Persistence | Transformation
Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing

Edited by Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C.Y. Ching

P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art
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he use of words, text, or Chinese characters in contemporary
Asian art raises a number of critical issues concerning the purported
function of language as signifier, and by extension its role as a means of
communication in speech or writing. The work of Xu Bing not only
addresses these questions, but also probes into the heart of language’s
cultural iconicity and its inherent connection to national patrimony.
Xu’s invented characters have vividly revealed the inextricable linking
of language, culture, and Chinese national identity. And whether it
is read as a gesture of political opposition or a loving (perhaps even
nostalgic) paean to generations of Chinese artisanal production, Xu’s
work demonstrates how rich language is as a site of critical inquiry for
contemporary visual artists in Asia.

This can certainly be said of artists working in other parts of Asia
as well. I am thinking in particular of two contemporary Japanese
women: Ichihara Hiroko (b. 1963) and Hirabayashi Kaoru (b. 1955),
both of whom work with words and text, but in different ways from
Xu Bing and from one another. By addressing aspects of “word art” or
“language art” in Japan, I hope to bring additional questions to bear on
this discussion, such as the tension between the iconicity and hybridity
of language, the gendered nature of language, the visual expressiveness
of language as form, and the commodification of words and text in a
modern consumer society.

Ichihara Hiroko is a self-described “language artist” who approaches
her work conceptually, that is to say, as texts that are simultaneously
poetry and akin to advertising copy. She is heir both to conceptual
word art by American women, such as that of Barbara Kruger and
Jenny Holzer, and to the work of generations of Japanese women poets
writing in the short poem or tanka form spanning the period from
the immortal poet Ono no Komachi to the contemporary poetry pop
icon Tawara Machi.

Hirabayashi Kaoru, on the other hand, is a painter and studio artist
who over the past decade and a half has produced numerous museum
and gallery installations of the Japanese phonetic syllabaries hiragana
and *katakana*, alone or together with series of Chinese characters. She renders them in low relief or as sculptural multimedia forms with evocatively painted surfaces. Her well-known *51 Sounds* series, referring to the fifty-one Japanese phonetic syllables, displays letter forms worked into a visceral, emotive exultation of language and its constituent elements.

Ichihara’s characters are mechanically produced and standardized in form, referring to commercial art and typographic design; Hirabayashi’s are painterly and expressive, drawing from calligraphic traditions, gestural abstraction, and the experimentations with language and iconic symbols in the work of Pop art figures like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Ichihara implicitly interrogates the commodification of language, while Hirabayashi fetishizes the historical imbrications of language by objectifying characters and syllables. How can the work of these seemingly disparate artists inform each other? Or for that matter help to elucidate the art of Xu Bing?

First, to fully understand the multiple linguistic registers in which Ichihara’s and Hirabayashi’s works function and the depth of their interrogation of language, viewers must be conversant in Japanese and know the various cultural resonances of the language. Those unfamiliar with the language—for example, viewers in Europe and America, for whom the linguistic meaning of Asian language art work is largely inaccessible—generally appreciate the work in formal terms, tending to exoticize the linguistic elements as alluring semiotic signs for Asianness and otherness. Non-Western artists exhibiting language art in an international cultural context are often keenly aware of this process of exoticization, which is certainly not limited to language-related projects; they even rely to some extent on this symbolic “native” association to stand out in a competitive global art market that demands commodifiable expressions of individual and national identity. In this sense, the work always exists in a matrix of insider/outside, Western/non-Western identity politics, subject to radically different readings depending on the context of viewership.

