His Books

By John Cayley

It has been difficult for me to determine precisely when I was first introduced to my readings of his unreadable book.[1] I am bad with dates, especially those relating to my personal history. I know that I was both writing and laying out a catalogue at the time. But the specialist bookseller for whom I was then working made it a principle not to date catalogues or other publicity material because dates can give readers and potential customers quick and easy reasons to discard ephemera on which the bookseller would rather they fixed their attention, not to read for meaning in itself but to be tempted to read and so to invest in books and reading after all.

If I meander in this way you will have to read my meanderings as commentary, occasionally as commentary by diversion, not necessarily as misdirections from my attempt to describe closely and to narrate my reading of his unreadable book. I've already spoken of a catalogue, whose date I will shortly determine, on which I was working when his unreadable book was first introduced to me. Even a catalogue must be composed to be read, in the knowledge that it is simply a tool of commerce, one that resists its ephemerality for commercial reasons. Ultimately it expresses a very definite, constrained and imperative meaning — *buy what I describe* — but it nonetheless contains a superabundance of other meanings and potential meanings and promises of meaning, both in the descriptions of what it offers as catalogue and within those offerings themselves whose meanings you, as buyer and reader, may acquire.

It was Spring 1997 when my then employer, a prominent antiquarian and specialist bookseller, now a major collector of Chinese books and printing, handed me a notice concerning his unreadable book.[2] I am unclear about what form this notice took. My best guess is that it was some reproduction of publicity for an exhibition of work by the artist of his books, including his *Tianshu*, that was held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London,[3] since soon afterwards I attended that exhibition and it was there that I first saw actual copies of his book and experienced this work in its usual art world context, as an installation, carefully composed for strong visual effect, in the perplexing but now well-established mode of installation art. It's not an object. It's not a painting or a sculpture or even a *book* as such. It's a configuration of objects and materials that represent a concept and

provide some evidence or record of the development of the concept and the making of its constituent elements. You can't possess it. You either have to find some elaborate way to acquire a personal record of the work or you have to take part in a process that allows the installation to remove itself into a museum or major gallery where this representation, beyond an individual's acquisitive capacities, can be preserved for collective curated culture. In a sense, I'm helping you to 'own' the *Tianshu* by writing this. Of course, a few individuals and legal entities are wealthy and resourceful enough to acquire such installations outright.[4]

I have been calling the *Tianshu* 'his unreadable book,' but it is impossible to be entirely satisfied with any general designation of this kind. It's a shorthand. The *Tianshu* is a book as well as an installation. It is unreadable, and so the phrase may be allowed to serve its purposes in this narrative, but, as is now well known, the properties and methods of *Tianshu's* unreadability are notable and pertinent to its remarkable and widely acknowledged aesthetic value. It is sometimes cited as the most important late-twentieth-century work of Chinese art.[5] Is it unique in some other senses that have earned it this unique status? Is it uniquely unreadable? How could we ever know whether or not something that we cannot read — literally or metaphorically — is unique? In a sense, every unreadable book must be the same as any other unreadable book. In so far as *Tianshu* is remarkable or 'unique' or 'original' — even using these terms as they are loosely employed to ascribe value to works of art — then it cannot be unreadable. And yet the unreadability of *Tianshu* is crucial. I realize now, as I write this, that, along with some of his more readable works, I have been reading and rereading his unreadable books for over ten years, that all my other reading and much of my writing has been undertaken in the articulate shadow of the unreadabilities that he inscribes.

Why 'his' book? Over my desk hangs the artist's proof of a woodblock print. My print is untitled, but I know that the artist eventually called it 'My Book.'[6] The printed area of the black and white image is forty-two by thirty-two centimetres and depicts one opening of what looks like an early western book, heavily bound with clasps and protected by metal mounted corners. It is set in a blackletter typeface. The text is unreadable but seems to be based on modern English from which most of the — to me — readable words are taken. The print depicts a bound bookmark of a ribbon-like material that partly obscures the text near the gutter of the opening's verso. Here is my somewhat hesitant transcription of the visible text on this left-hand side of the opening:

seled one may movin…
wiry jevoration has ve…
bac the phief leatures wh…
chese at eat bau to suffdtsta…

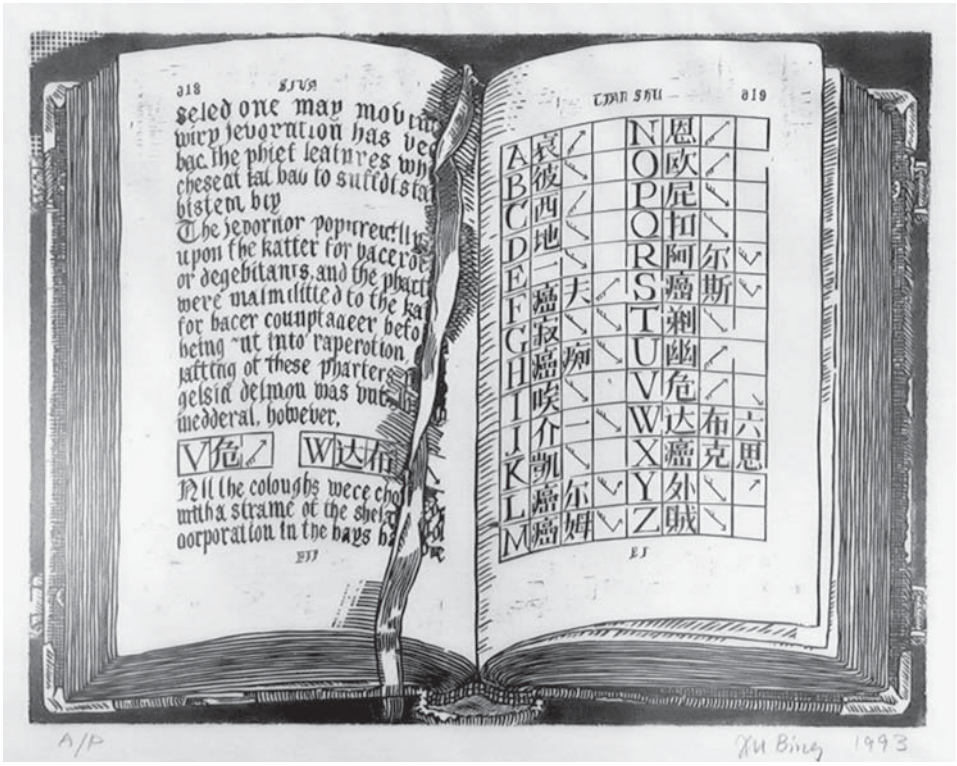

Figure 1[7]

bisten biy
The jedornor popicreutll…
upon the katter for bacero…
or degebitants, and the phart…
were maimilitted to the ka…
for bacer counptaqeer befo…
being ~at into raperotion, …
jafting of these pharters …
gelsia deimon was but …
medderal, however,
[two table figures for 'V' and 'W' in this register]
All the coloughs were cho…so
with a strame of the shela… …
oorporation in the bays b……e

It seems clear to me that these odd mis- or non-spellings are 'based on modern English' but its difficult for me to specify how or why. Is it solely because of the correctly spelled 'empty' or 'function' words? There is also the fact that English happens to be my mother-spelling and it is, I believe, the artist's second written language. Occam's razor tells us that English would be a likely default for any of his alphabetic encounters with other writing.

This is supported by the texts of his *Square Word Calligraphy* pieces which are all, to my knowledge, in English, although this writing system could equally well be applied to any language that now uses the Roman character set. I am getting ahead of myself. What I mean to say is that even, for example 'coloughs,' 'strame' and 'shela' seem to me to be English unreadables. Does this mean that I do, in fact, read them? Does this page inscribe the artist's other-lettered reading of English, where the grammar words are mostly familiar but full words remain an ungraspable babble? Then imagine yourself as the artist: build a table of correspondences in your own script to bring them to order. Discover, in the pages of a lost book, that this had been done long before, by you yourself, when you first encountered the other language and when you first wrote your book, the book of your encounter.

There are page numbers in Arabic numerals on the upper outer corners of the opening's leaves. 'His book' has many pages. The images of the book's page edges indicate that it is somewhere in the central portion of its full extent. The visible pages are numbered 618-619 with the '6's mirror-imaged. There are running headers on both verso and recto. The verso header is difficult to construe. It seems to read 'SIVA' but I believe that the 'V' is an inverted 'N' and the heading discloses some relation to Sinitic culture through 'SINA'. The recto header is clearly decipherable as 'TIAN SHU' a transcription of one name for his more famous unreadable book, bringing us back to its reading. On this page there is an alphabetic table set out in a grid of ruled squares, thirteen rows by eight columns. The modern capital forms of the twenty-six common Roman letters are arranged, in standard contemporary order, top to bottom, vertically distributed throughout columns one and five. In the squares beside each letter there is a rough phonetic transcription based on contemporary Mandarin pronunciations of the English names for the traditional letters, in one or two and, in two cases, three Chinese characters. In the second or third box beside each character there are arrows, pointing either diagonally up or down, and, in the case of 'G' down twice, in the case of 'L,' 'M,' 'R' and 'S,' down then turning up. 'V' and 'Y' also have second smaller arrows pointing down and up respectively. It is difficult to see what these arrows represent. Perhaps they are a contemporary rendering of tone patterns that are heard by the artist and other Chinese speakers in the voiced names of the English letters, translating pitch shapes that are insignificant for native speakers of English simply because they would be significant in Chinese and are therefore notable.

