



A Manifesto for Interpretation as Instigation
Antena

MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK
—Mierle Laderman Ukeles

For us there are not boundaries between things in such a clear way... We wear our mistakes and missteps out in the open and our arty-ness and politics intertwine in ways that often surprise us... We are constantly pushing ourselves, and others, to go places where we haven't before with art and creativity.
—Temporary Services

We know that the problems are too complicated, too complex, to define art from a dictionary... We say that art is defined by the people, because the people are the ones who make art.
—Emory Douglas

- The so-called language barrier is permeable.
- Differences in language signal larger differences in perception, culture, worldview, and mode of expression. Capital marshals difference as barrier.
- Language can be used to divide and conquer, and yet it can also be used to unite, to resist domination, to construct more humane and delightful realities.
- John Cage: I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry.
- To listen closely to what someone is saying and repeat it accurately (yet always differently) in another language is a specialized form of speech.
- We have nothing to say and we are saying what you said and it is poetry.
- Interpreters say what is being said, what has already been said, and what has not yet been said. Listening to what is being said elsewhere, in a different context, in a different language, can open us to think what we have not yet thought.
- Interpreters do not repeat the words of another person mindlessly, mechanically. Interpreters are not parrots. Interpreters repeat the words of another person mindfully, humanly. Compassion, humility and selflessness drive our practice. Interpreters do not mimic; we embody.
- We believe no expression embodies “original intention.” The presence of an interpreter is too often misunderstood as signaling insufficiency and inadequacy: the interpretation is not “the real thing.” Yet language is always versions of ideas, thoughts, and perceptions. What the speaker says is no more original than what the interpreter says.
- Interpreters are needed and need is uncomfortable and hence interpreters are made invisible, so as not to remind people of that uncomfortable need. Interpreters can find power in our invisibility. Visibility in our invisibility.

- Ending language dominance requires resources, patience, and tremendous willingness to work together with others in ways that are not always comfortable. To construct a space where no language dominates is an almost impossible dream. And yet we work to create such spaces, to ferret out the best methods for breaking down the inherited, unquestioned dominance of certain languages. We believe beyond the tiniest sliver of a shadow of a doubt that it is worth the effort.
- Interpreters think, speak, act. Our labor must be made visible and recognized. Our labor must remain invisible and unrecognized.
- Interpretation is not translation. Translation is not interpretation. The craft and skills needed for interpretation (oral communication, except in the case of sign language) are remarkably different from those required for translation (written communication). We feel ridiculous when we correct people about these terms. But we are willing to embrace our ridiculousness.
- In our technophilic late capitalist society, the human being is presumed to be replaceable, unnecessary, burdensome and ugly. Humans shit, humans need to sleep, humans have emotions and sometimes have children. Humans are difficult to manage and all-too-often irrational. For all of these reasons human interpreters are radically irreplaceable!
- A machine will never replace a human interpreter. We interpret constantly: the world around us, its textures, its cadences, its dangers. Machines are incapable of this level of cognition. A mechanized handheld interpreting device (an imaginary robot) cannot think, improvise, and respond elastically to unpredictable conditions of speech and relation. Such a device—even if it could function with adequate reliability—would never address the problems of language dominance. And we are in a war with language dominance! We are not providing a mere service for unjust institutions founded on the very logic we are seeking to undermine!
- Even in progressive movements and social justice organizations, language is used to divide and conquer. There is a bias against interpreters who speak with a foreign accent; they are rarely considered as skilled as native speakers, regardless of actual skill level. In fact, we all have accents; our articulateness is not dependent on our pronunciation.
- The interpreter is not a service provider. The interpreter is a curator, community organizer, activator, and instigator. A curator because interpreters can also convene people and objects. A community organizer because our principal role is listening and facilitating. An activator because our bodies are a vehicle for communication, and functional communication produces sparks, makes fire. An instigator because we actively work to demolish language hierarchies as they become real in space and time.
- Down with interpreters as service providers! Long live interpreters as instigators!

