

Conversation

Although the use of language is prevalent in much contemporary art, the appearance of the Chinese language at this historic moment is worthy of particular focus and attention. In the West, where the Chinese language is so often taken only as a sign of the exotic, the ways in which Chinese artists are tactically using language can sometimes get lost. This conversation, the second in a series devoted to aspects of contemporary Chinese art, features the participation of Wenda Gu and Xu Bing, two of the most prominent artists working through these issues, as well as Jonathan Hay, associate professor of Chinese art at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York. Born in Shanghai in 1955, Gu moved to the United States in 1987; he has exhibited his work in numerous exhibitions throughout the world. Born in Chongqing, Sichuan Province, in 1955, Xu has lived in the United States since 1990; he has also exhibited his work widely and was recently awarded a MacArthur Fellowship.

Numerous other Chinese artists are engaging with the issue of language. Zhang Peili's single-channel video, *Water—The Standard Version Read from the "Ci Hai" Dictionary* (1992), consists of a twenty-five-minute static camera recording of Xin Zhibin, the Chinese government's most prominent television broadcast

personality, addressing the camera with all the definitions of "water" from a Chinese dictionary. While the premise of the work seems utterly simple, the power of it lies in how the simplicity of the reading implicitly challenges conventions and assumptions on all fronts. The newscaster, as the official media representative of the Chinese government, reads definitions of a single word with the same affect and conviction as she

Simon Leung with Janet A. Kaplan

Pseudo-Languages: A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay

would a news story. To a viewer unaware of the subtleties of the Chinese language, *Water* might function similarly to other conceptual video artworks where state power is taken up as an object of critique. But Xin's "standard" pronunciation is actually in a dialect foreign to and imposed on most native Chinese speakers, incomprehensible to those who do not know *Po-tun-hua*, or Mandarin. In other words, while all Chinese speakers share the Chinese written language—a fundamental basis of Chinese identity—Xin's "standard" Chinese is for most Chinese people spoken in a language at once their own and not their own. What *Water* highlights is how in contemporary Chinese art, the citation or use of words, whether written or spoken, is a performance of language both within and against a tradition in which language has always been of utmost importance. The Chinese language is a performance of culture, state, and self.

This performance of language (its functions, codes, oppression) has been the focus of much work by contemporary Chinese artists in the last fifteen years. Some, such as Qiu Zhijie and Song Dong, practice a calligraphy where Chinese characters are written against the goal of communication. Qiu's *Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Thousand Times* (1986/97) is a work where the practice of the ancient art of calligraphy is overwritten to the point where



1. Wenda Gu. *Temple of Heaven*, 1998. Installation. Dimensions variable. Installation view, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York.



2. Ching-ying Man.
97 Reunification, I Am Very Happy . . ., 1997.
 Installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

it becomes a black block of ink on paper. In *Water Writing Diary* (1995), Song Dong takes almost the reverse strategy by practicing calligraphy on the surface of a stone tablet or table, using water instead of ink. The water evaporates, but the enactment remains in the hand and mind of the artist.

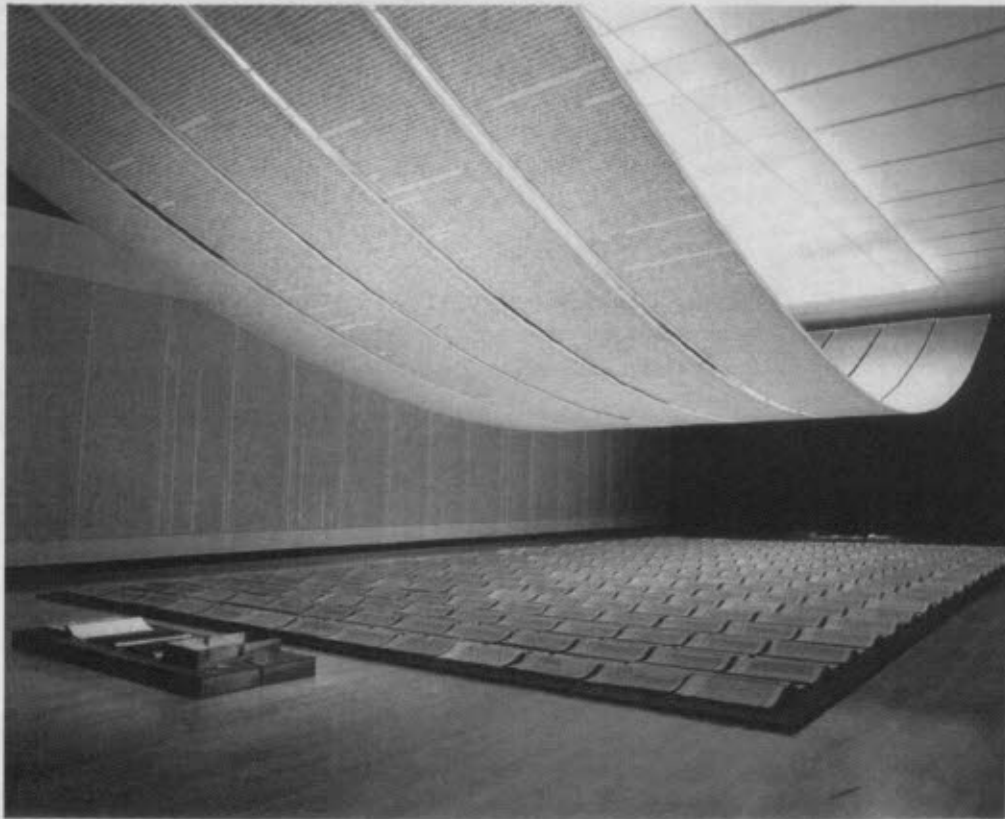
Ching-Ying Man, an artist from Hong Kong, also confronts the weight of Chinese history and identity in an installation made on the occasion of the turnover of Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China. *97 Reunification, I Am Very Happy . . .* (1997) (fig. 2) is an installation of red Chinese characters that filled the entire ceiling and wall space of a room with the sentence from the title. The repetition of words echoes the ubiquity of exactly such sentiments displayed in the celebratory signs throughout Hong Kong before the hand-over. Here, the imposition of a "glorious" national identity is met with extreme ambivalence and derided as farce.

