

Zeigam Azizov- Rainer Ganahl London/Marseilles/Vienna, July 1996

Linguini, Languages and Cultures

ZEIGAM AZIZOV: Why did you decide to work with foreign languages?

RAINER GANAHL: From very early on I was interested in foreign languages that always played a big role in my life. To learn them waste best way to escape, to obliterate my *mother* tongue and to get rid of where I came from. But only late, during my studies of Edward Said's "Orientalism" critique I became more aware of the interdependency of culture and power, pedagogy and history, narratives and the Other, languages and control. That was the point when I started to learn Japanese as an art practice for critical reasons. I wanted to become complicit in a history of "Orientalism".

ZEIGAM AZIZOV: What made you want "to escape, to obliterate your mother tongue"?

RAINER GANAHL: In terms of "escaping" it would be more accurate to talk of obliterating my "father and teachers tongues" - themselves victims of Nazi education - though there wasn't much talk. But I guess, this would become too autobiographical since I want to seem work more as an instrument to stimulate a discourse that is touching on broader issues then only personal ones.

ZEIGAM AZIZOV: What kind of discourse your work is stimulating?

RAINER GANAHL: Speaking of my body of work that consists of studying and teaching languages I would suggest to look more closely towards politics and micro-politics of languages, something that has been mostly ignored in spite of the "linguistic turn" during the 60s and 70s: Who wants or is forced to learn what kind of language for what kind of reasons? Why there is a linguistic map established that erases other languages or looks down on others? What are the advantages and privileges if one speaks a "master language" and the disadvantages if one doesn't? ("bread lines "often run along "linguistic lines" in the so-called Third and Second World; most European school systems select and measure success according to linguistic performance). What is it not to be able to express and think in one's proper language? Isn't language not just an instrument to think, develop concepts and subjectivity but also a source of collective memory? Isn't it interesting to see economic and political power and arrogance reflected and reinforced via linguistic impositions and codes?

ZEIGAM AZIZOV: When we met in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in summer 1991 you were studying Russian. Later on in London I was receiving from you postcards with impressive messages: "Please, teach me Japanese", "Please, teach me German". Are there more languages that you are studying and what is the reason for studying these particular languages?

RAINER GANAHL: Please, teach me Japanese; ...Swedish; ... Spanish; etc... Is a postcard project that I started some years ago? I have been sending to about 100 people stamped postcards asking the receiver whether s/he could teach me the local language I find myself in when traveling. This endless project depends on geo-linguistic crossings but

doesn't imply that I already know or learn the languages encountered. I don't speak any Swedish for example. But independent of these sent-out solicitations - so far nobody has replied with an offer to teach me - I have studied Japanese for art making. As I pointed out earlier, I did this in order to engage in some kind of Orientalism and in order to contribute to the trade and cultural (in) balance between Japan and the West. The fact that was as much afraid and prejudiced towards the Japanese language as everybody else with a similar racially biased Eurocentric background added to my decision to learn this language and its writing systems. As I say in my file, basic Japanese: "studying Japanese envelops one with an intriguing as a device for conceptualizing and presenting my work. With Basic Japanese, a show I did at Nordanstadt Gallery in New York 1994, I illustrated about 20 basic Japanese sentences with objects on a shelf. For my basic Greek studies and its precise study engagements - 3 months, 3 days week, 3 hours a day; 6 days, 6 hours a day - I discovered a very helpful and classical instrument to make me study: the camera. Since then, I video tape all my study activities which reinforces discipline through a "super ego "like control camera. The camera and the tapes produce "work" in many ways. Photography also serves as a medium for my job. (Basic German, 8 photographs; Basic Italian, 8 photographs, Basic French, 8 photographs, etc. next to other works) As I say in my file, nihongo: "the study of a language as art chronically stresses the readymade on both ends."

ZEIGAM AZIZOV: How are your studies as art stressing the readymade?

RAINER GANAHL: My studies are basically a *trying hard* and don't imply the same temporality as shopping and displaying. A major achievement of the ready made - already implied in the name- is the fact that it turned obsolete all those practices of the 19th century that demanded non ending apprenticeship. This is somehow contradicted with my exercises. Also, I am not so much dealing with the display and there contextualization of purchased goods - except tapes - but with that of institutional contexts. Also, we shouldn't forget that the ready made has already a long and stressed history...

Zeigam Azizov: You wrote about the ready made to be the paradigm of the age of shopping and about languages as belonging to an age of traveling. Could you please talk more about it?

Rainer Ganahl: If one reads Walter Benjamin and visits the Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville (now just named: BHV, in banal green colored letters) where Duchamp did some of his shopping one is tempted today to attribute shopping the character of the past as did Hegel to fine arts 150 years earlier. In these days, we don't get that excited about shopping anymore. It has lost a lot of its magical and ideological power, though not its economical one. Equivalent to the banality of the merchandise but bound to a stronger attraction factor traveling has turned since the 60s into a mass activity and mass medium. I guess that traveling has become as much available for the consumption oriented masses as industrial and colonial goods about 100 years earlier. Travels and languages belong somehow together though contemporary travel packages may exempt you from any contact with locals and their languages. Here I might add that I am not talking of the specialized and professional traveling, exploring, discovering, and colonizing experience of the times of let's say the former Belgian Congo (today's

Zaire) where language acquisition, linguistic impositions (French, English, Flemish, German), linguistic appropriations and transformations through selection and codification (Swahili) exercised a tremendous power and influence. Coming back to your question, today it is less commodity purchasing power that makes you "contemporary" but more the mobility in moving and communicating that "connects" you with the world as it is already stated in the famous AT&T ad: "We are all connected."

ZEIGAM AZIZOV: How do your studies constitute a critical art practice?

RAINER GANAHL: What is a critical art practice in constantly changing field? I try to find a modest answer for myself through the process of studying and reading itself as a particular production of critical knowledge and experience. Entering into a new language and cultural sphere affects me in a remarkable way that always has personal consequences. It creates a complicity that bears all the problems of inter-cultural exchange one finds everywhere else in life that is penetrated by racism, cultural arrogance created by centers, sexism, class differences, and struggles of all kinds. Studying is for me not so much seen as a neutral interest less nerdy activity but as an active and uncanny involvement in all kinds of problematic histories. From a purely art historical point of view this kind of mixing of institutions- pedagogy and education - does also have a particular edge and forms a rather unusual framework for legitimating a set of objects that then circulate as artworks. But in the end it is up to the reception to accept, engage and extract criticality from my rather dilettante *academia in mobile* that functions through indexicality and discourse rather than via the offer of new narratives that are already attractively laid out in the work.
