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Script as a Means of Communication in Xu Bing's Artworks

Introduction

Within traditional Chinese art, the liaison between writing and painting appears to be more evident than in other traditions. This can be largely ascribed to calligraphy which, according to the Chinese tradition, is a genre of painting. The emphasis on the graphic representation of writing, which is quite natural in the case of Chinese characters, modifies the usual perception of writing as a text. Traditional Chinese calligraphy pays utmost attention to how the artist's inner emotional state is rendered by lines, dots or curves. We can state that in calligraphy, script becomes a vehicle for the extralinguistic expression of the artist's individuality that makes a piece of art complete. However, this refined manner of articulating the artist's individuality does not exhaust the function of script in Chinese contemporary art. It is worth exemplifying this state of affairs with Xu Bing's artworks, where the traditional approach to script is approached from a highly critical perspective.

In order to understand completely Xu Bing's work with script, we must resort to his biography. Xu Bing 徐冰 (b. 1955) received

his diploma in printmaking from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, in 1987. This shows that he is thoroughly acquainted with printing techniques and that he already worked with script as a student. His interest in the written medium of language is also connected with his family and the political background of the People's Republic of China at that time. Xu grew up in a family of intellectuals. His mother was a librarian, and his father a historian at Peking University. Thus, contrarily to other children, Xu's childhood was spent in the surroundings of numerous books, which he was unable to read at the beginning (Leung et al. 1999: 94). Quite naturally, his contact with books took place more 'superficially', in terms of the script rather than the words or meaning which they conveyed.

Another important preparatory event in Xu's later artistic interest can be ascribed to the Cultural Revolution, which brought him, along with other young people from cities, to the countryside in 1975. Practically, the revolutionary literary education was limited to reading Mao Zedong's works. This experience proved to be extremely important because of another aspect of writing, namely its dominant educational function (Leung et al. 1999: 94). The Chinese script became a vehicle for spreading the communist ideology on a large scale among the masses, who lacked literary refinement.

The two stages can be viewed as two extremes, traditional and revolutionary, encapsulated in Xu's formative years, which resulted in his unprecedented approach to script in Chinese art.

Xu's artworks chronologically reflect his shift in concern with script. This can be described as an interest in script as such, its relation to semantics, its social function, and finally an exploration of how an artist uses script, which results in an original reinterpretation of classical Chinese calligraphy. What inevitably intersperses with all the themes is how script can be referred to communication, its original function.

Script as such

Beyond any doubt, the most important big piece by Xu from the 1980s is *Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu* 天書), which was created between 1987–1991. It is a mixed media installation work consisting of large printed scrolls and books, arranged in the exhibition space. They immediately evoke the context of Chinese calligraphy, but this is where Xu significantly differs in several respects. In calligraphy, a primary artistic importance is attached to ‘handwriting’, which may reveal the artist’s idiosyncrasy, and which is identified with an individualized, personal expression at the very moment when the work is being created. In this sense, it is more precise to refer to calligraphy in terms of performance art, where a piece of calligraphy writing is merely one part of an artistic oeuvre.

Within the above context, *Book from the Sky* liberates itself from calligraphic constraints. Xu uses a printing technique in his creation of script. He carves fonts, which delivers a repetitive effect without leaving even a single trace of the artist’s personal touch. This disconnects the work from calligraphy at its very essence. In this way, script is stripped of the layer which would otherwise reveal the emotional state of the artist. The font style was not invented by Xu. He refers to *Songti* 宋體¹, which was a standardized printing style employed by woodblock printers during the Song and Ming dynasties. This particular choice does not only veil Xu’s individuality; in fact his intention is to be perceived more as an artisan. This declaration stated in an exhibition hall can lead us to the conclusion that Xu does not intend to be expressed personally in the fabric of the script, in order to make it utterly sterile in this respect.

Considering the above, we can proceed to the more basic, linguistic function of the script. However, what at first glance appears to be Chinese are actually invented characters, the meaning of which cannot be deciphered. Thus, the script does not convey any meaning.

