Téléphone arabe

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> "In France, we say 'an angel passes by;' in Spain, 'a Bishop is born;' in Portugal, 'a poet is dead.' I'm glad that I could place a long silence in one of my films."
> – Raoul Ruiz

Definition

In French, the expression "*téléphone arabe*" has two meanings: 1) An oral communication and, furthermore, a rumor or unreliable information; 2) A kid's game which consists of whispering a word to one another in a circle: the first person whispers a phrase in the ear of the second, the second tells the heard phrase to the third, and so on until the last player says it out loud, usually giving way to a collective frenzy due to the – voluntary or involuntary – deformations the initial phrase has undergone through its multiple repetitions.

Hiatus

One day, I noticed that the word "telephone" written in Arabic created a semantic short-circuit with the French expression "*téléphone arabe*" (Figure 1):

Figure 1: The word "telephone" written in Arabic.

Figure 2: The word **"telephone" written in Arabic creates a sense of discontinuity with the French ex**pression "*téléphone arabe*."

Indeed, the word "telephone" written in Arabic is particularly Arabic only for the non-Arabic speaking person; someone who speaks Arabic will only read the word "telephone" since the Arabic connotation will naturally not be perceptible (Figure 2). This linguistic fact is not a theoretical construct open to speculative arabesques. I found it just as it was, like one finds a mushroom, one of these irreducible organisms that thrive in the dark corners of language and resist translation through their shady existence.

To share this curious finding, I decided to make a word-object out of it, a neon sign that I installed in a public space. Neon, of course, is a classical medium of conceptual art – one thinks of Joseph Kosuth's tautological neon piece titled *A Four Colour Sentence* (1965-1967), or Bruce Nauman's visual puns like *none sing/neon sign* (1970), for instance. I thought it was funny to make a hybrid object within this tradition but install it in a more anonymous public space instead of in the institutional frame of a museum; to set it somewhere it could generate cultural jamming instead of within a white cube where it would have more likely received a proper reading. Moreover, the hegemonic language of the art world – the language through which the type of conceptual statement my piece refers to becomes legible – is American and its alphabet is Roman. In this context, Arabic calligraphy seemed like a productive displacement, a bit like Peter Sellers in *The Party*: a mistake that gives birth to an eventful turn-out.

To build the word-object I asked an Arabic-speaking friend to write the word "telephone" in Arabic. Among the different linguistic possibilities, that classical Arabic noun, هاتف (phone), and its seemingly arbitrary etymology, seemed more appropriate to me than the dialectal phrasing, تلي‌فون (telephone), as it partly derived from French.

Telephone #1 (Brussels, 2005)

In the spring of 2005, my neon *Téléphone arabe* is hung on the parapet of the railroad bridge overhanging the art space for which I conceived it (Figure 3). A few days after its unveiling, the piece is vandalized.

Figure 3: *Téléphone arabe # 1* - Blue neon. Centre Recyclart (Curator: Komplot). Brussels, 2005.

We will never know the motives behind certain gestures. This being said, I came to realize some time after the destruction of the neon piece that I might have committed a clumsy translation mistake in this public setting, a mostly North African-populated neighborhood of Brussels. In fact, in Arabic, the expression "*téléphone arabe*" does not refer to a rumor. This is actually a colonial phrase, a derogatory term to describe oral cultures of Northern Africa. It was a way for the occupying forces to represent the indigenous populations as unreliable. The phrase "*téléphone arabe*" is therefore untranslatable in Arabic since it doesn't carry any linguistic intention whatsoever. A word-to-word translation is possible but it doesn't make any sense. Furthermore, in Arabic, this idiomatic phrase doesn't designate the kid's game mentioned earlier either; the Arabic expression for this is "broken telephone."

Anyhow, the art space that had commissioned the piece decided to remake the broken piece in a new format. It became a poster with the same word composed by a calligrapher (Figure 4). This unexpected remake of the exact proposition through a different formal iteration pointed to the second meaning of the phrase, that is, the kid's game: the transmission of a message in which each player tries to carry its proper meaning while also secretly hoping that it will be altered.

