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Being Borges

What's at stake when language becomes
literal via the visual?

Being Borges

Being Borges, presented by Office Impart, proposes a new form of literary translation, begging the question:

| What's at stake when language becomes
literal via the visual?

In this ongoing series of imaginary beings, Ana María Caballero takes Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero's *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (a vast compendium of humanity's imagined creatures) and its 1970 English translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni as points of departure from which to explore how AI interprets Spanish versus English text, unmasking biases ingrained in large data sets.



The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha: Image Generated by Borges + Guerrero's Spanish Text.



Shang Yang: The Rain Bird: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem. Available as part of a collector's set.



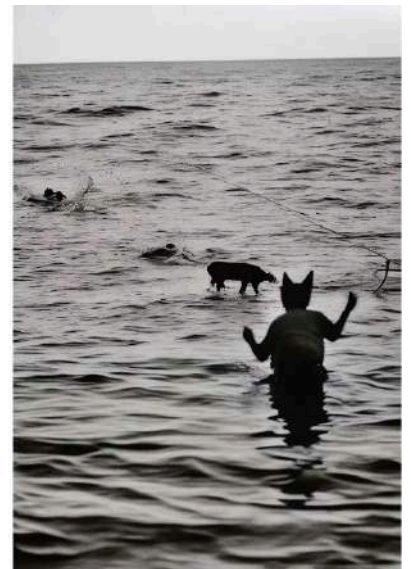
A Bao A Qu: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem. Available as part of a collector's set.



The Chinese Unicorn: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem. Available as part of a collector's set..



The Simurgh King of the Birds: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem. Available as part of a collector's set.



The Hundred Heads: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem. Available as part of a collector's set.

This collection also delves into the impossibility of translation—AI cannot “read” Spanish and English in the same way because they are different sign systems, with nuances and meanings that exist beyond their constructed signifiers, their words.

Caballero’s process was three-fold. She first used Borges and Guerrero’s Spanish descriptions of imaginary beings as prompts to create a large corpus of images, from which one was selected. The process was repeated using di Giovanni’s English translations.

Thirdly, Caballero wrote a new poem—an inspired, compressed recasting of the original Spanish text and used this poem to create an additional array of images. Her poems delve into the poetics of prompts, incorporating text-to-image generation semantics in their construction.

*‘I do not know which of us
has written this page.’*

Jorge Luis Borges

A Bao A Qu

As you circle the stairs, it will follow –
(growing blue) in the body,
the face,
scrambling to climb
frantic
as [krilll].
You are free to watch or
ignore how it pursues
up stones
that ruck like vertebrae
protecting new
(nerves)).
Its tentacular outreach,
its access
to weaponry,
rely on your
[virtue].
Be calm – for you are not
pure.
Are
you?
No. You've scaled these steps
like the rest of us,
hoping (((to poach)))
a clean
view.

A Bao A Qu - poem.

Shang Yang: The Rain Bird

When (my field) wants rain,
I do what my mother did –
I call the (dragon).
The beast comes,
a winged jade furor –
its tail a controlled
thing.
I only learned about Shang Yang recently:
how it possesses
one foot,
how children hop on a leg
to summon it or – rather –
to mock it.
[The bird] flapped its feathers before
Prince Ch'i's throne
and Confucius declared
(flood).
Flood. In this land
of lack.
They built dams in a flutter and saved
us. As event voiced by many lips
until it reached me,
here.
I could hop on one foot. I
could.
But I prefer the dragon, its clawed talon
tucked as it descends
to (((vent liquid)))
.

Shang Yang: The Rain Bird - poem.

The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha

Buddha's mother, ((a queen)), dreamt
a white elephant with six tusks entered
her body. The dream was delivered
to the king's advisors who predicted
a son would come
to save the world [or]
rule it.
((He saved it by refusing
to govern – abandoning
home)).
Elephants, like queens, can be domestic
and [sacred].
Six, as an idea, is also holy,
for those are the ways to move:
left, right, forward, back,
down, up.
Perhaps the baby boy
was a seventh tusk,
a seventh way –
(((penetration))) as passing
through.

