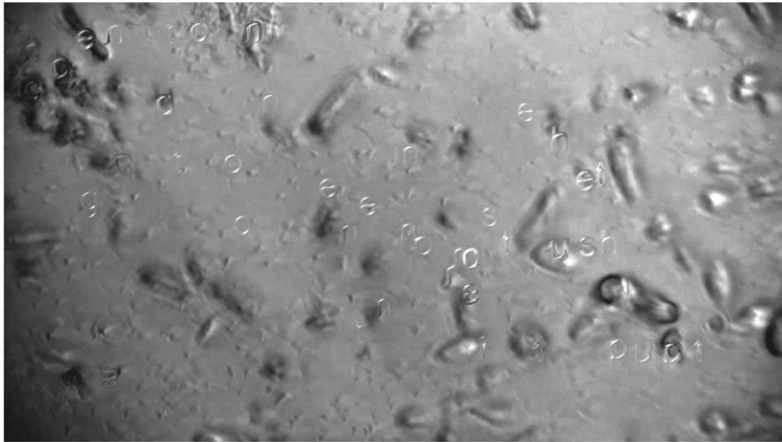


Jenna Sutela
Nam-Gut (the microbial breakdown of language) 2017
 video



Jenna Sutela: Nam-Gut

Banner Repeater London 24 May to 30 July

Amid the globular pops, staccato drips and burbling sounds of percolation that could be heard reverberating through the intimate gallery at Banner Repeater, a faltering anodyne voice appeared to be telling a story. 'The Lord of Bacteria, endowed with wisdom, changed the speech in their mouths,' it said cryptically, 'put contention into it, into the speech of Homo Computans that had been one.'

The strange voice belonged to *Nam-Gut (the microbial breakdown of language)*, 2017, an auto-generative poetry system devised by the Finnish artist Jenna Sutela, whose recent works constitute a rich and evolving matrix of organic computational networks and home-brew computing projects. Appearing here as a video installation, *Nam-Gut* resembled a quivering blue-green liquid test subject, its gelatinous mass permeated with translucent alphanumeric characters that drifted around lackadaisically, infrequently snagging on one another and forging temporary, almost-sensical graphemes. Between the broken words on screen and the tentative voice borne on the air, the peculiar realisation that *Nam-Gut* was, in its own way, communicating a message between the non-human and human worlds slowly formed into the question of where consciousness might be located.

If, as Sutela has argued this year in her fantastic essay 'Solid/Solipsism Remedy', 'brains are not a prerequisite for complex and interesting behaviour', then how might we interpret *Nam-Gut's* science-fictional communiqués, and what could they tell us about technology as a mediating factor between sentient and non-sentient agents? The material 'stuff' of the piece is simple enough: a Kombucha culture, or 'symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast', originally popular in Asia and now marketed as a voguish health drink in the West. Subjected to a 'wetware random number generator', this fermentation process had been made to 'speak' a series of predetermined phrases provided by the artist while also interfacing with an anagram-solving algorithm responsible for the cryptographic expressions on screen.

It would be a mistake to interpret these expressions as indications of 'intelligence'; that's not really Sutela's point. Instead of a representation of non-human cognition, she

visualises a problem-solving process at play, albeit one heavily mediated, aestheticised and rerouted towards her own conceptual ends. This was perhaps made more apparent in the short 'video mantra' *RI JIRI I O WA NU RU DAINICHI T-1000*, 2017, which played on a separate screen in the same gallery.

Soundtracked by a menacing loop of Brad Fiedel's lurching theme for James Cameron's 1991 tech-nightmare *Terminator 2*, this short film focused on the wondrous behaviour of *Physarum polycephalum*, more commonly known as slime mould. Slime moulds are single-celled, visually alluring, tentacular networks now considered to be a form of 'biological computer' given their logistical ability to map the most efficient routes between food sources, or their deployment of extracellular matter as a form of externalised physical memory, a kind of living hard drive.

According to the philosopher Steven Shaviro, 'the value of Physarum-based computing is precisely that this organism does not share our human biases and assumptions'. For Shaviro, and the many researchers he cites, this organism 'might well suggest distinctions, and even algorithmic procedures, that we could never think of on our own'.

Sutela documents this acid-green entity's slow creep around a metal structure, the form of which she derived from a mandala drawn by Minakata Kumagusu, a Japanese naturalist in the employ of Emperor Hirohito throughout the 1920s, who, through his diagrammatic extrapolations, sought to delineate the limits of anthropocentric thought and the possibility of other experiential systems. Intercutting this footage are fragments of Cameron's blockbuster movie, showcasing a villain composed of intelligent liquid metal, a 'mimetic polyalloy' nano-engineered to disperse or reconstitute itself in a manner strikingly similar to the slime mould's monomaniacal behaviour.

