Imperfect Metamorphoses of Language: Retracing a Childlike Vision with Artist Xu Bing.

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Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze three language installations by the Chinese artist Xu Bing: *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2001), *Book from the Sky* (1987–91), and *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom* (1997). In these three installations, Xu consciously makes language "imperfect," so as to allow the viewer to reexperience a childlike and playful relation to language. In *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*, Xu restages a well-known Chinese folktale through the creation of a chain of words from different languages that all share the meaning of "monkey." The artwork offers an alternative reading to the Tower of Babel narrative regarding the multiplicity of language, which departs from the dominant narrative of viewing multilingualism as an undesirable deviation from a perfect divine language. In *Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, the meaning of characters is either devoid or veiled. The viewer is confronted with a linguistic milieu that is both familiar and strange, where recognizable patterns of writing become penetrated with "errors" and "mistakes." Both artworks invite the viewer to rethink how so-called perfect language influences its speakers and whether it is tolerant to childish, exploratory approaches.

Considering that Xu consciously and carefully polishes all of the different forms of "imperfect" metamorphoses of language, his works allow us to approach the "imperfection" of language not only as a given status. They also stimulate us to approach language as a cultivated and crafted tool and to critically ponder a creativity that is inspired by a childlike perspective.

Xu Bing's Babel: Monkeys Grasp for the Moon

I could conceive of another story of Babel, in which God destroys the Tower not to create a confusion of tongues to block man's passage to heaven but to facilitate the multiplication of languages so that He can lean on the chain of words to reach down to the illusion of His creation and the image of Himself. With the chain of words, each word is tied to another because of their similar denotation, and each one is the extension of another because of their miscellaneous shapes and sounds.

The installation *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2001) by the artist Xu Bing occasions such a reading. The title is borrowed directly from a Chinese folktale. One day a monkey saw the reflection of the moon in water and became worried that it had fallen from the sky and drowned. He called out other monkeys, linking arms and tails, reaching down from the branch of a tree to save the moon. Inspired by this folktale, Xu's installation, which was exhibited in Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC, in 2001, is made from a chain of words that signifies "monkey" in a multitude of languages. Hanging down from the skylight to a pool of water with shimmering greenish hue, these word-monkeys transform the image of the Babel Tower into a chain or a ladder. The installation invites a new reading of the Babel story. Whereas the construction of the Babel is conventionally interpreted as a vain ambition to come closer to the perfect language of God, the chain resembles the means through which the original is to be redeemed by the multiplicity of languages.

Neither the folktale nor the installation explicitly refers to the myth of Babel; yet, they provide occasions for reinterpreting the multiplicity of languages *not* in terms of sin and punishment but as a manifestation of the desire to come closer to the thing itself through the multiplied ways of saying it—even though the thing itself, which these words aim at, remains an illusion. Be it a tower or a chain, they stand for the quest for a perfect language in which the word and the named thing are one and the same.

A perfect language is, in this scenario, the language of creation. "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light."[1] Walter Benjamin argues, in his article "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," that in the biblical narrative, the divine language is original, precise, and efficacious. It manifests the divine insight into life and nature, order and harmony through the perfect unification of language and matter. The naming language of Adam derives from the language of Genesis. Although it lacks the immediate

[1] *The Bible*, authorized King James Version (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 1.

force of creation and performativity, the language of Adam, received from God, sparkles with divine inspirations and intentions—which means, it possesses the quality of being proper and singular, from which the nature and essence of things shines through.[2] The collapse of Babel, thus, for Benjamin, symbolizes the breach of this perfect unity of language, world, and knowledge. The totality of truth and its expression is no longer unequivocally contained in one irreplaceable word, but becomes fragmented and displaced in a multitude of words that mean the same thing but in an inexhaustible and unessential manner.

