying foundation of my thoughts and, therefore, of my being. On the other hand, my friend's objectivity can also be suspected because it is in fact common for Norway, the country where I live and where my friend has always lived, for the native people not to like the sound of Dutch. This friend of mine, as already mentioned, one of the most musical people that I know, says he finds Dutch anti-aesthetic. I lived in The Hague ages ago so I'm pretty sure that this nice experience does also play a role in my aesthetic judgement of the language. *We can only see, or in this particular context, hear, what our own repertoire enables us to hear*, and my repertoire definitely leads me to appreciating this Germanic equivalent to Portuguese, my language and the fundamental structure of my rational thinking.

As I now switch from Al Jazeera to the Norwegian state channel NRK, still sitting at my far-too-large Scandinavian designed dining table, drinking coffee, French roast—my favourite—and waiting for the new state budget to be presented, I carry on pondering language, translation and internationalization. Though my focus is now sharpened as I'm actually anxious about the new budget since we all foresee substantial cuts in cultural funding. Sipping my French-roasted coffee, confined in my living room as the Scandinavian designed table, a bargain, seems to grow bigger day by day, I once again think of my favourite theme: art, fine art, contemporary art. This interest I have is per se an international one. The discussions, studies, researches, and practices all circle events, discourses, institutions, artists, and history lines within the international contemporary art scene. Of course, many projects are not meta-referential in that sense, but as the results are presented within the contemporary art field, when we discuss them, we discuss art.

I'm a part-time artist and a part-time cultural worker so the new state budget does not only interest me as a political-oriented being, but it might also bring along immediate concrete implications to my everyday life, 'cause, as a matter of fact, all I do, and by that I mean all I earn, comes from public funding. My survival is based on my income as a cultural worker at a non-profit foundation—the very same foundation responsible for this publication. The whole of the institution's activities are fully supported by public means. I also have my own practice as an artist and do so with the support of public grants, taking on freelance assignments for projects that too are publically funded. Sitting by my Scandinavia-designed dining table, a bargain but far too large for my place, feeling confined in my tiny living room, I think of the latest Manifesta in Saint Petersburg and of the São Paulo Biennial, none of which are being attended by me. 'Cause no matter how international the contemporary art field is, I mostly experience art through its documentation. No, my life is

not a nomadic one, it is not packed in a suitcase, even though my living room feels like a portmanteau. Most of my first-hand art experience happens here, in Norway, in the county of Hordaland. I travel abroad about three times a year and when doing so usually spend time in major European cities visiting art galleries and museums to slightly expand my limited horizons. As most art practitioners, researchers, and admirers, I see the importance of experiencing art in loco, though we are all also compelled to second-hand experiences through visual documentation, written descriptions, statements and analyses. *We can only see what our repertoire enables us to see.* My geographical restriction and the resulting voids it engenders call for attention. They are yellow lights flashing insistently during this self-reflexive process of not only thinking about art but also acknowledging my limitations in facing it. When I think of the world, I think of my world plus the usual referential cultural poles. I know that the world is a lot larger than that, I even listen to Al Jazeera. But still, my fundamental understanding of the world is based on the West, and let me put this straight: *my West* is not *the West*, it is the peripheral West. Portuguese, my native language, the skeleton that structures my rational thinking, is the eighth most spoken language in the world and yet, for any non-Portuguese native speaker, a reasonable response to this remark is articulated in the question: “So what?” Norway, the country I lived in as teenager and voluntarily chose to move back to has for years been ranked by UN as the world’s best country to live in. And again, a consistent reply to the latter can easily be condensed in the same question: “So what?” When thinking of the world, either the proper global world or the narrow and restricted Western world, neither Portuguese-speaking countries nor Norway stand out as absolutes. It is, therefore, inevitable to me, right now, in my cramped living room, latched onto my colossal Scandinavia-designed dining table, purchased second-hand online, to acknowledge the periphery as my central domain. I’m not even from Portugal; I come from the backyard of the West, from Latin America, from South America, from Brazil. My identity has been built on adjacency.

