

Semiotic Warfare

A Semiotic Analysis

the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979 - 1989

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3.2.3 GU WENDA, WU SHANZHUAN, XU BING: DECONSTRUCTION OF THE CHINESE SCRIPT

Gu Wenda, *Wisdom Comes from Tranquility* (*Jing ze sheng ling*), 1985/86, mixed media installation. (fig. 79)

Wu Shanzhuan, *Red Humor - Red Characters* (*Hongse youmo - chi zi*), 1987, mixed media installation. (fig. 83)

Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu*), 1987/88, woodblock print, mixed media installation. (figs. 88-91)



Fig. 79 Gu Wenda 穀文達, *Wisdom Comes from Tranquility* (*Jing ze sheng ling* 靜則生靈), 1985/86, installation, mixed media, ink painting, calligraphy, tapestry, collection of the China Academy of Fine Arts. Photograph courtesy Gu Wenda.



Fig. 83 Wu Shanzhuan 吳山專, *Red Humor - Red Characters* (*Hongse youmo - chi zi* 紅色幽默——赤字), 1986, mixed media installation. Photograph courtesy Wu Shanzhuan.



Fig. 88 Xu Bing 徐冰, *A Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu* 天書), installation, 1988, National Gallery, Beijing. Photograph courtesy Xu Bing.

Much has been written on that tendency of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s that is concerned with the deconstruction of the Chinese script. As part of the mid-1980s conceptual trend, it developed in reaction to formalist and expressive trends and - like Huang Yongping's *Roulette Series* and *Non-Expressive Painting*, or Wang Guangyi's cultural revisions - aimed at overcoming cultural schemata and conventions, including those of modern consciousness and Western modernity. Typically, these works focus on the Chinese script as the aesthetic and conceptual element constituting the work of art. The employment of an overall aesthetic impression is as important as the deconstructive procedure and the agitative gesture. Here I shall discuss three representative works by three different artists to exemplify these different facets of the trend: Gu Wenda's *Wisdom Comes from Tranquility* (*Jing ze sheng ling*, 1985/86, fig. 79), Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor - Red Characters* (*Hongse youmo - chi zi*, 1987, fig. 83), and Xu Bing's *"Book from the Sky"* (*Tianshu*, 1987/88, figs. 88-89). Chinese art critics called this trend "critique of the Chinese script"¹ or "anti-writing".² For them it constituted an interesting attempt to propose a contemporary art that simultaneously displayed national character and the assimilation of concepts of Western modernity and post-modernity, and thus could dare to participate in international cultural dialog on an equal footing.³ Western art critics, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with the exotic combination of the apocryphal appearance of Chinese writing, epitome of the Chinese culture as such, with the formal vocabulary of contemporary Western art.⁴ The title of Fei Dawei's article "Challenging Modernity. An Interview with the Painter Gu Wenda" (*"Xiang xiandai pai tiaozhan. Fang huajia Gu Wenda"*), published in *Art* in July 1986, expresses the main concern of the anti-modern consciousness trend within the '85 Movement.⁵ In this article Gu Wenda, who since the early 1980s had experimented with the introduction of such elements of Western modernity as surrealism into the field of Chinese ink painting, mentions the overcoming of tradition, including Chinese and Western traditions, as the main task of a contemporary artist, referring to Duchamp as the gravedigger of modern art.⁶ In this same article Gu Wenda states the following: "From the exhibition *New Works of Chinese Ink Painting* in Hubei on (...) [November 1985], I felt that many artists already had become captives of Western modernity. I really want to change. Furthermore, I have a strong rebellious mentality. I do not want to be a follower of trends. As soon as a trend emerges, I keep away. Maybe this is a kind of antidominant culture attitude."⁷ This kind of attitude was shared by some of the most progressive artists of the 1980s avant-garde. Many of them, including Huang Yongping (discussed in chapter 3.2.1), Wang Guangyi (discussed in chapter 3.2.2) and Wu Shanzhuan were graduates of the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. Xu Bing, who graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, shared this position.

Again, along with the reception of Chinese thought including Chan and the Yin Yang school, and Western philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Popper (namely, his theory of falsification), it is Gombrich's concept of schema and correction that plays an important role in the artistic approach of those artists who



Fig. 80 Gu Wenda 假文通, *Speechless 1*, 1985, performance, *Pseudo Character Series*, China Academy of Fine Arts. Photograph courtesy Gu Wenda.

graduated from the China Academy of Fine Arts. These works therefore should not be considered a mere critique of the Chinese writing, but rather an attempted correction or re-reading of this epitome of the Chinese culture, and thus a re-reading of Chinese culture as such. Furthermore, they are the artists' proposed means of overcoming Western "transplants of avant-gardism" and substituting instead "visual idioms derived from China's own traditions".⁸ The artists wittily propose the Chinese writing, representing the essence and particularity of Chinese culture, as the most powerful item in the discussion about the future direction of contemporary Chinese culture. They thereby emphasize different aspects of the function of writing in the Chinese tradition. While Gu Wenda emphasizes the spiritual dimension of writing and its literati tradition, Wu Shanzhuan focuses on the visual impact of writing and its social function. Xu Bing approaches Chinese writing as a meaning system and a canon of cultural legacy.

