

# *The Compositional Metaphors of Calligraphic Art in Contemporary Chinese Art as the Visual Element*

Cen Xiaoru<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Fine Art Department, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, S Wabash, Chicago, United States*  
*a. xcen@saic.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** As an essential and unique aesthetic element in Chinese art history, script art also has an influence on contemporary practices, which could not be overlooked. Practices making efforts to subvert or deconstruct the tradition of the calligraphy mechanism, or even the whole language system, have been given great attention in the international art field. However, there is a lack of analysis of the metaphorical structure behind the script. This paper aims to investigate the usage of Chinese characters in contemporary pieces of visual art from two artists and the cultural metaphors behind these literal components. This paper divides the use of Chinese characters as visual elements in contemporary Chinese art into two kinds - the practice of picturizing words and the deconstruction of textual mechanisms - and explores the metaphorical nature behind these two artistic means, using artists Xu Bing and Gu Wenda as representatives. The practice of picturing characters conveys the artists' retracing of cultural origins and worship of nature in his "Landscape" and "Living Words" projects; the structuring of the mechanisms of characters, including Gu Wenda's series of misspellings and Xu Bing's *The Book of Heaven*, implies a rebellion or critique of the system of discourse and power.

**Keywords:** calligraphy, contemporary art, Xu Bing, Gu Wenda

## 1. Introduction

Chinese characters and the traditions of calligraphy, including the practices of inscription, rubbing, and inter-disciplining art such as the painting of man-of-letters, which developed around them, have played an irreplaceable part in Chinese culture all over the 4000 years. As crucial cultural and cognitive phenomena and symbols, these elements also appear frequently in Chinese contemporary art practices by various means. In Xu Bing's experiments, for instance, developed Chinese characters degenerate backwardly into graphic sketching and illustrating, while pure orthodox calligraphies are applied for expressing foreign languages or even nonsense. For artists Gu Wenda, intentionally miswritten characters could be applied in visual expression.

There are already abundant investigations and analyses of the artistic language systems these artists adopt when using calligraphic elements in their practices and the relationship between their works and contemporaneous western text art. However, there are still many blanks in those intriguing details of the way they metaphorically transform, distort, play, and perform calligraphic art in their experiments to express their concepts. Hence, in this research, the author would like to roughly divide

the Chinese contemporary art practices containing calligraphic art into two basic categories and discuss the cultural and social metaphors behind these pieces.

## 2. An Exercise of Retreating back into Graphics: Taking Xu Bing as an Example

As one of the few surviving systems of writing based on pictographs that are still in common use, Chinese has a completely different structure from normal phonograms widely used in the rest of the world. Although modern Chinese contains many phono-semantic elements which indicate the pronunciation and meaning of characters, the initial pictogram expression of Chinese characters had built the cornerstone for the unique ambiguous relationship between scripting and graphic, or, say, visual art.

Dating back to the 8 century of the Tang Dynasty, Chinese aesthetician and artist Zhang Yanyuan characterized Chinese characters as the earliest and the most splendid expression of painting, or visual art, in his book *Notes of Past Famous Paintings*. According to the author, the inventor of characters known as Cangjie created a systematic graphic based on the pattern of animal footprints and the arrangement of constellations. Consequently, the invention of characters then disturbed the gods and spirits, initiating a series of unimaginable natural catastrophes. Zhang then concluded that when characters were originally invented, there was no difference between illustrating (painting) and writing [1]. Obviously, this myth which lacks evidence failed to provide a strong argument for the connection between characters and graphics; but the concept of considering characters as a vehicle of visual art has been successfully rooted in the theories and practices of Chinese art since then.

In contemporary Chinese art experimentations, a group of people, represented by Xu Bing, are fascinated with the procedure of transforming graphs seized from nature by human instincts into a set of readable mechanisms or, in Xu Bing's own words, a certain way of thinking. His obsession is to recreate the process of Cangjie's character creation over and over again in a large number of works: collaging, geometrizing, collaboration and integration of illustrating and writing. According to the artist, doing so provides him with an opportunity to discard the calligraphy disciplines of genres and styles among the history and contact with the primitive essence of the Chinese language and culture [2].

