

## Wenda Gu's *Metamorphoses*

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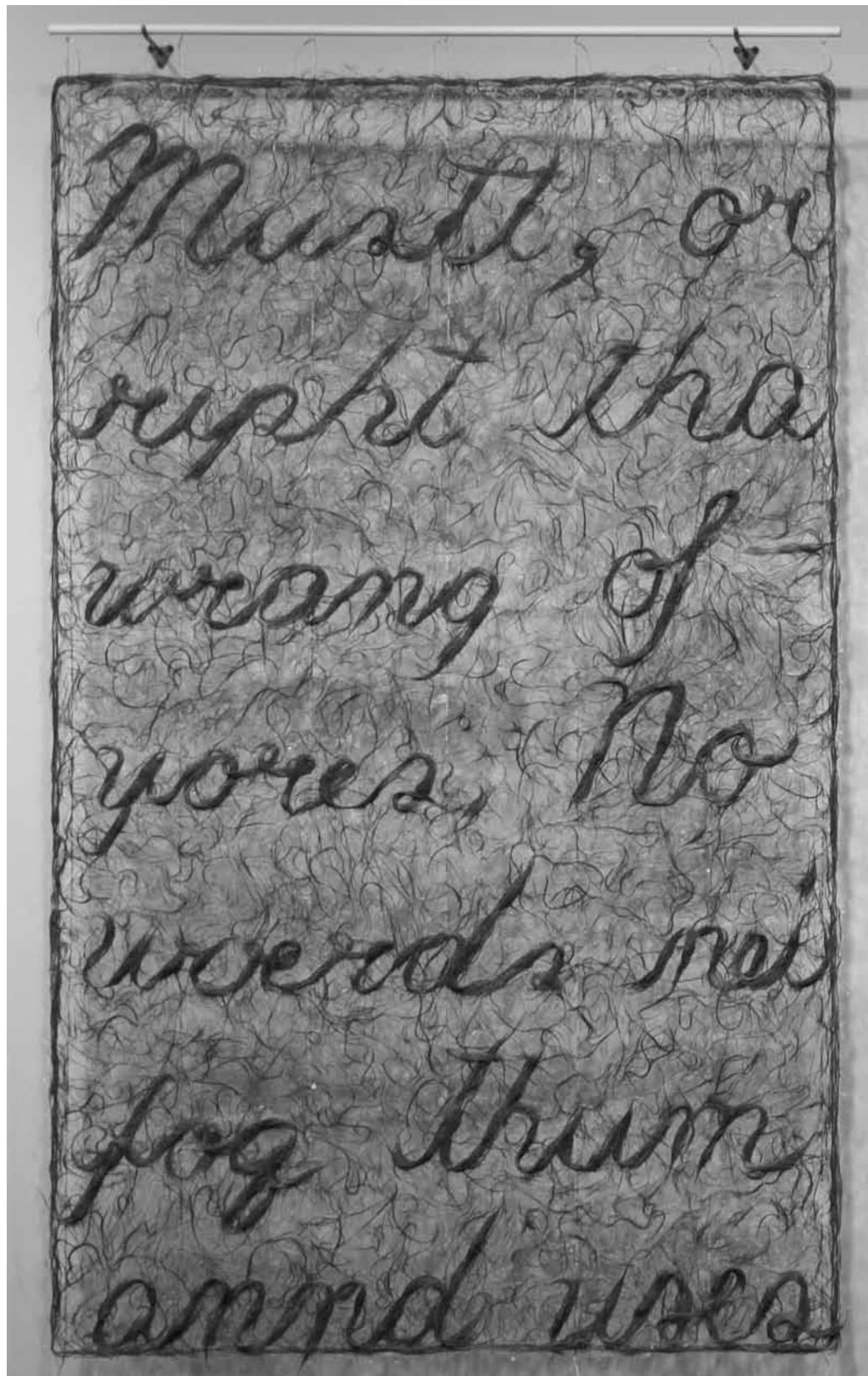