THE HYBRIDITY OF LANGUAGE

Ichihara’s and Hirabayashi’s work particularly draws on the visual and linguistic hybridity of the Japanese language. What do I mean by the hybridity of language? I am referring to the amalgamation of
distinct modes of linguistic expression into Japanese that have been continuously transforming the language since its inception. This began with the superimposition of Chinese-derived characters (kanji) and words (kango) onto a pre-existing native Japanese oral language beginning in the fifth century. As the Japanese shifted from orality to literacy, their language was further hybridized by the creation of two phonetic syllabaries (kana) known as katakana and hiragana to represent better the polysyllabic and inflected nature of spoken Japanese. These kana were invented in the eighth century and standardized over the course of the ninth. The first kana syllabary, katakana, is derived from a simplification of one part of a single kanji—one that had the same phonetic reading. And the second syllabary, hiragana, was a simplified visualization of the entire kanji character that also had a phonetic reading corresponding to the designated syllable.

More importantly, in the early stages of the development of the Japanese written language, a linguistic duality emerged between the Japanese and the Chinese, the often mentioned “wakan dialectic.” Because of their association with China, Sino-Japanese words (words of Chinese origin), referred to as kango (for speech) and kanbun (for written text), were perceived as “other” and accorded special status. Kango and kanbun were the official modes of communication for Japanese state and religious activity, and almost exclusively the preserve of men. Kana, on the other hand, which better enabled the written expression of Japanese spoken language, was associated more with native culture and became the preferred mode of expression for informal or vernacular writing, and, importantly for our discussion, was considered the appropriate linguistic mode for women. This early gendering of writing and speech is a third issue to which I will return.

The hybridization of the Japanese language certainly did not stop in the ninth century, but the locus of alterity in linguistic importation has gradually shifted over time to Euro-America, and more specifically to English in the postwar period when Japan came under the cultural suasion of American occupation forces and post-occupation Cold War geopolitical realities. Although no language is ever pure, and the process of hybridization quickly naturalizes linguistic imports, perception of linguistic alterity or otherness undoubtedly still persists (even if just in traces). From the nineteenth century onward, foreign loan words (gairigo) have largely come to be rendered in the katakana phonetic syllabary, which marks their otherness, or they are written directly with Roman letters (romaji). But rather than representing
something alienating, the otherness of these language forms instead curiously provides additional linguistic registers through which Japanese users can mark their texts, which are often employed to great effect. In the modern period, this is evident in all areas of linguistic production, but perhaps most vividly in the public commercial spheres of publishing and advertising, with no better visual expression of this cacophonous linguistic hybrid than the signage at the so-called scramble intersection in front of Shibuya station in Tokyo.

The strategic deployment of katakana and words in the Roman alphabet has been used to produce a metalevel of visual and textual expression through the trace resonance of their alterity, which has now come to function as a means of expressing emphasis akin to italics or bold-face.

This fact is certainly not lost on Japanese commercial advertisers, who have been playing with the multiple linguistic registers and graphical mutability of the Japanese language for over a century in popular design forms exemplified by the match box covers advertising cafes, bars, beer halls, and jazz drinking joints produced from the 1920s on, where even the Japanese word for Japan was rendered in multiple modes as “Nippon” and “Japon” in katakana and romanization.

One more recent example that similarly demonstrates the use of linguistic alterity to mark written expression is a series of advertising campaigns mounted by the Japanese National Railways (previously Kokutetsu, now JR) to spur domestic tourism within Japan. The first campaign, mounted in the 1970s, was called “Jisukabā Japān” (Discover Japan) and the other, following the success of the first, ran in 1984 under the copy “Ekuzochikku Japān” (Exotic Japan). In both, the name of the country was rendered in English, the first written in romanization and the second in katakana, as if they were foreign words, defamiliarizing the Japanese consumer with his/her own culture in the hopes of spurring a happy (and potentially profitable) reintroduction.²

Ichihara Hiroko’s training in the visual design course at the Kyoto College of Art and her continuing work in the design field have greatly sensitized her to the promotional impact of katakana text. It is not coincidental, then, that she writes her name in the katakana syllabary (Fig. 1), including her signature. This allows her to construct an identity, or at least a professional public persona, that is akin to a commodity and equally depersonalized, a point that she has underscored by copyrighting her katakana signature like a brand name. Certainly Ichihara is not the first person in Japan to spell out
Figure 1
"Ichihara Hiroko" written in katakana.
Photo: Ichihara Hiroko.

