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Marga van Mechelen*

Migratory Signifiers, Encrypted Symbols

How Globalization Mobilizes Aesthetics

Abstract: In this paper I apply the concept of migratory aesthetics to practices of performance and installation art. I begin with two examples of artists-migrants, the Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare and the Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Lê, and continue with Chinese artists who took the Great Wall of China as the locus but also the main motif of their performances and installations. I selected the work of Concept 21, the Yuanmingyuan group, and Xu Bing. I stress the importance of these art forms in relation to migratory aesthetics. I argue that it is the combination of signifiers inspired by Western art and Chinese iconographies – with sometimes intentionally encrypted symbols – that gives us a better understanding of the mobility and hybridity of aesthetics in times of globalization, which is therefore not restricted to artistic practices of migrants.

Keywords: Chinese art; Great Wall of China; iconography; installation art; performance art

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1 Introduction

In 2007 Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord introduced the term *Migratory Aesthetics* in a volume titled *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics*. Most of the contributors were and still are related to the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, founded by Mieke Bal, and its interdisciplinary research of topics from the fields of literature, film, post-colonialism, gender studies, etc. The combination of both terms, ‘migratory’ and ‘aesthetics’, is introduced as one of the many phenomena of globalization: the migration of people, forcibly exiled or not, their relocation, and the ‘injection’ of their cultural backgrounds into host cultures. ‘Migratory’ is connected by the authors to migration in the first place, but it is also an adjective of aesthetics, and in this conjunction expresses the mobility of aesthetics. This mobility implies not so much a subjection to cultural, political, and economic constraints, as its power to (trans)form them.

The main thesis as formulated in the Introduction of *Migratory Aesthetics*, is the following: “aesthetic practices often gain their force precisely through their contestation of constraint and the assertion of a certain freedom of movement” (Durrant & Lord, 2007: 12). This thesis is confirmed not only by the contributions in the volume, but also by my own knowledge and research in this field and what hopefully will be supported by the outcome of this text.

In agreement with Jill Bennett (2011), one of the authors of another book about migratory aesthetics edited by Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, I consider ‘migratory aesthetics’ an operative concept, setting the terms of a cultural inquiry as Bal does and touching upon epistemic matters (Bennett, 2011: 118). But these epistemic matters can be derived from art; they even come forward through art works as the ones I describe herein. I first give two examples that are closely related to the concept of migratory aesthetics in the more obvious sense: aesthetic practices of migrants or as Bhabha calls them “in-between artists” (Bhabha, 1994). These artists made the phenomenon of migratory aesthetics subject of their work by creating new modalities and new hybrid ‘languages’. Their works are a product of global migration and interconnected with their lives, but at the same time a theoretical object telling us how globalization or even postcoloniality and migration as an intertwined theme exemplifies the hybridity of contemporary culture.

The main focus of my essay is however ‘migratory aesthetics’ in a more general sense as aesthetics that migrates and is conditioned by globalization. The artists that I discuss under this banner do not necessarily have to be migrants. On the contrary it is my aim to demonstrate how transaction of cultural signs and identities can take place within one country in times of globalization by looking at things from different national as well as global perspectives. We speak about a *mental* movability and a capacity to look at a cultural state of art through the eyes of the Other, and to change cultural symbols amongst other by the introduction of to a certain extent *strange* media. ‘Strange’ to whom or what? *Strange* at least to their own cultural background, and not so much to who considers him or herself part of the global art world. I take my examples from Chinese art, in particular performance and installation art, in the period just before Chinese artists began to migrate on a larger scale to Western European countries and half a decade before Chinese art became ‘booming’, after the presentation of Chinese art at the Venice Biennale of 1993. All the art projects are related to the most important Chinese cultural symbol: the Great Wall of China. But first, I present two examples of artist-migrants from different regions of the world.