Figure 4: *Téléphone arabe # 1* (redux)
Poster substitution (calligraphy on paper). Centre Recyclart. Brussels, 2005.

After this turn of events, I decided to pursue the experiment while setting new rules to the ongoing production of the piece: to play Chinese whispers with my *Téléphone arabe*. This involved asking that players reproduce its material form without any consideration of its meaning: to reiterate the signifier literally, to draw from the word-image instead of the word-meaning; to take up the fact that the meaning evades transparent communication and that the mode of signifying is often more important than the meaning in itself. To make this happen, I asked the art space in Brussels to send me a photograph of the poster.

Telephone #2 (Montreal, 2006)

Upon receiving the photograph, I get in touch with a craftsman in Montreal and ask him to reproduce the visible inscription, the most accurately as possible, again using neon tubes. Friends of mine purchase this second neon reproduction of the piece and install in front of their house where it is lit (Figure 5):

Figure 5: *Téléphone arabe # 2* - Blue neon. Private home. Montréal, 2006.

A few days later, neighboring kids visit my friends to inquire about the strange looking sign that suddenly clashes with the surroundings. In 30 years, it was the first time such a contact had occurred. All of my friends' neighbors are Hassidic Jews who usually do not have relationships with people outside their community.

Telephone #3 (Ottawa, 2007)

I take a picture of the neon installed in Montreal and send it to an art gallery in Ottawa. This version of the piece had to be installed in an old governmental building, prompting me to start looking at the possibilities of the next iteration with this new constraint. I notice a small panel on which the title of the government agency used to be written. I ask permission to install the third *Téléphone arabe* at this specific location (Figure 6). The craftsman who builds the new version from the model pictured on the photograph taken in Montreal reproduces the word هاتف (phone) accurately – the degradation of the sign that I had hoped for does not occur. On one hand, it seems that the graphic design of this ancient alphabet is a technology so refined that it does not fall into disrepair so easily: the difference between each letter of the writing system is so well

defined that any confusion seems unlikely. On the other hand, I notice a serious degradation in regards to the context of reception. If this conceptual little game originating from a French postcolonial frame of reference could make sense amongst Francophones in Brussels or Montreal, it could hardly make any sense for the Anglophone public in this new setting.

Figure 6: *Téléphone arabe # 3*
Neon. Saw Gallery (Curators: Stéphan St-Laurent and Tam-ca Vo-Van). Ottawa, 2007.

Telephone #4 (Paris, 2011)

A few years after this semantic erosion of the word-object, a friend in Paris proposes to carry out a new production of the *Téléphone arabe* in his restaurant. It's back to the cultural and linguistic site of its inception for a very brief, ephemeral, inscription. It is reproduced in handwriting using chalk on the blackboard where the daily menu is usually written.

Telephone #5 (Shanghai, 2012)

I give the photographic depiction of the Paris version to a Chinese artist who will reproduce a new version as a shop sign located in the Anshun Lu bazaar in Shanghai. I point to the photo and ask him to remake *this*. "What is *this* exactly?" he responds. It was a very legitimate question. What was *this* I was pointing at? A bar where two middle-aged women are having a drink in front of a laughing bartender? A blackboard with some kind of convoluted white chalk markings? Therefore, for this particular version of the piece I had to precisely determine the dimen-

sions of the sign, the color of the letters and of the backdrop, the type of lighting apparatus and the highlighting rhythm of the diodes. I also had to choose the height at which it would be installed. All these directions when I thought I had found an ideal art project where I would be free of all artistic decision-making in the actual production of the work! (Figure 7.)

Figure 7: *Téléphone arabe # 5*
Neon. Bazaar Compatible Program (Curator: Paul Devautour). Shanghai, 2012.

This is as far as the project has been on the road to its own disappearance. Imagine this: a French artist installing a sign with an Arabic phrase in a bazaar in China. There is something of the silence of infinite space that resounds in this uncanny situation. It's a bit like the *Voyager* space shuttle that just left the solar system, delivering a message to unknown life forms – my *Téléphone arabe* drifts towards an unknown target, irreparably drifting from its source.

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Work Cited

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