

**Birgit  
Mersmann**

University of  
Duisburg-Essen,  
Germany

## **CASE STUDIES OF GLOBAL TRANSFERENCE. LANGUAGE, MEDIA AND CULTURE TRANSLATION IN XU BING'S WRITING-ART**

In the historical tradition of East Asian art, writing has always been tightly linked to the visual arts, particularly to ink painting. Calligraphy is the artistic playground where writing and painting join symbiotically.<sup>1</sup> Given this intermedia form of iconoscripture,<sup>2</sup> anchored in the formation of ideographic writing systems in East Asia,<sup>3</sup> the transition of ideographic writing to the medium of the computer as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean-François Billeter (2001). *L'art chinois de l'écriture*. Milano: Skira.

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of iconoscripture, see Birgit Mersmann (2015), *Schriftikonik. Bildphänomene der Schrift in kultur- und medienkomparativer Perspektive*, Eikones, NCCR Iconic Criticism, Paderborn: Fink, 135ff.

<sup>3</sup> See John DeFrancis (1984). *The Chinese Language. Fact and Fantasy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; John DeFrancis (1989). *Visible Speech. The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Sungdo Kim (2011). Iconicity of Korean Writing. A Media Semiotic Approach. *Bild Macht Schrift. Schriftkulturen in bildkritischer Perspektive*, edited by Antonio Loprieno, Birgit Mersmann, and Carsten Knigge-Salis. Weilerswist: Velbrück, 171-198.

digital visual writing space<sup>4</sup> seems natural. It is therefore not surprising that when digital technologies were appropriated by contemporary media art, East Asian artists often experimented with writing, typography and character design.

The work of the contemporary Chinese “script” artist Xu Bing is a case in point through which to study language, media and culture translation in globalized artistic contexts. Because of its translation-centered approach, it lends itself to reflection on the digital and global turn in the visual arts and media cultures – the transition from “the late age of print”<sup>5</sup> to the digital age, and the transcultural code-switching between different (art) languages and writing cultures in a globalizing art world. The installations *Your Surname Please* (1998) and *Book from the Ground* (ongoing project since 2003) represent the turning points of these transitions, marking what Xu Bing himself has described as adaptations to the digital “pictographic age”.<sup>6</sup> To understand the artistic attempts to replace linguistic translation by icon(ic) transcription, one has to look at the prehistory of experiments with writing within Xu Bing’s oeuvre. The later digital experiments in the transcoding of written language can be

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<sup>4</sup> See Jay David Bolter (2001), *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertexts and the Remediation of Print*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>5</sup> This is the title of Ted Striphas (2009), *The Late Age of Print. Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*, New York: Columbia University Press. In the late 1980s, when Xu Bing was still living in China, his script works playfully experimented with the (typo)graphic design of Chinese characters, using the ideographic writing system to demonstrate from a particular Chinese perspective the excess and hyperbolism of the print/ing culture and its erosion of meaning in the late age of print.

<sup>6</sup> Xu Bing (2007), Regarding *Book from the Ground*, [http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/automatic\\_update/subs\\_wrapper.php?section=xubing\\_interview.html](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/automatic_update/subs_wrapper.php?section=xubing_interview.html) (inactive link, last access 2015). This version of the text is slightly different from the later one of the same title published in Mathieu Borysevich, ed. (2014). *The Book About Xu Bing’s ‘Book from the Ground’*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 37-35. For this reason, the two text versions of 2007 and 2014 are used for citation.

read as digital remediations (and thus hyperwriting) of the analogue square word calligraphy invented and designed by the artist after his move to the United States in 1990.

**Performances of (un-)translatability: from analogue to digital square word calligraphy**



**[Fig. 1.]** Xu Bing, *A Case Study of Transference*, 1993-94, performance and video with two live pigs inked with false English and Chinese characters, discarded books, barriers. Installation view at Han Mo Arts Center, Beijing, 1994. © Xu Bing Studio.