Benjamin interprets the destruction of the Tower of Babel as a traumatic separation of humans from the perfect language of God. In fact, over the centuries, the biblical narrative has inspired many linguists, disciples, theologians, philosophers, and lovers of language to search for a perfect language. One of Xu's projects, *Book from the Ground* (2015–16), is precisely carried out with the image of Babel in mind. It is a pop-up book written exclusively in a language of icons and symbols. "The contemporary situation [of globalization] facing the modern man anticipates a way of expression that is immediate and unbound to particular regions," Xu writes, "It is not until now that the signification of the Tower of Babel becomes activated."[3] Xu envisions that owing to its immediate visual recognizability, the iconic language would revive the metaphor of a pre-Babel language in the contemporary context of an image-driven culture. This proposal can barely be said to be novel: from antiquity to early modern period of the European context, scholars and philosophers who dreamed of a perfect language, such as Plotinus, Horapollo, and Kircher, were drawn to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms for the same belief that, as Umberto Eco points out in *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1997), "images provide a means of communication that can overcome language barriers."[4]

In his book, Eco observes that in European history, the Tower of Babel narrative has never ceased to entice followers to search for a language that comes closest to the one spoken before man fell from the paradisiacal state. Some understand the perfect language to be an original sacred tongue that mirrored the nature of things without distortion but went lost and was concealed. Many existing languages are enlisted in the competition: Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Gaelic, and Chinese. To make it worse, views differ not only

[2] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume I*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 67–72.

[3] Xu Bing,《我的真文字》[*My True Words*] (Beijing: CITIC Press Corporation, 2015; my translation), 231.

[4] Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 168.

in terms of *which language* approximates the original perfect language but also in terms of *what* constitutes a perfect language and *how* it should be deciphered. Whereas Dante, for example, argued that what God gave Adam was not a natural language but a set of principles that underlined the universal grammar,[5] Plotinus believed that it was the Egyptian script that was encoded with divine wisdom and knowledge because of its visual design.[6] Both focus their arguments on innate linguistic features which appear to make a certain language a better candidate. In short, for some, the appeal of a perfect language lies in its aptitude for representing and relating to the world in a truthful and totalizing way, which offers the prospect of solving political and religious strife by obtaining a univocal perfect language. Others, by contrast, envision a perfect language that mirrors and expresses human thoughts unambiguously and universally. This leads to a paradigm shift, in which the quest for a perfect language becomes a philosophical project that aims for the construction of a scientific language "which could eliminate the *idola* responsible for clouding the minds of men and for keeping them afar from the progress of science."[7]

As Eco's book illustrates, a perfect language is often understood by its pursuers as a promise of harmony and transparency. The idea of perfection in language is intertwined with notions of originality, singularity, and universality. However, what Eco's book does not comment on is how a perfect language would influence its speakers and whether a perfect language is supposed to guarantee *perfect use*—perfect, that is, in the sense of univocal and unerring usage. Would a perfect language, for instance, eradicate the linguistic differences that separate Virginia Woolf—being a female writer of the twentieth century—from a carpenter of our time?[8] Since the pre-Babel language is depicted as univocal and incorruptible, immune to historical evolutions and individual variations, the Tower of Babel narrative clearly invites one to entertain the thought of undifferentiated use of language. To become a speaker of this ideal and neutral language means to *not* be able to fancy and judge the age, education, social class, and sexuality of the other

[5] Ibid., 44.
[6] Ibid., 145.
[7] Ibid., 209.
[8] I do not mean to say that the language of Woolf is overall better than that of a carpenter, although I do speculate that hers, in terms of its literariness, is more refined and self-reflexive. The comparison here is rather meant to invoke the notion of "heteroglossia," which Mikhail Bakhtin uses to explain the coexistence of different discourses, voices, and registers of languages in novels. Likewise, there is no unified reality in language, which is always "shot through with intentions and accents" and is subject to historical and social stratification. See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

person based on his or her language and accent. The price that one has to pay for attaining such a perfect language is thus to be rendered, blissfully and sickeningly, *invisible* and *irrelevant* to language.

