

6 Traduire en archipel(s)

Translating the City and Performing Translation in the Digital Era

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Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the exhibition *Traduire en archipel(s)*, held at CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo in Venice in April 2023, as a form of artistic performance of experiential translation of the city of Venice.

This project was born directly out of my practice of creative translation training, which includes intersemiotic translation through an experiential approach and out of my research on the concept of translating the city, and the creative role of errors in human and machine translation, with a focus on finding possible translations of the translated and *in-translation* city of Venice in particular.

In the first section, I introduce the theoretical background of my research on these topics, exploring my understanding and my practice of intersemiotic and experiential translation, as a form of exploration of all the possibilities offered by the original, in contrast with the perception of translation as simple reproduction.

In the second section of the article, I describe and analyze the works of my research-creation artistic project *Translating the City: Venice 2.023* in the context of the exhibition *Traduire en archipel(s)*, using ludic forms of intersemiotic translation to generate an embodied experience of the city through the “translator’s gaze” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019), and I clarify how these works fit within the theoretical background I have outlined.

The last section is dedicated to a discussion of how intersemiotic translation activities related to the exhibition have been integrated in an advanced MA course in translation I teach at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, to understand how this approach to translation can be fruitfully put at the service of translation training in the classroom, exposing students to a more complex and richer experience of translation.

Translating the City through Ludic Artistic Forms of Intersemiotic and Experiential Translation

The project I will discuss in this chapter is the point of encounter of several lines of research I have developed over the last years: on the one hand, research on the practice of translating non-standard texts, playing with errors

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-10](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-10)

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and meaningful deformations of language, and on the other hand, the concept of ‘translating the city’, and the interaction between human translation, machine translation, and digital tools applied to translation.

The concept of cities as “translation sites” was first studied by Sherry Simon (2008; 2013; 2019), who indicated that languages play a crucial role in shaping the spaces we inhabit and the relations we build across them. Over time, I have tried to expand this concept (Sofo, 2018a; 2021), to see translation “as a process of creative transformation and not as a simple copying mechanism”, which can “offer us a fruitful paradigm to reimagine the future of our cities, of the networks we create within them, and of the paths we can build to design new cartographies of the world” (2024, n.p.). In this sense, the city is seen as a palimpsest constantly rewritten and in need of translation, to be looked at anew through the lens of translation and through “*the translator’s gaze*, the intense engagement of the translator with the source text which also entails an appropriation of sorts—not just with the eyes but with all other senses” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxix, authors’ emphasis).

The experiential approach to translation allows us to see this discipline and its practice as a way to open the original to its variations, by exploring all the possibilities that a text can generate, rather than limiting the practice of translation to the attempt of offering a simple copy of the original. Such an approach, impacts “on the source artefact enriching it with new layers of understanding”, as Campbell and Vidal write (2019, p. xxvi). It “imagines translation as working *alongside* an original work, extrapolating the work in oblique fashion and always maintaining semiotic distance and creative tension with it”, as Lee writes (2022, pp. 2; 1) to define ludic translation. This allows us to perceive both the original and its translation(s) as multidimensional objects, which can be explored in non-linear ways. Not only does this enable work to “develop rhizomatically across languages, modes, and media”, but it also “subverts the top-down relationship between original and translation” (Lee, 2022, p. 3).

When I talk about experiential translation, I have in mind two definitions of this approach. Firstly, the one given by Campbell and Vidal, as a “holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process which operates in the translation of culture, community, voices of nature, place and environments”, and a process in which we are “envisaging the practice of translation as a contemporary and performative form of art or meaning-making that challenges authority and hegemonic values” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 3). Then, the one given by Isabelle Collombat of the “*approche expérientielle*”:

It’s an approach to professional translation based on experience—inasmuch as it ‘refers ... to the history of the individual and involves what he or she has accumulated as information, sensations, images, ideas, attitudes, values and so on, over time’ (Côté, 2003, p. 13), as well as the experiences or experiments—defined as ‘the act of provoking a

phenomenon with the intention of studying it' ...—carried out systematically and analytically by the translator.

(Collombat, 2022, n.p.)¹

The importance of materiality, experimentation and creativity in this project could not be stressed enough, and its focus is precisely on the “gaps and errors that arise through the use of technology in translation” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 3), trying to make use of these gaps and errors to understand the process of both human and machine translation, and to play with the instability of the original text and of the translation that these gaps and errors cause.

In the context of experiential translation, in fact, the errors of translation and the gaps generated by the many intertwining levels of metaphorical translation, transformation, and/or transcodification that are so common in the digital space we inhabit, are not understood as irremediable ‘faults’, but rather as a reservoir for creativity, as useful resources that can lead to a wider and deeper discourse on the theory and practice of translation as well as on the city. Errors are then what brings us to an understanding of translation not as “a test of comprehension but of the fruitfulness of our inability to comprehend”, as Scott suggests (Scott, 2019, p. 88).

Quite interestingly, as Connelly points out about the errors of machine translation in particular: “it is precisely these mismatches and slippages ... that begin to demonstrate translation’s full creative potential to artists in general” (2015, p. 62). Translation and contemporary art share in fact this interest in the creative error, and in the multiplicity offered by translation as a process of variation rather than imitation, as I argued in the analysis of several instances of ‘performance’ of the process of translation in contemporary art (see Sofo, 2023), which I then used as starting points for exercises of intersemiotic translation to be applied to translation training.

