

On different Kinds of Language

web exhibition

27.04.2017 — 27.05.2017

Athamor's third web exhibition talks about language both as a means of communication and as an encoding–decoding tool for human and nonhuman processes of interpretation. Three selected projects combine observation, intervention and irony to suggest reflections over the possibilities — and / or limits — of language. Language is a living entity, prone to be materialized, deconstructed, transferred, disguised. In the linguistic parabola by Prost, everything is nothing but a subsequent translation. Dai's semi-fictional story tells about the weird relationship between an archaic lingo and its commercial exploitation in contemporary China. Finally, the dissection of digital artifacts, operated by Rak, makes self-evident their nature as pure code, highlighting the fact that each single image on our devices is just a piece of a constructed language.

Athanasius Kirchner, *Prospectus Turris Babilonicae*, 1679

Book of Babel, by the American artist R. Prost, is “an electronic world tour, an algorithmic travelogue” which records all the outcomes of a reiterative process operated on a textual paragraph. This text has been translated with an online tool¹ into another language — namely, Portuguese — and the rendered version has been then translated into a third language, and so on to cover all the world's languages and finally return to English. Funnily enough — as one of the common standards for comparing languages is the Christian Lord's Prayer — the starting point is a passage from the English version of the Bible. Each consecutive translation though, by virtue of the absence of direct human interaction in the interpretative process, turns out to be mis-

leading and inaccurate, suggesting a feeling of oddity which recalls the legendary *confusio linguarum* (confusion of tongues) which is also the topic of the above-mentioned passage.² Although online translators became a common practice, experiencing this lack of accuracy is still something we are all familiar with. Since this issue affects the whole process, the returned English text completely loses its original meaning in favor of a babbling farce in which the most relevant comprehensible sequence is ironically the sentence: “it is a shit message”.



Furen Dai, *Language Product*, 9'12", 2016

Dealing with a different kind of meaning loss, *Language Product* depicts a fictitious factory in which words and sentences are manufactured. Furen Dai's work began with her research on a “Secret Women Language” called NüShu, which was originated and developed as a secret code among women from the Yao minority

in Jiang Yong, Hunan Province, China. Though nowadays the language has lost its functionality, women who still know the language have been pressured from Chinese government into performing their cultural activities as entertainment for tourists for menial wages. Mirroring this absurd commodification, the video is a weird journey through the act of producing the secret language as art object to be sold to people who are unable to decode the language. In Dai's words “history lives through language”,³ and through the fictional and almost satirical story narrated by the video we are witnessing how both Yao community history and NüShu language are undergoing a process of mystification and corruption.

Artifacts by Italian visual artist Carla Rak takes into account a more subtle process of corruption. Since its very beginning, photography has been considered a perfect medium to archive our memories. With the digital shift, a much wider amount of memories are collected and stored on binary files on our machine, yet their nature has become more ephemeral and short-lived. Referring to the inconvenient occurrence of digital damage, the artist has in-

entionally corrupted a series of still–life images from the archive of Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. As these digital reproductions are accessed with an ordinary text editor, they reveal their true nature of nothing more than a sequence of words set in a machine language. Rak nonsensically operates on this unknown language, making minor edits that cause images to lose some details, colors, tones. Still readable by machines, they are decaying, losing identity. As the disintegrating flowers in seventeenth–century painting were an allegory of human frailty and transience, these corrupted artifacts aim to recognize how feeble our memories could be in the digital milieu. Rak finally reproduces her decomposed images on big sized lambda prints, as a symbolic gesture to deliver their memory again to the realm of physicality.

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- 1 Perhaps this one: <https://translate.google.com/>
- 2 Book of Genesis, 11:1–9
- 3 Furen Dai, Artist' Statement