Figure 2
Hirabayashi Kaoru (1955–), 51 Sounds—
his/her name this way, and for the past ten years or so there has been a trend among younger Japanese to render their given names in katakana or hiragana and not kanji. But the move to render her entire name, including her family name, in katakana is still rather unusual. It essentially makes her unidentifiable by conventional means, since one is unable to look her up by her characters.

Skillfully marking her texts through a careful choreography of linguistic modes, Ichihara moves seamlessly between popular culture and the world of high art, often humorously referencing such international pop icons as Madonna, as seen in her sardonic text “not like a virgin” (bājin ni, mienai yōî). And the strategic use of katakana text enables her to render the most banal, mundane linguistic conventions like “sumimasen” (excuse me) strange—a matter which she further complicates by inverting two syllables to produce “sumamisen,” prompting the viewer to do a double take just to be sure he/she has not misread the text.

Hirabayashi’s work approaches the issue of hybridity through layers of history. She is fascinated by the duality of Japanese linguistic identity, its multiple modes of naming—Chinese ideographic or pictographic characters and the phonetic syllabaries of hiragana and katakana (and, of course, the derivation of the latter from the former). In her 1988 wall installation 51 Sounds—Doors (Fig. 2) she displays evenly spaced rows of monochromatic linguistic symbols carved in low relief. The vertical rows represent the modern Japanese phonetic equivalent to the Roman alphabet a, b, c, ordering the hiragana sounds “a, i, u, e, o, ka, ki, ku, ke, ko,” and so on. I should mention that, despite the fact that there are usually considered to be forty-six distinct phonetic sounds in Japanese, Hirabayashi has decided to fill in the missing syllables in her alphabet with the correlate vowel sounds; so, for example, where there is only “ya, yu, yo” she shows “ya, i, yu, e, yo.” While she has not discussed her rationale for doing this, one plausible explanation is that it simply enables her to maintain the aural rhythm of the alphabet reading through to the final sound of “n.”

Hirabayashi’s roughly worked painterly surfaces reveal three levels of linguistic and visual imagery. First is the hiragana syllabary, whose edges protrude out of the boxes to the left, creating an easily recognizable profile. To the right of them are the original kanji characters with the matching phonetic readings from which they were derived. Etched over these images are pictures, the names of which begin with the represented sound but do not correlate with the
meaning of the characters and were chosen either because of the image evoked by the sound in the artist's imagination or entirely at random. So the sound “ka” sits next to its correlate character, and overlaid on the hiragana is the image of a striking match that has ignited a fire on the kanji to evoke the word for fire (kaji, Fig. 3). Or the sound “to” is placed next to the image for a door (read “to”) that nearly effaces the character below. Hirabayashi returned to this format three years later in the project 51 Sounds—Cut Outs from 1991 (Fig. 4), where she displays staggered rows of monochromatic hiragana syllables carved in an expressive calligraphic style. Here Hirabayashi bypasses the kanji (the pictographic representation) and goes straight to the figurative. So we see a bug crawling over the syllable “mu” to evoke the Japanese word for “mushi” (bug). Eyeglasses (or megane) pop out of the middle of the kana for “me” (eye), and so forth.

