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The Displacement of Language into the Realm of Visual Art

Perceived via the sense of sight, written language and images in various forms have long been married within the field of visual art. However, text-based art was often contested in the West during the 1960s, one of the most tumultuous decades in history and one marked by an increasing demand for individual freedom and deviation from accepted norms. Dissatisfied with the direction of society and its government policies, artists channelled their ideas to the audience in myriad ways, among which a pivotal one was making artwork incorporating written language, creating a coded system of information and meaning. On the other hand, the traditional view at the time toward art museum or gallery visitor behaviour was that they were more used to appreciating physical and tangible objects, asserting that art is to be seen and not read. Therefore, motivated by the desire to question the process of audience engagement between seeing and reading in the art world, the conceptual art[1] trailblazers of the period—among them Lawrence Weiner, who places text on the walls and windows of galleries and public spaces; Joseph Kosuth, who makes neon texts mounted on gallery walls; and Barbara Kruger, an artist known for montaging feminist slogans over found images—have reconfigured the role of language and its semantic meaning in art by exploring every conceivable means in developing their work. Employing words and sentences as found objects from the burgeoning sea of print and graphic art, many artists re-appropriated a breadth of text into collages with images or even physical objects. Words and images were transformed into a total intermedial experience.

Some art historians have argued that it was the development of language-centred theories in the humanities[2] that affected the linguistic turn in visual art in the 1960s, one of the most significant decades in the development of contemporary art. But this movement to incorporate language into visual art did not stop in the 1960s; it remains influential today. Many artists continue to explore the boundaries of using language as a medium and are experimenting with cross-disciplinary technologies in the making of large-scale installations; or, rather, language can be added to or torn apart and has been transformed into an object as a core element in visual art. Furthermore, other than alphabetical languages, Chinese artists also have incorporated Chinese characters, introducing a pictorial or ideographic written language into their works. Integrating Chinese characters into

art creation is not a groundbreaking practice as Chinese artists have been obsessed with writing for centuries—an interest rooted in particular in the tradition of a refined Chinese literati culture devoted to the power of words, signifying a cultivated intelligence and authority. Without a phonetic system, learning to read and write Chinese characters requires a laborious process because each character is an abstract diagram. Artist Xu Bing once pointed out that writing a Chinese character is similar to a small painting, as the semantic meaning and aesthetic significance both are valued and contained in the Chinese characters.[3] Meanwhile, writing, especially the brush-written calligraphy, is more than a means of communication; it is a form of artistic expression embodied the artist's mind. However, instead of focusing on the literati tradition of calligraphic writing or ink painting, this essay queries the essence of artworks that are engaged with characters in a contemporary context that is divorced from the traditional role of denoting indexical meanings and challenges the time-honoured power of words and the authority behind them.

The Hypergraphic Language Constructs a Form of Thinking

Language is the primary tool of communication for human beings; it is where meaning resides in order to articulate ideas and embody abstractions. This is the major drive for many artists who incorporate language, either spoken or written, into their art making process. More than provoking an aesthetic appreciation among audiences, some language-based artworks also serve as declarative statements that trigger reactionary thoughts and actions in relation to sociopolitical issues. Letters and characters, phrases and sentences take on a concrete visual presence, which becomes important as a way of expanding or subverting the signified meanings.

For example, *2009–05–02* (2009), by self-taught artist Gu Dexin, metaphorically serves as an association of meanings and empowers the audience to become a collaborator in the providing fresh interpretations. Displayed in his solo exhibition organized by Galleria Continua, Beijing (May 2 to September 6, 2009), this site-specific work was Gu Dexin's last artwork before he resigned from the art industry. As a frieze encircling the upper story of the lofty Galleria Continua space, a set of twenty-five wooden panels were overlaid in red paint and the Song typeface[4] that is typically employed for propaganda slogans in China,[5] with the following eleven unpunctuated sentences: WE HAVE KILLED PEOPLE WE HAVE KILLED MEN WE HAVE KILLED WOMEN WE HAVE KILLED ELDERS WE HAVE KILLED CHILDREN WE HAVE EATEN PEOPLE WE HAVE EATEN HUMAN HEARTS WE HAVE EATEN HUMAN BRAINS WE HAVE HIT PEOPLE WE HAVE BEATEN PEOPLE TO BLIND WE HAVE SMASHED PEOPLE'S FACES.[6] High above these panels of violent sentences, television screens were set in the clerestories of the gallery broadcasting the same repetitive video loops of drifting white clouds against the blue skies, as though preceding the human sense of time. At the centre of the