CHARACTERS AS AESTHETIC SYSTEM, NON-EXPRESSIVE CHARACTERS

Already in the early 1980s Gu Wenda was experimenting with Chinese ink painting. He combined schemata (*tushi*) of traditional Chinese landscape painting with stylistic elements of Western trends, such as surrealism. In these often huge ink paintings, for example *Taiji* (*Taiji tu*, 1983, 140 x 700cm), *Horrors of War* (*Zhanzheng de kongju*, 1983, 180 x 580 cm) or *History of Civilization* (*Wenming shi*, 1985) Gu employed the ink and wash effects typical of traditional Chinese painting to create a surreal space in which cultural symbols - a cross, stone steles, or Chinese characters - drift across the picture space, creating a somehow ominous and spiritual atmosphere. These paintings, like *Rational Painting*, represent different historical, philosophical and scientific concepts, and thus were called "scholarly painting" (*xuezhe hua*).⁹ Washes and splashed ink were to create the impression of a kind of flowing energy, thus alluding to the traditional Chinese concept of *qi* (energy). These paintings therefore were also called "universal current" (*Yuzhouliu*).¹⁰ For Gu this medley of decontextualized visual elements and symbols conveyed the concept of the coexistence of different cultural spheres, an inner and an outer one, the outer delimiting the inner one - contemporary

Chinese culture representing the inner and Western culture representing the outer one. Furthermore, it stands for the process of the creation of schemata, in which a new choice always negates the former choice but also contains the former choice.¹¹ Gu here is inspired by Karl Popper's method of falsification. His concept of "simple artistic schemata that represent complicated cultural concepts" (*danchun de yishu tushi yu fuza de guannian*) is inspired by Popper, too. According to Gu a concept is expressed through the elimination of the same

concept. This approach is very evident in his scholarly painting, a term that had been coined in relation to the notion "literati painting" (*wenren hua*). The original connotation of the cultural schema has been replaced by a new concept.

From 1985 on the employment of Chinese calligraphy and Chinese characters in Gu's works became more prevalent. His experimental article in *Art Trends* (*Meishu sichao*), "Non-Expressive Characters" (*"Fei chenshu de wenzi"*),¹² paralleling Huang Yongping's "Non-Expressive Painting" (*"Fei biaoda huihua"*), which had been published in the same journal three issues earlier, attempts to eliminate the logical coherence of text and context constituting the meaning of the individual characters/ words, through false punctuation and regrouping of characters or the misspelling of characters. This concept is transcribed in works such as his performances *Speechless 1* and *Speechless 2* (both 1985; fig. 80) or in his painting *Shall we really Comment on the Character "Jing" Written by Three Men and Two Women?* (*Nandao women piyue san nan er nü suo xie de jing zi ma*, 1985). *Speechless 1* consists of an installation of Gu Wenda's paintings, including his *Pseudo-Characters Series* (1984), in which the artist performs a kind of dance. The characters and visual elements represented in the paintings thus become a mere background for the artist's performance. They are emptied of their meaning, thus representing nothing but an aesthetic system conveying solemn and majestic atmosphere. As Gu puts it: "Artistic schemata are the schematized outer appearance of human spirit."¹³ And further: "Linguistic signs are probably a kind of special aesthetic process."¹⁴ On the one hand, to consider the Chinese script as an aesthetic system equates it with the Chinese culture as such. On the other hand, the reduction of the Chinese ideograms to an aesthetic form implies the separation of form and meaning. The separation of form and meaning, the separation of signifier and signified, and thus the depletion of the characters' prospect of meaning, defines them as primary agents in the constitution of meaning systems and institutional systems. Script has a central position within Chinese culture and tradition. As an aesthetic system the Chinese script, particularly calligraphy, was



Fig. 81 Gu Wenda 戴文達, *Shes & Hes* (Ta he ta 她和他), 1986/ 87, installation, mixed media, calligraphy, tapestry, 300 x 600 x 80 cm, collection of China Academy of Fine Arts. Photograph courtesy Gu Wenda.



Fig. 82 Gu Wenda 假文造, *Fake Characters in Print Script*, 1986, splashed ink on Xuan-paper, 270 x 720 cm, collection of Guo Zhen. Photograph courtesy Gu Wenda.

associated with the Chinese educated elite and the ruling class. Gu Wenda emphasizes this aspect as part of his strategy of proposing "visual idioms derived from China's own traditions" as an autonomous system; an autonomous system out of which new answers for the development of a contemporary Chinese culture can be developed.

superimposed over a background of Chinese landscape painting elements. Ink washes create a solemn atmosphere. Both landscape elements and solemn atmosphere generate the context for the superimposed characters. However, the characters "*jing ze sheng ling*" (*Wisdom Comes from Tranquility*), originally connoting this kind of solemn, spiritual atmosphere, are partly misspelled and distorted - strokes are omitted, the characters are crossed out in red, or surrounded with red circles. Both the misspelling and the red crosses and circles create a distance between the characters and their connotations. The original coherence between background, or context, and meaning is annihilated. Thus the signifier loses the signified. This kind of detaching script from its cultural context is also evident in the artists' experimentation with different script styles and types. With the misspelled or distorted characters voided of meaning, the only reference left are script style and aesthetic appearance, which again are transposed into a different cultural context, that of contemporary art. (See fig. 82) Therefore, the red crosses and circles also indicate the process of falsification: The empty signifier is open for a new, not falsified, meaning and context. Gu here employs Popper's method of falsification of theories to propose a critical re-reading of the Chinese script, and hence of Chinese culture. He thus further points out the potential of development open to contemporary Chinese culture.¹⁵