In his early experiments, Xu created a "Landscape" series in which he repeated characters, words, or incomplete sentences to shape illustrations of the mountainsides and grasslands of the Himalayan region. In one of these works, for example, by adjusting the colors, sizes, and strokes, he used a few words and sentences, like "fog", "snow", and "cliff", to create a series of landscape sketches both visually and conceptually. As a whole, the work provides a rough sketch of the Himalayan Mountain on a foggy day, but when getting close to it, the audience can read the abundant information and emotions inside the text.

Many would regard Xu's experiment in this project as an Asian relative of concrete poems, or calligrams, which are contemporary genres of visual art that relies on text well-developed in western countries. In the sketch, the limitations and misalignment of words in the presence of nature are compensated for by the figurative nature of the painting, and the intention of both writing and drawing retreated back into their initial functions [3]. According to Xu himself, his works are not simply games of words that manipulate the concept of art like many modern pieces, but a way for him to penetrate the history of transformation and strengthen the technique of script to go into its original function of characters: recording.

Historian J.Elkins interprets the Chinese word Calligraphy (Shufa) as a part of "normative orthography", which impressively focuses on "shu", meaning "script" or "handwriting" [4]. However, "fa", meaning techniques, dominated the tradition of calligraphy in China for thousands of years, says the artist [2]. It seems to be more intriguing to go back to handwriting itself, to utilize the ability to

observe nature honestly and carefully to create one's own pictographs as Cangjie did thousands of years ago.

The artist's later installation works described the relationship between calligraphy, script, graphic art, and nature in a more matured and visualized way. His 2011 installation work, *The Living Word*, showed a transformation of typefaces of a particular Chinese character meaning "bird" from simplified printing character to traditional handwriting typeface, and then to the inscription on bones 4000 years ago, finally to a horde of real flying birds. This work explicitly indicated a great development of his main theme in the former *Landscape* project. The artist wanted to illustrate his logical chain of backtracking the present text back to its natural elements with the work, from a vehicle of figurative ideas and dense information to a systematic collection of easily recognizable and copied symbols to the reproduction of natural figures to real-world objects themselves. Finally, a vast amount of birds of imagination fly out from the chain of Chinese characters' history. The artist concludes that in the last step, the Chinese became very simple that they did not need to learn to grasp. Texts and symbols returned to the origin point of the relationship with nature, which surpasses the boundaries of languages [2]. To sum up, indeed, Xu Bing is a master in refining the history of Chinese scripts and visualizing them in a highly condensed form. He pioneeringly combined the abstractness of text and the concreteness of graphics and sculptures together to endow strong storytelling abilities to both the textual and visual elements in his works.[5]

### 3. Deconstruction of the Visual System of Chinese Script: Taking Xu Bing and Gu Wenda as Examples

Apart from emphasizing the original use of the script previously discussed, another set of artworks aimed to extremal the mechanism of structures and disciplines of Chinese characters while weakening the signification of language itself. For these artists, deconstructing Chinese characters was a way of artistic practice coated with political complexion.

According to Philosopher M.Foucault, discourse, including all means of building and spreading knowledge, is controlled and defined by groups or individuals seizing power. Hence, people dominated are always defined, evaluated, and constructed without the power of discourse [6]. As the most common and comprehensive vehicle of discourse, texts or words drew pioneering artists' attention without a doubt.

Artist Gu Wenda realized that cultural criticism could not succeed without accessing the level of discourse after 1985 when the Chinese art field underwent a great subversion [7]. He chose to use characters—the visual expression of the nation's language—as a symbol of the state and the cultural context behind it to carry out his practice of subversion and destruction. He was enthusiastic about early practices destroying the accurate structure of regular characters in his early works, for example, *the Mythos of lost dynasties* series. This project includes quantities of intentionally miswritten characters and sentences with designed syntax errors. The artist drew inspiration from big-character posters from the Cultural revolution. Many characters in these posters were intentionally or unconsciously miswritten to emphasize the humiliation of the denounced people. This phenomenon was borrowed by the artist in his artistic practice because he saw that the miswritten words had a mighty power inside them by which they could destroy the convention, protest, and explode harmfully and subversively [8].

Gu tamed the power of the miswritten characters in his works. For the artist, deconstructing the language banteringly by destroying the mechanism of its characters is an effective way to reconstruct the culture of the whole country. An ambiguous but bold rebellion toward the history of the state or even the political circumstance at the moment ran through this project.