Vidal Claramonte has given us a wonderful image of this proximity between translation and contemporary art, and between the translator and the artist:

The translator, like the artist, has the power to create an image, and that image reflects his/her view. In other words, it reflects how s/he perceives what s/he translates ... they both paint spaces ... both must deal with problems related to the representation of origin and its implicit copy, how this representation is carried out, and the references used to do so. In short, the question is how the translator establishes the relationship between words and things, how s/he does things with words, and how s/he looks at, paints, and listens to the world through translation. Since art has been asking these questions for centuries, this will help the translator to understand that representation is not limitation but interpretation. Blurring the boundaries between disciplines will help us understand translation.

(Vidal Claramonte, 2022, pp. 23–24)

I thus decided to turn to an artistic research-creation approach to offer a translation of the city, and I have tried to offer ludic forms of intersemiotic translation which use the methods of contemporary art to generate an embodied experience of the processes of translation constantly at work in daily life—focusing not on simple acts of interlinguistic translation, but rather on all forms of code-switching that include a linguistic aspect—by looking at the world through the lens of Translation Studies, through practices of translation and through the ‘translator’s gaze’, and in which not only the translator, but also the viewer/reader plays an active role.

The method I applied for these works is very akin to the one explained by Connelly for her artworks, when she writes that she uses “linguistic *translation* as both the subject and process to create multimedia artworks that interrogate and analyse the *translation* process itself” (2015, p. 11, author’s emphasis), with the intention to “reveal what the text says without saying” (Vidal Claramonte, 2022, p. 25). The questions behind my work are also very close to the ones that triggered her own research:

How can multi-media art practices be used to investigate linguistic translation *in action*? What new knowledge is generated out of/during/ as a result of this transdisciplinary inquiry? Is it possible to use *linguistic translation* as both the subject and process to create art works that make the process visible and have the capacity to create new knowledge about translation? What is the potential of a subjective, dialogic, polyvocal investigation into linguistic translation? What can be learned through this multi-modal transdisciplinary inquiry?

(Connelly, 2015, p. 11, author’s emphasis)

To these questions, my research adds questions about the city, such as: what can we discover about the city through a reading and a translation of its identity, of its structure, of the words that describe it and of the words that are inscribed on its walls? How can the disciplinary bases of Translation Studies, and of the intersemiotic and experiential approach to translation, allow us to understand the city—its present, its past, its future(s)—through a different lens, and how can the practice of linguistic translation and of metaphorical translation offer us new ways to rewrite, translate the city, both physically and metaphorically?

The idea behind this exhibition was thus to develop a project of translation of the city of Venice, a space that is itself the result of a translation and looking for translation at the same time, through an approach that joined the experiential and intersemiotic approach to the practice of contemporary art. Its aim was to understand how human creativity and human translation could meet artificial intelligence and digital tools to create a new understanding of Venice, generated by a reading of the gaps and errors of these tools and of translation, through the translator’s gaze, and also how this could fruitfully be put at the service of translation training.

Traduire En Archipel(s): Translating Venice 2.023

Traduire en archipel(s)/Tradurre in arcipelaghi (Becheanu and Sofo, 2023) is the exhibition born from the collaboration between Stefania Becheanu and me, curated by Elisamaria Covre and hosted by CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo at Isola della Giudecca, Venice, from 6 April to 23 April 2023, in collaboration with Università Ca' Foscari, Istituto Romeno di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica di Venezia and the Spin project TransKarib. The exhibition, born out of our collaboration for the translation of a work by Becheanu for a previous exhibition in Venice in 2022 (Becheanu, 2022), was held in the context of the international conference “Traduire en archipel(s)”, a conference held in Venice in April 2023 and in Tours in June of the same year, dedicated to an understanding of translation as an ‘archipelagic’, transdisciplinary and ‘undisciplined’ field.

CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo can itself be understood as a space of ‘translation of the city’. The gallery is in fact hosted inside the spaces of the Consorzio di Cantieristica Minore Veneziana, including local artisans as well as the classes of new technologies of the arts of the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice. By supporting the artisans through the rent of the exhibition spaces, the gallery challenges Venice’s usual market-driven choices, working towards an integrated environment for arts and crafts. The visitors entering the exhibition thus experience several levels of translation, from the translation of the space offered by the gallery itself to the ones offered in the exhibition itself.

I will focus in this chapter on my part of the exhibition, *Translating the City: Venice 2.023*, introducing the main sections of this project, which offered an experiential understanding of translation, of the city, and of the digital enhanced space we all inhabit. A virtual version of this exhibition (Sofo, 2024) can be accessed online through the link in the bibliography or the following QR code (see Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1 The QR code that leads to the virtual version of the exhibition.

Opening: For a Translation of Venice: A Manifesto and Fernweh

The exhibition was opened on the ground floor by the trilingual manifesto *For a Translation of Venice* (see [Figure 6.2](#)), which summed up the research on the concept of translation of the city of Venice that I have conducted and published in scientific articles over the last years ([Sofo, 2021](#); [2024](#)). The manifesto served as the ideal opening of the exhibition, because it was at the same time an overview of the thought processes which brought me to the idea of ‘translating Venice’, and an introduction to the concept behind the creation of the different series of works included in the exhibition.

For a Translation of Venice

Venice is a translated city.

This land wrested from the sea is one of the best examples of successful translation of a space, quite unfaithful to its original. To build on water, as it has been done in Venice, means to transform a space of movement, water, into a space of sedentariness. It is an extreme change of language; instead of learning how to move, how to follow the waves, one has to ask how to resist their force and how to find stability among the tides. Venice is a city that has not been afraid to find its body elsewhere, to explore its identity in all its plurality.

But Venice is also a city that needs to be translated.

It's in search of a new translation that can make people forget all the bad translations of it that have been produced around the world, and that can allow those who visit it a true understanding of its intimate language.