These two works eloquently invoked a complex dynamic of enmeshment between organic and simulated entities that ventured beyond the platitudinous anti-humanist rhetoric of what I have lately come to call the 'Slimegeist', that pop-nihilist tendency that similar but less-clever practices have of bluntly 'de-centering the human'. Sutela's biological systems work both computationally and poetically, and it is worth thinking about the decisions she makes as to how her organic subjects are made to enunciate their identities and actions as instances of manipulation and subjugation, as complicated 'kinship'. *Nam-Gut's* voice betrays vulnerability. It implores you to listen

to its tale, and in doing so evokes an empathic relationship between disparate agents.

'Shift the seat of identity from brain to cell and the nature of the subject radically changes,' suggests the philosopher of cybernetics N Katherine Hayles. By rewiring her organic co-conspirators, or swallowing *Physarum* before poetry readings as a paranoid-critical agent, imagining that the mould is reprogramming her human 'code', Sutela's works rewrite the boundaries of the human by way of an imaginative interspecial programming. It is a terrifying but nonetheless fertile and prescient prospect. ■

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Mene Mene Tekel Parsin

Wysing Arts Centre Cambridge

21 May to 9 July

Walking into the single room of this group exhibition of emerging and long-practising artists is something like the inverse of opening up a busy social-media feed of shouting words and grabbing images. Pale grey, shimmering and mostly monochromatic, like the page of a mystic writing pad, 'Mene Mene Tekel Parsin' may be constructed around the power of the word, but its works do not brandish a message of certainty. The absence of images makes for an anti-spectacular effect, and

'Mene Mene Tekel Parsin' installation view

Kameelah Janan Rasheed

Potentially How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette) 2016



the words of the works don't jump out, cajole or arrest you, you have to find them.

At the threshold, a projection of a poem below eye-level traces words in light (Imran Perreta's *when i (do) fall asleep*, 2017), and on the near wall, two white rectangles appear from a distance to be blank. Approaching, letters formed diagonally in faux pearls can be glimpsed – Sarah's Boulton's *how amber will fall*, 2017. The 'b' of amber is written as a '3'; many of the words that make it into her elliptical texts were once poetically chosen passwords, secret portals into personal browsing. The pearls have already started to fall off the wall in a random pattern on the floor, which is countered by a small grid of pearls still pressed into their sheet, order before entropy. There are many secrets hidden here, and I'm not sure whether, like spoilers, I should tell them.

The exhibition's encrypted approach is foretold in its name – 'Mene Mene Tekel Parsin' are the four Aramaic words said to have been spelled out by a floating hand in the biblical parable Belshazzar's Feast, indecipherable to 'all the King's wise men'. A humble man, Daniel, eventually construes a message about the end of the Kingdom, whose rhyme and reason religious scholars have debated ever since. The visitor, then, is called to reflect on the 'writings on the wall', which employ strategies of obfuscation and resistance.

Three silver scrolls of different lengths hang to the left of the room, a banner to the right, the former catching a kaleidoscope of light. The scrolls are Evan Ifekoya's *Ebi Flo (flex)*, 2016, printed with repeated fragments of narrative in CMYK colours, telling of the closeness of disco dancefloors and existential pronouns: 'Am I / You Me / Or are we?' For with the pronouncements of language comes the policing of identity. The banner is Sulaïman Majali's *hero/antihero*, 2012, an overlay of two pairs of words in all caps that require writing out separately to decode. Once you have, the piece suggests the reductiveness of social characterisations based on readings of faith or race, especially in the current media climate.

When the works use conventions of propaganda, they subvert them: in American artist and educator Kameelah Janan Rasheed's *Potentially How to Suffer Politely (And Other Etiquette)*, 2016, green clapboards in the field outside are printed with slogans exposing the paradoxes of liberal discourse that advise the oppressed to act with restraint. Recalling Martin Luther King's criticisms of the white moderate 'who is more devoted to "order" than to justice', in this rural setting, phrases like 'Lower the Pitch of Your Suffering' read as a retort to Keep Calm and Carry On Britain in the face of everyday racism. Lines from Language poet Hannah Weiner's *Code Poems*, 1982, composed from the International Code of Signals, respond indirectly in kind: 'How long have you been in such distress? / How many days? / Many / So many / Too many'.

Jesse Darling's *Bliss Symbols Protest Posters*, 2017, translate mottos concerning the tension between speaking up and keeping silent ('in silence they clamour'; 'speech is never free') into Bliss symbols, a graphic script of directional arrows, shapes and hearts which is not derived from the sounds of any spoken language. Now used primarily in special needs education, Bliss was developed with the ideal of universal communication in mind. But even though the exhibition, of which Darling is also the curator, features international artists, its shared language is that of colonising English. Threads of textual transition and (il)legibility come out of both the artist-curator's will to question the narrative structures of modernity and a personal ambivalence to being held to words.

Darling's move away from in-person performance follows