

This essay accompanies the exhibition *The Normal Condition of Any Communication*  
by cheyanne turions  
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**Gallery TPW** gallerytpw.ca

## The Normal Condition of Any Communication by cheyanne turions

*The Normal Condition of Any Communication* takes its title from the words of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who states that, “Distance is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication.”<sup>1</sup> He holds that the space between ignorance and knowledge is a factual distance crossed by way of observation and comparison. This is the same process by which you and I learned our mother tongues, and it stands in opposition to the stultifying relationship between scholars and pupils—a relationship that falsely maintains a distinction between intelligences. Radically, Rancière believes that all intelligences are equal. There is no need for didactic instruction in order to learn, because desire is the real measure of whether or not something can be incorporated into a way of knowing the world. The work of *not* knowing is a matter of translating signs into other signs, of moving from what is certain to what is mysterious, and testing understanding between these poles.

I have set the works that comprise *The Normal Condition of Any Communication* in relation because they address this poetic act of translation by emphasizing interpretation. Videos by Neil Beloufa, Keren Cytter and Reza Haeri dismantle a definitive sense of history in order to reconstitute a plurality of accounts. The notebook works of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri trace a dialogic process between the artists that, without effacing the personal, is staunchly political. A text-based neon sign by the artist collective Claire Fontaine questions the way cultural and geographical identities are formed. These transformative performances demonstrate the “unpredictable interplay

of associations and dissociations” that come to bear in analysis, and suggest that communication is possible despite the fluidity of meaning making.<sup>2</sup> Within this in-determinability we must consider how to live with conjecture, and how to move through communities that are as bound by difference as much as they are bound by mutual affection. The distance of communication is not just a relationship to facts but also relationships between people. Identity—yours and mine—is a constant renegotiation of these networks.

The distance that Rancière speaks of is first taken up in the front window space of Gallery TPW via a glowing blue sign that proclaims: “*Kino ngawaji megizijig eyaaway*.” A project of artist-duo Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere* (2011) translates this title phrase into a series of neon signs in any language save for English. It is presented here, as a special commission, in Ojibway. To begin where I am in an attempt to communicate across distance—in the city of Toronto, in the country of Canada—Ojibway marks the history of the land itself. Ojibway is the mother tongue of the Mississaugas, on whose territory Gallery TPW and the city of Toronto are situated. A significant portion of this land has long been (and still is) the subject of unresolved land claims between the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation and the Government of Canada.<sup>3</sup> This reality highlights the political agenda of the sign to confuse national or cultural senses of belonging by posing self-reflexive questions regarding both what is considered native and what is considered foreign.

Looking out from the gallery onto the street, the neon sign invokes the tropes of a capitalist economy, but in a language that is not recognizable as the local tongue of the market. This is not necessarily uncommon in Toronto. Though I am not trying to obscure the meaning of the sign from the street traffic, I do want to make this movement from one way of knowing to another concrete. The sign acknowledges two very particular histories: the rich cultural heritage of the Mississauga people, and Canada's colonial projects in relationship to indigenous populations. I have situated the sign as the first thing visitors will see because I want to begin the exhibition by acknowledging this land and its history. However, I do not want to manufacture a nostalgic desire for something original. I cannot claim a lived relationship to the past, but I can allow it to speak through me. By reading the sign and by learning what it says, I become a conduit for its injunction, which simultaneously grounds and unfixes my sense of self.