*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the
Buddha - poem.*

The Chinese Unicorn

Until now, I wasn't sure what to do
with my love for the word
(((piecemeal))).
I once galloped across the Eastern plains
drumming its sounds inside
my animal skull:
Piecemeal, piecemeal, piecemeal.
The ((tumult)) of its coupled vowels hummed
like this: What can be brought together
can also be (ripped)
apart.
For centuries, I avoided still bodies
of water, no matter my thirst, not wanting
to mirror my [unsure] architecture.
My form is patched in fragments, a birth tongued
by invaders, chronicled as an ((apogee)),
but no single syllable decides me.
Uproot, foolproof, [fitful].
Today I sip from this quiet lake, open-eyed.
My horn is there, reflected
in swells.
Airborn, (headline), brainstorm.
To picture me is to summon the ((fortune)) of a land
trying to understand fortune itself – at times confused,
at others (astute). Patchwork, palimpsest, amperсанд.
Piecemeal I behold myself, whole –
some myth, folklore served, synonym
of origin.

The Chinese Unicorn - poem.

The Hundred-Heads

Though my first time at the docks,
I could tell something wasn't right
by how the fishing lines (shook)
the men.
Frantic, they begged for arms,
beseeched the crowd.
The one they call (((Holy))) approached, spoke
to the being they hauled
from the (depths).
Kapila, he said, I know it's you
because of your one hundred heads.
None of the creature's mouths moved – not its lips
of horse, not its tongue of cat, not its whiskers
of fox, not its molars of pig.
Kapila, the [Holy One] voiced, karma
is conveyed as ((rope)).
Consequence, the horde hissed. Or, was it:
Punishment?
[Audacity] of the mind, it seethed, transforms
flesh into this.
But the strange critter was too busy
(drowning) on land
to concede.
I never learned how Kapila earned
his beastly heads. But I know how he became
a fish out of water.
I saw who pulled. I can give name
to every ((face)).

The Hundred-Heads - poem.

The Simurgh: King of the Birds

Can't remember if it was ((Margarita)) or
me who came across the Simurgh, King
of the Birds. Of course, al-Qaswini,
Burton, Southey, Firdusi and Flaubert
could claim discovery first. Though, before
them, Attar, in writing his four thousand
five hundred versed Parliament,
formed the creature upon a mountain.
It is a (fiction), this act
of retrieving. Who's to say the Simurgh
didn't fly out from a nest tucked
in the depths of my ((bookshelf)))?
Can you affirm whether it's Jorge Luis
or [Ana] writing this? No couplet wasted
to examine how it happened.
But every tarret to (extol)
that it did.
To (hark) means heed: to hark back
signifies relive.
The Simurgh, when Attar's legend found him,
(((dissolved)))-immortal bird of mortal birds with
wings that beat as thirty foreign pairs of wings.
A song composed of [borrowed] words.
Hark forward, (little) poem.

The Simurgh - poem.

The Monkey of the Inkpot

Most creatures who look like me
eat nuts,
fruits, leftover food (cast off) for cats
and dogs,
but my ((exact kind)), born north of North,
exerts patience –
we drink the ink that remains after a wrist
(((creates text))).
The black puddies in our stomachs
could delirium
kingdoms, [declare flood], trace singular
star maps.
We swallow unforned drafts, digest (the idea)
that never
was. Because we swig ink, [they think] we can't
truly exist.
Like this, we entered their (((literature as fiction))),
as myth,
which we knew would last longer, hold firmer,
than fact.

The Monkey of the Inkpot - poem.

The Double

Not to be confused with otherness,
[My suitcase] surfaces from the airport's gut.
Suits gutted, transported – (([rail surface])) encased.
I secure my luggage: [my form] heads home.
Home is not (security), not head, not form.
It's the self I leave when I abscond.
Leave it to me to (((abscond))) selfishly
And arrive supplied with fresh ways to still.
Still, refreshed supply goes wayward fast. I scan
Maps, [double down] on routes that become tracks.
Down the route, come double tracks. ((We and she)) map
One knot. The trip's up: I [hold] old baggage.
Know thyself, an Old One held and tripped me up:
To be (confused with otherness) is to be.

The Double - poem.

