

## **Lost in Translation: Caltranzit's Taxi Babel (review)**

Caltranzit's recent project, *Taxi Babel*, is one instance of its collaborative practice that focuses on the contested space of the San Diego, US – Tijuana, MX border. In the gathering space around and within a 1975 Chevy Malibu, Caltranzit's members directly address the real and conceptual presence of the border. In their car, artists from both countries interact with one another, traversing the border alongside the endless stream of other vehicles that cross, while traversing normal institutional and intellectual boundaries that often inhibit such engagements of collaborative practice. The diverse group, composed primarily of individuals and groups in Tijuana, and students in UCSD's Visual Arts MFA program, has a grand vision. However, their collaboration as it was performed during *Taxi Babel* ends low on content and high on spectacle.

*Taxi Babel* was no small moment for Caltranzit. The performance took place during the Museum of Contemporary Art's TNT, exposing the collaborative to a much larger and more formal audience than they have encountered to date. Amidst the mar-mar-march of Paul Kos' retrospective, and the Hessian sculptures of Anne Mudge, MCASD's regular opening-goers were treated to a strange assortment of people in orange jumpsuits standing around a "Taxi" stand that appeared to be a hijacked lemonade stand, a long line enduring the curated live music, ticket peddlers in the form of young women dressed in black, and a random encounter with a babbler next to the museum's only bathroom. Tickets for a ride in the red-velvet covered taxi were easy to come by. Barring the racket from the bands (cacophony added to babble) and the chilly ocean gusts, the *Taxi Babel* line waited patiently outside for a ride to, well, no one was really sure; the webcast of the performance on the MCASD's foyer window offered no geographical anchor, only the grainy images of an event with tea light candles.

Waiting patiently is perhaps an understatement. Caltranzit apparently misjudged the logistics of the performance: the taxi carried only four people at any given moment, and the duration between each departure and return was about twenty minutes. Using my math powers, I calculated that about twelve people each hour were shuttled to and from the cryptic location. The line was, at any given point during the evening, between twelve and thirty people long (Californians, it should be noted, love to wait in queues). This meant that my advancement from thirtieth to the front of the line in a mere one hour and fifteen minutes had more to do with absconders from the line than efficient transportation. Then again, efficiency was not the issue at hand: the long line resembled in miniature the long line at the international border; the only difference being that at the border I know why I'm waiting (even if I find both lines to be ridiculous). But let me be fair, I knew why I was waiting: I wanted to take part and witness a group of artists whose subject (the border) is one in which I have a great deal of interest. That, and I must admit, I treasured the idea of riding in very sexy refabb'ed Malibu; the car is hot.

The time finally arrived and I got into the car with my colleague and a couple who was behind us. (It turns out that finally, by this time, Caltranzit put their back-up fleet of vehicles into carrying more passengers.) We shuttled off in the rumbling belly of the land-based boat, exhaust leaking back into the cabin. A man drove the car, uttering hardly a word, while another woman explained to one of the passengers in a hushed voice barely audible from the rear seat some of the aspects of the Caltranzit collaborative (the make up of the group, its conceptual intentions, etc.). No one spoke a word to my colleague or me. We drove through downtown San Diego, following the public buses, getting accosted only once by a man with a beat-up eye waiting at a bus stop (he'd just been robbed, he said, and wanted a dollar; me and my fellow car riders sat silently watching him like he was the spectacle, and then drove off when the light turned green). Eventually we arrived at a café on the other side of downtown. The café was in a narrow two-story house. Our

first sight as we approached was the audience who had preceded us: their glum faces turned happy as they watched us pull up. This was an ominous sign.

As I walked up to the café door I could see three people standing and staring at us from the barista's counter. One of those staring was a woman in a bright green dress with China-red lips who looked fresh from the set of a David Lynch film (I fully expected the obligatory dancing dwarf to emerge at any moment). The strangeness, I figured, seemed relevant. As I turned to go up the stairs I saw three more babblers reading from books; I walked by them wondering if their books were really that interesting. At the top of the stairs a *maitresse* beckoned our group into a cozy room where, in the middle of the room, a table with three seated women were dressed in what might most succinctly be described as mystic-hippie attire. Three other chairs across from the women were empty, so my colleague and I, and another gentleman sat down while other audience members stood in the surrounding darkness watching.

I was still warming up from the long wait, glad to be out of the wind and in a warm room. The *maitresse* brought three menus and placed one before each of us. Three choices were provided: "Poemales," tarot, and frutas (fruits). The *maitresse* left and then returned to take our order. The gentleman to my right ordered the Poemales, I asked for the tarot, and my colleague ordered the frutas. (My colleague was tempted to ask for one of the dishes already ordered, but she refrained in the spirit of the performance.) The *maitresse* then took the menus and departed. The three women seated across from us suddenly stood up and moved about the room, sitting back down in front of us in a different order (presumably according to our menu choices). The *maitresse* then returned with three wine glasses. She produced an uncorked bottle of wine and pretended to pour wine into our glasses (this was the second in a series of disappointments, as by that time my headache caused by the long cold wait could have been ameliorated by a glass of wine). The *maitresse* then left and returned with an empty bowl, which she placed in front of the gentleman who had ordered the Poemales.

