Bernardo Oyarzún

Lengua izquierda

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To name is not to indicate, but to signify the absent[1]

Usually, in the midst of urgencies and daily concerns, we do not relate to language itself, and it becomes transparent, a functional instrument, a means of communication subordinate to the aim of indicating things. The objects of the world come before us, then, as "already named," ready, thanks to their labels, to be called on to serve our purposes. Indeed, it is this a priori correspondence between things and names that renders invisible the moment of language itself, a moment now lost in time, in which things have "come into" a world (a horizon of meaning) in the process of being named. In that moment lies the origin of both language and the world, where names are born along with the things that they designate. Is it possible to see the river before the word that names it? Could we do without the word before having seen that which we call "river"? What became of that moment when we saw something *for the first time?* But language, in its vast technical efficiency, hides from us, and the readiness of objects to be called to action is identified with the readiness of *langue* that has thus become *parole,* capable of being encoded in a dictionary, in a translatable planetary of words (in August 2005, representatives of the Mapuche people sent a letter to Bill Gates protesting a Microsoft project to make a Windows operating program in the Mapudungun language).

[1] Severo Sarduy, "El barroco y el neobarroco," in *América Latina en su literatura*, 16th ed., ed. César Fernández Moreno (México, 1998), p. 180.

Lengua izquierda by Bernardo Oyarzún reflects on the otherness contained by language. Over the course of the project, the artist has included different native American languages (thus far, Quechua, Otavalian Quichua, Aymara, Guaraní, Rapa Nui, Mapuche, Bésiro chiquitano), lost or atrophied languages that linger on, like specters, in the "right language," the dominant language used to dominate things. *Lengua izquierda* is also a reflection on the repressed strangeness that resides in all language, the strangeness of its seemingly docile availability. In this work, native American languages are at the service of a geopolitical reflection on language, but they are also part of a project that deals with a problem inherent to modernity in art: the relationship between language and the reality born of art at the limits of representation.

In every language there is a "left language" that is curtailed, disciplined, and forgotten. Not forgotten as vocabulary might be forgotten; this is not a loss that could be remedied with a dictionary or a language class. After all, the desire to name the experience of the world has never been a just a question of wanting "to learn a language."

What so surprises and fascinates us when we walk into Bernardo Oyarzún's *Lengua izquierda* is the fact that we are witnessing—from the insurmountable distance of our place as "viewers and listeners"—a sort of forgotten identity between the name and the thing, the thing that we don't see. "What exactly is it saying?" we ask ourselves. Rather than granting *another language* a greater power to name (a modern nostalgia for lost correspondence), Oyarzún's installation makes us reflect on the otherness that lies, forgotten and silent, in names at the service of our daily sense of things. Names that indicate—like the hand that points towards the pre-given—but no longer name.

On the basis of their instrumental quality, the native etymology of certain words suggests a meaning. And so, suddenly, a word no longer indicates, but *names*. For instance, *Kurikó* = black water. Untranslatable moment, because even though the word *Curicó* might, in

etymological terms, mean “black water,” it is used to refer to a city in northern Chile. In this case, Oyarzún’s installation speaks of the fact that the word *names* a visual experience. The artist’s use of etymology is not an attempt to restore a supposedly “true meaning” to certain terms. Just the opposite: it enacts the loss that words, in their technical readiness, bear. While language is a code for *signifying* the world, it also entails emitting *sound;* and when words emit sound, not only the material support of meaning, but also *the other of meaning,* surfaces. Heard is what was there before the world was brought—called up—by words: the barely audible moment of a drive to speak, to say things from the very experience of those things. That drive to name is what a speaker expresses so intensely, and that intensity lies in words whose meanings we do not grasp at first. Though not necessarily understood, that drive is heard in articulated sound. A sort of pure articulation, pure drive to want to say. That is, above all else, what we hear in expressions whose meanings we don’t know. In *Lengua izquierda* expressions sound like words, removed from the phrases of which they could form part. What is crucial here is that intensity is not due to a mythical inarticulate “content” but just the opposite: it is through articulation itself that it is heard.

In Oyarzún’s installation, the translation that in each case turns the body and sound of the native word into a “known meaning” speaks to us of a lost and violated strangeness. A forgetting also of the encrypted violence that underlies a world flattened by the translatable planetary of names that have become words in the dictionary. The political message of *Lengua izquierda* consists of suggesting that at the origin of language there is not inarticulate noise, the supposed prelinguistic *pathos* provoked by the presence of things themselves, but rather a world already named in another language. A language that, for those who have just arrived and encounter it, is splintered in words that emit sound rather than meaning.