*A Case Study of Transference*, the artist's first performance organized by the Han Mo Arts Center in Beijing in 1994, engages within the complexity

of linguistic, cultural and visual media translation with an ironic twist (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> Into a pen strewn with open books in many languages, the artist put a male and a female pig that it was hoped would mate. The artist and his assistants had imprinted the pigs' skin with orderly rows of invented Chinese characters on the female and invented English words on the male. Whilst the possibility existed that the pigs would not mate, they did in fact perform at length, mating repeatedly. Since the pigs had been transformed into vehicles of culture by the imprinting of letters and characters onto their bodies, their sexual union became a symbol of cultural transference. The western Anglophone and the Chinese culture unify in the image of copulating pigs. The male West passes his cultural heritage on to the receptive, female China. The union of the text bodies suggests Chinglish as a transcultural language of understanding. Or, should we see the performed sexual act as a rape, a domination of Chinese culture by the western Anglophone culture?

On closer inspection, the union between the cultures turns out to be a farce and a fiction. The linguistic signs are already fragmented intraculturally, they appear as pure script and phonetic images that in fact negate a message-oriented conventional transference of meaning. The signification and imprinting power of script is evaded by imprinting texts that are composed of freely invented Chinese characters and made-up English words. The newly configured Chinese characters derive from the *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) for which the artist had engraved 4000 arbitrarily composed characters into small squares of wood thus producing print letters or – more precisely – print characters as text modules. The resulting printed characters looked surprisingly

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<sup>7</sup> Since 2017, the video documentation of the performance has been on permanent show at the Guggenheim Museum New York. When it was first presented in the museum, it caused a controversy over animal rights.

unprinted, reminiscent of graphical, handwritten calligraphy, thus giving an ironic twist to printing as a means of typographic writing standardization. What remains is the materiality of the characters, the corporeality of script beyond its educational mission. The pigs do not care about the script culture, their instinct is not held back by the superficial layering, i.e. the texts imprinted onto their flesh, nor their cultured surroundings, the book-strewn pen. They perform transculturally in the sense of living bodies of flesh and blood beyond cultural prescriptions.

Beside the fact that by compositional reconfigurations the Chinese characters are reduced to pure “visual writing”, completely devoid of semantic meaning, there are also political implications involved in this topographical reorganization and (e)vac(u)ating of the Chinese writing system. It is not only a gesture critical of the fundamental reconstruction – and simplifying reduction – of tradition-generated Chinese characters under the banner of Mao's Cultural Revolution, the prohibition of reading and writing sparked by fear of intellectual subversions and political upheavals against the system in power, but also a general critique of writing reforms, including new character design, used as a political instrument of empowerment and national unification throughout Chinese history.

After the *Book from the Sky* was exhibited in Beijing in 1988, Xu Bing was labeled by the Chinese communist government as a bourgeois liberal. Reacting to this official denunciation by the Chinese state, Xu Bing finally emigrated to the United States in 1990. The subsequent linguistic switch from Chinese to English led to an artistic confrontation between the interacting writing systems; it was – ironically – (re)solved with the help of the so-called Square Word Calligraphy, an advanced development of

pseudo-characters for transgressing script-linguistic barriers. By inventing so-called “square words” – a term referring to the imaginary square in the midst of which the Chinese character positions itself – the transference of meaning is foiled. The artist introduced a new variant of writing that visually represented English words written in the Roman alphabet in the spatial configuration and calligraphic style of Chinese characters (Fig. 2).



[Fig. 2.] Xu Bing, *Art for the People*, 1999. Dye sublimation on dacron polyester, 36 x 9 ft (1097.3 x 273.4 cm). Installation view at the entrance of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. © Xu Bing Studio.

Due to its topographical writing mode adjusted to Chinese ideographic writing, the new graphic, Roman-alphabetic writing gains the overall appearance of Chinese character writing, thus confronting viewers of alphabetical writing cultures who are not familiar with Chinese writing with what at first-glance appear to be unreadable characters. Once their attention is drawn to the fact that they are facing alphabetical writing,

they usually very easily figure out the individual letters of each character configuration as building blocks of words. Working from the use value of traditional calligraphy, Xu Bing encourages the application of his newly invented Square Word Calligraphy by common people who are interested in calligraphy as an artistic technique of visual writing, teaching it in classroom workshops.