If regarding Gu's miswritten characters as an invasion of orthodox writing tradition and the conservative Chinese civilization [9], Xu Bing's other project with a high reputation, *A Book From*

*the Sky*, must be a philosophical practice of nihilism answering the same question that Gu met. In this project, Xu fabricated over 4000 characters by using the sequential orders of strokes he found in the most authoritative dictionary of Chinese characters compiled in the Qing dynasty [2]. When thousands of fake words were displayed as bound books in galleries, it started to offend the audience without a doubt. Unlike the satire and violence in Gu's miswritten characters, Xu's totally made-up characters brought people into a situation of speechlessness. The audience failed to decode every single character in this book and then could not extract any information—no matter it was useless or significant—from this work.

In this work, the artist took the mechanical laws of writing to an extreme and eliminated the basic function—readability—of words. The deconstruction of words might be more complete than Gu in his practice since all potential implications that could be found in texts were deprived in this incomprehensible “book”. A metaphor of a pure structure of power itself without any cultural or literal factors that influence people's sense and judgment was exposed to viewers. Xu's work provided people with guidance to support them develop their contemplation of the Chinese social structure connecting with language and also with discourse.

It is worth noting that the two artists did not limit the deconstruction of the writing system to a single language, their native tongue. Xu Bing applied aesthetic rules and writing techniques of Chinese calligraphy to English script to create a new type of handwriting regulation, by which he inspired the audience to think of the identification and evaluation of cultural differences in his work *Square Word Calligraphy* or *New English Calligraphy*[3]. Gu was more ambitious that in 1993, he started his famous project *United Nations*, in which he reconstructed the structures and arrangements of languages from all over the world, including but not limited to English, Arabic, and Chinese, by creating fake words or letters [10]. However, the foundation concept of their practices did not change. Written characters, or scripts, are the most representative expression of discourse that could be identified in daily life. Challenging the writing system of the language of a culture is a straight and impactful way to access the necessary question about how the social structure had control people through their systematic written cultures.

#### 4. Conclusions

Compared with other cultures, Chinese culture has more ambiguous relationships between its writing characters and pure visual art since Chinese is one of the few pictographs still in use. Hence, the presence of script art in Chinese contemporary art conveys more cultural and visual metaphors. In the works of the two artists discussed, the author describes two methods that artists use when manipulating and exploring the metaphysical meaning of script art. As instances of retreating the character back into graphics, Xu Bing's *Landscript* project and *Living Words* express his contemplation toward the origin of the Chinese language and the boundary between real nature and what words can portray. Gu Wenda's serial works and Xu Bing's practices represented by *A Book From Sky*, however, show a deconstruction of characters, no matter by offending or nullifying.

#### References

- [1] Chen Chiyu.(2020). *The same origin of painting and calligraphy and the observation of images and shapes: important aesthetic categories in the study of Chinese art historical views and methods*. *Art 100*. 2020(03):12-13
- [2] Xu Bing.(2015). *My True Words*. Beijing:CITIC Press
- [3] Liu Yuedi.(2020).*The expression of "calligraphic" in contemporary Chinese art: the example of Xu Bing's artistic evolution*. *Literary and Artistic Controversy*. 2010(02):18
- [4] James Elkins.(1999).*The Domain of Images*.Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- [5] Feng Boyi.(2002).*The continuation and extension of Xu Bing's text*. *Fine Art Observation*.2002[01]:22
- [6] Peng Peng.(2021). *Text, writing and image: On the three forms of Xu Bing's creation*. *Art Review*. 2021(11):103

- [7] OCT Contemporary Art Center, He Xiangning Art Museum. (2010). *Ink alchemy: Gu Wenda's experimental Ink Paintings* . Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing House.
- [8] Wang Minan.(2016). *The Use and Abuse of Words in Art: On the Art of Chinese Characters in the New Wave of the Eighth Five-Year Plan* . Literature and Art Research. 2016(05):111
- [9] (2014). *Art Things 30 Years*. Hongkong: Hanart TZ Gallery. 2014:42
- [10] Zhao Bin.(2021). *Word set fever: the presence of words in Chinese contemporary art*. Journal of Beijing Film Academy. 2021(05):68