

Press Release

WU SHANZHUAN: WORD SQUARING THE WORLD

Curator: Liu Tian, Assistant Curator: Mei Cuo

June 22 2024–October 27 2024

Long March Space, Beijing

In the preface of the recently concluded 7-month exhibition “from paper to paper: Inga Svala Thorsdottir + Wu Shanzhuan”, curator Liu Tian wrote:

The content of this exhibition consists of 600 creative sketches on A4 paper selected from various stages in Thorsdottir and Wu’s long artistic career spanning more than thirty years... Although it might act as an “index” providing an outline of their work, we must not see it as a “retrospective” in the nostalgic sense, for it is also a prelude to the research, exhibitions and publications that Inga Svala Thorsdottir + Wu Shanzhuan will continue to carry out going forward.

This time, we will see another presentation of this long-term promise: Wu’s creation and reflection on the “WORD” context spanning nearly 40 years since the ’85 New Wave to the present day, summarizing and organizing it as:

字方天下 | WORD SQUARING THE WORLD

The exhibition opens at Long March Space on 22nd June, 2024. The exhibition has been curated by curator and researcher Liu Tian, the artist’s long-time collaborator.

EACH WORD SQUARES THE WORLD.

THE SQUARE OF ANY WORD IS EQUAL TO THE SQUARE OF THE WORLD.

— By **WU SHANZHUAN**

“WORD SQUARING THE WORLD” shows over a hundred works since 1985 around several states of **WORD** (marked in bold below) that Wu Shanzhuan explored into and located at. This is quite a complex and lengthy story.

Wu’s self-awareness of “Chinese characters” was initiated when he studied at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art). Together with his colleagues from the “Red Humour” group, they held the sensational

“75% RED, 20% WHITE, 5% BLACK” exhibition in a special form of the Chinese character: **BOLDFACE**, **PRINT HAND**, and **ARTISTIC CALLIGRAPHY**. The visual display of the exhibition responded to the **BIG CHARACTER POSTER (DAZIBAO)** of the Cultural Revolution that had not yet faded from memory, abstracting the extremely strong visual perception into proportion of colors.

Selecting boldface without “expression” rather than **CALLIGRAPHY** originated from the visual perspective of big character posters (Dazibao). The idea held by Wu and his colleagues that Chinese characters themselves were ready art works. As a result, Wu developed the creation and writing of **CHARACTER IMAGES**: if we ignore the meaning of Chinese characters, we can regard them as an aesthetic image.

The “deficiency” in meaning caused by “character image” only as a form triggers a **PUN: DEFICIT (CHI ZI)**, both in Chinese means **RED CHARACTER** and deficit in the sense of loss. Deficit referred to “content” and “theme” cleaned by avant-garde art at that time. Deficit leads to a “container” (which later became Wu’s long-term proposition) to be filled. It was the working methodology that Wu extracted in that stage for history: “Bring/Borrow - Empty - Fill” .

The open-minded attitude towards history can be seen as the legacy of the intense revolutionary energy during the modern history of China. After the major changes unseen of 3,000 years, the repeated proposals and disputes based on characters (Wen Zi) and language as the foundation of “civilization” (Wen Ming) become the focal point of struggle. They accompany or lead to a series of processes crucial to Chinese culture: **LATINIZATION** initiative, **VERNACULAR LANGUAGE** movement, **SIMPLIFIED CHINESE** reform, **CHINESE PINYIN** scheme, **MANDARIN** promotion...

Among them, “The Second Simplification of Chinese Characters (Draft) Proposal” proposed by the radically sounded “Chinese Character Reform Committee” in 1977, can be seen as the precursor of the erroneous and pseudo character creators during the ’85 New Wave. For civilized people, the almost “innate” default preset (“**UNIFYING CHARACTERS IN THEIR WRITTEN FORM**”) can be mercilessly modified, and the avant-garde meaning of it is self-evident. The controversial draft was abolished in 1986. It was the same year that Wu graduated from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.

This is the background of “Deficit” (Chi Zi). Wu’s greatest difference from other famous counterfeiters lies in his swearing in front of the flag

with false Chinese characters: the “sublime object” he swore to was “absurdity”. In the “Word Building Creation Studio / Word Lacquering Workers Association / Word Cutting History Archives”, a dispersive (today’s so-called “decentralized”) **PARALLELISM** creates another sense of liberation: non-centralized addition. This is the sense of liberation brought by *TODAY NO WATER* of Wu, the almost-700-thousand-character novel that was created from the ’85 New Wave till the late 1990s. A large amount of characters was directly poured into it. On the flyleaf of this book, it is written: **A CONTAINER FOR WORDS.**

The monochrome of “deficit” began to change as Wu arrived in Europe. On the one hand, he found that the original political red was indeed only 75%, while the red of the market and consumption was 100%. On the other hand, “colors” appeared in works such as “Vege-pleasure” and “TOBUY IS TOCREATE” created with Inga Svala Thorsdottir, expanding into the previously polarized color system.

Subsequently, at the beginning of the new century, Wu paid attention to **SMS** (Short Messaging Service), a new text/word form that emerged with mobile phones. That was the **PIXELATED TEXT** displayed on Nokia phones, which were limited in number of characters and charged based on quantity. They were accompanied by new ways of social interaction, organization, and transformation. On the Internet, the **KEYWORDS** “others are searching” symbolized unfulfilled desires, like the interweaving of constellation or subway which he called **SUBWORDING**.

All of this has been overturned by **WECHAT** (literally means **MICRO-MESSAGE** which can be seen as a metaphor) today when SMS is only used to receive bills, express delivery information, and verification codes. The pixels can no longer be identified on the retina screen, for they are too small for human eyes. The interlocutors produced by the **LARGE LANGUAGE MODEL (LLM)** may be more fluent and profound than humans. Wu’s practice on words/characters leads to **PATTERNS**. He said, “To become a pattern is the best fate of an image. Content is meaningless, but it can become a pattern.”

So, the most popular **VOCABULARY** (such as “leek”, “fresh meat” and “horse door another bird”) can be “filled” in as patterns. His latest thinking focuses on **CONCHARACTER** (the characters context, word context, the characters domain) distinguished from **CONTEXT**:

CONCHARACTER:

1. The character context of each character (the characters domain).
 2. The characters context between each character (the characters context).
- CONCHARACTER: the world of Chinese characters.
We present characters nakedly. Let us be naked in the CONCHARACTER.

—By WU SHANZHUAN

This reminds us of Wu's decisive statement in his 1986 article *On Chinese*:
“WE SHALL TELL PEOPLE THROUGH THE ABOVE METHODS, THAT THIS IS OUR WORLD.”

Text by Liu Tian, Mei Cuo

About the artist

Wu Shanzhuan, 1960 born in China, 1986 graduated from Normal Department of the Zhejiang Art Academy. 1995 graduated from the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg. 1985 founded Red Humour. 1990 founded Red Humour International.