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## ► To cite this version:

Myriam Suchet, Sarah Mekdjian. Artivism as a Form of Urban Translation: An Indisciplinary Hypothesis. Sherry Simon. Speaking Memory. How Translation Shapes City Life, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016, 978-0-7735-4789-6. halshs-01437039

**HAL Id: halshs-01437039**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01437039>**

Submitted on 16 Jan 2017

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## Artivism as a Form of Urban Translation: An Indisciplinary Hypothesis

Myriam Suchet and Sarah Mekdjian

Translated by Carmen Ruschensky

I will build you a city out of rags, I tell you!

I will build you, without plan or cement

An edifice you will not destroy

(Michaux 1997)

The “language of Europe” is not a code but a constantly transformed system of crossed usages; it is, in other words, *translation*. Better yet, it is the reality of the social practices of translation at different levels, the *medium of communication* upon which all others depend.

(Balibar 2003, 178)

A city can be read as a collection of signs. Some of these signs are metaphorical, but most are extremely literal and concrete: billboards, logos, ads and graffiti demand constant visual and verbal decoding. It comes as no surprise, then, that translation is a very visible part of the urban semiotic space. In the aftermath of Bill 101, Quebec “stop” signs were replaced with signs that read “arrêt.” In 1992, the Minister of Transport reversed this decision, maintaining that the Office de la langue française had considered “stop” a French word since 1976. Today, the use of either term is accepted as long as they don’t appear together on the same sign, Quebec being officially unilingual. In other provinces or territories, Ontario or Nunavut, for example, the same sign can admit several terms in different languages, thus including *translations* into French, English, Cree, Inuktitut or Innu, as shown in the following picture.

**Figure 1 stop sign nakai/arret © Myriam Suchet**

To translate or not to translate urban signs: that is the political question – the effects of which are inscribed in the urban space itself. From Shanghai and Nicosia to Brussels, Johannesburg and Pula, power struggles can be read through the mere presence or absence of translations in a city. This History of great conflicts and reconciliations, however, is not the only one written by urban translation.

On the margins of the tug-of-war between coexisting languages and their respective imagined communities, other translating practices are transforming urban spaces and revealing the potential of previously unseen spaces. Such practices as well as other urban art initiatives could be described as forms of “artivism” – activism through and by art (Lindgaard 2005; Augoyard 2000; Douay 2012; Lemoine and Ouardi 2010). Two Montreal-based initiatives of note are the FRAPRU (Front d’action populaire en réaménagement urbain) and the “socially acceptable terrorist” art collective ATSA (Action terroriste socialement acceptable) (see Pelletier 2007; and, for other examples, Jacob 2011). If these translating strategies tend to be less visible than the famous controversy about the stop sign mentioned above, it is probably because the power games they engage are less familiar and because they call into question the very definition of “translation.” Exploring this uncharted terrain implies a certain degree of risk, but it’s a risk worth taking. We are currently experiencing a period of “crisis” in which established theoretical frameworks are, by all accounts, becoming obsolete. Put another way, inherited paradigms seem to be out of step with our contemporary realities. Could *artivism* in its various forms provide new leads? This is what Jorge Fernandes Torres, director of the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam and the 11th Havana Biennial, seems to suggest when he asserts that “the crisis, the lack of any model or point of reference, forces us to rethink our aspirations and our future. Fostering action is not in vain. However, imagination precedes all theory” (Torres 2012, 4).

The translation hypothesis, which is not typically part of geographers’ and urban planners’ theoretical arsenal, can provide a fresh perspective on the critical impact of urban art interventions. Innovative approaches in translation studies invite us to explore translation, beyond academic discourse, as a phenomenon firmly anchored in the City (see, in particular, Simon 2006 and 2012).<sup>1</sup>

This paper seeks to lay the foundations for a dialogue between translation theory (Myriam Suchet) and social and cultural geography (Sarah Mekdjian). This dialogue might be termed *indisciplinary*, for it not only bridges or connects two disciplines (as is the case in an inter-

disciplinary or trans-disciplinary perspective) but, more radically, challenges the authorized expertise of both, destabilizing their terminologies and tools to investigate third ways. Let us assert from the outset that this *indisciplinary* approach is itself experimental. Our aim is to bring different imaginaries and practices into contact. Translation will be used as a shuttle or a mediator to operate these connections, in lieu of a definitive theoretical framework.

We begin by identifying and documenting a number of current *artist* practices that transform our experience of the city. Since we are exploring unknown terrain far from our usual areas of expertise (literature and geography), we have developed our methodological tools (maps and compasses) en route, disorienting ourselves. Our “corpus” or “terrain” consists of a typology of artist forms organized around the hypothesis of translation (first part of the paper, Myriam and Sarah). We then reconsider the very definitions of “translation” and “city” through the prism of this typology, exploring the new configurations that emerge. Myriam (part 2) focuses on translation, redefined in terms of interval or interstices, while Sarah (part 3) offers a reflection on the city – urban art mapping in/as translation – with reference to an experimental workshop held in Grenoble (France) in 2013 that brought together a group of geographers, artists, and asylum-seekers (see Fischer et al. 2013). Our chapter is based on a series of photographic reproductions of the artist works cited. Obtaining the copyrights for all the works mentioned was a challenge we didn’t fully achieved. When not reproduced here, we invite the readers to discover and look at the works on line. The reading experience we would like to engage is not only textual but also visual. The images we are reproducing or referring to in this chapter are part of the interdisciplinary approach we are trying to develop.

Since our work-in-progress is programmed to be shared widely, our readers are invited to participate in the online version at the following website: [www.pearltrees.com](http://www.pearltrees.com).<sup>2</sup>

### **An exploratory typology of translational forms in contemporary urban art**

It is probably not enough to open our eyes, but we can learn to see (Foucault 1972) the proliferation of performative and experimental works that are exploring new ways of inhabiting cities and building communities all over the world – particularly in Europe and North America, as will be examined here. How and to what extent is translation implicated in these interventions, and what forms does it take? Drawing on results obtained from a search of the PLEPUC.ORG database,<sup>3</sup> we identified five categories of artworks, installations and performances implicating translation in an

urban context, with a view to interpreting works through the lens of translation and, eventually, redefining translation in response to the works analyzed. The five categories range from those that incorporate the most literal forms of translation to those using translation in a metaphorical sense, even though they still enact concrete, physical interventions that transform and redefine the urban experience.