CHARACTERS AS SOCIETAL AGENT

Gu Wenda emphasizes the visual impact of this aesthetic system of Chinese characters through the huge dimensions of his works. First, the compositions of his paintings, for example in *Wisdom Comes from Tranquility*, resemble enlarged details. Second, as evident in this work, by combining painting with other materials such as fabric and wood, he creates installation-like objects. Here the two paintings, showing the characters "*jing ze*" and "*sheng ling*" are arranged on two sides of a tapestry-like object, made from red woven hemp, to which wooden Chinese seals are affixed. The installation-like appearance of "*Wisdom Comes from Tranquility*" shows the influence

of the Rumanian artists Maryn Varbanov, who married to a Chinese woman, had a studio in Hangzhou. His so-called "soft sculpture" (*ruan diaosu*) exerted a considerable influence on young Chinese artists in the mid-1980s, and can be considered one of the factors introducing the medium installation into the Chinese art scene.¹⁶ Another influence is that of Cultural Revolution culture with its Big Character Posters and overall aestheticization of everyday life. The combination of elements of soft sculpture and the aesthetic and the script style of the Cultural Revolution is particularly evident in Gu Wenda's *Shes and Hes* (*Ta he ta*, 1986, fig. 81). Interestingly, all the artists focusing on the deconstruction of the Chinese script, for example Wu Shanzhuan (figs. 83-87) and Xu Bing (figs. 88-91), employ the installation medium. This medium allows the generation of an overall aesthetic impression conveying a strong visual impact, familiar to the artists from the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, these artists merged this kind of visual impact with an agitative gesture by combining the media of installation and performance. These factors are particularly evident in Wu Shanzhuan's installation *Red Humor - Red Characters* (*Hongse youmo - chi zi*, 1987, fig. 83). *Red Humor - Red Characters* consists of a room covered with Chinese characters. The visual imagery, the distribution of colors (ca. 70% red, 25% white, 5% black), the technique (ink and poster paints on paper), and the process of creation (Wu invited ordinary people to participate) allude to the Big Character Posters of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁷ Also similar to the writing of the Cultural Revolution is the distortion of the characters, a form of concise characters that omits strokes or replaces complicated characters through simpler homonymous ones. However, the writings represented are single characters, slogans, price notices, advertising captions, painting titles, jokes, and vernacular phrases - not political slogans. All the writings are grouped around the central sentence, "No one can interpret it" (*wu ren shuo dao*), that illustrates Wu's method, the juxtaposition of contradicting and unrelated sentences from diverse domains, for example "This afternoon no water" and "The Last Supper". This juxtaposition generates the kind of meaningless assemblage that cannot be interpreted and also recalls Chan Buddhists koans (epigrams) and Dadaist



Fig. 84 Wu Shanzhuan 吴山尊, *Red Humor Series 2 - Red Stamps* (*Hongse youmo xilie zhi er - hong yin* 红色幽默系列之二——红印), 1987, installation, mixed media. Photograph courtesy Wu Shanzhuan.



Fig. 85 Wu Shanzhuan 吴山尊, *This Afternoon No Water* (*Jintian Xiaowu ting shui* 今天下午停水), 1988, performance, Zhou Shan, China. Photograph courtesy Wu Shanzhuan.



Fig. 86 Wu Shanzhuan 吴山尊, *This Afternoon No Water (Jintian Xiawu ting shui 今天下午停水)*, 1987, performance, Zhou Shan, China. Photograph courtesy Wu Shanzhuan.



Fig. 87 Wu Shanzhuan 吴山尊, *This Afternoon No Water. Criticism Conference. I Am an Artist. (Jintian Xiawu ting shui 今天下午停水)*, 1988, performance, Zhou Shan, China. Photograph courtesy Wu Shanzhuan.

language games.¹⁸ The character “red (*chi*)” Wu used in the title also signifies “deficit (*kuikong*)”, thus alluding to the semantic emptiness of his “Big Character Posters”.¹⁹ As the writings do not transmit any intelligible meaning, the only thing left is their use, their pragmatic dimension, as a means of “circulation of social discourse”²⁰. Since the circulation of social and political discourse is also directly related to the style and the aesthetic appearance of the Chinese script, the viewer is confronted with a paradox. The aesthetic appearance of the writing connotes a context that is contradicted or annihilated by Wu’s nonsense characters and sentences. (See also *Red Humor Series 2 - Red Stamps (Hongse youmo xilie zhi er - chi yin)* 1987, fig. 84)

Wu here not only plays on the discrepancy between context and meaning, but also equates the Chinese script with the Chinese culture. Concerning his and the short-lived Red Humor group’s²¹ exhibition *70% Red, 25% White, 5% Black (70% hongse, 20% baise, 5% heise, 1986)*²² he describes his concept as follows: “In the Beijing train the people chatted. ‘Look, the blue bill-boards along the tracks.’ ‘White Cat detergent, Paeon Brand, Sea Gull watches...’ ‘Characters, Signs, we adapt to them, we use them. (...) We might as well use characters to create paintings. Culture is a kind of sign, characters are signs that express a sign.’ ‘They are the last strongholds of culture.’ ‘Chinese is different from all now existing languages ...’ ‘Because of this feeling of isolation, because of these thoughts expressed through a composite form,’ ‘We will write some Chinese,’ ‘We use 70% red, 25% black, 5% white.’ ‘Regular bold print characters are our expression, to have no expression is the best expression.’²³

As Gao Minglu put it: “The appearance of the characters is the appearance of culture. The critique of the characters is the critique of the culture, the reorganization of the characters is the reorganization of the culture.”²⁴

