Words Across Lines

The concept of "civilization" refers to a wide variety of facts: to the levels of technology, to the type of manners, to the development of scientific knowledge, to religious ideas and customs. It can refer to the type of dwelling or the manner in which men and woman live together, to the form of judicial punishment, or to the way in which food is prepared. Strictly speaking, there is almost nothing which cannot be done in a "civilized" or an "uncivilized" way; hence, it always seems somewhat difficult to summarize in a few words everything that can be described as civilization.

Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*

If one had to give a word to characterize the new exhibition, *Cross Words*, by Wuttin Chansataboot it could certainly be *complex*. And even though Boris Groys (b. 1947) reminds us that "[t]oday's public accepts contemporary art even when it does not always feel that it 'understands' this art" and that "[t]he need for a theorical explanation of art thus seems definitively passé,"[1] in this present instance, the meaning and depth of the artworks exhibited and the creative process behind them are difficult to appreciate without documentation. Entering the two rooms of Gallery Seescape, the viewer may find it difficult to comprehend the great number and diversity of pieces on display and their interconnections. But, like a puzzle, this complexity needn't confuse and distance the viewer, but rather engage them more fully. And even though chance—or perhaps controlled chance—also plays a pivotal role in this installation, ultimately it is this idea of complexity that qualifies best the process, the work, and its understanding—at least hermeneutically.

Long before Wuttin Chansataboot, the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte (1898–1967) developed his artistic practice around the relationship between image/word combinations, stating "No object is so tied to its name that we cannot find another one that suits it better" or "The words referring to two different objects do not show what can separate these objects from each other."[2] Although with a different purpose, Wuttin's approach also emphasizes the image/word relationship. Indeed, through acts of translation and interpretation, single words, photographic images, and stories—originating from two distinct cultures—become two-dimensional pictures, which are then fused by artificial intelligence (AI). Through these means, Wuttin engages us in a discussion between cultures—in a notably more positive light than Huntington—and a reflection on the place of technology in our lives in the twenty-first century.

The artist also mentions having been inspired by the 2000 Korean film *Il Mare* in which the two protagonists exchange letters from the same place but across a two-year time difference. Simultaneously as part of the Nakanojo Biennale 2021, *Cross Words* operates across—and places before our eyes—not a two-year but a two-hour time difference between "ISAMAMURA", the Creative Institution of Arts and Culture in Nakanojo (Japan) and Gallery Seescape in Chiang Mai (Thailand). Reflected in the selection and exchange of words and images from Thailand and Japan and in the many elements of his creative process that decontextualize and recontextualize, Wuttin embodies the concept of deterritorialization/reterritorialization as developed by Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Félix Guattari (1930–1992). Another relevant element seems to confirm this theory: the place given to language and its meaning.

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[1] Boris Groys. 2016. *In the Flow.* London, New York: Verso. pp. 23–24.
[2] Kathleen Rooney & Eric Plattner (eds). 2016. *René Magritte: Selected Writings*. University of Minnesota Press. p. 33.

In both locations, a table screen shows the letters of the Thai and Japanese alphabets that were distilled through multiple translations and interpretations and used by the algorithm to fuse illustrations from the two cultures as a kind of "non-anthropomorphic dichotomic digital golem." The latter, ever-changing, illustrates the philosophy of Heraclitus who said "You cannot step into the same river twice, for other waters are continually flowing on"; this work constantly evolves and remains in a process of development. This situation is accentuated by the fact that half of this projected hybrid form is created in Gallery Seescape while the other half is created by the computer in Japan. Visitors are drawn to this lively and colorful form, though they may not fully understand what it represents, all that it conceals within it, and all of the previous steps. Though the context of this work is situated in Asia within the framework of the biennial in Japan, the underlying message has a greater scope. It symbolizes our world in a globalized time when there is much mixing, merging, destroying, and rebuilding under the impetus of population movements, and when the acquired and alleged knowledge of human beings and the environment has been overturned by an immense crisis.

Since it is impossible for us to identify the details of the various steps in this final interactive installation, Wuttin made the choice to promote clarity and readability—contrary to many artists who prefer to shroud their creative process in mystery—by unveiling his process documentation (photos, words, stories, etc.) in the first room of the exhibition. The diversity of the photos reveals quotidian rural and urban worlds, ideas of nature and time, and the contrast between macro and micro. The subjects of the images are identifiable and interpretable, unlike the accompanying words in Thai or Japanese which, unreadable for many, become like abstract drawings. Here we arrive at the heart of this exhibition, where the complexity of each step is augmented by the requisite communication between cultures with different languages and different symbols, whose dialogue is made possible through the use of software and machines, and is inherently riddled with possible errors. Should we rejoice in this technology or beware of it? What are the limits of language and what miscommunications arise with each translation? How would the use of English, with its cross-cultural potential but colonial implications, change this experiment? Wuttin's work urges us to interact consciously, to reflect on our exchanges.

Wuttin Chansataboot also decided to incorporate cameras into the two exhibition halls, transmitting in real time what is happening in the two places. Thus, people visiting the exhibition can observe those who visit the other location and potentially interact with them. This live broadcast, while providing connection, is also a form of intrusion, a kind of game between observer and observed, like that which has invaded our societies, with its ubiquitous surveillance that initially purports to protect us, but which also serves a more sinister function.

One final thing we might note while facing the artworks, which can undoubtedly also inspire, is the silence in both rooms, despite the action and the perpetual movement of the table and the digital installation. There is an omnipresent silence there, which recalls the words of Thích Nhất Hạnh (b. 1926): "Silence is essential. We need silence, just as much as we need air, just as much as plants need light. If our minds are crowded with words and thoughts, there is no space for us."[3] In this expansive silence, taking in Wuttin's installation and artistic approach, one can sense a particular optimism as we emerge from the current pandemic. There is a feeling that across time and geographical distance, there is hope for fruitful communication, thanks to and despite our technological advances.

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[3] Thích Nhất Hạnh. 2015. *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise.* Parallax Press. p. 11.