



Shotgun Review

Living with Endangered Languages in the Information Age

By Shotgun Reviews *January 25, 2015*

In *Living with Endangered Languages in the Technological Age*, curated by Hanna Regev at Root Division Gallery, thirty artists respond to a global crisis: One language becomes extinct every two weeks when its last speaker dies.

The works in the exhibition cover six continents and consider languages such as old Macedonian, Tati (Iran), Mayan (Mexico), Nahuat Pipil (El Salvador), Sindhi (India), and even notes used in Gregorian chant. Regev, who is developing a reputation for uniting cutting-edge technology and art, also encouraged artists to examine less-commonplace categories such as artificial and computer languages. This elevates what could be a UNESCO cliché into an innovative, dense show that is also interactive—works have a QR code under the wall texts so the viewer can hear the language on their mobile devices.

During the opening I interviewed some of the artists. San Francisco-based Naomie Kremer created a video of ghostly fingers typing on a keyboard, which is juxtaposed with a drawing depicting samples of her handwriting. Kremer expounded on the idea of the uniqueness of handwriting, as opposed to typing, which all looks the same. Her elegant piece illustrates the abstract, disembodied action of typing against the very human marks of handwriting.

Artist Phillip Hua collaborated with soundscape artist Taras Mashtalir to create a multimedia work that weaves Hua's mother's voice, reading a poem in Vietnamese, with the "voice" of Google Translate transcribing the same poem into an eight-minute song. When I asked Hua how well Google Translate did with the poem, he said, "Horribly. One of the reasons we brought it in was the thought of asking: Does technology help, is it a substitute for humans yet? At this time, it's not."

Philip Alden Benn, an artist who works with data visualization, created a video of a map of the world that moves with the path of the sun. Color-coded indicators appear across the different continents and then dissolve, indicating the disappearance of languages on the Earth. "I realized that the 7,000 languages that are

endangered are actually cultures that the world is losing.”

Living with Endangered Languages succeeds on many levels and brings awareness to a subject that deserves more attention. Regev has brought together formidable talents who not only deliver a deft communication of the subject matter without sentimentality, but also provide solutions.

Living with Endangered Languages in the Technological Age is on view at Root Division through January 31, 2015.

Nancy Garcia is a freelance writer and television producer. She travels extensively, and happily calls San Francisco her home.