### **1. Translational installations *stricto sensu***

Certain art installations can be described as (pseudo) translational insofar as they explicitly incorporate translation in order to play with the shifts it engenders. An example of this type of work is Rachelle Viader Knowles' *Berlin Project* (2001),<sup>4</sup> realized in collaboration with three artists from Berlin, Germany and three artists from Kitchener, Ontario. The link between these cities is grounded in the history of Kitchener, which, up until 1916, was known as ... Berlin! Viader Knowles describes the project as follows:

In both Kitchener and Berlin, local artists act as “guides,” choosing a site of particular significance to them and recounting a story in their home language. The artists also act as “interpreters” by responding to the videos in the other language with a written simultaneous translation based either on their knowledge of the other language or by creative guessing. The written “translations” appear as subtitles. The video was produced for the council chambers of Kitchener City Hall, screened simultaneously on a large screen projection and on thirty monitors embedded into the architecture of the space. (Viader Knowles 2001, n.p.)

The video screen is split in two as you can see if you have a look at the link in the following end-note<sup>5</sup>. At the beginning of the video, visual artist Ian Newton, on the left, is recounting his first visit of Kitchener in English, while, on the right, an artist from Berlin is taking notes that appear as subtitles in German below. Still at the beginning, the “interpreter” remarks that Ian Newton is somewhere that resembles Alexanderplatz, and, as more subtitles appear, it becomes evident that she does not understand English. *Berlin Project* makes use of translation on at least three levels. The first and most obvious is with reference to the different languages used in the story telling and its interpretation. However, the lack of understanding transforms “interpreting” from a simple act of language transfer into a creative work on its own. Translation is also highlighted in the *mise en abyme* use of place, Berlin and Kitchener being reflections of one another. Finally, translation works across time and memory, since the history of Kitchener is invoked by reference to its former

toponym. In this way, the installation suggests a collapsing of space-time: it is Berlin (Germany) that appears on the council chambers monitors of Kitchener's (Berlin's) city hall.

## 2. Subverted signs (The insurrection of urban signs)

Altering street signs can be considered an act of translation even when no language change is involved, since it reveals the semiotic operation at work in the city. In his analysis of the proliferation of graffiti in New York in the 70s, Jean Baudrillard described graffiti as an "insurrection of signs":

Invincible due to their own poverty, they resist every interpretation and every connotation, no longer denoting anyone or anything. In this way, with neither connotation nor denotation, they escape the principle of signification and, as *empty signifiers*, erupt into the sphere of the *full signs* of the city, dissolving it on contact. (1993, 78-9)

The PLEPUC web site presents two photographic images on billboard ads, that both were part of the project *In Control*, curated by Lorenzo Buj and organized by the artist-run centre Artcite in Windsor, Ontario. Michael Fernandes' piece reads "Inhabited by a spirit, worshipped by savages".<sup>6</sup>

Jamelie Hassan's piece – a timely installation that coincided with the 1991 Gulf War in Iraq – features a photograph of the colourfully tiled dome and minaret of the Haidar Khan mosque in Baghdad taken in the 70s and the text, "Because there was and there wasn't a city of Baghdad."<sup>7</sup>

Though neither of these works makes explicit reference to translation, both are representative of subverted signs and, therefore, relevant to our typology and analysis.

Related examples are works by two Montreal-based artists, Gilbert Boyer and Peter Gibson. Boyer's 1988 piece, *Comme un poisson dans la ville* [*Like a Fish in the City*]<sup>8</sup> is a permanent installation that includes a series of 12 text-engraved plaques affixed to different buildings at various locations around Montreal. One of the texts – at the corner of Saint-Laurent Boulevard and Laurier Avenue – reads:

QUELLE CHALEUR ! J'EN VIENS PRESQUE A RÊVER DE L'HIVER. JE ME SUIS ARRETE PRES D'ICI. UNE POUSSIÈRE DANS L'ŒIL. À LA POINTE DE L'ANCIEN HOTEL DE

VILLE SE TIENT EN EQUILIBRE UN OISEAU NOIR. IL S'EVENTE LENTEMENT POUR SE RAFRAICHIR.

[It's so hot! I'm almost looking forward to winter. I stopped not far from here. Got dust in my eye. There's a black bird balancing on the turret of the old city hall. Fanning its wings to stay cool].

**Figure 2 BoyerPoissonVille © Myriam Suchet**

Rather than commemorating a monumental or official history of the city, Boyer's inscriptions record ephemeral moments. They invite passers-by to look at their city's architecture and its inhabitants from a different and unexpected perspective.

While Boyer subverts the function of commemorative plaques in Montreal, Gibson, a.k.a., Roadsworth, transforms road signs and surface markings, often intervening directly on the pavement.<sup>9</sup> Though working alone, Roadsworth situates his practice in a collective context and lays claim to public space in a unique way, transforming, for example, the white lines that normally delineate parking spots into giant dandelions blowing in the wind, or adorning the broken line of a passing lane with an image of scissors cutting their way down the road.