Leung: Although both of you use Chinese script in your installations at P.S. 1 for the exhibition *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, the forms of the scripts are very different. Xu Bing, in *A Book from the Sky* (1987–91) (fig. 3), you use typeface that you carve yourself—a moveable type from the Song Dynasty (960–1279), like that which is used in books or newspapers, a typeface that connotes the public. And Wenda, in *Temple of Heaven* (1998) (fig. 1), a site-specific installation that you created for the exhibition, you use ancient Chinese seal script, the oldest recorded form of the Chinese written language, which most contemporary Chinese speakers can't read. That seems related to other elements in your installation, like the use of old-style furniture.

Xu: I made *A Book from the Sky* in 1987. When I first showed it at the National Gallery in Beijing in 1988, I wanted to cover the entire space—the floor, the ceiling, the walls—with fake words. The installation consists of a series of beautifully bound boxed books arranged in a grid on the floor, giant scrolls arching from the ceiling, and smaller scrolls hung from the walls. I had invented the approximately four thousand unreadable characters printed on the books and the scrolls, but when visitors first entered the space, they thought that the words they saw were words they could read. However, when they actually tried to read the words, they couldn't. They thought that some of the words were simply wrong. Then they realized that all of the words were wrong. Their expected response was disrupted.

Strictly speaking, *A Book from the Sky* doesn't have any connection with text, since there is no "real" text, even though it takes the form of books and the appearance of "words." But it does have a connection with writing and printing. In Beijing I worked with a small printshop known for making beautifully bound books and facsimiles of classic books. I spent a lot of time studying book printing, so that eventually I was able to distinguish different styles of binding—the Song Dynasty style, the Ming Dynasty style, and so on.

3. Xu Bing. *A Book from the Sky*, 1987–91. Installation with hand-printed books. Dimensions variable. Installation view, The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



I used a typeface invented during the Song Dynasty by professional engravers, because over time it has become like the newsprint style of today, which I liked. I didn't want to express my own personality. I wanted there to be a tension between the seriousness of the execution and the presentation and the underlying absurdity that animates the project.

Hay: There has been an historical evolution of this kind of woodblock typography, which basically begins in the Tang Dynasty.

Xu: When I began *A Book from the Sky*, I was trying to carve standard script characters. But as soon as I started to work with the carving process itself, I found myself developing images that were closer to this preexisting typographical model. I'm not particularly attracted to calligraphy because it is too self-expressive, too individualistic, too emotional for my purposes.

Leung: The typeface you use, because it's associated with books and newspapers, connotes the public, in contrast to calligraphy, which is, as you say, more expressive.

Xu: If I use this public mode of, I don't want to say writing, because it's already changed, but if I use this public mode of communication, it already belongs to everybody, not just to me.

Kaplan: It's not personal.

Hay: You want to get away from saying anything specific. You want to withhold that kind of statement.

Xu: I even want the artist not to be in the work.

Gu: *Temple of Heaven* is the most recent monument in my ongoing ten-year project, *United Nations*, which I began in 1993. This project consists of the creation of a series of national monuments made of the hair of people from the place in which the monument is sited and a final United Nations monument. The final project will be a giant wall built solely from the hair from the

national monuments. The hair will maintain its ethnic identity but will be woven together into pseudo-languages co-existing on the wall.

The four walls and the ceiling of *Temple of Heaven* are made of hair that I have collected from 325 barber shops around the world over the past five years, including Poland, the United States, Israel, Russia, Hong Kong, South Africa, and China. The hair is formed into curtain walls inscribed with invented, unreadable

scripts based on the Chinese, English, Hindi, and Arabic languages. On the ceiling are large letters whose forms synthesize Chinese characters and English letters. On the floor is a Ming-style furniture setting for the tea ceremony. The seat of each chair is a TV monitor showing passing clouds. Visitors may sit on the clouds and meditate. The unreadableness of the languages is intended to evoke the limitations of human knowledge.

Hay: Could you talk about your use of seal script and also your use of old-style furniture?

Gu: It's related to my work from the early 1980s. At that time, I was intensively reading Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Bertrand Russell's philosophies of language, and I was just beginning to learn seal script, the first unified language in China, introduced by China's first emperor, Qing Shi Huang. Because I couldn't read the script, I felt liberated from the meaning of the words. I started to produce a series of ink paintings with different kinds of fake seal script. More recently I have become interested in how to integrate knowledge into the body, not through traditional calligraphy or printing.