The artist's abiding interest in the dual relationship between kanji and kana undoubtedly relates to an enduring locus of Japanese identity in classical imperial culture. The emergence of Japanese writing and composition in the hiragana syllabary is particularly identified with the Heian period of Japanese history, which began in 794 when the imperial capital first moved to the city of Kyoto (Heian-kyo at the time) and continued until the outbreak of civil wars in 1185. Starting with emerging schools of nativist studies in the eighteenth century, whose emphasis on Japanese learning (kokugaku) over Chinese learning was concretized in the reordering of the national academic canon under the Meiji nation-state in the nineteenth century, the Heian period has come to be considered in Japan and abroad as the apogee of classical Japanese imperial culture. This is the period of the production of The Tale of Genji, The Pillow Book, and numerous illustrated vernacular narrative or poetic handscrolls. These texts, as well as the textual selections on the handscrolls, were largely written in the Japanese phonetic syllabary as opposed to Chinese-derived kanji, which were more generally employed in official state and religious documents or in the writing of Chinese poetic texts. The Heian period is thus now identified as a locus of essential Japanese-ness because it is taught in school as a period when the Japanese began to assert their cultural independence from China and saw the full efflorescence of so-called native culture. In the modern Japanese collective imagination, the Japanese phonetic syllabaries are therefore icons of native identity vis-à-vis the continental culture of China. As a linguistic totality combining kanji and kana, the Japanese language is an
Figure 3

Figure 4
ison of Asian identity vis-à-vis the West. So depending on the context of production and reception, Hirabayashi’s work can express alterity, hybridity, and/or iconicity.

It is curious, then, that Ichihara has also chosen a linguistic form related to the short poem, the tanka (or waka), whose roots date back to the classical period; but she has put a very contemporary twist on the form, referring as much to corporate advertising jingles as to tenth-century poetry. And the content of her rhythmical texts are more feminist political commentary than dreamy aesthetic ruminations, as clearly demonstrated by the text chosen as the title of her 1999 book Push Your Way through the Crowd, Hurry up and Come to Me, Prince Charming! (Kono hitogomi o oshiwakete, hayaku kiyagare, oojisama)\(^5\) (Fig. 5). But I’m getting ahead of myself now. Back to Hirabayashi for a moment.

Hirabayashi’s two works from the 51 Sounds series from 1991, Chinese Characters III and Hiragana III, are twins. They are once again lined up in vertical alphabetical rows with the Chinese characters on the left mirroring the sounds of the hiragana, like the so-called “manyōgana” kanji that were used strictly for their phonetic readings. These two works are then brought face to face in 51 Sounds Dialogue II (Fig. 6) from the same year. They somewhat awkwardly face one another and represent Japanese linguistic doubles.

Hirabayashi’s multimedia installations open up the representational field even more by focusing on the correspondences between figurative images, their Chinese pictographic characters, and the Japanese phonetic sounds that constitute the figures’ spoken names. For the 1986 Indian Triennale and again in 1989 for the exhibition “Against Nature” at New York University’s Grey Gallery, she created installations entitled The Horary Signs that displayed the twelve pictorial symbols of the Asian zodiac (Fig. 7). Directly on top of the figures are the readings of their names in dynamically rendered hiragana; their corresponding kanji are written in a more austere regular script below on the wall and are simultaneously laid out on a round sundial-like table in the center of the room, perhaps a chart for astrological divination. On the wall, the figure of the tiger reads “tora,” two rabbits read “usagi,” the sheep or ram reads “hitsuji,” and two monkeys perched and hanging from a tree read “sar,” with the “ru” syllable humorously doubling for the monkey’s tail.\(^6\) The kanji below read the year names “ne, ushi, toru, ur, tatsu, mi, uma, hitsuji, saru, tori, inu.” The circular ordering of the figures that appear to fly through the air evokes
Figure 5
Ichihara Hiroko (1963–), book cover, 
_Push Your Way through the Crowd, Hurry up and Come to Me, Prince Charming!_ (Kono hitogomi o oshiawake, hayaku kiyagare, oojisama!) (Tokyo: Ariadone Kikaku, 1999). Photo: John Blazejewski.