**Fig. 1**  
**Wenda Gu**, Chinese, 1955–, *Metamorphoses*,  
 2004, hair, glue, twine, three panels, each  
 2 x 1.2 m. Spencer Museum of Art, the  
 University of Kansas, Museum purchase:  
 Gift of the William T. Kemper Foundation and  
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The acquisition of *Metamorphoses* (2004, fig. 1), a signature work by the Chinese-born Wenda Gu (b. 1955), significantly advances the Spencer Museum's commitment to the collection and display of international contemporary art. This striking and unconventional creation consists of three large suspended panels bearing unreadable letters and characters fashioned out of human hair—a material common to all human beings but one not usually encountered in a work of art. This article describes and interprets Gu's *Metamorphoses* within the context of the artist's biography and larger body of work, emphasizing the work's connection to Gu's well-known *united nations* series of installations, also made primarily of human hair.

A slender protein filament that grows from follicles deep in the dermis, hair is a uniquely defining feature of the mammalian class.<sup>1</sup> Far more than a shared physical attribute of all human beings, hair has also served as a cultural signifier throughout history and across the globe. The manipulation of hair—the way it is cut, displayed, or concealed—can convey subtle or powerful messages regarding gender, sexuality, class, age, religion, or politics.<sup>2</sup> Artists, in their roles as social observers and articulators of shared values, have in many different times and places represented human hairstyles in a wide variety of contexts, such as portraits, genre scenes, and religious or political images. Human hair, often believed to be spiritually linked to the person who produced it, has also been incorporated into artifacts such as Japanese Buddhist embroideries and Victorian jewelry and wreaths.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on hair's myriad meanings, numerous contemporary artists have used human hair in their art, sometimes in a mimetic fashion (as in the case of Robert Gober's surrealistic wax casts of human body fragments embedded with actual human hairs), sometimes as a reference to ethnic identity (as in the case of David Hammons' makeshift sculptures incorporating tufts of African American hair gathered from Harlem barbershops), sometimes to emphasize hair's status as a human-produced fiber that can be sewn into more traditional cloth textiles (as in the fiber art of Anne Wilson).<sup>4</sup>

Fig. 1, left panel



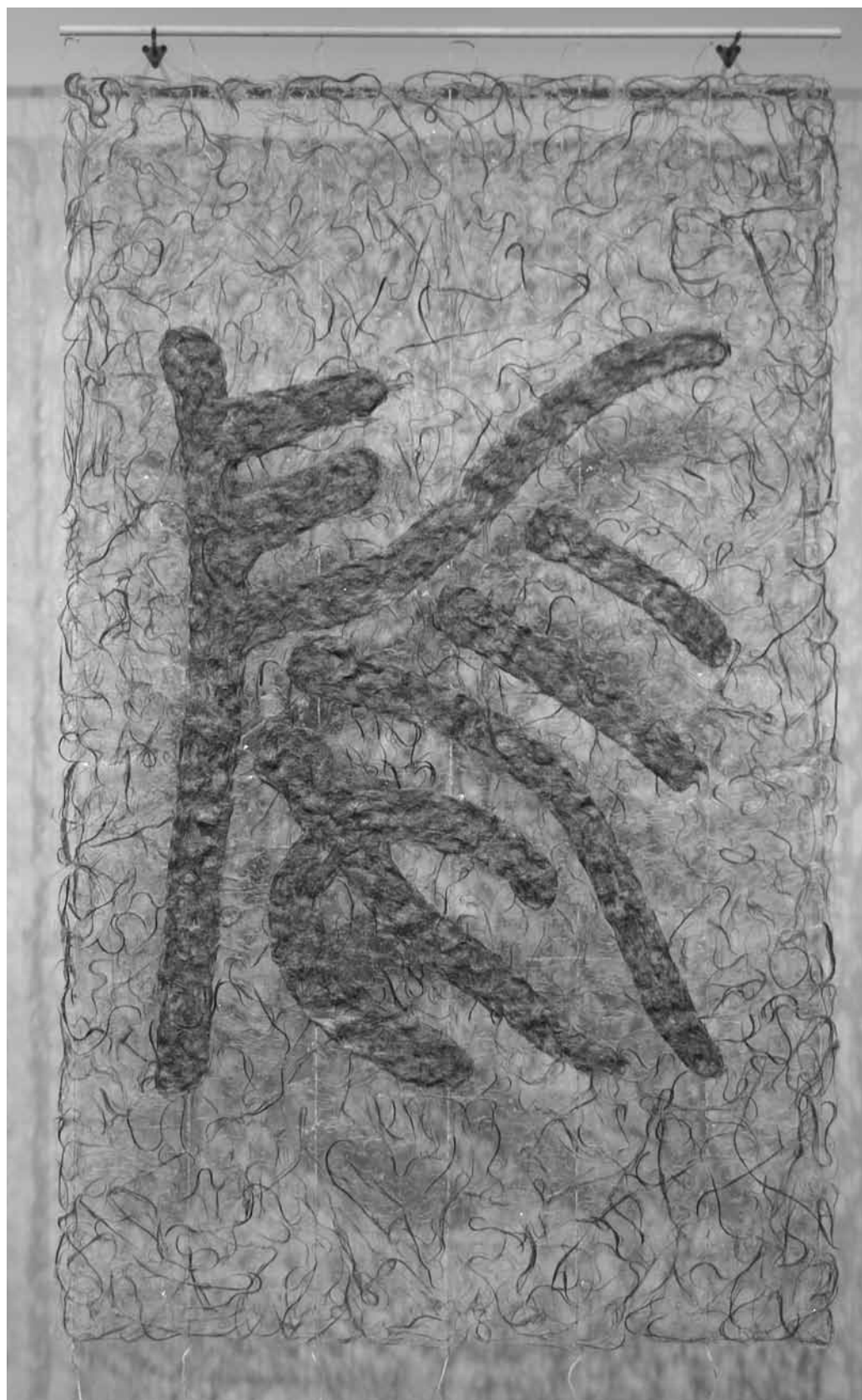
Perhaps no contemporary artist is better known for the creation of artwork made of human hair, however, than Wenda Gu, one of the major Chinese avant-garde artists of his generation.

