

The Battle between Simplified and Traditional: Chinese Text-based Interactive Installations and French Lettrism

Yue-Jin Ho

OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss several Chinese text-based interactive installations from Taiwan and Hong Kong which reflect the anxiety about facing the growing influence of Simplified Chinese and the cultural power from Mainland China. As a logosyllabic script, Chinese is structurally distinctive from alphabetical scripts. However, the ideas of French Lettrism on creating art through deconstructing languages to its smallest particles and using them as objects for a new form of aesthetics and social-political struggle has similarities with some Chinese text-based interactive arts of recent years. This paper will discuss how the ideas from Lettrism can be applied to artistic creations and to analyze Chinese text-based interactive works, so as to examine the specificity of Chinese-based works and the ways they handle the topics of China's cultural expansion.

KEYWORDS

electronic literature; text-based art; Chinese; interactive installation; lettrism.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa várias instalações textuais interativas em chinês de Taiwan e Hong Kong, que refletem a ansiedade de enfrentar a crescente influência do chinês simplificado e do poder cultural da China continental. Como escrita logossilábica, o chinês é estruturalmente distinto das escritas alfabéticas. No entanto, as ideias do lettrismo francês sobre a criação de arte por meio da decomposição da linguagem em partículas elementares e do seu uso como objetos para uma nova forma de estética e luta político-social têm semelhanças com algumas artes interativas em chinês dos últimos anos. Este artigo discutirá o modo como as ideias do lettrismo podem ser aplicadas às criações artísticas, analisando obras textuais interativas em chinês, com o objetivo de examinar a especificidade das obras em chinês e as formas como lidam com os tópicos da expansão cultural da China.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

literatura eletrônica; arte textual; escrita Chinesa; instalação interativa; lettrismo.

I. INTRODUCTION

The arguments around Traditional and Simplified Chinese characters is a complicated issue in the Sinosphere. Although such debates are often being presented as academic, such as their historical legitimacy and effectiveness on education, the arguments are always mixed with political identification and emotional factors (Chu, 2013: 209). On the other hand, as the differences between the two forms of Chinese are based on the structure of the glyphs, works of art and literature had been created to reflect the conflicts of Simplified/Traditional by exposing or exploring the components inside the characters. For example, although not explicitly dealing with this topic, Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* (1988) demonstrated the potential of artistic creation by reconstructing Chinese characters. Meanwhile, Taiwanese poets like Chen Li made use of the connotations of Simplified/Traditional characters and applied both types of characters in one poem, or like Hsia Yu who wrote poems with image-signs and asemic symbols (Zeng, 2009).

These poems may remind us of the works of Gabriel Pomerand and Isidore Isou from French Lettrism. This paper will focus on some Chinese text-based interactive installations which either proclaimed their root in Lettrism or their aesthetic strategies have shared the ideas of the Lettrist movement by preserving or crumbling the linguistic values in the characters.

French Lettrism is an avant-garde movement established in the mid-1940s by Isidore Isou. Influenced by preceding movements such as Dada and Surrealism, Lettrists aim to reduce language to its smallest particles and restore it with only basic communicative functions (Foster, 1983: 19). In the "Manifesto of Letterist Poetry" (1942), Isou proclaimed that "words" have substituted true emissions with analogies, politeness and diplomatic rhetoric (1983: 71) – a proclamation that rehearses earlier ideas from the avant-garde movement which considered existing art forms and their languages as limiting us to think and express ourselves according to bourgeois ideology. For Isou, the problem exists in the language-at-large and Lettrists should "break up the words themselves" and "destroy signification itself" (Bohn, 1996: 178-179).

Besides what Isou and his fellow Lettrists proclaimed in their manifestos and other statements, there are various intentions and strategies among Lettrists' arts. According to Bohn, there are works applying the ideas of ideographic and hieroglyphic languages to create visual codes for the audience to

decipher (2001: 271). On the other hand, there are iconic works in which the linguistic function has been stripped off and “reduced to the status of random marks on the page. The only recourse left to the spectator is to focus on their visual properties” (273).

