WTF: WHISKEY – TANGO – FOXTROT

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Two tripod structures made from lengths of bamboo are placed in the exhibition space at Cemeti Art House. On top of one of the structures a screen displays a video. A person is standing awkwardly at the edge of the beach and waving a green flag (the same colour as his shirt), along with a sound similar to a telegraphic message, or Morse code. Three or four steps away from this structure is another, topped with an illuminated round light bulb.

The movements of the performer in this video, titled *Calling Nyi Roro Kidul,* strongly resemble semaphore, although as far as I know, semaphore code is conducted using two flags; a red and yellow flag (Oscar flag) for communication at sea, or a blue and white flag (Papa flag) for communication on land. A series of texts appear on the video. The texts approximate customary semaphore messages, or international maritime flag signals.[1] Some of these quotes are below:

Delta - keep clear of me, I am manoeuvring with difficulty
Echo - I am altering my course to starboard
Lima - you should stop, I have something important to communicate
Sierra - my engines are going full speed astern
Tango - do not pass ahead of me

Not far from these two bamboo structures is the work *Gesture of Safe Passage.* This work consists of two photos (portraits) of people wearing masks on the front and back of their heads, as well as a text which is placed between these two portraits. The text states: *To ward off tiger attacks lighthouse keepers wear a mask on the back of their head. A head with two faces – to see what lies ahead and behind.*

This work draws from the mythology of the people who live around the Cimiring lighthouse on the island Nusa Kambangan. According to the beliefs of the people there, in the past when the area surrounding the lighthouse was still dense forest, the lighthouse keeper had to make a full day's journey by horse from the port to the lighthouse. Along the way to the lighthouse, often the keeper was attacked by tigers. To ward of attacks or to frighten the tigers, they wore masks on the back of their heads.

Calling Nyi Roro Kidul and *Gesture of Safe Passage* are more or less the same, both drawing from mythology. The green flag and t-shirt worn by the performer

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1. This system is one of the flag signal systems that represents each letter of the alphabet to or from a ship, as well as forming the components of the International Code of Signals (ICS).

in the (video) *Calling Nyi Roro Kidul* feature the colour forbidden in the area of Parangtritis Beach. Many myths have developed in Yogya about the queen of the south sea, Nyi Roro Kidul. One of these is related to the proscription of the colour green on Parangtritis Beach. It is said that Nyi Roro Kidul, who is a kind of "spiritual consort" for the Sultan of Yogyakarta, is wildly jealous. She will abduct anyone who is brave enough to wear the same green she herself wears. To this day the myth is still believed by some in Jogja, although I myself doubt whether those drowned in the ferocious waves of Parangtritis Beach are in fact wearing green.

Eventually my attention is drawn to the other works. A woman expresses a series of sentences from the sacred vows of a Catholic wedding. In the gaps between the words of the oath, she repeatedly blinks her eyelids. These blinks are in Morse code, forming the sentence that is also the title of the video, *Tuhan Aku Bohong (Lord, I am Lying)*.

In July 1965, the plane of US Navy officer Jeremiah Andrew Denton Jr was shot down while he was leading an attack on North Vietnam. From that day until seven years and eight months later, he was officially a prisoner of war. Nearly a year later, in May 1966, as a part of North Vietnamese propaganda, Denton was interviewed on television. When he spoke in front of the cameras and answered the questions, he continually blinked both his eyes, sending a Morse code message repeatedly spelling out the words T-O-R-T-U-R-E. Denton's television interview was eventually broadcast widely and his secret message was discovered by United States intelligence organisations.
Tuhan Aku Bohong (Lord, I am Lying) is adapted from Denton's actions in his interview. Marriage vows are only the first layer of this video.