Wu Shanzhuan’s method of employing distorted signs and senseless sentences reveals the redundancy of the Chinese written language, which in recent history was especially evident during the Cultural Revolution, and which is most obvious in the many theory-laden works of the ‘85

Movement. The semantic emptiness generated by Wu here not only is to be read as a vehement cultural critique, but also as a means of reflecting upon the "subject's place in discursive regimes" and "the operation of power within individual subjects".²⁵ The absurdity of his works thus is called "serious absurdity" (*yansu de huangdan*), and, alluding to the critical distance to society as well as the agitative and subversive attitude with which the Red Guards set out to fight institutionalized thought, he called the humor with which he paraphrased Chinese culture and society "Red Humor". This aspect is best expressed in Wu Shanzhuan's later *Red Humor* series, where the medium of the performance becomes more important, for example in his *This Afternoon No Water* (*Jintian xiawu ting shui*, 1987, 1988- today, figs. 85, 86, 87) This event involves paintings mimicking official certificates. The certified content is *This Afternoon No Water*. The certificates are displayed in public spaces. Wu thus intervenes as a disruptive agent into his social environment; in the *China/ Avant-Garde* exhibition, for example, he installed his *No Water* certificates in the public toilets, confusing the public and rendering the National Gallery's personnel indignant.

CHARACTERS AS CULTURAL CANON

Related to the various aspects of writing mentioned above, such as its function as a meaning system, its aesthetic dimension and its function as societal agent is its function in the constitution of a cultural canon. The control of this canon conveys power, which is particularly evident in Chinese history. Styles of writing and the structure of the characters changed with the dynasties. In recent history, it was most notably Mao Zedong who transformed Chinese language and writing. His campaign to simplify characters, "the promulgation of new and the abandonment of old characters" was an experience molding the consciousness of the avant-garde artists' generation. Xu Bing²⁶ states: "Mao's transformation of culture was meant to *touch people to their very souls*. Most deeply rooted was his transformation of language, because the Chinese language directly influences the methods of thinking and understanding of all Chinese people. (...) To strike at the written word is to strike at the very essence of culture. Any doctoring of the written word becomes in itself a transformation of the most inherent portion of a person's thinking. (...) My generation however was irreparably affected by the campaign to simplify characters. This remolding of my earliest memories, (...) the transformation of new characters and their eventual demise, the revival of old characters - shadowed my earliest education and left me confused about the fundamental conceptions of culture."²⁷ This experience led Xu Bing to "strike himself at the written word" to express his mistrust of writing and language as a reliable meaning system and canon conferring cultural identity. His attacks against the cultural canon of Chinese writing are as systematic and thorough as Mao's transformation of China's culture and society.

His *Book from the Sky* (Tianshu, 1987, 1988, figs. 88-91), a set of four books printed with fake characters invented by the artist, is itself a canon, but a canon of writings devoid of meaning. The book set is printed in the traditional technique of wood block printing with single movable wooden characters, and bound like traditional Chinese books (fig. 90). During one year Xu created nearly twelve hundred fake characters. These were, however, reconstructed employing existing character components, and thus still could inspire the viewer to search for possible allusions. This set was exhibited in 1988 in the National Gallery in Beijing. The *Book from the Sky* here was displayed in the format of an installation: open books were presented on a low platform; text was mounted on pillars and walls, and long scrolls were affixed to the ceiling, thus creating an overall aesthetic impression. Xu Bing comments on the combination of "ancient and modern aspects of the Chinese language" as resulting in "interesting and provocative form and meaning".²⁸ Here, and in all later installations of the *Book from the Sky* this impression is dominated by the element of serial repetition, evident in the display of the installation, and in the process of creation. (figs. 88, 90) The serial repetition of signs connotes the standardization of the canon and defines writing as "a method of cultural conditioning".²⁹ Xu goes through all the steps of this procedure of cultural conditioning: He creates the majority of his fake characters from the actual basic components constituting the Chinese characters, but chooses those combinations that had not been made in the course of Chinese history. Further, he employs the serial technique of printing with standardized movable characters, and the standard typesetting and layout of historical books. Evident here is a principle prevalent throughout Chinese history, the invention and manipulation of modular units as basic components of cultural production; in the case of the Chinese script each character, even though a different semantic and graphic unit, is nevertheless made from standardized and reproducible modules. Lothar Ledderose, who formulated this theory of the module in Chinese culture, mentions writing as a paradigm for understanding the logic of modular systems.³⁰ Another example he cites is woodblock printing. In his *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* Ledderose further reveals the existence of modular patterns of thought in ideas about personal freedom, China's culture of bureaucracy, or Chinese religion, as well as in the Chinese political and social organization. Through mimicking this principle of serial standardized production in the *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing reveals this basic cultural principle, most evident in writing, as the major factor restricting individual and social development. In an interview with Ma Yan he states: "I want to remind people that it is culture that restricts them."³¹ The semantic emptiness of Xu's canon, the reduction of the system of writing to its pragmatic dimension, is the artist's comment on the situation of the Chinese culture, which he considers to be approaching a cataclysm, as evident in the alternative title of his *Book from the Sky*, *The Mirror of the World - An Analyzed Reflection of the End of this Century* (*Xi shi jian - shiji mo juan*).³² In this respect his apocryphal scriptures resemble the Buddhist stone sutras that had been created as a canon, transmitting the Buddhist teaching for eternity. On the other hand, the semantic emptiness, the incomprehensibility of the

Book from the Sky is a shock for Xu's audience. As Britta Erickson mentions, Xu "is confronting his audience with unexpected situations. (...) His audience is forced to reconsider their assumptions about the value and reliability of the written word."³³ In this regard the semantic emptiness of Xu's writing appears as a system of empty signifiers open to voluntary redefinition, leaving the individual without answer.