2 Yinka Shonibare MBE and Dinkh Q. Lê

Still a very illuminating example of a migratory aesthetics understood as a repertoire of visual signifiers generated by migration, is the work of Yinka Shonibare MBE (1962), a Nigerian-British artist, born in London, who moved with his family to Nigeria when he was three years old and came back to London when he was sixteen. He became internationally well known for his three-dimensional arrangements of figures that reminds us through the style of their clothing of the elitist British fashion history of the 18th and 19th centuries and through its compositions of well-known paintings of European art, but for which he used *strange*, exuberant, colorful wax prints, known as Dutch Wax, Wax Hollandais or Hollandaise. The choice of this wax fabric, recognized by every African as *their* 'local' fabric, has a story that makes this hybrid combination of elements and traditions even more multi-layered.

The story of Dutch Wax goes back to the early 19th century when a Dutch company began to industrialize the handicraft of batik, which had its origins in India and later migrated to Indonesia (Arts, 2012). The new Dutch industrial product was however not sufficiently successful and they therefore looked for a new market, which was found in Western Africa. A second Dutch company also started with the production of batik prints and was so successful that even today its name is connected to the fabric: Vlisco.¹ There are numerous Vlisco designs, with many more meanings. These designs can literally express sayings such as: "A good life brings oblivion", or truths: "Only mothers know where their children are". They represent moods, should protect people against evil, or help them to reconcile with their fate.² Especially for funerals and weddings new outfits were made in Dutch wax and so, through the collection of fabrics, family histories have been written (Kouoh, 2012). Depending on the social and political context, the motifs in the fabric derive their temporary and local, thus continuously changing, meaning. Even if Shonibare knows about this meaning – at a certain time and place – when he chooses a certain design, he is not able

¹ Vlisco is still a market leader, but its position is threatened by the influx of Chinese copies. Vlisco advertises with the subtitle "The True Original". It now has flag stores in some of the major cities of West Africa.

² These examples are drawn from the two-channel video of Godfried Donker *The Currency of Ntoma (fabric)* from 2012, part of the exhibition *Hollandaise* in SMBA Amsterdam, 3 November 2012 – 6 January 2013. Donker's mother speaks in this video about the meanings of the wax prints.

to control its meaning because the Vlisco fabric is an example of travelling interpretations of motifs and of different kinds of “appropriation” (Vergès, 2012).

Shonibare is one of many artists who re-appropriated this textile and accompanying postcolonial histories.³

But this mere fact reinforces even more the hybridity of his installations. It is Indian in origin, Indonesian, with colonial – Dutch - reminiscences; it is also African with local and provisional meanings, but always an expression of African Black consciousness. Depending on the circumstances, wearing Dutch wax could be interpreted as “traditional behavior” or as resistance against the Western dress code and dominance in global affairs. For women doing business with these textiles it often meant more economic independence. “They are a form of savings” (Kouoh, 2012). Shonibare’s approach puts more emphasis on colonial histories in general and the involvement of Western countries, but through his choice of this fabric and also the dismemberment of the figures in the composition, the exploitation of the colonized is given undoubtedly a strong counter-voice.

Shonibare’s work is a good illustration of what Griselda Pollock considers to be one of the main roots of migratory aesthetics. In the preface of the exhibition *Migratory Aesthetics* curated by Pollock in Leeds in 2006, she refers to the history of Africa and its complex histories of intra- and intercontinental trade, after the end of slavery. She mentions in particular the textiles that show the linkage between this continent and South Asia. She does not mention Shonibare, but what she puts forward applies to him and that is that art can bring back in our memory what she calls the migration of ideas and aesthetics. Pollock’s exhibition, like my text, is not primarily about migrants but explores the movement of aesthetics and the aesthetics of movement. She mentions a number of key words that are fitting here as well, such as: passage, encounter, combination, relocation, displacement, memory, revisiting, reconnecting, and transformation.

A second example is Dinkh Q. Lê, an artist of Vietnamese origin.⁴ In his work the misinterpretation of cultural motifs, caused by different cultural backgrounds and political convictions, plays a major role. At the early age of ten his parents decided to flee from the war to the United States where he studied photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York with semiotics as

³ One could find examples in the Vlisco exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art Arnhem in 2012 and in several smaller exhibitions of SMBA, especially the one mentioned in note 2.

