

A hundred tongues...

Flutter by Alex Davies

“It has a hundred tongues a hundred mouths and a voice of iron

...There are a hundred meows, a hundred miles and a hundred tanks

...It is a hundred pounds, it is a hundred dollars, it is a hundred, it is...”

In the circle of whispers created by Flutter, messages emerge, mutate, falter and flower into a myriad of meanings. Sixteen speakers are arranged in a ring replaying hundreds of recordings of the game Chinese Whispers. Each new round of the game lets loose a new message, transmitted from one player to another around the circle. The speakers faithfully replay the increasingly unfaithful repetitions of the players. Davies manipulates the recordings to create dynamic flows of inarticulate murmuring from which the spoken messages emerge, and into which they melt. Standing in the centre I am encircled by the messages as they make their journeys through sense and nonsense. The insistent swells of sound surround me and the voices seduce me. There is something almost unbearably tender in the amplified whispers; they are so intimate that I can feel the breath of their ssssss’s caress me. The closeness of the recordings, their movement and spatial arrangement activate a sense of presence that lives at the nape of the neck and sends shivers through my shoulders and over my scalp.

The manufacture of this physiological response to the presence of non-existent others is a trademark of Davies’ work. He conjures the experience of phantom human proximity through the arrangement of audio visual traces. He has an illusionist’s grasp of how to manipulate and play with our senses, and an artist’s grasp of how to reveal the illusion at the same moment he creates it. In that ambivalent moment our senses are heightened and destabilised; we become aware of the power and fallibility of our perceptual systems in interpreting the world around us.

Central to the experience of Flutter, and much of Davies’ work, is a deep exploration of the relationship between human perception and technology. In Flutter the human speakers are (dis)embodied by the mechanical speakers, who play the role of technological “stand-ins”. They are mounted on tripods; identical, black, angular, person-height. Their dumb, faithful recreation of the players’ accelerating miscommunication speaks eloquently of the complex dynamics of power, similarity and difference that hold between humans and machines. The work unpicks the familiar themes of reproduction and transmission that run through much discussion around the relationship between art and technology. Flutter recasts the litany of anxieties of technological dangers and failures - degradation of the copy, “glitches” in the system, lag, interference, digital manipulation of “truth” - as essentially human. From the keenly felt absence of the humans arises a sense of compassion, even nostalgia for human fallibility. Flutter is above all a celebration of human error as it reveals the ceaseless creative work of making sense of the world.

“If you want to be a banana, die your hair yellow

... If you want to be an orange tie a red ribbon”

At the heart of the installation is a great pleasure in the way human beings construct and transmit meaning with language. It is a kind of fond analysis of the cognitive work involved in being linguistic creatures. The meanings of the messages shift in each round sometimes incrementally and sometimes in big leaps. The increments are the results of misheard or misremembered details, the leaps often seem to be moments of synaptic misfire. In a particularly nonsensical round the phrase *“If you want to be a banana, die your hair yellow”* is altered by a little girl who randomly changes the colour to orange, seeding a mutation that ends with *“If you want to be an orange tie a red ribbon”*. Like a lesson in Saussurian linguistics these substitutions reveal the great repertoire of language which is manifested in every individual utterance. It is a testament to the work we do, hundreds of times a day, in selecting each word, from all its alternatives, and stringing them all together appropriately.

Once a mistake, such as orange for yellow, has been made the message begins to unravel and the efforts of the players to interpret and repeat the phrase meaningfully become ever more fascinating. The work is pushed forward by the generative and degenerative effects of their individual styles of transmission. Some love to elaborate, adding emphasis, gusto and rhetorical twists. Some fudge over confusing non-sequiturs, slurring and self-correcting. Others aim for precision; clearly articulating even the most nonsensical phrases. The commonest fate of all the messages is to be slowly drowned out by the snorts and hiccups of suppressed laughter as the players dissolve in giggles over and over again. The laughter is, of course, infectious and spreads between the players and to the listener. It is partly a ticklish laughter, born of close breath in the ear, but it is also the entrance of hysteria born of miscommunication. At the same time as it celebrates the human achievement of meaning, it revels in the essentially slippery, chaotic, and promiscuous nature of language. It engenders rising panic as meanings refuse to stay still; running out of control. Language becomes the master rather than the slave. Each mangled phoneme demonstrates the impossibility of creating a secure verbal connection with those around us.