After beginning his career in China in the 1980s, Gu moved to the United States in 1987 and made his international reputation in the 1990s with his *united nations* series of installations. Inspired by the actual United Nations in New York and dedicated to realizing symbolically the utopian goal of human unification—which Gu admits is unlikely to be achieved in reality—Gu’s ongoing series, begun in 1993, consists of “monuments” (Gu’s term) made principally of human hair, largely collected from barbershops, and shaped by the artist and his assistants into elements such as bricks, carpets, curtains, and braids that are then combined to create large quasi-architectural, site-specific installations.<sup>5</sup> Consisting of both national and transnational or “universal” monuments—the former made of hair collected within a single country and addressing issues of that country’s history, the latter made of hair collected from around the world and addressing humanity as a whole—Gu’s *united nations* series numbers twenty-six works to date. Although the large-scale *united nations* monuments are always temporarily installed, usually in the context of a special exhibition, Gu has also produced for more permanent display many smaller independent works made up of elements identical to those used in the *united nations* series. One such work, the subject of this article, is *Metamorphoses*.

Fabricated by Gu’s assistants in his Brooklyn, New York, studio, *Metamorphoses* consists of three thin, delicate, translucent rectangular panels, each 2 x 1.2 m, comprised of long strands of human hair pressed into glue and supported by seven parallel lengths of twine, spaced more or less evenly and running vertically down each panel.<sup>6</sup> The panels hang by their twine elements from wooden dowels borne on brackets extending from the wall.<sup>7</sup> Irregular lengths of the supporting twine, some as long as 38 cm, dangle from the base of each panel—four from the left one (every second twine element extends beyond the base of the panel), six from the central one (all elements but the rightmost extend), and seven from the right one (all seven twine elements extend). Shorter lengths of twine dangle from the top, where the panels are attached to the dowels. The dangling twine along the panels’ top and bottom edges enhances the sense of delicate, airy suspension that is so central to the work’s aesthetic effect, as do the glistening patches of dried glue and the intricate shadows cast on the background wall by the strands of glue-stiffened hair.