Every city has its own syntax, its own grammar. In order to read a place, one must know the grammar of the space, and how to read its language.

Venezia is not Venice, Venice, Venedig, Venecia, 威尼斯.

But Venice is all these cities: plural, multilingual, because the language that inhabits us when we walk through it influences the way we read it.

In order not to lose Venice, we have to translate it, to give space to all of its languages.

There are different ways to translate a city, and there are transformations that happen even without touching a stone.

Perhaps a virtual translation of Venice - more simple, less smelly, more instagrammable, more consumable - could serve to save the real Venice, separating the postcard city from the real city. Making way for a new emotional cartography of Venice, one that is concerned with stitching back its fabric, its words, its body.

giuseppe sofo

Figure 6.2 The English version of the trilingual manifesto *For a Translation of Venice*, which opened the exhibition.



Figure 6.3 The postcard stands with some of the postcards of the series *Fernweh*.

Beside the manifesto was presented *Fernweh* (see Figure 6.3), an installation in the form of a postcard stand (borrowed from the repository of MUVE, the civic museums of Venice) displaying a series of 22 postcards, which consisted of photos taken in one city (the one indicated on the caption at the bottom of the postcard), but depicting the name or a symbol of another city.

This creates a sense of distortion, a sense of unbalance, which makes the viewer think of a mistake at the beginning. The German term ‘*Fernweh*’, which gives the title to the series, indicates a ‘longing for elsewhere’ and is the contrary of ‘homesickness’. The idea is that translating a city also means carrying that city and its memory with us elsewhere and returning to it even from afar. The places that inhabit our minds are often more important than those where we physically are with our bodies. These urban writings thus create connections between the two cities which become significant, and which remind us of our constant ubiquity in the digital and virtual word, which allows us to inhabit several spaces at the same time.

The City’s Alphabet

In the main room was exposed *The City’s Alphabet*, the core of the exhibition. Over the last years, in order to ‘read’ the text of cities in translation, I conducted several experiments with Google Translate’s real-time image translation

feature, through a research-creation approach (see [Sofo, forthcoming](#)). The aim of this function launched by Google in 2015, which translates live what the user frames with his or her smartphone's camera, was to provide quick translation of writings that users encounter in their daily life. The focus of the software is on usability rather than on high-quality and extremely reliable translation, and the process followed by the application to produce the translation entails great difficulties (see [Sagar, 2020](#)), which give rise to several errors, mainly due to the process of recognizing the text, decoding it, translating it in real time and then rewriting it on top of the original text, offering us the image of a digital palimpsest.

Experimenting with these tools allowed me to experience both translation and the city through a different lens. I was brought to look at the surrounding environment from a different perspective: the urban space became a text to read, looking for possible 'translation sites', significant writings to translate, in order to understand the city's lexicon. On the other hand, I became part of a "cognitive assemblage" ([Hayles, 2016](#), p. 32), in which the software I was using influenced my movements around the city, with translation becoming part of my gaze. As Hayles writes:

Because humans and technical systems in a cognitive assemblage are interconnected, the cognitive decisions of each affect the others, with interactions occurring across the full range of human cognition, including consciousness, the unconscious, the cognitive nonconscious, and the sensory/perceptual systems that send signals to the cortex. Moreover, human decisions and interpretations feed back into technical systems, sometimes decisively affecting the contexts in which those systems operate.

([Hayles, 2016](#), p. 33)

The question of the embodiment of translation is thus multiple. On the one hand, we have the implication of the translating body in the practice of translation. Isabelle Collombat interestingly defines translation as a form of encounter between "a textual body and a translating body":

Translation, in its practice above all, but also in its theorization, takes place in the imponderable that is characteristic of each new encounter between a textual body and a translating body. Seeing the translator not simply as a translating 'agent', but as a translating 'body' allows us to envisage his or her actions through all of its senses, more or less verbalized, more or less conscious, in the veritable limbo of the implicit and of interlanguage.

([Collombat, 2022](#), n.p.)²

Campbell and Vidal have also highlighted that intersemiotic translation, in particular, "involves a creative step in which the translator (artist or performer) offers its embodiment in a different medium" (2019, p. xxvi).



Figure 6.4 “All tourists are bastards/All bastards are tourists”.

On the other hand, we also have to take into account the extension of the human body beyond its corporeal limits that is characteristic of the digital era. One is in fact translating at once with one’s whole body, and one’s ‘cognitive baggage’, but also with the extended body of the ‘cognitive assemblage’ one is part of, and with the extended collective body of the community formed by the translator/artist and the active viewers/readers of the work, generating an extension and expansion of both the ‘translating body’ and of translation itself.

The works in this section took the form of sets of one picture and two screenshots including words written on the walls and streets of Venice and their translation through Google Translate’s real-time image translation feature, focusing on errors, misreadings and deviations of the translation that allowed for a double (or triple) reading, sometimes revealing the reality hidden behind the words, or generating alternative readings that can tell us about a different city than the one we read with our own eyes.

The first subsection included pieces realized by translating writings on the walls of the city, especially if related to its current situation. The first example of this is the graffiti “All tourists are bastards”, translated into Italian and French as “*tous les batards sont des touristes/tutti i bastardi sono turisti*”, which inverts the sentence, giving us “all bastards are tourists” (see Figure 6.4).

The second example is “*Venezia che affoga*” (Venice drowning), translated as “Venice or drowning 08.08/*Venise ou noyade 08.08*”, with the indication of a date that was not there in the original (interpreted by the software through a reading of the bubbles surrounding the writing), turning the certain “drowning” of Venice into a choice between two possible futures: Venice or drowning



Figure 6.5 “Venice drowning/Venice or drowning 08.08”.

