

**Carl Trahan**

**Words and their Shadows**

by Bernard Schütze

Mobilizing tensions by way of meticulously crafted contrasts is the driving force of Carl Trahan's art practice. Since the early 2000s, this Montreal-based artist has built up an increasingly coherent body of work centred on an operative transposition of the concept of translation into the visual arts. The act of translation involves a continuous back and forth movement between two meaning registers, one familiar and the other foreign. The impossibility of an absolutely faithful translation gives rise to a permanent tension between the two versions that can never fully correspond on either a semantic or stylistic level. In his earlier work series such as *Deux mots sur le mot* (2008) and *Projets autour de la traduction* (2005-09) the artist focused directly on translation procedures in an approach that explored juxtaposed bilingual textual material and the medium of drawing in its relation to notions of transcoding, copying and erasure. In an important work from this period, *Indicible* (2005) Trahan devised a process to visually and spatially fix the movement inherent in translation. He began by inscribing the French word "indicible" word on a large paper sheet and then proceeded to write out all its dictionary translations in German. The process was then repeated for each ensuing word pair and meticulously hand-drawn, branching out from left to right until the limits of the chosen surface were exhausted. This visual rendering of translational processes inscribes it in a visual field that gives spatial form to the movement of generally invisible cognitive operations. It also reveals the temporal dimension involved in this laborious unfolding over time. In his more recent series, the artist has broadened this approach by applying it to historical contexts viewed through the spectrum of a translation that operates not only spatially through diverse juxtapositions of two meaning registers, but also temporally by casting the shadows of the

sombre periods in recent European history against the backdrop of our contemporary timeframe. In his more recent series, the artist has broadened this approach by applying it to historical contexts through a translation process that operates not only spatially through diverse juxtapositions of two meaning registers, but also temporally by casting the shadows of the sombre periods in recent European history against the backdrop of our contemporary timeframe. Moreover, like the inflected word that begins this translation process, his exhibition projects proceed according to similar logic of unfolding an initial concept through a set of material transformations.

### **Anachronistic Translations**

The notion of translation, as understood by Trahan, does not only pertain to the spatial movement between two language registers, it also operates in the temporal field as that can be carried over from another era into our own. Just as translation confronts one with what is foreign in one's own language through contact with another, so does the revisiting of a past era shift the perception of our own. It is this vein that Trahan's latest work and taken the shape of successive exhibitions, *Tous les mots nécessaires* (2013), *La notte elettrica* (2014), and *The Nervous Age* (2015) that focus on the obscure eras of recent European history from three points of view. Considered as an ensemble, these exhibitions form a triptych in which these troubling and troubled periods are viewed through the lens of textual and visual elements that are contemporaneous with the respective contexts. The artist here takes his interest in translation processes further by inscribing it within a historical perspective in which the temporal shift introduces elements that are alien to our contemporary symbolic order and thus disjunctively shift the perspective from which it is viewed. Like translation, in which meaning is imperfectly transposed from a foreign linguistic register to a familiar one, Trahan's anachronistic gestures transpose the erstwhile contemporaneity of the "now" that was then into the "now" context of contemporary art. A brief overview of each of the three sections of this anachronistic translation and its intertwining of language, translation and temporalities via visual strategies is in order here before exploring how the triptych as a whole problematizes notions of a bygone contemporaneity.

## **Sounding the Unspeakable**

In the exhibition series *Tous les mots nécessaires*, Trahan gazes into the abyss of meaning ushered in by the Nazis' ideological manipulation of language and the unspeakable events it paved the way for. The conceptual starting point for this series is the word “*ewig*” (eternal), a word which Viktor Klemperer identified as a typical Nazi superlative in his seminal book *LTI - Lingua Tertii Imperii* in which he analyzed the perversion of the German language under the Nazi regime. The word appears twice in the series, first as a red neon light transcribed in Sütterlin script (a cursive script taught in German schools from 1935 to 1941) and then as the initial word for a translation process (from German to French) following the same formal unfolding as in *Indicible*. The contextual inflections of this word set the tone for Trahan's exploration of the shapes (typeface, signage, cursive script) that the German language was submitted to as part of the totalitarian propaganda machine. The notion of indoctrination, already alluded to by the neon script, is further echoed in another work - *Der Kleine Duden, 1934*. This installation consists of a small school desk on top of which lies a lead casting of a dictionary published a year after the Nazi ascension to power. This version of the *Kleine Duden* —the classic learning dictionary for German schoolchildren—included an annex dedicated to the vocabulary of the National Socialist party. In presenting this object as a lead casting —hence unreadable—Trahan underscores the opaque and silencing aspects of language under the regime. In its impenetrable leaden form the dictionary also point to the immense historical weight of this period in German history, which Germans refer to as the “*bleierne Zeit*” or leaden years.