Figure 6 (opposite)

Figure 7 (opposite, bottom)

イチハラヒロコ
Hiroko Ichihara
Figure 8
Hirabayashi Kaoru (1955–), a,i,u,e,o—

Figure 9
Hirabayashi Kaoru (1955–), 51 Sounds
Printing Machine Kanji and Hiragana,
images of traditional Japanese andon lanterns that consist of washi paper on wooden frames and could project figurative images or geometric patterns around the room like magic lanterns. Hirabayashi deliberately chooses symbolic imagery associated with folkish or traditional themes that, in the artist's words, will "link up with one's nostalgia."7

GENDERED LANGUAGE

The "wakan" (Japanese-Chinese) dialectical origins of the Japanese language raise another critical issue: the gendering of language in writing and speech (which I have already briefly mentioned). According to linguists, Sino-Japanese kango words were used almost exclusively by the Japanese elite male population; they were considered "harsh and less elegant and did not fit the cultural norm of ideal womanhood."8 Hence, a female counterpart to kango was formed; known as "women's speech" (nyōbo kotoba), it was written in kana and employed more words derived from native Japanese. The Tale of Genji is a prime example of vernacular literature using women's speech. Scholars have noted that over time elite and bourgeois Japanese women have inherited this women's speech, even today considering it more feminine and appropriate for their use.9 Hence, the linguistic gender divisions marked in the classical period persist in various ways in contemporary women's speech.10

Kanji are clearly coded male in Hirabayashi's works, and kana female, as seen in several bifurcated images like a,i,u,e,o—Box from 1984 (Fig. 8). This work shows two figures, male and female, who appear to be springing forth from linguistically constructed boxes—or perhaps they are being interred in linguistic coffins? The characters and kana syllables literally constitute the figures, but it is unclear whether they are emerging or disintegrating.

In some of Hirabayashi's images, like 51 Sounds Printing Machine Kanji and Hiragana from 1986 (Fig. 9), male and female figures stand beside or above their linguistic correlates with additional letter forms etched onto their simply rendered silhouettes. Language stands both outside the body and is stamped directly onto the body. It is an external construct and yet constitutes gendered identity for Japanese men and women.

The chaotic nature of 51 Sounds: A Man and a Woman, where the linguistic forms appear to be falling out of their frames, clearly
speaks of disintegration, either in the sphere of communication or in the linguistic construction of gender identity (although the latter seems unlikely since the kanji and kana do not migrate across boxes). The flat outlines of figures in Dialogue 1 (1986) are barely perceptible under the kanji and kana, and they appear inundated by the weight of the language itself. And while Hirabayashi labels some of her pieces “Dialogue,” the division between the sides does not seem traversable.

The issue of gender is intrinsic to Ichihara’s work. Many of her texts are self-consciously concerned with male-female relationships, mostly expressed from the woman’s perspective. Her large-scale text project, Sorry, Honey (Gomen ne, Dārin) (Fig. 10), which was displayed on an electronic screen in the popular Harajuku shopping area in Tokyo in 1991, refers obliquely to a relationship while also exploring a repeated theme in the artist’s texts—the profound disappointment of women’s expectations in their relationships with men. Yet she also reveals their inability to relinquish these expectations, as women look to men for validation and to achieve social acceptance, a point expressed by a number of the artist’s texts, including the title of her 1994 solo exhibition at Art Tower Mito, Ask Him about Me (Watashi no Koto wa Kare ni Kiite).

The artist’s book title mentioned earlier, Push Your Way through the Crowd, Hurry up and Come to Me, Prince Charming!, refers to the conventional notion that every woman waits for the moment when she will meet “Mr. Right” and live happily ever after. In Japan, a heavy emphasis is placed on marriage as a woman’s primary social goal, without much examination of the psychic toll of this intense social pressure. The anxiety over marriage looms large in Ichihara’s texts; in one, “I want to get married, I want to get married....” is repeated like a mantra (Fig. 11).

