Randy Garber

Made in Translation
Acknowledgements

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With interlocking themes of translation, perception, and technology appropriate to the multi-disciplinary space of the University of Michigan’s North Quad, the collection of works displayed in Randy Garber’s exhibit, “Made in Translation,” visually investigates how meaning is created and deciphered in our digitally complex world. Meaning is gained, lost, and re-conceptualized as we move between written, visual, aural, and verbal languages, conveyed in varied mediums. These systems of communication wield influence over meaning as they attempt to express the intangible worlds of thought, knowledge and human experience. By exploring different media -- printmaking, sculpture, and born-digital works -- Garber produces alternative representations of language that examine the nature of perception and the technologically facilitated ways we construct, interpret, and develop meaning.
While the hand-made techniques featured in most of Garber's artworks may seem “retro” in a time of digital everything, they are astute at creating a visceral and tactile experience from traditional processes (printmaking and sculpture). They deliver a sense of immediacy to the issues of our present digital era. For example, in “Manual I” and “Manual II,” Garber uses some of the oldest technologies for conveying information and creating meaning about the world - map-making and Chinese calligraphy scrolls - to illustrate the tensions between reality and perception. From afar, the visual composition makes it difficult to discern exactly what is represented on these scrolls. Letters, lines, and forms come into (and out of) focus, as viewers take in this work from near and far. Finely written pathways of letters and soft shapes overlay a gridded surface to create a layered topography.
As representations of landscapes, maps (both digital and material) attempt to distill relevant meaning from the tangible world through language and image. Inevitably, details are lost and made in translation. Garber’s skillful printmaking techniques produce a place that seems real because of the exactitude of her composition. In doing so, her work raises awareness about the process of collecting, representing and sharing information in a digital world. What details and experiences heighten our consciousness of reality? What features flatten and distort our perceptions and expectations? Landscape architect Anne Spirn has written of the “language of landscape,” describing how “landscape may be inhabited in imagination alone” and that “every landscape has both real and potential form — what is, what has been, what will, what might be.” Garber’s works illustrate and build upon Spirn’s reflection through the use of historical methods. In the context of a digital age, these works navigate, and bring meaning to, the processes of translation that create new conceptual landscapes out of what is, what has been, and what might be.
Attracted to the physicality involved in making hand-pulled prints, Garber uses print-making in What You Already Know, a series from 2008. Inspired by the death of Washoe, a chimpanzee who was the first non-human to learn and communicate with American Sign Language, the series confronts the vagaries of language and decoding meaning. At first glance, the print Frames Trump Facts (George Lakoff) may seem to represent a design of geometric shapes surrounded by a frame; a closer look reveals the jumble of words and letters that comprise the lines of the work. As lines and words are both vehicles for meaning-making, their intersection blurs the distinction between visual and written language. “What you already know” is repeated throughout the print in different languages, winding in and out to become either clear or impossible to make out. In The Wonder of It All, a cascade of letters falls over the shape of a monkey. Allusions to brains and neural pathways appear in the backdrop, hinting at the processes that sculpt and interpret meaning.
Garber again utilizes the charged material of copper in her Listening series to approach familiar themes. Listening: Transmit is a scroll-like hanging work created from 800 feet of inked and waxed copper tubes, hung by thin filaments, which form a staggered, parallel arrangement in three separate panels. This organization evokes themes of sound, hearing and translation. Copper tubes are enlarged to represent processes of communication, which move vertically and horizontally across space. An ornate pattern of intricately inscribed glyphs and nearly indecipherable words (repeating the phrases “one last question,” “what you already know,” and “Please Shout”) give texture to each tube.
A complement to Transmit, her work Listening: Receive is a collection of whimsical, cone-shaped copper forms that spring from the wall, as if to capture the fleeting conversations of passersby. The forms recall satellite dishes, phonographs, ear trumpets, and the ear itself. In this way, Garber’s work visually represents tools (both technological and biological) of translation that facilitate, confound, and generate communication.

In sharp contrast to the rigid copper material of Listening and Made in Translation, vintage player piano scrolls allow Garber to explore issues of hearing, listening and perception in a novel way. As with much of her work, COGnitive Dissonance confronts the ideas of hearing and not hearing in the context of understanding the world. Working with found player piano scrolls, Garber explores the material’s own form of language. Each hole in the player piano scrolls represents sound but it is the absence of the paper that indicates the presence of sound. The shadows made by the holes in the scrolls add to the visual language of the piece, exploring sound and silence, symbols and codes. With layers of woodcut prints on both sides of the paper, the scrolls snake
across the wall, evoking the desultory path of thought or discussion. Words, symbols and abstract shapes undulate throughout the scrolls, and words only begin to make sense if read in reverse. Composed of both accepted signifiers and invented codes, COGnitive Dissonance defamiliarizes language.