Three Chinese text-based interactive installations will be analyzed in this paper. By looking at *Jing*, we can observe how ideas from French Lettrism have been applied to a work in Chinese and French (letters) and the conditions it creates for audiences from different language backgrounds. In *Word Shatter* and *Bloated City / Skinny Language (BCSL)*, the language politics between the Simplified (Mainland China) and the Traditional (Taiwan and Hong Kong) are their main theme. Although both works are text-based and involved the aesthetics of character deconstruction, this paper will recognize different approaches required to read them. These works, to a certain extent, resonate with the two different intentions and strategies of Lettrism mentioned above, but also bear significant difference because of the medium specificity of Chinese characters and interactive media.

II. JING

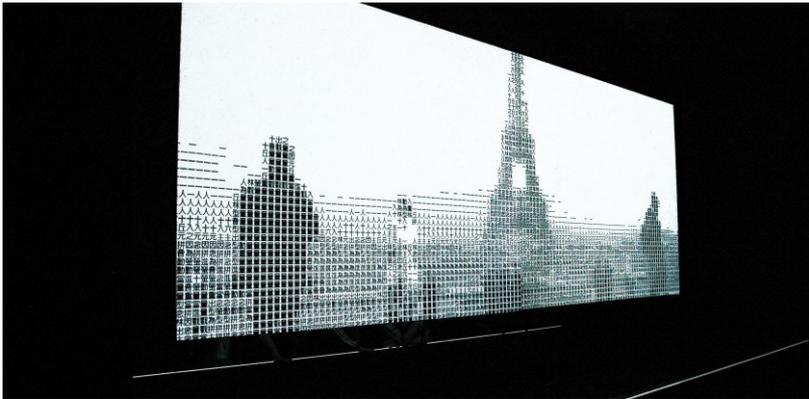


Figure 1. *Jing* (2010) ©ActiveCreativeDesign.

Jing (2010, figure 1) is a dual screen interactive work by French artist Patrice Mugnier and Taiwanese artist Kuei Yu Ho.¹ The work is projected onto a double-sided cinematic screen. One side shows the landscape of Paris with the Eiffel Tower and tourists, the other side shows the port of Kaohsiung, Taiwan with cargo ships and booms. The black and white landscapes are solely constructed by Traditional Chinese characters which the artists “inherited from the French movement Lettriste” and “derived from the ASCII art” (ActiveCreativeDesign).

¹ For documentation, see <http://activecreatedesign.com/?p=19%2B>.

Two guard rails are placed in front of the screens. When an audience touches the rail, the portion of the screen in front of him will turn blank, as if the ocean of characters is separated by force. If he is playing with the Paris side, some Chinese characters will rain from the top to the bottom in the blank. For the Kaohsiung side, some Latin alphabet letters tinkle, show up and disappear quickly, on random spots in the blank space.

Jing: The Characters and Alphabets

According to the artists, the raining down texts (but not those which form the background landscapes) are Chinese characters they found in the cityscape of Paris, and the alphabetic letters come from French words they saw in Kaohsiung (Mugnier, 2016). Most of the collected Chinese characters are names of restaurants in Paris Chinatown like “Beauty Garden,” “Shanghai” and “Solar city” while the French letters are luxury brands like LV and Chanel.

These Chinese words can be easily recognized as they come in as complete words (combination of characters/morphemes), like “Shang” and “Hai” are put together as “Shanghai.” They also rain down in their complete forms and give the audience a few seconds to read until they fall down to the bottom. On the other hand, the French words are displayed as separated letters. Such as the word “CHANEL,” in which the alphabet “C” suddenly shows up on a spot and immediately flaps to “H” then “A” and disappears after the last alphabet “L” has shown. The whole process is shorter than one second and they are literally unrecognizable without the explanation from the docent on site.