I will set out the table of letters with the characters adding transcriptions into the officially sanctioned 'pinyin' system of romanization:

A	哀 ai^{1}			N	恩 en^{1}		
B	彼 bi^{3}			O	欧 ou^{1}		
C	西 xi^{1}			P	屁 pi^{4}		
D	地 di^{4}			Q	扣 kou^{4}		
E	一 yi^{1}			R	阿 a^{1}	尔 er^{3}	
F	癌 ai^{2}	夫 fu^{1}		S	癌 ai^{2}	斯 si^{1}	
G	寂 ji^{4}			T	剃 ti^{4}		
H	癌 ai^{2}	痴 chi^{1}		U	幽 you^{1}		
I	唉 ai$^{1\ or\ 4}$			V	危wei^{1}		
J	介 jie^{4}	一 yi^{1}		W	达 da^{2}	布 bu^{4}	六 liu^{4}
K	凯 kai^{3}			X	癌 ai^{2}	克 ke^{4}	思 si^{1}
L	癌 ai^{2}	尔 er^{3}		Y	外 wai^{4}		
M	癌 ai^{2}	姆 mu^{3}		Z	贼 zei^{2}		

For systems of writing with a relatively small number of distinct elements a table like this provides a simple cipher capable of transcribing any arrangement of the original elements, here the now familiar and standard twenty-six roman letters. Thus — ignoring things like punctuation, case and the occasional extra-alphabetic glyph — the entire corpus of roman-alphabetic literature could now be inscribed using these Chinese characters. According to the table, '*Tianshu'* would be 剃唉哀恩癌斯癌痴幽, and 'his book' 癌痴唉癌斯　彼欧欧凯. In fact, as Bishop Wilkins pointed out in 1707, "*whatever is capable of a competent Difference, perceptible to any Sense, may be a sufficient Means whereby to express the Cogitations.*"[8] Since the advent of programmable machines and the swift, ultimately totalizing transcription of the human literary archive into encoded data scrolls, it has been possible to make such transcriptions purely for aesthetic effect. As recent example, there is *The Complete Works of W.S. by* a young artist doing graduate study at an art school close to my university, in which the letters of Shakespeare's written corpus are transcribed into the coloured dots (now more often referred to as pixels or picture elements) of a large print, the order and colour of the dots being determined through a correspondence between the first letter of a dot's colour name (in English) and the letter from Shakespeare that the dot transcribes.[9]

The young artist's Shakespeare is a simple cipher and it can be taken in with a single glance. It is unreadable but it's easy for me to convince myself that, given a programmable machine, I could read it back into the verses of the Bard. What interests me is the symbolic linking of literal identities to parts of larger symbolic and material structures and assemblages. The letter

Figure 2[10]

is linked, by acrostics, to the larger and more resonant name of a colour, a word, and then, in the printed work, to the matter and light of colour itself, reflected back into my eyes by the tiny dots. If, now, I took the table from 'My Book' and printed all the necessary character combinations to spell out the works of W.S.[11] I would produce a similar object for which I might claim a certain aesthetic, but its encounter with language would be different and would, necessarily, cut across cultures — the two great cultures of writing on the planet — in a manner that corresponds with the typical engagement of all his books, and of much of the artist's work as a whole. The identities underlying the cipher are different to those that the younger artist highlights and, in fact, although also literal, they are relatively complex as well as transcultural. Every letter has a name, a dictionary entry; it is also a word that can be pronounced in a manner that is not necessarily close to the way the letter may, typically, be sounded in reading.[12] 'W' ('double-U') is the extreme example. It is these pronunciations of the letter names that map to 'My Book's characters, or rather to only one aspect of each character (or set of characters) as a whole — their pronunciation in modern Mandarin. The rest of a character's symbolic structure becomes redundant, insignificant. But these differences, these systems of potential significant relationship to the rest of written Chinese are not thereby erased. The characters' differences and the meanings they might generate are embedded redundantly in the text, and hyper-repetitively, since only thirty of several thousand extant Chinese characters are used in the cipher. *My Book's Complete Works of W.S.* is an aesthetic celebration of mistranscription and, in the cross-cultural context, mistranslation or nontranslation. A grotesque mistranslation of W.S into Chinese. But this sense of meaningless excess and repetition depends on our awareness and sensitivity to those larger symbolic structures within which our messages are buried. No one is annoyed or oppressed by the frequent repetition of 'e' in written English. The e's and the other letters are unburied, unhidden. They are here on the surface. They are what they are. Aren't they?

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In the Spring of 1997, my then employer handed me a notice of the *Tianshu* with an expression that indicated that he was intrigued but wondered whether he should also be sceptically amused, dismissive even, and that I might be able to help him to confirm this prejudice, allied with the native scepticism that allows us to dismiss vast quantities of contemporary art, especially conceptual art, that would otherwise entirely overwhelm us. I was sceptical but I was also intrigued. We worked together in a bookshop specializing in reference works on, chiefly, traditional East Asian art, in those varieties and media acquired by wealthy western collectors and major institutions, not so much galleries of contemporary art, which then had little or no interest in contemporary Chinese art. How the world has changed. And perhaps it has changed because it has been prepared to read an unreadable book, so long as it is written in 'Chinese.' Very soon I would be prepared to try and read the unreadable book myself. But for now I smiled the smile of shared scepticism and reinforced prejudice, and put the notice to one side. I had a catalogue to finish, with many interesting and valuable items described within it. An unreadable book could wait.

But it couldn't. Before long I had picked up the notice and had taken in the fact that the work to which it referred was being exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art, a place that I patronized in the vague hope that I would either be happily accepted as younger and more fashionable than I was, or recognized as the sort of new media attuned middle-aged artist-critic that the institution required. Suddenly I had a specific reason to go to the Institute and see something that genuinely interested me and might also flatter both myself and my field.

These narrative asides, mini-stories against myself, do me no credit. I refuse to excise them because I believe they help to expose the 'cool' ambivalence that we too often assume whenever we begin to address unfamiliar art of our own time. Contemporary art and its 'world' have given us good reason to be sceptical. If art is cool how can we — why should we? — resist being cool back? The problem is that there is the cool of being cool and knowing cool, but also the cool of not wanting to associate oneself with anything that is uncool.[13] This syndrome locates the term in our culture as a position we can assume, albeit as a locative paradox for its subjects. How do we ever know where we are? We suffer from an unproductive to and fro which benefits only those who are cool enough not to care, except perhaps in terms of calculated investment. In my own aesthetic work, my practice of making and poeisis, I am unable to banish 'calculation' from 'those areas where there is no need of numbers.'[14] When it comes to criticism I expect to be able to respond without consideration of enumerated futures and values, and to do this from a place of warmth.

In Spring 1997 a large number of unreadable books were installed in the Nash Room of London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. The artist also set up a *Square Word Calligraphy* classroom in the Brandon Room. This was the artist's first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom. I still have some images of the show which I took with a prized early digital camera, the maximum resolution of which is now considered insignificant. Nonetheless these images give a clear indication of the installation and its configuration. They may be compared with the many high resolution, publication-quality images of installations elsewhere that have since appeared. For the sake of this narrative, I will refer to these images in my description of my first encounter with the physical manifestations of the unreadable book.

Despite its status as lo-resolution fragmentary record, my first picture gives you some idea of a first impression produced by this *Tianshu* installation. Open books on the polished wood floor of a supremely well-appointed Georgian interior. The traditional stitched, soft-covered Chinese binding of

Figure 3[15]

individual volumes — often one part, as here, of a multi-volume work — allows them to lie open comfortably on a flat surface, but because they are stitched through the entire book block a centimetre or so from the spine, the stitched portion of the block raises the centre of the opening and makes for what is the characteristic 'book-opening-shape' of a Chinese volume, different from its western counterpart. A western opening has its two waves or wings of pages (refer back to the 'My Book' print), whereas a Chinese opening is more of single wave with a cardioid crest. You need more than one book to set up an appreciable wave pattern. Arranged on the floor in installation, the books produce an effect of rippling undulation, the surface of a pool of learning, with their interior location now reminding me of the strange pools in Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* or certain of Bill Viola's video pieces.

My second picture brings us to an immediate confrontation with the paradoxes of our first readings of the unreadable book. These began, in fact, with the first impressions recounted in the previous paragraph. There, I read

Figure 4[16]

for you an aspect of traditional Chinese book binding and compared it with that of the West. If you were unfamiliar with this type of binding, then what I did might be seen as an act of translation, one that allowed you to read something from the installation that would otherwise be latent or concealed, or that would remain for you some part of the abstract effect of the installation, a mere rippling of light and form spread out at your feet. For me, this narrative approach has brought home the fact that even in the most immediately apparent aspects of this work, the same structures of differing and shifting cultural readability obtain, especially the superposition that the work assumes between transparency and opacity; old and new; persistent traditional form and artifice for the sake of artifice.