“Every nation in the region has a decision to make, either you are with us or you are with the terrorists

... Everybody is a terrorist, if you're with us you're a terrorist and if you're against us you're a terrorist”

Meanwhile, amongst the fecund proliferation of sense and nonsense, patterns emerge which demonstrate the deep social and cultural structures that govern language and our means of understanding and articulating reality. Davies has deliberately chosen an array of different communicative modes including weather reports, political rhetoric, recipes and religious texts. Our ingrained propensity to recognise and subconsciously reproduce the vocabulary,

structures and attitudes of each mode is constantly replayed. When faced with an ambiguity in a sentence, players select and create meanings that reveal their expectations of the particular style of the message. In linguistic terms they are performing “appropriately”. The listener is able to trace how these appropriate insertions often simplify, or exaggerate the initial message, sometimes to the point it becomes a parody of a style. Underneath the playful flow of the installation there is an increasing awareness of the normalising and controlling power of these patterns to self-replicate.

The form of the game particularly lends itself to exaggerating the political idiom of anti-terrorist rhetoric. One message begins; *“Every nation in the region has a decision to make, either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”*, and ends *“Everybody is a terrorist, if you’re with us you’re a terrorist and if you’re against us you’re a terrorist”*. This trajectory of incremental inflation brings to mind the spread of insecurity as a political strategy, the morphing of semi-official announcements into popular belief or satire and the increasing simplification of political positions in the media. The internalisation and easy reproduction of these turns of phrase by the players shows how much of the work of the propagandist (and the marketer) is done within our own heads.

The phrases play on discourses of paranoia and polarisation such as anti-immigration (*“There are illegal immigrants amongst us, be alert but not alarmed”*), making us aware of the way in which certain words, or classes of words, such as “illegal” and “immigrant” become strongly associated in our heads, no matter which side of the question we are on. Most topically for its exhibition in Sydney in 2006 several messages reference the particularly modern, technologically mediated version of the rumour mill that surrounded the Cronulla brawls, in which inflammatory text messages fanned growing racial tension (*“There is footage tonight of people of middle-eastern origin smashing windows and bashing Australians in restaurants”*). This brings to mind the revelations of Peter Manning’s book *Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism: Reporting Arabic and Muslim people in Sydney newspapers*, which describes a study that looked at the language associated with the words “Arab” and “Muslim” in 12,000 stories from Sydney’s two major newspapers for the year before September 11 and the year after. He shows that, contrary to what we might expect, the association of Islam with terrorism was established long before September 11; *“Over the two-year period...of articles reporting just local matters, whenever the word 'Muslim' was used in a sentence, of a dozen possible other categories of words, the word most commonly used in the same sentence in these two daily newspapers was 'terror'. Muslim equals terror.”*¹

“After he took him aside away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears he then spit and touched the man’s tongue”

...“After taking Jesus aside from the crowd, he stuck his hands in the guy’s ears and stuck his hand on his tongue and spat”

¹ From a transcript of a talk by Peter Manning on “The Offensiveness of Free Speech”, delivered on Radio National’s Lingua Franca, 4th November 2006. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2006/1779931.htm>, Accessed on December 13th 2006.

...“After pulling him out of the ground Jesus touched his ear and poked his tongue out”

Flutter generates particularly successful disasters of meaning from biblical texts. The portentous and disembodied whispering lends itself well to the more apocalyptic aspects of religious rhetoric (“*Be constantly vigilant. The devil is about to devour you...*”). Meanwhile the comical fate of many of the scriptural extracts reminds us of the apocryphal nature of our highest moral authorities. Short biblical sentences rapidly disintegrate into complete nonsense (like my favourite: “*Oh god who wines us and dines us*”) and the listener is left in no doubt that human beings are leaky vessels, unlikely to have reliably carried sacred messages across millennia. This trick has previously been pulled by Monty Python in *The Life of Brian* with the classic mutation “Blessed are the Cheesemakers”. The mischievous thrill of irreverence and the comic potential of florid scriptural prose make these rounds particularly prone to engulfing paroxysms of giggles. The foolishness of attempting literal interpretation of scripture is part of this joke, but the obvious human pleasure of story telling, embellishment and oral repetition give these texts a certain status within the game as rich veins of historical, cultural and social connection.

Sitting in the middle of this circle of miscommunication I, the listener, have a privileged position. I am an amused, compassionate but lonely god. I am omniscient, but cannot intervene as meanings collapse around me. I am excluded from this game, from its pleasures and its pains. But of course this sense of power and detachment is part of a rich illusion, which I know to be unreal. For I too am irrevocably part of language and part of the world. Davies’ work creates a very particular place for the perceiver to stand; a place of partial and privileged perception. He creates situations in which the audience must reflect on their own perceptual processes and on how they make meaning from the world. For the listening audience of Flutter there are two compelling realisations; firstly the joy, creativity and ultimate impossibility of fully transmitting meaning through language, secondly the overwhelming human need to create meaning in the world.