(see Figure 6.5). This second translation showed how the software was able to interpret non-verbal forms as text, leading to a deeper understanding of the city as text than the one I had in mind.

The second subsection is dedicated to a demonstration held in Campo Santa Margherita of the committees that work towards a different Venice, protesting against the idea of introducing a ticket to visit the city (eventually approved several months later) and in favour of more accessible housing for residents. This environment was particularly fruitful, as it focused on writings that already included a critique of the current situation of Venice (see Figure 6.6).

The sign “*la casa è un diritto*” (housing is a right) became “the cash and a direction/*l’argent et une direction*”, because of the angle of the picture which led the software to read the final “a” of “casa” as “h”, reflecting thus the actual reality of Venice’s housing market, exclusively based on the maximization of profits. Something very similar happened when in “*Venice*



Figure 6.6 The works derived from the demonstration held in Campo Santa Margherita.

riparta dale studenta” (Venice should start anew from students), the epicene term created for “students” in inclusive writing³ was not recognized by the machine, which highlighted instead the writing on the back “24 hour cash”, giving us “Venice starts again from 24 hour cash/*Venise recommence à partir de argent 24h/24*”.

A more ‘positive’ outcome is the one in which the sign “*Venezia invendibile r-esiste*” (Unsellable Venice resists and exists) was translated as “the inventable Venice reexists/*La Venise inventable réexiste*” giving us hope for the invention of a new Venice, likely because of the difficulty of finding the word “*invendibile*” in the dictionary used by the machine, and of the impossibility of decoding the wordplay on “to resist” and “to exist” built through the hyphen.

The third subsection is the one in which the results were more surprising and more ‘extreme’. The software is trained to recognize as many real-life writings as possible, even when letters are oddly written or the words contain typos or mistakes. This is why, after being exposed to buildings without writings for a long time, it eventually interpreted the arches, windows, and shapes of Venice’s palaces and bridges as letters of an imaginary text written by the city itself. This transformed the view of the city into an ‘architectural’ translation of the city itself, as we can see in the ‘translation’ of the façade of the Procuratie Vecchie (see [Figure 6.7](#)).

to generate something that we perceive as creative. The creativity is thus the product of the encounter between the human-generated data collected by the machine, the translator's gaze, which suggests a look upon the artefact through the lens of translation, and the active role of the viewer/reader who engages with the work.

This section opened with the video recording of a dialogue about the translation of Venice with Chat GPT (banned at the time in Italy)⁴. After a few initial exchanges in which Chat GPT interpreted the concept of 'translation' in its most concrete understanding, after clarifying that what I was looking for was a metaphorical translation of the city, Chat GPT started to adapt to my requests, offering an interesting perspective of translation for the city:

The transformation of the city in a metaphorical sense can be seen as a kind of translation or transposition into another form or context. For example, one could translate a city as an 'urban laboratory' where innovative ideas, technologies and solutions are tested to solve problems such as pollution, traffic congestion or resource scarcity... In another example, one could translate a city as a living organism in which buildings, streets, people and nature coexist and interact like the cells, organs and tissues of a biological organism. In this 'translation', the city becomes a living organism that grows, evolves and adapts to the changing needs and challenges of its environment.

(Chat GPT and Sofo, 2023⁵)

When asked about a possible application of this metaphorical translation to the city of Venice in particular, Chat GPT replied with fascinating proposals, such as the possibility of Venice becoming:

a model of a sustainable city, with a focus on the environment and reducing environmental impact ... a center of innovation and technology, with the attraction of startups and innovative companies developing solutions to address the city's social and economic problems ... a center of cultural excellence, attracting artists, creatives and intellectuals from around the world ... a model of sustainable mobility, with the adoption of environmentally friendly public and private transportation solutions ... an example of responsible and sustainable tourism by adopting policies and initiatives to reduce the impact of tourism on the city.

(Chat GPT and Sofo, 2023)

All of these proposals would make a great program for the urban politics of the future of Venice, after decades in which political choices have gone towards a maximization of profits, rather than towards a wider sustainability of the city's development. However, the most surprising answer is certainly the

one that closed the exchange, where I invited Chat GPT to Venice in Spring, and instead of replying with the usual lines which remind the user that the software is not a human being, Chat GPT replied: “Thank you for the invitation! I would be happy to visit Venice in the Spring and see for myself how it is changing and transforming into a sustainable and innovative city” ([Chat GPT and Sofo, 2023](#)).

Although this is mainly a sign of adaptation from the software to my requests, the incredibly fast development of AI tools leads to forms of dialogue with chatbots that can make us forget we are not interacting with a human being but with a machine. On the one hand, this could obviously lead to dangerous consequences (see [Xiang, 2023](#)), while on the other hand, it is simply one more manifestation of the ‘cognitive assemblage’ we form with all the devices that are present in our daily life, and exploring this means to better understand the digitally-enhanced environment we inhabit.

The second part of this section included a central piece and five series of four images created through text-to-image software, which allows the generation of images by artificial intelligence starting from a textual prompt. There is a heated debate at the moment between artists and the self-proclaimed ‘AI artists’, generating works through prompts, and claiming them as their own (see [Shaffi, 2023](#)). Without entering this discussion, what I want to highlight is that the purpose here was quite the opposite. Instead of manipulating these tools to create works I could claim as my own, the intention here was to give the software very simple prompts, in order to capture the ‘creativity’ of the software itself (always in the sense I highlighted before), following its generative process to understand what perception this offered of the translation process and of the city.