⁴ The choice of this example is inspired by a paper of one of my students, Saul Roosendaal, “Een nieuw gezicht voor Vietnam. Hoe Dinh Q. Lê westerse en oosterse interpretaties vergelijkt” (Konz et al., 2011).

his favorite subject. One of his works, made in 2010, is called *Signs and Signals from the Periphery*, in which he shows us the function of signs in the Vietnam economic system. He always uses art forms and materials with a Western origin, such as ready-mades, installations, and plastics, but his motifs are found in Vietnamese culture and are related to the fast changing Vietnamese economy. *Damaged Gene* from 2005 consists of plastic figures, dolls or children faces, but they are weird because each body has two heads. It refers to the physical abnormalities caused by Agent Orange, a mixture of chemicals that the American military used during the Vietnam War.⁵ But there is another layer of meaning, which has its roots in Vietnamese mythology: the magical power of divine creatures with more than one head and of more than the usual number of limbs. One could say that almost all his work is based on ambiguity and 'plays' with the remembrance on both sides of the May Lai history and the different meanings of the helicopter – the “indispensable” weapon of the Vietnamese war – for the older and younger Vietnamese people. He used a special Vietnamese technique to weave a mat with photographic pictures of Vietnamese journalists unknown to the Western world and mixed them with Hollywood pictures. Just because he is a migrant, and became a migrant at an early age, he is very conscious of the differences in interpretation and significance of cultural signs. He not only makes his audience aware of this fact, he also contributes to historical writing, to new identity formation and a mixing of elements and influences of different worlds. This process is a politics of aesthetics in the Rancierian sense (Rancière, 2013). Dinkh Q. Lê develops a complex form or arrangement to give voice to political, social, and cultural histories. In merging motifs from different worlds and forcing an encounter of these worlds in a new way, he may create new identities but still, and more importantly, within a polemical, multifaceted space embodied in his work.

3 The door to the global art world

Thus far I have related migratory aesthetics to migrants responsible for the migration of symbols and the formation of hybrid configurations of signs. Though I won't deny that their symbols are the most visual exponents of global exchange and communication or miscommunication, basically migratory

⁵ As is stated by both Griselda Pollock and Mieke Bal migratory aesthetics is often associated with trauma, not only the personal traumas of migration and being separated from one's homeland and family, but also the traumas of war and repression. In my text I leave this out.

aesthetics can also be found as I said before within one land. Implicitly this approach of migratory aesthetics moves us away from a discussion of migration and aesthetics in terms of identity politics. The concept of migratory aesthetics is even, as is stated by Bennett (2011), an alternative to identity studies. In my view it is motivated by a semiotic 'reading' of aesthetic practices in our contemporary world.

Historical and geographical differences have grown, due to globalization, in spite of the fact that everything seems to be more accessible; especially contemporary artists are aware of this fact. More often than not artists point out the heterogeneity and not so much the homogenization that is often associated with globalization, and rightly criticized. When I say “contemporary” – dangdaixing or dagndai yishu, I use it not only in the sense of the artist of today but also as a term that expresses a certain value, that could – in the Chinese context – be expressed by another term maybe even better: “avant-garde art” or “experimental art”. So “being contemporary” means “belonging to the avant-garde”, not anymore in the sense of “ahead of its time”, but just of “being up-to-date”, an “up-to-dateness” in relation to the world beyond his or her own country. Why not use the term “modern”? In the case of China, if I understood this well, this term would lead to much confusion. For Western countries “modernity” means a new epoch or episteme, while for China, as Gao Minglu (Minglu 1998: 19) stated, it means a new nation. As with Dinh Q. Lê, contemporary or avant-garde artists in China are using art forms that belong to the Western (Europe and North America) heritage and to some extent also the Japanese heritage of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde.⁶ And not only the art forms, but also references to the art movements that are usually related to these art forms. As for example: Dada and Surrealism with the medium of the collage, montage and photography, and Pop Art with its screens of popular images, or the performance and installation as dominating art forms of the last decades.⁷

⁶ Minglu (1998: 16) writes:

The cultural debate climaxed on the Mainland around the mid-eighties, and with such trends as Searching for Cultural Roots (Wenhua xungen), Cultural Reflection (Wenhua fansi), and Culture Fever (Wenhuafe), avant-garde art and literature movements with a more radical tone of social and cultural criticism emerged. Although the new art of the '85 Movement, so called, encompassed forms of almost every western modern movement from Dada to Pop, the art practice using various western-originated forms was self-oriented and not involved with the western mainstream for either direct input or evaluation; it was an internal dialogue answering only to its own social and cultural demands.

