

Written Response: Between Meaning and Experience

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Introduction

In this term, I continued my exploration of words and definitions, but I shifted my focus from “words” to a more basic symbol — “A”.

I chose the letter “A” as my starting point because it is the first letter of the twenty-six letters, symbolising the beginning of language and words.

In children’s education, “A is for Apple” seems to be a universal way for learning. But I started with a question: does “A” always mean “apple” for everyone? As people grow older and gain different experiences and social backgrounds, do they give “A” other meanings?



With this question, I interviewed twenty people from different age groups and created a personal “A card” for each of them. Each card features the letter “A” in a different typeface at the top left, alongside the participant’s response, with my illustration interpreting their answer as the main image. The results revealed that younger participants tend to form visual associations, while older participants related it to life experiences and emotions. This difference makes me realize that the meaning of language is not born naturally, it is built through layers of social experience.

Xu Bing’s *<Book from the Sky>* provides an extreme reference for this question.

By creating thousands of fake Chinese characters, Xu constructed a book that appears authentic yet is entirely unreadable — a language that exists in form but collapses in meaning.

I refer to this work because it visualises a state of linguistic failure: the characters look familiar but are deliberately detached from meaning.

It makes me question again whether the meaning of language truly comes from what it conveys, or from the human experiences that give it life.

Analysis of <Book from the Sky>

Xu Bing's <Book from the Sky> is a conceptual artwork centred on the failure of language. The artist hand-carved more than four thousand fake Chinese characters and printed them using traditional woodblock techniques. The characters were arranged into scrolls, books, and hanging banners that covered the exhibition space. When viewers entered the room, they experienced something both familiar and strange: the characters followed all the rules of Chinese writing, but when people tried to read them, they had no meaning at all.



This “visible but unreadable” state exposes a gap between form and meaning. Xu Bing did not destroy language directly; instead, through precise imitation, he made the emptiness of the symbols visible. Language, which is usually a tool for communication and knowledge, loses its function in <Book from the Sky>. What remains is only the beauty of the form and the empty shell of cultural authority.

The work questions whether language can still exist when it is separated from experience and understanding. Xu turns the collapse of language into a visible experience, reminding us that meaning is not a fixed property of words but something constantly produced by shared human experience.

Tension and Comparison with My Project

In <Book from the Sky>, Xu Bing constructs a fictional language that appears real but cannot be read, allowing meaning to collapse instantly.

My project, however, approaches the same question from another direction. I do not invent new symbols, instead, I re-examine the letter we already know.

When I asked people of different ages, “What is A?”, their answers ranged from simple visual associations to emotional and personal responses — for example, children related “A” to the pointed shape of a roof, while adults described it as a symbol of achievement, hierarchy, or

identity, recalling moments such as school rankings or job titles.

If Xu Bing shows a sudden breakdown of meaning through an imagined language, my work observes how this breakdown unfolds slowly in everyday life.

In form, *<Book from the Sky>* is unitive: although the characters vary in shape, they collectively create a calm, coherent system. The scale and repetition of these unreadable characters give the work a sense of unity and weight, as if all the pieces gather to express one idea.

By contrast, my project are separated and individual, each reflects the experience of one person. As the project developed, I let the images on these cards gradually blur, fade, and break apart, it is a visual process of losing meaning, showing how language becomes hollow when human experience is removed.



Xu Bing's act of "fake words" represents a complete emptying of language's meaning, while my approach of "blurring" explores how meaning slowly fades as experience disappears. Furthermore, Xu Bing's work is rooted in the collective ideology of his time, my research focuses on the fragmented language experiences of individuals in nowadays society. The tension between our works lies in these different understandings of break in language: Xu Bing shows how language collapses through too much form, while I show how it slowly fades as experience disappears. Both paths return to the same question — when meaning is no longer shared, does language still have value?

Reflection and New Questions

Through this thinking with Xu Bing's *<Book from the Sky>*, I have come to see language, experience, and meaning from a new perspective.

<Book from the Sky> presents an extreme moment where language exists in form but fails in meaning, while my A card project focuses on how this failure slowly happens in real life. By observing how people of different ages interpret the letter "A," I realise that meaning is recreated through use, forgetting, and reinterpretation.

The disappearance of meaning is not an end — it can also be a kind of reset, bringing language back to the origin of perception and experience. Here, perception means how we first sense language — by seeing, hearing, or touching it — before we understand what it means. Experience is the collection of our memories, emotions, and social backgrounds that shape how we give meaning to words. When perception and experience come together, language becomes more than communication, it becomes a reflection of how we live and feel.

This reflection opens new questions for me: When language loses its educational and social systems, can it still be learned? If there is no shared interpretation, can people still connect through words? Perhaps the value of language does not lie in expressing meaning but in its endless ability to make us search for it. This may become a possible direction for my next stage of research — to explore how language, through cycles of loss and rediscovery, continues to create new forms of understanding and connection.