The main piece, mounted in the shape of a spinal column, collected all the steps in the process of MidJourney generating an image through the command: “/imagine translation”. It starts with the first blurred sketches of the gradually forming images, and its core is the four images produced by the software (see [Figure 6.8](#)).

More images have then been generated through the ‘variations’ function, producing thus four quality-enhanced and modified variations for each image, except for one for which only three variations were produced, leaving thus a voluntary gap in the symmetry of the piece (see [Figure 6.9](#)).

Initially, the fourth version of the fourth image was not produced because I had finished the credits for the free version of MidJourney. While I thought about producing the fourth image at a later time, through a paid subscription, this gap caused by the fact that I was not using a premium version seemed significant in relation to our asymmetrical experiences of digital tools nowadays. This is why I decided to avoid generating the missing image, which resulted in further exploration of gaps and errors in translation.

The four initial images produced by the software algorithm and the successive variations mostly generated a city, in which buildings came out of the pages and gradually became people, though the text-to-image software was



Figure 6.8 The detail of the first four pictures generated by MidJourney through the prompt “/imagine translation”.

only asked to draw translation and not the translation of the city, and though I had never ‘fed’ MidJourney with any prompt related to the translation of the city at that point in time. It would thus be interesting to understand whether the fact that the software mostly created images of a city was influenced by the data of my own scientific research (collected from my laptop, or from publications found on the internet?), from the data of search queries I had performed over time on Google or other search engines, or if the data the software relied on also connected the concepts of translation and city, in ways that I had not imagined.

The remaining five series of four images each were created using different text-to-image softwares (MidJourney, Dall.e, NightCafé and Mage Space) through two textual prompts, “Translate Venice” and “Translate Venice into the city that Venice will be in the future”. This generated, among others,

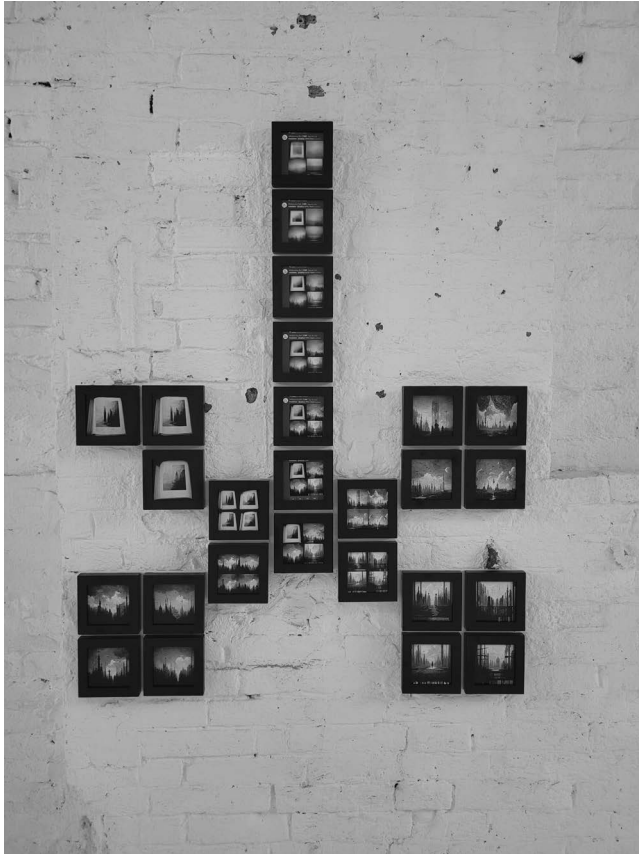


Figure 6.9 The artwork generated by assembling all the variations of the images created by the software through the prompt “/imagine translation”.

ornamental frames containing images of Venice (see [Figure 6.10](#)); images of a city dominated by huge gondolas, which become bigger and bigger, at times even more than parts of the island of Venice; apocalyptic images of a distorted Venice, drowning under high waters. All these images lead to an understanding of Venice as a city condemned to death by water, which will soon disappear and will only be remembered through knick-knacks and souvenirs, especially of gondolas.

Since these AI tools generate their products by using artificial neural networks to trawl the internet for existing imagery, this mainly reflects the image of Venice that humans have. If it is very clear that the exorbitant size of gondolas dominating the landscape is due to the fact that most pictures of Venice that can be found on the internet contain gondolas, the dystopic aspect of most of these images might be revelatory of what most humans fear for the future of the city.



Figure 6.10 One of the AI-generated images, in which Venice becomes a souvenir, a city that can only be remembered and not lived.

The Original Is Unfaithful to the Translation

The main room of the exhibition had stairs leading to a broken window, which offered a magnificent view of the Redentore Church over the rooftops of other buildings in Giudecca, and past the gardens of a neighbouring convent, but I had noticed during previous exhibitions that visitors rarely went up those stairs. I thus tried to attract visitors to this window, to give them the opportunity of enjoying the view, the wind coming in from the broken window and at lucky times the scent of the herbs in the garden, in order to apprehend the space of the gallery as another space that needed to be ‘translated’ and discovered through all senses.