T'ao T'ieh

Because [the beast] was tucked in the corner of a tapestry,
which, in turn, was hidden at the far end of the wing,
I thought – not of peril – but of (Auden).
though the two are similar things, I recalled, then,
how I disagreed with his (famous museum poem)
when I read it as a teen. Suffering is
not slipped into the cracks of paintings to announce callous –
how we don't stop glom at another's (([plunge])).
Rather, it reveals how deep
foreign failure cuts. Bruegel pushed Icarus' drowning
legs away, yet gave the canvas their ((submerged))
name. So, too, the tapestry, whose (legend)
quoted Borges: The T'ao T'ieh represents [gluttony].
Its effigy placed on plates to urge bodily
restraint, despite being a creature
with two bodies and a single ravenous face. I felt sorry.
Sorry for the poet, calisthenated for thinking the Masters
((misled)) diastated to trace our absent hearts.
And sorry for the Masters who – knowing ((the splash)),
the fangs, to be already too much – felt sorry, in
turn, for us
and stitched (their lessons) small.

T'ao T'ieh - poem.



*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha:
Image Generated by Borges + Guerrero's Spanish
Text. Available as part of a collector's set.*



*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha:
Image Generated by di Giovanni's English
Translation.*



*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha:
Image Generated by Caballero's Poem.*

El Elefante Que Predijo El Nacimiento del Buddha

Original Text by Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero

Quinientos años antes de la era cristiana, la reina Maya, en el Nepal, soñó que un elefante blanco, que procedía de la Montaña de Oro, entraba en su cuerpo. Este animal onírico tenía seis colmillos, que corresponden a las seis dimensiones del espacio indostánico: arriba, abajo, atrás, adelante, izquierda y derecha. Los astrólogos del rey predijeron que Maya daría a luz un niño, que sería emperador de la Tierra o redentor del género humano. Aconteció según se sabe, lo último.

En la India, el elefante es un animal doméstico. El color blanco significa humildad y el número seis es sagrado.

*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha:
Original Spanish Text by Borges + Guerrero.
Reference only.*

The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha

Translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni

Five centuries before the Christian era, Queen Maya, in Nepal, had a dream that a white Elephant, which dwelled on the Golden Mountain, had entered her body. This visionary beast was furnished with six tusks. The King's soothsayers predicted that the Queen would bear a son who would become either ruler of the world or the saviour of mankind. As is common knowledge, the latter came true.

In India the Elephant is a domestic animal. White stands for humility and the number six is sacred, corresponding to the six dimensions of space: upward, downward, forward, back, left, and right.

*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha:
1970 Translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni.
Reference only.*

The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha

Buddha's mother, ((a queen)), dreamt a white elephant with six tusks entered her body. The dream was delivered to the king's advisors who predicted a son would come

to save the world [or] rule it.

((He saved it by refusing to govern - abandoning home))).

Elephants, like queens, can be domestic and [sacred].

Six, as an idea, is also holy, for those are the ways to move: left, right, forward, back, down, up.

Perhaps the baby boy was a seventh tusk, a seventh way -

((penetration))) as passing through.

*The Elephant that Foretold the Birth of the Buddha:
Poem by Caballero inspired by the original Spanish text.*

No additional words or punctuation marks were used other than Borges and Guerrero's, di Giovanni's and her own. The image-generation was guided solely by these raw text inputs and via parametrization, thus each output represents a literal, visual translation of the texts.



Collectors will also receive a triptych that brings together Borges and Guerrero's descriptions of the imaginary beings, di Giovanni's translations and Caballero's poems into a triangulation of shared signification and of striking contrast. Each of Caballero's original poems may be collected as an edition of one, with a signed print available via special arrangement.



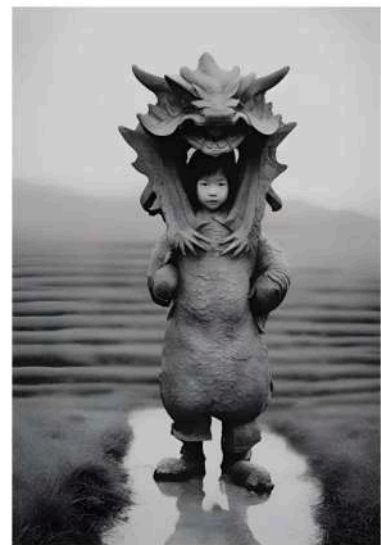
Shang Yang: The Rain Bird.



Shang Yang: The Rain Bird: Image Generated by Borges + Guerrero's Spanish Text.



Shang Yang: The Rain Bird: Image Generated by di Giovanni's English Translation.



Shang Yang: The Rain Bird: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem.

Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*, via which Calle attempts to describes a subject by documenting her efforts to approach him, inspired Caballero to access the core myths in Borges and Guerrero's book through multiple texts, seeking to humanize the fantastical by mapping these stories as analog, documentary-style photographs rather than painted, digitized or otherwise imagined forms. The interplay of text and image in *Being Borges* pays homage to Calle's work.

Being Borges invites viewers to experience language as a transdisciplinary work of art, one that expresses meaning beyond its systems of signification.



A Bao A Qu: Image Generated by Borges + Guerrero's Spanish Text.



A Bao A Qu: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem. Available as part of a collector's set. |



A Bao A Qu: Image Generated by di Giovanni's English Translation.

Universally it is admitted that the unicorn is a supernatural being of good
 género; así como los reyes, los anales, las biografías de varones ilustres y otros
 hasta los párvulos y las mujeres del pueblo

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Raisonné de la Littérature Chinoise (1948),

rey sin insignias reales

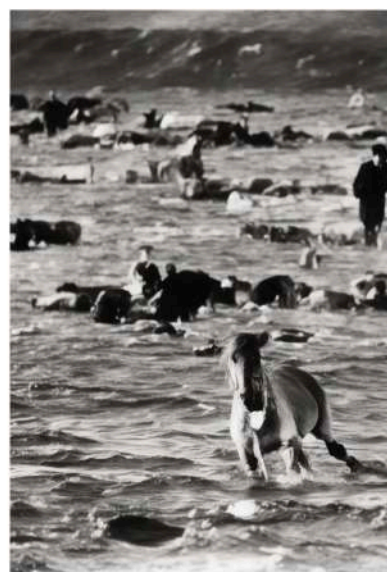
The Chinese Unicorn.



The Chinese Unicorn: Image Generated by Borges + Guerrero's Spanish Text.



The Chinese Unicorn: Image Generated by di Giovanni's English Translation.



The Chinese Unicorn: Image Generated by Caballero's Poem.



The Tension Between Translation and Interpretation in Ana Maria Caballero's "Being Borges"

By Virginia Valenzuela

What happens to an artwork once the artist whispers its existence into the world? The artist's intentions, though primal to the work, disappear, and it is but the viewer's reaction that defines its meaning. The same thing can be said of any thoughts we are brave enough to translate into the spoken or written word. The listener, or reader, decodes our meaning. The original is at the mercy of the interpreter, just as the interpreter is at the mercy of the skill and precision used to create the original.

It was Jorge Luis Borges, an incredible literary mind, and himself an accomplished translator of particularly difficult works, who said that “The dictionary is based on the hypothesis—obviously an unproven one—that languages are made up of equivalent synonyms.” If all acts of communication come down to the challenge of translating unequal signals, then how are we to endeavor to translate thoughts, stories, and images from one language into another?

Translation is, after all, a form of rewriting, an attempt to capture the meaning, music, and intention of the original. Even for Borges, who collaborated on the first English translation of his “Book of Imaginary Beings,” there was an impossibility of being truly faithful to the text. Language affects the way we convey meaning, the way we word things, and indeed, the way we see the world.



*T'ao T'ieh.: The Rain Bird: Image
Generated by Borges + Guerrero's
Spanish Text.*



*T'ao T'ieh.: Image Generated by di
Giovanni's English Translation.*



*T'ao T'ieh.: Image Generated by
Caballero's Poem.*

Ana Maria Caballero's series "Being Borges" is rooted at the crux of signifier and signified, of language and interpretation, of precision and ambiguity. Using artificial intelligence to translate the original text, the original translation, and her own original interpretation into images, Caballero exacerbates the differences between three different voices attempting to describe the exact same thing. The process of using AI, a machine that has been trained on human data—and yet, is not human, and thus not able to cover up its biases—reveals simultaneously, the importance of word choice, and the futility of word choice.