Gu Dexin, *2009–05–02*, 2009, five wood panels and red paint, 200 x 155 cm each, exhibition view at GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing. Photo: Oak Taylor-Smith. © Gu Dexin. Courtesy of the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing.

gallery's third floor, the sentence WE CAN ASCEND TO HEAVEN[7] was written twice in red lacquer on a concrete plinth. Consisting only of these three components, the exhibition as a total work of art reflected Gu Dexin's critique of society. Moreover, these spell-like repeating sentences created an association for the audience to the masterpiece *A Madman's Diary*, written by the modern Chinese writer Lu Xun in the early 1910s, which was an attack on the oppressive feudalistic society of China at the time.

2009-05-02 doesn't subvert the common practice of reading text in sequential order. On the contrary, by inviting audiences to slow down their viewing experience, the power of this work lies in the plain text introducing fact without further interpretation. Through reading the repeated pronoun "WE," the audience increases its level of self-consciousness. Gu Dexin directly addressed the audience in pondering the sociopolitical implications of this work, that everyone is somehow implicated in or liable for social atrocities and cruelty. The simple graphic design elements of blood red lacquer and rigid Song typeface are visual presences, but they are also the organic parts of carriers of meaning. Resituated on the wall of the gallery, the propaganda style of text spoke for the unresolved tension of what is uttered. On the other hand, contrasting with the serenity produced by the moving images, the gripping text triggered profound introspection and redemption in an extremely calm way. In this work, the sociopolitical commentaries conveyed through language are self-evident.

Focusing on the systems that circulate within texts, some artists believe the meanings of language exist even before any interpretation. Hong Kong

Gu Dexin, *2009–05–02*, 2009, five wood panels and red paint, 200 x 155 cm each, exhibition view at GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing. Photo: Oak Taylor-Smith. © Gu Dexin. Courtesy of the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing.

artist Tsang Kin-Wah is one of them. His artistic practice always involves manipulating the co-existence of sourced and self-authored text—in his case, shaping slang or profane language into floral patterns to create wallpaper that covers the exhibition spaces as well as rendering it into immersive video installations. Since 2003, Tsang Kin-Wah has applied these floral pattern and text wallpapers in exhibitions at various art spaces, such as *Chinese! It's Chinese ... Chinees! Eikel Chinees ...* (2005) at Temporary Art Center, the Netherlands, *You Are Extremely Terrified Of Them But You Are Definitely Not A Racist* (2012) at Plymouth Arts Centre, Plymouth, and *Either/Or* (2017) at Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver.

Most of the floral patterns are repetitious and meticulously illustrated in capital bold sans-serif typeface by Tsang Kin-Wah in a manner that recalls the English wallpaper design master William Morris. However, upon closer inspection, the luxuriantly naturalistic patterns are in striking contrast with the obscenities present in Tsang Kin-Wah's texts, both in Chinese and English—such as "CONQUE&PI$$ONTHEFUCKINGWEST," "F*CKINGMATERIALISTICCUNTS," and "港燦idiots"—that unleash a feeling of outrage to unjust prejudices. This also demonstrates the time-release effect that Tsang Kin-Wah has strategized to create an experience in which the audience can reflect upon the intrinsic tension between appearance and content. The unbroken and compact arrangement of sentences, mixed with symbols and signs, subverts a too-quick decoding of the entire text and increases our appreciation of the visual qualities within the composition. Responding to the titles of Tsang Kin-Wah's works, for example, *You Are Extremely Terrified Of Them But You Are Definitely Not A*

Racist (2012), one arrives at a new level of interpretation, as the sentence refers to the loaded reality of racism he experienced when he was studying in London. As a whole, snaking throughout different spaces in various cities, these text-based patterns probe into social issues that exist in our world and are waiting to be discovered and read.