Xu Bing clearly plays with the idea of fashioning a perfect language in *Book from the Ground—but* he cannot be grouped into the pursuers of a perfect language mentioned in Eco's book. His miscellaneous language installations and projects, instead of striking one as serious religious and scholarly undertakings, foreground the idea of playful deviations and *imperfect* uses. In this chapter, I perform a close reading of three of Xu's installations so as to unpack the theoretical and artistic implications of crafting and encountering an imperfect language, and to form a critical thinking of language and creativity inspired by a childlike perspective.

From his earlier work *Book from the Sky* to a more recent experiment with Chinese characters to render landscape motifs, Xu consistently implies the perspectives of a child or a novice learner, whose relation to language is primarily one of apprenticeship, play, and exploration. Rather than a quest for the perfect language, one could summarize his work as an inquiry into imperfect metamorphoses of language. In using that term, I follow Helena Leheckova's observation, in her article "Imperfect Language: *How Come*? and *So What*?" that "children and students of the language can replace correct items with almost anything from the realm of incorrect or non-existent language items."[9] The dimension of errors and play is an important part of a child's experience of language. Xu's language installations, in a way, turn the child's experience of failure to understand and master a language into an artistic expression, which further invites the viewer to participate in and to rethink such failure and imperfection.

Xu's installation *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*, for example, shows that the path to self-knowledge and our innermost desire is not to be obtained through a perfect language but to be illuminated and retraced in the disjunction between language and an inexperienced, probing child. The moral of the original folktale, which most Chinese children read while sitting on the laps of their mothers or hear before going to bed, is that it will put you in danger once you cannot distinguish the real from the illusionary. Xu's installation, however, gives the collective childhood memory a twist. The didactic message is retold through a playful engagement with words of different languages. Substituting symbols of monkey for monkeys, his work asks: how to grasp the real if language is not only the path and means but also what we are? Does saying the same thing in multiple ways lead one to come

[9] Helena Leheckova, "Imperfect Language: *How Come*? and *So What*?," *Slavica Helsingiensia* 35 (2008): 123–32.

closer to the thing itself? Xu, in my reading, plucks the didactic parable about vanity and failure out of the collective childhood memory of the Chinese and reinterprets it in terms of the reliance of humans on language as a poetic gesture toward the image of the real.

Childhood Lost: The Book from the Sky

In August 2018, I was at the retrospective exhibition of "Xu Bing: Thought and Method" at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing. When I entered the first exhibition hall of *Book from the Sky*, a piece of artwork that I had extensively read about because of my research, I was completely unprepared for the impact and sensation it transmitted to me, and realized instantly that I had underestimated the importance of the form of artistic expression. Initially I had been drawn to *Book from the Sky* because of Xu's avant-garde approach to language. The printed texts that fill up the space of the installation are composed of four thousand characters that the artist himself invented. These characters look like Chinese from afar but cannot be read and understood by anyone. However, a viewer who reads Chinese could easily find themselves being tempted into a habit of reading, since these fake characters do comply with the formal principles of the Chinese writing system—for instance, the square frame and the compact and orderly combination of different radicals in each character. Some radicals are even identifiable as meaningful Chinese words.

Temptation and frustration, familiarity and unease: these are the affective responses that this artwork affords me. It is thus a piece of work that explores the nature and limits of language through questioning the culturally tuned inclination for interpretation, whose force is even more pronounced for the local audience because of its reference to Chinese history and philosophy. Xu Bing himself and some scholars point out that this piece of artwork has to do with the artist's first-hand experience with language planning and reform in China and the cultural revolution, during which Chinese characters were altered and abused to promote the communist political agenda. "Therefore, in our initial understanding of words, it has implanted a special gene: subversion—that words can be used to 'play,'" says Xu.[10] At the same time, there are also scholars such as Roger T. Ames and Kuan-Hung Chen who comment on the implications of Taoist tradition and Chan Buddhism in this piece of work.[11]

[10] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), IX.
[11] Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger T Ames (ed.), *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011).

