THE BOOK OF JESTS
HYUNG-MIN YOON

Exhibition at grunt gallery
Sept 11 – Oct 11, 2014
How many Marilies does it take to change a lighthouse?

None.
The lighthouse contains the arch of its own revolution.
The Gesture of Writing

Václav Hácha

The Gesture of Writing traces the movement from writing by hand as a sculptural form, forward to typing, a process that removes irregularities and unwanted incidental marks, in which “we no longer engage with a stick, but with a series of hammers”. Placing the gesture of writing into an historical context, he notes that the practice of typing ultimately transformed the meaning of these renderings placed next to such diverse scripts?

Vilém Flusser’s The Gesture of Writing is a typed work from 1991. It describes in fine, methodical detail the act of writing through inscription, to penetrate a surface, and a written text is an inscription, although as a matter of fact it is in the vast majority of cases an inscription. Therefore it is not to be formed, but to inform, and a text is not a formation, but an inscription. I believe that we have to start from this fact if we want to understand the gesture of writing: it is a penetrating gesture that informs a surface.”

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The Gesture of Writing contains strikeouts and types, and moments when the hammers glanced unevenly. Reading it (at odd in PDF format) thus also requires care and a certain level of translation, of filling in, or working to discern the author’s intent. The text lightly abrades our reading of it, a distant echo of Flusser’s process of translating and re-translation, but his process, while arduous, was not endless: “It is a gesture of making holes, of digging, of perforating. ‘It is a penetrating gesture that informs a surface.’”

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Dürer’s lithographs, inscribed and re-inscribed over centuries, are now subject to a new interpretive maneuver, moving from their 14th century European Christian context to the present day. What sort of prose text might occupy the space intended for the sacred?

The artist looks to the role of the Jester, an ancient figure found the world over, and found in close proximity to power. Able to speak the unspeakable, the Jester claims an uneasy space of intimacy and exclusion, whether in a monarch’s court or, these days, on late night television. The Jester draws and re-draws the line between insult and adulation, using flourishes, oblique angles and side-long curves in his speech. Jokes – like prayers – are most often spoken.

Transposing the method of the polyglot prayer book, Yoon sought out political jokes in English, Italian, Hebrew, Hindi, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Russian, Japanese, Arabic, German, Greek and Czech from friends and associates. They address classic themes such as hypocrisy, corruption and oppressive bureaucracy yet riff on the culturally specific paradoxes and absurdities of power. Certain formats – light bulb jokes, doctor jokes, and the like – repeat across nations, historical moments and regimes. Using a font developed in Dürer’s times, Yoon letter-pressed these jokes into the Terra nullius at the centre of the illuminated pages. By indexing the landscapes, forms and figures of the illustrations to the content of the jokes, new meanings are constructed. Emili Hácha, the President of Czechoslovakia during Nazi occupation, becomes a hooded monk waiting for dinner; German Chancellor Angela Merkel is seen as the Virgin Mary, no less, and Berlusconi becomes King David. Bound in deep magenta, the photo-lithographs with their letterpress texts form a new volume of flagrant iconoclasm – and in the case of the Arabic scripts, near blasphemies. Yoon’s method proposes the artist as editor, as publisher of a trans-historical, multilingual anthology, in a finely crafted limited edition.

In the gallery, in addition to the book, framed prints reproduce several two-page spreads. These particular excerpts are often in a left-page question, right-page answer format, or one printed page weight the blankness of its neighbour. In the archive area behind the exhibition space, a video records the artists’ hands turning the pages of the book. She takes care to time the page-turning correctly: in comedy timing is everything. This video of the silent reading, along with Yoon’s process of photographing and photographing the pages, as well as the framing and reframing of the letterpress jokes remind us of Flusser, translating and translating again. From one medium to another and back again, Yoon re-works her thinking along Flusser’s chain, to the point when all possible meanings have been extracted, seeking exhaustion.

Lorna Brown
August, 2014

The Book of Jests

The Book of Jests began in an antiquarian bookstore in Vienna where Hyung Min Yoon found and purchased a 1922 edition of Albrecht Dürer’s illustrations. The book, Marginal Drawings for the Prayer of Emperor Maximilian I, was bound in grey cloth with beveled edges, and contained illustrations created for the margins of a prayer book. Originally published in 1515, Dürer’s illustrations were used in the mass publication and distribution of a single Christian prayer to multiple language groups, leaving blank the space of intimacy and the history of printed text, this central unmarked ground must have seemed an almost overwhelming space of possibility.

The illustrations, inked in green and orange and sepia, are familiar biblical themes—mass produced extensions of the sacred manuscripts illuminated by hand in Medieval times. Horned devils perched on filigree, winged dragons and architectural nourishes, where Hyung-Min Yoon found and purchased a 1922 edition of Albrecht Dürer’s illustrations. The book, Marginal Drawings for the Prayer of Emperor Maximilian I, was bound in grey cloth with beveled edges, and contained illustrations created for the margins of a prayer book. Originally published in 1515, Dürer’s illustrations were used in the mass publication and distribution of a single Christian prayer to multiple language groups, leaving blank the space of intimacy and the history of printed text, this central unmarked ground must have seemed an almost overwhelming space of possibility.

The illustrations, inked in green and orange and sepia, are familiar biblical themes—mass produced extensions of the sacred manuscripts illuminated by hand in Medieval times. Horned devils perched on filigree, winged dragons and architectural nourishes, changing mounted knights and mythological beasts: what might these have meant to the readers of some forty three languages of the polyglot prayer book? What universalities were assumed to reside in the scrollwork embellishments, allegorical arrangements and fantastical landscapes? What process of translation transformed the meaning of these renderings placed next to such diverse scripts?

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