This second picture captures the image of a young Asian woman entering the Nash Room for the first time. I gazed back and took a digital photograph of her as she began to read. You may now begin to appreciate how her reading differs profoundly from my reading and, I assume, from your own while also leaving intact the overarching tenor of the installation. Soon we will all be reading our ultimate inability to read but we will achieve this in very different ways. Unless she was raised in the West with little or no exposure to sinocentric literary and material culture — and that would be entirely possible these days — this young woman will be familiar with the way an old Chinese book lies on a flat surface. For you, if you are brought up in the West, it will be different. As we approach the installation with this usually subliminal visual reading of book cultures, we encounter a superposition of the type to which I referred above. Any particular reading of this display of unreadable book openings will be indeterminate until we know the cultural background and experience of the reader. This point appears obvious in this context, its effects immediately, visibly palpable when we are presented with the *Tianshu* installation. It provides broad but powerful support for the effects of cultural predisposition on reading, *à la* reader response criticism. However, while these cultural effects are palpable and crucial for the *Tianshu*, by contrast, it would be difficult for me to anticipate, in any easily expressible sense — assuming you are a western reader — the characteristics and contexts of your particular reading of, for example, *The Way by Swann's.*[17] Bizarrely, it can be acceptable for both you and I to say that we have both *read* Proust's classic text, that we both share a closely related literary experience, even if I have read it in English and you have read it your native French. Here, faced with a book 'from the sky,' with his book, we know that we are reading in an entirely different way as compared with the young Asian woman. Let's imagine that she is indeed Chinese, from Hong Kong, studying business administration at Brunel University in West London. She has, indeed, seen a number of old Chinese books during her young life, not as many as I have, but far more than you, and they are a part of her native material culture. She reads contemporary Chinese fluently, although less frequently these days.

She knows, more or less instantaneously, that she cannot read this Chinese, if it is Chinese. She does assume, in some sense, that it is Chinese. For you, it will be different. You read the 'words'? or 'characters'? printed in the books on the floor *as* Chinese and *as such* you know that you cannot read them. But you don't know that *you can't read them*. To know that, you would have to know that they can't be read, and not even the Chinese woman knows this yet. It will take you 'longer' than it takes her to come to this realization, although not necessarily longer in terms of the temporal duration since either of you first encountered his book. You may already have read an explanation of the installation and may thus already have been informed that the 'language' of the *Tianshu* is unreadable. But to know this in the way that the Asian woman or I know it, you would have to take the time to learn and be able to read at least some Chinese. Because of my education and interests, my own reading was and is relatively privileged. I can see how and why, in certain clear respects, my reading might differ from that of someone who was raised and educated in a sinocentric culture, and I can anticipate, with

Figure 5[18]

good chance of success, how my reading and the young Asian woman's will differ from yours, assuming you were not so raised. I can see this in terms of the *Tianshu's* relation to language as a system of inscription and also to language as material culture.

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It must have been a few years later, in 2000 or 2001, that I was waiting to collect my youngest daughter in a North London primary school yard. There was an elderly Chinese gentleman there, also apparently waiting for a young child, I assumed his grandchild, who was in the same year as my daughter. By his dress, it was clear that the old man was visiting from the Chinese mainland. He was wearing a cotton cap and jacket that reminded me of rural China, although the style had been more or less universal throughout Chinese society. I decided to say hello and attempt a friendly conversation in my reasonable but far from fluent Mandarin. "Hello," I said, in *putonghua*, the 'common tongue,' "Where are you from?" I addressed him directly, unambiguously. He could see that I was talking to him but he knew that he couldn't understand me. He pointed to his nose, a traditional Chinese way of indicating oneself, and said in slow, clear, and ungrammatical *putonghua*, "I ... am ... China." Just as you or I would say, "I ... English," to a cannibal in New Guinea. His sentence is arguably a little less ungrammatical in Chinese. Mandarin *was* his native dialect. "I know you're Chinese," I answered, in Chinese, "but where in China are you from?" He pointed to his nose again and repeated slowly, "I ... am ... China." I soon gave up.

I do know a couple of languages but I'm no linguist. I suffer from the monolingual inertia of the predominant Anglophone. Nonetheless, I am a literal artist and I do also fancy myself as a comparative grammatologist as well as something of a linguistic philosopher. As such, I tend to subscribe to Ivan Illich's view of linguistic distinction, or rather indistinction.[19] In the great scheme of human things, modern 'languages' are just that, modern. They are recent constructs, as much a function of geopolitics and contingent national boundaries as of anything else, including actual linguistic behaviour. In earlier times, and even now, it might be better to think of human beings as speaking/writing and hearing/reading without predetermination of some distinct language that they were or are doing this 'in.' Groups of people have come together and they speak/write and hear/read until they are doing so together, in a way that, literally, makes sense to them and makes sense for them. This is one way of thinking through certain consequences of the fact that so many people who may be deemed 'illiterate' or 'uneducated' nonetheless may have remarkable mastery of several languages in their day-to-day lives, far beyond the capabilities of most predominant Anglophones. Such people simply kept talking to many other people until, in different

times and places, they understood one another, while we, the predominant Anglophones, continue to concentrate on a particular privileged register of now global English in order to make ourselves understood to a particularly recalcitrant but extremely powerful constituency. At any high-level — academic, economic, political, cultural — conference on the planet, there will be English. Even at places and times where other languages are prevalent or more fluently practiced by those meeting together, if even one of those present does not yet speak one of the other non-English languages at play, well then, they are liable to apologize for the fact that they have become, 'the cause of English,' the reason for the meeting to revert to the global common interlocutor.[20]

The existence of sinocentric culture complicates this picture, especially as the economic, political and cultural power of China experiences a renaissance with global reach. For just as the words, 'I ... English,' — as soon as they are voiced — can be presumed to establish a framework for all the subsequent words towards which its addressees should both speak and write, 'I ... am ... China,' in Chinese, makes a counter claim of similar cultural moment, but having, for the time being, very different effects. The old man meant to tell me, 'I cannot understand what you are saying unless we are both speaking Chinese, which is clearly impossible in any world that is known to me.' Because, in his world, the non-Chinese do not speak Chinese and are not expected to do so, not even when they are in China, let alone when they are outside the central kingdom. He wasn't saying, 'Chinese is the predominant language. Speak to me in Chinese and then we can talk.' I *was* speaking Chinese. This fact, however, was impossible for him to acknowledge. It could not be so, according to 'China.' He was telling me, 'We cannot speak to one another, even if we are speaking to one another; this is impossible, because ... I ... am ... China.'

I believe that this story comments, pointedly, on our possible readings of his book in a number of ways, admittedly divergent. For those of you — I can't say 'us' here — who do not know how to read or speak Chinese, why is there a more or less immediate and culturally significant aesthetic attraction, a frisson, a sense of being in the presence of an important work of art, precisely at that moment when you are told — by me, or by someone else — that the writing in the *Tianshu* is unreadable? Would you or I have experienced the same thrill if the floor of the Nash Room in the Institute of Contemporary Art had been covered in books that were, in some sense, Spanish, but were composed of words that did not appear in any Spanish lexicon? 'Beautiful,' we might say, but, 'Important?' I'm not sure.

We know immediately, by seeing and without having to know the Chinese language, that the *Tianshu* installation *is* Chinese. 'I ... am ... China,' it says to us, and so it says to you — who do not read or speak Chinese — that

these books can say nothing to you, that you can say nothing to one another. This is a fact that his book would have said to most of you if they had, in fact, been written in perfectly readable Chinese, and it is something that both interlocutors will always have suspected to have been the case. China is an absolute or perhaps *the* absolute other. Then, on top of this, shortly afterwards, we learn that the artist has made or received a *Book from the Sky*; he has painstakingly fashioned a 'Chinese' that no one, not even the Chinese, not even he himself, can read. We're stunned. He has reiterated the statement. He has made explicit for us the nature of the relationship. His book says, 'I ... am ... China,' but says it such that there is *literally* no way that any of us can converse with it. There is no way that you or I or anyone can read his book, and there is no way that we could ever be translated or inscribed upon and within its stitched and folded leaves. The 'same' statement might have been made by an unreadable 'Spanish' book but it would not have the same force of reiteration, the same sense of being a stark, inescapable statement of what we already know, that language from another culture is from an Other Culture. Myself, I point to my nose and say to all you others everywhere, '*All language* is from another world.'

If the *Book from the Sky* had been 'Spanish' it might not have seemed to be from another world. Entering the Nash Room of the ICA we would have seen: 'a number of copies of the same book open on the floor of the gallery with, perhaps, proof sheets from the edition pasted together as long scrolls and hanging from the ceiling.' This installation might have seemed strange to us but we would nonetheless have recognized a familiar type of object — the book, the western codex — one designed to contain language from a nearby culture, identified nationally and associated with the Iberian peninsula. The form of the container would appear to be unusually old perhaps, but fundamentally the same as the form of books such as those which have long surrounded us in our own national cultures. We might look more closely at the language 'contained' in the books and notice that they bore a Spanish that was not Spanish? an old or damaged Spanish? a Spanish that was almost Spanish? finally: an unreadable Spanish. But these books would feel like they belonged in our world, no matter how clear to us that the language was not, in fact, from this or any other world.

As western readers of his book we have immediate access to that aspect of the work which tells us, '(This) language is not in our world.' The traditional form of the Chinese book, strange to us, helps us to receive this impression. We know that these are likely to be 'books' on the floor of the gallery, but we are far from familiar with the detailed *how*, the material facts of how they could ever contain or convey language. As such, it is less of a surprise to know that what they contain is unreadable always and everywhere. And yet it does remain a surprise. We can appreciate how much has gone into the

making of these books. There is so much evidence of a living, once powerful tradition from elsewhere. Thus contained, the characters of his book do strike us as language from elsewhere which is, as I say, another world whence all language comes to us.

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Let's return to the Nash Room, to the exhibition as it actually occurred and to the young Asian woman who now bends down to examine an opening in one of the books on the floor.