RECEPTION

The unique nature of the ideographic Chinese characters and the central position of writing in Chinese history and politics explain the vehement official reactions to the works concerned with the deconstruction of the Chinese script. Generally, these works were criticized as nihilist by the official side. The distortion of the epitome of Chinese culture and the medium of the transmission of orthodox thought was unacceptable, and could only be understood as a mockery of the official ideology and world view. It therefore is only naturally that Gu Wenda's first exhibition of his *Pseudo Characters* in Xi'an in June 1986 was an internal exhibition (*neibu guanmu zhan*), only open to a small public. Still Gu's exhibition was criticized as "the funeral of a mentally ill".³⁴ The most fervent critic of the New Wave, Yang Chengyin, particularly attacked Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, considering it the sum of all negative tendencies and elements of the New Wave art movement. In his article "Program of the Art of the New Wave", mentioned in other chapters of this book, he relates the work, and with it all works concerned with Chinese script, to the Chinese idiom "ghosts pounding the wall", thus

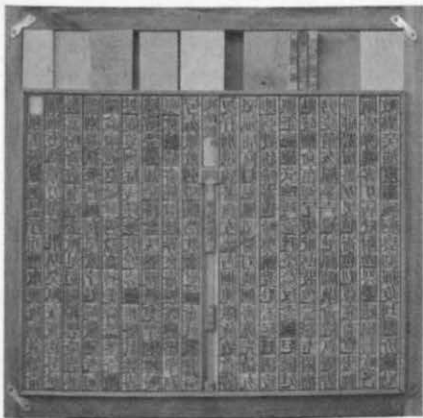


Fig. 90 Xu Bing 徐冰, *A Book from the Sky* (Tianshu 天書), detail, movable letters. 36 x 48 cm. Photograph courtesy Xu Bing.



Fig. 89 Xu Bing 徐冰, *A Book from the Sky* (Tianshu 天書), detail, one copy of the Book from the Sky, woodblock print, fake characters. Photograph courtesy Xu Bing.



Fig. 91 Xu Bing 徐冰 designing the characters for his *Book from the Sky* in his studio in the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Photograph courtesy Xu Bing.

designating them as a trend that has lost any reference points and criteria of judgment.³⁵ The illegibility of Xu Bing's, Gu Wenda's and Wu Shanzhuan's characters was considered the expression of extreme subjectivism, and thus of bourgeois liberalism.

The effect on the general public was ambivalent. Viewers often reacted in ways contrary to the artists' hopes, and did not accept the illegibility of the characters. Instead they primarily tried to read them, to imagine connotations and understand their meaning. They were not used to seeing characters reminiscent of Big Character Posters in an art exhibition, and in the case of Wu Shanzhuan's *Red Humor* were especially interested in the absurd meanings generated through Wu's transformations and juxtapositions. Xu Bing mentions, "The Chinese people did this type of creative linguistic manipulation - writing *dog* in Liu Shaoqi's name to declare hatred of him, or emphasizing the heart in the character *zhong* (loyal) to express dedication to Chairman Mao. (...) The uniqueness of Chinese characters has encouraged a tradition of playing upon words since time immemorial."³⁶

Positive voices celebrated the works, and especially Xu Bing's, *Book from the Sky*, as the real future of Chinese art, proposing, as they did, a combination of visual idioms and concepts stemming from the Chinese tradition with a contemporary art language.³⁷

As mentioned above, the works concerned with the deconstruction of the Chinese script actually were a reaction not only to the experience of the political manipulation and exploitation of the Chinese writing and to its semantic redundancy, but also to the

prevailing trends of self-expression and to humanist enthusiasm. Like Huang Yongping's *Roulette Series* and Wang Guangyi's cultural revisions, they introduce the ploy of art as a strategy of overcoming artistic and conceptual patterns, and like those works, they refer to both Western and native Chinese traditions, including the legacy of the culture of the Cultural Revolution. The cultural critique, the semiotic warfare of those works, attacks institutionalized thought by mimicking its mechanisms. This strategy not only made the works of Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan and Xu Bing important statements within the Chinese art scene of the 1980s, but also made their positions valuable in the international context.

