CHAPTER FOUR

Making Natural Languages in Contemporary Chinese Art

RICHARD VINOGRAD

Since the mid-1980s Xu Bing and other contemporary Chinese artists have explored problems and contradictions of textual language, the interplay between textual and visual meanings, or between meaning and nonsense, and the status of cultural versus natural languages in a series of ongoing projects. Several of these projects involve aspects of what can be termed *natural languages*, although this term can comprise various topics that may not be immediately or transparently interrelated. For the present discussion, I use natural language to refer to four major categories that operate in contemporary art practice:

1. everyday, native language, as opposed to artificial or machine language
2. signs and talismans such as the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经) or talismans of the Five Sacred Mountains that are conventionally said to be of divine or heavenly, nonhuman origin
3. legible signs in the natural world or landscape
4. embodied texts in or on animal or human bodies, from surface tattoos to genetic codes

Broadly speaking, then, natural language references appear in the linguistic realm—primarily textual rather than spoken language, given the visual arts context of most projects—in the geophysical realm of landscape, and in the biological realm of animal and human bodies. The notion of the natural is of course not self-evident or unproblematic, any more than is a simple distinction between the cultural and the natural. Some version of that distinction seems often to function in contemporary art practice, however, even while being problematized and complicated, and thus it seems a useful starting point for discussion. Similarly, the identification of these artists as "Chinese" acknowledges the locus of their early training and fields of activity, as well as culturally based references to Chinese language practices and texts, without overlooking the international or transnational contexts in which many of these projects appeared, or the conditions of intercultural encounter that precipitated many of them.

Xu Bing has engaged all of these types of natural language in his work, where in one or another form it is an intensive and ongoing preoccupation, but a concern with language, writing, and the problematics of meaning is very widespread in post-1985 Chinese art. There may be particular historical reasons for this, having to do with the coming of age of artists whose formative years were passed under the hypertrophied semiotic regime of the Cultural Revolution. Ideological slogans, big character posters, the ubiquitous Little Red Book, and other visual-textual machinery of political discourse and propaganda were so pervasive that both language and its material embodiments were an inescapable part of public consciousness. In a manner similar to the torrent of Mao imagery (often parodistic or critical) that was unleashed in the same post-1985 era as a kind of return of the impressed, involving a working out of the overload of Mao image exposure during the Cultural Revolution, we might see the wave of language-based art—often nonsensical and deliberately obscure—as a long-duration response to collective linguistic trauma.[1]

The deployment of natural language concerns in contemporary Chinese art practice is, however, so diverse, and so full of ambiguities and self-reflexive positions that any univocal explanatory context—even one so potent as the political horizon of Maoist China—is bound to seem inadequate. Indeed, the same post-1985 era was also marked by the introduction of waves of literary, semiotic, and cultural theory into Chinese academic and intellectual circles.[2] It is not difficult to see a widespread concern with language, text, and meaning issues in the visual arts as either a deployment of such critical and semiotic theory, or as a reactive manifestation of weariness toward a theoretical oversaturation that might have seemed as pervasive and as inescapable as Maoist rhetoric.

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There are still other, historically more deeply situated horizons to the language-centered arts of recent decades. China has always been marked in the European worldview as the site of ultimate linguistic and communicative difference—difficult or impenetrable language combined with inscrutable embodied facial expression. Paradoxically, for Leibniz and others in the late seventeenth century, China held out hope as the source of universal language: in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易经) hexagrams conveyed to him by the Jesuit Father Bouvet, and whose invention he attributed to the ancient Fohy (Fuxi 伏羲), Leibniz saw the origins and counterparts of his own binary arithmetic.[3] The idea of a universal language, especially one of purportedly deep antiquity, was in turn linked in some ways with the quest for humankind's original, more or less pictographic, natural language by Kircher and others.[4] Such deeply situated cultural forms as the hexagrams are referenced in contemporary Chinese art practice, but the broader residue of this deep history of cultural encounters may have been the felt need on the part of contemporary Chinese artists to negotiate the horizon of linguistic difference as part of their reengagement with the international art world.

It is a long way round from Mao to Leibniz to Fuxi to Xu Bing, but the centrality of paradox at least survives the journey. Natural language is to begin with a vexed term. The most common usage nowadays is to distinguish natural spoken or written languages from artificial languages, that is to say, computer languages or codes, or machine languages. Native language ability is indeed, according to Steven Pinker and Noam Chomsky, natural or instinctive—humans seem to be prewired for language use and understanding and for the employment of a universal grammar.[5] At the same time, it is a commonplace of semiotic theory that language systems are constructed sign systems, arbitrary in the sense that they have no natural relationship to their referents, with such exceptions, important in the present context, of such phenomena as onomatopoetic sounds or pictographic scripts.

The notion of "making" natural language also seems intrinsically paradoxical, and similarly, many of the uses of natural language in contemporary art contexts involve paradox or internal contradictions: natural languages are made or performed, rather than discovered; natural languages are made unnatural, unfamiliar, and difficult; and natural languages are often deployed to unmake meaning.

LIMINAL LEXICONS

While most of the projects we are concerned with do not involve ordinary or natural language in the current usage, some of Xu Bing's projects deal with natural language in the most common sense. The *Square Word Calligraphy* (Figure 4.1) project, for example, involves natural English-language words that are deformed and defamiliarized in their graphic representations. Thus the tension between the natural and the artificial/constructed that is intrinsic to the natural language concept is echoed in the tension between familiar and defamiliarized native language in the square word calligraphy mode. The English or other Roman alphabetic language-using reader enters into a liminal or interlinguistic space, in which the 'natural,' relatively automatic, or unconscious process of reading and decoding is made laborious and strange. This is a space of a certain discomfort, puzzlement, and, ultimately, of wonderment, in which the visitor/reader may feel that she has become all at once literate in a new language. The *Square Word Calligraphy* "classroom" installations are ultimately congenial and rewarding spaces. The lightened semantic load of the texts involved—often nursery rhymes or personal names—has something of the accommodating character of Chinese primer texts such as the *Three-Character Classic* (*Sanzi jing* 三字经). In that way, the classroom spaces of *Square Word Calligraphy* take on some of the retrospective, nostalgic aura of preschool or primary school classrooms or other early reading spaces.