Figure 6[21]

She sees something that is familiar to her in the way that older western books are familiar to us — the weighty tomes of our tradition. If I attempted to translate her experience I would say that she sees the opening of an old Latin Bible or an early edition of a major historical work, perhaps concerning the fall of the Roman Empire, something that would normally be displayed in a glass case with low, conservation-grade lighting at the British Library. She sees pages from a book that would be too old and precious for any individual other than, perhaps, a wealthy forebear to have owned. In the corresponding, translated experience, at the British Library, one wouldn't expect to be able immediately to read or to place the words on such a displayed opening. One turns to a neatly typeset and mounted caption and

trusts its author instead, an absent, erudite curator. Our western inability to read would likely be based on spelling. We would read the relatively familiar forms of decipherable letters but they would be seen to be arranged, spelt, into the unreadable word shapes of a language we do not know, the Latin we never learned at High School for example. Even were the characters of his book to be readable, our young Asian woman's expectations would be different. She would expect to know individually, to be able to recognize and read the majority of the *words* or rather the characters on the pages before her. She would expect their spellings to be more or less the same as they had 'always' been. If 'to spell' translates the modern word 拼 (*pin*) describing the process and result of assembling brush strokes and/or sub-lexical elements into the lexical characters of Chinese, then the spelling of Chinese has been remarkably consistent and decipherable to anyone who has learned its written forms since about the second century of our era.[22] Our young Asian woman expects to see characters she knows but not necessarily to understand how these larger-than-letters linguistic signs — a little smaller than the average meaning-bearing 'size' of 'words' in western languages — have themselves been arranged into construable text. She doesn't expect to know the grammar of old or medieval or even nineteenth-century academic Chinese but she does expect to recognize the spelling of all the constituent words of all those distinct languages practices which are not, by the way, 'mutually intelligible.'

Instead she's somewhat shocked to see that, although the characters look, superficially, more or less right — the strokes are all well-formed; as are many of the sub-lexical elements — she can't recognize — in the sense of decipher or look up in her internalized dictionary — *any* of the complete characters. It gets worse. It's not that the writing, if it is writing, is nonsense or some other form of writing. These characters look like they could be characters, but they aren't. Now, as I've suggested before, this experience is difficult to convey. We will come back to the problem when I describe my plan to translate his book into 'European.' For the moment, I want to shift focus again and indulge in some calculated speculation concerning the experience of the artist and author of his book, as he both makes the book and prevents himself from ever being able to read it. After all, we can be more certain about him than about our young Asian woman. We know that he is fluent in Chinese and that, despite being of university age at the time of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and thus denied the usual access to higher education, he was and is well-educated. Why did he make his book? What did he want himself and others to think and feel when they tried to read his book?

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Our focus shifts, this time to what must be considered, after all, one of the most significant subject positions from which the unreadable book can be read. Inevitably, the work came to our attention in the West, in a Eurocentric context. Clearly, it was not made in such a context. It is unlikely that the artist of his book imagined a western audience for his work as he began to make it in the late 1980s. As he set out to carve his unreadable characters, he is likely to have been radically uncertain about the possibility of having *any* audience for the work. We know that he was actively working to resist *readers* of his book. What audience did he expect for this work, in late 1980s China? The engagement of his book with questions of intercultural translation — its (im) possibilities — was something that came later, something that was read into his book both by others from elsewhere and by the artist himself. You can see him discovering an interest in the intercultural communicative potential of language art in his later work — *Square Word Calligraphy*, and now especially *Book from the Ground*. He reacted quite quickly to the reception of *Tianshu* in the West and learned to read it differently, just as both he, as an artist, and his book were being read differently in the West. Arguably, the inclination of his later work in this vein runs counter to that of his unreadable book.

Some time after seeing the installations in London I met the artist of his book. He came to dinner at our flat in London along with a well-known Chinese poet of the same generation, the mutual friend who brought us together.[23] When we spoke about his unreadable book — and this is borne out in other published interviews — although he understood and appreciated the force and aesthetic potential of *Tianshu* as an engine of paradox for intercultural translation, he tended to fall back on a very different personal sense of the work, whenever he was asked. He says that he made it in order to expose the fact that Chinese literary culture is 討厭 *taoyan* which I translate here as '(oppressively elaborated in a manner that is) boring, tedious, something to avoid (in favour of more pleasurable or valuable pursuits).' I mean to suggest that the usual gloss of *taoyan* as 'boring' is basically correct but needs to be boringly elaborated in order that it might help to explain why, at an early point in his career, the artist exhausted his woodblock print-maker's energies and skills in the surely tedious exercise of personally hand-carving a font of over four thousand non-lexical and therefore unreadable 'Chinese' characters.

Although we don't yet know why he did something so *taoyan* in order to demonstrate that literary Chinese culture was and is *taoyan*, we do know that, at least initially, he made what he made for other Chinese readers. When it was exhibited in Beijing 1988, the *Tianshu* did cause a sensation, and its artist must have anticipated this, to some extent. But whatever the sensation his unreadable book then produced, we know that this was not a function of any *transcultural* unreadability. The book generated controversy

within Chinese culture, including of course its artistic subculture, which was then experiencing something of a renaissance.

We can assume that the artist's comments were then and are still highly pertinent. In one possible interpretative extrapolation of his own rendition of his book's significance as boredom, he can be seen to have produced a book, dressed up in all the material culture trappings of imperially sponsored literary historical authority, but all this book will say to anyone is "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah ..." or perhaps in a better and more self consistent translation, "seled one may movin… wiry jevoration has ve… bac the phief leatures wh… chese at eat bau to suffdtsta… bisten biy ...The jedornor popicreutll… upon the katter for bacero… or degebitants, and the phart… were maimilitted to the ka… for bacer counptaqeer befo… being ~at into raperotion, … jafting of these pharters … gelsia deimon was but … medderal, however, ...All the coloughs were cho…so ... with a strame of the shela… … oorporation in the bays b……e..."

The authority with which his book does this is crucial. This authority is generated by the material cultural elaboration of the work in all its fine and tedious detail. The production of the *Tianshu*, especially at the time that it was done, was a monumental *tour de force*. The facsimile reproduction of old Chinese books is highly developed in Chinese book culture. Late imperial and post imperial facsimiles of much earlier fine editions (善本 *shanben*) may themselves be highly prized by scholars and collectors, not least as, in themselves, sensitive and scholarly renderings of their objects of attention. Overlaid on this practice of cultural homage and preservation there is also the very different sinocentric engagement with reproduction itself, where culturally authorized 'copies' — remakings or reembodiments of a work — may garner, ultimately, all but the same cultural moment as an original; always assuming an original survives, which is often not the case.[24] The *Tianshu* appears then as something like the facsimile of a great book that never existed. For a traditional scholar it would be disturbing to encounter such a fine book, such a fine facsimile, with nothing but non-characters as its text. That unreadability should have been produced *intentionally* — that was scandal and cultural vandalism. The artist appears to be nose-*thumbing* when what his book seemed to be doing — at first to us, earlier — was pointing to itself (its nose) and saying, "I ... am ... China ...

"... and China is the centre of all culture...." The artist did indeed produce his book to make this statement, only he explicitly intended the further qualification, "... and all authoritative, elite (Chinese) culture is boring, repugnant (*taoyan*)."

In the detailed description and commentary appended to the present volume, you will find my own fine and tedious attempt at an elaboration

of the traditional Chinese material cultural niceties of his unreadable book, including illustrations of how it functions both as book machine and also, ineluctably, as an engine of the culture it pretends to critique. Before shifting focus yet again, there is at least one more cultural complication that his book silently evokes and of which I must speak briefly. The artist was born a little more than half a decade after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and he came to maturity during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, roughly 1966-76. He was one of the many young people of his generation to be sent to the countryside, where the culture of peasant-farmers' life and work, which Mao's Marxism had established as the only viable and authorized revolutionary cultural practice appropriate to socialist reconstruction, was to serve as his locus of higher education. The universities were closed. Going down to the countryside was intended to prevent him and all cadres of students from turning into feckless bourgeois artist-intellectuals. I am more or less the same age as the artist of his book and studied Chinese at the time when the artist's generation was struggling to move back from the countryside, and as more so-called pragmatic Chinese leaders began to repudiate the 'excesses' of Maoism while beginning to dabble with those excesses of Capitalism that might still allow them to retain absolute control of China's momentous social order.[25] There are strange parallels between these synchronous but widely separated cultures of once younger intellectuals. My generation was too young to be directly, subversively active in the socio-political counter-culture of the 1960s but we followed in its wake, transfixed by its values, and are still, to this day, faithful to those newly-fashionable ideals that we perceive as viable in the face of global neo-liberal excess. We were led to drop out for a spell and turned — we still turn — 'inwards' for solace, secret pleasure, in order to assuage our undoubted guilt and complicity, and to reassure ourselves that our increasingly threatened and marginalized other-worldly, anti-venal ideals have some basis, some ground for practice, in our lives. There is an uncanny rhyme, echoed in the more or less real-world activism of the more political members of the generation I'm trying to characterize, between its implicit ideals and values, and those underlying the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. It seems to me that many Chinese artists and intellectuals of the artist's age, and the artist of his book himself, are still grateful for some of their experiences during that 'decade of turmoil.' They too were not directly active in the 'real' revolution but were swept up in its turbulent wake. Of course, the involvements of Chinese youth were more total and extreme than anything we experienced in the West but I'd still maintain that there are shared structures of engagement and thinking, and a certain relationship to values encountered as and within the (dys)function of higher education. In the artist's case, for example, he still believes in the people, in the culture of the people, and in the possibility that this culture

can be transmitted directly, in a manner that can be immediately appreciated and that is not boring (*taoyan*). His use of *Square Word Calligraphy* in his *Art for the People* banners and his transcriptions of Mao's talks at Yan'an would be crucial to my thinking here. These pieces are not ironic; they are intended to convey values and ideals that are proposed as universal, in a would-be universal language — English with Chinese calligraphic characteristics.