On the other hand, the characters used to compose the landscapes are selected only according to the density of their strokes to create the effects of grey-scale. The meaning of these characters is not being considered (Mugnier, 2016). A dense character with many strokes serves as a black pixel in the picture, while a simple character with very few strokes looks like a light grey pixel.

Jing: Analysis

According to the artist statement:

The project « Jing » is a creation dedicated to “Alterity,” which is the principle of exchanging his own perspective for that of the other. Because ActiveCreativeDesign is composed of French & Taiwanese artists, it is sensitized about the way people look to each other. The project Jing simply tries to answer this question: “what reflects me in the culture of the other?” (ActiveCreativeDesign)

When an audience approaches the screen of Paris, the mechanism is self-explanatory. The illuminated guard rail is inviting and the audience can observe

the result on the screen immediately. For the falling Chinese characters, their literal meanings are clear. These words, as mentioned above, are mainly restaurant names and they all together are indeed an example of Western (Parisian) stereotypes on Chinese-ness. For a Taiwanese/Chinese audience, it may take some time to figure out what these words, collectively, are referring to as they may not be familiar with the stereotypes on them. This process of deciphering or interpreting seems to be one of the most interesting aspects of this work. Its grammar of interaction provides the possibilities for the audience to play while still providing enough time for understanding and interpreting the falling words. As Simanowski argued, the joyful play of the interactions in any text-based installations may deprive the linguistic meaning of the text as the audience “will not look through the signifiers but at them” (2013: 197). However, in *Jing*, it provides significant time (as the characters are falling down slowly) and limited interactions (just by touching the rail and opening up the ocean of characters) for the audience to read, rather than to just look at the text. Besides the falling characters, the audience may even have time to guess if there are any linguistic meanings among the background characters.

On the other hand, the Kaohsiung’s side is not as effective as its counterpart for realizing the idea of “alterity” from the artists. The artists consider that the French brands’ signs in the Taiwanese city contribute “to destroy the identity of local territories” (Mugnier, 2016). However, such message can hardly be delivered because the names of luxury brands, although considered stereotypes of French-ness in Oriental eyes, can only be seen as flashing Latin letters. It is simply impossible for the audience to connect these letters with any specific words.

Applying Barthes’ semiotic conceptions of the second-order semiotic system, or the connotation, Bohn argues that a Lettrist work which merely consists of typographic signs without linguistic values cannot denote specific meaning sign by sign and can only serve as visual signifier (1996: 275). Like the work *Van Gogh* (1976) by Micheline Hachette, the pseudo-characters, collectively, serve as a visual connotative signifier and remind us of the language of the Mayan or the Japanese kanji seals which influenced Van Gogh (276).

For *Jing*, a similar but not identical result is achieved. The relation between a Chinese character and a Chinese word is complicated and the notion of “word” in Chinese is “neither a particularly intuitive concept nor easily defined” (Sun, 2006: 46). However, from the audience perspective, we can consider most of the characters used in *Jing* (as backdrops) not comprehensible even for Chinese-speaking audiences, which makes the few comprehensible words (Chinese restaurant names) and the few incomprehensible French alphabets stand out in the work. For a Chinese-speaking audience, the Chinese restaurant names maintain their literal meaning while the French brand names become meaningless letters. All of this happens over the backdrop of the massive sea of random Chinese characters. This picture somehow delivers a connotation which Chinese characters

(and its culture or power) are swallowing the weak, lonely and linguistically meaningless alphabets of the West.

For the audience who is illiterate in Chinese, this notion of cultural invasion can be even stronger as the visual effect of a sea of foreign texts can be quite striking. Roland Barthes calls this condition a “panic expression,” when one perceiving a system of symbolism not comprehensible for him but only with the connotation of exoticism (1991: 144).