One might say that *A Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu*, Figure I.1) also plays on the same tension between familiar natural language forms and the estrangement from, or defamiliarization of, the invented graphs. Compared to *Square Word Calligraphy*, the emotional tone of *A Book from the Sky* is much less accommodating, and more fraught with frustration and anxiety, which may account in part for the vitriolic critical reaction it stimulated in China, within its primary and "natural" audience. Native natural language is made illegible and difficult for readers of Chinese, who are cast into a psycholinguistic limbo of elusive meaning, always in sight but not quite within reach. It is a psychic space of deliberate illiteracy and dis-ease, with some of the symptoms of illness in its discomforts and self-alienation. It can be at the same time a liberating and exhilarating space of neologism, populated by fragmentary sememes awaiting reformulation into a poetics of nonsense.

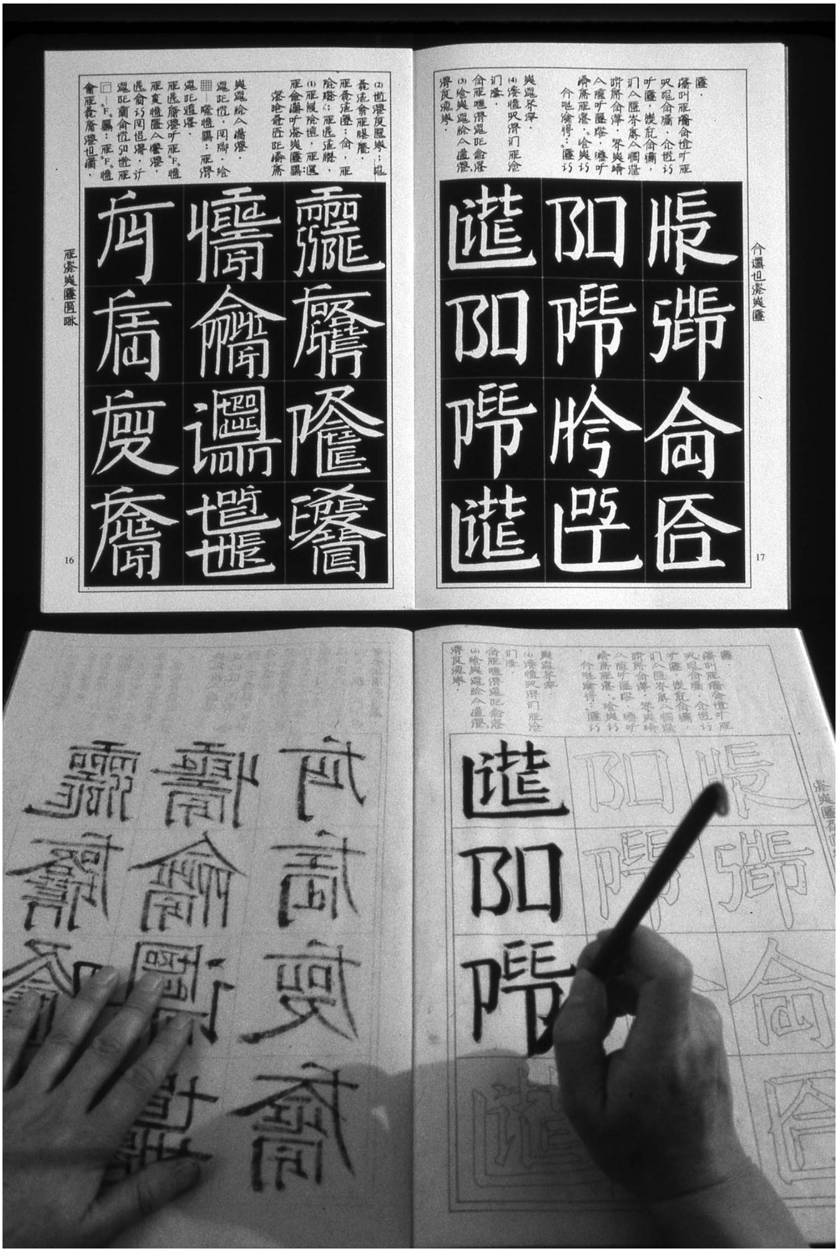

FIGURE 4.1. *Square Word Calligraphy*, Xu Bing, mixed-media installation, 1994–1996. (Courtesy of the artist.)

In both *Square Word Calligraphy* and *A Book from the Sky*, exhilaration and disquiet alike arise from the blurring between the cultural and the natural. In their loss, the cultural codes of reading and language are felt to have the status of natural abilities, whose absence occasions the same kind of disorientation as the failure of space-time coordinates. This loss is all the more poignant for being surrounded by dense material environments of reading, a lectic landscape that reminds us that reading is not purely a mental or psychological act, but one situated in reading places and supported by the physical and tactile presence of books, paper, and even computer screens. The sensorium of reading and printed matter is offered in abundance, from the relief of carved woodblocks to the drape of thread-bound volumes, even as the reader is cast into an alexic state.

SIGNS OF DISPLACEMENT

The concept of natural languages had a deep historical basis in China and elsewhere in the world. The idea of a legible world, or of the phenomenal world as a panoply of signs, had a central position in the European medieval worldview, and in Chinese metaphysics as well.[6] In China the idea of revealed heavenly images or signs as the origins of writing was very powerful, and often located the idea of natural language in the visible, written, or graphic primarily, rather than in spoken language. The trigrams were viewed as a form of natural language, related variously to the state of primordial chaos, to phenomenal reality, and to the revealed cosmic diagrams known as the River Diagram and Luo Writing that were supposed to have emerged out of the Yellow and Luo Rivers on the backs of tortoises.[7] Another form of putatively natural language script involved the Daoist talismans (*fu* 符) or esoteric magic scripts used as amulets or sometimes representing the Five Sacred Mountains, in diagrammatic forms that map the infrastructure or inscape of those sites.[8]

Such forms of natural language were often referenced in Chinese avant-garde art of the mid-1980s and afterwards. Huang Yongping's *Roulette Wheel: Paintings Created According to Random Instructions* of 1985 used trigram signs as part of artistic divination techniques related to the *Book of Changes* to guide his painting production.[9] These deployments of versions of "natural" signs were in every case deeply cultural, and even intercultural, in their contexts. Huang Yongping's divination paintings reference aleatory production methods of the early twentieth-century Dada and