From the personal view of the artist, the square word calligraphy serves as an ambiguous means of expression to both adapt to the new linguistic environment in the United States and to save parts of the Chinese language and culture increasingly put under pressure by the dominance of English as global lingua franca. From a writing-theoretical point of view, the square word calligraphy figures as an iconic transcription that merges two different writing systems and cultures on the graphical level, thus cross-breeding to create transcultural writing as a form of trans(lated)-writing. Specifically, iconic transcription refers to the topographical inscription of alphabetical writing into Chinese ideographic writing, its visuo-spatial composition and configuration of characters. The writing result is a hybrid writing, disturbing in as much as it marks the graphic borderline between readability and illegibility.

The installation series *Living Word* (2001-2011) expands on the model of the square word calligraphy, translating it from the two-dimensionality of the written page (or scroll) into the three-dimensionality of life-like animated script. Word definitions found in the Oxford English Dictionary are transcribed into square word calligrams following the typeface re-configuration technique described above. This time, even the graphic image of the signified is integrated into the iconic transcription of alphabetical letters into Chinese characters. The chain of “transcriptural” graphic signs visualizes the transition from

phonography via ideography to pictography, thus pointing to the future of writing in a postphonetic, pictographic digital age. In the installation *Living Word 2*, for instance, the graphic letter-sign for “bird” is transformed into the abstract drawing of a bird; materialized as a paper bird in the script mobile, it appears to break free while ascending to the sky. Through means of iconic sign transcription, the moving of the characters and typefaces becomes literal – a performative gesture of the life-like embodiment of nature in writing, as reflected in the title.

*Your Surname, Please* (Fig. 3), a mixed media installation from 1998, displays the first digitized version of the square word calligraphy. As with most of Xu Bing’s artistic works, it is a project in progress. Accordingly, it exists in various versions and at different places. At the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan, it has found a permanent showroom.



[Fig. 3.] Xu Bing, *Your Surname, Please*, 1999. Installation view at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan. © Xu Bing Studio.

Originally, the work was created for the Spanish island of Las Palmas. Using his square word calligraphy for producing New English Calligraphy, the artist wrote the – statistically most common – surnames of the island's inhabitants down, displayed the calligrams on a wall and digitally scanned them. The audience was invited to search for their surname in the computer database, print out a copy of their calligraphed surname and take it home. The installation reflects in its construction the multilayered process of “transwriting”, showcasing the panels of calligraphy, computers, printers, desks and chairs. In later developed versions of *Your Surname, Please*, the potential for (inter)active participation in the trans-writing process was more pronounced, enabling viewers to type in their names in English letters on the

keyboards of the computer stations and then become visual witnesses of how their typewriting was gradually transformed, or more precisely, transcribed into calligraphic pseudo-Chinese characters. Like in the first conceptual design of the work, they could then print out their “character” names. The product of this particular writing configuration is a new visual, topographical reading that adapts Roman-alphabetic readers to ideographic reading and writing. Meanwhile, approximately 3000 surnames (among them also those of famous personalities and families, including Clinton, Gore, Roosevelt, Reagan, Singh, Garibaldi) are digitally transcoded as square word calligrams, immediately retrievable from the database by the input of typing and ready for animated transcription. The additional digital animation of the script as a new element of the English square word calligraphy, technically realized by programming the intermediate stages of Xu Bing’s character writings, allows the movement between different writing systems to be visualized; it illustrates the fluent transition of code switching as iconic transcription and thus demonstrates the digital decomposition of differences and oppositions of both the writing design and meaning production. Even on the media level of writing involved in the *Surname* project, these transitive fluctuations become manifest. Viewed from the user perspective, typewriting is switched to handwriting, and handwriting turned into printing via the computer as intermedium. Considered from the producer perspective, handwriting is transposed into digital machine writing, thereby facilitating the visual transcodings between typewriting and handwriting. In terms of the final outcome of the multimedia

transcription, it is – quite paradoxically – the handwriting that is revived and preserved through the digitization of script translation.

### **The Babel project: Icon-language design for global communication**

With *Book from the Ground*, Xu Bing's large-scale design project of shaping a new system of translinguistic and transcultural writing enters into a new pictographic stage. The story of Mr. Black – a white-collar city bachelor whose daily 24-hour life is described in the graphic novel entitled *From Point to Point* – is written in a language of icons. From a script-linguistic view, it would be properly defined as “iconic writing”, because its visual symbols contain no equivalents in spoken language. Although the *Book from the Ground* is an artistic project dedicated to rebuilding the destroyed “Tower of Babel”, its creator Xu Bing is very serious and ambitious about its humanistic communicative goal, namely the design of a universal writing system that can be comprehended globally regardless of the linguistic and cultural background, including the educational level, of its “readers”. Given this objective, the artist puts his project in line with the numerous historical attempts to create a universal script. He makes particular reference to the French philosopher Jean Douet who, in his essay “A Proposal to the King for a Universal Language” (1627), was one of the first language theoreticians to recognize the potential of the system of image recognition in Chinese character writing as a basic model for the design of a universal language.