*Foreigners Everywhere* distinctly captures a double meaning of identity and relation, which can be understood to say both that there are foreigners everywhere and that a person is foreign everywhere. By disrupting a notion of home (or a homeland), the sign complicates how ideas of inside and outside are constructed. In a world increasingly composed of itinerant populations—immigrants, refugees, tourists and migrant workers—it is essential that vigilant attention be paid to how this cultural mixing actually plays out when we move through the world. History provides many examples of the horror that can be conjured when fear is at the root of perceived difference. The twinned charges of the sign destabilize us all in turn, offering an egalitarian position from which to begin understanding each other. In this case, what we share is a negotiation of the land we find ourselves on, which implicates history as much as it does a present-tense conception of what we can



Mladen Stilinović. *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist*. 1992.

imagine the future be. The signage defines community by referencing an identity that produces exclusions, but it simultaneously absorbs and redistributes that disparity. Through the production of difference, shared heritage is acknowledged. Community is not an entity but a perpetually fluctuating series of relationships. The sign, as an instance of linguistic and cultural translation, initiates a dialogue between the specificity of Toronto's history and the unpredictable variety of experiences embodied by each person who cares to engage with the sign's message.

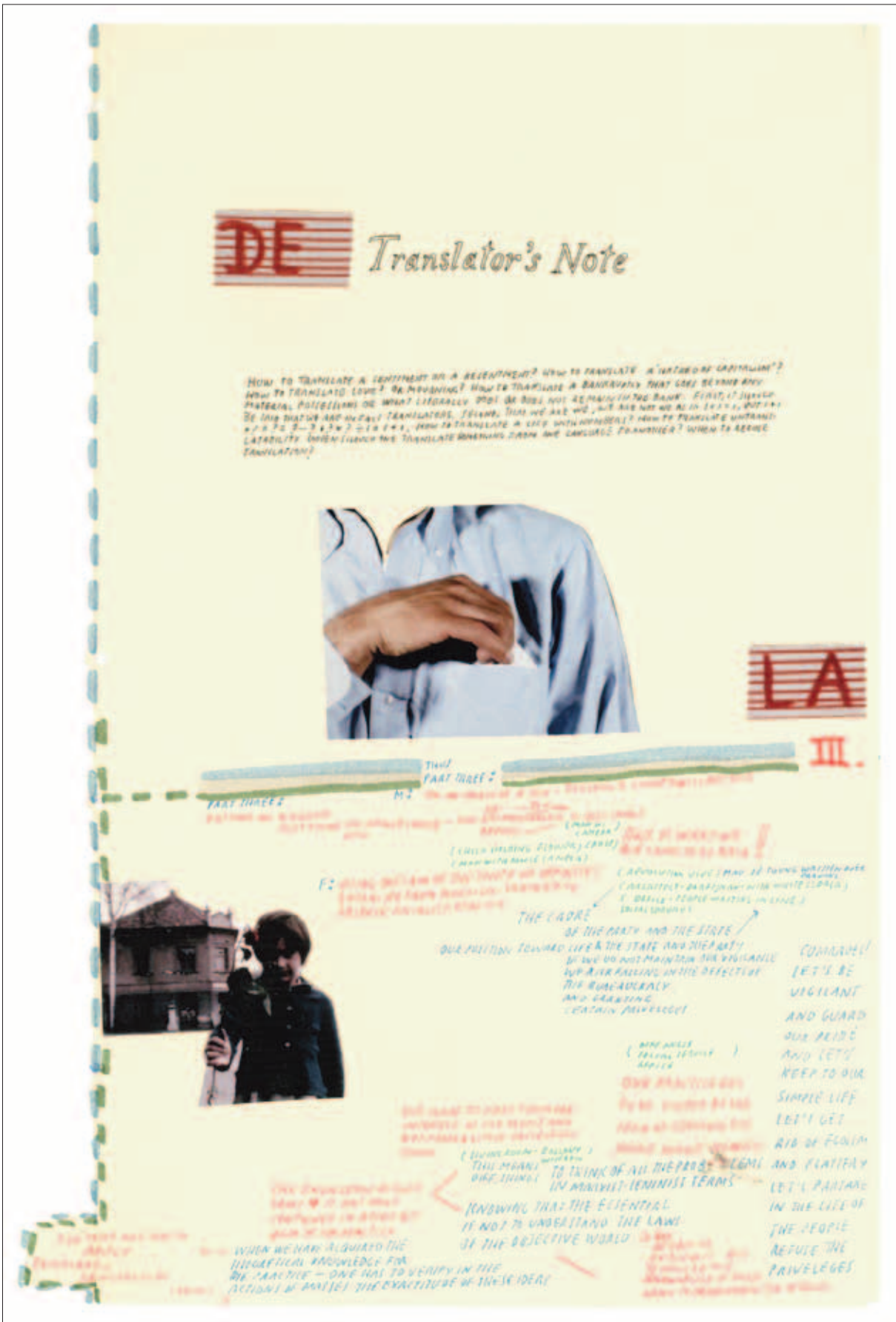
The sign begins and—for me and many others—ends in English. I am reminded of Mladen Stilinović's flag *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* (1992). I by no means want to reinforce the ostensible message of Stilinović's piece, but I cannot escape my own privilege in growing up speaking the language that functions as currency in the land of art presentation. Translating "foreigners everywhere" from English into any other language does not redistribute the power of the English in the art (or business) world but it provides an opportunity to augment understandings. When the Ojibway is translated back into English, for instance, what happens is roughly this: "All to be out of the way, foreigners are there everywhere." The sense of "foreigners everywhere" is closely maintained, but within the discord from the original to the cross-translation back to English, cracks appear. Extrapolating from this instance of disorientation, I can imagine what is left behind in the move from intention and reception, and be humbled in my own attempts to speak.