As far as Japan is concerned, one might think of the Gutai group.

⁷ In Xiamen an avant-garde movement came into existence that named itself Xiamen Dada. It was founded in 1986 by Huang Youngping, Cha Lixiong, Liu Yiling, Lin Chun, and Jiao

The application of these art forms and references to art movements elsewhere, are themselves part of migratory aesthetics: they are migratory signifiers. The choice of the art form, here mainly the performance that is indicated in the Chinese language as behavioral action, is a signifier in itself being crucial for the understanding and critical reception of the art work or the art project as a whole. It is much more important than the signified, that it to say the subject matter or content of the reference. Concrete references – as for example in the form of a “quote” – hardly seem to play a role; I did not find any example in the limited field I researched of a concrete re-enactment or a declared reference to a specific work of art. The art projects I will discuss obviously are loaded with symbols, but where are they symbols of? Are ambiguity, hybridity, and encryption not a necessary feature of these examples of migratory aesthetics, and a proof of their “untranslatability” (Maharaj, 2002)?

With Dinh Q Lê we saw complex relations between the artist-migrant with a double cultural background, who ‘works’ with the historical relation, but at the same time with relations in the ‘here and now’. Vietnam and the United States shared a history, and because of that things will be recognized, though they are obviously experienced and remembered in quite different ways. For contemporary artists in China there is a history before the year we identify with the start of globalization, 1989, and one after, in both a political, economic, and artistic sense. The intention to bring art closer to life and to aim for free subjectivity played a major role in the eighties. Performances and installations appeared to be an excellent tool, as the “iconoclastic ideological utopia and dematerialization” (Minglu, 1998: 19).⁸ While looking at the ‘after 1989 tendencies’ we see an increase of an affinity with traditional media. Rather soon after 1989 it became impossible to escape from the commercialism and the pressure of the international art market. As Minglu stated: “Many artists abandoned the humanist utopianism and hopefulness of the eighties” (Minglu, 1998: 21). This is certainly true after the 1993 Venice Biennale, which made Chinese contemporary or experimental art very popular worldwide, and a global commodity. The situation became much more complex, also on a semiotic level. Chinese artists were using an international language and operating as transnational artists or world travelers; some of them were or soon became

Yaoming and is well known for its live events. It encompassed as its sources of inspiration both the historical avant-garde (Marcel Duchamp) and the neo-avant-garde (John Cage and Joseph Beuys). In the early eighties, The Chinese magazine *Meishu* published articles about Surrealism. ⁸ It is central to my approach not to make a media-based distinction between performance and installation, or to separate these art forms from conceptual art practices. See my *Art at Large* (2013).

migrants; other artists returned home or did so many years later, but this international language lead to a difference in interpretation among local Chinese people on the one hand and the more cosmopolitan artists and the international, mainly North American or European art public, on the other hand. For many reasons! Wrong presuppositions about the context or about the meaning related to genres chosen by the artists, as for example the historical connotations of the self-portrait, but also the understanding of political motifs and intentions. The art projects I discuss show this development, but maybe not so much that they accentuate the differences between the generations but more so the interrelation between certain projects of the eighties and nineties. 'Indecisiveness' of interpretations plays a minor or – on the contrary – a major role in these art projects. It is even so that misunderstanding or the impossibility of understanding intentionally is enforced by artists.