The deeply personal nature of Ichihara’s texts sharply contrasts with the rather antiseptic and anonymous quality of the standard Gothic typeface that she employs. One wonders, is the speaker Ichihara herself? Or are the statements meant to imply general truisms addressing a common condition among Japanese women, perhaps more like the aphorisms of Jenny Holzer? Does Ichihara want the viewer to re-evaluate his/her own complicity in the status of women in society? How can one avoid some degree of self-examination when directly addressed by these poignant and often heartbreakingly humorous voices?
Figure 10

Figure 11
Ichihara Hiroko (1963–), *I Want to Get Married, I Want to Get Married... (Kekkon shitai, Kekkon shitai...)*. Photo: John Blazejewski, after Ichihara Hiroko, *Push Your Way through the Crowd, Hurry up and Come to Me, Prince Charming!* (Kono hitogomi o oshiwakete, hayaku kiyagare, oojisama!) (Tokyo: Ariadone Kikaku, 1999).
Figure 12.
Ichihara Hiroko (1963--), Girls’ Secrets
(Onna no ko no himitsu), bag. Photo:
John Blazejewski.
Ichihara's works come in many formats; some are texts printed on objects like small nondescript white sacks that have the simple text "Girls' secrets" on them (Fig. 12). An enticing, even seductive object, the sack invites the viewer to peek inside, but also expresses the ambivalence of girls' secret-keeping. Should we be titillated by this mysterious bag of secrets or feel disturbed at the fact that girls do in fact need to keep secrets because they are increasingly engaged in illicit activity such as the rampant leisure prostitution or so-called compensated dating (enjō kōsai) among Japanese bourgeois high-school girls catering to middle-aged men who fantasize about them in their school sailor uniforms?

A simple everyday commodity, a telephone card, painfully echoes a line frequently uttered by women, "You could have at least called" (denwa kurai dekiru hazu dewa), the "dewa" at the end of the sentence implying an incomplete thought as if the speaker trailed off in mid-sentence.

Many of Ichihara’s texts speak to women’s profound disappointment in love affairs and their obsession with their bodies as viewed by men. “I’ve become an unwanted woman” (Irannai onna ni narimashita, which Ichihara also translates as “He doesn’t want me any more”); “My tits are shot” (Oppai no mochigusare); and “No chance of getting laid” (Otoko ni dakareru kihai nashi) read just a few. The directness of the voice speaking is uncomfortable and unfeminine. The texts are often dialogues with someone and speak about the context of relationships.

“If you love me then say you love me!” (Sukinara suki to ieyo). And sometimes Ichihara even speaks in the male voice (indicated by the use of the masculine pronoun ore), as in her text, “I take the best part” (literally, “I drink the tastiest broth” [Ama shiru wa ore ga su])

Ichihara strategically inflects her language with a masculine tone and sometimes employs a distinctly Kansai-area dialect, since she is from Kyoto. However, it is not the genteel lilting women’s speech for which Kyoto is generally known, but a rougher masculine “Kansai ben” more associated with Osaka. Feminist linguists have argued that this type of linguistic move constitutes a kind of “code switching” from a feminine to a masculine linguistic code, which according to Hideko Nornes Abe, “reveals the negotiation of power between speech participants.”11 Among the many consumer goods that Ichihara has designed are two buttons, each with a single word, “apologize!” (ayamare) or “shut up!” (damare), both in the imperative, a verb form seldom used by women because it is considered too harsh and confrontational.
Ichihara has been known to hand out these buttons to men in various public settings.

She cannot resist an opportunity to poke fun at cultural norms and beliefs. Her decidedly sardonic and sarcastic tone in a large-scale banner for an exhibition in 1995 at the SAM Museum in Osaka announced “Contemporary art is just a snap” (Gendai bijutsu mo rakushō yo.) A few years later, in 1999, she revisited this theme in a text projection event employing twenty-five monitors in an appliance store in the Akihabara electric goods shopping district of Tokyo (Fig. 13). Ichihara’s text, “Art in progress” (Bijutsu chū), was displayed on the television sets at ten-second intervals between works of art by twenty-five other artists.