My intellectual formation has been the result of four factors: the Marxist ideology I grew up with and the capitalist reality in which I exist today; my extreme Chineseness and my existence as a citizen of the world. I have benefited from experiencing both systems, both cultures. I am interested in fusing global cultures. I thought if I used a conventional printing style, both English and Chinese readers would realize immediately whether it was fake or not. When I used seal script, neither Chinese nor non-Chinese readers would be able to make that determination. So I am playing a double game. Chinese readers could interpret the concept of an unreadable language as the mythos of a lost history, while non-Chinese readers could interpret it as a misunderstanding of an "exotic" culture. In general, the miswritten language symbolizes misunderstanding as the essence of our knowledge of the material world, yet the pseudo-languages help us to imagine a universe beyond language.

Leung: How is that related to the furniture?

Gu: The furniture is a counterpart to the words. I want people to sit on the chairs, surrounded by the four invented languages in a transcultural setting, to meditate about issues like existence beyond knowledge, beyond nationality, beyond the boundaries of culture and race.

Kaplan: Are your works designed specifically for a non-Chinese audience or for any audience?

Gu: My more recent works, which I have executed all over the world, are for international audiences. But my early ink paintings were for Chinese ones. At that time, I was more interested in the philosophy rather than the politics of language. But the government suspected that unreadable characters might have hidden meanings or that I was destroying the code of tradition; they consequently closed my exhibitions several times.

Xu: I produced *A Book from Sky* before I came to the United States. Although it was produced and first shown in China, it was not concerned with an audience of a certain nationality as much as with a larger public.

Hay: It was initially created for a Chinese context, even if you weren't specifically thinking in those terms. But since then it has had a very long international after-life. What's involved for you in its transfer from China to other countries?

Xu: When I first showed it overseas, I wondered whether people would understand it. But in the countries in which I have shown it, they seem to like it. Maybe they like the idea, maybe the form.

Hay: I'm more interested in whether you think it can be effective here, or whether it's effective in a different way. You must have thought about this quite a lot.

Xu: All the responses are different. Chinese audiences lose part of the meaning, and Western audiences lose another part, but each side gets the part that the other doesn't.

Hay: Some of us who think about Chinese art have been critical of certain mainland Chinese artists who use obvious signs of Chineseness to exoticize themselves. Is this a criticism that can be made of either of you?

Xu: I don't feel that the desire to draw in a Western audience by exoticizing my Chineseness applies to me. Since I grew up in China and am involved in Chinese culture in a very deep way, what I do comes very naturally. I have no other choice but to draw from my own cultural tradition, which has been filtered through Mao's Cultural Revolution. I feel that to use Chinese cultural elements to address global issues, to participate in global cultural debates, is a positive development. The alternative pursued by some others is to avoid using Chinese cultural elements to address larger issues. The problem with this is that you're giving up your own culture; you're abandoning something of yourself. Part of the international success of *A Book from the Sky* has come precisely from the fact that it embodies a particularly Chinese approach to culture. The real problem is not what materials or cultural elements one uses, but the level of one's reflection.

Gu: Regarding the question of whether using Chinese cultural elements may be criticized as opportunistic exoticizing, I think this criticism not only applies to Chinese artists, but it should also be applied to non-Chinese ones, too. There has been a long tradition of Westerners exoticizing Chinese culture, and there would be no reason for Chinese artists to exoticize themselves were it not for this historical condition.

Hay: I agree.

Gu: This criticism must therefore apply to both sides.

Leung: I feel that the strength of Jonathan's question, however, lies in the fact that if you are Chinese in an international frame, you're given a type of authority that non-mainland Chinese artists are not given.

Gu: There is another issue I'd like to address. Artists like Xu Bing and I use Chinese elements, but not in a traditional way. This is difficult for non-Chinese audiences unfamiliar with Chinese culture to understand. They think that we are using traditional Chinese elements, when we are not. At the same time conservative Chinese intellectuals criticize us for revisionism. This is a dilemma we

face because of the isolation and the ensuing level of incomprehension between different cultures.

Leung: I want to depart from that last comment and ask you specifically about the languages you use. On the one hand, there is a destruction of authenticity in making pseudo-languages; but, on the other, I'm struck by the underlying ideology of internationalism in your work and by the fact that the

