Encoded within language is all of human history, culture and environmental knowledge. When the words no longer fall from the mouths of small children, a language will die. It is our most vital asset.

Joy Gregory

Space and language, both verbal and written, have always fascinated me. Throughout my life I've engaged in endless bouts of correspondence: in London I ran a conversation series that created a vocal ordering of the visual, and recently I've been involved in an extensive community oral history project; not to mention I am a loud and enthusiastic talker. Since arriving in Sydney two months ago, this fascination has taken on a new lease of life as both conversation and writing have become crucial ways for me to position myself 'in-between'; to learn about and engage with my new home in Australia, to reflect upon the historical connections with the UK and to relay my new experiences back to London. The letters I send to family and friends seem to clearly stage the spatial and temporal distance that my new home affords.

Such preoccupations have been the entry point for which I have been thinking through the 17th Biennale of Sydney; that is how we orientate ourselves through language. This is obviously fundamental to any international art event, the importance of engaging with and listening to different voices, to allow new and collaborative spaces and orientations to develop – a strategy echoed in the Biennale's subtitle, Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age, and in many of its thematic threads, forums and events. One such fruitful conversation arises between Joy Gregory's video Gomera (2010) that is situated on Cockatoo Island and Susan Hiller's two-part work The Last Silent Movie (2007) that takes up residence at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), as both artists' works explore endangered and extinct languages. Their inclusion in this Biennale also has a local political resonance, as Australia's list of endangered and extinct languages is sadly, but not surprisingly, comprehensive.2

In this context, Gomera’s location in the Dock Precinct on Cockatoo Island is a clever one, as one can imagine a version of El Selebo developing here for exactly the same reason. As a result the work itself, which is located in an old, damp, circular concrete bunker, is constantly in dialogue with this maritime location. As you view the video, your attention's continually drawn outside as the sound ricochets around the space, creating the effect that the whistling is coming from beyond the flapping black curtain that conceals the door – a cry from the imagined historical space of Cockatoo Island, or the artistic voices that can be heard in other pockets around the site, creating a weird sense of disorientation between past and present. The soundtrack of Gomera (which includes a poem by Pedro Garcia Cabrera and music Gregory recorded at a local street parade) also mingles with the literal sounds of Cockatoo Island: screeching seagulls, clanging chains, footsteps in the gravel, the ocean, which are visually echoed in the coastal and port scenes of the video. As you leave Cockatoo Island by ferry, you can't help but recall the final scene of the video which is from another boat window overlooking La Gomera's barren coastline as the artist leaves the island. The video

ALTAIR ROELANTS

Lost Voices: the artwork of Joy Gregory and Susan Hiller

English, a throwback from its colonial past. Later in 2003 during her NESTA Fellowship, Gregory revisited these ideas after attending a conference hosted by the Foundation for Endangered Languages in Broome, Western Australia.1 Coincidently, Gomera is one of the works that resulted from the extensive period of research that followed. This ten-minute video documents the whistling language of El Selebo that is used on La Gomera in the Canary Islands to communicate the long distances across the mountainous landscape. The audience is introduced to La Gomera with a view through a smudgy boat window, followed by roving, grainy footage of a foggy, rural landscape, a skewed panorama that is hard to understand visually. The camera’s focus is resolved when two boys begin to converse in the beautiful whistling tongue of El Selebo, a language which is no longer endangered. Their whistling leads us through the forested interior; it navigates the terrain, intermingles with other sounds of the island, and orientates our vision. We are made privy to this intimate language which, as the artist describes, has been explicitly 'created in response to the land'.5