In the long hallway of the gallery, a vitrine displays a number of works on paper by New York-based artists Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, illustrating an exchange that moves over personal differences. *The Meaning of Everything* (vol. 2, 2008–2010) is an ongoing series of handwritten notebooks passed between Anastas and Gabri that began when they attempted to make sense of the world after the financial upheavals of 2008. These meticulous sketches, lyrical compositions and newspaper clippings evince the artists' grappling with the sudden and massive shifts in some of the world's largest economies. What the works reveal is the abundance of questions,

both answerable and unanswerable, that rise up in the everyday lives of people in the wake of devastation.

The project's trajectory, in opposition to the mindset of capital that provoked it, is conceived as a long-term undertaking. *The Meaning of Everything* is a document of the intellectual and affective movements or becomings that will constitute their future lives. Though much of the subject matter Anastas and Gabri contend with is ugly (money, advertising, boredom, denial), their efforts to collaboratively make sense are fundamentally utopian. They unapologetically intertwine the personal, the political and the economic in their notebooks, insisting on the interconnectedness of art, work and life. By articulating webs of influence, they are able to demonstrate how attempts to answer the question of what really is of value extend beyond personal concerns. Qualities of life are not realized in a vacuum: they include considerations far beyond one's intimate sphere. In this way, their notebooks are not just remnants of collective inquiry but also treatises for future action, maps and manifestos.

What this project attests to are the winding routes taken in an attempt at comprehension. Anastas and Gabri provoke and challenge each other to the effect that their collaboration broadens their respective visions of the world. By reaching to make sense of each other, the shapes of their own understandings are subject to mutation, as are mine by observing them. Rancière believes that an attempt at sense making is as productive as what might more obviously be termed creation, insisting that, "spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers."<sup>4</sup> In this case, I compose my own poem from bearing witness to Anastas and Gabri's wanderings, as they have composed their poem as visual artists and scholars. Though I do not personally know the artists, their project stands as a passage between us. Distance is neither greater nor smaller when the communication is between friends, enemies or strangers. If I allow that Anastas and Gabri can speak to me, then our correspondence stands as an instance of differences being bridged.



Ayreen Anastas + Rene Gabri. "Translator's Note" from *Meaning of Everything* (vol. 2), 2008-2009. Courtesy of the artists.