Figure 7[26]

When the *Tianshu* was first exhibited in China in 1988, it did cause a scandal, a sensation. It was perceived to attack those bases of culture that the artist of his book characterizes as *taoyan*, and in a manner that was impossible for cultural authority to assimilate. Somehow it was and is apparent that his address to traditional imperial culture was also an address to contemporary totalitarian cultural authority, dismissing it as boring, something that going down to the countryside had allowed the artist and his other artist colleagues to overcome in practice. The artist's worker-peasant carving of over four thousand characters was an act of proletarian artistic production. The act and the objects it generated manifested all the care and concern that practice itself may invest in cultural tradition, in the *Tianshu*'s case, the tradition of

the Chinese book. He had produced an impossible as well as an unreadable object. As a faithful facsimile of one of the 'four olds' this book object was something that should have been destroyed by any progressive citizen; as the product of the artist's worker-peasant labour, and also as a commission for the print-factory labour of other Chinese workers, it could be seen — in stark contradiction — as sacrosanct, ideal, one of the many triumphant productions of New China.[27] Although the non-lexical words of the book said nothing, they managed nonetheless to express the artist's care for his literary tradition, including its scholarly concerns and his faith in a demonstrably shared language underlying his non-words, one that bears language and silently speaks or sings to us even after we are gone. Making this potential language unreadable could nonetheless be read in a paraphrase that the artist of his book still affirms. He feels that all officially sanctioned language — sanctioned by its framing in whatever paraphernalia of totalitarian public culture — is, in fact, not language at all. It is simply a mass of verbiage, with no lexical relation to living human practices.

Later, long after I saw the installation of the *Tianshu,* I encountered one strangely similar book object, also embodying deeply contradictory cultural structures but making a highly contrastive statement. It was around the time when the artist was producing his *Art for the People* banners in *Square Word Calligraphy*. It may even have been precisely when one of them was hanging over the entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London?[28]

The encounter took place in the bookshop, of course, where we had just acquired a fine edition of the official Chinese translation of the *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels.[29] I was asked to describe the book. My reason for mentioning this edition is that it was, like the *Tianshu*, in some sense the facsimile of an early Chinese book. This Marx and Engels was produced in the form of a *shanben*, a fine or antiquarian edition, or, as I wrote in my description, "a refined and representative manifestation of the 'old culture', otherwise and elsewhere being 'swept away' during those same years [of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution]." I decided that the design of the book suggested a Song period (960-1279) model, closest, if anything, to the style of printing in Buddhist sutras, perhaps the epitome of the earliest, finest Chinese printing available to us in other than unique exemplars. It is not only in the realm of revolutionary cultural politics that — without, apparently, any sense of irony or contradiction — canonical anti-establishment texts can be dressed up in the material cultural trappings of authority. Imagine leather bound copies of *The Naked Lunch* or Warhol film transcripts, or records of Joseph Beuys' arguments with wolves. But in 1973, when this *Manifesto* was made, the very agents of the cultural sanctification that it performs on behalf of radical iconoclasm were busy actively destroying any and all material evidence of objects *in the very same form* as those that they were using to shore up their power and prestige. Such contradictions lead to non-sense, and must

have vitiated any linguistic message in the *Manifesto*, looked at from the artist of his book's point of view. He reads meaningless text in the *Manifesto* and everywhere in Chinese culture, removed from the dictionaries of universal language, from the language of the people. In another uncanny rhyme, this time a rhyme of practice, the fine-edition *Manifesto* was explicitly validated in political terms by the insertion of a separately printed description of its production. This book was made by anonymous workers carrying on a tradition that was not acknowledged as 'old' cultural authority, but that was seen instead as the manifestation of civilizing technical innovation by the people, by China's early, world-beating printers and book makers. The artist of his book, in his carving of its unreadable characters, embodied these same traditions, recast as progressive folk traditions. Both the anonymous Cultural Revolutionary work group and the solitary, once anonymous but now world-famous international art star produced books that are, culturally, literally, unreadable.

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I have attempted to explain briefly how an ancient-seeming impossible object was also a contemporary political statement. I have strayed far from my original narrative trail which now appears to have been abandoned in a morass of analysis associated with the artist's installation at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1997. I hadn't yet been convinced to compose a bibliographic, bookseller's description of his unreadable book, not until shortly after I saw the exhibition. I guess that did it for me. I was intrigued and convinced. Perhaps more importantly, I was becoming aware that the existence of his book had a bearing on my own ideas about writing and about translation. I was beginning to consider the problem of translating the *Tianshu* into 'English.'

However, before I considered translating his book I was faced with the task of describing it. We had decided to list the book in the catalogue of the specialist bookseller for whom I then worked. My then employer was able to contact the artist, negotiate supply and set a price. At the time, in 1997, I considered the price quite full, as booksellers say, and yet it has to be conceded that although only one customer took advantage of our advertised price, that customer procured a remarkable bargain.[30] I spent some time with a copy of the *Tianshu* and wrote a long description, the original text of which can still be found in copies of the paper catalogue and also on the world wide web.[31] In the past few months I have spent more time with his book and also looked closely at another copy of the book held by the British Museum.[32] I have augmented and revised my original description and this more recent text is appended to the volume before you.

I say that I consulted a copy of *Tianshu* in the British Museum. The presence of this copy in its collections is worthy of remark. The book's acquisition by the Museum was due to the good offices of one of the curators in what was then its Department of Oriental Antiquities. She was told about the *Tianshu* in 1993 by a Hong Kong art dealer.[33] Thus, by fortunate chance and thanks to the curator's perspicacity, the world's greatest museum — of antiquities — had already appropriated what is sometimes regarded as the most important work of twentieth-century Chinese art four years before it was first exhibited in London or noted by the only western bookseller — the one for whom I then worked — in a position to represent it successfully as a book. Personally, because I had once worked in the Chinese section of the British *Library* — for a couple of years up until 1988, the very year during which parts of his book were exhibited in Beijing — I was disappointed that the *Tianshu* was not in the Library's collection. The Museum and Library were divided institutionally in the 1960s, divorcing legacy collections on the basis of media — books one way, prints another, for example. After 1993 the fact that one national, London-sited collection possessed this object meant that there was no chance that another such collection could acquire it. This a perfect example of how the cultural positioning of a work of art is determined by the institutions to which we entrust our culture. His book is 'art' (or perhaps, rather, 'future antiquity'), not 'book' or even 'book art' because the Museum bought it before the Library could consider it, assuming the Library would ever have noticed. I trust that the Tate Gallery curators also feel the kind of guilt that I feel. We might have had our chance to set his book in another light. Here I am doing my best to read it, yet again, as if it were a book.

This was the necessary purpose of my catalogue description. To be eligible and appropriate for our bookseller's catalogue the *Tianshu* had to be read as a book. I was not working for an art dealer and I never have. Today I work as a writer, a writer in and of so-called 'new' or 'digital' media no less. What was and what is my personal interest in his book?

I wanted to translate it.

I still want to translate it. I feel guilty that I have not already done so. To assuage this and other guilt, I have, amongst other things, written this strange narrative essay that should now meander its way back to near present conclusion with an exposition of my plan to translate his book.

I came up with the idea of translating the *Tianshu* very soon after describing it in that catalogue entry. I even discussed my intention with the artist of his book on a number of occasions. He seemed to be favourably disposed towards the idea. He himself may well have felt that he had already undertaken this task. As he says in his own words elsewhere in the present volume, the original exhibition of work in progress from the making of his book included

artificial dictionary definitions of characters from the *Tianshu* composed in unreadable English.[34] The artist's later *Post-Testament*, might also be regarded as a book-length, or perhaps book-sized, partial translation of his *Book from the Sky*.[35] However, I have enough regard for my own understanding of his book and its significance to believe that these essays by the artist are far from being complete or faithful translations.

In his subsequent work, the artist of his book seems chiefly to have been concerned with what is commonly seen as the intercommunicative potential of language, its interrelation with things, with images and with thought, its transparency, its potential universality. He seems to have taken up a resonant fellowship with other artists and scholars of language who have longed for a universal and philosophical language, an Esperanto of inscribed humanity embracing all that could be expressed by all the people in all the worlds they might inhabit. The artist of his book has made, in his *Square Word Calligraphy*, for example, a potential global alphabetic writing that embodies and teaches — as an artwork it is also a pedagogical system — Chinese cultural practices of calligraphy. Surely this is a powerful and inclusive combination. He even went on to make computer software that enabled western alphabetic writers to generate his more universal Square Word characters without having to trouble themselves with the much longer and more difficult task of learning to write with Chinese brush and ink, the fundamental mark-making practice which underlies the only other culture-bearing way of writing on our planet.[36] Finally, one of his most recent major undertakings is the *Book from the Ground*. This work explicitly references, contradicts and complements his other book, our subject, the one from the Sky, the one I still want to translate. Despite the probable fact that his new earthly book can spell out everything we need to know or say in thing-like universal icons, I still feel the need to make a western book that does what his first book did. Somehow his *Book from the Ground* reminds me of Swift's academicians in Lagado, 'almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs,' packs containing all the things that they carried around with them instead of words, which yet seemed to 'serve as a Universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling.'[37] In these days of ours, when Japanese novels made from text messages occupy that country's best seller lists, why shouldn't all literature itself be made — for all the peoples of the world — from the icons in his *Book from the Ground*, our shared ground?