Gregory’s thought-provoking Gomera is the result of her ongoing research into language development and endangerment, which began in 1997 after visiting the island of Bocas de Toro (off the Caribbean coast of Panama) where the locals speak a dialect drawing from Victorian English, a throwback from its colonial past. Later in 2003 during her NESTA Fellowship, Gregory revisited these ideas after attending a conference hosted by the Foundation for Endangered Languages in Broome, Western Australia. Coincidently, Gomera is one of the works that resulted from the extensive period of research that followed. This ten-minute video documents the whistling language of El Selebo that is used on La Gomera in the Canary Islands to communicate the long distances across the mountainous landscape. The audience is introduced to La Gomera with a view through a smudgy boat window, followed by roving, grainy footage of a foggy, rural landscape, a skewed panorama that is hard to understand visually. The camera’s focus is resolved when two boys begin to converse in the beautiful whistling tongue of El Selebo, a language which is no longer endangered. Their whistling leads us through the forested interior; it navigates the terrain, intermingles with other sounds of the island, and orientates our vision. We are made privy to this intimate language which, as the artist describes, has been explicitly ‘created in response to the land’. In this context, Gomera’s location in the Dock Precinct on Cockatoo Island is a clever one, as one can imagine a version of El Selebo developing here for exactly the same reason. As a result the work itself, which is located in an old, damp, circular concrete bunker, is constantly in dialogue with this maritime location. As you view the video, your attention’s continually drawn outside as the sound ricochets around the space, creating the effect that the whistling is coming from beyond the flapping black curtain that conceals the door – a cry from the imagined historical space of Cockatoo Island, or the artistic voices that can be heard in other pockets around the site, creating a weird sense of disorientation between past and present. The soundtrack of Gomera (which includes a poem by Pedro Garcia Cabrera and music Gregory recorded at a local street parade) also mingles with the literal sounds of Cockatoo Island: screeching seagulls, clanging chains, footsteps in the gravel, the ocean, which are visually echoed in the coastal and port scenes of the video. As you leave Cockatoo Island by ferry, you can’t help but recall the final scene of the video which is from another boat window overlooking La Gomera’s barren coastline as the artist leaves the island. The video

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reiterate the strong connection between land, identity and language. This rich audio-tapestry is a direct and often heart-rending exposé of colonisation’s attempts and successes at classifying and killing off languages, and in turn communities. The dense, oral complexity of the work is overwhelming including songs, lullabies, single words uttered for an anthropologist’s microphone, laughter, staged conversations and casual exchanges. These voices are played in a dark room against the backdrop of a black screen which bears only a white text that announces the name of the language, its origin, status (as Hiller classifies: endangered, nearly extinct and extinct) and English subtitles.

The viewer is clearly implied in Hiller’s chorus. The opening South African Language of K’ora prompts: ‘Listen, listen just for once to how they speak. So you will not be ignorant …You cannot see me but today you will get to know me through my tongue.’ These often blatant accusations are riddled with references to landscape, land loss and colonial history. The variety of rhythms, sounds, pitches, clear and crackling recordings that Hiller employs to portray this message is fascinating, and the translation of these diverse oral traditions forces us to recognise the multitude of ‘other’ voices. Both the video and accompanying twenty-four etchings of the sound waves produced (exhibited in an adjacent room), highlight the cultural tendency to prioritise the written word, part of the reason such oral traditions are lost or destroyed as ‘orality is banished to the spatiality of the object; one writes on it’. This is also alluded to in the sound waves’ jagged, homogenised lines that look like blips on a life support monitor, a juxtaposition which demonstrates the total failure of the ‘text’ to capture the emotion detected in the voices you hear calling from the room next-door.

Both Gomera and The Last Silent Movie provoke a self-conscious awareness of our own orientation within the safety and security of dominant and homogenous visual and verbal languages. The successful re-articulation of these rich, marginalised and forgotten voices amidst the 17th Biennale of Sydney, amongst other language systems, exposes the often aggressive historical and cultural power structures that shape our own communication frameworks, an issue that many of us are either not aware of or choose not to talk about. All humans are affirmed through communication and linguistic connections that relate to a specific place and time. To lose one’s voice is to lose orientation of the self which is to the detriment of us all.

1. From the opening text of Gomera, 2010.
2. Over 250 Indigenous Australian languages were once spoken in Australia but now only around 90 remain.
3. Joy Gregory was awarded a NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, UK) Fellowship in 2002.
4. The conference was titled Maintaining the Links: Language Identity and the Land.
5. From an interview with Joy Gregory, 21-22 May 2010.
6. The languages are from a diverse range of countries including Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, China, Colombia, East Timor, Germany, Isle of Man, Jersey Channel Islands, Latvia, Russia, Turkey, United States, Vietnam and Wales.

The 17th Biennale of Sydney runs 12 May to 1 August 2010, taking place in venues and sites around Sydney Harbour, including: Cockatoo Island, Pier 2/3, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney Opera House, Royal Botanic Gardens, Artspace and the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Grand Court). www.bos17.com

Altair Roelants is an arts writer and curator from London. She relocated to Sydney in early 2010.