Surrealist artists, Breton and Duchamp chief among them, a connection elsewhere indicated by Huang's leading role in the Xiamen Dada anti-art performances.[10] The *Book of Changes* signified not only primordial Chinese culture but also its reception in the West, as perhaps the best known (if not necessarily the best understood) of the Chinese classics through Wilhelm's interpretive translation accompanied by Carl Jung's forward.[11]

Huang Yongping also produced large-scale land art projects in France that reference *Book of Changes* trigram patterns and Daoist talismanic signs.[12] These evoke a context of geomantic practice, with geomancy involving a kind of nature code that renders the landscape readable. At the same time, the location of Huang's talismanic and *Book of Changes* signs in the French landscape recalls the context of his participation in the multicultural program for *Magiciens de la Terre*, in which Chinese geomantic traditions were both respected and re-exoticized in the company of African, South American, and Oceanic cultural practices.[13] Gu Wenda's projects also reference the gamesmanship of Chinese artists positioning themselves in an international art world arena, in which the currency of a familiar exoticism played a helpful role. Gu's serial *United Nations* projects suggest a globalizing agenda through a copresence of multiple invented scripts—with the pseudo-Chinese script possessing some of the unreadable familiarity of Daoist talismanic signs—that are "naturally" interrelated by their realization in ethnically differentiated human hair samples, another "natural" biological language of ethnic typology.[14]

Many of these early examples of cross-cultural natural language are magnified, hypertrophied, and one might say outspoken in size and scale—visual shouts across the geographical and cultural divides that separated China from the rest of the world. Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* installations were amplified in another way, in the sheer quantity of their invented graphs (Figure I.1). There is an enveloping sea of text on the floor, surrounding walls of text, and ceiling/tent/sky of text in these installations that materializes the omnipresence of language and semiosis—a very real prison house of encompassing language for the visitor, and a psychological space of detention/attention for the Sinoliterate viewer, who cannot easily get the alluring promise of signification out of his or her head.

Despite the enormous and obvious labor of making that went into projects like *A Book from the Sky* and *United Nations Series*, the viewer/visitor's role is paramount. Whatever significance, or nonsignificance, there is in such projects is not a message communicated from the artist to viewer but rather is produced in the space of encounter between graphs or environments and the viewer's response, even if it is only one of bewilderment. The visitor's active and participatory role in making natural languages is explicit in the *Square Word Calligraphy* (Figure 4.1) writing stations, but it was no less central to *A Book from the Sky*. Indeed, that now commonly employed title for the installation seems to have been adopted by Xu Bing as a replacement for the earlier *Mirror to Analyze the World* because of the response of certain visitors, in the same fashion that the critical response to his Great Wall rubbing project contributed the now standard title *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.[15]

The Chinese language equivalent of *A Book from the Sky* (*Tianshu* 天書) might be rendered in a fuller and more historically based translation as "Heavenly Scriptures." This version acknowledges the long-duration importance of "Heaven" (*tian*) in Chinese political cosmology, and the specific locution of *Tianshu* as a label for Daoist talismanic writings, one of the kinds of purportedly natural languages discussed earlier, which may be considered "scriptures" because of their religious aura and contexts. The Daoist *Tianshu* may be considered a form of natural language because they are ostensibly not human productions and are not translatable into the codes of conventional language.

Because *Tianshu* are religious and untranslatable graphs, the labeling of Xu Bing's installation with that term seems pejorative in terms of socialist aesthetics. The term suggests incomprehensibility, and thus inutility and social isolation, as well as Daoist mysteries or mystifications, and hence at least a tinge of religious superstition. The title *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* similarly had critical and pejorative implications, including futile activity and the taint of counterrevolutionary orientation.[16] Xu Bing's openness to adopting pejorative characterizations of his works suggests that for him, meaning is not just unstable in the poststructuralist sense, but is literally what the viewer makes of it. "Making" natural languages thus refers to an at least tripartite process: the invention of new symbols by the artists; the facture of material embodiments of such symbols, in print or woven hair or other media as the case might be, and with all the consequent significance attached to those choices of materials and media; and the meaning-making produced by the reader/viewer/visitor in his or her perceptual, bodily, and psychological/intellectual engagement with the texts.

This insistence on making and production, and the accompanying magnification of scale and quantity of pseudo-semantic forms seems compensatory for the evacuation of discursive meaning in projects like *A Book from the Sky*. One might say that the making is the meaning. Or, in another and equally valid sense, the meaning lies in the unmaking of meaning, especially if we emphasize the interpretation of such projects as critiques of the vacuousness of political discourse. In a curiously complementary way, the later *Square Word Calligraphy*, which seems to offer restitution of meaning and communication, and even a mildly utopian international translatability, diminishes in significance by focusing on personal names and nursery rhymes for its demonstration texts—texts whose discursive significance is less important than their phonetic structure. It seems entirely characteristic of Xu Bing's artistic strategy to offer something and then take it away, presenting a perpetual horizon of things just out of reach.

GROUNDING NATURAL LANGUAGES

While most of the natural language projects discussed in the preceding were pure text or reading environments, however densely materialized, Huang Yongping's talismanic graphs in the French landscape are reminiscent of land art, large-scale shapings, borrowings, or employments of the geophysical landscape for art projects. Since some Daoist talismanic graphs were semi-iconic signs of sacred mountains, this grounding of graphs in the landscape seems appropriate. There is a cultural grounding at work here as well; a reference to deep cultural practices that lends the contemporary projects a certain historical weight and resonance. This strategy is also at work in *A Book from the Sky*, with its referencing of Song dynasty printing and bookbinding practices, and in many other contemporary Chinese art projects. Typically, in both Huang's and Xu's projects the displacements and distortions of deep cultural practices—into the French countryside or into nonsensical graphs—makes it clear that the contemporary artists are leveraging the cultural capital invested in those practices for their own purposes, rather than simply invoking tradition.