It is interesting to view this aspect from two perspectives. Firstly, it is highly dubious to say that the script consists of char-

¹ Used during Song and Ming dynasties, *Songti* was the official printing script. There was a special guild of craftsmen who were commissioned to carve them. Xu Bing emphasizes that in this way *Songti* was not created by one artisan, which disconnects the authorship from a particular person, thanks to which anonymity is obtained. Cf. Xu 2006: 103.

acters that are graphic representations of meaning. The graphs, which would be a more appropriate term here, do not refer to any denotations, which in turn questions their ontological status as text. However, we do not refuse the arrangement of the graphs the status of script, which constitutes a book. The fact that the book cannot be read yet still remains a book can be defended by, for example, the existence of ancient writing which can no longer be read by anyone, or the conversion of some text into an invented system of writing. They are not refused the status of a text that may potentially yield some sense. It is more a question of our own inability to read it. *Book from the Sky* is a special case as there is no semantic underlay to it².

Secondly, we can depart from the fact that *Book from the Sky* is not only a book but also a piece of conceptual art. Within the artistic realm, the requirement for a text to convey some meaning may well be weakened, at least in terms of linguistics. How can it be comprehended in that case? We should look back to Xu's childhood, when he was confronted with innumerable books whose the meaning was inaccessible to him. Our perception of script is somehow similar. We should also bear in mind that Xu as a child wanted to create one book which could encapsulate everything (Leung et al. 1999: 94), which is an impossible enterprise in the case of conventional books. Viewing *Book from the Sky* from this perspective, it can hypothetically convey meaning. In my opinion, the interpretational key can be found in the *Daodejing* 道德經, a most important work of classical Daoist philosophy. In a passage from Chapter 41, which tries to illustrate the meaning of *dao* 道, it is written that: '無隅 [...] 希聲, 象無形' (Laozi 2006: 101). 'The great square has no corners [...] Great music sounds faint. Great form has no shape' (Laozi 1963: 160).

What the above passage conveys is the inexhaustibility of *dao*, inextricably connected with the fact that none of the essential or distinguishing attributes are actualized in the realm

² The meaning of *Tianshu* in Chinese is ambiguous, as it also means 'gobbledygook'. This ambiguity can be comprehended by Chinese speakers, but the translated title misleads the non-Chinese audience into an interpretation based on English lexemes in the English translation. Cf. Abe 1998: 178.

of perception. Once forms are given in experience, *dao* becomes nothing more than a finite object of perception, which contradicts its identity.

From this perspective, *Book from the Sky* becomes readable as a text containing every single aspect of the universe without any possible distortion, which could be caused by the finiteness of both linguistic medium and comprehension. This fact is also emphasized by the depersonalized script, which does not assume any particularity in this respect. Whereas calligraphy is intensely saturated with the artist's personality, Xu's artwork remains perfectly complete in the absence of any possible persona.

Book from the Sky operates with a script which is essentially different from that which is employed in Chinese calligraphy. At the same time, it meets Chinese tradition by being nothing but script itself, which is a vehicle to all possible meanings or messages.

It is also important to remark that the script has no pronunciation, although the structure of the graphs is similar to the Chinese characters which contain a phonetic composite. Despite the fact that some Chinese characters have phonetic components, they are not by necessity decisive in determining the pronunciation of the characters which contain them³. Pronunciation is known only in the case of the characters which are used in speech. In other words, phonetic competence is bound by necessity to performance. This makes Xu's script even more undetermined and potential rather than concrete.

Script as meaningful text

Xu, however, does not limit himself to the variety of script which distances itself from the semantic layer. In his later works, he discusses the interactions between script, pronunciation and meaning. One such example, *ABC...*, was created in 1991, after Xu's emigration to

³ According to Zhou, 80 per cent of Chinese characters have phonetic components but our chance of guessing character pronunciation is 39 per cent (quoted by Harrist 2006: 39).

New York, which must have naturally brought the Roman alphabet to his artistic attention.

ABC... consists of fonts carved in wood. They present clusters of Chinese characters, which correspond to the English pronunciation of the Roman alphabet letters. For example, the letter 'W' is represented by the cluster '大布六', pronounced: 'dabuliu'. The meaning of the sequence of characters in Chinese is 'big', 'cloth' and 'six'. If we consider the relation between the script, pronunciation and meaning, we can evidently observe that the script is managed by pronunciation, and the semantics emerges as a by-product. Shifting our interest to the script, we can state that it means and constitutes a fragment of some text. However, the question of the text being meaningful is at least arguable. Is it then legitimate to state that the script in *ABC...* communicates something?