Here we encounter the treacherous paradox of translation. It is manifestly impossible, but it must be possible. Sometimes I think of it like this: Every utterance, in whatever form, in whatever language, is necessarily unique. Any translation of an utterance is simply a new unique utterance is some other form or language. This is guaranteed for us by the embodiment of language

in space and time and by our own coincident embodiment. Nonetheless, we do say things to one another. We pass utensils back and forth that 'are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling' because we ourselves are generally of the same kind, and the shape or culture of our lives is nearly resembling. As Walter Benjamin puts it, even more strongly, generalizing to all significant communities of linguistic practice: '... every evolved language ... can be considered as a translation of all the others.'[38] This must be true, and translation must therefore be possible so long as we believe that we all live nearly resembling human lives and so long as we remain generally of the same kind, as creatures of language. If his book is language it must be possible to translate it in this sense, to make a new book in our own language that is the same, or nearly resembling.

You might now say to me that the writing in his book is precisely not language. Isn't that the point? It's not readable. It's not the archive of a language anyone could know or use. But just because it's not *a* or any language that does not mean that it isn't language. Academicians of our own, far in advance of those in Swift's Lagado, have pointed out that systems of language, of symbolic exchange, are based on arbitrary signs with systematic differences. The forms of the four thousand unreadable characters that the artist of his book spelt out and then carved for printing as moveable wooden type were determined by systematic differences between their (unreadable) forms and those of other characters composed from elements that are 'generally of the same kind or nearly resembling' but which happen to exist in Chinese dictionaries, in, that is, those traditional lists of characters that have been used for Chinese writing, historically. The reason his characters are unreadable is because they have been systematically constructed as signs of their exclusion from these dictionaries. I think that it must therefore be true to say that the characters the artist made are a part of the system of written Chinese, a part of its language. They are simply a part that this system of writing and its history determined, in their marks of difference, as unreadable in terms of that system.

At one point in composing this narrative I was using the word 'illegible' instead of 'unreadable.' Neither word, without explanation, expresses unambiguously the way in which the artist's characters cannot be read. I considered these words to be typical near synonyms of English, one Latinate, one Old English at root. Both have misdirecting connotations. 'Illegible' implies that what it describes is too indistinct or unclear to be read; 'unreadable' might be a negative judgement attributed to writing that is entirely clear but, for example, 'boring' (*taoyan*) or pointless. This latter sense of 'unreadable,' however, is a function of interpretation and implies, paradoxically, that one can read all too well, well enough to realize that what you are reading is 'unreadable.' Reading his book, at least we know that it would be impossible to get

anywhere close to such an interpretative moment. Thus using 'unreadable' in its more literal sense is safer here, in the context of this essay.

But I return, for a moment, to illegibility in order to underline my contention that the writing in his book is writing, that it is language. If it weren't, it would nonetheless be a *representation* of writing, an image of writing. Marks like this in what is clearly — visually and physically — a book, will be seen — in a blur, from a distance — as the image of writing before they can be read or not read or proved to be unable, ever, to be read. We are back to a consideration of the points of view of people entering a gallery installation and seeing his books from different cultural and linguistic distances.

A prominent scholar of Chinese art history once pointed out to me certain strange phenomena emergent from the representation of writing.[39] To be a representation of writing, the marks-as-image which constitute the representation must be *illegible* in the sense of indistinct, unclear, unable to convey the systematic differences that would otherwise allow them to function as writing, as linguistic archive. Why? Because if the marks-as-image are clear enough to be legible then they are not a *representation* of writing; they *are* writing. The characters, the marks-as-image, in the *Tianshu* are clearly and distinctly able to convey the differences that distinguish them from characters in Chinese dictionaries. They are writing. Strung together, they constitute an unreadable text, but they are not illegible in the sense of too indistinct to be read; they are not a second-order image or representation of writing.

Good. So I have even more reason to believe that I could make a new unique writing in a form or language of my own that could be appreciated as a translation of the writing in his book. Although his book is, clearly, an impossible and ideal object, the unreadable book from Elsewhere, I cannot translate it in the abstract. I cannot keep treating it as exemplary. It exists as an object in the world, something with specific properties and methods. I have to recognize, treat and translate its accidents as well as its perfection.

So much of the *Tianshu* is its existence in the form of a book, a Chinese book. We know that it was produced in the late twentieth century but that it was modelled on much earlier antiquarian Chinese book forms and designs. At an early stage of thinking about its translation, I decided that I needed a model, an early English book that would provide a framework for my translation of the form. It has never been clear to me that the artist of his book had, at some point, chosen to model the *Tianshu* on a specific early book. I believe that he did have certain authoritative encyclopaedic works in mind but that other necessary aspects of his project precluded the choice of a single model.[40] This is borne out in the description of his process in the present volume. Even his remarkable patience for the durational effort of

hand-carving characters did not turn to the carving of sets of woodblock 'plates' for every page impression that would have been necessary to print the book in the more usual traditional Chinese manner. Although the Chinese invented moveable type, the large number of characters required for a workable Chinese font made it more practical, at the scale of printer's workshop or factory, to carve entire woodblocks, each block carved with reversed images in relief of all the characters needed for a particular page impression. For a workshop of trained carvers and printers — traditionally only quasi-literary — this was easier and more economic than setting pages from a huge, unwieldy font of over-numerous characters. The artist of his book designed and carved four thousand distinct characters and he was also obliged to carve many of these characters in a number of different sizes — for titles, interlinear and marginal notes, and so on. But he did not have to carve multiple copies of distinct characters such as would be required for a natural language Chinese font where common characters — the equivalent of frequently used words such as 'and' or 'the' — would have to exist in multiple copies or 'sorts' in order to be able to correctly set the impression of written text, with repeated words, on the page to be printed.[41]

These technical considerations and the practical solution chosen to address them constrained the artist of his book in terms of how it would be printed and, especially, due to its unusual hand-carved wooden moveable font, how it would look and therefore what range of early texts it might plausibly or successfully imitate. As the artist himself describes in his own words in the present volume, he desired that his book should have the aspect of the earliest Song period Chinese printed texts but the moveable font he was able to carve, in a slightly squat Song *style* (宋體 *songti*) font, better for carving and suited to the practicalities of his wooden sorts, suggests, to the Chinese bibliophile's eye, fine editions of a later, Ming period date. Moreover, the very fact of using moveable type meant that his book was unlikely to have been modelled on any of the relatively rare, actually existing examples of early Chinese moveable type printing.[42]

But, in any case, I felt that I needed to use a model for other reasons. My choice of model book would provide an implicit reading of his unreadable book, an ironic or paradoxical commentary. I chose John Wilkins' *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, 1668.[43] This date is not early enough to impress a Chinese bibliophile. No western printed model book could come close to matching the Song period vintage that the artist of his book intended.[44] In traditionally accepted dating schemes, by the time of the publication of Wilkins book, even the Ming dynasty had ceded the mandate of Heaven for twenty-four years and the Manchu Kangxi emperor was on the throne. The Chinese empire was, to some eyes, already in its last pre-modern days. Nonetheless, these were still great times for book making.

The end of the Ming period is well known for its bibliographic gems which at least have the advantage of a certain currency, with many works extant and relatively accessible in collections of early Chinese editions. But primarily I was taken, as I say, with the idea that modelling the form, the shape and design of my translation on Bishop Wilkins' monumental essay would give both a good corresponding sense of the range of significant formatting in the artist's book, and comment on its project as an act of language making.

There are notable rhymes of structure between the two works. The artist's book is in four volumes. Wilkins' *Essay* has four parts, with an appended 'Alphabetical Dictionary Wherein all English Words According to their Various Significations, Are either referred to their Places in the Philosophical Tables, Or explained by such Words as are in those Tables.' In the final volume of the *Tianshu*, you will find sections that are clearly recognizable as dictionaries and lists of words or compounds with, apparently, articles of definition.[45] Wilkins' aim was to provide, as his title indicates, a universal way of writing in a 'Real Character,' by which he meant a writing system the graphic forms of which were explicitly related to an exhaustive description of the world, all its objects and essences, and all their possible accidents and relations. The artist's first title for his book is known and acknowledged to have been 析世鑒 — 世紀末卷 *Xi shi jian — Shiji mojuan*, translating as *Mirror to Analyze the World: The Century's Final Volume*. He actually *adopted* — for reasons of convenience and also because of its inherent resonance — his book's soon popular nickname, *Tianshu*, *Book from the Sky* or more properly *Writing from Heaven*, a reference to Chinese revelatory, sometimes oracular practices, in popular religious culture, of what we might regard in the West as graphic glossolalia. The earlier, initial title for the work indicates, I believe, the artist's underlying intention to provide an exhaustive description of the world in human cultural terms using the only language in which this could ever be possible, a form of language that could never be read. Wilkins' *Essay* is the positive of this necessarily negative if more accurate image of the world, since the world must surely be incapable of representation as such, in its totality. For Wilkins and the scholars of his day who struggled to replace learned Latin with a universal language, New Science — within the finitude guaranteed by theism for which the world was simply a large, knowable, created thing — promised that the world both could and should be exhaustively set out in philosophical tables. Real characters could be fashioned to stand for the real things which would otherwise, literally, overburden the academicians of Lagado.

Perhaps it is possible to say that Bishop Wilkins' book is already a translation, an anticipatory plagiarism as the OuLiPians might say, of his unreadable book. Strangely it would be truer to say that Wilkins' *Essay*, perhaps along with his *Mercury: Or the Secret and Swift Messenger,* is a more faithful translation of the

artist's subsequent language work and especially his *Book from the Ground* and its universal, if popular, language.

