

GU WENDA'S UNITED NATIONS: A CONSIDERATION OF TWO MONUMENTS

DAVID CATEFORIS

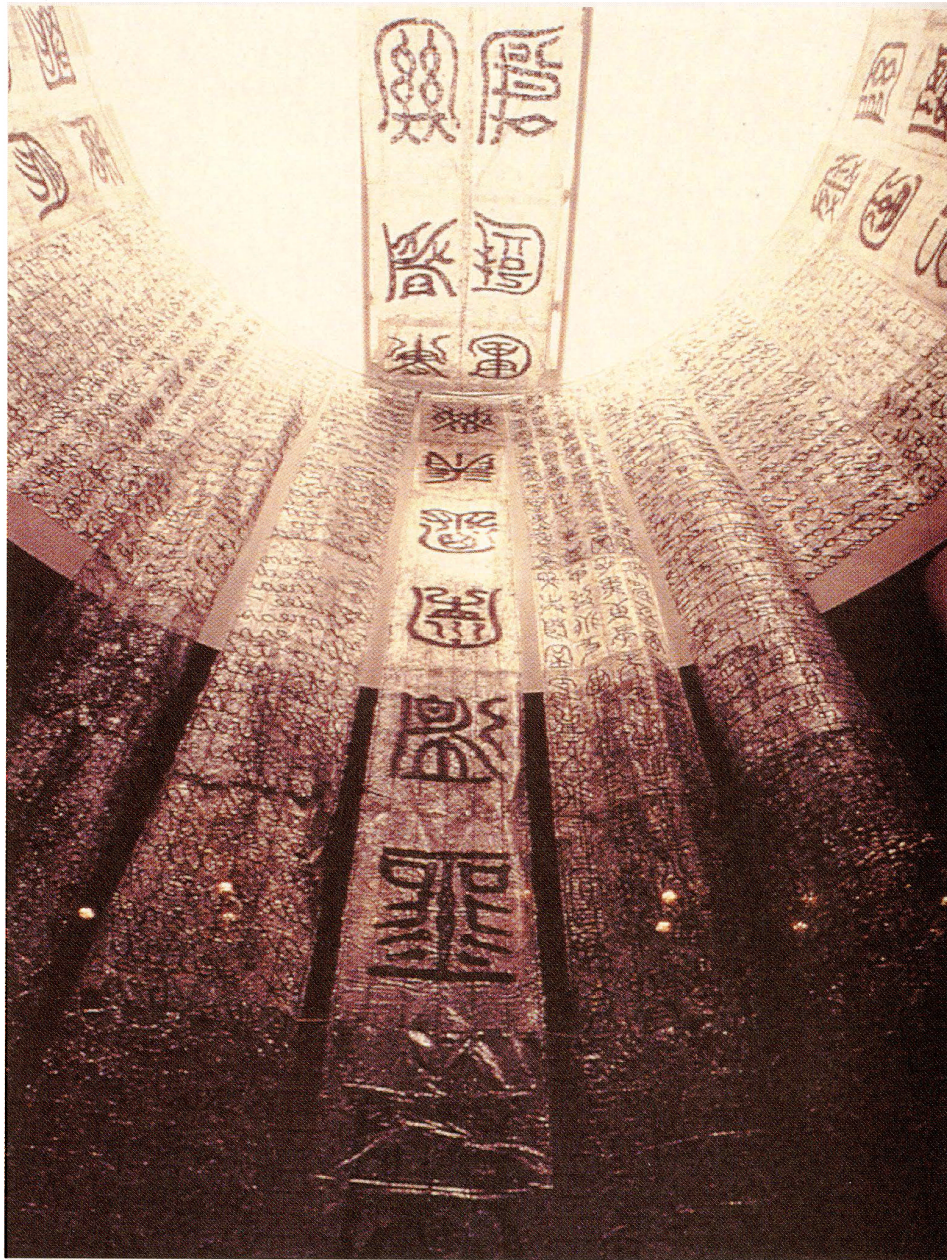


Figure 1. Gu Wenda, *United Nations: babel of the millennium*, 1999, site-specific installation, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photograph courtesy of the author