- [1] Lü Peng (1992): pp. 288-299: "Trend of the Critique of Chinese Characters".
- [2] Wu Hong (1999): pp. 36-41.
- [3] Fei Dawei discusses this aspect in an interview with Gu Wenda. Fei Dawei (1986): pp. 53-56, 63.
- [4] Through the artists' deconstructive distortion of the Chinese characters, the Chinese script had obtained a kind of double hermetic nature.
- [5] Fei Dawei (1986): pp. 53-56, 63.
- [6] Fei Dawei (1986): pp. 55, 56.
- [7] Fei Dawei (1986): p. 53.
- [8] Wu Hong (1999): pp. 36-41.
- [9] Gao Minglu (1999): p. 157.
- [10] See Gao Minglu (1999): p. 157.
- [11] Gu Wenda (1985): pp. 2-7.
- [12] Gu Wenda (1986): pp. 32-36.
- [13] Gu Wenda (1985): p. 6.
- [14] Gu Wenda (1986): pp. 32-36.
- [15] On another level, Gu, like Huang Yongping, refers to Wittgenstein's "transcendental linguism" - the conviction that the inner structure of reality is evident in language, but cannot be described with language.
- [16] See for example Hou Hanru, "Wan Man tan ruan diaosu" ("Varbanov on Soft Sculpture"), in MS 1986.3: pp. 60-62.
- [17] See also Gao Minglu (1991): p. 203.
- [18] For the conceptual and aesthetic equation of Western art trends and concepts with native Chinese concepts, see the chapter on Huang Yong Ping, chapter 3.2.1.
- [19] Wu Shanzhuan describes this installation in "The Emergence of the Red Characters (*Chi zi de dansheng*)", unpublished manuscript. See also Gao Minglu (1991): p. 203. See also ZGMSB 1987.40: p. 1.
- [20] Bryson, N. (1999): p. 55.
- [21] Wu Shanzhuan and six of his fellow students from the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts organized the Red Humor group in 1986. It dispersed in 1987.
- [22] Gu Wenda also created an installation consisting of characters with the title *Red, Black, White* (1986).
- [23] Wu Shanzhuan, "Process and People, Work of Art, Numbers and Characters", not published. Citation from Gao Minglu (1991): pp. 191, 192.
- [24] Gao Minglu (1999): p. 195.
- [25] Bryson, N. (1999): p. 55.
- [26] For a detailed description and analysis of Xu Bing's work see Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing: Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words*, Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 2001.
- [27] Xu Bing (2001): pp. 13, 14.
- [28] Xu Bing (2001): p. 17.
- [29] Xu Bing (2001): p. 16.
- [30] Ledderose, L., *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- [31] Ma Yan interview with Xu Bing, November 20, 1991. Ma Yan, "A Reader-Response of 'A Book from the Sky,'" here cited from Erickson, B. (2001): p. 58.
- [32] See Erickson, B. (2001): p. 38.
- [33] Erickson, B. (2001): pp. 10, 11.
- [34] ZGMSB 1986.33.
- [35] Yang Chengyin (1990).
- [36] Xu Bing (2001): p. 17.
- [37] See Du Jian (1990).

3.2.4 XIAO LU/TANG SONG: *THE PISTOL SHOT EVENT*

Xiao Lu/Tang Song, *Pistol Shot Event* (*Qiangji shijian*), performance, February 5, 1989, National Gallery, Beijing, pistol, installation, *Dialogue*, (telephone booths, mirror, mixed media, bricks) (figs. 92 -94)



Fig. 92 Xiao Lu/Tang Song 肖鲁/唐宋, *Pistol Shot Event* (*Qiangji shijian* 枪击事件), 1989. Photograph courtesy Hou Hanru. Reproduced with permission of Xiao Lu.

The most spectacular event of the *China/ Avant-Garde* exhibition, the summit and résumé of the art of the New Wave, was not performed by the veterans of the avant-garde, but by two young unknown artists. Xiao Lu and Tang Song, both children of high-ranking cadres, had graduated from the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts in 1988. The performance's effect on the art scene was significant, outweighing the work's immanent readings. In fact, the meaning of the work is constituted by outer factors, such as the artists' social position, and the performance's place and time, hence the social, spatial, temporal, and intellectual circumstances of the performance.

THE INCIDENT

On February 5, 1989, the date the Chinese avant-garde art scene had awaited since the *Zhuhai Symposium* in 1986, at 11:20 a.m. immediately following the opening ceremony of the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, Xiao Lu fired two pistol shots on her installation *Dialogue*. (fig. 92) Then she passed the pistol to her boyfriend Tang Song, and ran away. Soon after, Tang Song was taken away by the National Gallery's security personnel and by plain-clothes police. (fig. 95) All performances were stopped immediately (and anyway those that had already taken place were made without official authorization).¹ When nineteen police cars eventually arrived, the banners spread in front of the National Gallery had to be taken away. (fig. 15) At 3.00 p.m. Gao Minglu announced that the exhibition would be closed temporarily. At around 5:00 p.m. Xiao Lu surrendered to the police. For having disturbed the public order, both artists were taken into custody for five days. After three days, however, they were released.

The exhibition was reopened on February 10, 1989.² The National Gallery imposed a fine of two thousand Yuan on the seven co-organizers of the exhibition, for breaking the regulations and conditions specified in the exhibition contract. In addition, the gallery announced that further exhibition projects of these organizing units would not be accepted for a period of two years.³

After they had been released, Tang Song and Xiao Lu scattered cigarette butts onto the bricks in front of the installation *Dialogue*. (fig. 93) On February 17, 1989, one day after the exhibition had been reopened for the second time (after having been closed because of the bomb threat letter), both artists, already on their way back to the Jiangnan region, published a statement in *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (Beijing Youth): "As authors of the *Pistol Shot Event* from the opening day of the *Modern Chinese Art Exhibition* (i.e., the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition), we want to confirm that this was a purely artistic event. In addition, we think that art can express the artist's understanding of society. But as artists we are not interested in politics. What we are interested in is the value of art, social values, and the choice of the most adequate artistic expression for obtaining a more thorough knowledge."⁴

WHAT IF THE ONE WHO SHOT HAD BEEN AN ORDINARY CITIZEN

Xiao Lu and Tang Song's decision to perform the *Pistol Shot Event* had not been motivated simply by artistic aims. Speculation and the challenge to discover how far they could go were major determining factors. Unlike the majority of the artists

participating in the *China/ Avant-Garde* exhibition, neither Tang Song nor Xiao Lu had even started their artistic careers, and both considered the long awaited exhibition, held in the symbolic venue of the National Gallery in Beijing, a springboard to fast fame. One can call this kind of disposition typical of the Chinese contemporary art scene of the 1980s, as evident in the provocative character of many of the performances. To outshine all the other works and performances of the exhibition, such as Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong*, Huang Yongping's rope project, Li Shan's *Foot Washing*, Wu Shanzhuan's *Big Business* or Wang Deren's throwing of condoms, the performance had to be as extreme as possible.⁵ Xiao Lu, daughter of Xiao Feng, former head of the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts, and Tang Song, son of a commander of the military district of Zhejiang Province, as privileged as the children of high ranking cadres, could go much farther than simple citizens. A boldness that only could be based on naiveté, led them to exhaust these privileges. With wit and sensibility they tested the political and social limits.

