



DEAR FRIEND, so there you suddenly were, asking me about translating, which tbh, definitely got me feeling in more than one type of way! In the ten years I've been translating, I've rarely been asked, although, I suppose I haven't exactly offered to tell either. I think this letter might be the first time I have actually written about translating, so yeah, ok.

I came to translating somewhat unexpectedly, and I think I've realised only recently that over the years translating has become almost like a glue that bonds various parts of my life together. In addition to being a translator, I'm also a writer and curator. And the kind of translator that I have become is deeply connected to the fact that I also write about and work in art in other capacities. I mostly translate texts on art, design and architecture and, just so you know, I want to point out that these are texts that are often, but not always, short form and based on a more immediate reaction to current events, to what is happening in these fields in the present moment—so I would say, it is slightly different from translating literary works in terms of the scope and points of impact in time. Although yes, experimental fiction and poetry with close ties to art/the art world is also very much a thing and *my* thing at that, but that's maybe for the next letter.

Ever since I read “Minu auhinnad” (My Awards) by Maarja Kangro, an Estonian writer and translator, last spring, I haven't stopped thinking about this quote: “It was great to be nominated in the category of translation, it was like an award for adults. For writing, a half-wit could easily get an award, but a translator cannot be a complete idiot.”¹ It might be one of my favourite quotes about translators and writers, probably because as soon as I read it, I was like, but my proverbial bitch, I'M BOTH! And yes, also because it's a pretty great self-own. So, I'm not entirely sure what it means to write about translating, but I do know that the kind of energy I try to bring into my writing doesn't necessarily have a place in translating.

A translator is in the business of invisibility—the better you are, the less visible you become. But regardless, you are never not there. In every (international) exhibition, architecture competition, design publication, translators always lurk in the margins.

In the margins, heated discussions blow up and get erased in the end, wiped off the face of the ...*final.FINAL.docx*²; conversations about issues that often hit people the hardest—history, politics, race, class, gender, sexuality—especially when language is used carelessly, disappear without leaving a trace, to be accepted or rejected as if having always/never been there. Sometimes there are emotional dramas of a more personal kind, like that one time Comment (x) by an editor literally made me cry. Bc I mean, how else would I react in the middle of insane deadlines and countless edits going back and forth when someone actually takes the time and dedicates a whole comment to letting me know I have done a good job on something that I really worked hard on? I guess where there's a void, a little does a lot?³

Because there is a lack of human interaction in this type of work. I almost never see the people I work with in person; it's always e-mails, documents, file transfers, deadlines, etc. Translating absolutely is solitary work. Still, I'm hesitant to say it's lonely, because there is a different kind of intimacy present.

I see writers up close, and in my case they are sometimes artists, designers and architects. I witness their excitement, joy, disdain, neuroses, what they accidentally let slip, etc. Some of them I've gotten to know better over the years, there are some I love translating, some are (un)problematic faves, and some (whose writing) I have become to dislike strongly. I can see the writer as they are in that moment, and maybe in some ways even clearer than the reader does (bc of what gets edited). However, in the process of translating, editing and mediating between translator, editor, client and writer (btw, the latter two are different people more often than not), I often remain invisible to writers. I exist in an abstract way, as A Translator, Some Translator, and it's not rare (and this is where it gets a little weird) that the writers are people I know and who know me in a different professional context. Do you know the feeling when you have an intense dream about someone you don't really know very well and that makes you look at them a little differently the next time you see them? Yeah, it can be a little like that. And it's... it's a mood for sure.

So yes, translating is intense mentally, emotionally, but also physically if you forget or can't take care of your body properly. Combined with other jobs, it can be a challenge—switching between the mental registries required for different types of work is exhausting—and as a personal plot twist, it turns out I translate best very early in the morning and write best very late in the night, which does not make for a good routine. I recently went to a talk where two translators, women around my mom's age who have been translating way longer than I, described how they have always translated alongside other jobs they have had, through family vacations, early mornings and late nights—it's never been their sole occupation. The same was confirmed by a survey I saw somewhere, 9 out of 10 had other jobs. And that comes with another set of challenges (see: precarity). Despite/ because of that, it finds, or I deliberately try to find ways to fill every possible crack with translating whenever I can. As a freelancer you don't really say no to a job, so translating has become a glue that holds my life together also in a very material sense.

But I've realised that translating also carries me in other ways. For example, to say translating has made me a better writer is not exactly true—it is through translating that I have become a writer at all. So lately, I've been exploring how to bring what translating has given me to other areas in my work, to see what happens. It takes time but I'm sure something will come of it. I'll let you know!

Anyway, thanks again for asking!

YOURS, KEIU
KRIKMAN

1. No, the book has not been translated and no, I don't know what page this is from.

2. That's a lie though, no decent translator/editor/project manager would let file names get so messy; that's what writers do.

3. Fyi on the other end of the emotional spectrum for me and I suspect a lot of other translators, is not tears of sadness, but a deep earth-shattering shame over mistakes that have slipped into the world and can no longer be undone.