In the open exhibition space of Gallery TPW, a large W-shaped set of walls create three corners each housing one of the exhibition's video works. Though each video is contained within a nook, they equally partake of the sculptural structure, creating a simple path around which gallery visitors can travel to view each media piece. To begin, Reza Haeri's *All Restrictions End* (2009) is a cinematic essay that takes up Iranian history through the lens of fashion, mapping political revolution through changing tastes in clothing. Drawing from a diverse set of references such as the archives of Iranian and European cinema, histories of photography, painting and revolutionary graphics, and the writings of philosophers and translators alike, Haeri composes a poetic reflection on Iran's cultural and political negotiations between East and West; future and past; freedom and repression. By muddying distinctions between these supposed dichotomies, Haeri enacts another claim of

Rancière's, that "these stories of boundaries to cross, and of a distribution of roles to be blurred, in fact coincide[s] with the reality of contemporary art, in which all specific artistic skills tend to leave their particular domain and swap places and powers."<sup>5</sup> The form of *All Restrictions End* performs its avowed claims by incorporating still and moving images, by equivocating between poetry and documentary and by casting a tailor's silent meditations in the starring role of a theatrical performance. In other words, Haeri displaces forms and mediums to affect new readings of history.

For Haeri, changes in what is culturally acceptable in clothing and fashion are not used as a metaphor for political revolution. Rather, he constructs a narrative where clothing is chosen for its cultural import, for the power differential it carries with it. A poignant example is the changing signs in Iranian storefronts.



Reza Haeri. *All Restrictions End*. Still from video. 2009.

They read “Veiled Women Not Allowed” early in Reza Shah’s regime (1925-1941), but 50 years later were altered to read “*Unveiled* Women Not Allowed.” Similar narratives could be constructed for other countries (consider Canada’s and France’s current obsession with legislating the wearing of veils in a time of rampant Islamophobia), and in this sense Haeri’s film tells a common story of clothing being used as a means of social control.<sup>6</sup>

Haeri pays particular attention to the role that suits have played in Iranian history. Beginning with the coup d’état of the 1920s, clergymen became leaders, in part by putting on business suits as fashioned in the West. In the early days of the revolution, any man without press lines on his trousers would be dismissed from work, for how could he say his prayers without breaking his press lines? Here is an example of cultural hybridization: the creased press lines become a way of mapping tradition onto a new reality. The suit, the new ruling-class outfit, idealized the power that had settled in after the coup, facilitating the movements related to speaking by creating an attention that dictated what would be heard. In this case, Western culture was the “other” imported for its cache: an act of translation utilized to a specific advantage.

What Haeri catalogues are a number of instances where attempts have been made, rather successfully, to appropriate social power by an act of cultural translation. Through poetic narration, *All Restrictions End* asks in what dress can one revolt, await one’s lover, occupy an embassy, go to war, or simply look? Answers to these questions ebb and flow, my responses differing from Haeri’s much as they would differ from yours. As is repeated often in the film, “Revolution of the look, liberation of the eye,” hinting at the potential of cultural hybridity to cut across stultified oppositions and give rise to different ways of fathoming the world.

Neil Beloufa addresses the indeterminate potential of translation in his film *Untitled* (2010), which is a portrait of a place’s non-existence. In a set constructed almost entirely of life-size cardboard fabrications of an Algerian villa, a number of former inhabitants and neighbours relay a story about a home being occupied by terrorists. However, accounts vary widely, even contradictorily, and in the protagonists’ imagination of what the terrorists might have done during their day-to-day rituals of occupation, the stage of their ruminations does not corroborate their telling.



Keren Cytter. *The Hottest Day of the Year*. Still from video. 2010.

Instead, flattened images of a pristine home stand in as counterpoints to their hypotheses.