The hair in all three panels spreads in a curvilinear filigree while merging into dense clumps that form unreadable scripts. The left panel, which is outlined by a thin band of gathered hair

Fig. 1, middle panel



(absent from the other two panels), bears seven horizontal lines of mostly miswritten English words that frustrate attempts to read them. This garbled text might be transcribed as: “Mustt, or/riphth tha/ wrang of/yores No/woerds nei/fog thumn/ammd uses.” The right panel presents, in four columns, sixteen unreadable (i. e., invented) Chinese characters based on the ancient form of writing known as seal script. The central panel bears a single, large, equally unreadable character made of matted hair—a character synthesized from the graphic elements of English letters and seal script.

The work’s title, *Metamorphoses* (from the Greek *meta*, change + *morphē*, form), denotes transformations, such as hair transformed into writing, and language transformed into illegible signs. Effecting such surprising transformations has long been a central artistic interest of Gu’s, whose recent projects include *Ink Alchemy* (2000–01), in which, with the help of Chinese scientists and professional ink manufacturers, he created ink out of human hair; *Tea Alchemy* (2002), in which he collaborated with a Chinese paper factory to fabricate paper from tea leaves; and *Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry* (1993–2005), in which he rewrote classic Tang dynasty poems by transliterating English translations of them back into Chinese to produce bizarre, largely nonsensical “post-Tang” poems that he then retranslated into English. The transformation of language, exemplified by the latter series, and so fundamental to the Spencer’s *Metamorphoses*, is perhaps the most abiding of Gu’s artistic concerns, dating to his earliest years of avant-garde activity in the 1980s.

Born Gu Wenda in Shanghai and still known by that name in Asia—he legally changed his name to Wenda Gu after immigrating to the United States in 1987 (adopting the Western convention of giving the personal name before the family name)—the artist came from a cultured family that included his paternal grandfather, Gu Jianchen, a prominent playwright, movie screenwriter, and film and theater historian. Gu Jianchen versed the young Wenda in classic Tang poetry, while his wife gave the boy his first instruction in calligraphy, traditionally considered the highest form of visual art in China. Such artistic pursuits were suppressed, however, during China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–76), defined by Chairman Mao Zedong as an attack on the “Four Olds”—old thought, old culture, old customs, and old practice—and meant to clear the path to further revolutionary progress. Gu’s grandparents were labeled rightists and sent to the countryside for reeducation, whereas Wenda joined Mao’s Red Guards (*hongweibing*) and applied his calligraphic talents to writing propaganda posters. After the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Gu studied wood carving at the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts and then received academic training in ink painting at Hangzhou’s Zhejiang Academy of Fine



Fig. 1, right panel



Arts (earning his MFA in 1981), where he went on to teach from 1981–87. While teaching in Hangzhou, Gu turned to avant-garde experimentation under the influence of the Western modern art and philosophy that was newly available to Chinese artists after that country's reopening to the West. Challenging the traditions of painting and calligraphy in which he had been trained, Gu experimented with miswritten and unreadable Chinese characters, gaining recognition as a major innovator in the so-called "85 Art Movement" of Chinese avant-garde art (also known as the '85 New Wave).<sup>8</sup>



**Fig. 2**  
Wenda Gu sitting among  
his *Pseudo-Seal Script* in  
copybook format, 1983–87,  
ink on rice paper, seals.  
Photographed in the artist's  
Williamsburg, Brooklyn  
studio, 1994

Among Gu's best-known creations in this vein are his pseudo-seal-script characters (fig. 2), fake variations of the ancient script that the emperor Qin Shihuangdi (reigned 221–210 BCE) imposed to establish the first standardized system of Chinese writing, which today can be read only by those with special training.<sup>9</sup> Gu reports that he felt liberated by the experience of being unable to read seal script: "I intuitively felt a great deal of freedom, for my idea is that if you understand the content of the characters, you will be confined by it."<sup>10</sup> As a result, Gu set about inventing new characters—entirely devoid of meaning—that not even seal-script specialists would be able to understand. He viewed his unreadable writing both as an avant-garde challenge to Chinese tradition and as a philosophical expression inspired by his reading of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, in Gu's summation, holds that "there is always something mystic and unexplainable" in the world that language cannot capture.<sup>11</sup> Chinese communist authorities, however, perhaps suspecting

that Gu's unreadable characters might contain hidden political messages, shut down his first solo exhibition in Xi'an in 1986. The next year Gu, seeking greater artistic freedom and greater professional opportunity, immigrated to the United States on a student visa, settling in 1988 in Brooklyn.