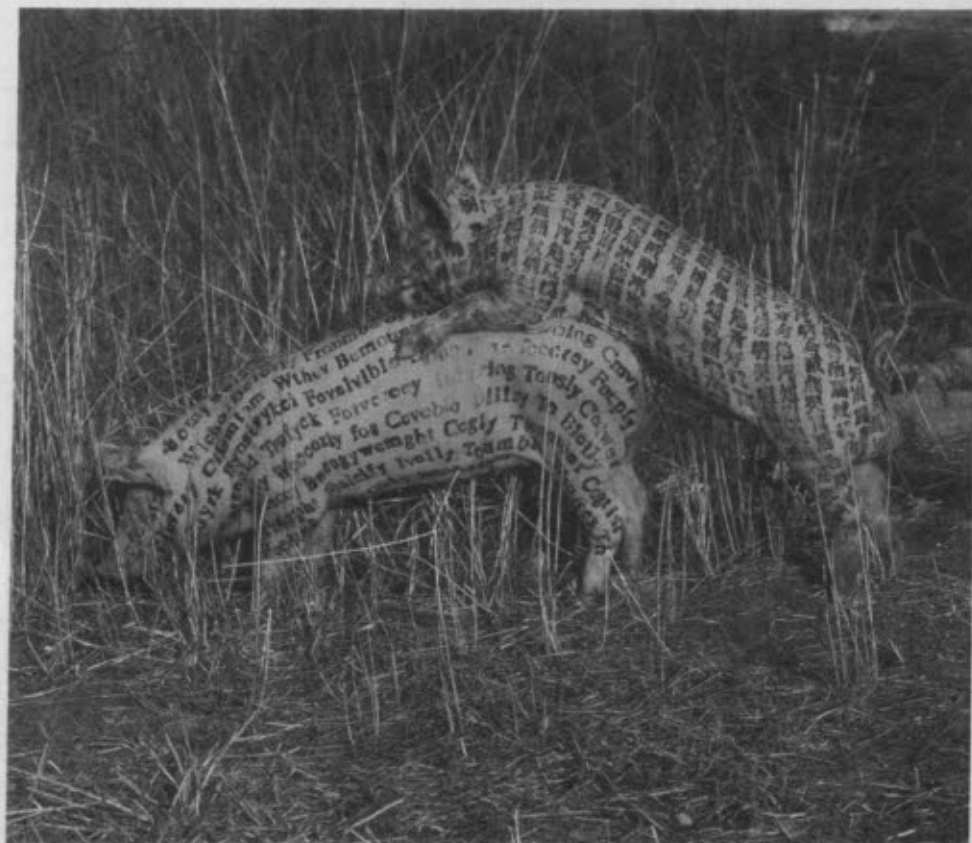
languages that you do fake from are not just any languages. They are hegemonic languages. Historically, they have been languages of domination, languages that empires have used as a form of unification.

Gu: Since I installed *Temple of Heaven* at P.S. 1, I have sat in the gallery and talked to visitors. One Russian man who works for the United Nations, who knows of my private *United Nations* project, asked why I used four languages and didn't include Russian. Jewish visitors have asked why I didn't include Hebrew. Language is a sign of nationalism. When the project is finished in 2004, I will have produced works in twenty-five countries, probably using almost as many languages.

Leung: Can you address the internationalism of the project? I'm particularly interested in the problematic notion of the "united nations."

Gu: I began to think about *United Nations* in 1992. As more institutions around the world became interested in participating in the project, I began to think more about its political, philosophical, and ideological dimensions. The target is the United Nations, an organization whose utopian purpose is to create a better world by unifying its different races and cultures—a vision that probably won't exist in our lifetime. But it can be realized in art, whose function is to serve as a projection of our imaginary.

Hay: That leads to a comment that I'd like to address to Xu Bing. You seem to make reference in your work to a different set of utopian ideals that basically comes from the Chinese Communist Party, from Yan'an, where Mao gave his famous "Talks on Art and Literature" in May 1942, in which he expounded his philosophy of art. In your work, these ideals, which as propaganda no one can believe in, take on a new form. There's a kind of distortion. Are you trying in this aspect of your art to recover something positive from the Communist experiment? Do you want to find something in it that is still positive, that can still be believed in, and develop that? I'm especially struck by your identification



4. Xu Bing. *A Case Study of Transference*, 1994–95. Two live breeding pigs with text. Courtesy the artist.

with carvers, artisans, and designers, rather than with the model of the literati artist and the concept of authenticity that goes along with that.

Xu: A very interesting question. I develop these works from a certain doubt about cultural authority. For this reason, my work troubles intellectuals. Many of those who saw *A Book from the Sky* in China wanted to find real words, but they couldn't, and that bothered them.



5. Xu Bing, *Net and Leash*, 1997. Mixed-media installation with writing, metal fence, and live sheep. Installation view, Eastern Illinois University Art Center, Charleston. Courtesy the artist.

Hay: It's threatening. It makes certain people uncomfortable, particularly those who are steeped in traditional Chinese culture. And those who are modernizing?

Gu: Both. It's disturbing to Chinese audiences and also to Western ones.

Hay: To conservatives on both sides who have an orthodox idea of culture.

Xu: This is the point of *A Case Study of Transference* (1993–95) (fig. 4), an installation in which I put two pigs that were to be mated into a pen filled with books in different languages. The body of the male pig was printed with fake English words and that of the female with fake Chinese characters. The laborers who worked in the place from which I bought the pigs didn't care, but the intellectuals were horrified by my actions.

Leung: Regarding your use of animals, it seems that you're dealing with the issue of communication.

Xu: I work with animals as a way of rethinking human culture, because they offer a vantage point from which to look at culture, as embodied by the dense expression of writing. As I was preparing *A Case Study of Transference*, people were worried that the pigs wouldn't work. But the pigs really enjoyed it. They didn't care that they were in an art gallery, the arena of culture.

I contributed a piece with sheep to the exhibition *Animal. Anima. Animus.* at the Pori Art Museum in Finland in 1998, which included fifteen artists from all over the world whose work deals with animals. In my piece, *Net and Leash* (fig. 5), I fabricated a steel cage in the form of a text that the curator wrote about the exhibition and a leash made of wire bent into the form of a verse from John Berger's poem "They Are the Last," which reads: "Now that they have gone/it is their endurance we miss./Unlike the tree/the river or the cloud/the animals

had eyes/and in their glance/was performance." Working with animals makes it possible to highlight the difference between civilization and nature. The pigs really enjoyed themselves, but the people felt embarrassed as they watched them. That point is really important.