An example we came across by chance in the early stages of this research project is an exhibition held in October 2012 at Le Jeu de Paume in Paris: *Entre/Between*, a survey exhibition spanning over 40 years of work by multimedia artist and translator Antoni Muntadas, originally from Barcelona and currently based in New York. Considered one of the first artists to develop media art in the 70s, Muntadas explores, among other things, what anthropologist Marc Augé has referred to as “non-place” and “nomadization” (Augé 1992). Muntadas' first video and television experiments involved direct interventions in the media landscape. According to the exhibition's curator, Daina Augaitis (2011, 14): “Muntadas' work suggests that in those situations that cannot be completely known, predicted or controlled, there exist possibilities for a multitude of engagements, especially if we consciously participate in deciphering and translating ‘what we are looking at.’” The on-going project *On Translation: Warning*, begun in 1999, exemplifies this aspect of Muntadas' work. Taking the pervasive influence of the “media landscape” on social life as a point of departure, the artist has acquired advertising spaces in various locales around the world to reach the widest audience possible. All of these works display, translated in each country's official language, the following text: “Warning: Perception Requires Involvement.”<sup>10</sup>

The typography employed is consistent with advertising and newspaper headline styles: the brief, catchy slogan is written in capital letters, with a uniform colour scheme of white text on a red ground. The sentence is translated according to the location, and displayed using a wide variety of media: posters, stickers, press inserts, building facades, windows, pamphlets, catalogues, books, magazines, newspapers, photographs, postcards and banners. These works question *in situ* the manipulation and mediation of information in a way that engages the public and encourages participation.

### **3. Transforming and creating spaces (Guerrilla gardening and theatre hacking)**

The third category of our typology takes us off the beaten path into less visible spaces: abandoned lots and buildings that have been transformed into gardens, bicycle paths, exhibition spaces and temporary housing. Some of these projects, including three examples from the PLEPUC site, are the result of officially endorsed municipal initiatives. However, most forms of “guerrilla gardening” (Reynolds 2008; Hou, 2010) are the result of more-or-less illegal tactics and interventions.

Trevor Gould’s monumental work *Fable VII*, inspired by La Fontaine’s fable *La cour du lion* is installed in the courtyard of Ottawa City Hall, and consists of three elements: an interior inscription in Latin “Ex Oriente Lux,” a bronze element in the exterior pool, and a lion with an accompanying frame.<sup>11</sup>

The work establishes a reciprocal action between interior and exterior space, creating a dialogue between the architecture of the surrounding buildings. While the bronze frame evokes a sundial, the component located in the pool constantly animates the surroundings, offering notions of constant renewal through sunlight and directional alignment. To complete *Fable VII*, local artist Philip Fry created a landscaped garden with hybrid lowbrush blueberries, local pink spirea and granite stones, arranged so as to evoke the shape of animals at rest. (*Fable VII*, n.d., n.p.)

Another large-scale installation of note was commissioned for a project marking 20 years of cooperation and exchange between Lyon and Montreal.<sup>12</sup> Two gardens were created, the *Jardin de Lyon* in Montreal<sup>13</sup> by French artist Jean-François Gavoty and landscape architect Guerric Péré, and the *Jardin de Montréal* in Lyon by Quebec artists Michel Goulet, Réal Lestage and Julie



Saint-Arnaud<sup>14</sup>. Gavoty describes another ephemeral piece of his, entitled *Un jardin avec des ailes* [A Garden with Wings] that he created for the *Festival des jardins de rue* in Lyon in 2004:

For this garden, I recuperated a bunch of used, crumpled car wings of different colours. After a few pressings, I managed to flatten them out and assemble them to make a ground. Scattered wild flowers and grasses were planted in the cracks, between the irregular shapes of the fenders, and, in the centre, there was a metronome hidden in a waterproof case, timed to beat every second. Urban legend has it that passers-by could hear this muffled ticking sound, as if the little garden had a heartbeat. For a few months, it discreetly marked the time passed in traffic jams. (Gavoty 2004, n.p.)

### **Figures Gavoty 3.4 et Gavoty 3.5 © Jean-François Gavoty**

A third and somewhat less monumental example is Marlene Creates' *Boreal Poetry Garden*,<sup>15</sup> an ephemeral installation consisting of hand-written poems on cards, temporarily placed in various locations in the forest. According to the artist, "The brief texts reflect some of the site's particular geophysical and climatic characteristics, its plant life, wildlife and social history, and my experiences here. For me, the location of the words in the specific spot to which they refer is fundamental to the radiating energy of their meaning and, of course, their beauty" (Creates 2005, n.p.).

Beyond the threshold of official art, we find activist groups engaged in subversive forms of guerrilla gardening and insurgent urbanism. One of the groups active in Montreal is CRAPAUD (Collectif de recherche sur l'aménagement paysager et l'agriculture urbaine durable), an urban agriculture initiative begun in 2009.<sup>16</sup> Another well-known group is the San-Francisco-based art-design-ecology studio Rebar, organizers of the annual *PARK(ing) Day* event that has for its motto "Reclaim your city!" Rebar proposes to temporarily transform metered parking spaces into green spaces.<sup>17</sup> They obtained a Creative Commons License that allows activists all over the world to join the movement, and the annual *PARK(ing) day* event now occurs in hundreds of cities around the globe, including Toronto and Montreal (Hou 2010).

More ephemeral but no-less spectacular are interventions that take the form of collective performance or "theatre hacking." Olivier Choinière, in addition to his collective "social theatre events," has organized several audio-guided walking tours, including *Ascension: pèlerinage*

*sonore sur le Mont Royal* [Ascension: Mount-Royal Sound Pilgrimage] and *Bienvenue à (une ville dont vous êtes le touriste)* [Welcome to (a City Where You Are the Tourist)]. Each spect-actor walks alone, following the precise directions of the pre-recorded voices on the audio guide along the way. As Francis Ducharme notes

The audio guide not only provides an itinerary, it also imparts an ambiance through the sound and dramatic performance of the text ... The poetic and fictional nature of this text brings a literary dimension to street theatre. The text, the ambiance of recorded sounds, and the dramatization all produce effects of proximity and distance between real and fictional space ... The works' complex ambivalence and irony with respect to sense of place engage and provoke reflection without imposing a given position. (2009, v and 4)

The city here is the scenic backdrop of the activity, of the spect-actor's journey, but it also becomes a fictional decor seen through the lens of the text.

#### **4. Alternative narratives (The polyphony of unheard voices)**

Some installations seek to give a voice to silenced subjects of History. An example would be the “counter-monuments,” such as Jochen and Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Disappearing Monument against Fascism and War*, a 12-metre high lead-coated column erected in 1986 in Hamburg-Harburg (Germany) to be gradually lowered into the ground and eventually disappear altogether (Young 1993).