Starting in 2009, Tsang Kin-Wah shifted the form of his work by creating immersive video installations using computer technology and

Top: Gu Dexin, *2009–05–02*, 2009, five wood panels and red paint, 200 x 155 cm each, exhibition view at GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing. Photo: Oak Taylor-Smith. © Gu Dexin. Courtesy of the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing.

Bottom: Gu Dexin, *2009–05–02*, 2009, video, 3 mins., exhibition view at GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing. Photo: Oak Taylor-Smith. © Gu Dexin. Courtesy of the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, Beijing.

experimenting with text flowing in both virtual and physical spaces. Compared to the previous work he made using text only, these video installations are diverse in their hybrid form of multimedia interaction. I see this as a change of focus from addressing external social issues to inner representation of metaphysical questions of human life.

Tsang Kin-Wah, *In The End Is The Word* (detail), 2016, six-channel video, 10 mins., 10 secs. © Tsang Kin-Wah. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.

Left: Tsang Kin-Wah, *In The End Is The Word*, 2016, six-channel video, 10 mins., 10 secs., installation view in exhibition *Tales of Our Time*. © Tsang Kin-Wah. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.

Right: Tsang Kin-Wah, *In The End Is The Word*, 2016, six-channel video, 10 mins., 10 secs., installation view in exhibition *Tales of Our Time*. © Tsang Kin-Wah. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.

Next page: Tsang Kin-Wah, *In The End Is The Word*, 2016, six-channel video, 10 mins., 10 secs., installation view in exhibition *Tales of Our Time*. © Tsang Kin-Wah. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.

In 2016, Tsang Kin-Wah was commissioned to create a multi-channel immersive video installation, *In the End Is the Word*, for the exhibition *Tales of Our Time* at the Guggenheim, New York (November 4, 2016 to March 10, 2017). Displayed in a room with painted black walls, a video projection consisted of found video clips about the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands dispute[8] accompanied by collaged images, animated texts, and ambient sound. Beginning with the images of the beautiful seascape near the islands, ships carrying activists approach the islands in an assertion of sovereignty, while coast guard vessels are sent by the Japanese government to block them. More ships and vessels from various political entities and military agencies enter the scenario and fall into sea battles. When things escalate to gunfire and bomb attacks, all of a sudden, continuous waves of text stream[9] from

Tsang Kin-Wah, *In The End Is The Word*, 2016, six-channel video, 10 mins., 10 secs., installation view in exhibition *Tales of Our Time*. © Tsang Kin-Wah. Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.

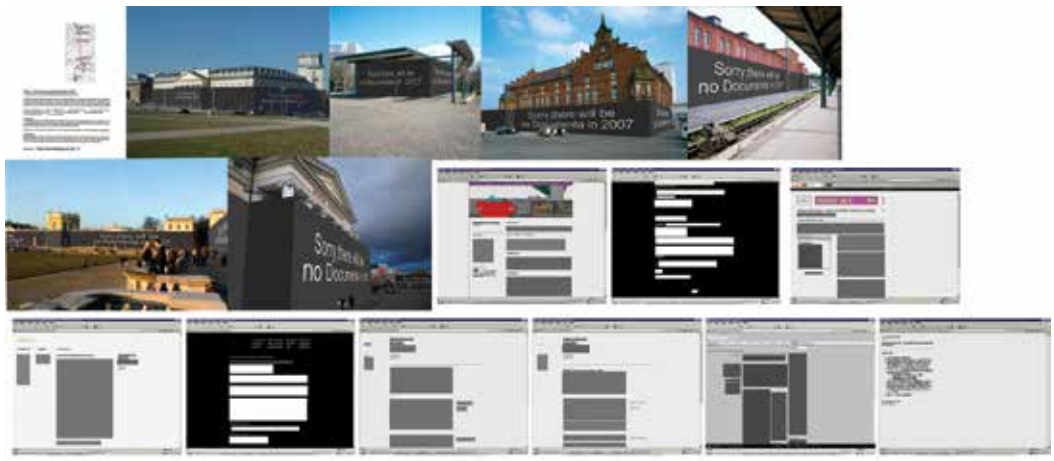
the horizon of the sea to wash over the screen and spread across the floor, wiping clear the dispute, like a tornado. The projection ends in a scene in which the sea returns to tranquillity, with a whale rolling in its waters. In this engaging work, it is easy to read the texts when a few of them appear at the beginning. As increasingly dense texts start to stream over the screen and along the floor, the letters lose their distinctiveness and eventually become illegible. This results in a gradual process of suspending semantic meaning, transforming text from the verbal to the visual, from a meaning carrier to a visual element. As the title of the work indicates, Tsang Kin-Wah questions the authority of written text in building historical narratives. Written text is often thought to be a reliable source of truth. In an interview,[10] Tsang Kin-Wah expressed concern that "once you manipulate the text, the history is around your fingers." Ironically, in the last few moments of the video, even though the written words still exist, the texts are so dense that they become an overexposed image and thus lose their specific meaning.