Leung: That's exactly how I thought about it. Animals are the object of language, but, in *A Case Study of Transference*, it's language that doesn't make any sense, so the self-consciousness returns to the person who provides the gaze. In a sense, the gaze of language turns back onto the person, and the person becomes the object.

Xu: My interest in books and words comes from my family and my generational background. My father used to work in the history department at Beijing University, and my mother worked in the library studies department. When I was very young, I grew up in an environment filled with books. I became familiar with all different kinds of typeface and binding, but only visually; I couldn't read them. When I started to learn to read, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing. I was sent to the countryside and could only read Mao's books. When the Cultural Revolution ended and I returned home, I had the opportunity to read many more books because of my parents. Yet, I felt uncomfortable. I was like a hungry person who, when he has the chance to eat, eats too much and gets nauseated.

In the past, people were very respectful toward books. I was very respectful. But after reading so many, my attitude changed in a strange way. I started to feel that there were too many books, and I also came up with the idea that I wanted to make a book of my own that would explain the world. This is why I made *A Book from the Sky*. When I came to the United States in 1990 as a visiting artist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I went to the university library. I would go into the stacks and touch the books, which I couldn't do in libraries in China. I looked at them closely, but I couldn't read them. It was like when I was child.

Hay: A throwback to that time.

Xu: Yes. I've always had a strange relationship to words. Familiar, but also kind of alienating. When Chinese children learn to write, we spend a lot of time memorizing and tracing characters in calligraphy lessons. My father would ask me to do a page every day. The purpose was not really to learn specific characters, but rather to teach me discipline within a particular cultural framework.

Hay: I don't want to lose the question of ideology here, the political issue, because it's sometimes very difficult to get artists from mainland China to speak directly about politics.

Xu: My generation of artists has a very strange relationship with words. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao was promoting simplified characters. We spent a lot of time memorizing the new words. Then they would change the words the next year. And then they would change them again.

Hay: They would go back to the earlier mode?

Xu: It was really confusing. Not only with respect to language but culturally.

Leung: I remember growing up in Hong Kong and learning the old style of Chinese script, but I would not be able to read books or newspapers from

Mainland China. This simplification of the language that you are talking about, to the point that nobody could read it and certain aspects would therefore have to be restored to make it more comprehensible, echoes what you say about the control of language, especially during the Cultural Revolution.

Gu: Language is the power of mind and manipulation. Think only of propaganda. Groups use language to impose their ideas on you. You learn to be controlled through their propaganda. It's very political. That's why the dictator is not as comfortable with the language inherited from the old emperor. He wants to establish his own language, currency, and so on to affirm his authority. Cultural texts encode political power.

Hay: So there's an issue of control, of power.

Gu: That also goes back to my training. When I was a student in the China National Academy in the 1980s, I was trained as a calligrapher and a landscape painter. For three years, from morning to late afternoon, I just copied from the masters. I learned the art of self-discipline, self-control, and meditation in the process. I learned the way to be patient.

Kaplan: It's very interesting that both of you have chosen the issue of translation in your approaches to language, and that you've chosen to make it impossible to translate, because you're not writing a real language. But are referencing a language that you've invented that doesn't say anything. Is the impossibility of translation one of the issues you are thinking about?

Gu: Translation is a metaphor of the global situation today, a transnational situation. We carry on the Chinese tradition in this global context. That's why I use hair from different races. I want people to feel that they are part of the work, not just passive viewers looking at it. The work is not shaped by stone or wood; its power comes from living people.

Leung: I want to ask you about your use of hair in relationship to translation. Although your idea is that hair is natural, and in some ways essential, hair is one of the most synthetic signifiers, in that there are different styles and cuts that go in and out of fashion. In other words, hair doesn't signal biology or nature, as much as it signals artifice, in that artifice is inherent in language, in that there may be elements in a language that can be choreographed to mean radically different things.

Gu: In today's technologically advanced world nothing is really natural. We live in a world in which engineering has invaded the human body, laying the foundation for a new stage of artificial evolution propelled forward by market forces and commercial objectives. My use of hair is coded biologically, as well as historically, socially, ethnically, culturally. Scientists can discover information about a person by analyzing the DNA in their hair.

Leung: Exactly. Hair is a type of text.

Xu: Regarding the issue of translation, some people have pointed out that even before *A Book from the Sky* left China, it was exploring questions of comprehension and incomprehension. I myself have doubts about the degree to which it's possible for there to be translation between cultures, since even people within



6. Wenda Gu. *United Nations—Hong Kong Monument: The Historical Clash*, 1997. Site-specific installation for Hong Kong Handover 1997. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Hanart Gallery, Hong Kong. Sentence reads, in classical Chinese order (top to bottom, right to left): "Once upon a time there was an English merchant who said, 'Imagine, if every Chinese wears one more inch of clothing.'"

the same culture have difficulty communicating. I feel that I'm working in a space between cultures.

In 1994 I produced *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* (figs. 10–11), which I first showed in Finland in 1996. It is a simulated classroom in which visitors may practice what seems to be traditional Chinese calligraphy. When visitors first read the characters they are to copy, they think that the characters are Chinese. However, when they become involved in the actual act of copying, they realize that the words are really characters composed of reconfigured Roman letters that spell out words in English, which they can read. The only way that they can achieve this experience is by finding a place between two languages, between two cultures. Moreover, in *Your Surname, Please* (1998), when a visitor types his or her name into a computer keyboard, the computer translates the name into a character composed of reconfigured Roman letters, which the visitor may then print out and take home. In this way, a close relationship occurs between such a language and the audience.