In contemporary society, marked by the “ubiquity of the Internet and the convenience of even faster transglobal communication and information

sharing”,<sup>8</sup> the limitations of spoken and written interlanguage communication represent a significant burden. In the view of Xu Bing, “the age-old human desire for a ‘universal script’ has become a critical need. This predicament requires a new form of communication better adapted to the circumstances of globalization. Today, the implications of the Tower of Babel can, all the more powerfully, be felt”.<sup>9</sup>

What is the special feature of Xu Bing’s universal script design for global visual communication as created in *Book from the Ground*? On what basis and systemic principles is his universal icon/ic writing built? The extremely clever strategy of the artist was to not (presume to) invent a new universal script, as most of his historical predecessors had aimed at, but rather to construct it from preexisting signage, symbols and icons that function as visual transmitters of conventionalized, shared meaning. The prehistory of the project shows clearly that it did not evolve from character creation, but from the collection of signs and symbols that “are already in use and have the ability to be easily recognized”.<sup>10</sup> Interested in image recognition as a primary means of communication, Xu Bing began collecting airline safety cards which provided a variety of icons amounting to the comprehensibility of a universal language. He continued to expand his collection in 2003 when he saw icons on a chewing gum packet that explained how to throw it away after consumption, visualizing the message: “Please wrap the used gum and dispose of it into a trash bin.”<sup>11</sup> He realized that “in addition to single icons used to explain something simple, several icons together can be

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<sup>8</sup> Xu Bing. Regarding ‘Book from the Ground’. *The Book About Xu Bing’s ‘Book from the Ground’*, edited by Mathieu Borysevicz. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Bing (2014), Regarding ‘Book from the Ground’, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Bing (2014), Regarding ‘Book from the Ground’, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Bing (2014), Regarding ‘Book from the Ground’, 37.

used to narrate a longer story”.<sup>12</sup> From that moment on, he began systematically and incessantly collecting symbols and icons. Whenever he saw a symbol or icon of communicative relevance, he took a photo or cut it out, and then pasted it into a booklet that functioned as a sort of dictionary of symbols. He collected logos, icons and insignia from across the globe and began researching the symbols of specialized fields such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, drafting, musical composition, choreography and corporate branding. The main goal of this investigative collection was to understand the core design elements and habits of visual communication. The main idea of the *Book from the Ground* is to constantly add on new symbols in order to keep pace with the discovery or coinage of new icons. Usually, the found-footage symbols and icons are graphically synthesized so that they appear as unicode signs. Nevertheless, the full spectrum of visual signs from signage, logo(gram)s, symbols, insignia, icons to pictograms is present. The variety of visual sign types is not restricted to one standard category; it is only graphically harmonized to guarantee consistent recognition and readability. In order to extend the scope of pictographic meaning production, Xu Bing sometimes relies on the principles of Chinese character-construction such as the visuo-spatial composition of more than one character in an imaginary square used to configure a new word (or) concept. Similar to the Chinese character-construction of “forest” – constructed by doubling the character for wood–, three car icons stacked together signify “bottleneck”. A repetition of these composed signs based on multiplication along the pictographic writing line expresses a gridlock.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

*Point to Point*, the first story of *Book from the Ground*, was written directly with icons (Fig. 4), after a first attempt to translate a Chinese (written) language draft for an amateur novel into icons had failed due to the difficulty of transferring the structural complexity of the language system.



[Fig. 4.] Xu Bing, *Book from the Ground*, 2012. © Xu Bing Studio.