As I had been familiar with this piece of work, I was ready to appreciate it from the perspective of an insider. Although I was excited to engage with the artwork's material presence in a gallery space, I took it for granted that it was meant to be a cultural theorist's routine procedure to test and confirm and possibly add something new to what they know. And then I was there. Face-to-face with the giant printed texts hanging from the ceiling and pasting up on the walls, the confusion that I had anticipated acquired a rather rich and nuanced taste. It is a nauseous and thrilling sensation caused as much by the oversized texts, the serene and almost formidable atmosphere, and the visual impact of repetition implied in the typographical style, as by the meaningless glyphs. Whereas the immensity of scrolls, posters, and books, with an overwhelming amount of characters printed on them, suggests an adult world of order and sacredness, these characters' lack of reference to a reality beyond themselves turns the exhibition room into a playground where the sacred is bound to lose both its altar and myth.[12] Insofar as the physical body of the viewer is wrapped in the artwork, it is made possible for form and content to unite into an expressive whole to register its force and to enable a childlike vision of an inaccessible, slightly absurd, yet fantastic linguistic world.

Between the experience of the artwork from above (by looking at the images of the installation) and that of the artwork from within (by being present inside the gallery), as I came to realize, what is left untranslated and untranslatable is the body and vision of a child who has learned to speak but is not yet able to read and write, a child who is in the process of perfecting their language to better make sense of the surroundings.

The grandness and serenity of the room, as if it desires and comments on our smallness, sets the tone for the viewer's subsequent experience of the pseudo-language. Even before one starts to read the glyphs closely, the relation of the viewer to the texts is that of apprenticeship and deference. The confusion and frustration, caused by the eagerness to understand and the failure to do so, is not easy to be dismissed, as it is supposed to belong to

[12] In an article that reflects on Benveniste's and Lévi-Strauss's thoughts on myth, Agamben observes that games and religious ceremonies are often closely related. Whereas the realm of the sacred is composed of myth and ritual, with the former being the articulation of history and the latter the structured act whose purpose is guaranteed by myth, in the realm of play—here Agamben cites Benveniste, "we can say that play exists when only one half of the sacred enactment is fulfilled, translating myth alone into words and ritual alone into actions." The transformation of the sacred to play is also relevant and interesting in looking at *Book from the Sky*, which, through preserving the graphic and textual structure of characters alone, makes language a prototype for the interplay between the sacred and play. See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007), 78.

the ignorance of a child instead of the incomprehensibility of the texts. The profound sense of rejection, absurdity, and melancholy, which the artwork, in the end, means to expose the viewer to, proceeds from the inability to completely work through a linguistic childhood of innocence and to have our craving for language satisfied. Indeed, how many of us can still recall vividly the bygone phase where our relation to the world is not perfectly and seamlessly clothed in linguistic signs? Our barred access to language often turns out to be a fleeting moment in our life, which is soon rewritten with the all-powerful present experience of a perfect bond between words and things. A linguistic childhood that is marked by an imprecise measure of the fissures and gaps is one that we barely know we have lost. So we walk into galleries and cinemas to illuminate the secret dark chamber of memory and to look for the nostalgia of something that we cannot remember and have not yet learned how to long for. However, whereas it is a lost linguistic childhood that this artwork promises to bring back, it is a childhood that comes to betray us. This newfound child will never achieve the state of perfection through repeated acts of reading and memorizing, because the characters of Xu's installation are meaningless in themselves and resist to be learned. The viewer is doomed to be an eternal apprentice.

