

Location, Locution, Location

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Perhaps the best definition of pidgin languages lies in their alternative designation as ‘contact’ languages — a term that elegantly captures both the initial encounter between two alien and uncomprehending peoples, and their ensuing efforts to establish a linguistic ‘common ground’ that would enable them to communicate. For much of the time, these early exchanges would have revolved around the business of trade, so it’s not surprising that any developing lingo would have reflected these limited, functional imperatives. Gradually, though, over a period of time, and incubated by a closer level of interaction between the respective peoples, many of these fledgling languages acquired an increasingly sophisticated and autonomous form. Although still recognisably a variant of the original dominant language, usually that of the dominant – often colonial – culture, these ‘pidgin’ languages began to take off in markedly different directions; infused and transformed by a bevy of local influences and inflections.

Erika Tan’s striking and intriguing installation, *PIDGIN interrupted transmission*, highlights the ongoing significance of these endlessly mutating linguistic hybrids and anticipates their increasing proliferation in today’s media-saturated, polyglot landscape. Two large projection screens confront each other at either end of the gallery, each one home to a parallel stream of images and icons. At times, the content on one screen seems echoed or mimicked by that of the other; but, mostly, the flow seems random, discontinuous; a babble of overlapping tongues. This interplay is actually very precisely synchronised, and is mediated by the presence of a third element (a computer control-system called SmartPax running a software programme called Trax) which Tan has chosen to foreground as part of the work. On this

third (monitor) screen, positioned on a desk next to a book of research documents, packets of digital data float by (corresponding to the image-sequences on each of the projectors), each one accompanied by traces of the underlying computer code, but also by other textual annotations.

If this conceit helps to illuminate the signifying chain in which language operates, much of the projected imagery tends to emphasise its shifting, unstable nature. A key motif is the game of 'Chinese whispers,' enacted at several points in the work, in which a message is relayed, and progressively distorted, through successive iterations. Elsewhere, a number of canonical or instructional texts are put through a similar process of 'transliteration', in which a series of figures from different linguistic backgrounds transcribe, then recite, each set of words phonetically (as opposed to finding equivalents which *translate* their original meaning). Hearing Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* read back at two or three linguistic removes is a profoundly disorientating experience — the voices of the people, in their polyglot diversity, re-affirming and, at the same time, undermining the book's Internationalist message. For every example of a breakdown in communication, *PIDGIN* generates new and unexpected connections. Although it proceeds along a particular pre-programmed 'timeline', its seemingly inexhaustible hubbub of imagery possesses a distinctly non-linear, recombinant quality. Collisions of images, words and sounds set off miniature chain reactions, while a flurry of flash-framed SMS texting icons testifies to the emergence of an extraordinarily popular vernacular language, as functional and as abridged as any kind of pidgin.

Throughout the work, Tan plays deliberately, even relentlessly, on the homophone between 'pidgin' and 'pigeon'. Although the pun illustrates the ease with which language can suddenly slip from one set of meanings to another, Tan's exploitation of the *double entendre* releases a host of complementary allusions (common-or-garden/feral entities doubling as carriers of hidden messages...) The link helps to negotiate the space between the exotic and the homely, engagingly traversed in several of Tan's earlier

pieces, which are remarkable for their deft and subtle exploration of the close and occasionally ambivalent relations between British and Chinese cultures. A large-scale installation like *Passing*, for example, finds an appropriately widescreen expression for its historical patchwork of traditional/stereotypical representations of 'Chinese identity', whereas other, smaller works like *Chintz* and *boatrace* are more intimately rooted in the nuances of popular, everyday idiom. Each, though, resembles *PIDGIN* in its sensitivity to the vagaries and complexities of language.

As an aside, it is also interesting to speculate how *PIDGIN* might have been forged out of an encounter with the arcane and sometimes formidable lexicon of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The piece certainly conforms to D&G's description of a 'language machine'. It is, to be sure, an 'assemblage'; even, to some extent, a 'rhizome': a branching, open-ended structure that unfolds in opposition to classical Western hierarchies of knowledge. Perhaps the most persuasive analogy, however, is to be found in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of so-called 'minor' languages — variants of the dominant spoken or literary mode which 'decentre' the prevailing 'major' language, often by means of radical reduction or exaggeration. Although Deleuze and Guattari's points of reference are drawn primarily from the field of literature (Kafka's pared-down, utilitarian German providing a particularly compelling example), it is easy to see how pidgin languages, with their simultaneous facility for assimilation and modification, could be recruited to their wide-ranging politics of deconstruction and 'deterritorialisation'.

Today, though, the *mot du jour* is globalisation — a big, and apparently unifying, idea (although, again, meaning different things to different people) that seems to have been adopted as the axiom of the future. Its gospel of economic development, in which the corporate-capitalist mantras of unimpeded markets are bolstered by the boosterist jargon of new technology, has come to represent a new kind of 'dominant language', parroted with increasing regularity across the surface of the globe. And yet, despite these homogenising forces, the last few years have seen an equally powerful re-assertion of local identities and allegiances. Computers, faxes and mobile

phones may have abolished pre-existing national and geographical coordinates but have done so in a way that has created, and promoted, a plethora of local voices. Communicating with these new technologies is a facility we have started to acquire, but are only just learning to make our own. As *PIDGIN interrupted transmission* shows to such vivid effect, it is in these creative adaptations, these all-too-human corruptions and transformations, that a truly expressive colloquial language may begin to emerge.