A War Room, New Year’s Eve 1999, Chennai, Southern India: A group of engineers are on stand-by, ready to deal with the presumed catastrophic, global consequences of the predicted meltdown of world-wide computer systems at the turn of the millennium. Fifteen years later Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter locates the key human and non-human players in this apocalyptic chapter of the digital age.

Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter’s artistic and research practice examines the paradoxical geopolitics related to technological development as it manifests itself in neo-colonial structures. Her methodology is based on fieldwork in which she encounters outsourced work and educational forces as well as engaging materials such as programming languages and outmoded apparatuses, for example by learning and working with legacy programming languages such as COBOL.

For the last five years Hilfling Ritasdatter has been researching how Western information infrastructures depend on legacy software and ongoing maintenance that are often provided by the so called developing countries. In one of her cases she investigates the Year 2000 problem, or Y2K bug, as it was dubbed primarily in the Western world and which started to get worldwide attention in the mid 1990s. Since the early days of computation it had been a routine as well as a technical standard to indicate year dates with two digits instead of four, leaving out the numbers specifying the millennium in order to save costly computer memory. But awareness of the potential implications of such a practice began to be raised: When reaching the year 2000, the computer would not be able to distinguish the 00 of 2000 from the 00 of 1900. The Y2K bug was presumed to lead to failures within major financial institutions like banks or stock exchanges, payroll systems, telecommunications and power systems.

The following image series are taken from a slide-based work part of the project Bugs in the War Room, which was originally presented as a solo exhibition at Overgaden – Institute for Contemporary Art, in Copenhagen, 2016. The work looks into the power mechanisms of repair and execution as mutually dependent. The bug which was to be fixed “once and for all” is here revealed to form part of a basic feature of technology as something that needs to be continuously maintained in order to execute at all. The myth of linear technological progress works to support neo-
colonial power regimes but these are disrupted by the ultimate paradox which is that the West is dependent on the developing nations in order to keep their own supposedly more advanced systems running.

REFERENCES


SUNRISE
00-01-01

THE INDIAN ENGINEER SAYS:

"WE HAD SET UP SOMETHING CALLED THE WAR ROOM TO MONITOR THE SYSTEMS' CHANGE OVERS ..."

...THE WAR ROOM WAS A 360° ROOM. EVERYBODY WAS HAVING A TERMINAL TO MONITOR THE SYSTEMS AND TALK TO THE CLIENTS ... 

...THERE WERE NOT MANY PEOPLE IN THE ROOM. ONLY THE KEY PEOPLE. ABOUT FIFTY OF US."
"SOMEHOW I MANAGED TO BE AWAKE AND IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME TO WATCH THE SUN RISE BEHIND MAY ISLAND ON THE FIRST OF JANUARY, 2000 ..."

"I’M NOT WORRIED BY NEW ZEALAND OR AUSTRALIA, I’M A BIT MORE WORRIED BY JAPAN, BUT I AM MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE REST OF THE FAR EAST ...

THE WESTERN Y2K EXPERT HAD SAID:

THE PHOTOGRAPHER SAYS:

- IT WAS PERFECT!"
... THE WORST PREPARED COME FIRST. I WISH THAT FOR ONE EVENING THE EARTH WOULD ROTATE THE OTHER WAY."

PETER DE JAGER AKA MR. MILLENNIUM BUG. 1999.

"WE HAD TO MANAGE THE ENTIRE 24 HOURS - JUST FOLLOW THE SUN ON THAT DAY ...

... IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE DATE, JUST THE USUAL PRODUCTION SUPPORT PROBLEMS."

... VERY FEW CRITICAL PROBLEMS WERE THERE ...