Minglu describes the artists of the eighties, which he named 'the '85 Movement' (2004: 785, n.4), as artists who considered themselves "cultural pioneers", with the task to "enlighten the masses, fight for social reform, and rebel against the past" (1998: 21).⁹ He talks about artists who were represented in his 1998 show *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. They were interested not only in new media art forms and educational or emancipatory goals with a focus on contemporary society, but also in Chinese history and in the monuments of the past, such as the Old Summer Palace, Tiananmen Square, and most importantly the Great Wall of China.¹⁰ To summarize its critical history: in the pre-modern era the Great Wall symbolized "the futility and cruelty of the first emperor's political and military ambitions" (Minglu, 2004: 773), while around 1900 it began to represent national power, a few decades later becoming also a symbol of Chinese identity and pride – not always in the same degree among leaders and the Chinese people. In the Mao era the interest in the Great Wall weakened, to get a renewed importance after Mao's death during the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, who presented the restoration of the Great Wall as an expression of the love for the nation. In the words of Minglu (2004: 773): "the Wall was a consistently changing sign". It became a topic not only for Chinese artists, but

⁹ Minglu did this in a Chinese publication in 1986 (2004: 785, n.4). It covers one hundred unofficial art groups nationwide beginning in 1986 and 1986. Artists changed the name to 'the '85 Art New Wave'.

¹⁰ The relation between Chinese avant-garde artists and the Great Wall was not only a subject of the exhibition *Inside Out* of 1998 but also of an exposition of 2005, first in Beijing and later in Buffalo, New York, called *Chinese Art Interprets the Chinese Wall*.

for foreign artists such as Marina Abramović and Ulay as well.¹¹ Already in the early eighties they began to investigate the possibilities to make a walk on the Wall, not together but individually, each of them starting at one end of the wall, respecting its historical meaning. Right from the start it was clear that this would be the most challenging performance they ever undertook and a huge effort to organize. It took almost seven years of preparation with negotiations on the highest cultural and political levels between Chinese and Dutch authorities. It was not only a project of endurance, but also a clear vision on the cultural history and symbolic meanings of the Chinese Wall, resembling to a certain extent what, for example, Cai Guo-Qiang five years later showed in his “dragon fire” project of 1993, in which he created with the use of gunpowder a wall of fire and light of ten thousand meters long along the Chinese Wall. Symbolically, he intended to create a line of energy – also a central concept in the performances of Marina Abramović and Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) – to awaken the sleeping wall. His idea was a continuation of former projects in which the Great Wall was also approached as a body – dead or seemingly alive.

4 Concept 21 and the group of Zhang Lianjii

There was a group called Concept 21 that did a series of performances in May 1988 on the Wall, when Marina Abramović and Uwe Laysiepen were still walking on the wall, from both – female and male – sides of it.¹² Though there is no direct resemblance between 'the walk' and the ritualistic performances of Concept 21, there are still some affinities between Concept 21's performances and Marina Abramović's earlier performances and those of other artists in her close circle. Concept 21, a group of four artists (Sheng Qi, Kang Mu, Zheng Yuke, and Zhao Jainhai), began their famous performances two years earlier, in Beijing. In these performances wrapping was one of its main features, as it was in *Wrapping Up: King and Queen*, a performance by Zhang Peili Geng Jianyi,

¹¹ An early performance alongside the Chinese Wall was done by the Hong Kong-based artist Kwok Mang Ho, who did a performance (he called it a happening), in the year 1979, consisting of a construction of a string of plastic bags.

¹² They began on March 30 and met each other on June 26. They were not informed about Concept 21, though Ulay Laysiepen (p.c. September 12 & 13, 2012) is convinced that they had a major influence on Chinese artists in those years. In general he says that Chinese artists are not inclined to mention their precise sources of inspiration.

done in the same year, in Luoyang, in the province of Henan.¹³ In Concept 21's performance *Screaming against the Sky*, the four artists, with the help of another six artists, were dressed in black and looking like ghosts. They were playing folk music and singing primitive songs to call forth the souls of those who had died while constructing the wall. The ritual was a kind of funeral in which the Wall was the living and breathing body that was subjected to suicide. The surface of the wall was wrapped in red curtains and the artists lit fires in the watchtowers; they behaved like mourners (Minglu, 2004: 774).