Using hypergraphic language, the works of Gu Dexin and Tsang Kin-Wah combine, in different ways, textual content and visual forms into an integrated system. Gu Dexin's work is clearly related to the convention of blunt, catchy, and declarative propaganda aesthetics. He directly emulated the propaganda typographic style familiar to most Chinese audiences in an attempt to create a form of visual thinking for his audience toward the critical issue of how visual presentation of propaganda language has already shaped our thoughts and minds. Tsang Kin-Wah, on the other hand, appropriates the patterns of wallpaper in his practice, not to pay homage to the appreciation of high art but to present nonsensical and vague language through decorative visual gestures in order to rhetorically

demonstrate reflection on how we appreciate beauty while, at the same time, worshipping the power of words.

When Words Take Physical Forms

For some artists, language is a more effective means of expression than images in evoking a direct emotional response from audiences, mainly because other than articulating ideas, language can embody abstractions, providing more cognitive content. Moreover, when words become materialized, the bond between word and idea can be challenging for the audience. Detouring through a process of being read and seen, materialized language can create ambiguous dimensions when imagining the tangible and intangible, the known and unknown.



Shi Yong, *Sorry, There Will Be No Documenta in 2007*, 2006, online project. © Shi Yong. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Shi Yong, a prominent figure in contemporary Chinese art, once worked in the advertising industry. This experience has drawn his interest toward the polysemy and ambiguity of language, and the role of language is essential within some of his works, such as *Sorry, There Will Be No Documenta in 2007* (2006) and *Nothing Is Impossible* (2010). The former work was a virtual project that responded to the mania among Chinese artists for worldwide recognition by being selected for documenta. In the latter work, Shi Yong reappropriated the commercial slogan, "Impossible is nothing," of a sportswear marketing campaign that itself had appropriated this famous quote by Muhammad Ali, and turned it into an installation of Chinese character sculptures fabricated in iron. Standing side by side, these character sculptures gradually decrease in size, like a boat sinking into the sea. This tragic ending and the inspiring spirit this short sentence expresses are in sharp contrast to each other. Both of these works mark Shi Yong's poignant comment on the abundant confidence of the contemporary Chinese art scene in the early 2000s.

In 2016, Shi Yong's work *A Bunch of Happy Fantasies* was presented in his solo exhibition organized by ShangART S-Space, Beijing. This work is an installation recreating a Chinese poem titled *A Rose Made from Water*, written by Shi Yong's friend who was under the influence of opium. The handwritten

Shi Yong, *Sorry, There Will Be No Documenta in 2007*, 2006, colour chromogenic print, 95 x 71 cm. © Shi Yong. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

characters of the stanzas have been materialized from mumbling speech into indecipherable orange neon signs, bristling inversely on the red floor and hanging upside-down in the space, line by line. When the signs are lit up, the glowing curves erupt the space into a sea of orange flames, and the chromatic and luminous visuality of the signs blur the distinction between seeing and reading. With the lines reading "running in the wind," "the swaying island," "agilawood detained," and "the fragrant body,"[11] Shi Yong has created an "installation of words"[12] by materializing Chinese characters from the semantic to the visual, from the readable to the ideographic, in order to achieve the false sense visual pleasure. The subtle nuances of words that can be captured by turning the pages of a book are replaced by an unspeakable illusion of fantasy in the form of neon signs, the most evocative material in stimulating urban aesthetics upon the nightscape of modern cities. Moreover, this visually appealing inscription places the audience outside of its meaning by suspending the semantic function of the words, which now have been rendered into objects in a physical space. It is not the first time that Shi Yong has intentionally created a gap between the text and audiences. In his previous work *Let All Potential Be Internally Resolved Using Beautiful Form* (2015), a line of Chinese text on abstract forms made from building materials meticulously covered by a thick metal strip, with the legs of the characters remaining visible. Rather than presenting indecipherable characters through partial obliteration, Shi Yong made the text fully apparent this time. However, before the audiences apprehend the "happiness" suggested by the title, the hallucination of visual fantasy already manipulates their perceptual experience in daily life, a phenomenon of urban modernization and consumerism that Shi Yong witnessed in the first decade of the 2000s. The inverted neon Chinese characters also points out the fact that the effort we make to escape from reality might be proven futile, as a distorted reality