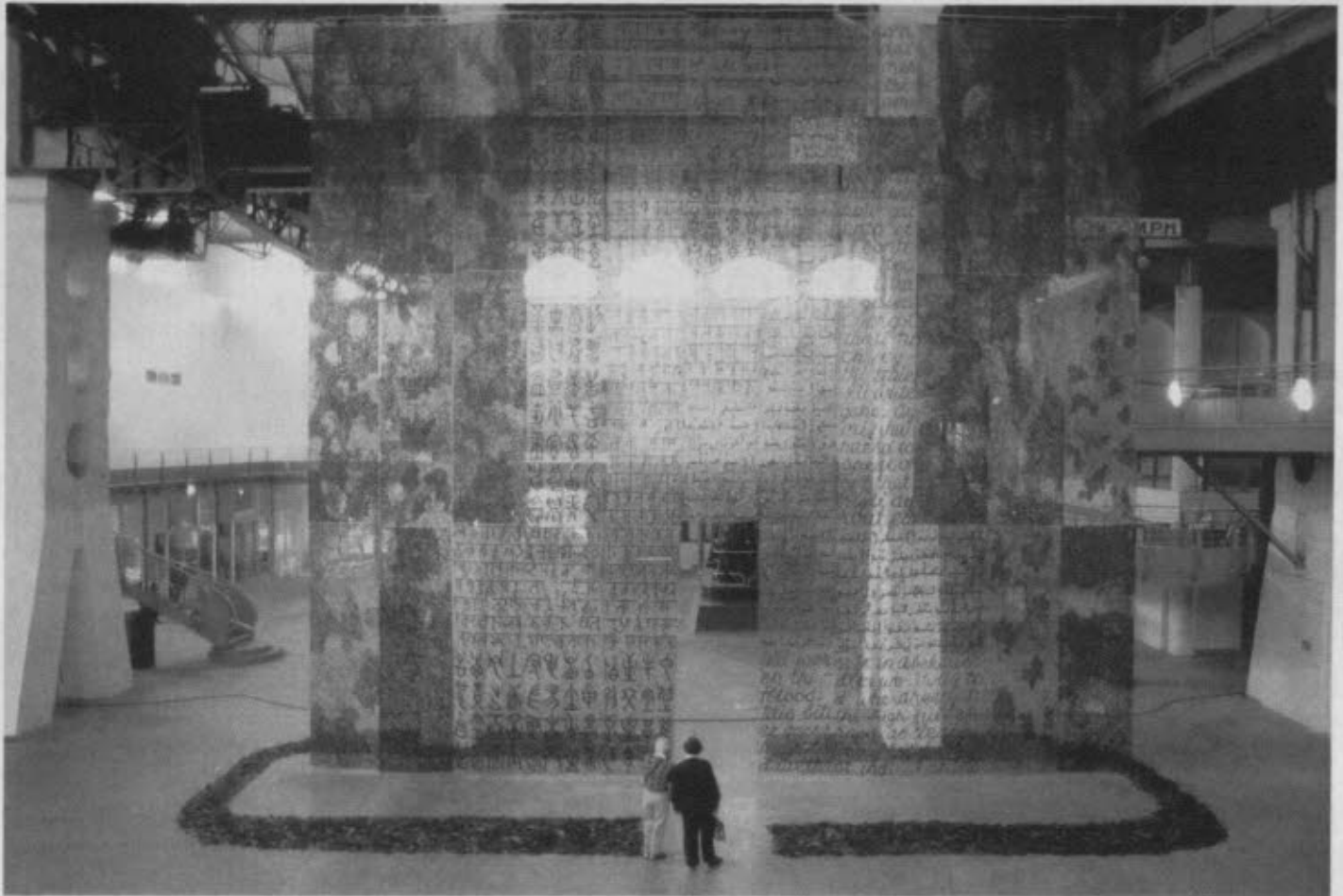
Leung: You translate Roman letters and English syntax into Chinese script, and it actually works.

Xu: I wanted to distance myself from the contemporary art system. A gap has opened up between contemporary art and its audience. Many people don't understand contemporary art, and they think they are the problem. But actually the problem is with contemporary art. I want to make work that engages the audience in a friendly way.

Hay: So we're back to the utopian ideal.

Xu: I want the audience to become involved in the work.

Gu: The issue of the relationship between the work of art and the audience is important. My use of the human body as my medium is my way of closing the gap between the work of art and the audience. I develop the monuments that comprise the *United Nations* project in close dialogue with issues central to the local contexts in which the works are sited. For example, I created *United Nations—Hong Kong Monument: The Historical Clash* (1997) (fig. 6) on the occasion of the handover of Hong Kong to China. It included British hair formed into the shape of the Union Jack and Chinese hair formed into the shape of a flag inscribed with pseudo-Chinese seal script. Between these flags was a nineteenth-century British quotation, also rendered in hair, that was presented in Chinese format—that is, you had to read it from top to bottom, right to left. It said: "Once upon a time there was an English merchant who said, 'Imagine, if every Chinese wears one more inch of clothing.'" It's about the origins of the Opium War (1839–42) and the extension of the British market into Asia. But ironically it also referred to modern China, an enormous market that has opened up and has attracted corporations from all over the world. The British merchants' words have become a reality today.



7. Wenda Gu. *United Nations—Africa Monument: The World Praying Wall*, 1997. Site-specific installation. 40 x 44 ft. (12.2 x 13.4 m). Second Johannesburg Biennale.