Critics and advocates of the performance were interested in exactly this aspect. "What If the One Who Shot Had Been an Ordinary Citizen?" asks Qian Haiyuan in the title of his article. Here he discusses the disturbance of public order, and most notably the open question of how the artists could have gotten hold of the pistol, and the consequent breaking of regulations concerning arms. He attacks the common belief in privileges, which perverted the course of justice and silenced the media.⁶

According to Zheng Shengtian, at the time Xiao Lu's teacher at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts, it was the grandson of a high ranking cadre in the logistic department of the People's Liberation Army, who had secretly taken his grandfather's pistol, and passed it on to Tang Song and Xiao Lu.⁷ But, since the official side did not make inquiries, these facts have never been revealed to the public. The artists' early release confirms their privileged position, as do the public telephone booths Xiao Lu used for her installation *Dialogue*, which she could have obtained only through special connections Li Xianting, the performance's strongest advocate and one of the few who knew about it in advance, considered that these particular premises constituted the special signification of the *Pistol Shot Event*. Li criticized the *China/ Avant-Garde* exhibition of being too prepared to compromise, and lacking avant-garde qualities. According to Li, the only work with those qualities was the *Pistol Shot Event*, since it attempted to broaden artistic, social and political limits and pointed out deplorable states of affairs. He considered the performance an ingenious project challenging the flexibility of the Chinese legislation through a tightrope walk between criminal act and art. According to him, the witty use of social, political and legislative gray areas not only contributed to the work's path-breaking character within the domain of contemporary Chinese art, but also made it go beyond Duchamp's *Fountain*.⁸ Other positive voices did not support Li's extremely positive position. Many disapproved of Xiao Lu and Tang Song taking advantage of their privileges, and further criticized the artistic quality of the performance as lacking spirituality, originality and artistic



Fig. 93 Xiao Lu 肖魯, *Dialogue* (Duihua 對話), 1989, installation, telephone booths, mixed media, mirror, bricks, bullet holes, National Gallery, Beijing. Reproduced with permission of Xiao Lu.

autonomy. Because of the performance's dependence on time, space and the specific background of the artists, it could not really provide new positions for the Chinese avant-garde. Nevertheless, they considered *Pistol Shot Event* an important work in the history of Chinese avant-garde art.⁹

Li Xianting's extremely positive evaluation of the work seems to be part of his strategy for ensuring the avant-garde potential of the '85 Movement, which includes keeping its status as a counter-position to the official art. Gao Minglu, who together with Li was one of the main curators of the exhibition, conceived of the *China/ Avant-Garde* exhibition in a vastly different manner, as a retrospective, and aimed for the official acceptance of Chinese avant-garde art. Li Xianting even went so far as to call the exhibition a part of Xiao Lu and Tang Song's performance, and it seems possible that Li acted behind the scenes, encouraging the artists as they formulated the performance.

THE EVENT

Most art critics focused on the performance's preparation and on its consequences. Liao Wen relates: "At 11:20 a.m. on February 5 on the ground floor of the National Gallery in the *Modern Chinese Art Exhibition*, the participants coming from the Fine



Fig. 94 One of the shots Xiao Lu fired at her installation *Dialogue* hit the mirror, National Gallery Beijing, February 5, 1989. Reproduced with permission of Xiao Lu and Tang Song.

Arts Academy of Zhejiang¹⁰, Tang Song and Xiao Lu, fired two pistol shots at their work *Dialogue*. After the incident the police arrested the artists and the exhibition was closed. Three days later the artists were released. Thus the work of art was accomplished."¹¹ Xiao Lu and Tang Song say the performance went as expected.¹² For the artists, besides the act of shooting, the performance obviously included the procuring of the pistol, the arrest by the police, and their later liberation. Obviously, they wanted their performance to function as an indicator of a social deplorable situation.

Only few art critics discuss the part of the performance that took place in the National Gallery the day of the exhibition opening. Lü Peng calls the act of shooting on the installation *Dialogue* "a symbolic attack against reality that does not admit any kind of dialogue, and thus a critique of the situation of culture in China." He further mentions: "The goal of *Dialogue* is a revolt against culture. This is exactly the spiritual quality of the work."¹³ On the one hand, the *Pistol Shot Event* can be interpreted as a symbolic act; on the other, it can be read as a gesture of desperation, facing a reality hermetically closed to dialogue and change.