I wish to address my remarks today to two individual works by Gu Wenda, whose exhibition brings us together here in Kansas City. Bringing people together, both literally and metaphorically, is in fact one of the main functions of Gu Wenda's art, and, I believe, one of its great virtues. I first became seriously interested in Gu Wenda's art about three and a half years ago, while I was revising the chapters on modern and contemporary art for the current edition of the textbook *Art History*, whose principal author is my senior colleague at the University of Kansas, Marilyn Stokstad. Seeking to conclude the book with an artist whose work deals in an ambitious, positive,

and memorable way with issues of globalization, so prevalent in contemporary political, economic, and cultural discourse, I discovered Gu as the ideal choice. And, seeking also a work addressing itself to the millennium, the perfect piece by Gu for my purposes was his *united nations: babel of the millennium*, a site-specific installation he created for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1999 (fig. 1).¹

Gu Wenda began his *united nations* series in 1993 and has to date produced twenty installments of it—the latest being the one on view here in Kansas City at the H&R Block Artspace. The series consists of site-specific “monuments” (Gu’s term) made of human hair, which Gu collects from barbershops and presses or weaves into bricks, carpets, curtains and, most recently, braids. Gu’s “national” monuments, which have been installed in such countries as Poland, Israel, Taiwan, and Australia, use hair collected within and address issues specific to the country in which they are exhibited. His “transnational” monuments address larger themes and blend hair collected from different countries as a metaphor for the mixture of races that Gu predicts will eventually unite humanity into what he calls “a brave new racial identity.”²

The transnational monument in San Francisco, *united nations: babel of the millennium* refers through its title to the legendary Tower of Babel, whose story is recounted in Genesis 11. According to Genesis, the people baked bricks and took mortar and said “Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, with its top in the heavens.” To humble the people’s pride, God confounded their language so that they could no longer understand one another, but seemed to be “babbling.” And God scattered them over the face of the earth, leaving the tower unfinished. The legendary Babylonian conqueror Nimrod was traditionally said to have supervised construction of the tower, whose historical origin was the ziggurat, a sacred tower commonly found in the major cities of ancient Mesopotamia. Just as Babylon, with its mixture of races and languages, might well have presented to an ancient visitor a confusing Babel of tongues, it is appropriate that Gu Wenda chose to stage his modern response to this ancient story in San Francisco, a racially and ethnically diverse city that due to its reputation for moral license also happens to have the nickname of “Babylon by the Bay.”

Gu’s work embodies the concept of Babel in its profusion of one hundred and sixteen rectangular panels incorporating nonsensical, invented scripts based on Chinese, English, Hindi, and Arabic characters, and on a synthesis of Chinese and English. This nonsensical writing has its roots in Gu’s initial experimentation with pseudo-seal scripts from the mid-1980s, which helped to make his reputation as a leader of the so-called ‘85 Art New Wave in China. The scripts in the *united nations* work frustrate the ability of viewers to read them and, in Gu’s terms, “evoke the limitations of human knowledge.”³ Gu hopes also that these unreadable scripts will help prepare viewers for entry into what he calls an “unknown world”⁴—a utopian world, perhaps, that cannot be described or defined by any written language.

While Gu’s scripts derive from and refer to a range of language families from around the world, the characters themselves are made from human hair collected from three-hundred and twenty-five barbershops in eighteen countries, and thus literally embody a wide range of nationalities as well as variations in age, gender, and race. (The hair is held together with glue and the curtains are thus very delicate.) Gu uses hair as the principal medium of his *united nations* installations in part because of its multitude of symbolic meanings, which vary from culture to culture, and fundamentally because of its ability to evoke the human subject from which it came—what the artist calls a “silent self.”⁵

In *united nations: babel of the millennium*, this multitude of silent selves is fused into a set of curtains that takes on the form of a cross—symbolically important in many cultures, including both Chinese and Christian. According to Gu, the multi-paneled cross also evokes the famous funeral robe of a Han dynasty princess (Dou Wan, wife of Liu Sheng), which was crafted of jade tablets sewn together with gold thread. In Gu's conception, the cross's arms curve with the circular architectural space forming the image of the jade robe with extended arms.⁶

