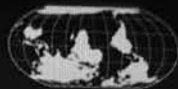


John Smith

Cry to the Oud

French → English

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Super Wash
TONGUE



THE THIMBLE

About ten years ago I became fascinated by Word Lens, a newly developed language translator app for smartphones that enabled tourists to decode signage and restaurant menus in foreign countries. When the phone's camera was pointed at a piece of text, the app would attempt to translate the text into the user's chosen language and graphically reproduce the translated text as an integrated part of the image on the phone's screen. The cleverness of the app was very impressive, but it interested me much more when it got things wrong.

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A couple of years later I was asked to make a short video work (subsequently realised as *Steve Hates Fish*) which would be projected at night in the window of Tintype Gallery in north London and viewed from the street after dark, both by deliberate visitors and casual passers-by. The only stipulation was that the work should relate in some way to Essex Road, the busy shopping street in which the gallery was located. I had been intending to make a video that explored the idiosyncrasies of Word Lens for some time and the commission seemed to offer an ideal opportunity to challenge the app's intelligence.

Strapping my smartphone to the front of my video camera and filming directly from its screen, I told Word Lens to translate from French into English, deliberately confusing the software by pointing my camera at the English signage displayed on the numerous shopfronts that surrounded the gallery. In an environment overloaded with information, the signs ran riot as the restless software attempted to fulfil its task, looking for French words to translate in places where there were none.

French → English

Skasi
IT'S LONG



French → English

**JUST
FAT**

ORDER takeaway ONLINE



French → English

**STALEMATE DAY
LOANS**



**GOD WANTED
INSTANT
CASH PAID**



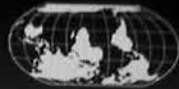
French → English

STEVE HATES

FISH



French → English



French → English

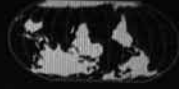
BEATNIKS

TRAINING - DECLAIMS SHIRT &

ERASE



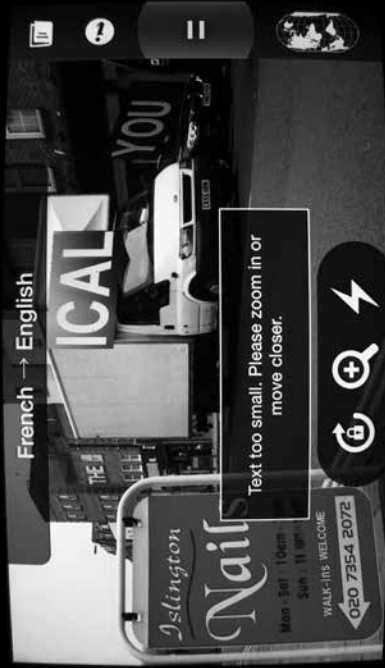
REPAIRS



The app was extremely obliging and did its best to help me. Sometimes it went as far as to interpret rectangular architectural features like windows as words. Very occasionally it found a genuine French word to translate - I discovered that French for 'fart' is 'pet' so a sign advertising PET FOOD displayed itself as FART FOOD. But most translations were approximations at best. The sign displaying the word CHEMIST was read by the software as CHEMISE, and thus became transformed into SHIRT. LAUNDERETTE was replaced by TONGUE, presumably because the French word it most closely resembled was LANGUETTE.

Explicable interpretations like these were very rare. Although the app bombarded my camera with its ideas, any logic behind most of the translations remained entirely mysterious. Why did RUGBY SHOWN HERE translate as SHOJO PHLEGM? And what did 'shojo' mean anyway? I discovered online that it meant 'young girl' in Japanese, but why the juxtaposition with 'phlegm'? Someone told me that they'd heard of a Japanese fetish that related to the phlegm of young girls but I decided not to investigate further.





The closer I looked at some of the app's juxtapositions, the more concerned I became about what it was thinking. What was going on with its algorithms? I was particularly troubled by a sign advertising SOUTHERN FRIED CHICKEN which flickered between SOUTHERN DIED and CASTRATE FRIED, generating horrific mental associations with historic racist atrocities in the southern states of the USA.

Was I giving the app's AI too much credit? Had these disturbing combinations of words occurred just by chance? I didn't think so, and one particular scene that never made it into the final work seemed to fully justify my paranoia. I made my video in 2015, not long after the civil war in Syria and the terrible scale of its destruction became headline news in the west. Staring at my screen, I became pretty sure that Word Lens knew what was going on too.

In the scene in question, six individual words generated by Word Lens were superimposed upon the upper storeys of a red brick building that housed a street level Costa cafe. The text on a local estate agent's signboard on the corner of the building had been replaced by the two words STRIP and SYRIA. To the right of the sign, the words CRY, TO and THE were framed by the windows on the first floor. Above them, in larger letters, the three-letter word OUD stood out against the grey slate tiles of the mansard roof.

ALCOHOL FROM
THE FUTURE

STRIP
SYRIA

020 7412 7570

OLD

THE

CRY TO

The combination of these words on the screen made perfect, tragic sense. STRIP SYRIA on the estate's agent's signboard signified the consequences of the ruling regime's relentless bombing campaign - the ongoing decimation of the country's infrastructure, architecture and cultural heritage. As a stringed instrument that originated in the self-same region more than a thousand years ago, the oud symbolised the very essence of that heritage. Everything seemed hopeless, all I could do was observe the devastation and loss of life from afar and CRY TO THE wistful sound of the OUD.