*Double Blind* is a large-scale sculptural installation that was commissioned in 2008 for the atrium of the new Vancouver Community College's Broadway Campus building. Created by artist Antonia Hirsch, the work consists of mirrored acrylic domes arranged on a four-story-high wall to represent the Snellen eye chart used for routine eye exams. This version, however, is translated into braille, thus transforming it into an “eye chart for the blind.”<sup>18</sup>

*Sacrée montagne* (literally “sacred mountain,” but connoting also “damn mountain” or “hell of a mountain”) is a collaborative and interactive work organized by the National Film Board of Canada. Joëlle Gauthier of the NT2 hypermedia art and literature lab provides the following detailed description:

*Sacrée montagne* is a collaboration between writer/journalist H  l  ne de Billy and photographer Gilbert Duclos ... It takes the form of a virtual, interactive discovery of Mount-Royal, the famous “mountain” situated in the heart of Montreal. It addresses the “persistence of the sacred in our secular society.” Different artists have identified six locations on the virtual mountain that serves as the main navigation interface: the cemeteries, the cross, Saint-Joseph’s Oratory, the statue of Fame (the angel statue), Beaver Lake, and the mountain trails ... Each of these six virtual sites contains links to secondary sites that include content specifically created for the project: short films, photo albums, interviews with Qu  b  cois personalities, documentation of cultural events, and documentaries on the history of Mount-Royal, such as the canonization of Brother Andr   in 2010. (Gauthier 2011, n.p.)

## 5. Invented maps and trajectories

Imaginary maps and counter-cartographies have much in common with alternative narratives (as above), especially when drawing attention to blind spots in a city’s official spatial representations. Stephen Foster’s *Kiss and Tell*<sup>19</sup> is a map of Quebec City that represents, in place of official monuments, the locations of graffiti works photographed by the artist. For Foster, these works are traces of personal and intimate history in public space.

Roaming the streets of Quebec City and photographing traces of personal history, the artist, whose work deals primarily with representations of Aboriginal people in popular culture, hopes to create a space of political and social dialogue. *Kiss and Tell* offers the internaut a photographic representation of graffiti practices intimately inscribed in and mapped across the city, personal histories woven together in the collective public space. (Galand 2009, n.p.)

In the collective project *Detours: Poetics of the City*, organized with the support of the Agence TOPO, a Montreal-based artist-run centre for new media, the participating artists have not mapped places but rather itineraries, often combining visuals and sound archives. Taien Ng-Chan, the project’s coordinator, contributed two maps: *City Transit*<sup>20</sup> and *Streets of the Saints*,<sup>21</sup> video poems that follow the trajectories of strangers encountered on city buses. Other maps include *Field Notes*, within which Emilie O’Brien explores a “much-loved,” unofficial area of green space in Montreal’s Mile-End neighbourhood – *Le Champ des Possibles* [Field of Possibilities] – with

embroidery, textworks, images and an interview with Emily Rose Michaud, creator of the *Roerich Garden Project*.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Figure 4 Topo © Taien Ng-Chan**

London-based artist Christian Nold has developed a similar form of participatory map-making with his series of “emotional cartographies” that measure individuals’ emotional arousal as they navigate the city. Combining two technologies, a Global Positioning System (GPS) and a lie-detector-type sensor that measures Galvanic Skin Response (GSR), his maps represent temporal emotional reactions to particular environments and geographical locations.<sup>23</sup>

French artist-performer Mathias Poisson’s urban maps are drawn in motion, while walking in cities. As Poisson explains,

I spend my days roaming city streets, discovering neighbourhoods, exploring marginal zones, finding lost or discarded objects, hanging out under bridges or in the woods, contemplating the landscapes around me. I note the sensations, preoccupations and observations that arise during these outings, and then I draw maps based on my experience, or I survey areas and map out new paths for possible future walks ... My drawings reflect the gestures and memories that seem important to me. They recount a journey, highlighting some parts, omitting others, deforming perspectives. (2010, 105)

In a similar vein, choreographer Lauriane Houbey collaborated with visual artist Marie Moreau to produce *Géographies intérieures*, an exhibition based on mental maps and maps drawn in motion, held in Grenoble in 2012. In her text “Arpenter les recoins, les revers” [“Exploring Recesses, Other Sides”], Houbey describes roaming the city with her sketchbooks:

I had a collection of standard spiral notebooks and felt pens that I carried around with me in my knapsack. I worked with the notebooks on my knees, or even on the ground, on the sidewalk, or on a step, often spreading them out, side by side, to allow the story to unfold across several frames. Sometimes, turning the page, landing on a new page, interrupted the process. So I would come back to it later, or not. (Houbey and Moreau 2012, 6)

Both Lauriane Houbey and Mathias Poisson create maps while walking, wandering (and getting lost) in cities. These two artists focus on margins and interstices from a walking perspective,

reinventing and subverting dominant urban landscapes. Their (disorientation/disorienting) maps involve the participation of urban dwellers met while walking or asked to walk with the artists. The mapping performances described above around walks and artistic journeys refer to the Situationists' *dérive* (literally: "drifting") and psychogeography (see Simay 2008; Paquot 2010).

We will come back to the Situationists later. Here, we would like to revisit the concept of "translation" in light of the above tentative and exploratory typology of activist translation forms.

### **Figural interstices: intervals of urban translating**

When I say that translation seems to me intrinsic to any utterance, I am referring to solitude. Because utterances are rare. Not because there aren't many of them but because they can only be located in a rarefied space, a no man's land, a space without a subject ...  
 a terrain that belongs to no one. *No man's land*. Not for sale, not for building. And especially not a site of meetings, exchanges, dialogues, discussion, or influences, in short, communication. But a space, first and foremost, of observation and reflection. (Hocquard 2001)

How do the above practices change our understanding of translation? To what extent is translation involved in urban activism? The way translation operates in the above examples has little to do with a mere transfer. It even goes beyond explicit reference to language. In what sense, then, can these practices be referred to as forms of "translation"?