Although quite a few Lettrist paintings from the West applied the ideas of ideogram and hieroglyph in their works (Bohn, 2001: 265), most of them didn’t involve issues of cultural conflict or postcolonialism. *Jing* includes such messages by placing an extreme ratio of letters and ideograms (characters) in the work (99% of characters with only 1% of letters), and by a dynamic interaction which presents the letters and characters differently.

It seems that the difference between *Jing* and the traditional Lettrist works are mainly on the connotation of a specific language (Chinese) and the medium-specificity of interactive media. In the following, this paper will analyze two Chinese-text based interactive works which both involve the strategy of deconstructing existing Chinese characters and issues of language politics. By investigating both works, this paper evaluates Isou’s ideas that “letters have a destination other than words” (1983: 72), and also how to dig up the “hidden meanings in their letters” (73) which may work differently on the letter level (or stroke level for character) in Chinese text-based interactive artworks.

III. SIMPLIFIED VS TRADITIONAL CHINESE

The arguments around Traditional and Simplified Chinese characters are a complicated issue in the Sinosphere. The Traditional Chinese characters are the style of Chinese glyph which has organically evolved to its current form since Emperor Qin (the first emperor, 259 BC – 210 BC) unified the characters by political means. It has largely remained in the same shape since the style of Clerical Script emerged in Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), and later on evolved into the Regular Script. The Simplified Chinese characters, on the other hand, are a set of glyphs which has been artificially designed and/or standardized (according to the hand written forms invented by common daily use) by simplifying the stroke and structure of the characters and reducing the numbers of characters. They are the result of several rounds of simplification projects mandated by the Chinese government from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Nowadays, Simplified Chinese is established by law in Mainland China² and also used by the government and people in Singapore and Malaysia. The Traditional Chinese is now used by the government and people of Taiwan, Hong Kong,

2 For example, publication of Chinese books must be printed in Simplified Chinese unless they are direct copies of ancient books or made for artistic usages, such as a manual for calligraphy. See “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language” http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2005-08/31/content_27920.htm.

and Macau. However, Simplified Chinese is now much more commonly seen in public spaces and found in library collections in Hong Kong and Macau because of the strong influence from Mainland China and because both districts are now under Beijing's rule. The growing influence from Mainland China also led to the tendency of shifting from Traditional Chinese to the Simplified in many overseas Chinese communities and has created a lot of controversies among the diaspora.³

Because of these political factors, the debates about which form of Chinese is better, such as in terms of historical legitimacy and effectiveness, are never a purely academic issue but more of a site of political struggle. For example, an online debate concerning any topics can often be diverted into personal attacks on the participants' identities based on which form of Chinese they are using to make their comments.

As stated above, this issue of politics of language has drawn attention from many writers and artists for their creations. As the difference between Traditional and Simplified Chinese is mainly on the visual structure of the glyphs, media artists have created works to emphasize this fact by making the characters in motion and playable by audience, such as the two installations below from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

IV. WORD SHATTER



Figure 2. *Word Shatter* (2010) ©Moca Taipei.

Word Shatter (2010, figure 2) by Lu Tsung-Han is a single-screen interactive work exhibited in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei.⁴ Two sentences from the classic narrative poem *Pipa Performance*: “Where music is concerned, Xunyang is

3 For an example case in Richmond, BC, Canada, see <http://www.richmond-news.com/news/nothing-simplified-for-chinese-community-in-sign-debate-1.20618801>.

4 For the artist demo, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbwX-fP6yCI>.

barbaric. Throughout the year I hear no wind or string music.”⁵ are displayed on the screen, written in traditional Chinese with classical calligraphic style. Individual members in the audience are invited to stand in between the screen and the projector, seeing their arm’s silhouette on the screen. When their silhouette “touches” on a character in the sentences, it will shatter into strokes, then some strokes will disappear while others will reorganize as a simplified form of the same character at the original position. After a while, if no one touches the character again, it will reconstruct itself back to the original traditional character.