When he first arrived in North America, Gu spoke no English. Being surrounded by a language he could not understand must have resonated with his earlier experience of being unable to read seal script, but learning English was a practical necessity; he stopped making art almost entirely for a year to study the language of his new home country.<sup>12</sup> When he resumed art-making, Gu ceased working with language, having realized, as he later said, that although "language is indeed second nature to human beings, it is still nature transformed through human activity, and is set apart from our primordial, unmodified 'first nature.'" <sup>13</sup> That "first nature" Gu located in the human body, which he deemed entirely "authentic."<sup>14</sup> This led Gu to incorporate materials from the human body—first menstrual blood, then placenta powder, semen, and finally hair—into his art. This move was inspired in part by Gu's interest in contemporary bioscientific research in cloning, transplantation, and genetic engineering, all concerns of what he calls the "biological millennium."<sup>15</sup> Gu also embraced bodily materials in an effort to escape from "illusionism," arguing that corporeal substances "are the antithesis of art as object exhibited in museums and galleries. They are as real as the people who look at them and therefore can penetrate us with a deep sense of spiritual presence."<sup>16</sup> Calling the bodily substances "silent selves," Gu added: "When viewers behold the works with human body materials, they are literally encountering themselves."<sup>17</sup>

In his controversial series of *Oedipus Refound* installations (1990–93), Gu displayed corporeal substances associated with human reproduction—including menstrual blood, semen, and placenta powder—in an effort to "hit the core of human existence."<sup>18</sup> Then, in 1993, Gu began to use as his medium a human-body material much less freighted with the taboos surrounding sexuality yet still powerful in its associations: hair, launching the *united nations* series of installations that secured his international reputation. Gu chose hair as his medium for the *united nations* because of this material's rich variety of symbolic meanings in different historical, cultural, and religious contexts. For example, notes the artist, some Native Americans consider hair "the location of the soul" and a source of vitality, whereas the Catholic Church preserves the locks of saints as holy relics.<sup>19</sup> Shorn hair can imply renunciation or sacrifice, and freely grown hair can project power and superiority, as in royalty, or a challenge to social restrictions and state power, as in the case of American hippies.

Beginning in 1993, Gu created his first several *united nations* monuments out of hair collected within individual countries, including Poland, Italy, The Netherlands, Israel, and the United States, designating each installation that country's "division" of the larger project, which he first intended to culminate in a grand installation in New York in the year 2000, but later decided to continue indefinitely. As the *united nations* series developed, Gu introduced what he called "transnational," or "universal" monuments, composed of hair collected from many different countries and intended to address humanity as a whole. The monumental *united nations – babel of the millennium* (1999, fig. 3), for example, a site-specific installation for the rotunda of the San Francisco Museum of

Modern Art, incorporated hair collected from 325 barbershops in eighteen countries and fashioned into 116 suspended panels bearing simulated, unreadable scripts based on English, Hindi, Arabic, and Chinese seal script; the most prominent visually are large characters synthesized from elements of English and seal script, like the one later to appear in the center of *Metamorphoses*. All of this indecipherable writing evokes both the world's linguistic diversity and the Babel of linguistic separation invoked by the work's title. In Wittgenstein-inspired philosophical terms, Gu explains that "the miswritten language symbolizes 'misunderstanding' as the essence of our knowledge

**Fig. 3**  
Wenda Gu, *united nations*  
- *babel of the millennium*,  
1999, site-specific installation  
at the San Francisco Museum  
of Modern Art, hair, glue, and  
twine, height 22.9 m, diameter  
10.4 m. San Francisco Museum  
of Modern Art, Kent and Vicky  
Logan Family Gift



concerning the universe and the material world. Yet, the pseudo-scripts help us reach infinity and eternity by imagining the universe, which is out of the reach of human knowledge (language).<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the blended hair that constitutes the work is meant to evoke the utopian possibility of human unification—a transcendence of linguistic and other cultural differences achieved through biological merger.