In the design of her line of consumer goods, Ichihara humorously draws attention to the commodification of culture and the deep entanglements of social interaction and consumption. The simple text on the face of a wristwatch she designed reads “You’re getting late” (Okureru de), and a wrapped present displays the repeated text “This is a trivial gift” (Tsumaranai mono) (Fig. 14), playing on the standard humble Japanese expression when giving a gift to someone, “This is a trivial gift, but...[please accept it]” (Tsumaranai mono desu ga...)—gift-giving still being one of the most fundamental expressions of social relations and mutual obligation in Japan.

The skill with which Ichihara has been able to adopt the language of advertising took an ironic turn recently. Her work was emulated by the Dentsū advertising firm in posters for the internet company Isao Net that were displayed in the Yamanote train lines in Tokyo and clearly employed Ichihara’s signature style of repeated simple statements of black text on a white background. Ichihara responded in print to this “fake Ichihara” display, as she calls it, by issuing her own text “You owe me a word of apology!” (Fig. 15).

THE VISUALITY OF LANGUAGE

While Ichihara generally uses a standard printed Gothic typeface that is cool and inexpensive, removing any physical traces of the artist’s hand, she is concerned with the visuality of language in terms of the context, presentation, and spatialization of her texts. They have been printed or projected on a variety of surfaces including banners, walls, sculptural forms, commodities, and various forms of digital display,
Figure 13

Figure 14
Ichihara Hiroko (1963—), *This Is a Trivial Gift (Tsumaranai mono)*, wrapped present. Photo: John Blazejewski, after Ichihara Hiroko, *Push Your Way through the Crowd, Hurry up and Come to Me, Prince Charming!* (Kono hitogomi o oshiwake te, hayaku kiyagare, oojisama!) (Tokyo: Ariadone Kikaku, 1999).
Figure 15 (left)
Ichihara Hiroko (1963–), You Owe Me a Word of Apology! The artist is pictured holding her response to Dentsu subway advertising imitating her work. Photo: Ichihara Hiroko.

Figure 16 (right)

Figure 17 (opposite)
many of which are transitory. Featured in the Yokohama Triennale in 2001, Ichihara displayed her texts on small banners hung along both sides of major walkways to and from the exhibition venues so that they could be experienced in a spatial progression. The banners on one walkway to the exhibition read “The art that I love” (*Koisuru bijutsu da*, also alternately translatable as “loving art”; Fig. 16). At the end of the walkway a heraldic banner announced “happiness is right in front of you” (*shiawase wa me no mae*). On another walkway the banners asked “What more do you want?” (*Kore ijō nani nozomu*).

For a temporary 2001 project sponsored by the Coca Cola company in Yokohama, Ichihara produced a large-scale text to be viewed under the ice at a skating rink (Fig. 17), which read “Until the magic wears off” (*Mahō ga tokeru made*; in Japanese, this is literally, “until the magic melts”).

The “visualization of language” is Hirabayashi’s main preoccupation. But her visualization is more stable and concerned with the sensually evocative connotations of writing and speech as they invoke other bodily senses. A bizarre biological twist of fate has actually had a marked inflection on Hirabayashi’s work. After she suffered a serious blow to the head several years ago that required brain surgery, doctors
Figure 1.8
Hirabayashi Kaoru (1955–), *Pure Light*,
discovered that from birth she had had an inexplicable congenital atrophy of the left hemisphere of the brain, the part of the brain that usually controls linguistic skills. In Hirabayashi’s case, however, the brain had naturally rechanneled all the left-hemisphere functions to the right hemisphere along with her visual functions. Critic Nanjo Fumio has speculated that this may be the reason that the artist approaches written characters visually rather than linguistically, but the linguistic and auditory component of Hirabayashi’s work is still strongly present.¹³