Top: Shi Yong, *A Bunch of Happy Fantasies*, 2009, neon light installation. © Shi Yong. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Bottom: Shi Yong, *A Bunch of Happy Fantasies*, 2009, neon light installation. © Shi Yong. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

has ensnared us into the delusion of keeping happiness under our control. Leading us to explore the social emotions of Chinese people, this particular work by Shi Yong is a synesthetic object that has the potential to change the way we comprehend language.

In the process of materializing language into objects, Shi Yong releases the intriguing connection of written language with semantic meanings and visual reading. Neon is a remarkable manmade medium that suspends daylight and darkness and confuses the distinction between reading and seeing. Shi Yong's neon installation of language has taken material form

Shi Yong, *Let All Potential Be Internally Resolved Using Beautiful Form*, 2015, exhibition view at Madeln Gallery, Shanghai. © Shi Yong. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

for an immaterial handwritten poetry that even further exposes the gap between reading and seeing, as these signs are indecipherable. When the visuality and materiality drive the language away from meaning, it emancipates the words from meaning and sets them against the mythology of the medium itself.

When Language Is Performed for Ephemerality

Written language has been used for centuries to serve the purpose of recording and transmitting ideas for a future human civilization, and, as I have demonstrated, the link between language and image in the visual arts is inextricable. Two artists, Charwei Tsai and Song Dong, especially emphasize the fact that ephemerality is an unavoidable truth in all kinds of lives, let alone words and art. The objects used in their art making are for the most part themselves ephemeral. And ephemerality and longevity somehow pinpoint one key element with contemporary art—time.

Deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy, Taiwan artist Charwei Tsai has created her signature series of works that inscribe Buddhist mantras onto ephemeral and organic objects such as lotus leaves, flowers, tofu, mushrooms, and the skin of frogs. Written from different directions, left to right, up to down, and vice versa, the Chinese mantras are composed of around two hundred characters each and are legible and merge well with their application upon a multitude of living surfaces. The first piece in this text-based series of works is *Iris Mantra* (2005). The text she wrote on the petals of an iris is one of the best known Buddhist mantras, the *Heart Sutra*,[13] which refers to the Buddhist notion of the interdependence of impermanence and continuity between individuals and the universe. When the flower with its inscription inevitably falls into decay, it echos the message delivered by the *Heart Sutra* by following the passage of time and its natural cycles, through which language not only enriches the natural texture employed within the work, but it also become recontextualized.

Charwei Tsai, *Iris Mantra*, 2005, photograph. © Charwei Tsai. Courtesy of the artist.

Charwei Tsai, *Sea Mantra*, 2009, commissioned by Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, Australia. © Charwei Tsai. Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation.

Opposed to the idea of longevity that is a concern of many artists who wish to leave their art as a legacy, temporality always remains at the centre in her artistic practice. Later on, she created more works with the sutra by employing a range of multimedia approaches. In 2009, commissioned by the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, Australia, Charwei Tsai developed the work *Sea Mantra* as a part of the series of site-specific works by inscribing the *Heart Sutra* onto a mirror as a "moving canvas" that she placed in the sea, thus reflecting wave movement that is subjected to the law of time. If her work with organic materials is about the process of change, writing on the mirror and placing it in nature is a direct engagement with our surroundings. Symbolizing the fundamental concept of emptiness in Buddhist philosophy, the mirror points to the idea that nothing exists independently and permanently in the world, and everything is the result of infinite causes and conditions. In Charwei Tsai's work, the mirror captures the ephemerality of nature as reflections, wherein the text of *Heart Mantra* reverberates in the air. Charwei Tsai also started to document the process of the objects and her writing mutating and transforming as a performance through photographs and time-lapse video, which places the act and the writing together into a scripted object that stands on its own. Rather than having a literal ephemera practice, Charwei Tsai conceived her works in layers, from a performance of writing on something material and tangible, to a site-specific installation, and then to video and photographs.