In my opinion, what surfaces in *ABC...* is how language can be deconstructed. The arrangement of sounds, signs, and meanings in the languages we speak is arbitrary. Language allows us to express our thoughts, discuss facts and ideas, which in turn gives us assurance. However, one of the possible issues pinpointed in Xu's work is that the construction on which our communication is built might sometimes be no more than gibberish. In that case, is script a good medium for communication? If we compare *ABC...* with *Book from the Sky*, the possible answer would be that script can successfully communicate when it remains semantically silent, but not meaningless.

Another perspective that combines script with text can be found in *New English Calligraphy* (*Xin Yingwen Shufa* 新英文書法), which is also alternatively entitled *Square Word Calligraphy*, from 1994. As can be inferred from the title, the work is closely connected to Chinese calligraphy. However, what makes it different is that instead of Chinese characters, English words are written in block style, where one word equals one 'character' block. It is an interactive oeuvre as it involves the audience in the very process of creating calligraphy. When the work was exhibited in Copenhagen, the exhibition space was converted into a classroom, where the audience were provided with brushes, paper and a video manual.

Compared to the previous works, *New English Calligraphy* is different in many respects, one of them being that the script is not printed but written personally, which brings it closer to the traditional art genre. Thus, the calligrapher leaves some of the idiosyncrasy in the created works, which is the most desired feature of Chinese calligraphy. However, Xu's views on individual expression have not changed since *Book from the Sky*. The other side of the coin is that personal involvement exposes the participant to inculcation. In a sense, the script is not only written on paper but also into the one who performs the writing. This can be explained in terms of how the interactive character of the work is achieved by means of education. The process of learning, especially at an elementary level, consists in internalizing patterns by performance, and learning a given script is one of the most typical examples. Xu provides the audience with paper, on which word block contours are marked with thin, red lines. This concept is borrowed from *miaohong* 描紅, exercise books for Chinese elementary school students to memorize and practise the repetitive production of Chinese characters.

The audience becomes involved in the educational project, thanks to which the 'block script' becomes an effective medium of communication, provided that they know the English language. However, we should note that performative learning that develops certain habits instills in us standards which, in the case of script, would be the rules⁴ governing the production of given characters or letters. As Xu himself remarks, learning calligraphy is not just learning to write but 'disciplining within a particular cultural framework' (Leung et al. 1999: 94).

This refers us to Xu's biographical background connected with his stay in the countryside at the end of the Cultural Revolution, when the artist was already acquainted with semantics, which enabled his indoctrination with script⁵. In literate civilizations, script is the most essential conserver of culture, and accordingly, the absorption of

4 Depending on a given script, they can be, for instance, stroke order, curves etc.

5 The work can also be set in the context of the 1950s literacy campaign addressed at peasants and workers, the most promising social class who were to cultivate communist ideas.

it is inextricably conducted in the same way. Thus, humans are not only consumers but also the transportation of cultural transmission. This aspect appears to be perceived by Xu as endangerment. It changes the perception of Chinese calligraphy, which is generally regarded as a means of individualized expression. A calligrapher becomes formatted by calligraphy technique and their every single performance is tantamount to the confirmation of previously imposed standards.

This phenomenon can be viewed in the wider context of Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, which is defined by the sociologist as:

a system of durable, transposable dispositions [...] as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively applied to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them. (1990: 53)

It is quite evident that *habitus* is both practice-based and oriented, and its application does not have to be necessarily conscious. This brings the notion very close to the usage of script, a strategy of communicating in a determined way, which is learnt by an individual through their functioning in society. The socialization of individuals also includes education, during which not all things are acquired consciously. In this way, some patterns of behaviour are thought to be highly individual ones, whereas in fact they realize and reproduce the patterns of *habitus*. If we refer *habitus* to calligraphy, the individualized expression becomes not so obvious. It results from reproducing one's personality in a particular way, which follows the paradigm of a particular artistic expression. Thus in calligraphy, individualized script can be a variety of the reproduction of an aesthetic *habitus*.

The role of script can be interpreted even in political terms. Hajime Nakatani places writing in the historical context from Imperial China until the Cultural Revolution as the uncovering of a graphic regime, which is exercised through physical writing (2009: 7). In this sense, it is not we who write the script but it is the script that overwrites itself upon us.