What does seem to be a matter of agreement between the previous occupants, is that the house is constructed of glass walls, making it a curious place for rebels to have hidden. I can visualize the house allowing for sight in both directions: from the inside out and from the outside in. The visual permeability of the structure—even if only implied—complicates the suggestion that anything universal can be revealed from a subjective point of view. Along with the characters in the film, I try in vain to understand how these improbable tales might be true. In the irresolvable parallel between the set and the story, Beloufa creates an uncanny space of reception that effaces the value of so-called reality. Acts are not born out; testimonies ring false. The security of an idea of truth is compromised by an oscillation that refuses to give in any direction.

If, however, I am willing to engage in a game of suspending disbelief, then it is possible to conjure the villa constructed from real materials, to envision the strange rituals of the interlopers and to call to mind a glass castle in various states of ruin. Beloufa does not suggest an obvious route to take in constructing a reading of the film's contradictory stories: the conceptualization of one denies the plausibility of another. Even while I play out one interpretation over another, Beloufa manages to instill a simultaneous acknowledgment that any understanding is but one amongst a field of possibilities. Going down one road does not hinder the possibility of going down another, and thus a unifying narrative resists formulation despite the singular subject matter. Though Beloufa operates here in the realm of fiction, he is also able to imbue nonfiction with a sense of ambiguity. This is not to conflate theatre and documentary but, as Rancière puts it, "to know that...spectacles [are] merely spectacles can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in."<sup>7</sup>

Playing with the potential of stories and images to say something of the world, Keren Cytter's *The Hottest Day of the Year* (2010) is a film in two parts. The first is a meandering history of the fictional character

Anne-Marie Baptiste, a nurse who fled France to work in South Africa during World War II. The second presents a strange meeting of women administrating enrollment in the Israeli Defense Forces.

Narrated in equal measure by Baptiste's grandson and the recitation of entries from her journal, Baptiste's story is neither clearly documentary nor fiction, but some slippery negotiation between the two. Illustrated in part with real photographic images that reference actual people and events, the fabricated life of a war deserter is lent both philosophical and historical authenticity. Cytter is playing with expectations of how truth is constructed, insisting on a sociological montage that incorporates idiosyncratic emotional responses as much as it does facts. Rising up out of Baptiste's created story is the claim that in and of itself objectivity is an inadequate marker of what has come to pass, whether it is fantasy or fact.

In the offices of the Israeli Defense Forces, a number of women are in various states of waiting: one crawls along the ground with a serious migraine, another idly flips through the pages of magazine and a civilian patiently remains seated, expecting a military official to process her application. When the registration process finally begins, cryptic answers that function as markers of history rather than signals of qualification are given to standard questions—'82, for example, marks the beginning of the Lebanon war and not the requested measure of fitness. The scenario is made stranger by the fact that all of the women in the offices are actually too old to be in the Israeli military. As the coherence of the situation degrades, Cytter encourages a sort of reading that is outside the nuances of how narrative is usually understood.

Demarcated by a title sequence that comes in the middle of the film (a self-referential dissection of the medium of moving images), associations between Baptiste's biography and the IDF offices are tenuous at best. The eponymous situation of *The Hottest Day of the Year* occurs in both parts of the film; a female soldier thumbing through a *National Geographic* magazine possibly connects the romantic anthropological tone of the first section to the latter; and in both parts time is measured in relation to the political history of Israel.

These connections are more the product of my mind, however, which is desperate to weave disparate elements together, rather than real connective tissue. Cytter aggressively maintains distance between the sections of her film despite the fact that I want to fashion linkages. The manufacture of this desire draws attention to the agency bound up in looking, and as Rancière reminds me, “being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation.”<sup>8</sup> This looking is already activity; it is the work of making sense of and moving through the world, be it through a landscape or through an artwork.

Cytter’s interest in the alienation between experience and communication, narrative and representation, is taken up here through fractured anecdotes that resist comprehension except by way of their unknowability. *The Hottest Day of the Year* can only be understood through the lens of irrational or nebulous associations. While this may seem like a failure of communication, it is also possible to read it as a frank example of the limits of communicability: language and media are mostly impotent when trying to fabricate a bridge between a historical French nurse and contemporary Israeli soldiers. Boundless imagination and the hyper-mobility of many people today (both physical and electronic) provide a plethora of opportunities to set people and ideas in relation. Still, this possibility does not necessarily equate to fruitful exchanges. Cytter is encouraging an honest evaluation of the capacity of hybridization to produce either viable or spiritless offspring.

