Clarissa Baldassarri

Find in Translation, Lost in Words

Paris Internationale
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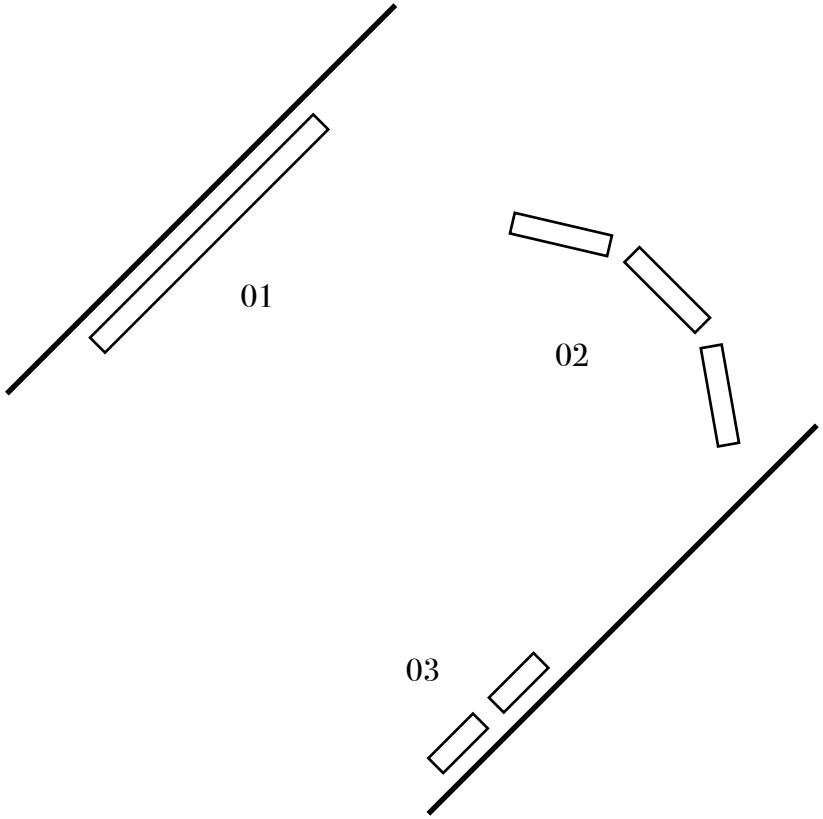
Featured works

01
Tower of Babel (Lakewood church, Houston, Texas), 2026, inkjet print on paper, 82x145 cm

02
Found in translation, Lost in words, 2026, 3-channels video, sound, 12' 31"

03
God Bless America, America Bless God (Pneuma church, Houston TX), 2026, inkjet prints on paper, 26x47 cm each



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Religious glossolalia has traditionally been interpreted as a problematic linguistic phenomenon: a form of language that appears to speak without signifying, in which the glossolalist speaks in order to say nothing, precisely so as not to be deceived by words (De Certeau, 1983, p. 10). However, interpretative difficulties have generated tensions surrounding the legitimacy of glossolalia within the Christian tradition itself. Already in the First Letter to the Corinthians, in fact, the Apostle Paul addresses a tension that has accompanied glossolalia since its earliest accounts: that between spiritual manifestation, interpretation, and communal recognition.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul compares speaking in tongues to musical instruments producing indistinct sounds: if the flute, the harp, or the trumpet fail to produce recognisable distinctions, their message remains incomprehensible. Later, he states that although there are many different languages in the world, anyone who does not know the meaning of a sound remains a foreigner to the person speaking.

"There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me." (1 Corinthians 14:9–11)

Paul's passage does not, of course, offer a theory of interpretation in the contemporary sense of the term. Nevertheless, it already highlights a question that would remain central: glossolalia poses not only a problem of manifestation, but also one of interpretation.