To do this, I created an *on-site* piece, by translating the view from the window, through the same methods used for the section *The City’s Alphabet*, and I decided to place here a further piece, entitled *The Original Is Unfaithful to the Translation*, derived from a sentence by Borges which perfectly reflects my view of translation. As I wrote in a previous article, in fact, “while the translation gives us the opportunity to read the original as well, as in a palimpsest ... the original, taken by itself, isolated from all alternative versions, accounts only for itself, leaving us in ignorance of all that the text is, and all that the text could be, in its infinite variations” (Sofa, 2018b, pp. 91–92).⁶

Le prime chiavi del mio primo appartamento veneziano aprivano la porta ma non la chiudevano, mentre le chiavi del mio coinquilino aprivano e chiudevano senza problemi. Un calzolaio mi disse che c'era bisogno dell'originale, perché senza originale non poteva fare una buona copia. Gli ho spiegato che – come teorico della traduzione – non credo nell'autorità dell'originale e che Borges diceva che "l'originale è infedele alla traduzione". Mi sono anche detto che forse una cattiva traduzione è proprio questo: non una traduzione che non apre il testo, ma una traduzione che lo apre, ma non riesce a chiuderlo. Alla fine sono riuscito ad avere una copia delle chiavi che aprivano e chiudevano la porta, non da un originale, ma da una "buona copia". Forse una "buona copia" potrebbe salvare Venezia, darci la chiave per liberare l'originale?

Les clés de mon premier appartement vénitien ouvraient la porte mais ne la fermaient pas, alors que les clés de mon colocataire ouvraient et fermaient sans problème. Un cordonnier m'a dit qu'il avait besoin de l'original, parce que sans l'original il ne pouvait pas faire une bonne copie. Je lui ai expliqué que – en tant que théoricien de la traduction –, je ne crois pas à l'autorité de l'original et que Borges disait que "l'original est infidèle à la traduction". Je me suis également dit que c'est peut-être ça une mauvaise traduction : non pas une traduction qui n'ouvre pas le texte, mais une traduction qui l'ouvre, mais qui ne parvient pas à le fermer. Finalement, j'ai réussi à obtenir une copie des clés qui ouvraient et fermaient la porte, non pas à partir d'un original, mais à partir d'une "bonne copie". Peut-être qu'une "bonne copie" pourrait sauver Venise, nous donner la clé pour libérer son original?

The first keys I had of my first Venetian apartment opened the door but did not close it, while my housemate's keys opened and closed without a problem. A shoemaker told me that he needed the original, because without an original he could not make a good copy. I explained to him that – as a translation theorist – I do not believe in the authority of the original and that Borges said that "the original is unfaithful to the translation". I also told myself that perhaps that's what a bad translation is: not a translation that does not open the text, but a translation that opens it, but fails to close it. Eventually I managed to get a copy of the keys that opened and closed the door, not from an original, but from a "good copy". Perhaps a "good copy" could save Venice, give us the key to set the original free?

Figure 6.11 The trilingual text dedicated to the relationship between original and translation.

This installation included a trilingual text dedicated to the relationship between original and translation, through a true anecdote (see Figure 6.11—please read the text), accompanied by three sets of keys with keychains of different colours: green (the original), red (the 'bad' copies) and yellow (the 'good' copy).

By the time I made the artwork I had left the apartment and returned the keys to the owners, and had lost both the "good" and the "bad" copies I had made. Therefore, I had to ask a locksmith to make good and bad copies of another key. However, the locksmith kept refusing the idea of making bad copies, because he refused to do a bad job, and because he was not sure he was practically able to make them. After insisting on the 'rightness' of these errors of production for my own project, I had to come up with suggestions for the

locksmith on strategies he could use to produce copies that did not open the door: an education to error-making and to the possibility of imperfection, and the potential creative paths that imperfection opens.

Reading these daily-life moments of failed translation can show us a material embodiment of the ‘faults’ we attribute to linguistic translation, its gaps and errors, which are indeed characteristic not only of translation, but of every act of communication, transmission and reproduction.

Performing Translation In (and out of) the Classroom

One of the main driving ideas of the exhibition “Traduire en archipel(s)” was to bring translation outside of the classroom, and outside of the usual academic and literary circuits, to encounter other forms of expression and of cultural transmission, such as contemporary art.

However, after experimenting for several years with experiential and inter-semiotic translation in courses of translation (see [Sofo, 2020](#)), I believe that this approach can also be fruitfully put at the service of translation training in the classroom. From a pedagogical point of view, in fact, exposing trainees of translation to ‘undisciplined’ forms of translation—whereby I mean both unclassifiable in a single discipline and more playful—leaving both the physical space of the classroom and the metaphorical space of the classic translation studies curriculum, allows to stimulate their creativity through methods that could not be used through a traditional curriculum, offering a more complex and richer experience of translation. As Collombat writes, this approach “illustrates the usefulness of the links between theory ... and practice ..., in the sense that the reflexive translator bases his actions on analyzed, objective self-observation”, and in these situations “recourse to theory is dictated by the need to optimize practice, and is based on it” ([Collombat, 2022](#), n.p.).⁷ I have thus involved students of my MA advanced course on translation in several activities related to the project, among which the creation of their own ‘translations’ of Venice on which I will focus in this final part of the article.

One student, Lisa Mirandola, selected excerpts of quotations from books on Venice by several authors (Borges, Mann, Bolaño, Capote, Brodsky, Proust, Calvino, Giusti), and assembled them in their different languages, before proceeding to translate each quotation into the original languages of the other quotations. This produced a multilingual reading of the city of Venice and a sort of multilingual dialogue between these authors, through a performative ‘chain translation’, which led to the multiplication of languages, of readings and, inevitably, misreadings.

Chiara Basone, instead, took pictures of peculiar Venetian doorbells, whose shape give the impression of a human face, and decided to name each one of them and assign them one of the traditional professions of Venice, that have by now disappeared (*impiraressa*, *remer*, *pizzegamorto*, *pittima*, *revendigola*, *spezier*),⁸ somehow allowing the traditional Venice to come back to life (see [Figure 6.12](#)).