Each of the panels that make up *united nations – babel of the millennium* measures 2 x 1.2 m—the same dimensions as the panels in the Spencer’s *Metamorphoses*. Gu established this module for creating suspended walls or curtains in his 1997 *united nations – africa monument: the world praying wall* and has used it in most of the subsequent installations in the series. The Spencer’s work thus relates directly to the *united nations* series in its format and can be considered a condensed version of those much grander installations. The smaller scale of *Metamorphoses* invites viewers to inspect it more closely than they might a large installation and to confront very directly the glue-stiffened strands and clumps of hair that form the panels (fig. 4). This may induce a sense of revulsion, since in most cultures hair, often considered attractive or alluring when attached to the head, is seen as disgusting when it is detached from the body. Cast-off hair is, in the terms of the influential psychoanalytic theory of the Bulgarian-French philosopher and critic Julia Kristeva, an abject material. According to Kristeva, hair, along with other corporeal wastes (nails, urine, vomit, menstrual blood, and so on) is abject because it is evacuated from but remains psychologically linked to the body that formed it; it is “something rejected from which one does not part.”<sup>21</sup> As a critical force, the abject confronts us with the materiality and mortality of the body and disrupts the boundaries between subject and object that we employ to maintain a secure sense of identity.<sup>22</sup> Gu recognizes the “fear of waste material” that viewers bring to his artwork.<sup>23</sup> Yet while most people expect his art made of human body waste to be “filthy,” Gu says, “they don’t think that when they see it.”<sup>24</sup> Shimmering in the glow of gallery lights, the panels in a work such as *Metamorphoses*, evoke, for Gu, body waste transformed into “a rising human spirit.”<sup>25</sup>

Unlike the *united nations* monuments that incorporate panels featuring pseudo-scripts derived from several major world languages, *Metamorphoses* includes scripts based only on English and Chinese, evoking the two cultural worlds—American and Chinese—in which Wenda Gu has long operated and whose cultural traditions his art negotiates. Because of its flexibility and natural tendency to curl, human hair lends itself well, as in the Spencer’s work, to the creation of cursive English letters and the predominantly curvilinear strokes of seal script (which differ from the mostly polyangular strokes of regular Chinese script).<sup>26</sup> The juxtaposition of the texts in the left and right panels of *Metamorphoses* highlights basic structural differences between the English and Chinese languages. English is an alphabetic language, its words composed of letters, and Chinese is a logographic language, with each character constituting a word, morpheme, or speech sound. As displayed in *Metamorphoses*, English is conventionally written in horizontal rows and read from left to right, whereas Chinese traditionally has been written in vertical columns and read from right to left (although much modern Chinese is now, like English, written in horizontal columns and read from left to right).

*Metamorphoses* presents the two pseudo-languages in a balanced and symmetrical fashion, but awareness of Gu’s ethnicity and heritage encourages the viewer to discern additional signifiers of Chinese tradition in the work. The suspended panels, for example, suggest the hanging scroll of silk or rice paper commonly used as a format for Chinese calligraphy and painting. Many who have written about Gu’s art have gone further, likening the strands of dark hair in panels such as these to the strokes of ink in Chinese painting and calligraphy. Additionally, Xiaoneng Yang has pointed out that hair is central to the creation of both traditional Chinese ink art and the unconventional art of



**Fig. 4, at left**  
Detail of *Metamorphoses*,  
right panel. Photo by  
Robert Hickerson

Wenda Gu, with the former achieved through the use of brushes made of animal hair and the latter made directly of human hair.<sup>27</sup> Finally, a more general connection in traditional Chinese thought between handwriting and the body (albeit not hair per se) may be noted: Chinese writers have routinely used bodily metaphors in appreciating and assessing calligraphy, describing characters as possessing such qualities as bone, sinew, and flesh and blood, and they have understood calligraphy as a physical extension of the writer’s body.<sup>28</sup> In Gu’s *Metamorphoses*, a bodily substance becomes writing, bringing this idea full circle. And yet, in Gu’s work the traditional Chinese graphological conception that an individual’s writing reveals his or her personality or physical appearance is lost in the anonymity of the “silent selves” whose hair has been shaped into letters and characters by Gu’s assistants.