At the 2016 Sydney Biennale, she expanded the process of making art as objects of meditation into a collaborative social practice by inviting a group of Taiwan-based Tibetan Buddhist lamas to inscribe the *Hundred Syllable Mantra* onto Taiwanese-made incense spirals, which was her largest installation work to date, *Spiral Incense—Hundred Syllable Mantra*, which hung from the ceiling to the ground. Enacting the ritual of spiritual purification from this world to the other, the scripted incense was lit the whole day during the exhibition period, and the burnt ashes were piled over the ground. The gradual process of the physical form of the sacred text becoming extinguished into ashes and smoke reiterated the transience that is at the heart of Buddhist philosophy—encouraging contemplation

Top: Charwei Tsai, *Spiral Incense—Hundred Syllable Mantra*, 2016, spiral shaped incense with herbs, installation view at 20th Sydney Biennale. Photo: Ben Symons. © Charwei Tsai. Courtesy of the artist and TKG+, Taipei.

Bottom: Charwei Tsai, *Spiral Incense—Hundred Syllable Mantra*, 2016, spiral shaped incense with herbs, installation view at 20th Sydney Biennale. Photo: Ben Symons. © Charwei Tsai. Courtesy of the artist and TKG+, Taipei.

on the human state and evoking spiritual healing. As a malleable material, the language in Charwei Tsai's work is no longer a vessel of statements or a preservation of meanings but a visible form that proves the change of time.

Song Dong, *Water Diary*, 1995, performance. © Song Dong. Courtesy of the artist.

Another artist who also engages with language and ephemeral material is Beijing-based avant-garde performance artist Song Dong. While Charwei Tsai concentrates on the decay of objects with scripted language, Song Dong's work presents the rapid evaporation of language on the surface of relatively permanent objects. Inspired by everyday existence, Song Dong began to employ stones and water in his practice in the 1990s. In *Water Diary* (1995), an ephemeral work that exists only as a photographic record, he wrote his diary with brush and water onto stones at home each night before going to bed. Once the words were written, they disappeared almost immediately with no traces left behind. Replicating texts is the traditional calligraphic training to model oneself after the master and attain proficiency. Writing calligraphy in water is a common practice for many Chinese kids from Song Dong's generation until now as it saves money on ink and paper by tracing over the writing multiple times. This also lives in Song Dong's childhood memory when his father taught him to use his own finger to write with the water on the stone. From Song Dong's perspective of dialectic thinking, the formless yet tangible water is a source of life and destruction.[14] To some extent, keeping a diary is an extremely personal activity of recollection, yet it is not individual memory that matters, not even the content of the words he has written. During the process of appearance and disappearance, the short-lived water trace of characters has challenged the incontrovertibly sublime power of written words that turn powerful ideas into objects of conscious reflection that affect human behaviour. When the written words in water get dry, the stone returns to its natural status as though nothing has happened. The temporality of language and ephemerality of the water altogether conceal the idea of emptiness in Daoism—it is opposed to fullness and exhibits

Left and right: Song Dong, *Writing Time With Water*, 1995–2002, performance in New York. © Song Dong. Courtesy of the artist.

openness to everything—and this practice has gradually become an integral part of Song Dong's life.

In the same year of 1995, Song Dong expanded the repetetive action of keeping a diary with water into an international public performance work, *Writing Time With Water* (1995–2002), that took place on the concrete surfaces of streets in different cities across the world, including Beijing, Tokyo, Hong Kong, London, Sydney, and others. In 2005, Song Dong performed another one-hour piece in front of Times Square, New York. Starting at 12 p.m., Broadway was bustling with people. Checking the time on his watch, Song Dong employed a large brush to inscribe the time of the event on the hot pavement in hours, minutes, and seconds. In contrast to his water diary, in which he used Chinese characters, Song Dong wrote down digits as the measure of time in this series of performances—digits that also only lasted for a few seconds before evaporating into the air. Although the number of digits and the duration of performance is finite, the essence of time it attempted to capture is infinite. Through the act of performing writing, Song Dong transformed a self-cultivated meditation toward his public engagement, referring to a fleeting moment that is shared between the flows of people on the street and himself.