We might begin by trying to describe the role that translating plays in the different works included in the typology. One point these works have in common, whether they take the form of verbal or visual signs, graffiti, official architectures, marginal spaces, maps, installations, performances or gardens, is that they all introduce, though very briefly, a different dimension into the urban space. "Translation," redefined in this context, thus changes the established order of things and expands our horizons beyond the existing range of possibilities. We can say that these works *translate* insofar as they do not simply suggest new approaches to familiar urban situations and activities but rather *enact* or *operate* new situations and new modes of action. Translation, then, acts as an interval – a very concrete *battement*. In "urban" terms, we could say that translation operates as an interstice in the city.

Political scientist and sociologist Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat<sup>24</sup> defines the potential inherent in interstitial space:

Interstices represent what is left of resistance in big cities – resistance to normativity and regulation, to homogenisation and appropriation. They embody, in a sense, what is still “available” in the city. Their provisional and uncertain status allows for a glimpse of other ways of creating a city that are open and collaborative, responsive and cooperative. The importance of the interstitial experiment is borne out in this very register, in methodological, formative, political, as well as heuristic terms. (2009 [2007], 108-9)

While the notion of the interstices evokes a gap, rupture or interval in the saturated space of the city, its temporal dimension should not be overlooked. Hélène Hatzfeld, Marc Hatzfeld and Nadja Ringart emphasize both the spatial and temporal dimensions of the interstitial experience:

From a spatial point of view, what is at stake [with interstices] are the fragments of urban space that fall outside officially regulated zones. There are many examples, from vacant lots, squats and hideouts, to unattended parking lots and other places transformed by various forms of marginality ... From a temporal perspective, interstices reveal the perpetual movement and plastic evolution of the city. In the wake of social and economic changes, for example, spaces that at one time had a precise function are transformed or abandoned, thus becoming pockets that invite marginal activities. (1998, 36)

The power of the interstitial experience can be partly attributed to its ephemeral nature, which is also its limitation. But how can we understand translation as creating intervals and interstices without reducing these concepts to simple metaphors? Understanding translation as operating interstices involves shifting from a spatial representation – the linear transfer from a “source language” to a “target language” – to a temporal one that is disruptive. As a temporal process, the act of translating interrupts the utterance and denaturalizes the discourse. In other words, translation, in its activist manifestations, is not so much about transferring from one language to another as it is about recognizing languages as forms of practice. As Meschonnic puts it:

From a language, any language, we have nothing but discourse. It is this truism that must be stated, even at the risk of ridicule. Yet the so-called “genius” and supposed clarity of the French language

remind us that the distinction is not in vain: the mode of existence of a language is radically different from that of discourse. (2000, 31)

Elsewhere Meschonnic remarks that “language alone, with respect to the nominalism of discourse, does not exist. Words, alone, do not exist. Except in the dictionary. In this sense, the French language, like any other, does not exist” (1997, 32).

Translation, then, has to be considered in terms of enunciation, and translating as a way to create new modes of speech that undermine the limits of naturalized “language.” To establish the link between urban activist translation and its subversive enunciative power, it might be useful to explore the notion of the *interstices* in relation to that of the *figural*, as developed in another context by discourse analyst Laurent Jenny. Describing the enunciation event, Jenny suggests we “think of an utterance as a ‘deal,’ a lexical *throw of the dice*.” (1990, 16). While everyday language tends to conform to the rules of the game, literature transforms it, even to the point of setting the conditions under which the dice can be thrown. This is what Jenny refers to as the *figural*:

The *figural*, while grounded in the discursive event, also necessitates reflection on the form of language itself (its division into linguistic units, its combinatory rules). It drives us back to a “first” decision with respect to form, since it gives shape to the emergent and arbitrary moment. By a kind of double effect, the discursive event lies in this reciprocity between the production of discursive meaning and the re-presentation of language that gives rise to it, between the power of naming and the opening of possibilities within the language. (1990, 20)

The interval created by urban activist translation must be understood, in both its temporal and spatial dimensions, as a delimited, ephemeral and disruptive event or space. By joining the sociological, urbanistic notion of the *interstice* (Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat) with the stylistic, enunciative notion of the *figural* (Laurent Jenny), translation can be redefined not as a linguistic transfer but rather an enunciative upheaval of sedimented discursive practices. However, translation should not be conceived as “figural interstices” metaphorically, but as a plane of immanence (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 89). In this respect, our approach differs radically from that of Homi Bhabha. As Bhabha explains:

[I’m using translation] not in a strict linguistic sense of translation as in a “book translated from French to English,” but as a motif or trope as Benjamin suggests for the activity of displacement

within the linguistic sign ... But for me, the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (1990, 210)

Despite the enduring interest in Bhabha’s redefinition of “translation”, we believe that reducing translation to metaphor is not the most productive way to explore translation in the urban space. Activist translation in/of the city is a *practice* that reveals that “language” is not an entity or an essence. And it is *as a practice* that it gives rise to other practices.

### **The (geo)graphic translation of the translation hypothesis**

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire ... The metropolis is now the point of massive collision – dare we call it class struggle? – over the accumulation by dispossession visited upon the least well-off and the developmental drive that seeks to colonize space for the affluent. One step towards [a reinvention of urbanization] is to adopt the right to the city as both working slogan and political ideal ... The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. (Harvey 2008, 23-39)

The subversive activist practices discussed above constitute creative challenges to neoliberal urban capitalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). How can the notion of translation help us understand other forms of urbanism and the social production of urban space? Can urban art retain its critical edge, or is it doomed to serve as a pawn, to be assimilated to the market economy? Is it possible to critique neoliberal models of urban development by the means of art and imagination?

