

Can you swim?

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Who doesn't know them, those handy little books that protect us from speechlessness abroad, the little companions that let us find the right words to master the mundane or that might even save our necks in tight spots. They help us avoid a soup that's too spicy in Thailand and specify which linguistic somersaults could perhaps ease the consequences of an incautious glance in Iran.

Some of these books accompany us through Russia as a "phrase book" or offer "Portuguese for the Globe Trotter"; others promise "Turkish in 30 Days" or "Danish in a Hurry". In contrast to actual language courses which generally present grammar and vocabulary systematically, phrase books or crash course books chiefly contain complete sentences tailored to specific situations. Therefore, the usefulness of such a guide lies in whether one finds oneself in the designated situation or in a very different one.

The situations these little helpers describe change over the years in accordance with the changing habits and demands of the travellers. Therefore, older editions often contain the sentence "Please tell the chambermaid that there is a fly in my room.". in newer versions the fly is gone and one finds much more frequently "Where can I get a new battery for my mobile phone?".

Just how often these books really come in handy on the road is questionable. For the most part, gesturing and simple English are faster to the mark than desperate leafing through the dictionary. However, even when the actual practicality of these little volumes is rather small, reading them can be an extraordinary pleasure. Even before we set off on our journey, the light of the Cyclades shines forth from "Greek for the Globe Trotter", more perhaps than from a guide book that explains the local customs and the points of interest. The reason for that lies primarily in that these phrase book take hold of our fantasies: we're invited to dream up situations where we might need sentences like "Two coffees, please, with sugar." Or "Hello, have you got any good tomatoes today?" – and with that we're practically sitting on the island.

Phrase books tickle our cravings but can also steer our thoughts onto truly bizarre tracks. We can imagine, for instance, a case when we need the Arabic for "Why does this car have no muffler?" or we might consider how we could end up asking in Finnish "Does this hot water come from the boiler?" and indeed what answer would we get?

The reading a phrase book can be so intriguing can be traced to the conflict between the fundamental unpredictability of a journey and the task of these little companions to anticipate situations and provide the linguistic material to master them. The authors have to be inventive, anticipating potential events during a trip. And precisely for that reason these small volumes have a narrative dimension; they sketch out a short story or outline a travel novel. One could even be reminded of a travel horoscope.

The artist Alex Hanimann chose approximately 200 Italian sentences from phrase- and crash course books and used them as material for his work at the Centro d'Arte Contemporanea Ticino in Bellinzona. He was prompted, he said, by his own inability to speak Italian. However, Hanimann has already worked in a similarly playful way with language. In 1993, for instance, for an exhibition "The Swiss Paradigm" in Winnipeg, he created a work using various English expressions that focussed on the disparity between "Security" and "Insecurity".

In Bellinzona, Hanimann supplemented this body of found sentences with a number of

'created' phrases, employing them in three different ways. In the two larger rooms of the Centro sentences and sentence fragments composed in big letters and mounted on orange or black boards are laid out on tables. Visitors are invited to reorganize the sentences, letting themselves be guided either by colour or content criteria. For example, one can organize the sentences by colour, form a pattern on the table and then read the curious conversation, the peculiar narrative one just formulated. Or one can attempt to tell a story with the sentences at hand, to create an amusing conversation. And naturally one becomes aware – regardless of whether one has touched the boards or not – that we're leaving behind a kind of message for the next visitor to the show.

In the two smaller rooms Hanimann mounted some of these sentences as a running frieze, once in black and once in orange. The selection criteria for the sentences was that they run the exact length of the walls. Naturally the results are quite curious elements from a story which the visitor has yet to invent: "Perchè ti vesti sempre di nero?" "Mi pare che la macchina non funzioni bene." "Il ragazzo rimane muto." etc.

In the last, smallest room in the Centro Hanimann presents all of the sentences from the exhibition in the form of an index. Organized by length and printed in a normal font on paper bands, the sentences form a curve, a wedge on the wall. And naturally there arise confusing, poetic or completely abstruse associations: "Non ho niente." "Tutti i giorni." "I cavalli neri." daily black horses, that's really a tough one.

Hanimann's process at the Centro is, in principle, quite simple. First he finds sentences in phrase books and the like and frees them from their context and their proper place within a specific situation. Then he lays out the new criteria for their organization: by colour or the poetic will of the viewer, by wall length or the length of the individual phrase. In this way the sentences acquire a multitude of possible new contexts and, therefore, new meanings. All in all, the installation at the Centro acts like a large and extremely effective catalyst for our imagination. We can answer the assertion "Ho cacciato i leoni in Africa." with the remark: "Bring me the next size."; request "Fammi vedere." or philosophically counter: "Doubt is the prerequisite of all understanding.". Each time we imagine a different story; each time different images come to mind. Sometimes we come up against sheer ordinariness: "That's all." "Nothing's changed." "I can't do that." and then we're surprised once again: the question "Can you swim?" has no definitive answer but nevertheless the assurance: "Quando avrò la risposta, ti telefonerò subito.". So, we'll wait until it rings.