Any kind of large-scale inscription of or on the landscape evokes both casual graffiti on rocks and cliffs at famous scenic sites or pilgrimage spots, and programmatic monumental cliff carvings like those of Sutra Stone Valley in Shandong.[17] Some of Xu Bing's

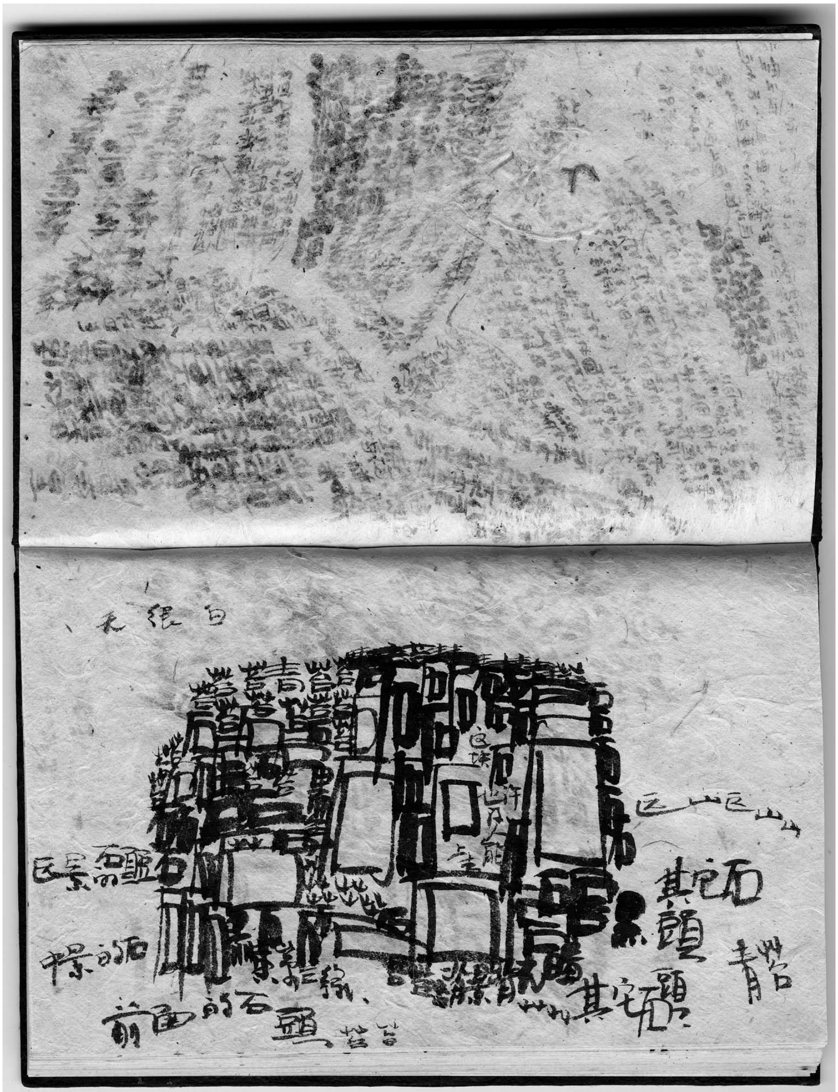
天很白
其它石頭
前面的石頭
其它石頭

FIGURE 4.2. *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange*, Xu Bing, ink on paper, 1999–2000. (Courtesy of the artist.)

recent projects such as *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange* of 2000 (Figure 4.2) involve not inscriptions on the landscape but landscape as inscription, in which the visually constitutive elements of landscape painting designs are composed of legible graphs—forests composed of *mu* 木 or *shu* 樹 'tree' or *lin* 林 'grove' graphic clusters; ridges and cliffs composed of *shi* 石 'stone' graphs, *qiu* 丘 'hill' graphs and the like.[18]

Xu Bing's strategy has a somewhat removed, deep historical antecedent in the Japanese Heian period *ashide*, or reed writing, in which pictorialized *kana* syllabary graphs, originally derived from Chinese characters, were woven into pictures in semi-disguised forms to convey religious or poetic sentiments through a hybrid picture-text.[19] Whatever Xu's awareness of this Japanese genre, which has some congruencies with his interest in visual games, interactivity, and acts of recognition, he shifts the parameters from text embedded within, or underneath, a dominant pictorial design, to a more thoroughly textualized form in which the landscape design is entirely composed from graphs. The effect is to visualize and foreground the process of linguistic categorization and conceptualization that lurks behind perception and recognition, pictorial or otherwise. Do we "see" visual forms of rocks and trees? Or rather linguistic-conceptual categories of "rocks," and "trees"? Characteristically, by fashioning his graphs into a landscape painting rather than a landscape, Xu Bing simultaneously interrogates the status of pictorial representations, as alternatively iconic or symbolic, in C.S. Peirce's terminology.[20]

Equally characteristically, Xu pushes the interrogation further and in several directions in this and other work. In *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange* (Figure 4.2), graphic forms become iconic in two ways. Some like, *mu* 木, 'tree' or *tian* 田 'farm field,' or *cao* 艸 'grass' look like schematic versions of their referents, and are thus loosely pictographic. Others are grouped in ways that visually resemble, through their density, tonality, rhythm, or arrangement, trees on a hillside or a ridge of stones above fields. Symbolic forms can suggest diagrammatic maps or mental notations, as when graphs are strung together in phrases, such as 'a strip of red emerges from the ground.' Thus the total ensemble of *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange* has elements of sketch, map, and diary notation all at once.

In the related *Landscript* installation for the Biennale of Sydney (2000), Xu shifted his arena from representational to perceptual space with a mixture of Chinese and *Square Word Calligraphy* graphs painted on the glass windowpanes of the Art Gallery of New South Wales that echoed the forms of urban landscape visible through the same glass. Since almost everything in the field of vision except for a few trees is humanly produced, there is little tension here between even a represented or illusionistic nature and cultural forms of writing as in *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange*, an aspect emphasized by the outspokenly geometric arrangement of the graphs in *Landscript 2000.* What does seem at issue again is the interplay or inextricability of perception and conception or categorization, or, to put it another way, the filtering or screening effect that mental categorizations have on perceptual experience.

Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange takes place entirely within representational space, while the Sydney version of *Landscript* involves "real" perceptual space of the cityscape that is framed by the picture-plane-like glass of the gallery windows, so that it too has the quality of a pictorial or mediated experience. *Reading Landscape: After Yuan Jiang* (Figure 4.3) for the Sackler exhibition engages both the representational space of the Yuan Jiang landscape painting and the physical space of the gallery and the viewer's perceptual field. By extending the now three-dimensional, materialized carved graphs for landscape elements like 'grass,' 'water,' and 'cloud' into the intermediate space between viewer and flat scroll painting, Xu Bing suggests that linguistic forms are in some sense more "real" than the illusionistically representational forms of the landscape painting. At the same time, the extension of the operative space of the painting beyond its mounting into three-dimensional space tends to emphasize the physical status of the painting as an object, comprised as much by its framing silk mounting as by its pictorial representational content. This double transposition—from pictorial representation to textual graph, and from flat picture to interspatial sign—further suggests that language is always present in nature as a kind of interference pattern. By juxtaposing graphs for landscape elements with the pictorial representation of landscape by Yuan Jiang, Xu presents a world thoroughly inhabited by linguistic signs. He further conveys a materialization of cognitive perception, as the pictorial images are transposed into linguistic categories in the process of perception/reception, literally "before our eyes."

Song Dong' s 1996 performance work *Printing on Water* provides an instructive precedent and comparison for Xu Bing's engagements of language with the natural world.[21] Song's performance, though earlier than Xu Bing's projects discussed here, took the further conceptual step of trying to physically imprint textual language on the natural world, without the mediation of representation, paintings, or gallery spaces. In place of the traditional practice of accomplishing that through carving enduring text on stone cliffs, Song Dong sat in the Lhasa River and repeatedly plunged a carved seal into the flowing water. Song Dong's event is saturated with

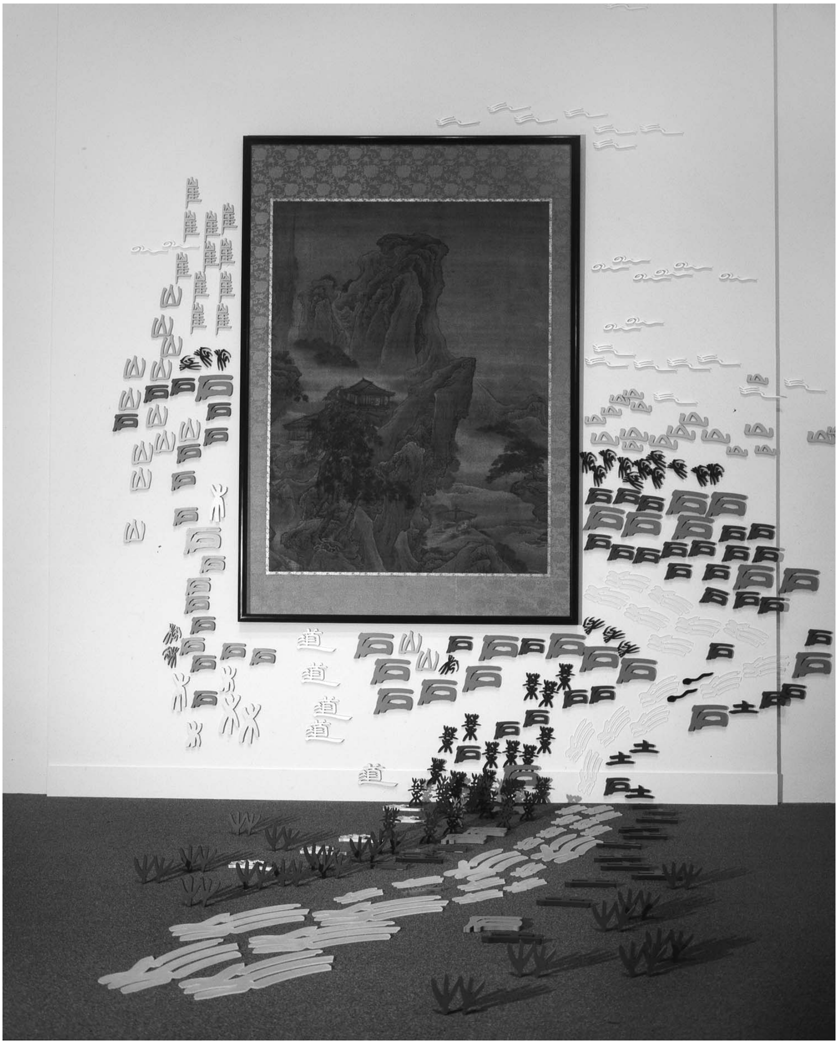

FIGURE 4.3. *Reading Landscape: After Yuan Jian*, Xu Bing, 2001. Wood, PVC, acrylic paint, and Chinese landscape painting, installation view. (Courtesy of the artist, photo: Tsao Hsingyuan.)

futility, made all the more poignant through a near-ritualistic reiteration. The flowing river refuses the imprint of Song's carved seal, in the way that the natural refuses the imprint of the cultural, and just as the phenomenal world refuses containment by linguistic categories. Song's performance is an exercise in negation of meaning, other than that invested in the performativity of the event.

SOMATIC TEXTS

Printing on Water dissolves textual significance, but produces a kind of performative meaning through the rhythmic, embodied gesture of stamping the water surface. Gu Wenda's *United Nations Series* involves another kind of embodied language, or pseudo-language, in its use of braided human hair as the medium for invented graphs and scripts, conveying specific physical and ethnic messages that transcend the ambiguities of the scripts. In a number of recent projects Xu Bing and other contemporary Chinese artists have explored biological languages separate from ordinary speech and written language. These could potentially include facial expressions, gestural and body language, identifying markings, and color display, all the way down to forms and behaviors as expressions of genetic traits, which are in turn embodied in genetic codes, conventionally represented by an alphabetic language of DNA sequences. As with many other forms of natural languages explored by Xu and his contemporaries, biological and genetic languages prove often to be competitive with, or destructive of, standard language and its understanding. Such bio-art projects move the problematics of natural languages from the relatively uneventful realm of landscape into the proximate and unsettling arena of animal and human bodies.