Within any given culture, nation or relationship, difference is something we have to come to terms with. Though *The Normal Condition of Any Communication* provides examples of translation across distance, I am mindful of the fact that translation solves nothing. Translation is no answer. It is the work of discord and negotiation, and the understandings wrought are only every partial. A literal translation (if and when that is ever possible) is not the totality of what something means, and the desire to mediate differences should not be allowed to flatten them out.

And yet, it is important to demarcate between the irreducible remainder of translation—those concepts that have no equivalence or the rhyme of poetry that cannot be mimicked—and desperate maneuvers that intentionally erect boundaries of resistance. The former is the inevitable consequence of an attempt to understand the world in different ways. The latter is the product of fear. The defamiliarizing effects of translation allow for difference to be named, but they also articulate a third thing in common between any two people, breaching the possibility of recognizing another in oneself. Though singular notions of identity or history are forfeited for the recognition and reconstruction of a plurality of accounts, what is gained is an eye to the future. The tools of learning—contemplation and comparison—involve a reckoning of the idea of the past to the reality of the present. By figuring and disfiguring history, these works suggest that singular coherence is unlikely, and from there they conjure a mutable conception of the now.

What kind of future can I envision? How can my ways of seeing, hearing and interpreting affect what is perceptible and imperceptible? None of the works in this exhibition suggest easy or replicable strategies for speaking across distance, but rather they indicate a measure of success: it is possible to communicate across differences so long as a multiplicity of meanings are fundamentally maintained. Translation theory counsels that, “the outcomes of translation will significantly depend on the ways in which the bodies, literal or textual, articulate the process of mutual identification.”<sup>9</sup> So, do my identifications re-inscribe inequality? Do they reenact globalization? Or do they seek out new languages? And, importantly, do I operate from an initial position of respect, presuming equality yet acknowledging that a “bridge is passage, but it is also distance maintained”?<sup>10</sup>



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London/New York: Verso, 2009, page 10.

As Rancière relates in *The Emancipated Spectator*, the book originated in a speaking request he received to reflect on debates around theatre, performance and the spectator based on ideas he had previously developed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* sets out the pedagogical theory of Joseph Jacotot who, in the early 19th century, claimed that one person can teach another what neither of them knew, that all intelligences are equal, and that popular instruction is opposed to intellectual emancipation.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, page 17.

<sup>3</sup> LaForme, Bryan, "Mississaugas of New Credit's Toronto Purchase Specific Claim" *Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation*, [http://www.newcreditfirstnation.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=28](http://www.newcreditfirstnation.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=28)

A current land claim of the Mississaugas of New Credit has recently entered into negotiations with the federal government regarding 250,880 acres of land in the Greater Toronto area that stretches from Ashbridge Bay in the east to Etobicoke Creek in the west, running 28 miles north at either end.

<sup>4</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London/New York: Verso, 2009, page 13.

<sup>5</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London/New York: Verso, 2009, page 21

<sup>6</sup> Leung, Wency. "Should Canada ban Islamic face veils?" *The Globe and Mail* (11 April 2011), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/the-hot-button/should-canada-ban-islamic-face-veils/article1979819/>

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London/New York: Verso, 2009, page 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, page 17.

<sup>9</sup> Longinovi, Tomislav Z. "Fearful Asymmetries: A Manifesto of Cultural Translation," *Atlas of Transformation*. Eds. Zbynek Baladrán and Vit Havránek. Prague: tranzit/JRP|Ringier, 2010, page 320.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Trans. Kristin Ross. United States: Stanford University Press, 2007, page 33.

## Thanks:

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