By the margin of the West, the rich West, there is Latin America. When addressing Latin America, the predominant focus is often on Spanish America. Well, as mentioned before, I come from the Portuguese America, and, when speaking of Brazil—even though Rio de Janeiro, my hometown, is the most known city — it is São Paulo that is our centre, not only economically, but also culturally. I grew up in Brasília, the political centre, one of the most peculiar cities in the world, a place that has played a significant role in my inmost lack of a sense of direction, and yet is still a peripheral city in comparison to São Paulo. And then there is Norway, the self-apologetic, self-righteous and marginal Western country I chose to be my home. I even managed to pick Bergen as my base, again not the national cultural pole, but the second city. Sipping my coffee, French roast, my favourite, at my huge Scandinavian-design dining table, feeling that this piece of furniture grows as the living room and I shrink along with it, clustered in this adjacent existence of mine, I wonder where the line between peripheral and provincial actually is; though I’d really rather be marginal. I start grabbing some books off the shelves, rapidly browsing through them, searching for an insight. I’m not sure if I know what I’m looking for, I’m not even sure if I know what I’m thinking. I keep browsing the books and laying them on my over-two-meter-long, far too large for its surroundings, Scandinavia-designed oak table. There is no overstatement in claiming to be manic at this point. As the piles of books get higher and higher, and the shelves get emptier and emptier, somehow I start feeling less confined. Is it even necessary to mention that the state budget has been long forgotten? So what is it I’m thinking? I’m thinking of who I am.

We can only conceive what our repertoire enables us to conceive. And now I’m considering this assumption of mine about Portuguese, my native language, being the one crucial grounding structure of my thinking, to be pretty reductive. As I look at my books, piled on my far-too-large Scandinavian-design table, all I see is a miscellany of all things I really care for. I see piles of German language literature books along with stacks of Russian, Portuguese, Norwegian, English and Japanese literary works. There is wealth of playwrights, with an over-representation of American and Brazilian authors, and Beckett, of course. Then there are loads of theoretical books: Bataille, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Kant, Deleuze, Debord, Habermas, Adorno, Benjamin, Bourriaud, Jameson, Krauss, Marcuse, Heidegger, Eco, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Agamben, and Zizek, to mention just some. There is a whole section for media and gender studies, postcolonialism, art theory, approximately one hundred art catalogues, a countless amount of DVDs, and so forth. I suddenly realize I might be wrong. At home this Wednesday morning, even though I usually go to my office on this day of the week, standing in my tiny living room, drinking coffee, I look at my Scandinavian design table, over two meters long, a bargain, covered with books, and I get the sensation that this massive piece of furniture is actually shrinking. *We can only see what our repertoire enables us to see* and it is incontestable that mine ranges further than the specificity of my native language or country I chose to be my home. Yes, I am aware of my cultural dependency on the hegemonic centres: they are significant in providing me with vital tools for my understanding of the world, of culture, and therefore of humanity. This hunger for input from these centres also results in a wider knowledge of their cultural means, but this is not the whole story. I am also particularly interested in the cultural production and discourses of my adjacent world. This characteristic can be seen as a constant in most peripheral scenes, it is a reflex of our marginal state. Unlike a nucleus as the dense centre of an atom, hegemonic cultural centres are not centres by nature. No, the heart of today might as well be the tail of tomorrow.

With that in mind, I again sit down at my Scandinavian-design table, now seeming so little under the piles of books, and take a sip of my cold French roast coffee, saying countless titles of artworks out loud – names of hundreds of artists, both local and international, all of who I’ve seen exhibited here, in Bergen, during the past thirteen years. Among the international ones, there are also many names, many projects, from outside

of the prominent cultural centres, from outside of the Euro-American world, most of them presented at the very same institution that I now work for, the one responsible for this catalogue. *We can only see what our repertoire enables us to see.* It's true that I certainly see many of these works through my own limited glasses, blurred by my peripheral Western lenses. However, even with the awareness of the risk of being reductive when facing the artworks, and with the consciousness of the great curatorial responsibility that lies in presenting the Other in ways that do not constrain the work into fitting projected ideas and local agendas but rather in ways that enable its plurality, diversity, and even possible contextual and cultural translation inadequacy, I still believe that this continuous exposure to art from marginal places plays a crucial role in the expansion of my repertoire. Especially after spending my summer reading a whole compilation and other publications written by the renowned Latin American art critic, curator and professor from my own country, it strikes me that beyond the differences within our cultural, historical, socio-economical and political contexts, generally speaking, there are intrinsic characteristics in the art production she, the art critic, addresses that are remarkably close to Norwegian art production. I can therefore only conclude that our adjacency is our strength; it compels us to be multilingual as we strive after an unclaimed relevance at the rim of the relevant and central Other.

"A cada dia creio menos na possibilidade de comunicação da arte. Ou melhor, creio, cada dia mais, que cada um vê num objeto artístico somente aquilo que seu repertório lhe permite ver." (Aracy Amaral, 1990)

BIO:

Adriana Alves is an artist working with video, installation and text. She attended media studies at the University of Brasilia and has a BFA and MFA from the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. Alves also works as an independent producer. At 3,14 she is the head of the educational program as well as the coordinator and co-curator of Circulating AiR.