This aspect returned in another performance called *The Great Earthquake*. Wrapping and mourning both were favorite motifs in the Chinese performance art of that time. Both in feeling and in the use of motifs there are many resemblances with the Western performance art of the late sixties and seventies, so twenty years earlier, though there are no specific references ("quotes"). Possibly they had some knowledge about Jackson Pollock, Joseph Beuys, Gutai, Yves Klein, and Christo, but there is not much to say about when they became acquainted with these artists. However, it is certain that many artists of this generation studied the work of Robert Rauschenberg when he had a show in the China Art Gallery of Beijing in the autumn of 1985 (Berghuis, 2006: 52). The main difference with these Western types of performance art in general, however, is the fact that the basic idea of the Chinese performances at that time went beyond personal histories. It can be looked upon as allegories that were intended to serve another, larger goal, first often a socio-political one, and later the aim to awaken Chinese histories. As Berghuis (2006: 54) makes clear, this interest in history was supported by a couple of academies that asked their third year students to go to important cultural historical sites, like Xi'an and Dunhuang.

In the case of a later series of performances from the year 1993 by Yuanmingyuan, a group consisting of Zhang Lianjii and fifteen other artists, the wrapping of wounded people lying on the wall of Simatai (in the province of Hebei) was considered as a symbol of a general sacrifice. These people were wrapped in black bandages, while others were pelted with Coca-Cola bottles. Here also, the Great Wall seems to play an allegorical role, better to say 'roles', because it was presented as the body that is responsible for the burial of people and in its ruined state, as the object of a funeral. The Yuanmingyuan group

¹³ I read about these early examples in Berghuis 2006. Berghuis mentions another few examples of performances in which wrapping plays an important role. He even suggests a change of meaning when in the summer of 1988 the defense of Chinese cultural heritage came under attack (Berghuis 2006).

moved, with the help of a hundred local people and students, ten thousand bricks from the ruins of the Ming era to a place of a later date, an exertion that took several days. These bricks were packed in a red fabric of a curtain and positioned like a cross, so altogether this could be identified as a Crucifixion. Paper money was scattered all over these bricks, an act that referred to another old Chinese funeral ritual. Minglu (2004: 777) stresses that there are additional possible interpretations, but I think that the indecisiveness by mixing up different symbols and cultural histories does not prevent us from recognizing larger ideas in these allegories, while at the same time making us aware of the fact that this indecisiveness or ambiguity is meaningful in itself.

As has become clear, these performances took place in public space, even in the open air. They were executed mainly by groups of performance artists and with the help of ordinary people. They were quite ritualistic and in that sense certainly not strange to Chinese cultural traditions. There were other directions in performance art at the same time. For example the so-called theatrical performances, which had other, but also Western sources of inspiration and different conditions (Berghuis, 2006: 55). Only the fact that theaters and other more private spaces were chosen as stages changed the character of these performances in the direction of a more personal focus.

5 Xu Bing

The Great Wall was also the main motif in *Ghosts pounding the Wall* (1987–1991) by Xu Bing. He had participated in one of the 1988 performances – *Great Earthquake* – and began in that same year the preparations of this new project. If we look at this project that consisted of a complex preparation – the ink rubbing of the Wall with the aid of seven students and eight peasants – and the installation in an American museum in Wisconsin of the 30 meter-long rice paper prints, I, myself, with my Western eyes, am inclined to relate this work with frottage as it was used by the Surrealists in the past. It is, however, also a well-known technique in Chinese history, to reproduce calligraphy prints and to make “imprints” from tombstones and stele. It took Xu Bing three weeks to make the mono-print over a length of 150 meters of the Great Wall. In fact the project existed of two parts: first the performance of the artist, students, and farmers, and second the installation of the indexical remains of the performance in a museum space. The series of photographs made of the performance stress the importance of the performance as an instrument of time and space. The project as a whole had a strong conceptual appeal, brought about by the idea of