Kaplan: Could you talk more about this issue of audience?

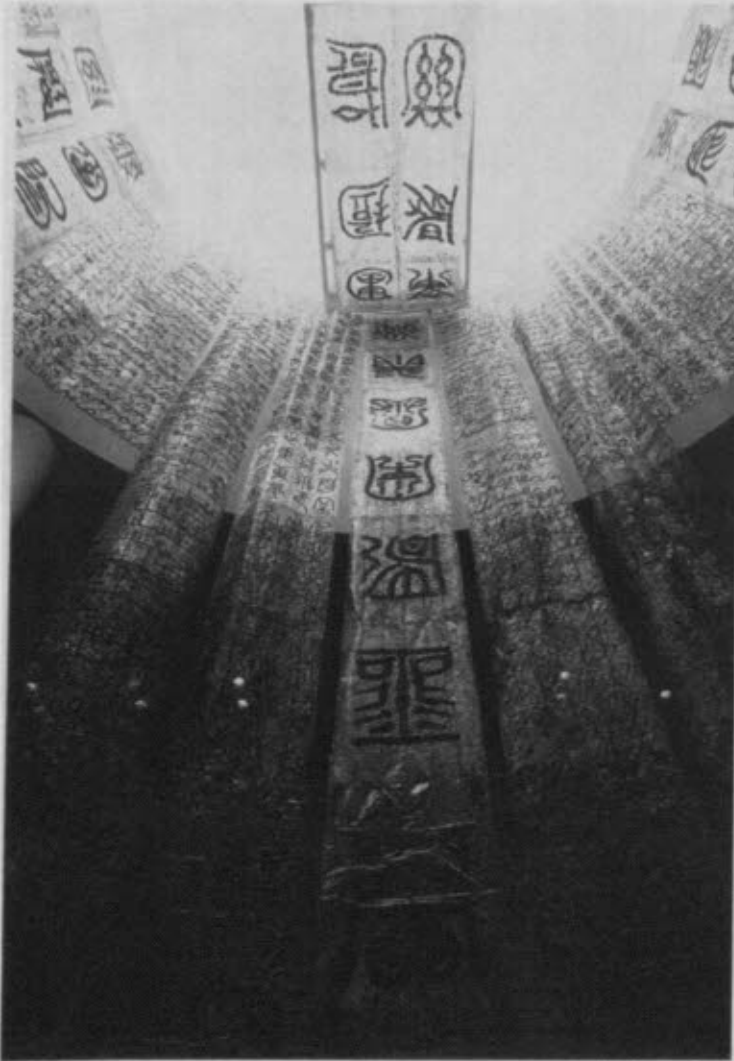
Gu: I try to close the gap between the artwork and the audience by ensuring direct physical contact, interaction, and dialogue with the local population through the collection of the hair and reference to the cultural histories from which the monument will be created (fig. 7). Each monument requires huge amounts of hair and usually involves the participation of twenty to forty barber-shops over a three- to four-month period. When the hair is transformed into bricks, curtain walls, carpets, and so on, it is reincarnated in a sense, and this process often has a tremendous psychological impact on the local population. I brought my proposal for *United Nations—Israel Monument: The Holy Land* (1995) before Parliament, which debated whether the use of hair in this manner was inappropriate because it evoked memories of the Holocaust. I argued that it was not, since it was about ensuring the Jewish people's presence in the project, which would otherwise be incomplete.

Kaplan: You create different situations in which different dialogues and debates can be framed and discussed.

Gu: Yes, that's the real function of the *United Nations* project. I don't just invent work privately in my studio. I go into the culture. I get material from

local populations so that when I conclude the project, it will be as if millions of people helped shaped it. In 1999 I will produce *United Nations: The Babel of the Millennium* (fig. 8), a site-specific installation for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It will be an enormous tower referencing the biblical Tower of

Babel constructed from rectangular panels depicting nonsensical languages, including pseudo-English, Hindi, Arabic, and a synthesis of Chinese and English; the panels will be made of human hair collected from over three hundred barbershops around the world. Designed for a space intended for public gathering, the tower's structure will combine two important symbols: a cross and a refined form of a funeral robe from the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) created for the Princess Liu from jade tablets sewn together with gold thread. The cross's arms will curve with the circular architectural space surrounding it, forming the image of the jade robe with folded arms. I will also present a performance in conjunction with the installation—a wedding ceremony presided over by a mixed-race child (fig. 9). I believe that we are on the verge of



8. Wenda Gu. *United Nations: The Babel of the Millennium*, 1999. Site-specific installation. Height: 75 ft. (22.9 m); diameter: 34 ft. (10.4 m). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Kent and Vicky Logan Family Gift.