This dialogue between the environment and the young generation, represented in the photographs of young people inside of the telephone booths, as well as by Xiao Lu and Tang Song, is only made possible through the disturbance or destruction of the smooth, but impenetrable setting visible in the mirror between the booths. The choice to perform *Pistol Shot Event* for the *China/ Avant-Garde* exhibition in the National Gallery, on the symbolic occasion of the climax of Chinese avant-garde art, and in a symbolic space standing for the national culture as such, constitutes the semantic context of the performance. In this regard it is, as Lü Peng calls it, a critique of and a revolt against the reality of culture in the People's Republic. The aspect of desperation is evident in the contrast of the acoustic and visual expressive qualities generated by the pistol shots. The acoustic expressive qualities of the shots, the sudden disruption of the latent background noise of the visitors, as well as the expressive qualities of the bullet holes,¹⁴ contradict the hermetic nature of the installation. (fig. 94) Still, no communication is possible between the viewer and the represented figures, as they turn their backs to the viewer. And, if one considers the red telephone between the booths that seems to be out of order, then the communication between both figures seems disturbed, too. In addition, the expressive qualities of the iconic signs, such as

the dominance of gray scales and the fuzziness of the enlarged photographs, connote distance and the impossibility of communication. The hermetic silence, the frozen dialogue, is rent by the bang of the shots. The installation symbolizes in a direct and naive manner the subject cited in the title, the dialogue, respectively the impossibility of a dialogue. The shots appear as an act of desperation, that aims to change the prevalent situation, but in vain.

IN BETWEEN STRATEGY AND DECEIVED NAIVETÉ

Probably because of the naiveté of the work, Chinese art critics largely overlooked the performance's qualities of desperation and resignation. After all, the installation *Dialogue* was Xiao Lu's graduation work.¹⁵ Most art critics focused on the much more spectacular aspect of "privilege art" (*tequan yishu*).¹⁶

Shao Yangde, one of the opponents of New Wave art, is one of the few who discussed the performance from the perspective of desperation.¹⁷ In his article "A Symbolic Suicide" ("Xiangzheng xing 'zisha'"), published in *Fine Arts in China* on May 29, 1989, in the days leading up to the Tiananmen massacre, he not only admitted that the artists had the right to commit such a suicide, but he also called *Pistol Shot Event* an artistic form adequate for expressing the actual crisis: "Art is like a second life. If there is some excitement in the first life, the second life can perform a sacrifice and validate the first life. (...) *Dialogue*, being a symbolic suicide, can be interpreted in diverse ways. It broadens the domain of art appreciation. The dialogue is performed by shots. (...) I think the dialogue is never interrupted. It is already eternal. The shots spread steadily. The audience does not need to be afraid. Everything is as usual. It is difficult to change."¹⁸



Fig. 95 Policemen arrest Tang Song after the Pistol Shot Event. *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, National Gallery Beijing. Reproduced with permission of Xiao Lu.

The intellectual's resignation, evident in these lines, replaced in the late 1980s the cultural euphoria of the mid-1980s. The second campaign against Spiritual Pollution in 1987 clearly showed that the ideal of the Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s, namely the productive dialogue between intellectuals and government, had been only a farce. They again became aware that they were excluded from an actual influence on the country's modernization. *Pistol Shot Event* is an allegory of the dilemma of the Chinese intellectuals. Therefore, many of them retrospectively read the performance as an omen presaging the events on Tiananmen Square, the violent suppression of any possible dialogue between young generation, intellectuals, and rulers.

Ironically, the impossibility of an equal dialogue is also evident in the reception of *Pistol Shot Event*. The dispositions of naiveté and boldness had made possible Xiao Lu and Tang Song's performance, as well as the student movement of Spring 1989. Naiveté and boldness simultaneously made the artists' work a move in the strategy of Chinese art critics, and made the students become a plaything in the net of political power struggles. The shots Xiao Lu fired at her installation, not only are, as Li Xianting calls it, "the ceremonial answer to the final curtain call of New Wave art" (*xinchao meishu de xiemu li*), but they indeed ring in the end of the intellectuals' patriotic and humanist attitude, that had been typical of the 1980s.

[1] See chapter 2.5.

[2] For a detailed description of the course of the exhibition see also Hang Jian/ Cao Xiao'ou (1989) and Lü Peng (1992): pp. 325-353.

[3] See "The Aftermath of the Modern Exhibition Is Not Over Yet" (*"Xindai zhan yubo wei jin"*), in: ZGMSB 1989.14 (April 3 1989): p. 1, translation see appendix 7.

[4] BJQNB, February 11, 1989.

[5] See also Lü Peng (1992): pp. 325-353 and Hang Jian/ Cao Xiao'ou (1989): pp. 5-9. See further chapter 2.5.

[6] Qian Haiyuan, "What If the One Who Shot Had Been an Ordinary Citizen" (*"Jiaru kaiqiang zhe shi pingmin"*), in: ZGMSB 1989.22 (May 29, 1989): p. 2.

[7] Interview with Zheng Shengtian, Madrid, February 2000.

[8] Li Xianting (1989.2): p. 1, translation see appendix 7.

[9] Li Yang (1989): p. 1, translation see appendix 7.

[10] Now known as the China Academy of Fine Arts.

[11] Liao Wen (1989): p. 1.

[12] See Li Xianting (1989.2): p. 1, translation appendix 7.

[13] Lü Peng (1992): p. 345.

[14] Xiao Lu's first shot hit the mirror between the telephone booths. The second shot hit the glass of one of the booths. The shots did not cause the cracking of the mirror, and hence the disruption of the hermetic situation, as the artist had intended. See Lü Peng (1992): p. 342.

[15] See also Yang Chengyin, "Program of the Art of the New Wave", in: WYB, June 2, 1990: p. 5.

[16] Li yang (1989): p. 1

[17] See chapter 3.1.2

[18] Shao Yangde (1989): p. 2. See also appendix 7.