Garber continues her meditations on language in Merck Manual, as she rips pages from The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy and allows them to dangle from the wall in a shredded mass of tangled words. By translating knowledge from its form in a textbook to a new form as an artwork, Garber implies that all knowledge is truly up for grabs. The shadows cast by the tumbling strips of paper are the visual equivalent of echoes, representing the unbounded iterations that stem from visual, aural and spoken language. Questioning once more “what we already know,” Merck Manual examines how different systems of communication challenge, disguise and illuminate knowledge.
As meaning is translated across disciplines and through new digital mediums, what is lost? What is gained? While writing Beyond Good and Evil, Friedrich Nietzsche lamented how his fluid, light thoughts would be translated into the rigid, static medium of written language. While describing his “written and painted thoughts,” he wrote, “nobody will guess from this how you looked in the morning,” mourning how the true integrity of his thoughts would never be adequately communicated in written form. Language may be a two-dimensional medium of communication that cannot accurately represent the complex, three-dimensional world - but Garber’s sculptural and printed works present fluid, innovative forms of language and translation. Her non-linear ways of representing language challenge language’s usual tendency toward a rigid representation of facts. By reimagining language in different forms and media, Garber explores how meaning “looks in the morning,” before systems of representation and communication encode it. At the same time, Garber purposefully obfuscates meaning, enticing viewers presenting partial tidbits of the whole story and then concealing the rest. In Garber’s world, meaning is shifting, hazy, ambiguous, just slightly out of reach.
Garber’s foray into digital mediums is equally thought provoking. A monitor of scrolling text juxtaposes excerpts from newspaper articles and musings on semiotics with weather forecasts and school assignments. Ripping these textual items from their original context, Garber redefines the boundaries of print products, creating new meaning as words visually meld together or stand alone. At times Garber isolates words and phrases on the screen, detaching them from their narratives and drawing attention to letters as visual objects. Garber combines passages from works discussing meaning-making, like Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Marriage Plot and Suzi Gablik’s The Reenchantment of Art, with prescriptive texts like culinary recipes, reframing information to impact the way viewers read and experience language.

Using electronic tickers, typically associated with a constant stream of information, Garber inputs phrases and jargon into these devices to digitally reflect on the role of technology in the communication of ideas. One ticker repeats the sentence, “Technology scares me, technology stares at me, technology bares me, technology cares for me, technology becomes me, technology is me.” In another, transformations to the word order and language of the phrase, “what you already know,” scroll across the screen. Through a seemingly direct and communicative medium, Garber’s work questions and acknowledges an often-elusive reality: language and knowledge are translated as they are processed through the digital realm.
On another ticker, Garber selects language from a Merck instructional manual (also represented in her work Merck Manual), which reads as a thoughtful array of jumbled gibberish. Re-contextualizing the language of the manual seems to suggest the impossibility of electronic communication as an artistic medium. Gone are the dangling sculptural forms and jungle of paper present in her more material and physically engaging “Merck Manual.” At the same time, her digital work allows the manual to be deciphered in new ways. Changing the medium, in this case, changes the visual experience and presentation, but not necessarily the message. While the visually engaging physical deconstruction of the manual is lost, specific words and phrases are gained through translation into a digital world, although the space between what is seen and what is understood remains. Both works scroll through our imagination, albeit in different ways.

Beckoning attention through their vibrant, glowing intensity, these ticker works also confuse technological expectations. They call into careful question the utility of the digital age. How can we best use technology to illuminate our work without hindering meaning? In what ways does technology change the meaning of our work? Garber’s poignant objects of inquiry present us with an occasion for reflection on these pertinent questions, which may be directed to:

http://mblog.lib.umich.edu/made_in_translation/
As Garber writes in her essay, “Conversing and Reversing,” “my reticence to move fully into the digital age is neither an ideological nor techno-phobic position. Rather, I’ve realized that printmaking is not just a medium I use to express ideas, but is the very way I discover them.” And herein lies the essence of her work, as represented in the context of the increasingly interdisciplinary and digital world epitomized in North Quad. To understand new directions of inquiry in the digital future, we need to understand the processes of art and craft - persistent dedication and attention to details - that allow us to fully communicate, discover and approach understanding of our ideas in the present. We need to know where we are grounded - in discipline, medium, etc. - to learn from, and create knowledge about the information that is gained and lost through our newest endeavors in the digital realm. Through her investigations of the vacillating nature of meaning, Garber’s art invites viewers to pause and reflect on the intricacies of our perceptual landscape.
2Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; 177.
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North Quad Space 2435
Opening and Artist’s Talk:
Friday, December 2, 6 – 8pm