No, simply to offer up Wilkins' *Essay* as a translation — like a photographic negative — would be unfaithful to the unreadability of the artist's book. I planned to use the *Essay* as a model but to fill it with an unreadable script translating the artist's project in terms of our own, western linguistic structures. For this part of the work, it would be necessary to devise an unreadable alphabet or, more accurately, set of 'alphabetic' glyphs that could not be read as belonging to any existing list of such glyphs in the West. This is clearly the most difficult aspect of the project for technical graphic reasons and whether it is even possible, I have yet to determine. However, to make the attempt would be entirely necessary in order to remain faithful to the language and form of his book.

Characters are the graphic atoms of Chinese writing, of the Chinese system of inscription, by which I mean that if you have anything 'less' than a character what you have is not an atom of language but a mere sub-atomic assemblage of graphic marks. If you have more than a character then you have either a linguistic 'molecule' or an atom of language and some extraneous graphic material. The artist of his book was fortunate in the 'atomic structure' of his language in that it has *many* atoms, a large set of distinct atomic elements with elaborate and accessible internal structures. Thus, it was relatively easy for him to create new *unreadable* atoms, consonant with the existing atomic system, by manufacturing, as we have said before, new differences in order to make new characters that are not listed in any existing lists or dictionaries of Chinese characters. He had a lot of graphic elements in elaborate (sub-atomic) structures to play with.

The 'atoms' of our predominant system of inscription, which is alphabetic, are relatively few in number and, graphically, they are composed from a relatively small number of marks and differences. Moreover, there are many historical alphabets that may have exhausted — who can tell? — the range of significant graphic differences that it is possible to indicate within the repertoire of marks available to a typical letter. Is it possible to make a new unreadable alphabet, the glyphs of which have never been used in any other such set of alphabetic signs? This is what I would have to devise in order to translate his book. To be clear, we are not considering purely material differences, the graphic analogue of allophonic differences, we are talking about differences *that make a difference* and whether there are enough of these differences available, in this best of all possible worlds, to construct an unreadable alphabet.

In earlier times, when this seemed to be soluble problem I nonetheless sought expert help and enlisted the collaboration of a letterer and carver who also,

for his own reasons, became fascinated with the language work of the artist of his book.[46] My potential collaborator worked on designing an unreadable alphabet and font that bore some relation to the cut in Bishop Wilkins' *Essay.*

Figure 8[47]

Had we gone on to perfect this alphabet; assuming it was possible to do so — and of this I am still not sure since there are so few letterforms that have not been used in other western alphabets — then the basic elements of a translation would have been in place. The completion of the project would consist in the manufacture of what would outwardly appear to be a facsimile of Wilkins' *Essay*: letterpress pages printed from a bespoke unreadable font, set in designs and layouts which followed those in the *Essay*: titles, subtitles, running headers, tables, columns, printed marginal notes, italics, ornaments, rules, and so forth. We would enhance the book with, say, a fine full calf, faux contemporary binding with gilt and decorative tooling and blind stamping to give the book the same authority as his *Tianshu*, that sense that it was truly a mirror of the world in unreadable script.

In this potential speculative collaboration, although my colleague and friend, the letterer and carver, would have designed the font, I would have been responsible for the order and placement of the unreadable letters. It is important to make it clear that I would not, at the level of language, in the spelling out of non-words for example, have created a table of correspondence between our translation's non-letters and a Roman, or any other alphabet. I would not have extended the analogy of form taken from Wilkins' *Essay* down into the language as far as its spelt words and sentences. The translation could not have been made as a coded version of Wilkins' exposition of a universal language. The ironic commentary implicit in the relation between a western book about a universal philosophical language and another work in a universally unreadable Chinese language would have been left at the level of the book, the form of the book. Arguably, even in the artist's book itself, in the *Tianshu*, this ironic commentary is present as a statement within the terms of Chinese culture. His book does, after all, appear to be an encyclopaedia, and as the original title of the work indicates, a (perfect) mirror of the world — at the level of its form, as a book object.

No, I would produce unreadable, extra-lexical words spelt with unreadable letters. More accurately, the word-shapes would be constructed such that it would be pointless to attempt to discover or establish correspondences

with words in any dictionary or try to garner some cultural or critical benefit from adding them to any dictionary. I would fashion algorithms to construct them with the help of my fellow poets and programmers of writing in digital media. The algorithms would generate word forms with linguistically plausible but quasi-random distributions of the glyphs from the unreadable alphabet. Some of the unreadable spelt words shapes would also be repeated throughout the text in distributions which further suggested natural language but once again this would be done without establishing any decodable correspondences.[48] Just as headings are set out in his book, the *Tianshu* itself, a small subset of translated word forms would be used for titles and subtitles for the work, its parts and subsections. These would be laid out coherently in the translation with correspondence at the level of tables of contents for the entire work and for its major parts, following in some measure, the translation's model, Wilkins' *Essay*. As in the case of the *Tianshu*, the only construable symbolic system in the work would be a relatively transparent decimal page numbering system.

This narrative now contains my most exhaustive exposition of a possible translation of his unreadable book into a western language-bearing codex, bearing extra-linguistic language in a near similar material cultural form. The proposed translation is clearly and necessarily conceptual, although it would be problematic to try and determine how much more conceptual such a translation should be considered as compared with all those varieties of intercultural inscription — of literary art, of language art, of thought in the form of language — to which we commonly refer as successful translations, using them and their translated words as if they were an integral part of our own host language and culture. As Walter Benjamin puts it — writing in German — "... all ... language ... can be considered as ... translation ..."

I feel, as I've already said, guilty for not have actually realized my translation, for not having brought it into the world. And yet, translation also feels to me like a secondary, a lesser creative activity. Or perhaps this feeling arises because the process of translation is conceptual. It is, perhaps, an example of conceptual art that is exhausted by its concept. By the time I have, in my own words, elaborated the concept I will have already, in a sense, translated the work, and there is no need to make an actual transcription of this process. After all, those people who would be able to appreciate the faithfulness and subtlety of my translation would be precisely those people who do not need my translation because they are already able — as I am now — to read and understand the original.

His book, as real and embodied as it may be, is also a work of conceptual art and thus, itself, runs the risk of being exhausted — aesthetically, intellectually — by its concept, of appearing to us as something that needn't actually exist as an object in the world. I do not believe that this was ever the case for the

artist's project during any passage in the making of his book. Even within the context of its own time and culture, the *Tianshu* needed to be made. Now, not only does it exist, it has long existed far beyond is particular time and culture. For me, one mysterious source of the sense that it is more than a conceptual work is due to its engagement with language, because it is a monumental and beautiful language-bearing object, the artist's unreadable book, a beautiful book of unreadable words. But this book comes from another culture as it emerges into life and art, created by concepts that you and I have no way of exhausting and no right to fully understand. His unreadable book will always ask us to be translated.

Notes

1 Xu Bing's work of book art, originally known, in Chinese as 析世鑒 — 世紀末卷 *Xi shi jian — Shiji mojuan*, or *Mirror to Analyze the World: The Century's Final Volume*, later usually referred by its adopted name, 天書 *Tianshu*, which is most often translated as *Book from the Sky*.
2 Christer von der Burg of Hanshan Tang Books (then still 'Han-Shan Tang').
3 The exhibition was definitely still on at the end of May 1997, my visit was on the 27th of that month as indicated by the dates on my digital photographs at the time. Xu Bing's assistant, Jesse Coffino-Greenburg, has since sent me scans of what must, I believe, have been the leaflet in question, for the ICA's 'Fortune Cookies' series, 9 May-8 June 1997, including the Xu Bing exhibition, 24-26 May, with *A Book from the Sky + Square Words: New English Calligraphy + A Case Study in Transference* in the Nash and Brandon Rooms.
4 In point of fact, installation versions of the *Tianshu* have been acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia, 1992; by the Ludwig Museum, Köln, Germany, 2000; and by the Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, 2001.
5 See: Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
6 *'My Book'* — See: Christer von der Burg, ed., *The Art of Contemporary Chinese Woodcuts* (London: The Muban Foundation, 2003). This an edited and well illustrated book which also serves as the catalogue for a portfolio issued simultaneously by the Muban Foundation. The portfolio comprises sixty original woodcut prints by sixty contemporary Chinese artists in sizes ranging up to one hundred by seventy centimetres, and including the final state of Xu Bing's 'My Book.'
7 Xu Bing, Untitled artist's proof ['My Book'] 1993.
8 John Wilkins, *Mercury: Or the Secret and Swift Messenger*, Foundations of Semiotics, vol. 6 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984) 69. Emphasis in the original.
9 Caleb Larsen at the Digital+Media Program of the Rhode Island School of Design. I teach in the Literary Arts Program of Brown University.
10 Caleb Larsen, *The Complete Works of W.S.* (2007)
11 In fact I have done this. On the world wide web please access the universal

resource identifier <http://programmatology.shadoof.net/myWS/>

12 I was first struck by this when reading looking through a copy of Dr Johnson's famous *Dictionary* as displayed in the house where he lived, 17 Gough Square, now one of London's smaller museums, in the late 1990s.

13 Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

14 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstader, Harper Colophon ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 115. Discussed in John Cayley, "Hypertext/Cybertext/Poetext," *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

15 *Installation by Xu Bing*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1997. 480x640 digital photograph by the author, 27 May 1997.

16 *Installation by Xu Bing*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1997. 480x640 digital photograph by the author, 27 May 1997.

17 This less usual translation of Proust's title is one recently adopted by the translator Lydia Davis (Penguin, 2003).

18 *Installation by Xu Bing*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1997. 480x640 digital photograph by the author, 27 May 1997.