Urban planners, who work for the promotion of competitive neoliberal cities, are increasingly integrating art into restructuring projects. In his famous book *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure and Everyday Life* (2002), Richard Florida suggests that the Fordist city be transformed and restructured as a creative one. Florida’s work can serve both as an introduction and a warning with respect to the possibilities for geographical thinking about the integration of art in contemporary urban contexts. Florida, who is Director of



the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute, describes the emergence of a "creative class" at the service of a "creative city," founded on artistic and cultural practices. Cities, he believes, should be attempting to attract creative types – artists, journalists, artisans, and workers in high-tech fields, among others. The presence of this creative class enhances a city's "creativity index," and this, according to Florida, is the key to economic urban renewal. Several municipalities have been inspired by Florida's theories, transforming their images as post-industrial cities into new, competitive, "creative cities." Far from destabilizing contemporary urban capitalism, Florida's theory advocates using art and culture as economic tools to improve cities' commercial images and economies, using, that is, the symbolic and economic value of art and culture to accumulate capital, produce surplus value, and generate competition. Contemporary developers are looking to the symbolic power of art and culture to remake the urban image and this "restructuring of Fordist production models has put cultural economies and creative industries at the centre of debates on the future of urban development" ("Présentation" 2013, n.p.).

While the concept of the creative city has received a lot of attention, it has also been sharply criticized. Urban sociologist Jean-Pierre Garnier refers to the creative class as an urban myth, a "(self)proclaimed, avant-garde" (2011, n.p.) and questions the kind of "life" it enables and what kind of survival it implies for those excluded from it. Geographers Anne Clerval and Antoine Fleury (2009) investigate links between gentrification, the eviction of low-income populations, speculation in real estate, and cultural policies carried out in Paris since the 2000s. The latter, they say, have not stopped gentrification, as promised by the Left since 2001, but have in fact contributed to it.

The translation hypothesis developed here conceives translation not as a transfer from one model to another (from a Fordist to a creative model of the city, following a process of creative destruction) but as a permanent on-going practice. The idea is not to create a new city based on activist proposals (functioning as designs for urban planners and architects), but to identify forms of urban practice that empower citizens to constantly question and destabilize the urban space. Translation, in this context, refers precisely to these everyday acts of deconstruction rather than to the construction of absolute or totalizing models. Translation is a critical process that destabilizes everyday relations and generates new socio-spatial practices that are continually called into question.

Activist projects that incorporate mapping processes are among the most interesting forms of urban translation. While prospective maps are a common tool used by urban planners to design totalizing models of cities, artists and activists use maps to subvert their original uses and purposes. In *The Practice of Everyday Life (L'Invention du quotidien)*, Michel De Certeau (2011 [1984]) critiques the map and its totalizing discourses that impose a disciplinary, “technocratic” and “functionalist” ideology on the city. He proposes, instead, a “return to practice,” distinguishing the “walk,” which lies beyond the visible and readable, from the map, which offers a panoptic image of the city in the service of modern urban planning (93). However if maps are classical instruments of control, governmentality and panoptic totalizing urbanism, they are also used by researchers, activists, artists and activists working on a critique of contemporary urbanism, neoliberal urban economies and the apparatus of surveillance.

Counter-cartography projects have largely been involved in producing alternative visual narratives of social spaces, including cities. The Counter Cartographies Collective, for example, “uses what Deleuze [1988] calls a ‘new cartography,’ a practice that creates new (political geographic) possibilities and other (political geographic) realities, rather than representing already existing geographies” (Dalton and Mason-Deese 2012, 443). Process-oriented mapping practices like those of Mathias Poisson or Lauriane Houbey seem to create possibilities for a critique of the modernist city by playing upon its socio-spatial conventions. These mapping practices reactivate links between geography, map-making and art, while, at the same time, introducing a social and critical dimension. Gilles Tiberghien traces the critical use of maps in art to the beginning of the modernist era, observing that, “with modernism, conventionally starting with Manet, maps became an instrument of rupture, a critical mode in the regime of representation” (2010, 198). According to Tiberghien, “The map is based on an irreducible distance to its referent. Contemporary artists appropriate mapping practices not to bridge this gap but to circulate within it” (2010, 198).

Many activist maps, especially works based on the practice of wandering in the city, echo the mapping practices of the Situationists, who took a critical stance on art and its commodification. In the 60s, Guy Debord and the Situationists used mapping practices to subvert the representational role of art, transforming it into a political practice. They invented a “map/card game” inspired by the writings of Henri Lefebvre, in particular *The Critique of Everyday Life [La Critique de la vie quotidienne]*, published in 1947. Lefebvre introduced the idea of the city as a

place of play, inviting “players” to defy the rules and socio-spatial conventions of modernist urbanism. Debord later developed the Situationist practice of the *dérive*, a kind of technique for losing oneself in the city. The rules of the game are as follows:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there ... In the “possible rendezvous,” on the other hand, the element of exploration is minimal in comparison with that of behavioural disorientation. The subject is invited to come alone to a certain place at a specified time. He is freed from the bothersome obligations of the ordinary rendezvous since there is no one to wait for. But since this “possible rendezvous” has brought him without warning to a place he may or may not know, he observes the surroundings ... The lessons drawn from *dérives* enable us to draw up the first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city. Beyond the discovery of unities of ambiance, of their main components and their spatial localization, one comes to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses. One arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence of psychogeographical pivotal points. One measures the distances that actually separate two regions of a city, distances that may have little relation with the physical distance between them. With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experimental *dérives*, one can draw up hitherto lacking maps of influences, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is no worse than that of the first navigational charts. The only difference is that it is no longer a matter of precisely delineating stable continents, but of changing architecture and urbanism. (Debord 2006 [1958], 62-66)

The *dérive* creates the conditions for a “disorientation” that eventually gives rise to reinvented maps and eventually to a reconfiguration of the city. The notion of play is a point of departure for possible urban practices. Renegotiating the rules of the urban social space through play can be understood as a form of translation operating in the city and in the social lives of the urban dwellers as an emancipatory practice.

As seen above, the *Detours* project, Mathias Poisson’s travel drawings, and Lauriane Houbey’s sketched-out roamings, among other examples, recall the Situationist *dérive*, going beyond the rules of the game. Similar examples include the video mappings of Bouchra Khalili or

Till Roeskens recording drawings in-progress, narrated by the drawings' makers who recount their memories, thoughts and feelings in the process.