In explaining the Spencer's work, Gu himself emphasizes the transformation of the presented languages into unreadable forms and their combination in the center into a synthesized character, which for him represents the meeting of different cultures that, through miscommunication and misunderstanding, creates something new and unexpected, and, as he writes generally of his use of pseudo-languages, "repositions us in an unprecedented, unknown world."<sup>29</sup> In an e-mail excerpt, presented here unedited (in lowercase letters—Gu's customary style—and without altering the artist's imperfect English), Gu writes of *Metamorphoses*:

the chinese and english on 2 hair penals remain the original forms of the languages but they convey no meaning. actually the symbolic meaning of those english and chinese on the hair penals are otherwise, especially when different cultures meet. one culture cannot be translated into other culture without misunderstandings, predicaments, confrontation. but the bottom line is no matter how defficult and how exotic when different cultures meet, the outcome is something different. this is showed in the third penal which is the conbination of english and chinese. i call it metamorphoses.<sup>30</sup>

As an additional symbol of cultural confusion, Gu notes that the hair in the pseudo-English panel—which is noticeably darker than that in the center and right panels—is Chinese, whereas the hair that forms the pseudo-Chinese is Caucasian (implicitly, white American), confounding the expected link between nationality and language.<sup>31</sup> Appropriately, the character in the center panel is made of mixed Chinese and American hair.<sup>32</sup>

*Metamorphoses* in many ways reflects key elements of Wenda Gu's own professional and life experience. Its inclusion of pseudo-seal script recalls his earliest avant-garde experiments with language in China in the 1980s; its presentation of pseudo-English evokes his initial encounter and continuing difficulties with the new language he adopted after coming to the United States; its medium and format links it with the artist's tremendously successful *united nations* series; and its fabrication by studio assistants speaks to Gu's present economic success in the art world. Since the late 1990s, with the rapid rise of the domestic Chinese contemporary art market and mounting recognition of his work in his native country, Gu has spent increasing amounts of time in China, and he now divides his year between bases in Brooklyn and Shanghai. The oscillation between pseudo-English and pseudo-Chinese set up by their juxtaposition in *Metamorphoses* speaks to Gu's constant physical travel between his adopted and native countries (where he is known, respectively, as Wenda Gu and Gu Wenda, his very name metamorphosed), his frequent switching between their languages, and his everyday encounters with misunderstandings brought on by the difficulties of translation. Just as Gu's own being now merges Chinese and American culture and the Chinese and English languages, so too does this art, especially in its central hybrid character. But beyond its relevance to Gu's own experience, *Metamorphoses* invites us all to ponder the relationship between language and culture, communication and miscommunication, and to consider Gu's claim that "human knowledge is always secondary to the body."<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

- 1 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hair> (accessed 8 January 2009).
- 2 For studies of the social aspects of hair in various Asian contexts, see Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara D. Miller, eds., *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
- 3 On Japanese Buddhist embroideries, see Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, "Bodily Gift and Spiritual Pledge: Human Hair in Japanese Buddhist Embroideries," *Orientalia* 35, no. 1 (January–February 2004): 31–35. On Victorian hair jewelry, see Helen Sheumaker, *Love Entwined: The Curious History of Hairwork in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
- 4 On depictions of hair and its varied meanings in Western art and visual culture since the Renaissance, see Penny Howell Jolly et al., *Hair: Untangling a Social History* (Saratoga Springs, New York: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 2004).
- 5 For a survey of the *united nations* series to date, see David Cateforis, "'The Work is Not Finished': Wenda Gu's *united nations* series and the Dartmouth Monuments," in *Wenda Gu at Dartmouth: The Art of Installation* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in association with University Press of New England, 2008), 63–85.
- 6 The spacing between the parallel strands of twine ranges from approximately 18 to 20 cm. To make a panel like the ones comprising *Metamorphoses*, Gu's assistants lay down the lengths of supporting twine on a sheet of plastic the size of the desired panel, press hair into white glue to compose the panel, then press another sheet of plastic over the top. The plastic sheets are removed after the glue has dried, resulting in a stiff yet delicate and semitransparent panel, full of open spaces between the glue-stiffened strands and clumps of hair.
- 7 Gu has specified that the hair panels should be hung so that their centers are at eye level and the panels extend from the wall about "half a foot or so." Wenda Gu, e-mail to the author, 30 March 2005. As presently installed in the Spencer (January 2009), the panels hang about 12 cm away from the wall and 86 cm above the floor.
- 8 The name "'85 Art Movement" was coined by the critic and curator Gao Minglu. For a concise and accessible introduction to Chinese contemporary art, on which there is now a substantial literature in English, see Britta Erickson, "A Fleeting Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Art," in her *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (Stanford, California: Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, 2005), 10–31.