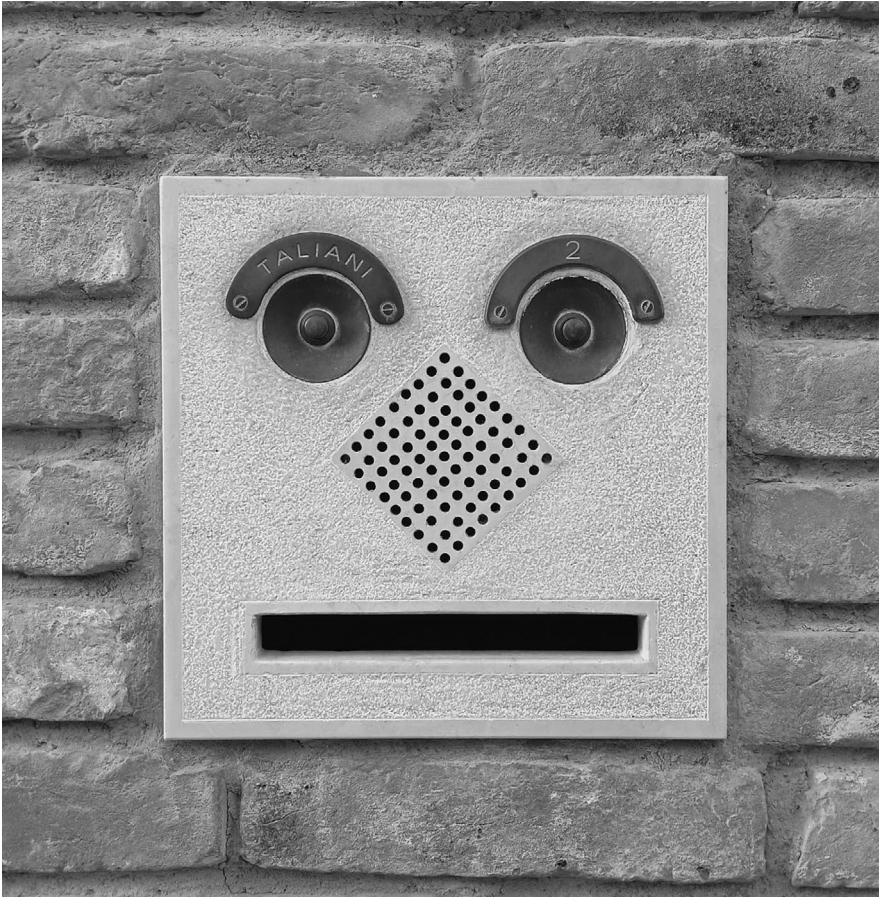


Figure 6.12 *Siora Taliani, Impiraressa dea Cae de Millefiori*, one of the works by Chiara Basone. Picture by Chiara Basone, © 2023.

Four students who had worked together on the collaborative translations (Eleonora Franceschi, Gaia Rutigliano, Petra Tortato and Samantha Cirillo) decided to produce a common and multiple ‘translation’, by interviewing people in Venice (both locals and tourists) and Paris, asking them for their own translation of Venice. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed, and these transcriptions were then ‘fed’ to Chat GPT (both in Italian and in French, through translations carried out by the students), asking the software to produce two different poems, starting from the Italian and from the French transcriptions/translations, a process which generated two entirely different poems, as can be seen from my translations into English:

Pretty, magical, beautiful, / Venice is an enchanted island, / An abused city, / But with a much bigger heart. // Suspended on water, suspended

in time, / Always waiting for something to happen, / Venice is passion and love, / The city of masks and gondoliers. // St. Mark's Square, the bâtiments très beaux, / *Acqua alta, paeassi corosi, moti ondosi e gas veevosi* [high waters, corroded buildings, wave movements and venomous gases], / But one cannot hate this lady, / For Venice is a newfound humanity. // Mahler and his symphonie No. 5, / Let the gondolas go to Venice, / And the love for this romantic city, / That must be pampered and loved deeply. // And when you return to the liberty bridge, / Here comes serenity, / For without water you cannot live, / And Venice is the city within me.

Beautiful, magical, so beautiful, / But mistreated, a lady in pain, / A unique and sensual city, / With a sublime history and colors. // Venezia, city of love, / Of lovers and gondolas, / Of historic buildings that always scream, / And crystalline waters that roll. // But it became an amusement park, / A Disneyland full of tourists, / Who invade the city like barbarians, / Leaving behind them disorder and sadness. // I'm a Venetian who loves it so much, / It's my heart and soul, / But overpopulation is a scourge, / And it must be regulated to be saved. // Suspended in time, on the water, / Venezia is always waiting, / For something special, something beautiful, / Like the love that bewitches and enchants us. // The masks, the gondolas and the gondoliers, / Mahler's music that carries us away, / All this is part of the history / Of this city we love so much. // Venezia, you're like a beautiful lady, / To be cherished and loved deeply, / For without you, we wouldn't be the same, / And our world would be different.

This is a perfect example of how students could combine a metaphorical understanding of translation of the city, and an actual practice of intersemiotic and experiential translation, through the use of digital tools and artificial intelligence. It allowed them to go beyond the limits of the discipline, putting their linguistic and translation skills to the test, while creating something original at the same time, and it especially allowed them to experience both the city of Venice and the practice of translation through a different lens.

Conclusions

Traduire en archipel(s) and the connected activities afforded the translators involved in the project, as well as viewers/readers, and the students, a real form of intersemiotic and experiential translation, which led to a deep reflection on both translation—as a practice and a discipline—and the city of Venice, moving beyond the usual confines of the discipline, and beyond the source in search of new translatable targets, instead of a single target.