Word Shatter: The Poem

Pipa Performance is a classic narrative poem written by the well-known scholar-official-poet Bai Juyi in AD 816. He had been demoted to Xunyang, an area at that time considered remote from the capital. In a party, he heard someone playing beautiful Pipa music. Bai then discovered that the musician was an old retired ChangNu (an occupation similar to Geisha in Japan) also from the capital and was forced to resettle in Xunyang for living. Bai wrote this poem to compare his own bad-fortune with this ChangNu. The two lines used in this work described the remoteness of the area in which he could not find any wind or string music, in order to imply the lack of high culture in that area.

Word Shatter: Analysis

According to the artist statement, Lu considers Traditional Chinese characters more than just glyphs as being a treasure of Chinese culture. For him, Simplified characters are like wounded characters which signify the decline of “cultural connotations” and emotional expressions in the simplification process (Lu, “*Word, Shatter*”). In a video interview, he argued that the evolution from Traditional to Simplified character is a “cruel and violent process” and these two forms of writing are “in conflict” with each other. He considered Xunyang being in a condition of “cultural loss” in Bai’s era, and Hong Kong or Taiwan, which are still using Traditional Chinese today, are undergoing a similar situation (MOCA Taipei, 2010).

The language of the poem is classical Chinese and the literacy of classical Chinese nowadays is similar to Latin in the modern English world. However, the vocabulary in these two lines is quite vernacular and similar to modern Chinese. An educated Chinese audience should easily grab the meaning of it. Additionally, the poem is written in calligraphic style. These two aspects, classical Chinese and calligraphy, not only reflected a sense of high culture but also implied a historical feeling.

⁵ Translated by Ying Sun (2008), quoted from <http://musicated.com/syh/TangPoems/PipaTune.htm>.

Audiences from Taiwan and Hong Kong are used to appreciate classical poems in calligraphy written in Traditional Chinese rather than in the Simplified form. If we see any classical poems written in Simplified calligraphy, it would be like seeing a medieval illuminated Bible written with the font of Comic Sans which appears to be an inharmonic modern parody. As a result, once the audience triggers the sensor and sees the character being simplified, the negative connotation of Simplified Chinese can be interpreted because it violates the norms of traditional Chinese culture understood by Taiwanese or Hong Kong audiences. This effect is enhanced by the words “wind or string” as they are not only referring to ancient music instruments but to ancient high culture music similar to “symphony.”

The interaction mechanism is also important in this work. Unlike many interactive works in which audiences are invited to create sensational drawings with lots of freedom, the interactions in this work are limited. After they touch all the interacting characters and see them “wounded and heal,” there will be nothing more new to see or play. This factor allows the audience to read and think about the meaning of the work after the “Wow factor” (Simanowski, 1996: 196), once the initial surprise has diminished. The ensuing result contains a strong political statement: an inharmonic picture, a destroyed but recognizable historical artifact, which reminds Traditional Chinese users (e.g. Taiwanese and Hongkongese) of their current frangible political and cultural condition under the shadow of Mainland China. This metaphor is even stronger for the audience who knows the background story of the poem quoted in this work.

Taking a semiotic approach, the denotations of the texts (meaning of the poem) in this work create a metaphor for “cultural loss”, which resonates the aesthetics of traditional literary forms. Besides, the collective connotation of Traditional Chinese characters, classical Chinese language and calligraphy implied a sense of history and civilization. This work delivers its complete message by inviting audiences to shatter the traditional characters in order to destroy such implication.