In 7 (*les mots les plus terribles du national-socialisme*) Trahan reworks this notion of a sealed-off language to touch on the dilemma between the unrepresentability of the horrors committed in the name Nazi ideology and the necessity to bear witness and sustain an admonitory memory. For this intervention, Trahan chose seven words from the National Socialist vocabulary that he deems the most terrible. Instead of transcribing the letters of each word one after the other, he drew the Fraktur typeface letters on top of each letter other so that they form a solid layering of dark graphite with only vague hints of the outlines remaining discernible. Through this drawing

gesture, which teeters on the edge of an abyss, this harrowing work succeeds in giving a palpable form to the tension between the representable and unrepresentable, the legible and unspeakable, the translatable and untranslatable. Using the visual means proper to art, Trahan thus communicates the incommunicable opacity of language and the incomprehensible darkness that this baleful period has not ceased to confront us with. This terminal opacity of language is contrasted through an inclusion of the voices of survivors of the Nazi regime's oppression. For instance, in the exhibition's eponymous work *Tous les mots nécessaires* displays a series of graphite blocks engraved with a list of German words taken from the book *What a Beautiful Sunday* by the writer and Buchenwald survivor Jorge Semprún, who identified these words as essential tools to stay alive in the camp. Language is thus at once revealed in its most deadly guise and as a bare form of resistance to counter its destructive force.

Whereas *Tous les mots nécessaires* is based on a process of erasure and obscuring of language under the leaden hand of a totalitarian regime cast in increasingly dark gradations of grey, the *Notte elettrica* exhibition series explores the stark interplay of light and darkness. Trahan here uses various strategies to convey the Futurists' headlong embrace of technological acceleration and war mongering, as well as their uneasy relationship to Italian fascism. True to form, the artist again deploys his visualized translation inscription, this time with *Bouleversements (Traductions)*, comprising a back-and-forth process across French and Italian beginning with the word "bouleversement" (upheaval, disruption). Drawing directly on words taken from the Futurist manifestos, the installation *Notte elettrica* transmits phrases in coloured neon lights flickering in a darkened space. Adjacent to this work, there is a face-to-face encounter between an upright lamp featuring Marinetti's continuous profile in glass and a similar upside down lamp, displaying Mussolini profiled countenance (*Lampes-Marinetti-Mussolini*). In reactivating elements of the Futurist modern design inflected aesthetic, Trahan's gestures reveal an inherent paradox of the Futurist stance, which is to have abetted and propelled the destructive and oppressive forces of Italian Fascism through their adulation of the "illuminating" advances of modern technology, such as neon signage, electrical lighting and the automobile that were heralded as a means to lift Europe out of the night of the past. Instead the ideological complicity of Futurism with Fascism gave rise to a new barbarism that sang the praises of war

and the destructive might of technology. Through this focus on the complicity between an early 20th avant-garde and political movement, Trahan reflects on the how the shape given to words, in their aesthetic and ideological intertwining, can speedily lead humanity down the road of disaster.

### **Erstwhile Contemporaneities**

Trahan's latest series, *The Nervous Age*, redirects the focus on the obscure moments of recent European history to the broader period between the beginning of the second industrial revolution in 1850 and the outbreak of World War I. Through images and texts immanent or directly relevant to this period, Trahan redeploys his signature visual strategies to explore how the rapid technical and scientific advances were accompanied by a simultaneous sense of metaphysical unease and a fascination with spiritualism and the occult. In the diptych *Wo viel Licht ist, ist auch viel Schatten* (Where there is much light, the shadow is deep), consisting of a drawn copy of two photographs depicting stage psychics making use of electric light as part of their acts, the tension between rational and irrational forces, rapid modernization and psychological disorientation is made immediately palpable and apparent. Through its combination of drawings transposed from photographs, textual citation and historical references to technical advances (electricity, Morse code, physics) and the concomitant civilizational malaise and sense of impending doom, *The Nervous Age* exhibition reveals this period as the breeding ground for the aberrant historical developments examined in the two previous exhibitions. The considerable coherence between the three iterations resides to a large extent to the way in which the material manifestations (black and white drawings, textual engraving in graphite, visualized translation gaps) are immanent to its conceptual content (metaphysical tensions born of the contrast between light and dark, disjunctive times, the political forces at work in the aesthetic shaping of language) thus relaying the tensions of the recent past in the proximity of the present.

In revisiting the particular sombre periods of Nazism, Italian Futurism and Fascism and the tensions unleashed over the 65 years of the European pre-World War I period, Trahan's current body of work probes the ominous charge they carry over into the present. In so far that it focuses on the darkness of these eras' respective contemporaneities from today's perspective, his artistic gesture echoes Agamben's insight that: "The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present."<sup>1</sup> In foregrounding the voices and observations of these erstwhile contemporaneities in the visual language of an art predicated on a perpetual now time, the artist's interventions prompt a double reflection: in what way is the contemporaneity of these past eras translatable into ours, and how can this disjunctive, untimely contemporaneity prompt us to better anticipate the movement of the shadows looming against our immediate horizon.

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<sup>1</sup>Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" in *Nudities*, David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella trans., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 13.