This approach has in fact allowed to perceive translation as a field of possibilities and as an “unstable, transformative process which embodies both

displacement and dialogue” (Perteghella, 2019, p. 63). Intersemiotic translation was central in all the activities related to the project, since in these practices “instead of focusing on the translation of sense or meaning, the translator effectively plays the role of mediator in an experiential process that allows the recipients ... to re-create the sense (or ‘semios’) of the source artefact for themselves” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxvi).

Through this process the text becomes multilingual, multivocal, and multidimensional, because the use of ludic translation has allowed to “add performative value to a source text more than to transmit or communicate its instrumental meaning”, and to “[open] up a text to playful experimentation ... moderated through the translator’s knowledge, disposition and subjectivity as well as their sensory and embodied experience of reading” (Lee, 2022, p. 63).

The centrality of the translator is in the end also the centrality of the human, since these forms of intersemiotic experiential translation also respond to the need of finding a new role and new tasks for human translators in the era of the evolution of automatic or assisted translation. If humans are being replaced by machines for trivial tasks of translation, this will hardly be the case for forms of ludic intersemiotic translation, for which “non-trivial effort is always involved”, since “the solution to the problem presented by the pre-existing work needs to be creatively sought beyond bilingual glossaries, dictionaries and automated translators” (Lee, 2022, pp. 31–32).

A meaningful play with language and with digital tools in translation, which can lead to deep reflection about our languages, their interactions, and our interactions with them, as well as our relationship with the spaces we inhabit, can thus paradoxically be a way to escape the control of digital technologies over translation, and to bring back the human at the centre of the practice of translation. As Collombat states, in fact:

Our discipline is not only rooted in society, but also profoundly connected to the human. In fact, in my opinion, such a holistic approach to the act of translating, in which the translator invests himself as an individual, in all his singularity, goes hand in hand with a humanistic approach to translation, and to translation training.

(Collombat, 2022, n.p.)⁹

Instead of yielding to the control of digital tools over translation, playing with these same tools in unexpected ways, assigning a new centrality to the translator’s gaze, the translator’s ‘extended body’—including his or her own ‘cognitive baggage’, the ‘cognitive assemblages’ and the communities he or she is part of—can thus turn into a fruitful route for a humanistic approach to both translation practice and translation training, helping us to find new and more joyous forms to apply human creativity to the process of translation and its understanding.

Notes

- 1 All translations in this article from French and Italian into English are mine. French source text: “Il s’agit d’une approche de la traduction professionnelle fondée sur l’expérience—en ce qu’elle ‘renvoie ... à l’histoire de l’individu et implique ce qu’il a accumulé comme informations, sensations, images idées, attitudes, valeurs, etc., au fil du temps’ (Côté, 2003, p. 13), ainsi que les expériences ou expérimentations—définies comme ‘le fait de provoquer un phénomène dans l’intention de l’étudier’ ...—menées de manière systématique et analytique par le traducteur” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).
- 2 French source text: “La traduction, dans sa pratique surtout, mais dans sa théorisation aussi, se fait dans l’impondérable propre à chaque nouvelle rencontre d’un corps textuel et d’un corps traduisant. Voir le traducteur non plus comme un simple ‘agent’ traduisant, mais comme un ‘corps’ traduisant permet d’envisager son agir dans tout son ressenti, plus ou moins verbalisé, plus ou moins conscient, véritables limbes de l’implicite et de l’interlangue” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).
- 3 About the use of schwa as a morpheme to create epicene terms in Italian, see: [Sofa, 2019](#).
- 4 The timing of the exhibition was right on cue from this point of view, because Chat GPT was banned in Italy for 28 days only, exactly from March 31, 2023 (six days before the opening of the exhibition) to April 28, 2023 (five days after its closing).
- 5 The whole dialogue has been translated by the author from Italian into English.
- 6 Italian source text: “non è mai la traduzione o la riscrittura a essere infedele all’originale, ma è sempre l’originale a essere infedele a tutte le riscritture e le traduzioni che ne seguono ... Mentre la traduzione, infatti, ci dà la possibilità di leggere anche l’originale, come in un palinsesto ... l’originale, preso da solo, isolato da tutte le versioni alternative, non rende conto che di se stesso, lasciandoci nell’ignoranza di tutto ciò che il testo è, e di tutto ciò che il testo potrebbe essere, nelle sue infinite variazioni” (Sofa, 2018b, pp. 91–92).
- 7 French source text: “Elle illustre l’utilité des liens entre théorie (du verbe grec *theôrein* qui, rappelons-le, signifie ‘observer’) et pratique (du grec *praxis*, qui renvoie à l’action), en ce sens que le traducteur réflexif fonde ses actions sur une auto-observation analysée et objective. Il s’agit néanmoins d’une approche *bottom-up*, où le recours à la théorie est dicté par la nécessité d’optimiser la pratique et part de celle-ci” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).
- 8 These professions can be roughly translated as follows: *impiraressa*: the craftswomen who threaded tiny coloured glass beads made by local artisans with long needles, in the production of glass jewellery; *remer*: the craftsman who shapes the wooden oars and ‘forcolas’ for gondolas; *pizzegamorto*: gravedigger / undertaker; *pittima*: debt collector; *revendigola*: ragwoman; *spezier*: grocer
- 9 French source text: “Notre discipline est non seulement ancrée dans la société, mais aussi profondément liée à l’humain. De fait, à mon sens, une telle démarche holistique de l’acte de traduire, dans laquelle le traducteur s’investit en tant qu’individu, dans toute sa singularité, va de pair avec une approche humaniste de la traduction, et de la didactique de la traduction” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).

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