Yet Another Time: Two Forms of Childhood

The significance of language is well acknowledged in the discussion of Xu's artworks,[13] whereas its connection to childhood is far from self-evident. "I mentioned in a previous article my personal and unique relation to words," writes Xu in the introduction to his collection of essays *My True Words* (2015):

> My mother worked in the library studies of Peking University. She was busy at work; often when there were meetings, she would have me locked in the stack room. I was from early on familiar with the look and style of all sorts of books, but they were at the same time unfamiliar to me since I couldn't read them back then.[14]

Despite the artist's explicit reference to his childhood memory, his artwork's potential of retracing a childlike experience of language does not draw much critical attention. This is not surprising. Contemporary viewers

[13] See Tsao and Ames (ed.), *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art*.
[14] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), IX.

are hesitant to confine their understanding of an artwork to an authorial intention and source of inspiration. On the other hand, childhood is barely thought to be productive to critical theory. Indisputably, in various fields of study such as psychoanalysis, linguistic studies, and anthropology, a substantial amount of research is devoted to childhood as a critical period of development. However, the inverse practice, a critical approach informed by a childlike vision rather than a critical thinking about childhood, is rather uncommon.

"It is not possible to conceive a form of critical thought that is not also, in its every fold, a meditation on childhood," observes Paolo Virno in his article "Childhood and Critical Thought."[15] Walter Benjamin, as Virno points out, is representative in this respect because of his insightful reversion of the pedagogical perspective. Without his persistent and attentive reflection on childhood, Virno observes, Benjamin's sensitivity to the changing condition of art in the modern age would have blacked its much-lauded sharpness. In Virno's words, only a person who has spent a long time dwelling on children's games characterized by the inexhaustible iteration of the same gestures and the same verbal formulas could understand the exact significance of seriality on a grand scale, which by now marks not only the culture industry but all the abyss of immediate experience.[16]

The technical reproducibility of the work of art, according to Virno, is comparable to the childhood fascination with repeating the same things over and over again. Repetition and seriality, which redefine not only the work of art but also modern experience in general, are what make childhood a critical category for understanding what Virno calls the "puerile" society of advanced capitalism.[17] From technology to wage labor, from cultural production to urban life, the modern forms of experience exhibit a lack of self-reflection, a deprivation of meaning, and a mechanical repetition of the same, whose features, as Virno points out, "must be questioned, proceeding from the experience of the subject who, not yet speaking, is in the process of acquiring language."[18] Yet, unlike the child, who demands for the same thing repeatedly because each repetition is a realization of the unrepeatable, and because, to use Virno's words, "one looks for a perfect completeness in every single iteration,"[19] the "puerile" modern subject is an eternal child

[15] Paolo Virno, "Childhood and Critical Thought," *Grey Room*, no. 21 (Fall 2005): 7.
[16] Ibid., 9.
[17] Ibid., 10.
[18] Ibid., 7.
[19] Ibid., 10.

whose apprenticeship to language is definite and conclusive because his/her obsession is with the form of repetition itself.

With *Book from the Sky*, it is the difference between these two forms of (natural and eternal) childhood and that of (unrepeatable and formal) repetition that the viewer is invited to confront and compromise. Laborious training in reading and writing is necessary for a child to be completely initiated into a language, especially when we are talking about a language such as Chinese, whose written forms often do not reflect the corresponding speech sounds. It is not the first time that I hear people say, "You Chinese people must be very smart; otherwise how could you remember so many complicated characters!" In response to this compliment, any literate Chinese person would tell the same story—how they sit for hours on end to practice writing, with each character at least three times. In fact, written language is challenging for children in general because it requires a cognitive understanding of the symbolic nature of language. A child who is learning to read and write not only has to discriminate real writing from similar shapes and forms, to develop word and print awareness and to know how words and texts are organized spatially, but also to understand and accept the correspondence between written words and speech sounds. It is only through repeated immersion and stimulation that the synthesis of sounds and images and the equation of oral and graphic values become naturalized.