Both of these perspectives confirm that *New English Calligraphy* uncovers the reproductive, unconscious mechanism. It is also a response to the question why Xu distances himself from the traditional calligraphic technique, hidden beyond the *Songti* fonts. In printing, in comparison to calligraphy, the printmaker is more conscious of being an artisan, someone who reproduces some patterns, than a painter-calligrapher, whose approach is strongly motivated by unconstrained expression.

The work should not necessarily be interpreted as a negative statement by Xu. The artist seems to identify himself as a 'facilitator of communication'. This can be testified to by the fact that his educational project featured a follow-up. Some audiences successfully mastered the square calligraphy and started corresponding with Xu. In this way, the new script has enabled a new form of communication in English. On the other hand, the uncovering of *habitus* can also provoke a broader reflection, which does not only concern artistic expression but also personal involvement within scriptural communication, and whether it can pose a threat to human individuality. Every single performance enhances the socially accepted patterns of behaviour that affect our selves. If I am right in contextualizing *Book from the Sky* in the *Daodejing*, Xu is certainly aware of the fact that linguistic behaviour imposes shapes and forms on *dao*, which ceases to be the uncarved block pu 樸 (Laozi 2006:81)⁶, and as a consequence its identity is lost. Accordingly, the script, which is to be a medium of communication, absorbs and forges the impeccable individuality of its user.

Considering the ambiguous rather than precisely uttered message of the work, the artist's statement is more moderate. His square calligraphy creates a new area of scriptural communication. In his other work, he proceeds even further in terms of possible participants. While *Square Word Calligraphy* is dedicated to English users only, *Book from the Ground* (*Dishu* 地書, 2003) challenges a multitude of ethnic languages and bases communication on a 'transcultural' script.

Book from the Ground is a piece of interactive art. It employs a text processing programme which converts input in an

⁶ Chapter 32.

ethnic language to an iconic script which, according to Xu, can be comprehensible to anyone, despite their particular linguistic background. It is worth remarking that it is an ongoing project as the artist's intention is to enable input in all the languages spoken in the world.

The script, whose iconicity is shifted to the very verge of making it most intuitive to anyone, allows communication between users who do not share the same language. In this way, Xu's artwork transcends cultural limitations. The function of the script, apart from its intuitive character is worth another examination. It is interesting to notice that in spite of being attached to meaning, the script at the same time has no pronunciation. In fact, it can be pronounced in any language. This brings the artwork close to *Book from the Sky*, where script also does not contain any phonetic indications. However, what makes the works significantly different is that in *Book from the Ground* the script conveys meaning. There is also an interesting parallel between the two works, which can be attributed to the *Daodejing* context. *Book from the Sky* seems to realize the unrealized potential of *dao*, which is expressed only to be inevitably annihilated. For this reason, its script has no communicative function. Despite the fact that the script in *Book from the Ground* is the vehicle of communication, its phonetic layer remains untouched as it is not given any standard pronunciation, thanks to which it can be manifested by any possible phonetic system.

Considering the chronological grounding of the works, we can state that in his artistic discussion of script as a medium of communication, Xu has reached a compromising solution that allows the script to be a tool for linguistic interaction, which concurrently remains considerably undetermined on some levels. Thanks to this, at least to some extent, the artworks remain convergent with *Daoist* linguistic scepticism.

Script as graphic medium

The relation between script and text does not exhaust Xu's reflections upon communication. He addresses it in a highly complex

way in *Landscape Landscript* (*Shanshui Xiesheng* 山水寫生, 1999), a collection of sketches drawn during the artist's trip to Nepal.

This trip would appear to be entirely essential for the contextualization of this particular artwork. Chinese painting tradition aims at sharing the artist's experience of scenery, and it has even developed special techniques, such as multiple perspectives, which allow the viewer to be engrossed in the picture by means of what can be described a 'disinterested' wandering. The fact that the trip is to be undertaken within a piece of art without a determined destination brings it close to *Daoist* philosophy, which aims at approximating *dao* in a way that is more intuitive than systematic.

