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Collaborative Calligraphy: An Asemic Writing Performance

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> *Have the idea in your head before you take up the brush. Design the composition only after you have thoroughly considered it. Be very careful with the general shape and the spacing, and do not let the character tilt sideways. […] Do not spoil a character by overpliancy, nor cause discomfort by imbuing it with quarrelsome feeling. Let all four sides be evenly proportioned and all parts co-ordinated. Short and long strokes must be calculated in relation to one another, and a compromise effected between the coarse and the fine. […] The animation and spirit of a character depend largely upon its proportioning.*
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> — Ou Yang Xun (歐陽詢) (557-641).[1]

[1] Ou Yang Xun, *The Book of Calligraphy*, qtd. in Yee, *Chinese Calligraphy,* 145.

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> *When one shews someone the king in chess and says: "This is the king", this does not tell him the use of this piece—unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this last point...*
>
> — Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951).[2]

Background

My research is concerned with Chinese calligraphy in a globalised context, examining, among other things, the areas of signification available to non-readers of Chinese. In C.S. Pierce's terms such signification includes that of "iconic" signs, which have a resemblance to their objects, a photograph of chair for example, and "indexical" signs, which have a physical relationship to their referents, a weather vane pointing the direction of the wind for example.[3] Chinese characters were originally pictographic and therefore communicated meaning iconically; modern characters, although significantly changed and added to, still retain this relationship to images.[4] Chinese calligraphy may also be said to communicate in an "indexical" fashion, though the relationship of marks to the calligrapher's body, particularly in the more cursive scripts. Indeed Chinese calligraphy may be regarded as simply a visual record of the author's movements in time and space.

In the course of researching notions of intercultural signification and translation I became interested in so called "asemic" writing.[5] That is, the writing of "abstract" words which lack semantic content (symbolic meaning), a phonetic element (a sound), and recognisable syntax, and which can be viewed therefore simply as compositions of (written) marks.[6]

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Editor's note: an accompanying video of Buckingham-Hsaio and Chou's *Collaborative Calligraphy* performance can be found at liminalities.net/13-2/calligraphy.html

[2] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, aphorism 31.
[3] See: Pierce, *Pierce on Signs*.
[4] See: Peng and Gang, "Cultural Semiosis in Artistic Chinese Calligraphy".
[5] A term coined by visual poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich. See Jacobson and Gaze, *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*.
[6] See: Wu, "A "Ghost Rebelion": Notes on Xu Bing's "Nonsense Writing" and Other Works". And also: Kawakami, "Illegible Writing: Michaux, Masson, and Dotremont".

Description

Collaborative Calligraphy was performed by English artist Roland Buckingham-Hsiao and Taiwanese artist Chou, Cheng-Yu (周政宇) at Hei Bai Qie Art Space (黑白切藝文空間) in Taichung City, Taiwan, on Saturday 23rd and Sunday 24th April 2016. The performance lasted six hours on the first day and three on the second. During the performance the two artists sat on chairs opposite each other at a table as if playing chess. On the table were two long-haired Chinese calligraphy brushes and brush rests, two small dishes containing ink, two glasses of water, a 20 x 20cm sheet of "lightly smudging" (略為暈開) Chinese calligraphy paper and paper weights.[7] The artists made one stroke at a time each on the paper using Seal script (篆書) technique. An asemic character was thereby collaboratively constructed as the artists responded to the developing composition from their own perspectives, physically left and right, conceptually eastern and western. The artists were permitted to stop the character when it was their turn to write. After a character was stopped it was set aside to dry and then attached to the wall behind the artists (see video and photos above for documentation[8]). 40 characters were completed in total, of which 30 were selected by the artists and arranged into sets of six to be exhibited (see figures below[9]).

Hei Bai Jie Art Space is located within a traditional Taiwanese market, and as a consequence the audience consisted of passers-by as well as invited guests. Information about the performance was posted outside the space in Chinese and English, and a small amount of exterior seating was provided. The audience was free to come and go, walk around the space and take photos or videos if they wished. The characters produced were exhibited at Nami Art Space, Taichung, Taiwan, from 28th April to 28th May 2016, and at the Centre for Art, Design, Research and Experimentation at the University of Wolverhampton, from 21st October to 25th November 2016.