Although the labor of repetition involved in language learning can hardly be experienced as purely enjoyable (as it is in games), each time when one writes a character, this writing act is supposed to be a complete execution of a reality reorganized through a set of principles and formal rules. With *Book from the Sky*, however, it is precisely this reference to a reality beyond the glyphs that goes missing. Whereas the regular strokes and repeated structures within each character do reflect the Chinese script, its symbolic reference is shifted from things, concepts, and phenomena to an existing language. Therefore, every single character, instead of promising to activate a set of possible relations and associations among different speakers and contexts, forms a closure of meaning and a stasis of reference. The four thousand pseudo-Chinese characters, although looking quite different from one another, accumulate into a single overwhelming text that comes to stand for the repeated breach of the bond between words and world. Every now and then certain components of a character would strike a viewer as perfectly meaningful and thus raise the expectation of meaning and the illusion of language. Yet, like a crying child who refuses to be soothed with one or two candies when there are obviously more in the jar, we have learned to desire language in its entirety and no longer feel at ease to live with texts which,

because of the scarcity and inconsistency of readable elements, look like landfill sites of deserted characters.

This installation facilitates the convergence of two forms of childhood. The first one is the lived childhood, which becomes unlocked from the memory inside the gallery; and the other one is the childhood Xu has crafted and presented to the viewer, which is an imperfect copy of the lived childhood. With the latter form of childhood, the sweet encounter with a lost piece of memory is haunted by the tyranny of form; and the laborious yet soothing act of repetition becomes an impulsive and self-denying demand.

Yet Another Language: Square Word Calligraphy Classroom

In *Book from the Sky*, repetition comes into play in various ways; it takes place simultaneously on the level of *language*, *method*, and *experience*. First of all, the language of this particular artwork is that of printmaking. As Xu comments in an interview, it has a direct relation to his reflections on repetition and seriality, which he considers to be the defining feature of printmaking as an art form. Unlike painting, printmaking relies on predetermined, mediated, and repeatable traces of movements, while enabling a balanced aesthetic experience of intellect and emotion.[20] Xu introduces these features of printmaking into *Book from the Sky* as a formal language of the artwork, so as to activate a similarly predefined and impersonal relation between speakers/viewers and language. "Only through prints are these unknown and fake Chinese characters able to be replicated and thought real," says Xu in the interview.[21] By making the form as neutral and unobtrusive as possible, Xu prevents the form of repetition from becoming reminiscent of particular individual and authorial intentionality. It is to be experienced as a pure form that intensifies the truth and illusion of language.

Whereas this piece of work, which is made of paper and texts, assumes an appearance of lightness and transcendence, the actual process of making it is painstakingly monotonous and uncreative. All the four thousand pseudo-Chinese characters are handmade woodcuts, which involve repetitive manual labor of designing and engraving day and night. This contrast between the

[20] See Xu Bing,《对复数性绘画的新探索与再认识》[New Exploration and Re-understanding of Serial Painting], http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/article/overview/84eiAzl/about_by2/X/761erC, accessed October 16, 2019.

[21] Xu Bing, 《徐冰的八十年代：一场源于想象的超越》 [The 1980s of Xu Bing: A Transcendence that Results from Imagination] (my translation), interview by Xiong Xiaoyi, Artron, August 3, 2015, https://news.artron.net/20150803/n766912.html.

work's apparent ephemerality and the intense labor that its creation involves may seem a mere detail at first sight, but it is the key to Xu's understanding of creative and critical thinking as embedded in repetitive and laborious acts of learning, observing, and practicing. In a letter to a friend in which he talks about modern art and education, Xu comments that the biggest issue with Western art education is its overemphasis on creativity. "In terms of art," says Xu, "it is no doubt crucial for training and cultivating one's faculty for creative thinking. However, the problem is that [the current education system] attributes it to a simple model, instead of [encouraging] a thorough exploration of its production mechanism."[22]