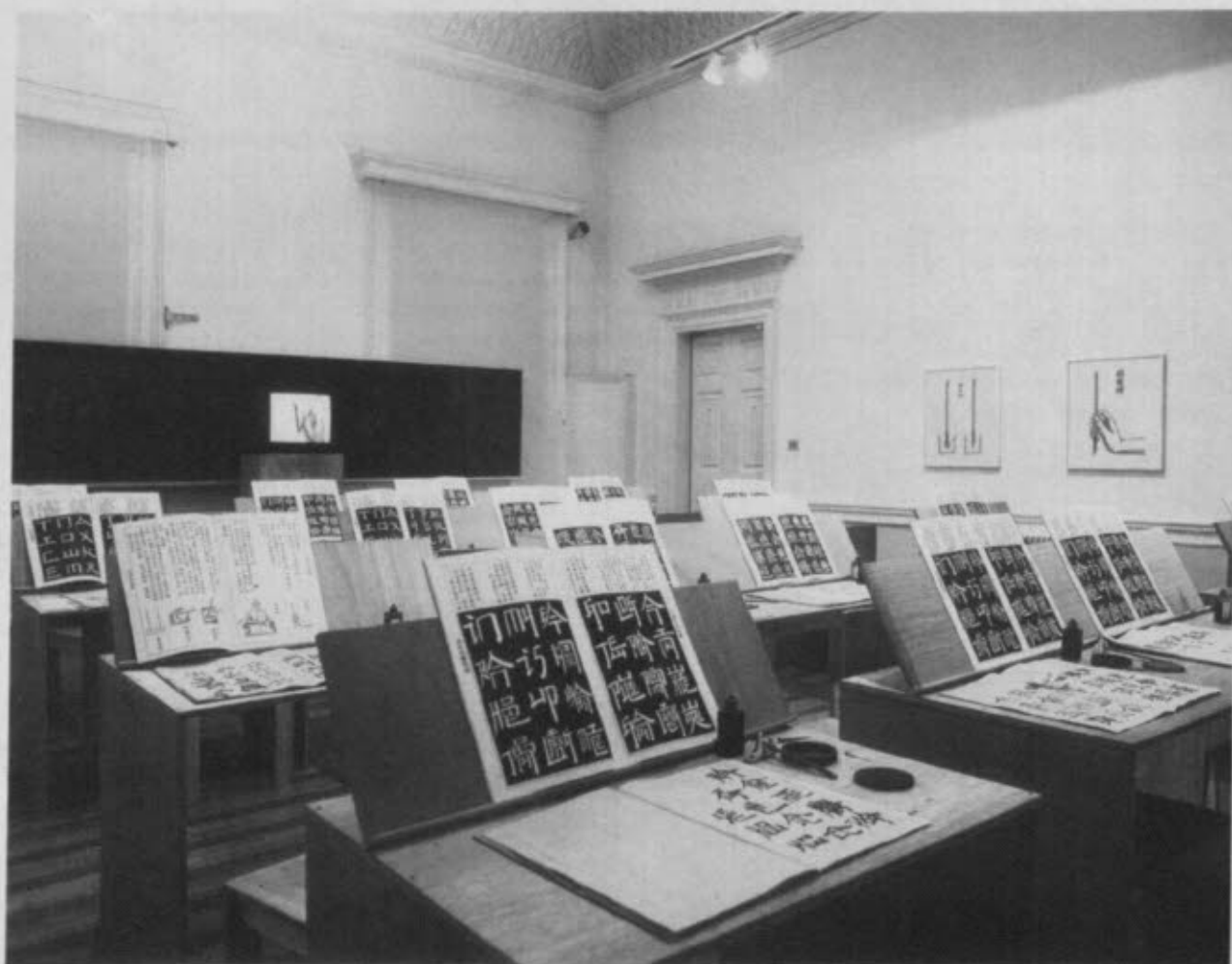
9. Wenda Gu. *Cultural Wedding*, 1999. Performance at Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, February 28, 1999.



a historical transition in which we must choose whether or not to realize the vision of a powerful humanity by uniting different races and cultures.

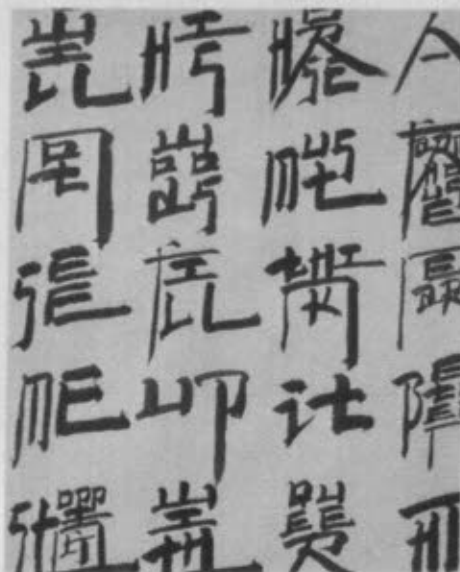
Xu: *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* has been shown in different countries, too, and a lot of teachers have brought their students to the gallery to learn. Some have even asked where they may buy the instructional book for their students. They are trying to find new ways to teach the young generation about other cultures. During the Kwangju Biennial, the program was made available on a local television channel. Interestingly, some visitors later wrote to me in my invented characters, which they had learned.

I believe that art should serve the people. This is Mao's idea.



10. Xu Bing. *Introduction to New English Calligraphy*, 1994-96. Gallery transformed into classroom. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

11. Xu Bing. *Introduction to New English Calligraphy*, 1996-99. Rice paper and ink. Translation of Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Courtesy the artist.



Contemporary artists can learn something from Mao. I once made a work in which, if the text is read from left to right in the way it appears it ought to be read, it doesn't make any sense. If, on the other hand, you read it top to bottom, right to left, then the characters link together and make sense. This text is from Mao's "Talks on Art and Literature." If you read it horizontally, you can't get the exact meaning, but you still have the sense that it's Mao talking.

Gu: Yes, art as a service to the people. That's Mao's idea.

—December 18, 1998