Also the complexity of the narrative had to be reduced, resulting in a simple 24-hour story about the daily life of a contemporary person living and working in a city – that of “Mr Black, from his waking up in the morning, going to the toilet, to his rushing to work, dealing with his demanding boss, drinking with friends, and surfing the internet in search of a girlfriend.”<sup>13</sup> Although the content, message and thoughtfulness of the story is restricted, the global outreach of the book is almost limitless,

<sup>13</sup> Bing (2014), Regarding ‘Book from the Ground’, 135.

since it can be read and understood by everybody “without the need of translation”.<sup>14</sup> For Xu Bing, “the limitations of the book lie in your life experience, not in your educational level or geographic location.”<sup>15</sup> It is the shared visual, physical and emotional experiences that allow for competent icon-reading.

Due to its linguistically non-translational foundation, the iconic writing system compiled for *Book from the Ground* can be turned into a global translation instrument. After writing a book to be universally understandable, Xu Bing has reprogrammed his self-composed universal icon-script system as a translation tool, facilitating the translation of written language into the pictogram system. He developed a “font library” computer program that enables users to type English or Chinese sentences and see them instantaneously translated into the new iconic writing.<sup>16</sup> Currently, this font library program is limited to English and Chinese, but in the future, it will include other major languages, thus rendering possible global communication through a translinguistic visual code. Xu Bing comments on this icon-translation potential of a universal script as follows:

“[...] after our currently un-finished computer program is perfected, writers of every language will be placed on equal footing. To a certain extent, this software will function as a point of transfer between dissimilar languages. This early result should not be minimized because it has limitless potential to expand into even larger arenas. The relationship between our new language

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The “font library” translation program sometimes produces bizarre, unexpected results. These reveal the imperfections of the program development and the lapses of mistranslation.

and other, preexisting languages resembles the relationship between Mandarin and the many Chinese dialects: disparate pronunciations refer to identical characters. English cannot become a 'global language,' as its relationship with other languages is one of mutual exclusivity. As the use of English expands, other languages are lost. Michael Evamy states, 'for now, the world's peoples must either be addressed in their own language, or by non-verbal means.' In that respect, a pictographic language not reliant upon phonics has a special advantage."<sup>17</sup>

The installation of *Book from the Ground* in the exhibition space<sup>18</sup> reflects this aspect of language-independent icon communication. Two computers equipped with Icon Chat Software are set up, facing each other; they are separated by a wall of frosted-glass that double-functions as language barrier and language translator. It displays a written iconic dialogue in the graphic style of Xu Bing's universal pictographic writing. The two computer terminals are installed with a basic chat program. The chat users take opposite seats. They are separated by the frosted-glass partition, but at the same time they are placed very close to each other, thus evoking the feeling of telepresence. When the users want to communicate, they type in an English or Chinese sentence, as in web-chatting. Pressing the return key activates the instantaneous translation of the given sentence into the pictographic symbol language shaped by Xu Bing. Through this interactive arrangement, the installation demonstrates how global e-communication develops into icon/ic writing.

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<sup>17</sup> Bing (2007), Regarding *Book from the Ground*, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> The icon chat installation of *Book from the Ground* was first exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007 as part of the exhibition *Automatic Update*.

The translation program is a crucial element of the *Book from the Ground*, since it does not only establish the interactive act of a message, but also serve as a means to familiarize users of diverse languages with the new pictographic writing system, so that in the future – this is one of the visions of the artist – it might be applied independently of individual spoken languages. As utopian as the artistic *Book from the Ground* project might look from the historical perspective of failed attempts to shape a universal script for common usage, it signals an *iconic turn* of writing in general and the related writing cultures, particularly in the face of digital media culture.

Another important aspect of the new icon writing system is that it directly expresses and communicates the demand for corporate image design in the global economy and consumer society. According to Xu Bing, the new pictographic communication system “draws its strengths from political and economic factors [...]. It is rooted in the market rules of the global economy and world politics. Capital has become the new global language of power, but it must still undergo large-scale unification before it can more effectively control commerce.”<sup>19</sup> While drawing image-reading inspiration from the global visual language of internationally-operating corporations, the symbol translation tool of *Book from the Ground* itself represents a branding tool for visual marketing and global product communication in an iconified living environment.

