

CHAMBER: Karyn Nakamura

*Perfect Syntax*

*Device for Deterritorialization*

May – June, 2024

For lower\_cavity's CHAMBER series, artist Karyn Nakamura has produced two separate media installations, *Perfect Syntax* and *Device for Deterritorialization*. In both projects, Nakamura employs narrative and her own personal experience as mediums through which to explore the gaps and discontinuities inherent in memory, language, and translation. These processes—and their potential for error—find their analogue in the artist's conceptual and material methodology, which often relies on salvaged A/V equipment, homebrewed processing patches and software, and clunky, DIY cable adapters and video boards. The unruly, contingent quality of Nakamura's approach to the digital and analog media she employs literalizes the lossy nature of communication itself, staging the sometimes impossible-seeming challenge of meshing incompatible subjectivities.

Installed in two adjoining brick chambers, *Perfect Syntax* opens with a diaristic description of an ordinary day's activities. In the first chamber, a flat screen monitor displays footage of an urban landscape filmed from a high-speed train, accompanied by a spoken monologue. The first-person narrator recounts a pleasant but unremarkable day, occupied with such things as visiting a friend and grilling salmon for dinner. But the narrator's recitation becomes increasingly riddled with doubt as she begins to question whether the events are being recalled correctly. Gradually, this uncertainty begins to infect the image and sound as well; both become increasingly glitchy and subject to strange degradations. The narrator's voice pauses, circles back on itself, then extends and slows into pure electronic noise. The image freezes and stutters, fragmenting into ghostly layers of digital artifacts; these in turn give rise to grotesque biomorphic forms evoking flesh, organs, and neural architectures that flow and mutate against a black background.

Slowly, these shapeshifting structures resolve into recognizable words as order begins to return to image and sound. The original train footage reassembles itself into visual coherence; the narrator's voice returns to normal. The events of the day are finally remembered in their correct sequence. But despite its neat resolution, the journey has opened a brief but unsettling window into those abyssal regions that underly all communication, and perhaps even thought itself—spaces mediated not only by the opacity of electronic media and the unreliability of language and memory, but by the raw biology that gives rise to consciousness.

In the adjoining chamber, a single light illuminates a dense but fragile tangle of threads that connect a cloud of words printed on slips of paper. This assemblage represents a point cloud of the individual words comprising the narrative presented in the video; a kind of chaotically physicalized concordance that also suggests neural thickets of language and thought. Together, the two components of Nakamura's installation remind us that language

and syntax—and by extension, memory and experience—are tenuous, composed as much from the voids between things as from the things themselves.

In Nakamura's *Device for Deterritorialization*, a patched-together tangle of cables, wires, and hand-assembled circuit boards hovers above a lone workstation in a pitch-dark, subterranean space. Mounted on either side of a modified keyboard are two partially disassembled flat-panel displays. Flickering lines of text in English and Japanese tumble and scroll across the two screens, each recounting a stream-of-consciousness narrative of a chance encounter in the rain between two young people waiting to cross the street. The texts race past us and each other, back and forth, in parallel and in opposition, offering fleeting glimpses into the subjectivities of both characters; the myriad threads of perception and association that unspool out of even the most mundane experiences.

Nakamura's inquiry into the fault lines and irreconcilabilities of translation and language manifests not only in the work's content, but in its technologic implementation: the hiccupping English and Japanese texts running across both screens are the result of a custom patch that feeds separate competing signals into the displays at the same time—restaging perhaps aspects of the artist's own experience navigating the world through the lens of multiple languages. Dangling between the screens in the tangle of cables (amidst which is also suspended a snapshot of Nakamura asleep) is a tiny LCD panel across which a morphing grid of Japanese *kanji* and English letterforms parades like a highly unstable translation key. Overhead, a strange pulse of fractured and fading light radiates outwards across the ceiling, suggesting the transient passage of the neurochemical impulses we call memory.

Despite its heavy investment in the tools and systems of digital media, Nakamura's work always feels intimate and improvisational. The touch of the artist's hand is everywhere: in woven paper strips of characters taped to hand-braided wires and salvaged displays, in her homemade adapters connecting outdated or incompatible devices. Though her practice positions itself within the morass of the technologic, Nakamura's emphasis on the provisional and the personal reflects the arduous, unreliable, and ultimately makeshift process that is narrative and meaning-making. Rather than slickness, her work foregrounds technology's inherent fragility, its built-in teleology of obsolescence. In this way, it reflects something of our own condition.

—Anthony Disenza

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Karyn Nakamura is an artist and researcher in visual forensics based in NY. She is a recent graduate of MIT, where she entered with the intention of studying physics and left with a BS in Art. As a researcher, Nakamura studies human-in-the-loop synthetic image detection and applications of computer vision in the analysis of video evidence. Her independent work has appeared in an abandoned 2-story pub designed by Frank Gehry, the facade of a 400-foot wide 10-story building, Mother's Tank Station (London), Foreign and Domestic (NY), lower\_cavity (MA), MAPP Montreal, and Domicile Tokyo. A recipient of the Schnitzer Prize, Wiesner Award, and Everingham award, Nakamura is currently supported by the Steve Jobs Archive.