19 See, amongst other works Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1988). Especially, chapter IV, pp. 52-70, 'Translation and Language.'

20 My German colleague Roberto Simanowski gave me this phrase, 'the cause of English,' when describing a meeting with friends who were variously Spanish, Italian, and French and where he became 'the cause.'

21 *Installation by Xu Bing*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1997. 480x640 digital photograph by the author, 27 May 1997.

22 A remarkable span of time during which the orthography *of a culture*, Chinese imperial culture, has remained stable and readable in this sense. This is another non-relative reason that an unreadable Chinese book has more significance and potential affect than my speculative example of an unreadable 'Spanish' book, where the anticipated readability of Spanish orthography goes back — what? — three or four centuries rather than almost two millennia.

23 Yang Lian (1955-).

24 A huge question that I hope to take up elsewhere, with an excellent introduction to the very issues provided by Robert E. Harrist Jr., "Copies, All the Way Down: Notes on the Early Transmission of Calligraphy by Wang Xizhi," *The East Asian Library Journal* X.1 (2002).

25 I studied Chinese 'language and civilization' in the north of England over four years. Think of similar young people in darkest Asia studying European language and civilization for a similar period.

26 *Art for the People* by Xu Bing, V&A Façade, Cromwell Road Entrance, London, 1999. Digital photograph from the V&A web site, courtesy of the artist.

27 See Xu Bing's essay in the present volume and my description of the *Tianshu*. I am referring to the fact that Xu Bing had the edition of his book produced at a small rural book factory.

28 See above. The *Art for the People* banner hung over the entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1999.

29 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Gongchangdang Xuanyan* (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhuashe, 1973). Here is the complete text of my longer expository description of this item for Hanshan Tang Books. "Beautifully carved woodblock printed edition of the Chinese translation of the *Communist Manifesto* produced at the height of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in its centre of power.

"There is a great deal that could be said about this remarkable but unassuming item. It can, in a sense, be seen as the bibliographic equivalent of a high leader's perfectly tailored Mao suit in the sartorial domain of actually existing socialism.

"Its most striking aspect is perhaps the fact that it was produced at all. What is this book, if not a refined and representative manifestation of the 'old culture', otherwise and elsewhere being 'swept away' during those same years? This is the official Chinese Communist Party translation of Marx and Engels' most famous tract, carefully designed in the manner of the very finest rare and early Chinese books. The colophon tells us (with notable pedantry) that the text is based on the 14th printing of the 6th letterpress edition of the *Manifesto* as it was issued by the People's Publishing House in 1964. This text has been carved onto woodblocks and printed in the traditional manner for this special edition. The design of the book is carefully calculated. Both the number of columns and characters-per-column, and the choice of typeface itself refer to Song period models — the earliest and most prized form of Chinese printed book. Each page has 10 vertical columns of 20 characters and the font style is *fangsongti* — Song regular calligraphic style. In fact, the design of the book immediately recalls Song period printed Buddhist sutras, the pre-eminent religious publishing of that period. Other aspects of the design — of the block centre or *banxin* with running title and leaf numbers on the folded outer edge of the leaf and single upper 'fish tail' — are consistent. Notes are also reproduced in traditional-style doubled columns of smaller characters with the only odd note struck by the carved 'characters' of occasional western references set at 90 degrees. The binding is a further aspect of the overall quality production with brocade covered corners and the whole finished with a book label printed on gold flecked paper.

"Perhaps, the only unambiguously 'communist' characteristic of the publication (other than its content) is the complete absence of any reference to named individuals associated with its production. On the face of it, this is a 'collective' effort. The inserted sheet with publisher's explanation attempts a resolution of the item's inherent ideological contradictions. Apparently, the development of woodblock printing technology was stunted or 'halted in mid course' by the 'devastations of reactionary elements'. Apart from the canonical propaganda function of the text itself, the book's production has allowed the survival of a technology and craft carried out by (often, as here, anonymous) workers. Nine young middle school graduates studying woodblock printing were also involved in making the book and this too is cited as a good thing (which it is, after all). The finishing (or starting) touch is the good solid Marxist/Cultural Revolution slogan printed in red at the beginning of the work: 'Quan shijie wuchanzhe, lianheqilai!' — Workers of the World Unite!

"There is no indication of the extent of the edition for this wonderful item. This is not a work for the masses. Given its quality and rarity, it most likely was

presented to high level party officials. This example is in excellent condition, especially considering its relative delicacy, the time of its production and its cultural and ideological ambiguity."

30 The price listed in Hanshan Tang Books, List 82, was ten thousand British pounds.

31 The universal resource identifier for this description is <http://www.hanshan.com/specials/xubingts.html>.

32 My thanks are due to Mary Ginsberg of the British Museum's Department of Asia for allowing me to consult their copy. It's registration number is 1993.7-9.01. This copy, by the way, is marked '88/100' and I wonder if Xu Bing chose this number for its auspicious connotations and potential effects.

33 Personal communication from Anne Farrar (Jan. 9, 2009) who first discussed his book with Johnson Chang of Hanart in the British Museum canteen.

34 See the *Dictionary of Selected Words from A Book from the Sky*, 1991. These were also exhibited in the Tokyo 1991 gallery show, the first time the finished book work of the *Tianshu* was presented to the public. *Xu Bing*, Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan. September 2-14, 1991. Two sheets of paper, printed on both sides, to make an eight-page folio, 11.4x16.1 cm.

35 *Post-Testament* 1992-1993. First shown, *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile*, Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, July 31-October 10, 1993. 350 copies of a leather-bound, letterpress printed book, the text of which alternates between extracts from the King James version of the *New Testament* and various pulp novels.

36 I mean, to put it simply and in abbreviated form, Chinese culture's morphographic as opposed to alphabetic system of writing. However one wishes to characterize or judge the Chinese system of writing, it is undoubtedly radically different from any (broadly) alphabetic system, and it is the only other such radically different system on our planet to support and enable a cultural domain.

37 *Gulliver's Travels*, Part III, Chapter V.

38 Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1997) 117.

39 Robert E. Harrist Jr., "*Book from the Sky* at Princeton: Reflections on Scale, Sense, and Sound," *Persistence | Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*, eds. Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C.Y. Ching (Princeton: P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, 2006) 35-37. Harrist supports my contention that the characters in the *Tianshu* are writing rather than representations of writing by demonstrating that they obey orthographic rules, a less abstract version of my argument, expressed less in terms of the theories of structural linguistics.

40 Partly because of the partial correspondence with the original title of the *Tianshu* as a work of art (see note i above and the Extended Description below) but also because it is a similarly elaborate and 'universal' work in terms of form and content, and because many fine editions exist, some of them very similar to the 'look and feel' of the Tianshu, I have always felt that the artist's book bore some relation to the 資治通鑒 *Zizhi tongjian* or *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, a 'universal history' compiled by Sima Guang (1019-1086) et al. This work exists in many editions and was first presented to the Shenzong emperor of the Song period in 1084.

41 See the Extended Description of the *Tianshu* below.

42 Clearly, although I am far from being a connoisseur in the league of true Chinese bibliophiles and collectors of fine editions (*shanben*), I do have my experience of working in the Chinese section of the British Library and still now with Hanshan Tang Books. For this project, I have spent some looking through various compilations containing representative reproductions of sample pages from early Chinese books, including one that Xu Bing mentions in his essay in this volume, the National Library of China comp, 中國版刻圖錄 = *Zhongguo Banke Tulu* = *Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Woodblock Editions* (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1990). Most recently, I looked through a handy new reference work, especially the section on books printed in moveable type. Zhao Qian, 明代版刻圖典 。 趙前 編著 = *Mingdai Banke Tudian* = *Illustrated Compendium of Exemplary Ming Woodcut Editions* (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2008). I have yet to find a specific existing book that closely matches a significantly wide range of characteristics of the *Tianshu,* in terms of book format or design.

43 There is a useful modern facsimile edition of this important and interesting work. John Wilkins, *An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, English Linguistics 1500-1800, vol. 119 (Menston: The Scholar Press, 1968). It is also excerpted and discussed in Wilkins, *Mercury*.

44 Song period (960-1279). The earliest dated printed book is considered to be the Chinese *Diamond Sutra* of 868 ACE, from the Dunhuang collection in the British Library. Gutenberg's *Bible*, 1455.

45 See especially colour plates 33, 34 and 36.

46 Gary Breeze, whose studio is based in Norfolk, has produced some superb commissions and original sculptural works. He now, perhaps more accurately describes himself as a 'lettering sculptor.' See <http://graybreeze.co.uk>. In 1999 he took part in a group show, 'The Pleasure of Influence' for Sculpture in the Garden, Deans Court Wimborne, and included two small stone stelae carved with Square Word characters in Hoptonwood limestone, *'Comprehension', and 'Examine closely' after Xu Bing*.

47 A first draft unreadable alphabet, referencing the typeface in Wilkins' *Essay,* designed by Gary Breeze. Letter to the author, 30 December, 1997.

48 See the description of the *Tianshu* below. Xu Bing does not seem to have attempted to set out his characters in sequences that would be seen as structurally analogous with sequences of characters in natural Chinese.

The writing within it would perhaps appear to be similar to that in the *Codex Seraphinianus*, except that my translation of his book would be explicitly constructed to be indecipherable whereas the status of the language in the *Codex* is, as I understand it, still unknown. Luigi Serafini, *Codex Seraphinianus*, 2 vols. (Milano: Franco Maria Ricci, 1981).

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