The woman seated across from the gentleman began to speak in Spanish. He did not understand, but eventually was prompted to choose between three types of poem-tamales, finally picking one from the category of "love." The woman then opened the Poemale and began to read aloud in a dramatic fashion. When she reached the end of the poem she carefully refolded the poem and handed it to him. She then asked him, in Spanish, to open it and read it. Of course, this command from the woman had little effect on the gentleman except to make him feel incredibly embarrassed; he replied to her in English that he didn't speak Spanish, and then once more in Spanish: *no hablo español*. All to no avail as the woman kept repeating her command, and was soon accompanied in a chorus from the other two women. These sirens bleated their commands over and again, until helplessly the gentleman looked at me and asked for help, whereupon my companion, who is fluent in Spanish, quietly told him that they were asking him to read the poem. Quickly he unrolled the poem from its corny binding and read the poem. His slow, mispronounced reading of the poem produced a startling effect: the most heart-felt honest moment of the entire performance came from his recital. His fear combined with his good-sport willingness made every utterance unaffected, unscripted, and enjoyable.

My turn came next as the *maitresse* took the plate from the gentleman and placed it in front of me. I was nervous after having witnessed the sirens' work on the gentleman. The woman across from me began to speak in Spanish, "Thanks for being here, thanks for coming to share our language..." After concentrating very hard, I chose the first tarot card from a deck placed before me: Death! The card accurately reflected my sentiment. "Words are only sounds, signs, signals," the woman continued--her tarot mysticism saddling up next to classic semiotics. My dish concluded as she handed me my fortune while she announced: if you wish to learn more about

our language then study these words.

My colleague was next. The plate landed before her and then she listened to a grand performance of pathos. Among other psychosexually charged statements from the performing woman, the pomegranate, apparently, was my colleague's groin. All the fruits in the woman's basket elicited an epithet. The woman plucked a grape, set it on the table and flicked it with her finger (in the dim light the grape flew across the table and hit my torso). She then took a peeled orange and bit into it; the orange's juice drizzled down her hand and arm in a sticky, pulpy ooze. She offered it to my colleague who politely declined, "no gracias." The woman repeated louder than before, "Tómelo!" (Take it!) My colleague reaffirmed, "no gracias." Finally the maîtresse, hovering quietly at the side whispered in the ear of my colleague, "I think you should take it, ma'am." My colleague acquiesced, took the orange, and set it in the bowl before her. The three sirens were quiet. The maîtresse took my colleague's bowl, leaving the orange behind, and then announced that the performance was over. Relieved, we all silently left the room and walked back down the staircase now emptied of babblers babbling. Then, once outside, in less than a minute, the taxis reappeared and returned us all to a museum now emptied and closed; the janitors were busy cleaning up the opening's detritus, and a line of taxi hopefuls were still standing in the cold.

To be fair, some of the issues of language and its (forced) incomprehensibility are the same that often affect both sides of the border. Still, the performance was a grandiose but uninteresting reprisal of concept shallow performance art. The babblers were mildly interesting, but more or less disconnected from the piece (though a weak argument might be offered that disconnection was their purpose, it's difficult to support any connection to that). The taxi was fabulous, but ultimately the ride was much like other first rides (in cars or otherwise): I expected more and got less, and where I was delivered, I was not so certain I enjoyed. The café's settings were pleasant, though the references to mystic experience were a cliché. The three women at the table all performed their scripted parts well, but the performance might have benefited from a reduction in pathos.

Concepts of mis/interpretation are very relevant to border issues. The politics of misinterpretation are nearly identical with the border dynamic. To this degree, addressing these issues is important. Asking the audience to re/interpret (translate, translive) 'from the heart' via mystic pathos is less interesting to me, since acting 'from the heart' forms too many systems of oppression at present. Demanding an act of misunderstanding (on the part of the performing women) perpetuates the border, reinstantiating its impassibility with each lost utterance. The gentleman's tenuously read poem transcended the women's linguistic dominance, not only through his heartfelt reading, but also in the act of willing helpfulness provided by his co-immigrant, my colleague. There in the space of performed oppression and our enforced symbolic silence (with the exception of my fluent colleague), an alternate space of resistance appeared. The mysticism was merely esoteric, the women were border guards, and each of us (me, my colleague, and the gentleman) did not communicate in our own way: the gentleman and I seemingly and unknowingly forced the sirens to repeat their commands until they were performed; the actors could not move forward until we complied. Likewise, there was change in communication through my colleague's refusal of the orange. How would one classify my colleague's conscious refusal, in Spanish no less, of their commands? Was the barrier language, or was the barrier the edifice of the performance?

I've traveled to a fair number of countries without speaking the native tongue, and through the goodwill of the country's residents, and some laughable charades on my part, I've always been able to communicate. That experience was denied in the space of the performance where dialogue was impossible because the performers had no desire to engage us. While this is a part of the very real nature of border politics, it hardly constitutes the sum reality. In fact, the performance nearly

essentializes in its focus on miscomprehension (in our case). Even the border between MX and US has its performative array (those of us who have passed through the membrane know the variations of script well). Granted, others may have experienced the performance differently, but that's not something I can reasonably address here. Spanish speakers also experience the political border between MX and US differently and I'm not at all convinced that this performance can equivocate that experience for me. In the end, my long cold wait ended in a long uninspired performance.

I would like to conclude with an up-beat story of the vibrant "border culture" that happens all around us in San Diego and Tijuana. On Friday night, the night after the Taxi Babel performance, my colleague and I crossed into Tijuana to see a show by the Monterrey band Kinky. The crowd was mostly teenage and twenty-something locals with the very occasional foreigner. The dominant demographic was composed of squealing girls with pimples and braces, much like the most pop-ular concerts I've been to around the world. Kinky put on an amazing high-powered show (primarily in Spanish), and everyone had a terrific time.

A short Tijuana girl asked me in Spanish to take a picture of the band for her (since I was taller than most in the audience), and though I couldn't understand her words, I understood her. Word and language succumbed to a more meaningful interaction. And, a truly mystic experience took place in the Jai Alai hall of Rockeros.

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