More than any other form of inspired speech, glossolalia has short-circuited the categories of linguistics (Lipparini, 2012, p. 78), since, while displaying certain outward characteristics of natural languages, it seems to elude the linguistic criteria normally used to define them (Samarin, 1972, p. 85). Following extensive comparative research into the phenomenon, William Samarin concludes that glossolalia is not a language in the strict sense, but rather a façade of language (Harkness, 2021, p. 12): an imitation of its outward forms, lacking a stable syntactic and semantic structure capable of creating new relationships and communities.

It is precisely within this interpretative impasse that the exhibition project Found in Translation, presented for the first time at Gian Marco Casini Gallery in Livorno, takes shape.

The exhibition is an artistic restitution of ethnographic and theoretical research in which the artist Clarissa Baldassarri stages questions rather than answers: questions that have driven her doctoral research over the past two years, investigating glossolalic and communicative phenomena within some of the largest Charismatic Christian and Pentecostal communities in South Korea, Brazil, and the United States.

If the linguistic and interpretative approach used so far to decode glossolalic manifestations has proved insufficient (De Certeau, 1972), and the interpretative processes within religious communities themselves generate ongoing tensions concerning the criteria of authentication, does the problem really lie in the nature of the phenomenon, or in the context in which it is interpreted? Do art and glossolalia share the same hermeneutic structure? What might emerge from this encounter?

Rather than asking whether glossolalia constitutes a language, a creative act, or a mystical experience, the works in the exhibition propose that we question the conditions that make its recognition as a meaningful phenomenon possible. From this perspective, the transfer from a religious context to an artistic one does not offer an interpretative solution, but rather a device through which to observe how meaning emerges each time from a different hermeneutic framework.

The works Found in Translation, Lost in Words and Wordless Symphonies, Noteless Poems (2026) consist of an operation of linguistic interpretation and transcription that investigates the hermeneutic possibilities of glossolalia by transferring the phenomenon from a religious setting to an artistic one.

Starting from three distinct glossolalic recordings collected in South Korea in 2024, six artists of different nationalities—Genevieve Quinn (Australia), Mônica Coster (Brazil), Zoé Chataignon and Tristan Fermandois (France), Sergio Pinzón (Colombia), and Marinés Agurto Hormazábal (Peru)—were asked to identify, within the vocabulary of their respective mother tongues, words that might be as phonetically compatible as possible with the sound material they had received.

From a strictly linguistic perspective, the results appear as sets of words lacking a stable semantic and syntactic structure. However, by shifting the focus from the meaning to the prosody of the words, they emerge more as poetic noises than as meaningful words (De Certeau, 1996), giving rise to sound poems that sing rather than signify.

Vocally, despite belonging to different languages, the transcriptions retain common traces of rhythm, repetition, cadence, and phonetic proximity that structurally and phonologically refer back to the original glossolalic event.

Indeed, if we were to adopt a logical-linguistic approach to translation, we would find no verifiable correspondence either between the words and the original audio or between the words in the different languages. If, on the other hand, we adopted a sound-based, poetic interpretative approach, we would realise that, despite semantically expressing distinct concepts, the prosody of these words is remarkably similar not only to the original audio, but also—and above all—to the texts in the other languages.

By adopting not an approach based on the translation of meanings, but rather what De Certeau defines as an exchange of bodies—that is, writing from the very place where one speaks—we can observe how these texts, interpreted within an artistic context, despite lacking stable semantics and being syntactically incorrect, would appear to our ears and eyes anything but meaningless. Instead, they would emerge as resonant bodies (De Certeau, 1980/2015, p. 35).

Methodologically, therefore, this generative and translational process can be understood not as a linguistic failure, but as a form of improvised creativity and embodied expression. Like glossolalia itself, Wordless Symphonies, Noteless Poems confronts us with the same interpretative and authenticating crossroads, in which language, temporarily freed from its denotative function, opens up new interpretative and celebratory possibilities, in what De Certeau calls a "Vocal Utopia" (Harkness, 2021, p. 15).

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2026

inkjet print on paper 82x145 cm (framed 85x148x4 cm)
ed. unique + 1AP

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2026

3-channels video, sound | 12’ 31”

ed.: 3 + 1AP

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