The fact that language introduces categories which classify our experience questions its utility in the cognition of *dao*. However, similarly to *Daoist* philosophers, who wrestled with the problem, Xu discusses the usage of script in a different rather than semantic way. If we take a closer look at his landscapes, we will discover that they are constructed of Chinese characters. Thus, the primary, semantic role is exchanged for that of a brick that constructs scenery in the same way as painted lines. The script is essential here in transmitting the emotional state of the artist experiencing landscape, and it does not suggest it in an imposing, determined manner, as would be in the case in, for example, a descriptive passage. This brings Xu's script strategy very close to how the usage fable-language *yuyan* 寓言 is described in Chapter 27 of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. The fable-language consists in telling stories, thanks to which the listener does not concentrate on the particular meanings of words or utterances but rather on the story itself (*Zhuangzi* 2004: 947). In this way, the interpretative focus is shifted from category thinking to a more intuitive and holistic comprehension. As for the piece by Xu, speech functions more as imagery bricks.

Landscape Landscript is significantly different from the above pieces in that it addresses the issue of script in a most traditional artistic way. The exploration of script through landscape painting concurrently examines how traditional Chinese painters employ Chinese characters. Both in calligraphy and landscape painting, which also consist of inscriptions, the characters, apart from be-

ing another means of brushwork expression, maintain the same expressive importance in terms of the semantic layer. Considering this, Xu's artwork is a proposition for a different approach to script not only in communication on a general level but also more specifically in visual arts. Employing the characters on a more elementary level of meaning — for instance, composing a field with a repetition of the character 'cao 草' (which in Chinese stands for 'grass') — is definitely secondary to the 'architectural' function in creating the fabric of an oeuvre. In other words, we can state that the architecture cancels out the character's meanings.

Communication beyond script

Finally, we can address the issue of communication in a different way — i.e. if it can be successful without script or even language. If so, what kind of communication would it be?

This question is also present in Xu's art, particularly in his provocative installation *A Case Study of Transference* (*Yi ge Zhuanhuan Anlie de Yanjiu* 一個轉換案例的研究, 1994), which is also known as Culture Pigs. The installation involves a male and a female pig in what can be described as a peculiar pigsty, which is lined with books in many languages. The two pigs are printed with different scripts, one being inexistent Chinese characters, while the other involves nonsense words in English.

The printed script considerably puzzles the audience, who try to decipher the message printed on the animals. The task seems to be even more futile as they are confronted with two separate scripts that, as the installation title suggests, are to interact with each other. While engrossed in putting together the jigsaw puzzle, the pigs, which physically 'carry' the script, end up mating. The shunning not only of semantics but also semiotics is a great challenge for humans, but as the installation proves, it is not a problem for animals.

If we relate the work to the notion of being confined by Baudrillard's *habitus*, the animals are printed with a cultural code, which is a vehicle for a particular culture. The pigs, because of their ignorance of the script, do not develop any *habitus* relative

to it and do what is natural for them. In contrast, the act of public copulation is considered to be particularly obscene by the audience, mainly because of their habituation by a particular culture. This dichotomy shows the power of scriptural transfer in forging one's behaviour.

The work also reveals that there is communication other than linguistic, located far beyond script. Despite the meaning of script or lack of, it constitutes only a kind of optional, ornamental feature. This does not disconnect script from its original function of conveying meaning but serves to make it transparent.

Conclusion

We can state that Xu's works constitute a series of investigations into script, where he explores the phenomenon of communication, which is not always necessarily linguistic. The wide-scope and multiple approach towards the issue over many years has been achieved by considerably different approaches.

Being an artist, Xu is naturally interested in exploring personal engagement in work creation and shows that this kind of activity is both complex and dangerous. He uncovers that the streaming of the artist's individuality through script is materially processed, and as a result their 'output' individuality is unavoidably negotiated. The process also leaves an indelible mark on the artist, whose *habitus* increases in the degree of determination.

But script is not merely a tool for shaping one's *habitus*. By applying various methods of examination, Xu deliberately deconstructs the phenomenon of script on at least two levels. Within the realm of art, script does not abandon its semantic function. Although it possesses aesthetic and expressive features, the primary quality of conveying meaning remains central, which can be exemplified by, for example, poetic inscriptions. Xu challenges this state of affairs and has been undeniably successful. He also analyses the phenomenon of communication more generally, beyond art, to reach the conclusion that script can exist apart from its apparently indispensable linguistic property. This twofold deconstruction undermines the original identity, or even ontological status of script.

The deconstructionist presentation together with the disclosure of the oppressive character of script does not limit Xu's investigations exclusively to the issue of Chinese culture. The observations derived from the particular background of Chinese calligraphy and Cultural Revolution propaganda experience in fact address the more universal issue of communication, which is present in every particular culture.

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