V. BLOATED CITY | SKINNY LANGUAGE

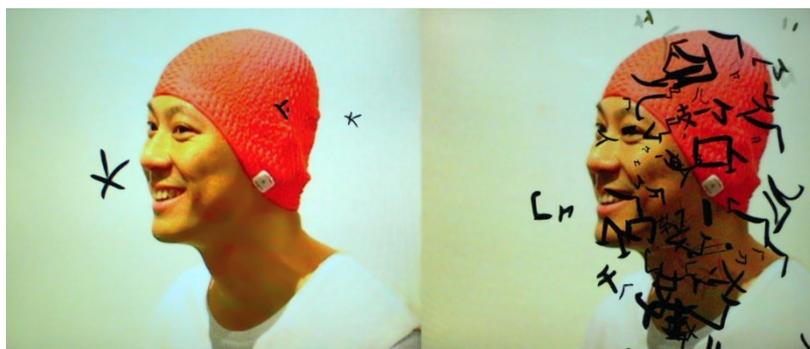


Figure 3. *Bloated City | Skinny Language (BCSL)* (2007) ©Hung Keung.

Bloated City | Skinny Language (BCSL) (Figure 3) is a series of interactive artworks by Hong Kong artist Hung Keung, starting from 2006. This analysis is based on the version shown in the “Chinglish” exhibition in 2007 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art.⁶

The audience stands in front of two parallel screens and sees his own identical live images being projected on them. At the same time, Chinese characters, components of characters and strokes of characters travel across the two screens like flies. The characters and strokes stay over the audience’s body on the right-hand screen if the viewer does not move, and they fly to the same body on the left-hand screen if the viewer starts and keeps moving.

BCSL: The Characters

There are four different conditions of characters being used in the work: complete characters (Simplified and Traditional), components of character, and strokes of characters. It is worth to notice that since the complete characters being used are relatively basic, they can also be considered as components of other characters. However, the “flies” (all characters and character-like materials in this work will be named “fly” to avoid confusion) will never gather and form a new character or any sentences in this work. Unlike works such as *Still Standing* (2005)⁷ by Bruno Nadeau & Jason Lewis, in *BCSL* if you stand still, and let the “flies” lay on your body, the “flies” will only overlap with each other and incline in various directions, it is almost impossible to form any new characters even by accident.

⁶ For the artist demo, see: <https://vimeo.com/51657749>

⁷ See http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/nadeau_stillstanding.html.

On the other hand, some of the “flies” deconstruct and reconstruct themselves following human movements. Those “flies” evolve from a dot or stroke to a complete character or component while moving, and then deduce themselves back to a dot or stroke. However this cycle always remains the same and none of them will change to another character or component.

Figure 4 contains the table of some of the complete characters being used in the work according to my observation. The components and strokes which cannot be translated because of their limited linguistic meaning are not listed on the table.

Characters which are the same in simplified and trad. Chinese	Simplified Chinese Characters	Traditional Chinese Characters
Knife 刀	Old 旧	New 新
Mouth 口	Car 车	
Human 人	Horse 马	
Big 大	Child 儿	
Also 也		

Figure 4. Chinese Characters in *BCSL*.

BCSL: The Title and the Statement

The Chinese title of *BCSL* is *FungHung SingSi SauSan Manzi* (literally meaning “breast enhancement city and slimming body text”) may better explain the original idea of the artist than its official English title.

FungHung (breast enhancement) and *SauSan* (slimming body) are two terms being widely used in the early 2000 in Hong Kong. TV and public space were flooded with advertisements of body treatments at that time. Compared with their old counterparts like “diet” and “breast implant,” these trendy terms emphasize the naturalness and healthiness of the treatments. Ironically, these advertisements always come with erotic photos of women with stylized bodies to demonstrate the products’ effects.

These body images, the rapid development of Hong Kong, and the news about the United Nations deciding to abandon Traditional Chinese (which was a false report as the UN has already abandoned it in the 1970s) inspired the artist to create this work (The Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2007). As he mentioned in his statement:

From my personal point of view, the city should gradually develop and should not demolish villages or small cities in the name of such projects as new hi-tech buildings; similarly, women should strive to be physically and spiritually healthy rather than superficially beautiful through, for example, excessive weight reduction or breast enlargements. Simplified Chinese is a skinny—maybe even an emaciated—version of

traditional Chinese. From this material, I created the title of my interactive project ‘BCSL’ (Hung, “Context of BCSL Project”).

