

The Concept of Translation

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I first developed my concept of translation when the native and latterly acquired backgrounds of my artistic training in Korea were given a new perspective by moving to Europe. The European ways of living and thinking were very different from what I was used to and at times I myself felt like a relic in a museum. The Parthenon frieze felt alien and uncomfortable in the British museum, uprooted from its history and original surroundings, such as the light, air and wind, of its native place. It came to be represented in a different way. Western art is rooted in a time and place peculiar to itself and what I had been taught in Korea was a version of that which had been institutionalized in Korean society and was not quite the genuine thing. This led me to think about this shift in locality and how the shift might cause distortion by the possible lack of cultural understanding. There is a fundamental difference between something that has spontaneously developed and something that is translated. Therefore, I developed a general mistrust of translated information that was delivered without cultural or historical understanding. There is always an element of interpretation in translation, but especially when dealing with ancient or historical discourses, which often depends on other translated texts as sources. Hence the relationship between the original and the end product inevitably becomes stretched and distorted. Finally, one can also question the validity of cultural definitions on a more general level. Even if the translator possesses adequate understanding of the two cultures that they are interpreting, ultimately the translated material is experienced by an audience who can hold an entirely different set of cultural definitions and expectations. This problem is exacerbated under the context of globalization and the hybridization of cultures taking place today.

In my new work, I reference Chinese porcelain, made and decorated in China exclusively for export to Europe and later to North America from the 16th and the 20th century. Such items are a good example of the complex interactions that can occur in a single translation experience. These pieces, when viewed by their European owners may represent an object with specific 'Chinese' traits. Yet, this understanding should be viewed under the pretext that these pieces were not used and seen by everyday Chinese people. Thus, the culture that these pieces represent is different than what one might consider the pure, national cultural identity of China. Conceptually, 'translation' for me as an artist, has involved reproducing an art work situated in a public establishment and relocating it. After being produced alongside its original, the work is moved to a place of my choice. By relocation, I want to provide a different context to the work, though its shape may be identical to its original; but I am also looking forward to meeting new viewers, who have different cultural experiences, in recognition that a work of art reads differently depending upon the viewer's cultural background, experience and accumulated knowledge. Living and working in London and Seoul, I have experienced these types of hybrid cultural situations and often locate my own identity on the border between various cultures. In my work, I represent, as specific images of ceramics and Buddha's, my 'translation' of various religious, historical, and cultural problems that I experience as an Asian artist in the 21st century. And my reinterpretation gets again 'translated' by viewers in their distinct conditions and situations through the religious, historical, and cultural contexts in which they exist.

These works deal with penetration between civilizations, transference, and questions of originality, copy, and replication and I use soap as my main medium to attempt a unique reinterpretation. Soap as material has many inherent properties that have been useful when dealing with these ideas of translation. Firstly, soap has the ability to show the passage of time – as a common, everyday material, it can exhibit a temporal flow in a compressed way because of its trait of easily wearing out. After consistent use, a bar of soap will erode and eventually disappear. When we unpack a new bar of soap and begin to use it slowly day by day, the time that elapses in our lives is perceptibly measured. By the time the soap is almost used up, we have had any number of big and small experiences. Thus soap as a commodity, with its very private function, coming into contact with the entire nude body, is a well suited material for making a concrete representation of the life process or perhaps, a mere trace of this life process. Due to this property of erosion, soap can also come to represent an absence of constancy. I find a personal connection to this idea when thinking back to my experiences living in England and Korea. The people I have met in these places and our shared experiences are never permanent and my identity is ultimately based on a collection of these ever-changing memories. My soap sculptures, unlike stone or marble pieces, are made with the intention that they will eventually disintegrate. Like the everyday soap we use for washing, a soap sculpture placed in a museum can also weather, lose its fragrance and disappear. Due to our direct experience with soap in our everyday lives, this lack of permanency becomes easily perceptible to the viewer.

Soap also carries the meaning of the everyday or mundane. It is an ordinary material that has daily intimate contact with our body. We use soap in the morning to wash our face and in the evening before we go to bed. We live from day to day without much reflection and hardly notice how the soap gets smaller day after day. Using a material such as this to recreate classic sculptures usually constructed of stone or some other more permanent material is my attempt to question the meaning and authority of these old artifacts. Scent, although invisible, is another important quality of soap. I believe that a successful interpretation of an object should engage as far as possible all five senses. Through sensory experience, we have a feeling of being transported back in time; we are there, in sight, sound, smell and touch, and sometimes even taste. A memory of a specific time, place, or emotion can be easily triggered by our sense of smell. Often these smell associations can be stronger and more powerful than even visual or verbal ones. To experience the fragrant properties of soap, one needs to be in direct physical proximity to the material itself. Therefore, one cannot appreciate the true quality of the material through a visual image alone; so the material has the effect of dividing image and reality.