This reference to ancient Chinese art is characteristic of Gu's work, which, even in its transnational aspect, continues to use elements drawn from the cultural vocabulary of his native country. Also referring to Chinese culture are the most prominent characters of the San Francisco *united nations* monument, which are examples of Gu's pseudo-seal script. Unreadable by both Chinese and non-Chinese viewers, Gu's pseudo-seal script might be interpreted by the former as a violation of the sacred status of language in Chinese culture. For the non-Chinese viewer, these characters simply seem mysterious and exotic. The incomprehensible nature of this and the other pseudo-languages in Gu's installation symbolizes Babel—the confusion, misunderstandings, and potential for conflict resulting from cultural differences, including languages, that prevent us from transcending our divisions to build collectively a utopian Babylon. Gu attempts to build this Babylon by using an aesthetic and material vocabulary that bridges cultural differences to propose a new, truly multicultural situation of unity.⁷

Gu's latest work in the *united nations* series, *united 7561 kilometers*, addresses itself more directly to the political divisions that characterize the contemporary world, even as it holds out the utopian possibility of human unification that is shared by all the *united nations* works. First installed in the atrium of the art building at the University of North Texas in Denton, *united 7561 kilometers* featured a central, inwardly illuminated column composed of hair panels with Gu's trademark nonsensical characters (fig. 2). These were surrounded on two sides by a suspended tent or temple-like structure composed of a thin, continuous braid of human hair, five thousand meters in total length. According to Gu's calculations, the individual strands of hair comprising this continuous braid would extend 7561 kilometers in length, the distance given in the piece's title. Created over the course of about two years by three female assistants in Gu's Shanghai studio, this long rope of human hair symbolizes the immensity of the global population and the essential interconnectedness of human beings that are central concerns of the *united nations* series as a whole. At the same time, the persistence of racial and ethnic differences among humans is suggested by a few braided lengths of pure blond hair and pure red hair that appear on both sides of the canopy, contrasting the otherwise uniformly dark color of the braid. (It should be mentioned that Gu himself did not intend for these purely blond and red sections to appear isolated within the overall braid; they were placed there independently by the women in Shanghai who braided the hair, and may suggest unconscious resistance on their part to the sort of racial and ethnic mixture Gu's art envisions.)

The braid in the Denton installation was hung in one hundred and ninety-one divisions of equal length, and was threaded along the base of each side through one hundred and ninety-one rubber stamps bearing the names of the one hundred and ninety-one nations of the world at the time of its creation (fig. 3). Typical of Gu's play with language, the name of each country is spelled backwards in lower case letters (e.g. *learsi* for Israel). At the end of one side in the Denton installation, the braid continued in a pile on the floor, threaded through several additional rubber stamps with blank areas to accommodate the names of new countries. This element of Gu's work suggests that, rather than coming together, humanity will in the future divide itself even further politically.



Figure 2. Gu Wenda, *united nations: united 7561 kilometers*, 2003, installation at the University of North Texas, Denton. Photograph courtesy of the author

And the artist's own *united nations* project has documented this trend: three years ago, when Gu created *united nations: man and space*, the world map presented one hundred and eighty-eight flags⁷ which the artist rendered in hair panels (fig. 4). Three years later, Gu had to incorporate into *united nations: united 7561 kilometers* the names of one hundred and ninety-one countries, and by leaving additional blank stamps to accommodate more, he suggests that the political fragmentation of humanity will continue.

Adding to this sense of fragmentation is the backwards spelling of the name of each country, suggesting the difficulties of international communication. Gu has pointed out that, if the stamps were actually inked and used to print the countries' names, the letters would come out in the right order but would be backwards⁸—a situation of linguistic absurdity that may, among other things, be read as a critical comment on the absurdity of the political fragmentation that Gu's work documents.

In its present incarnation in the H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute, *united 7561 kilometers* has taken a different form (see page 4). Now the hair braids are suspended in the shape



Figure 3. Gu Wenda, *united nations: united 7561 kilometers, 2003* (detail), installation at the University of North Texas, Denton. Photograph courtesy of the author

of a large room, with a door-like opening that invites the viewer inside. The hair panels bearing the synthesized pseudo-characters now hang above the central space in the form of a canopy rather than reaching down to the floor in the form of a column. The rubber stamps are now dispersed through the hair walls at different heights rather than hanging uniformly along the bottom edge of the suspended loops. And the trailing end of the braid now forms a tightly coiled spiral on the floor in the centre of the monument rather than trailing off into a pile along the outer edge.