- When we interpret, we are not speaking as “ourselves” in any moment. “We” have nothing to say in this conversation; “we” are not “speaking.” Through our body, through our voice, another person’s voice becomes hearable: a different shape of communication becomes possible.
- When we interpret, we are speaking as someone else, saying someone else’s words. And at the same time we are being ourselves entirely, insofar as we are selves who seek a practice grounded in listening, in being the conduit for conversations that otherwise might not take place.
- When we interpret, we become antennae, receiving and transmitting at the same time.
- Interpreters perform radical acts of listening, thinking and speaking, suggesting a model of organizing that entails making space for others to act. Not to be the person in the room who is leading. To work purposefully toward making it possible for others in the room to communicate and to lead. This model is especially important for people who benefit from different forms of privilege (including but not limited to white privilege). Dismantling privilege is an urgent task! Let’s get to WORK!
- When interpreters work, we always perform: we perform on the shop floor, in the courtroom, the community meeting space, the poetry symposium, the academic conference, the workers’ center, the hospital, the state welfare program, the domestic violence center, the mental health center, the social justice gathering. We believe there is much to be learned by being an interpreter working on a regular basis in the field, doing the hard work in a thousand different contexts with an ear always at the ready. We learn by listening. We teach by listening.
- Interpreters have bodies and occupy space; we are not body-less or space-less. We allow other people’s words, ideas, thinking, experiences to live in our bodies for a time. We speak as attorney and judge and victim and defendant and witness. We speak as power-hungry politician, as progressive politician, as progressive organizer, as power-hungry organizer, as undocumented immigrant activist, as deported immigrant, as remorseless murderer, as regretful attacker, as abuser and abused. And despite embodying their language for a time, despite inhabiting their speech, we do not permanently become these people or speak for them. We speak them speaking through our bodies.
- Interpreters speak for them. Interpreters speak for us. We are them. They are us.
- Interpreters are devious secretaries of oral language. We take dictation in our minds, then immediately convert that language into another language. We are not to be trusted, for we can twist meanings at any point. We are absolutely necessary and completely treasonous: the foremothers of interpreters in the Americas are la Malinche and Pocahontas. Interpreters lead to downfall, paving the way to ruin, to societal collapse. Ruin and societal collapse could be a useful path toward remaking a world that urgently needs to be remade.

- The interpreter is a receptacle: constantly filling and constantly emptying. An empty signifier. A body that takes in other bodies, temporarily holding them before releasing them via language, thus making them accessible to other people's awareness, if not understanding.
- The role of mediator, receptacle, body-holding body is one that has been historically gendered "female," and in practice a majority of working interpreters (and translators) are women. Our demand that interpreters be understood as instigators is feminist at its core. These "parrots" talk back; these secretaries write manifestos.
- Interpreting is an embodied poetics. Interpreting is an embodied politics. We bring our whole selves into the room, though we doubt our selves will ever truly be whole.
- Let's repeat. Chant with us: down with interpreters as service providers! Long live interpreters as instigators!
- Interpreting can be recast as performance. We see "performance" as a frame that can be applied to any activity in order to reconceptualize it, to question its premises, contours, or outcomes. To make the master's tools visible. By framing our work occasionally as performance, we seek to instigate: to combat the devaluation of interpreting and to re-imagine it as a generative site for thought, writing, social movement and art, to bring this crucial interlingual labor from invisibility into visibility, and back and forth between the two.
- Through the frame of performance, we gain access to an entirely different set of conversations and resources. Museums or performance festivals or art spaces can function as important laboratories; they have the potential to support research into things that have not yet been done. Research into the undone and the undoing.
- Resources available in an elite high art context must be put to the service of actual living people. The intellectual discourse that exists in these contexts must critically engage with language dominance. There are crucial things being said elsewhere and otherwise: interpretation is a tool to make those things heard.
- Whenever we are able to gain access to institutions and spaces of privilege, it is our responsibility to use that access as a tool for community advancement and as a wedge to open access for others.
- Our work as interpreters is also our poetry. Careful intensive attention to language and to the gaps and fissures between languages. Bodies manipulating language in a hyper-conscious way. A poetics lingering in the space between visibility and invisibility. In the space between spoken and heard. In the space between.
- Poetry is a phenomenon that happens on the page and off the page, written and improvised, spoken and embodied, in motion and in music and in silence. We refuse to accept the confines of received notions of what a poem is or can be. We refuse to stand

still with our sheaf of papers, intoning our revelations. Interpretation is movement is instigation is our poetics.

- We do not need our “poems” to be recognized as such by those who experience them: some might see them simply as a transit board meeting or a neighborhood council meeting or a talk by a Guatemalan indigenous woman fighting for land rights and against corporate exploitation of Mayan ancestral lands. Our poetry might be repeating the words of two people as they speak across languages for the first time. Our poetry might be a glimmer of recognition or the snag of non-understanding in the space between two perspectives.
- Whenever two different languages brush up against each other, a spark. Whenever a moment of untranslatability snags, an opportunity to a further dialogue.
- The interpreter-poet rejects heroic singular visibility yet demands that our work not be made invisible. Rejects control over language yet embraces agency in relation to language. Submits to a flow of language and shapes that flow. We perform a service like any other secretarial service and unlike any other secretarial service. Secretaries for language transfer. Spoken scribes.
- We perform our invisibility. Invisibility becomes visible in our bodies.

Sources

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Colophon

Antena is a language justice and language experimentation collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and John Pluecker, both of whom are writers, artists, literary translators, bookmakers and activist interpreters. We view our aesthetic practice as part and parcel of our language justice work. Antena activates links between social justice work and artistic practice by exploring how critical views on language can help us to reimagine and rearticulate the worlds we inhabit.

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