These practices do not impose an omniscient view of the city as from a zenith. They offer, rather, a multiplicity of embedded, alternative narratives that integrate different points of view and modes of expression. Gilles Tiberghien notes that "a number of contemporary artists have created roadmaps as a way of recording ... their subjective experiences while exploring different places or territories" (2010, 207). Tiberghien refers, in particular, to the work of artist Richard Long, whose maps "do not just represent the paths taken by the artist. They become paths in themselves, a conceptual analog" (Ibid.). Jean-Marc Besse proposes the idea of "itinerary maps," which provide a "representation of the territory in a way that does not depict it as independent of the activities that take place there ... the territory's very structure being defined by the practices of those who traverse it, leaving traces of their passage" (2010, 7). These maps criticize the territorial and disciplinary conception of space enacted by conventional grid maps.

Taking these itinerary maps as a point of departure, artists, geographers, and people facing complex socio-geographic and administrative situations, most of them asylum seekers, were invited to participate in a series of experimental, interactive mapping workshops in Grenoble. Over a two-month period, in May and June 2013, two researchers, three artists/performers, twelve participants, a photographer and a research engineer met together twice a week at the premises of the Association of Asylum Seekers in Grenoble<sup>25</sup>. These workshops were intended to create encounters around mapping practices and to produce alternative narratives on contemporary migrations and urban space. These workshops were an experiment in reinvesting the city, providing a point of entry for people whose status was precarious, using map-making as a form of translation. Marie Moreau, Lauriane Houbey and I worked with participants on themes related to migration experiences, border crossings, and living conditions in Grenoble. Marie Moreau asked participants to make felt-pen drawings of their journeys on large white sheets, Lauriane Houbey focused on the sounds heard during their travels and recorded participants' narratives, and I proposed a collaborative map key (using coloured stickers) based on words related to both their migratory experience and life in Grenoble. Participants then integrated the stickers based on this key into their drawings. Dozens of languages were present in these exchanges. Participants had lived or traveled in many different countries, and their past and present nationalities included

Sudanese, Eritrean, Armenian, Congolese, Guinean, Algerian, Azeri and Afghan. Some were asylum seekers or refugees, while others held no official administrative status. A range of linguistic, discursive, social and administrative differences had to be negotiated by participants, artists and researchers alike.

Creating the maps involved a double act of translation. First, map-making enabled us to frame our exchanges in a way that denaturalized participants' relationship to the administrative language and discourses of institutions governing the asylum process (Fassin and Kobelinksy 2012). Second, the maps themselves, particularly those of Grenoble, which were subsequently included in several exhibitions in the city, encouraged readers and spectators to critically engage with their daily environment in the city. While asylum-governing institutions base their decisions on "the interpretation of the refugee's story in terms of conformity and deviance ... and an objectification of truth and falsehood" (Rousseau and Foxen 2006, 506), the maps produced in these workshops were not to be judged with reference to any horizon of "truth." These maps are neither true nor false, neither fictional nor imaginary. They allowed participants, within the unique context of the workshops, to express recollections, stories, feelings, demands, and discourses.

Artists Lauriane Houbey and Marie Moreau had both already experimented with mapping as a means for establishing relationships with people living in the socio-spatial margins of the city. Houbey, as we have seen, has associated map-making with a form of roaming, while Moreau relates her interest in experimental mapping to a sense of disillusionment:

At first I wanted to create works related to community centres, public health and social facilities, for example, that I thought had an important history and role in Grenoble. There were also some collaborations with Lauriane on landscape and territory around Grenoble. And this shared history of being evicted from one squat after another. A silencing operation that is still going on today. The city started to seem like a hollow shell. Anyways, it's a period that I went through. I was disillusioned. I needed to find new resource-spaces like vacant lots, passageways, unused zones where it was still possible to hang out, get lost, dream. (Houbey and Moreau 2012, 2)

With the workshops' participants, faced with the daily challenge of adapting to an exclusionary city and country, we tried to invent and map out spaces that could function as resource-spaces, places of refuge/interstices. For Houbey, "Resource-spaces are also spaces that stimulate the imagination. Environments where everything isn't already planned out and regulated, zones that

seem like they're being used by other people for other purposes, or maybe even completely abandoned and serving no purpose whatsoever. Unaffected, in both the functional and aesthetic sense of the term" (Ibid.). Moreau describes the maps created as part of an incomplete, referential, non-referential, and anti-conventional local atlas:

The maps create ruptures. New stories emerge in these spaces. Sometimes, from one conversation to the next, two completely different maps are created by the same hand. The map-makers, who use the maps to "represent" (or represent themselves) use them for different reasons. They invent worlds that never existed before, worlds that don't exist in reality. The map represents and reconfigures a relationship to space in a given moment. It is a relative relationship that evolves. This is why the maps are exhibited and circulated. *Atlas local* is a work-in-progress. (Houbey and Moreau 2012, 4)

As acts of translation that are by necessity relational, the maps we created are ideally presented to the public in a way that allows for interaction with their creators. They are tools that denaturalize both our linguistic relations and our interactions with the urban space.

### **Figures 8 and 9 Guide cartographique (©Mabeye Deme)**

The above guide map was created by two of the workshop's participants. It is a tool intended to help newcomers arriving in Grenoble, unwelcomed immigrants in particular, settle in France and obtain rights. Unlike a conventional guide that outlines pre-existing itineraries and points of reference, this map cannot be used to orient oneself in Grenoble. Neither the scale nor the points of interest can be verified in relation to the terrain represented. Translation here does not consist in transforming one referent, the city of Grenoble as conceived by conventional maps, into another equally stable referent, the city of Grenoble seen by asylum seekers. Translation plays a different role. Mapping becomes an act of translation insofar as it creates a displacement. On the one hand, it calls for using one's imagination to explore the city shown on the map. On the other, it invites us to abandon stable reference points in order to explore the city itself. The guide offers tips for general attitudes to adopt in the city, for example, "don't be afraid of police officers," and provides an itinerary that highlights several "resource sites" along the way.