- 9 Within a few centuries of its imposition by the Qin emperor, seal script was supplanted by more modern forms of writing (still in use today) and was largely reserved for use in decorative engravings and carved identity seals (hence its English name). For a concise introduction to the development of Chinese script styles, see Shen C. Y. Fu, "A Brief History of Chinese Calligraphy," in Gordon S. Barrass, *The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China* (London: The British Museum Press, 2002), 19.
- 10 Wenda Gu quoted in Wang Ying and Yan Sun, "An Interview with Wenda Gu," trans. Yan Sun, in Wang Ying and Yan Sun, *Reinventing Tradition in a New World: The Arts of Gu Wenda, Wang Mansheng, Xu Bing and Zhang Hongtu* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Schmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College, 2004), 24.
- 11 Wenda Gu interviewed by Yan Zhou, Brooklyn, New York, 30 March 2002, quoted in Yan Zhou, "The Centrality of Culture in Art: The Contemporary Challenge to Chinese Artists, Particularly Wenda Gu" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2005), 120.
- 12 Michel Nuridsany, *China Art Now* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 87.
- 13 Gu quoted in Wang and Sun, "An Interview with Wenda Gu," 24.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Wenda Gu, "face the new millennium: the divine comedy of our times," in Mark H. C. Bessire, ed., *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 35.
- 17 Ibid., 36.
- 18 Wenda Gu quoted in Linda Weintraub, *In the Making: Creative Options for Contemporary Art* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2003), 295. On the *Oedipus Refound* series see Zhou Yan, "Wenda Gu's Oedipus," in *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1993), 20–23.
- 19 Gu, "face the new millennium," 38.
- 20 Gu "face the new millennium," 39.
- 21 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 10, quoted in Regan Golden-McNerney, "A Home of Hair: Abjection and Wenda Gu's *china monument: temple of heaven*," in Wang and Sun, *Reinventing Tradition in a New World*, 15.
- 22 Christine Ross, "The Paradoxical Bodies of Contemporary Art," in Amelia Jones, ed., *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 391.
- 23 Gu, "face the new millennium," 37.
- 24 Wenda Gu quoted in Lucinda Breeding, "Gallery Gazing: Midwinter Exhibits Offer Plenty of Variety for Local Art Enthusiasts," *Denton* (Texas) *Record-Chronicle*, 23 January 2003.
- 25 Wenda Gu in conversation with the author, 6 June 2007.
- 26 I thank my colleague Amy McNair for this observation regarding the suitability of hair for the creation of seal-script-style characters.

- 27 Xiaoneng Yang, "New with Old: Gu Wenda's Art and Chinese Traditions," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2, no. 4 (December 2003): 15.
- 28 See Yueping Yen, *Calligraphy and Social Power in Contemporary Chinese Society* (London: Routledge, 2005), 75–80.
- 29 Gu, "face the new millennium," 39.
- 30 Wenda Gu, e-mail to the author, 29 March 2005.
- 31 Wenda Gu, e-mail to the author, 21 August 2006.
- 32 Wenda Gu, e-mail to the author, 15 January 2009.
- 33 Gu, "face the new millennium," 34.

## About the Author

David Cateforis is associate professor of art history at the University of Kansas, where he teaches American, modern, and contemporary art. His writings on Wenda Gu have appeared in several journals and in the books *Wenda Gu: Art From Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*; *Translating Visuality – Wenda Gu: Forest of Stone Steles, Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry*; and *Wenda Gu at Dartmouth: The Art of Installation*.