an imaginary migration of the huge three-dimensional monument, with all its symbolic layers, through a fragile two-dimensional imprint, which has its own cultural connotations. Though migratory symbols obviously were important, it is the tangibility of the imprints as a witness or trace of what happened along the Wall that is central to this project. By stressing the indexicality, I'm proposing a slightly different interpretation of the use of rubbing than Minglu's. He considers the creation of a dead skin primarily as an iconic sign (Minglu, 2004: 779). Though his approach does not exclude mine, or the other way round, the difference has a major implication. Where Minglu sees the project as being concerned with representation, I look at it as a way of making something present as close as it can be. The presence of more than thousand sheets of rice paper that originally touched the Great Wall brought the Wall to the gallery in the most direct, continuous way. Hence, it leads us back to the first part and the performance of the assistants, and through that, to an earlier work of Xu Bing that over the years had different names: *Book of Heaven: A Mirror to Analyze the World* or, as it was called later, *Book from the Sky*. Xu Bin started this project in 1987, and ended it years later when he had a collection of hundreds of books that could be displayed on the floor beneath a canopy of strips of uncut book pages (Heartney, 2008: 314). In *Ghosts pounding the Wall* the assistants were wearing special clothing with prints of characters of this previous work.

Xu Bing moved for *Ghosts pounding the Wall* to Wisconsin in 1990 and later to New York; since 2008 he is back in China and Vice President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. In all the intervening years, he had exhibitions all over the United States and also in Europe, three times in the Netherlands, and three times he was present at the Venice Biennale. There is much more to say about this project and its early reception in China, how it got its title, and how this title was understood.¹⁴ Britta Erickson wrote several articles and a book about his work in which she indicates the consequences and possibilities connected to the migration of the work. She says that around 1989, "Xu first saw the potential for extracting multiple readings from his works. Xu's move to the United States provided a change of venue and a markedly different audience. This situation almost inevitably produced a new set of interpretations, which the artist encouraged" (Erickson, 2000: 227). Therefore the migration of the imprints should not be considered as a journey, with the Wisconsin gallery as its final destination and a meaningful conclusion. Erickson gives a number of examples of how he plays with unpredictability and with a deliberate obscurity of Chinese characters for a Western audience. But not only for Westerners, but

14 See Wu (1999).

also for the Chinese! What is at stake here is a continuous production of encrypted symbols, clearly without a key. Since his *Book of Heaven* he joked with Chinese characters that looked like characters in the Song dynasty style, only nobody was able to pronounce or understand them: they were merely his invention. As Minglu (1993: 28) argues: “by his complete avoidance of legibility in the text, Xu removed all semantic significance from the work itself, and thus erased all traces of his own ego as the creator of the work”. In the Barthean sense “the author is dead” (since he killed himself); it’s to the reader to give his work meaning. Only the reader is not capable of doing so, at least not in the strict sense. After his migration to the United States, Xu Bing also began to manipulate English letters. Cultural negotiation and cultural transference became his major topic, but always with the ironical impression that misunderstanding and miscommunication are inevitable when different discourses meet each other in a global world. How playful these works may be, they emphasize at the same time a displacement in time and the existence of many temporalities, so a hybridization of the experiences of time and place.

6 Concluding remarks

Migratory aesthetics was introduced as a semiotics of globalization. However, it is one of the least stable semiotics one can have. Already in the scholarly introductions of this concept the dynamics of the migration of aesthetics and the aesthetics of migration is indicated as its core content. It is described as being marked by hybridization telling, on the one hand, about its many sources but also, on the other hand, about its open-endedness. Much is here to tell about the performances as a signifying practice that is loosely connected to Western art traditions while at the same time incorporating Chinese rituals and (encrypted) symbols, which are read by its audiences in different ways. This is not a surprise; it is to be expected of a migratory aesthetics.

I focused on the Great Wall as the locus of several performances, which appeared, at least in the eighties, to be a good tool for highlighting Chinese cultural heritage. But this highlighting had a dark counter-side because most of the performances dealt with the dead and sacrifices. Two motifs, those of wrapping and rubbing, appeared to be most remarkable, the first one used by numerous performance artists. The decision to limit the discussion to performances and installations related to the Chinese Wall made it easier to say something more specific about migratory signifiers. Nevertheless, ambiguity prevailed also in these projects around the Great Wall and nothing can be said

with much certainty. The last artist I discussed, Xu Bing intentionally created barriers for understanding, though he, like the other artists, chose an open, public space and an art form that is more interactive than any other. In fact all the examples that illustrated the concept of migratory aesthetics as a migration of aesthetics were motivated by a politics of migratory aesthetics, what indeed was hard to deny.

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