Xu's 1995 *American Silkworm Series Part I and II*, for example, involved in its second phase, silkworm larvae scattered upon the pages of books, other printed matter, and even computer monitors to spin their cocoons (Figure 4.4).[22] In the process, the silkworms covered the texts with an increasingly dense filigree of silk, ultimately obscuring and disfiguring the texts beneath. The Chinese word for silkworm, *can* 蠶, is also a homonym for disfigurement and destruction 殘, an apt description for the effects of the silkworms' biological expression on the texts. Silk threads have something of the quality of a text in their linearity and their suitability for spinning and weaving into a textile, just as yarns are spun and stories are woven into texts. The silkworms' texts are thus in some ways an overwriting of the printed texts, and suggest the obliteration of culture by the relentlessly natural expression of languages of the biological world, as well as by the destructive processes of time and history.

Xu Bing's *Guangdong Wild Zebra Herd* (Figure 4.5) borrows the natural language of species-specific markings to transform

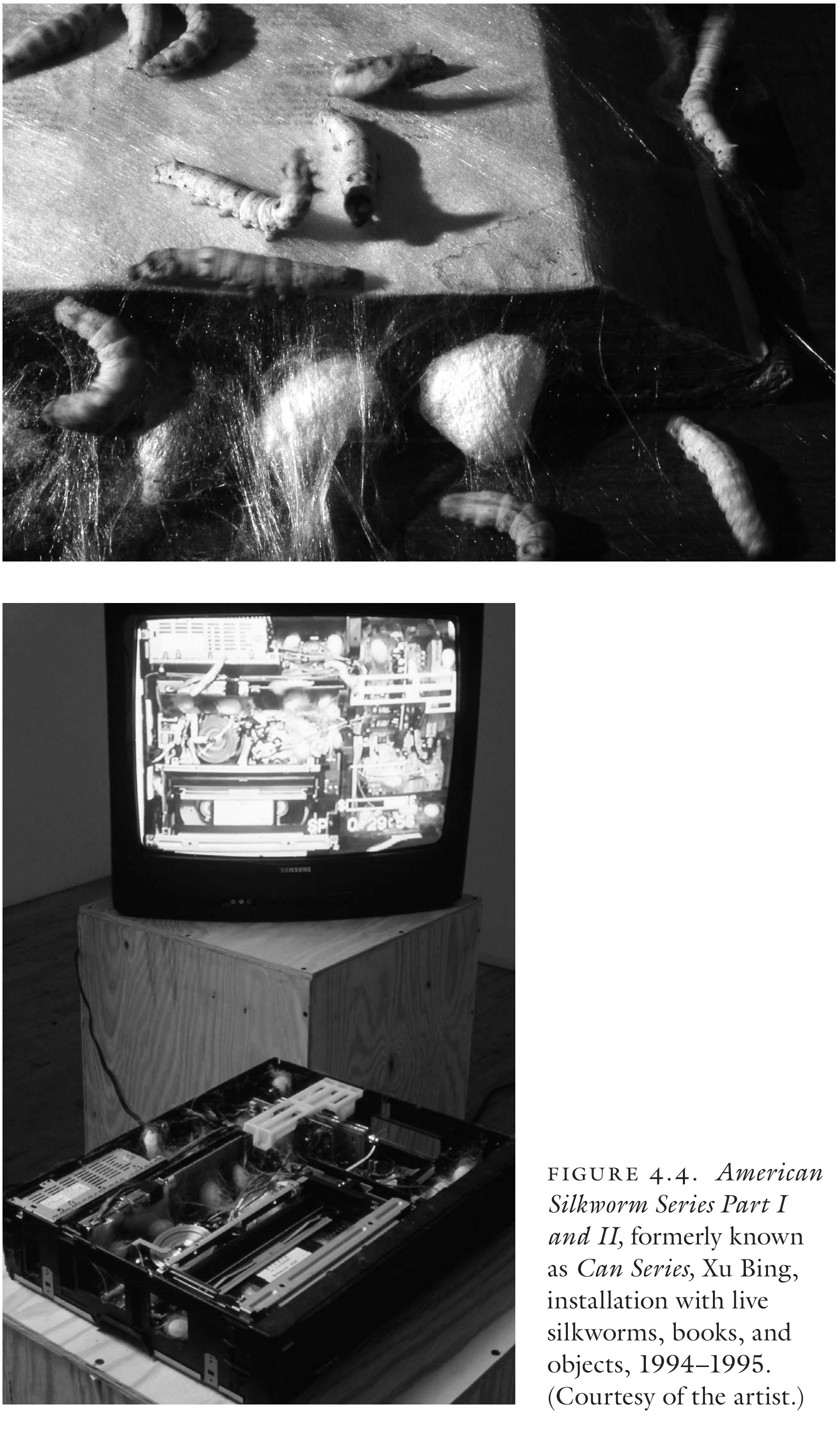

FIGURE 4.4. *American Silkworm Series Part I and II,* formerly known as *Can Series,* Xu Bing, installation with live silkworms, books, and objects, 1994–1995. (Courtesy of the artist.)

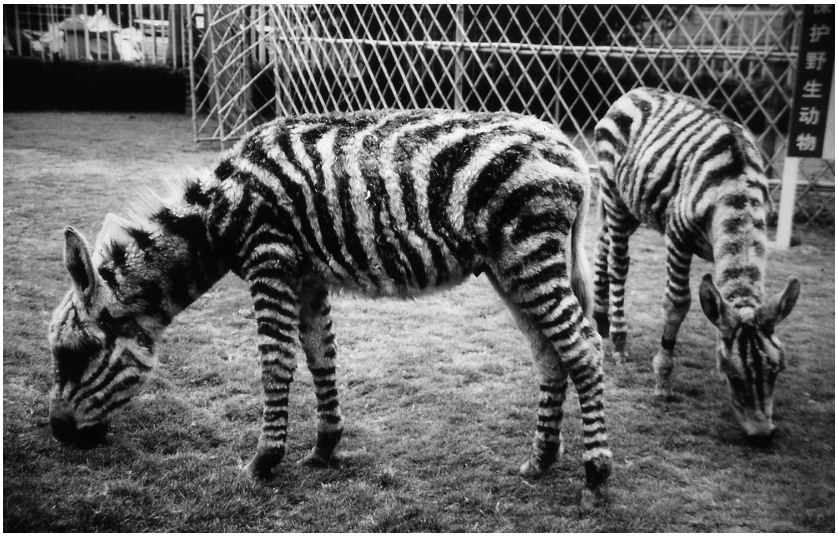

FIGURE 4.5. *Guangdong Wild Zebra Herd*, Xu Bing, installation with live donkeys, Guangzhou Biennale, 2002. (Courtesy of the artist.)