What is creativity? How does it happen? Is it possible to craft a form of critical thought informed by a childlike vision? Xu's installation *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom* provides an occasion for exploring these questions. The installation includes teaching videos, manuals of instruction, copybooks, writing utensils, all of which make it mentally safe and practically easy for visitors to adopt a learner's mindset and to simply try things out. If, with *Book from the Sky*, the serenity of the room is manipulated so as to arouse in viewers a sense of smallness and inhibition, the detailed replication of a calligraphy classroom in the gallery, while conveying an atmosphere of discipline and seriousness, means to simulate a traditional and stimulating environment of learning. The inviting tone and the nostalgic sentiment associated with the classroom setting clearly frame the installation as an inhabitable space which desire the physical presence and engagement of gallery visitors. One sits down and starts to observe: how to hold the brush properly? How much ink should one allow the brush to absorb, so that its contact with paper does not result in an overflowing splatter? From which order should one practice these characters? Slowly the anxiety and excitement of appreciating art gives way to a keen focus on the content and makeup of the learning materials. The characters printed on the copybooks, at first sight, appear false to Chinese speakers and foreign to English speakers. Yet, through repeated observations and practices, one is surprised to find that these characters, although looking like Chinese script, are actually English words written in an alternative way that appropriates the formal principles of Chinese writing. The meaning of the characters thus becomes available to the visitor as a revelation and a reward. An entire new set of questions about the nature of language and the limits of perception begin to stir up in one's mind while the hand continues to carry out an unreflective devotion to ink and paper.

This installation builds up a situation where a creative and critical relation to language and writing proceeds from repeated and even boring acts of

[22] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), 117.

reading and writing. The pleasure of exercising one's intellect is intensified because both the aim and the object of one's critical thinking are concealed, delayed, and then found when least expected. In fact, Xu already started experimenting with this idea of combining English words with Chinese script and calligraphy shortly after he moved to New York. The initial result was *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy* (1994–1996), an instruction manual that contains a code of calligraphic script that resembles the English alphabet, explanations of the rules that govern compositions of square words, and illustrations that show how to prepare ink and hold a brush. Later, when it was exhibited in galleries, Xu reframed the work in a classroom setting. By doing so, Xu creates the condition for the emergence of a particular state of mind—innocence, receptivity, concentration, and even boredom—which makes the discovery of a confused tongue all the more exciting and thought-provoking.

Meaning, once discovered, cannot be undone. Being at home with one's language often means the ability to have concrete words dissolve into the natural and undivided flow of thoughts. Except for people who are poets by nature, we allow meaning to dictate our relation to language; we forget and leave behind the child—who mumbles and fumbles, who chases after words, crying for their letter cookies—so as to build a strong bond with meaning. The beauty of the square word project is its implication of an uncompromising linguistic vision that belongs to an inept and ungainly child. Although still being under the yoke of meaning, each word acquires a dignity of its own. Stuck in between the double linguistic and cultural references, it necessitates a mentality of translation to convert image to word, word to meaning.

This piece of work, to put it in a more specific context, comes from the urge of the artist to make sense of and respond to the cultural and linguistic dilemma he found himself in. In Xu's own words:

> After arriving at the US, language and communication became an urgent issue. It formed an awkward relationship with your life: Your faculty for thinking is mature, while your ability of speaking and expressing is childlike. Your affinity with Chinese is deep-seated, while you have to use a language that is unfamiliar and inconvenient. You are a well-respected artist; but in that context, you are not so much different from an illiterate.[23]

Xu explains that as an artist living abroad, he has to deal with a foreign language that makes his expressions childlike. His strategy is to allow this

[23] Xu, *My True Words* (my translation), 164.

childlike perspective to influence and shape his artistic expressions. In *Square Word Calligraphy*, the foreign tongue becomes an illusive middle ground. Two languages meet halfway, displacing and redeeming each other through a fanciful fusion of meaning and form. A Chinese speaker can immediately relate to the graphic and calligraphic form, whereas an English speaking person may mine for meaning. The square word is a language that undoes its native speakers; or rather, it turns *accented* Chinese English speakers into its "natives." When it comes to textual representations of foreign accents, a common practice is to misspell the words and transcribe the sounds literally. Xu, however, makes the Chinese English accent an entirely visual and written form. Although the dimension of sound is lost with Xu's visual representation of the accent, the emphasis, in this way, is shifted to the simultaneous presence of two languages and the double reference to two cultures in each single word. As if they were listening to a speaker with a thick foreign accent, the viewer has to make great efforts to filter out the interference of another language.