Using these inherent qualities of the material, I have been able address issues of cultural translation through my work. My original soap sculptures were replicas of traditional Western sculptures made out of soap which I started making while living in London. In the main building of the Slade School, there was a sculpture by a 19th century British sculptor, John Flaxman. At first, I had no idea or interest whose work it was and I regarded it as just another piece of old Western sculpture, symbolic of the historical meaning of the place in which it was sculpted. Seen from the perspective of the modern art, it was also a work rooted in the past, whose significance was in art history alone. However, after watching a restorer clean the ancient figure, I gained a new appreciation for the value that a work of art accumulates over time. From then on, the old, worn-down stone pieces in the museum gave me a sense of time. Solidity and permanence are the qualities commonly attributed to stone, but even a strong material like stone will wear down with time. This thinking resulted in my choice to use domestic soap as a sculptural material to replace marble. With its 'scent', soap also allowed the immediate experiences of sculpture works, the on the spot experience available only in that particular time and place. Constructed close to real scale, I often placed these works in direct proximity to the original piece. Thus, the viewer is confronted with a juxtaposition of an original or authentic piece and a copy or imitation in plain sight. Here, the material of soap was ideal in that from a pure visual standpoint, the finish could be rendered to be similar to a white, polished stone, such as marble. Having been trained and educated in the Korean fine art education system, I was coming out of an environment where copying and replicating Western art work was the norm. I was interested the cultural translation that occurs through the process of replication and copying. From a pure craft perspective, it was interesting that no matter how precise and exact a replica could be made, it could never carry the same cultural significance as the original piece.

In 2002, I decided to refer to my actual works as 'museums'. The exhibition was called Translation Museum and comprised of coloured wood constructions and soap sculptures in the form of classic antiquities, selected from the plates of art history books. By body-casting using soap, an 'original' work was created, whose meaning was altogether different from that of the ancient original. These museum-like pieces naturally inhabited the exhibition space. They showed the longevity of traditional craftsmanship as well as subtle incongruities that lead the visitor to probe intimate spaces of each piece. Adding creases in the garment, or removing an arm or the head gives the suggestion of the possibility of another version. However, these works were not only about replication, but also about the movement and transmission of artifacts around the world. These new pieces were not mere recreations of the original work, but unique in themselves according to the translator's views and ideas. Whereas I recreated ancient Greek and Roman marble statues in previous work, in my recent work, I remake Asian ceramics from blocks of soap and exhibit them as if they were in a museum. The object that is called 'artifact' has its own unique temporality and spatiality, and I have paid close attention to the temporal gaps and spaces generated as such objects move around world.

My soap sculptures take the same forms of what they represent but possess completely different historical, cultural contents and new contexts. In Translation-Vase, I represent Chinese decorative ceramics, sculpting them from blocks of soap, making incisions, filling in, and painting them. Another work in my ceramic series is Translation-Glass Bottle, which has the same form as Translation-Vase but is made out of a transparent material. The artifacts, as they move between Korea, China, and Britain, encounter audiences of different cultural backgrounds and are understood in different ways depending on their cultural backgrounds and levels of comprehension. Artifacts are functional things that were once used by people, but after their cultural values are discovered and they are moved into museums, they become untouchable objects. I am interested in the temporal pause that takes place in this process. My Translation-Toilet Project consists of soap Buddha statues that were made to be used by audiences in the bathroom

and then brought back into the gallery, at which moment the process of 'artifactization' stops. The soap statues in the bathroom stimulate functionality, decorativeness, and audience participation, in the process of which they generate their own provenance, and are understood in divergent patterns according to each culture, religion, or gender.

In my travels to London and Seoul, or Greece and India, I have been interested in what makes each place distinctive but cannot be visually transmitted. I am always aware of the scent, wind, and other properties that are non-transferable to an image. Seeing photos of a place before I go there and looking again at those images after traveling to that place, the photos look like a shell without a scent. Cultural experiences or artifacts that are re-created through images alone cannot exist in a different place and time. Therefore, the scent of soap becomes an ideal medium through which to express these issues. Fragrance is directly experiential and has a capacity to divide an image and an actual experience. When I attempt to replicate museumized or cultural artifacts and interpret them, they get miscomprehended in different contexts and cannot exist in the same way when they are moved into other temporal and spatial settings. Transmission, movement, and enjoyment come to possess different contexts. By representing culturally representative artifacts, I address invisible sensibilities along with the questions of movement and transmission.

I often identify myself as someone on the border between cultures. There are borders of gender, nationality, and culture, all of which I am continually mediating. Having lived abroad and experienced life in different parts of the world, it is hard to categorize my identity as strictly Korean. In many ways, my life and identity is a product of cultural translation. In everyday life and as an artist, I am constantly translating. Whether it is physically, through the replication of cultural objects, linguistically, through communication through different languages, or even conceptually, through the communication and transmission of ideas surrounding my artwork. In *The Location of Culture* (2004), the author Homi Bhabha writes, "What is striking about the 'new' internationalism is that the move from the specific to the general, from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence. The 'middle passage' of contemporary culture, as with slavery itself, is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience." This passage provides an apt description of the background for my work to date, where soap has become both a material and a metaphor. As a soft, malleable material, my soap sculptures stand in direct contrast to the rigid, solid sculptures of the past. This reflects the loosening of cultural categories and definitions that were once thought to be permanent and unchanging. Soap as a material also gives me great freedom to reproduce valued artifacts with a precision and accuracy, which allows me to allude to the form and shape of classic sculptures. Whereas, the artifacts I reference from Europe and Asia are often defined in a single, definite way, my works are more fluid and can be interpreted in multiple ways. They are products of translation occurring over and over, which is a reflection of my own life and existence.