ordinary donkeys into something exotic through painted zebra stripes.[23] This both imitates and denies natural signs in a way that evokes camouflage, makeup, visual mimicry, and deception as fundamental counterfoils to the legibility of nature. Camouflage and visual mimicry are, of course, part of "natural" strategies of deception practiced by plants, invertebrates, and mammals alike, even if unselfconsciously. *Guangdong Wild Zebra Herd* (2002) and the related *Panda Zoo* (1998) installation of masked pigs with real bamboo and a painted mountainscape backdrop, all within a gallery space's "nature preserve," involve a deliberate human deception that differs from the human intervention and arrangement of the silkworm larvae in *American Silkworm Series.*[24] At the same time, these projects can yield a reflexive interrogation of the conditions of painting as well as of human visual deception: is painting in some ways a natural activity as much as a cultural one, a human counterpart to natural deception strategies?

Similarly, we might ask if language use is ultimately natural, even with, or perhaps especially because of, all its artifice, ornament, rhetoric, and lying. Xu Bing's work constantly probes and critiques language culture as an instrument of political manipulation and deception, as a mental prison, as a pretext for controlling and

<i>Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art : Cultural and Philosophical Reflections</i>, edited by Hsingyuan Tsao, and Roger T. Ames, State University of New York Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/newschool/detail.action?docID=3407104.
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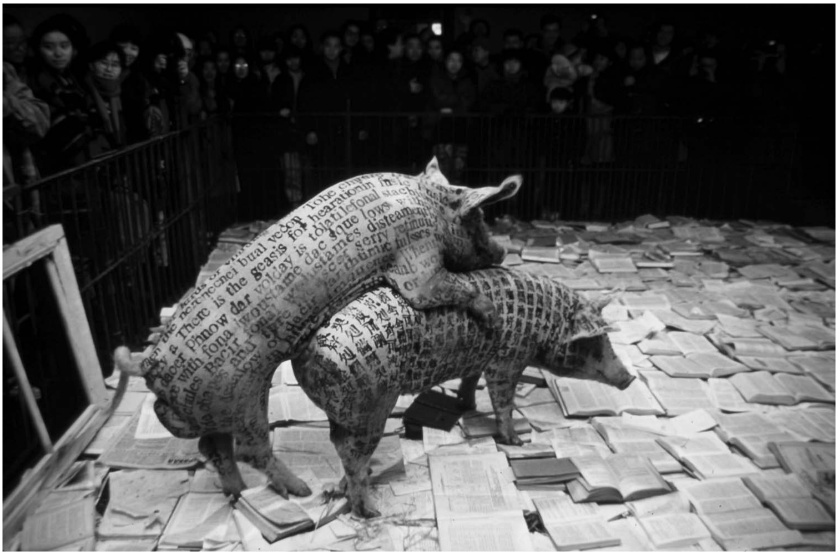
abusing animals, and as an interference pattern in our visual perception of the natural world. At the same time, this critique is not protected from a reflexive realization that language and textuality are pervasive human activities, perhaps distinctively natural ones.

Xu Bing's *Net and Leash* installation of 1998 involved a human constraint of animals, not through species counterfeiting but through language.[25] Sheep were leashed with a chain of poetic text, and caged within a materialized and enclosing exhibition statement, as if to show that language conceptions are as much a source of human dominion over animals as are physical constraints, and that both humans and animals are perpetually caged by conceptual structures that are invisible without a special effort of attention. Like the natural world landscapes of *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange*, other animal bodies are, it would seem, only perceivable through a scrim of linguistic consciousness.

Xu Bing's *A Case Study in Transference* performance involved copulating pigs whose skins were imprinted with invented pseudo-Chinese graphs from the *A Book from the Sky* lexicon and nonsense English words, all the while trampling on books underfoot (Figure 4.6).[26] The project seems to celebrate the triumph of animal instinct over linguistic culture, and simultaneously to satirize utopian hopes for intercultural communication, since what is being transmitted here, however primally, is in any case nonsense text. Some subtexts of the project involved questions of cultural and gender dominance and subordination, since the male pig was imprinted with pseudo-English text and the sow with pseudo-Chinese graphs. Further, since the pigs were culturally marked, their mating could be considered a kind of mock miscegenation. Whether intended or not, the genetic implications of the performance do in fact provide a frame for the event, against which matters such as the uncontrollable dissemination of the semiotic process take on further resonance. The ultimate controlling language for animal sexual behavior is not the imprinted nonsense text on the pigs' skins, but the sequences of the genetic code that they exchange, a reminder that "the genetic code must be regarded as the most fundamental of all semiotic networks and therefore as the prototype for all other signaling systems used by animals, including man."[27]

Questions of genetic dissemination and miscegenation do not seem so far-fetched in the context of the extended version of *A Case Study of Transference*, the follow-up *Cultural Animal* performance where the pseudo-English pig attempted to mate with a male



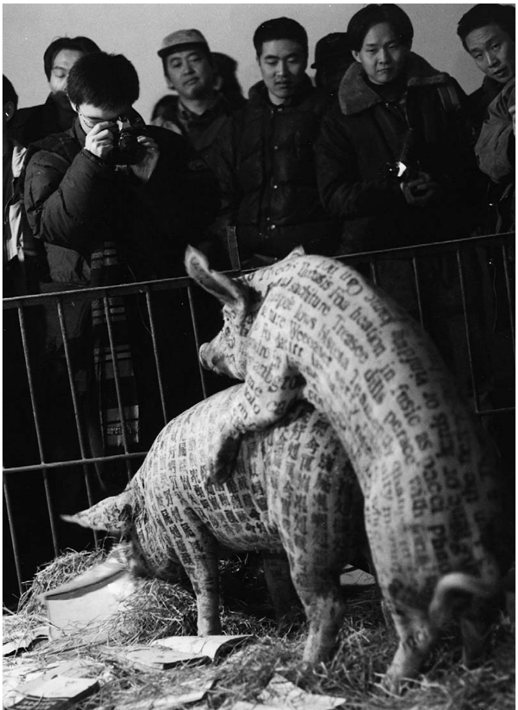


FIGURE 4.6. *Case Study for Transference #1*, Xu Bing, performance at the Han Mo Art Center in Beijing, 1994. (Courtesy of the artist.)

mannequin imprinted with pseudo-Chinese graphs.[28] This mock reverse bestiality sets the terms of language, gender, culture, reality, and artifice into a whirling spiral toward the abyss from which it is hard to pull out into any stable plane of interpretation. At least the animal–human interaction in this, and in less flagrant and disturbing forms in Xu Bing's animal art, reminds us that related aspects of the genetic, the natural world, and the linguistic horizon of identity all operate in the human sphere as well.