Conclusion

Virno says that to survive the capitalist society of spectacle, we need to return to the "egocentric language" of children, "renovating the infantile feeling of language as something one accesses, of language as a faculty."[24] What Virno means here is to retrace a childlike relation to language, which is governed, first and foremost, by the desire of communication and the satisfaction of self-expression.

In a way, Xu's artworks have spelled out the possible forms of this egocentric language of children. Xu has developed the "living word" in *Living Word* (2001), in which flocks of birds, which have the shape of the Chinese character (鳥), take flight from the dictionary definition of bird inscribed on the floor; the "landscript" in *Landscript* (1999), *Reading Landscape* (2001), and *The Suzhou Landscripts* (2003–13), in which landscape motifs (for instance, trees, grasses, and mountains) are sketched with corresponding Chinese characters that indicate trees, grasses, and mountains; and "iconic language" in *Book from the Ground*, in which icons and symbols completely take the place of language in terms of storytelling. Besides all these different forms of children's egocentric language (living word, landscript, and iconic language), in this chapter, I have closely analyzed some other forms of "egocentric language" crafted by Xu: the multilingual effusion in *Monkeys*

[24] Virno, "Childhood and Critical Thought," 11.

Grasp for the Moon, the childish glossolalia in *Book from the Sky*, and the dream language in *Square Word Calligraphy*.

Xu's language installations shift the dominant narrative of searching for a perfect language (as elaborated in Eco's book) to the alternative means of crafting and polishing that, following Leheckova, I have labeled *imperfect metamorphoses of language*.[25] The shift of focus is not due to the impossibility of language to mirror reality and thoughts truthfully, but to the concern that a perfect language is not tailored to express human passions and desires, and thus is principally intolerant to childish and exploratory approaches. Xu's artworks showcase that in language, imperfection can be attempted and achieved via different means—with "achieve" being a rather counterintuitive word here, since I assume that few people are keen on achieving the status of an "imperfect" speaker. On the one hand, the image of an imperfect speaker is often associated with children, foreigners, and any social group and class whose language diverges from the standardized form. The term "imperfect," in this case, is used in a negative way to mark the limited proficiency of the speaker, whose use of a language deviates from the linguistic norm.[26] On the other hand, the imperfection in language can be fashioned and crafted into an artistic expression. The Italian and Russian avant-gardists' experiments with the audiovisual dimensions of language, for instance, because of their suspicion toward and rejection of sense, let language "deform" and lose its familiarity, so as to enhance one's direct engagement with language itself.[27] Xu, likewise, by estranging different language forms, reinvokes the memory and experience of a lost linguistic childhood in his artworks, making the "imperfect" language forms in his artworks a critical category, through which the viewer comes to relate to language in new and exploratory ways.

The idea of an *im*perfect language comes into play in Xu's artworks at two levels. First, all the different forms of language in his installations are far from perfect, for in none of them do sound, visual, meaning, and thing unite into a harmonious entity that guarantees proper access to truth and knowledge. Xu's "egocentric" languages are not subject to the common understanding of language, which overemphasizes language as a tool for communication and thus renders the experience of language itself, if not impossible, then firmly limited to the domain of poetry. Second, neither the pseudo-language in

[25] Leheckova, "Imperfect Language."

[26] See Nancy C. Dorian, "Language Shift in Community and Individual: The Phenomenon of the Laggard Semi-speaker," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 25 (1980): 85–94; and Silvia Dal Negro, *The Decay of a Language: The Case of a German Dialect in the Italian Alps* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 29–33.

[27] See Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (ed.), *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

Book from the Sky nor the square word in his other work has a native speaker. Rather than invoking the image of an ideal language user, they are results of close encounters between a language and an eccentric and "imperfect" speaker. When it comes to an "imperfect," erring tongue, as Xu seems to suggest, it is not the idiosyncrasies of the speaker that have to be bypassed or overcome. It is language itself that has to bend its form and meaning, and to be reinvented with the rigor of an innocent and daring child.

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