[7] The space also contained an electric fan.
[8] Photos of the performance by Maggie Hsiao.
[9] Photos of the calligraphic characters by the author.

Discussion

The unreadability of the characters produced in the performance was an important element, as the work dealt with the cultural differences in eastern and western conceptions of visual composition and language production, and the (im)possibilities of signification, translation and aesthetic agreement related to them. However, the inability to comprehend the symbolic signification of a work of Chinese calligraphy (the meaning of the words) is not exclusively a foreign experience; viewing unreadable characters is a common experience even for the Chinese people. Firstly, calligraphy uses traditional characters, which mainland Chinese people may struggle to read as the written Chinese of the People's Republic was substantially revised and simplified by the communist government in 1956 and 1964. Although traditional characters are still taught and used in areas not subject communist control: Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong. Secondly, even those able to read traditional characters require specialised knowledge to read cursive scripts, as the characters are significantly abbreviated and distorted though the speed of their writing. Thirdly, the characters of ancient scripts—certainly Oracle Bone script (甲骨文) and to a lesser extent Seal script—often bear only distant resemblance to their modern equivalents and again require special knowledge to comprehend. Calligraphy, however, even when the characters are unreadable, maintains it position at the top of China's aesthetic hierarchy, and the ability of written Chinese to communicate to its audience outside the symbolic signification of words underpinned the the performance and the work produced.

Seal script is an archaic script common in the Qin and Han dynasties (221 B.C.E. – 220 A.D.) but only commonly used for ceremonial or decorative purposes thereafter. Its technique was chosen for the performance firstly because of the difficulty of symbolically understanding Seal characters and secondly because of the ease of iconically understanding them—they have a clearer link to images than more modern scripts. Moreover, the strokes of Seal script are evenly weighted and rounded off at the ends with circular movements which enabled a much more seamless character to be written. In the performance this meant that the characters looked to have been written by a single hand and were therefore less "imbued with quarrelsome feeling". Although the performance played with aesthetic, compositional and cultural differences, a set of harmoniously composed characters was ultimately intended.

Notions of indexical signification were also important to the work. In Chinese calligraphy the calligrapher is traditionally seen as the origin of meaning, communicating through individual expression. As Olivier Burckhardt puts it, "self-expression [is] the core fundamental principle of Chinese calligraphy."[10] In

[10] Burckhardt, 'The Rhythm of the Brush', 124.

both the analytic and continental strains of 20th century western language theory however, the social construction of language, rather than authorial expression, is emphasised. For the French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980) for example, it is "language which speaks, not the author."[11] In other words, language is a pre-existing structure within which the author fits, to the extent that his or her identity is determined socially, through language. Working within the analytic tradition Ludwig Wittgenstein also emphasised the importance of conventionally-defined language and argued that the meaning of words resides in their *use* within society.[12] In *Philosophical Investigations,* he further argues that the rules of language are analogous to the rules of games, that therefore saying something is analogous to making a move in a game. *Collaborative Calligraphy* dealt with calligraphic writing rather than speech, nevertheless in light of Wittgenstein's theoretical models it sought to produce characters communally through agreed compositions in a (non-competitive) game, rather than individually as is the usual practise.[13] Social and individual models of language are not mutually exclusive however; as Hodge and Kress point out "[e]ach producer of a message relies on its recipients for it to function as intended."[14] In other words the process of interpretation (semiosis) necessarily situates individual texts within the social discourses and exchanges of interpretative communities. Asemic characters allow for a variety of symbolic interpretations and involve the reader or interpretive community to a greater extent than normal in the communicative process.

In summary, the performance investigated the effect of new context (and ultimately globalisation) on traditional cultural practices by considering the possibility of inter-cultural interaction and communally written language. It explored the different kinds of meaning that may be produced through the application of new theoretical models and drew upon notions of iconic and indexical signification to introduce the possibility of communication outside of the symbolic.

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[11] *Image Music Text,* 143.

[12] "[I]f we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we have to say that it is its *use*." Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book and Brown Books*, 4.

[13] An obvious development of the piece is to involve more people, possibly passing sheets around a round table, participants contributing strokes to the character at each turn.

[14] Hodge and Kress, *Social Semiotics*, 4.

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