Characters or digits in water—present and absent, remembered yet forgotten—are both ephemeral and interpret emptiness in an alternative way that make sense of a common moment in time. More importantly, the physicality of matter and thought that is encapsulated in language is erased in the inescapable flow of degradation. Charwei Tsai writes on an ephemeral object, while Song Dong writes with an ephemeral material. In their work, the temporality and ephemerality of language lead to an ongoing and open-ended process of exploration in a system of language in which words, digits, and the act of writing are all made material.

In the larger context of cultural and information exchange, written language has fabricated an immersive visual landscape within contemporary life, and the boundaries between words and images have pointedly dissolved. Like sounds, images, and the combinations of them, written language is also socially conditioned. With the emergence of digital media, artists today have even more diverse practices that address the relationship between language and art from those in the 1960s. Interactivity lies at the core of many works created in the 2000s, and artists are well aware that the value of incorporating language in their work does not come only from manipulating text fragments, but words can function with audio, video, and other media within a complex and coherent environment. Thus, these kinds of total works of art fundamentally expand customary understandings of reading and seeing in the digital era.

Notes

1. In the late 1960s, a group of English conceptual artists, Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, and Mel Ramsden, founded the pioneering art group Art & Language to question mainstream art practices. They considered language the most suitable means to expose the ideologies of art under its visual surface.
2. Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Words and Images in Modern Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 139.
3. Britta Erickson, Maya Kovskaya, and Craig Yee, *Xu Bing: Language and Nature* (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2018),135.
4. With its broad vertical strokes contrasted with flat horizontal strokes, Song typeface, or *song ti*, is a widely used style of type in print for Chinese scripts that follows the standard form of national characters in China. However, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is known as Ming typeface, or *ming ti*, which refers to the real dynasty that gave birth to it.
5. Another famous Chinese artist of this generation who plays with propaganda aesthetics is Wu Shanzhuan. His pivotal work *Red Humor International*, created in 1986, is an installation of text, including political jingoism, Buddist scripture, and propaganda slogans.
6. This translation is provided by the author. The original Chinese sentences showed in the exhibition are 我們殺過人我們殺過男人我們殺過女人我們殺過老人我們殺過孩子我們吃過人我們吃過人心我們吃過人腦我們打過人我們打瞎過人我們打爛過人臉.
7. This translation is provided by the author. The original Chinese sentence is 我們能上天堂.
8. This territory dispute is around the archipelago of a group of uninhabited islands, known as the Diaoyu Islands in China and Senkaku Islands in Japan. The geography limits of islands between Japan and China were not defined clearly in the treaty of First Sino-Japanese war in 1895. Since then, Japan controlled the archipelago until the 1970s, when the China and Taiwan goverments started to claim sovereignty over the islands. In 1996, the Hong Kong activist David Chan tried to plant a Chinese flag on the islands to claim sovereignty, but he drowned when he swam to one of the islands. Massive public protests in Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan heightened the dispute, while guard vessals from goverments were sent to the sea.
9. The text can be found on the artist's website: http://www.tsangkinwah.com/writing-in-the-end-is-the-word/.
10. Hong Kiu, "The Anxiety of Marginal Identity," *Mingpao Weekly*, December 14, 2016, https://bkb.mpweekly.com/cu0002/20161214-16452/.
11. This translation is provided by the author. The Chinese title of the poem is《水做的玫瑰》and the original sentences showed in the exhibition are 風聲中奔跑、禁錮的沉香、飄搖的島、充滿暗香的身體.
12. Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
13. The *Heart Sutra* is one of the most popular scriptures in Mahayana Buddhism, which is highly respected in Tibetan Buddhism. There are two versions of the *Heart Sutra*, a long text and a short one. The Chinese edition of the short text was translated by Xuanzang, with around 260 Chinese characters.
14. Song Dong, artist's statement on *Water Diary*, 1995, in Alexandra Munroe, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World,* exhibition catalogue (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017),189.