The tendency to near resemblance can be seen in the work that is just above *Tuhan Aku Bohong*. That work is made from three panels. The first panel, on the left, is a portrait of a stylishly dressed man standing with a slight smile playing on his lips. The second panel, consists of two portraits printed on one piece of paper. The same man's face appears with a woman. The man's expression is the same as the previous photo, even his shirt and tie are the same, while the woman wearing glasses beside him seems older and melancholy. Looking more closely, it seems the two portraits come from different negatives that have been merged. Beside them, on the third panel, a sheet of gold card with rectangular openings reveals selected letters behind it. If we remove the gold card, we discover the marriage vows uttered by Islamic brides. If we replace the card, through the openings we read the name of the work: *Take Care Dear.*

Observing Leyla Stevens' works as described above, whether I like it or not, I am forced to trace from her previous works or those of her last few exhibitions. *Signalmasters* (2011) and *Keep Your Shoulders and Waist Strong/ Instructions for Gesture* (2010-2011) are two of these. "Language" as expressed through gesture, as well as the role of text, are both very important aspects of these works.

In *Signalmasters,* Leyla re-framed semaphore code as a series of gestures that then confront the landscape. The gestures in these photograph and video works are not just limited to movements of the body, but rather "body language". Through performative photos and a series of instructions in the form of text, she brings "body language" into a more complex grammar in *Keep Your Shoulders....* by inviting three people with different cultural backgrounds; Australia, Korea, Mexico. In the end, we can see that body language continues to be influenced, constructed and codified by social and cultural space. In these two series of works, gesture is also a symbol of the desire and inability to communicate across geographical and cultural distance.

Throughout her residency at Cemeti Art House, Leyla tried to further probe how a "language" is expressed and read, as well as a how a "message" is coded then interpreted through or with the use of codes such as Morse and the Cardan Grille.[2]

I "read the message" or "translate the code" in Leyla's work in precisely the same way as I see the installation *Calling Nyi Roro Kidul.* I imagine that work is communication between two people that are far from each other. Between a person who stands on the edge of the beach and a person who is on the other side of the ocean, atop a lighthouse. The two structures of bamboo lengths are a metaphor for the extensive distance. I only hope that the lighthouse keeper is able to hear the Morse code signal that is being sent. Hopefully the person in the green shirt is still in the range of focus of the lighthouse keeper's binoculars.

Language, I understand as an eternal distance. It will always be there and we must continue to cross it in order to survive. Perhaps we will never know how long it takes to sail across the expanse of ocean that lies in front of us, because we never know the limits of a language. The peaks or limits of language only make God angry. Chieko, a deaf girl in a film by Alejandro González Iñárritu,[3] had to write in the Kanji script to communicate with the gang of wayward youths she had just met. These thugs could not master sign language. The only sign language (gestural language) or "secret code" that they were capable of breaking was when Chieko sat straddled, lifting her skirt and opening her legs wide. No more and no less.

Chieko had to undergo a difficult process and we know that "changing language" or "translation" is not always precise. I had to undergo a stage more or less similar to that of the deaf girl when breaking the code in Leyla's work. I needed

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2. As Leyla did in her work *Take Care Dear.* The *Cardan Grille* is an ancient method of sending a secret written message (cryptography) using a grid or a kind of stencil made from thick sheets of paper or metal, out of the surface of which are cut squares with spaces or gaps. The recipient of the message must possess the same stencil as the sender in order to read the secret message (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardan_grille; accessed 27 December 2013).

3. The film that I mentioned entitled *Babel* (2006).

a kind of device, an injection of information or extra baggage to catch the secret message in *Tuhan Aku Bohong* and *Take Care Dear.* What would happen if the marriage vow underneath the Cardan Grille on *Take Care Dear* was not written in Latin, but Arabic? What if the blinks in the video *Tuhan Aku Bohong* did not form a sentence in Bahasa Indonesia or English, but Tagalog?

As it seemed for Chieko, communication becomes a matter that is impossible but unavoidable, or perhaps the other way around. Unavoidable but impossible, because language is an experiment that continues in the time and space of humankind. To "translate" and "to be translated".

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