All of these changes invest the work with new meanings. For example, the seemingly random placement of the rubber stamps, many of them at some distance from the floor where they are impossible to read, suggests further geopolitical fragmentation and increasing difficulties in communication. Along the coiled braid at the base of the installation, several of the rubber stamps appear to orbit around a central point, evoking on the one hand a solar system or, on the other hand, less positively, a whirlpool carrying flotsam down a drain—the latter reading more cogent than the solar system reading given that there is nothing at the spiral's centre to evoke a sun.

Counteracting and ultimately overriding such negative connotations, however, is the visceral sense of human interconnectedness embodied in the five thousand meters of braided human hair, so powerfully evocative of the vital organic forces that produced it and with which we cannot help but identify as we interact with the work. The spiral length of hair on the floor can also be interpreted in a positive light in terms of the widely accepted meanings of the spiral as a symbol of all that is cyclical, moving, changing, and evolving—just as Gu's work itself changed between its showings in Denton and Kansas City and just as his *united nations* project continues to evolve as he pours his creative energies into it. (The artist recently told me that the spiral to him suggests “a constant move and spin” as well as a “universe,” with the four walls moving toward the central spiral signifying the “unification of the universe.”)¹⁰



Figure 4. Gu Wenda, *united nations: man and space*, 2000, installation at the 2001 Chengdu Biennale. Photograph courtesy of the author

At its foundation, through its use of blended biological materials—specifically hair—Gu’s art stresses the biological unification of humanity as an antidote and possible solution to the political and cultural divisions that his *united nations* monuments also acknowledge. Biological union is the subject of his ongoing series, *Gu Wenda’s Wedding Life*, one installment of which he presented in conjunction with the exhibition of *united nations: babel of the millennium* in San Francisco (fig. 5). This performance was a symbolic wedding ceremony between the artist and a Caucasian bride from the United States, presided over by a mixed-race child. Explaining the significance of this performance, Gu remarked: “I believe that we are on the verge of a historical transition in which we must choose whether or not to realize the vision of a powerful humanity by uniting different races and cultures.”¹¹ On another occasion, and in a similar vein, Gu declared: “I believe biological marriage is more essential than cultural marriage. Just imagine: if all the people are mixed-blooded, we will have no racism in our world.”¹²

Such statements convey Gu’s utopian vision of a unified humanity and the vision to which he dedicates his art. Admittedly, this vision seems depressingly out of reach in our present era of worldwide racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions—tensions that often erupt in atrocious and tragic violence such as the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ongoing bloodshed in the Middle East and elsewhere. But it is precisely because the present situation does seem so dire that we desperately need art like Gu Wenda’s to help us imagine something better, and to encourage us all to work towards it.



Figure 5. Gu Wenda, *Cultural Wedding*, performance at the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 28 February 1999.
Photograph courtesy of the author

Notes

¹ See Marilyn Stokstad in collaboration with David Cateforis et al., *Art History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with Prentice Hall, 2002), 1183–84.

² Gu Wenda, “face the new millennium: the divine comedy of our times,” in *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, ed. Mark H.C. Bessire (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 40.

³ Gu Wenda quoted in Simon Leung with Janet A. Kaplan, “Pseudo-Languages: A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay,” *Art Journal* 58:3 (Fall 1999): 99.

⁴ Gu, “face the new millennium: the divine comedy of our times,” 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ Gu quoted in Leung with Kaplan, 98.

⁷ This paragraph is indebted to a March, 2001 text by Heather Whitmore Jain, “Understanding the Hairy Gibberish of Gu Wenda,” provided to me by Gu Wenda. A shortened version of Jain’s text was published as “The Hairy Gibberish of Gu Wenda,” in *Collect-ing* (China Guardian Special Editions No. 2, n.d.), 32.

⁸ Gu Wenda, email to the author, 30 August 2003.

⁹ David Cateforis, “An Interview with Gu Wenda,” in Bessire, 159.

¹⁰ Gu Wenda, email to the author, 30 August 2003.

¹¹ Gu quoted in Leung with Kaplan, 98.

¹² Gu Wenda quoted in Carla Bianpoen, “Wenda Gu Pursues ‘One New Racial Identity’,” *Jakarta Post* 25 (November 2001).