*The Hundred Heads: The Rain
Bird: Image Generated by Borges +
Guerrero's Spanish Text.*



*The Hundred Heads: Image Generated
by di Giovanni's English Translation.*



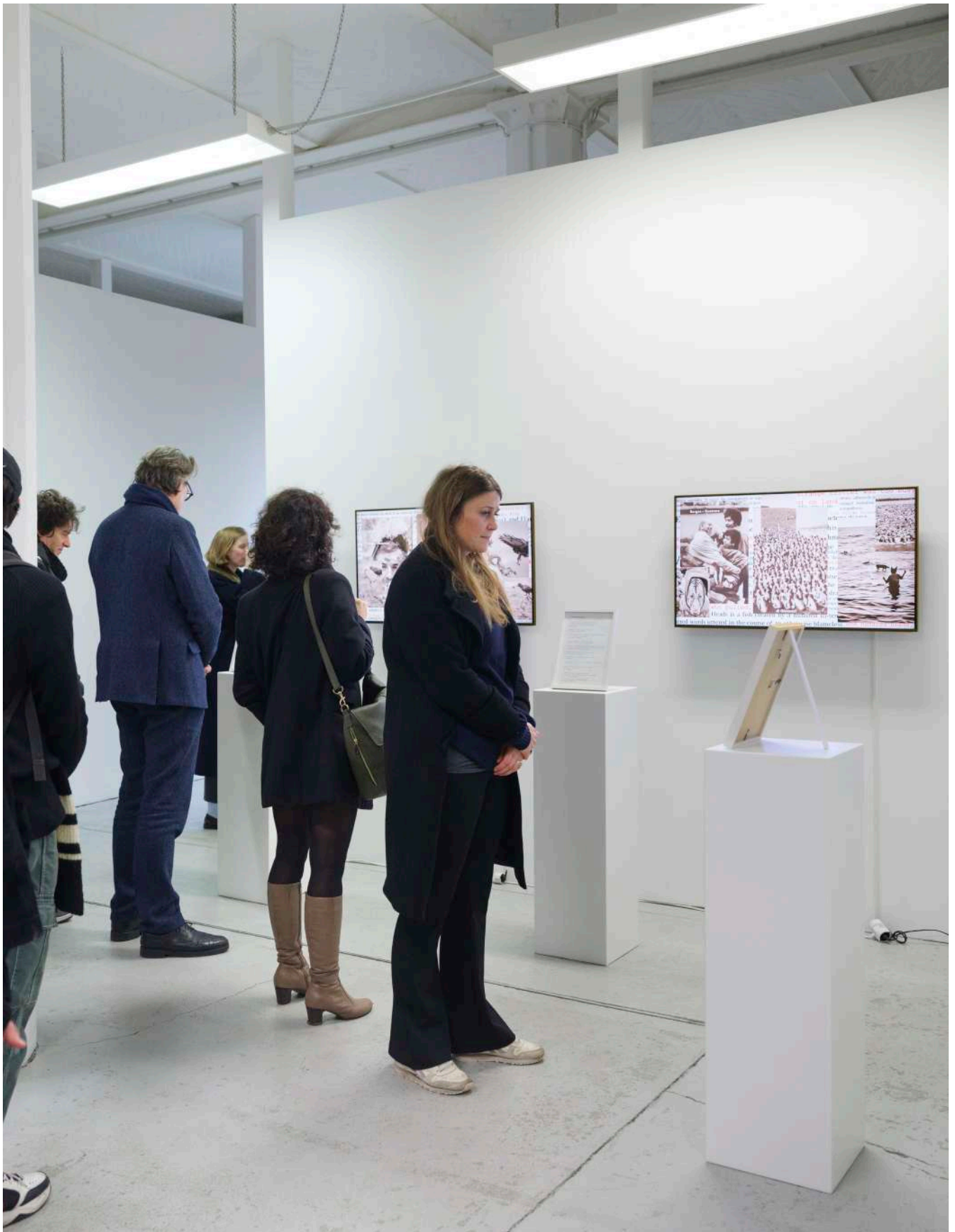
*The Hundred Heads: Image Generated
by Caballero's Poem.*

Each artwork in "Being Borges" weaves together the original Spanish, the English translation, and the poet's own interpretations together in a textual tapestry that is constantly interrupted by the AI-generated images these words conjure up. Like Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne*, the artworks attempt to approach their subject, but never get close enough to put their finger on it. The three voices, along with the images of various sizes inspired by each, create imperfect triptychs full of hints, but bereft of clarity.



Caballero's experiment in translation forces the viewer to consider the inadequacy of communicating across languages, cultures, and spans of time. It also, at base, questions the necessity of precision in such an endeavor. After all, is it the artist's ability to convey themselves that draws us to their work, or rather, the space they leave for our own interpretation?









ANA MARÍA CABALLERO

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