However, as art critic Leung Po Shan commented, it is difficult to get that message just by seeing the work, and almost any topic can be implied in such a way (2007). It is difficult for an audience to think of breast enlargement or city development by playing with this work. As stated in the table above, none of the characters being used has clear connection with these two topics, and the visual effects or the grammar of interaction also imply nothing about it.

BCSL: The (mis)interpretation of Simplified vs Traditional Chinese

As the artist stated, “my feelings towards this country and its linguistic development are complex: on the one hand, I argue that Simplified Chinese characters contain insufficient historical and cultural value; on the other hand, I treat Simplified Chinese as an efficient tool for practical purposes” (Hung, “Context of BCSL Project”).

Although it is hard to learn the complete intended ideas through the work, audience nevertheless may notice the issue of Simplified and Traditional Chinese. These two kinds of characters can be recognized on the screen, and the audience may also notice the Chinese character “new” (written in “old” Traditional Chinese, but the Simplified “new” remains the same) and the character “old” (written in “new” Simplified form) among the flies. However, the rapidly moving “flies” and the playfulness of the work raise the question whether the audience can read the characters. Even if they do, the connotation could be very different from what the artist intended.

Since the character “new” is written in old Traditional form and the character “old” is written in new Simplified form, it could also suggest an equal and interchangeable relationship between the “new” Simplified and the “old” Traditional. Moreover, as Simplified Chinese is mainly a result of stroke-reduction from the old one, it is not easy to differentiate the “flies” between Simplified characters or components/strokes of the Traditional. For the animated motion, the uniform insect-like behaviour of the “flies” may also suggest that they belonged to the same species and evolve in the same way. None of them looks culturally or practically superior to its counterpart. One of the possible interpretations of this work is that it emphasizes the similarity rather than the differences between the two forms of Chinese. In contrast to the artist’s thought, the work could suggest that Chinese as a whole is a dynamic system and is always evolving in an organic and dynamic way.

VI. CONCLUSION

A few characters used in BCSL have retained their denoted meanings, but in practice there are no linguistic values that can be read from them and certainly not from other “flies” (strokes). There are also no significant cultural connotations derived from the fonts of all the characters and strokes, as the font applied in the work looks like random handwriting rather than the styles usually used in calligraphic or printing arts.

In fact, the artist of BCSL never mentioned Lettrism in any text about his work and he may have a very different message to deliver in his mind. How BCSL works is in fact similar to a traditional Lettrist work (in comparison with *Word Shutter* and even *Jing*). Since in BCSL the linguistic values from the original characters are almost totally stripped off, the remaining characters and strokes in motion somehow stand on their own right as a kind of new letters or signs for interpretation. Such interpretation not only may depart from the original idea of the artist but also escape from the original cultural and historical referent of the graphemes.

By applying the strategies similar to Lettrism, works in Chinese can achieve results similar to Lettrist works which were made with pseudo or invented letters. What Isou once proclaimed in his manifesto “Destruction of WORDS for LETTERS” (1983: 72) can now become Destruction of CHARACTERS for RADICALS (semantic components in a character). Compared with letter-based works, the semantic or pseudo-semantic components in Chinese characters can create an extra layer for audience to contemplate with. When a character is being deconstructed and re-constructed, it results in something similar to what Barthes suggested on Arcimboldo’s portraits, a hesitation “between coding and decoding” when we are not sure to read/decode the total meaning of the pictures (i.e. a specific person) or to look at the detailed elements (e.g. fruits or flowers or fishes) (1991:137). This hesitation or confusion is what made Arcimboldo’s portraits unique, which is also the main reason why the discussed character-based media arts are different from the letter-based ones.

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