This has most often been visualized through the imprinting medium of the tattoo, including Huang Yan's 1999 *Chinese Landscape—Tattoo*, in which the figure is no longer in the landscape as in traditional Chinese landscape painting, but the landscape is on the human figure. This is an act of self-exoticization but is also a reminder that the natural world is perceived through a cultural lens, even at the stage of embodied, physical perception. Zhang Huan's *Family Tree* photographic series visualizes genealogy not as an internal genetic process nor wholly as a physical manifestation of appearance, but rather as a simultaneously cultural-linguistic-physical category in which the nominal genealogical sequence is tattooed on the face in gradual overlay to the point of a complete erasure and self-negation of personal identity.[29] Textual language repeated and overlaid is transformed into bodily marking. Qiu Zhijie's *Tattoo 1* photograph of 1997 utilizes the body and face as a natural surface for a graph that is similarly self-negating and marks a full and reciprocal incorporation of language into the human subject, and of the human subject into language.[30]

Each of the modes of natural language we have encountered represents an alternative to conventional language. Even *Square Word Calligraphy*, which comes closest to ordinary natural language in the most widespread usage of the term, involves a radical deformation and defamiliarization of scripts so that a conscious effort of recognition is required for decipherment, unlike the more or less automatic recognition of natural languages. This search for alternatives suggests a pervasive horizon of dissatisfaction with or mistrust of conventional language, whether from its liability to political or commercial manipulation, its openness to ambiguity, or from an exhaustion of impact through overuse and abuse. The kinds of natural language alternatives that are employed—linked variously to elemental sign systems, to the geophysical world, or to biological bodies—do not, however, provide the security of authenticity, simplicity, and directness of meaning that might be expected.

The overarching outlook of the various projects ranges from the extreme distrust and pessimism about the possibility of meaningful communication in *A Book from the Sky* (Figure I.1) and *Printing on Water* to the hopeful transculturalism of *Square Word Calligraphy* (Figure 4.1*)* and *United Nations Series*, but in each case the starting point is at least a condition of frustration of expectations, defamiliarization, and categorical disorientation.

To counterbalance these insecurities, these projects offer primarily the materiality of natural language-making contexts, as process of facture (*A Book from the Sky* and *United Nations Series*), as embodied text (*American Silkworm Series*, Figure 4.4), or as perceptual horizon (*Landscript*). Natural languages are thus sometimes deployed in ways that are compensatory for language loss and corruption, or restorative of deep cultural identities. More often than not, however, natural languages are referenced in ways that deny, suspend, complicate, and interfere with legibility and meaning. In contrast to the intrinsic promise of natural language as a universal code of intelligibility, contemporary art practice often denatures language.

NOTES

1. For a sampling of Mao imagery in this period see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 43–53.
2. See, for example, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism and Cultural Theories: Lectures in China (Houxiandaizhuyi he Wenhualilun.* (Xi'an: Shaanxi Teacher's University, 1987). See also Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); also Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*, 14.
3. See Frank J. Swetz, "Leibniz, the Yijing, and the Religious Conversion of the Chinese," *Mathematics Magazine* (October 2003).
4. See Haun Saussy, "*China Illustrata:* The Universe in a Cup of Tea," in *The Great Art of Knowing: The Baroque Encyclopedia of Athanasius Kircher*, ed. Daniel Stolzenberg, 111–112 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries, 2001), for the "supposed natural stage common to Egyptian and Chinese writing."
5. See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (New York: Morrow, 1994).
6. For medieval theories of natural signs, though the primarily linguistic rather than the theological, see Andrea Tabarroni, "Mental Signs and the Theory of Representation in Ockham," in *On the Medieval Theory of*

Signs, ed. Umberto Eco and Costantino Marmo, 195–224 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989).

7. See Stephen Little, ed., *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: The Art Institute, 2000), cat. no. 14, p. 139.
8. See ibid., cat. nos. 53–55, pp. 201–205, for early, Tang dynasty examples of Daoist talismanic manuscripts from Dunhuang.
9. See Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 15.
10. Ibid., 198–199.
11. Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes.*
12. *Sacrifice au feu*, at Saint-Victoire, France, in 1990.
13. See Jean-Hubert Martin, et al., eds., *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), 152–153.
14. See Gao Minglu, *Inside Out*, 4.
15. For the background of the titles of both projects, see Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*, 41–52.
16. Ibid., 41.
17. See Wen Fong, et al., eds., *Images of the Mind: Selections from the Edward L. Elliott Family and John B. Elliott Collections of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting at The Art Museum, Princeton, University* (Princeton, NJ: The Art Museum, 1984), 82.
18. See Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*, 72–73.
19. See Julia Meech-Pekarik, "Disguised Scripts and Hidden Poems in an Illustrated Heian Sutra: Ashide and Uta-e in the Heike Nogyo," *Archives of Asian Art* 31 (1977–1978): 53–78.
20. See Robin Allott, "Language and the Origin of Semiosis," in *Origins of Semiosis: Sign Evolution in Nature and Culture*, ed. Winfried Noth, 255–268 (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994).
21. See Gao Minglu, *Inside Out*, 9.
22. See Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*, 63.
23. See Wu Hung, Wang Huansheng, and Feng Boyi, eds., *The First Guangzhou Triennial: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 480–481.
24. For *Panda Zoo*, see ibid., 2.
25. Ibid., 41.
26. Cf. the discussion in ibid., 60–62.
27. See Thomas A. Sebeok, "Goals and Limitations of the Study of Animal Communication," in *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1972), 117.
28. See Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*, fig. 44, p. 62.
29. For both Huang Yan and Zhang Huan works, see Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, eds., *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2004), cat. 101, p. 140, and cat. 107.
30. See Wu Hung, *Transience*, 173–174, 22.

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