This dimension becomes manifest in the various commodified art extensions, installations and pop-ups of the *Book from the Ground* used for exhibition projects. Although Xu Bing was convinced that “the best

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<sup>19</sup> Bing (2014), Regarding ‘Book from the Ground’, 44.

form of *Book From the Ground* is its ‘non-art’ appearance”, it cannot be denied that it was designed by an artist for – first of all – artistic presentation contexts in a globalizing art world. How, then, to exhibit the global visual communication message of a single book publication, namely that of *From Point to Point*, in an art museum or gallery? How to medially translate the creative design of icon translation into the exhibition-centered language of art/istic translation? These were the conceptual and practical challenges that curators of Xu Bing’s *Book from the Ground* had to confront when devising a concept and design for its exhibition.

For the release of the icon-script book *From Point to Point* in mainland China in 2012, Mathieu Borysevicz had organized a work show of Xu Bing’s *Book from the Ground* in the Shanghai Art Gallery. Inspired by the corporate logos and consumerist icons of the translinguistic visual communication system, the curator developed the idea for a “Book Launch” exhibition including a merchandising pop-up concept store. The typical book launch model presenting a poster with the author’s portrait and a book table stacked with the newly released publication was adopted for the book-release exhibition of the icon-story *From Point to Point*. The stack of books was featured as *The Tower of Babel* installation built from over 2000 copies of *From Point to Point*. With this form of presentation, the curator not only visualized the high-flying and risky intention of the book’s creator to overcome (inter)linguistic miscommunication and globally unify all people over the world by the construction of a universal icon script, but also managed to transform the non-art character of the book object into an eye-catching art installation work. Side by side with the *Tower of Babel* book installation “a poster of the author’s image” was shown “that had been reduced to a symbol, and propped up on a painting easel.” The simulacrum of the artist “greeted

every visitor to the show, as if he was behind the scenes getting prepared for a public reading and signing.”<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of the *Shanghai Concept Store: Book from the Ground* (Fig. 5) in one of the exhibition rooms carried the consumerist and market-oriented mise-en-scene of the book's message even further.



[Fig. 5] Xu Bing, *Shanghai Concept Store: Book from the Ground*, 2012. Installation view at Shanghai Art Gallery, Shanghai. © Xu Bing Studio.

For the merchandising store (an idea of the curator), the artist had turned signs and symbols from *Book from the Ground* into practical consumer objects, such as t-shirts, umbrellas, books, dining tables and tableware, furniture, refrigerator-magnet sets, and chocolate. Exhibition visitors could shop the consumable icons inside a three-dimensional installation of a shop that spatially represented the symbol for “store”. With this concept-store installation, the artist and curator made clear that our daily lives and communications are strongly imbued with consumerist signs and corporate image-building, and that there is no

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<sup>20</sup> Mathieu Borysevicz. Extension from the Ground-Exhibition, Etc. *The Book About Xu Bing's 'Book from the Ground'*, edited by ibid. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 68.

escape from this icon-ified socio-economic environment. The translation of icons into commodified objects can also be interpreted as a form of ironic translation, mocking the translatability even of signs into artistically designed products of capitalism. The store-extension of *Book from the Ground* demonstrates the rise of capital to the new global language of power.

### **Translation(al) Art and Visual Globality**

In the work of Xu Bing, the artistic case studies of global transference were triggered by his personal experience of migration – his linguistic, cultural and artistic displacement and confusion. The particularity of his Chinese art language and artistic context had to be transculturally extended in order to address the new American and international art audience and market. In order to create contact zones with art viewers, curators, dealers and buyers all over the world, he prolonged the calligraphic literati tradition of Chinese writing-art into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by transforming it into a universal iconic script that serves the purpose of global visual communication and linguo-iconic translation. The iconologos, as designed for *Book from the Ground* as a new system of communication, are coined as a new lingua franca and transcultural currency for the global translation of the art of writing. As an add-on, the icon-script is developed into a translation tool allowing for language-image translation and human digital communication beyond linguistic translation. With this practical software application, Xu Bing has found a way of medially translating Chinese writing culture into the pictographic age of global digital communication.

The analysis of the writing-art of Xu Bing has demonstrated the significance of translation as both a metaphor and tool for the creation of

global contemporary art. With regard to the transnational study of visual art and culture, it has pointed out the need for a theorization of visual translation. Translatability turns out to be the currency of interlinguistic *and* intervisual global communication. If contemporary art aspires to global transmission, receivability, and understanding, it has to reflect on the conditions, modes and practices of translation – culturally, visually, and medially.

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