The translational map, which offers no prescribed course, places its user in a precarious situation. The indicated resource sites are options to be explored according to a continual re-

evaluation of attitudes and responses to different interactive situations. The city does not pre-exist as an ordered whole. It is a terrain of possibilities that the reader, the traveler, anyone and everyone can discover on the basis of a minimal range of social attitudes and interactions. Presented with the guide map, established residents of Grenoble experience disorientation and discover unknown places. The political idea of the “right to the city” developed by Henri Lefebvre (1968) is built on minute acts – movements, deviations, and rhythms in the very heart of the spaces where we live out our daily lives. (Counter-)mapping is one way to reinvent – i.e. translate- our everyday urban realities.

## Conclusion

The respective reconfigurations of “city” and “translation” that we propose here, uniting different voices and drawing on numerous activist examples, point to the important role of *practice*. Translation has been used to highlight the gaps, margins, intervals, interstices and other shifts in the space-time of the city. We have, in a sense, used “translation” as a temporary tool, useful as long as it can help to *think otherwise*. As soon as it loses its critical edge, we shall move on to another tool.

Scholarly research and, as it happens, the writing of this article, propose that we *think otherwise* by leaving the comfortable room of our “specialities” to create a space for dialogue and the launching of alternative ideas. Without attempting to arrive at definitive conclusions, we recognize our responsibilities as researchers to engage with initiatives at the intersection of art, activism, and translation, where it becomes possible to re-imagine collective alternatives. We feel that creating dialogue instead of playing the role of experts is a step in this direction, and we hope that this openness, resulting from a friendship too often masked by the apparent neutrality of academic research, will encourage response.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, among a multitude of examples: the volunteer translating collectives “Translating the Printemps Érablé” (<http://translatingtheprintempserable.tumblr.com/>) and “Rouge Squad” (<http://rougesquad.org/fr>) that emerged during the 2012 Quebec student protests; the Canadian Centre for Architecture’s 2008 exhibition *Actions: What You Can Do With the City*, and the subsequent seminar, held at the same institution and entitled: “Modernity in Translation: Geopolitical Interactions in Residential Culture” (<http://www.cca.qc.ca/fr/centre-d-etude/355-esra-akcan-modernity-in-translation>).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pearltrees.com/#/N-u=1\\_598928&N-reveal=1&N-f=1\\_7896025&N-s=1\\_7896025&N-p=75193583&N-fa=4813041](http://www.pearltrees.com/#/N-u=1_598928&N-reveal=1&N-f=1_7896025&N-s=1_7896025&N-p=75193583&N-fa=4813041).

<sup>3</sup> Présences du littéraire dans l’espace public canadien (PLEPUC) is a database of over 600 Canadian literary works created by a Concordia research group led by professor Marc André Brouillette. According to their web site, PLEPUC aims to 1) contribute to the knowledge about the relation between various literary forms and their inclusion in public space, 2) encourage the creation of literary works by organizing multidisciplinary workshops that aspire to renew the connection between people and literature, and 3) publish information, articles and studies that can stimulate thought about the artistic, aesthetic, social and urban issues surrounding this subject (<http://plepuc.org/en/about>).

<sup>4</sup> See *Berlin Project* (2001), a site-specific video installation presented at the 2001 Contemporary Art Forum, Kitchener, Canada. (<http://uregina.ca/rvk/berlin.html>).

<sup>5</sup> <http://plepuc.org/fr/oeuvre/berlin-project> and <http://www.rachelleviaderknowles.net/berlin.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://plepuc.org/fr/oeuvre/inhabited-by-a-spirit>

<sup>7</sup> <http://plepuc.org/fr/oeuvre/because-there-was-and-there-wasnt-a-city-of-baghdad>

<sup>8</sup> <http://plepuc.org/en/artwork/comme-un-poisson-dans-la-ville>

<sup>9</sup> <http://plepuc.org/en/artwork/untitled-13>



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<sup>10</sup> <http://ensembles.mhka.be/items/5945/assets>

<sup>11</sup> <http://plepuc.org/fr/oeuvre/fable-vii>

<sup>12</sup> [http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?\\_pageid=1616,4272052&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=1616,4272052&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)

<sup>13</sup> <http://jfgavoty.free.fr/nord-est/n2e1.html>

<sup>14</sup> <http://jfgavoty.free.fr/nord-est/n3e1.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://marlenecreates.ca/virtualwalk/map>

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.crapaud.uqam.ca/?page\\_id=37](http://www.crapaud.uqam.ca/?page_id=37)

<sup>17</sup> <http://rebargroup.org/parking-day/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://plepuc.org/en/artwork/double-blind>

<sup>19</sup> <http://projets.chambreblanche.qc.ca/stephenfoster/>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/citytransit\\_fr.html](http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/citytransit_fr.html)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/saints\\_fr.html](http://www.agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/saints_fr.html)

<sup>22</sup> [http://agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/fieldnotes\\_en.html](http://agencetopo.qc.ca/detours/fieldnotes_en.html)

<sup>23</sup> [biomapping.net](http://biomapping.net).

<sup>24</sup> Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat is a member of LERSEM (Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches en Sociologie et Ethnologie de Montpellier - EA 4584). He serves on the editorial committee of the politics, art and philosophy journal *Multitudes*. His numerous publications on political and artistic practices and experiments are available through the cOOP cooperative. For more on the notion of the interval, see also: the AAA collective (Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée) (<http://www.urbantactics.org/>) and Guillaud (2009).

<sup>25</sup> The premises of the Association for Asylum Seekers (ADA) in the Maison des Associations were used for the workshops. ADA, financed mainly by state subsidies, is one of two associations in Grenoble which help asylum seekers with their administrative procedures. Some of the main functions carried out by ADA consist in drawing up and translating life stories, appeals to the CNDA (French court reviewing appeals on refugee status), legal aid,

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supporting asylum seekers at meetings with the authorities, financing the journey to the CNDA in Paris.