

On the Enigmatic: "Proliferating Books" and Their Verso, the "Signifying Power of Writing"

USUDA Shoji

"The Library of Babel"—Characters / Books / Media
September 18—October 25, 1998
ICC Gallery A

The recent ICC exhibit, *"The Library of Babel"—Characters/Books/Media*, was an exploration of the modern state of libraries and literature, as well as the magnificent vitality that words themselves possess.

The exhibit was inspired by Jorge Luis BORGES's short story, *The Library of Babel*. BORGES's library is a honeycomb structure of hexagonal rooms, stretching infinitely in every direction, just as its biblical namesake reached infinitely towards heaven. Each hexagonal room houses twenty identical bookshelves. The literature enshrined, however, proves incomprehensible—limitless combinations of twenty-five orthographic symbols. An attempt to comprehend this scene ends in the uneasy suspicion that we have wandered into a labyrinth, and are now helpless to do anything but cower before the surging flood of words rushing towards us.

The ICC exhibit featured four artists. YAMAGUCHI Katsuhiro, who has been working with video since the 1970s, contributed «The Invention of Morel», a video installation. The observer is bombarded with multiple images from world history and from the lives of people around the globe. Simultaneously, the observer's own image is captured by a hidden camera and projected to interact with the others. One can think of a library as an embodiment of all of human history and knowledge. YAMAGUCHI's observer, in effect, becomes part of this library of humankind.

Architect SUZUKI Ryoji contributed an L-shaped corridor entitled «Experience in Material No.39—BIBLIOTECA». The columns are reminiscent of a Greek temple, but on closer examination, one realizes that, with a subtle shift in coordinates, SUZUKI has created an optical illusion. The structure is a Klein bottle, folding endlessly back on itself—SUZUKI's characteristic interpretation of BORGES's infinite world.

The library was born with man's invention of writing; the very first, which stood in ancient Babylonia, was the setting for NAKAJIMA Atsushi's short story, *Mojika* (The calamity of writing). The Babylonian library was stocked with heavy clay tablets of bearing cuneiform script, for in ancient times, as now, it was in the written word that the library's existence was rooted. Written documents have paramount importance there. It was thus with renewed fascination concerning the significance of the written word that I turned towards the



YAMAGUCHI Katsuhiro *The Invention of Morel* 1991,1998
A Video Sculpture composed of 12 television monitors, 6 video decks, 10 acrylic columns, 1switcheer, and 2 speakers
318×450×227cm



KOHMURA Masao *Non-Word Dictionary (Katakana Version), Non-Word Dictionary (Hiragana Version), Non-Word Dictionary (Chinese Character Version), Five Chinese Character poem Catalogue, Chinese Character Four Word Composite Catalogue "Matter is void. All is Vanity."* The Haiku Catalogue

work of KOHMURA Masao and XU Bing. KOHMURA Masao has been using computers to explore the written word since the early 1980s. In this exhibition, he presented «Chinese Character Four Word Composite Catalogue», in which common combinations of *kanji* (Chinese characters) are projected onto the floor, while a voice simultaneously reads them out loud. At first glance, any literate Japanese would recognize the meaning of the characters he projects. As one stares, however, the characters are switched around, forming nonsensical, meaningless combinations. KOHMURA's work on display also includes books that the visitor may examine: dictionaries, as well as five collections of poetry and «The Haiku Catalogue»—a glossary of seasonal words used in *haiku*. On closer observation, these books also prove chaotic and meaningless. The dictionaries are entitled «The Non-Word Dictionary»; the poetry collections «Five Chinese Character Poem Catalogue» are an endless expanses of meaningless garble, reminiscent of a book described in BORGES's work, its pages filled with, "leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency." What is most amazing, perhaps, is that even recognizing it to be cacophony, verbal nonsense, one cannot help looking for meaning within the chaos—a reflection, perhaps, of how strongly humans are colored by the signifying effect of our culture.

XU Bing's «A Book from the Sky» (book and installation) further spotlights this laughable human tendency. XU shows us what appears, at a casual glance, to be *kanji*. Under closer examination, however, they prove to be nothing of the kind. His *kanji* impersonators are rendered in combinations of the letters of the alphabet.

The vast system of *kanji* used by the Chinese and Japanese today was formed under several generative principles. For instance, two basic characters might be combined in a new character whose meaning is taken from both. [Combining the characters for *sun* 日 and *moon* 月 produced the character 明 meaning "bright."—Trans.] The most widely used principle, however, was to combine a basic character with the same pronunciation as the word in question with another that suggests its semantic connections. Thus, the character for *river* 河 consists of a character 可 meaning "can" that is a homonym for *river* and the character for *water*

水. Applying these and other principles can produce almost infinite possible combinations.

XU goes beyond those principles to absorb the alphabet into the mixture. The resulting universe of imaginary *kanji* he creates by combining letters of the alphabet has opened my eyes to the massive creative potential that lies within *kanji*. It is no wonder that Sergei EISENSTEIN expressed his fascination with the composition of *kanji* in the essay "The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram."

Finally, this exhibit as a whole led me to think upon the fate of the library as we know it. The deluge of comic books and the rise of new media such as the electronic book daily erode the library's goal of becoming the definitive literary space encompassing encyclopedic knowledge. BORGES's library is not simply a fairy tale of meaningless chaos. The chaotic library he describes is reminiscent of the biblical story of Babel, in which humanity is deprived of a common language. In turn, the chaotic world of disparate languages that mankind was thrown into seems an allegory for the chaotic state of knowledge today—infinite fecund, profoundly divided. KOHMURA especially, I felt, poignantly examined knowledge's auto-deconstruction, this state of confusion in which we find ourselves.

USUDA Shoji

Born 1943. Employed by a publishing company; primarily known for writing on typography, the culture of the written word and book design. Editor of *Nihon no Bukku Dezain 1946-95* [Book Design in Japan, 1946-1995] (Ginza Graphics Gallery).



SUZUKI Ryoji Experience in Material No.39-Biblioteca 1998
Installation 396×1406×220cm



XU Bing A Book from the Sky 1991
Four volumes of woodblock prints, wooder box
46×30cm (60x 49.2×33.7×9.5cm)
photo: SAKURAI Tadahisa