Hirabayashi’s characters and syllables have a physical presence that imbues them with more than mere status as signifiers—they are objects, icons that are often majestically nestled in their own boxes and elevated onto their own shelves. For Hirabayashi, the Japanese language does not just express duality and iconicity, it has an animistic power that also nourishes the spirit. In her 1993 series The Word Spirits (Kotodama), Shelves and in her works since then, Hirabayashi has increasingly enthroned her syllables by mounting them individually on small dais or shelves on the wall. Or she bakes them in divine illumination, as in the work Pure Light from 1997 (Fig.18), where rows of inverted katakana syllables on the floor are paired with piles of salt (salt often being used in Shinto-related acts of ceremonial purification). The syllables are presented as linguistic gods to be viewed with awe—each diminutive, but as a whole expressing a majestic and mysterious power. Underscoring her spiritual response to language as icon, Hirabayashi has written, “the 51 elements of the syllabary are not mere linguistic notations, but instead a mandala expressing the universe itself.”¹⁴ The term kotodama (the power or spirit of words) in her title refers to an ancient term from the period when the emperor and the imperial clan were first emerging as political powers in Japanese state formation, and the native animist set of beliefs that came to be known as Shinto (the Way of the Gods) began to be codified to serve as a legitimizing agent for imperial rule. In the essentializing discourse of nativist (kokugaku) scholars of the eighteenth century, particularly the well-known figure Motoori Norinaga, the term kotodama was redeployed as a means of sacralizing the native Japanese spoken language, which solidified the common notion that native words have an intrinsic vitality of profound cultural consequence. In Norinaga’s view, in Japanese native spoken language “there was no separation between the words and the things they named; to utter the word was to give rise to the reality itself.” So in order to restore the full power of kotodama, logos had to be liberated from the alien imported Chinese written text.¹⁵
Extending the understanding of kotodama to include written text, Hirabayashi asserts that Japanese phonetic syllables by their very essence and auditory associations evoke a sphere of meaning that both harks back to their original kanji derivation and goes beyond it. Words beginning with the “ka” sounds (ka, ki, ku, ke, ko), for example, evoke images of communication: kaku (to write), kiku (to listen), koe (voice). “Ta” sounds evoke spatial movement: tabi (trip), tsuku (to arrive), todoku (to be delivered). The “na” sounds have negative emotional connotations: namida (tears), netamu (to feel envious), nayamu (to be worried), and so forth.16 In this respect, she sees language as sensually and psychologically evocative at a deep linguistic level due to the resonance of kotodama.

CONCLUSION

For nearly the past two decades, Hirabayashi Kaoru has been absorbed with visualizing the multiplicity of coexisting Japanese signifying forms—pictorial, phonetic, and ideographic. Her work vividly demonstrates that language does not just communicate history but formally instantiates it. And spoken and written language are similarly constitutive of gender identity. Hirabayashi’s work forcefully argues that language’s cultural iconicity is not compromised by its hybridity. Rather, she invests the Japanese language with a spiritual aura that is articulated by the animistic notion of “kotodama” (the power or spirit of words).

Seemingly at odds with Hirabayashi’s emotionally charged, visually expressive adoration of language, Ichihara’s pithy statements speak to the more mundane tensions of everyday life and the fraught nature of human relationships. The timeliness of the artist’s messages and her public relations sophistication have earned her a growing network of young fans, some of whom have themselves mounted Internet chat sites to discuss her work. Yet despite the overarching context of social criticism in which Ichihara’s work is situated, it is not absent the historical cultural connections that pervade Hirabayashi’s. Curiously, over the past few years Ichihara has been involved in producing “love fortunes” (koi mikuj) for various Shinto shrines in Japan. O-mikuj are a form of divination by lots that predict good or bad fortune, a practice that continues to be common among Japanese today. So Ichihara is not only a poet, a designer, and an adwoman, she is also a fortune
teller. Thus the curiously incongruous mixture of the critical and the nostalgic that is evoked by Xu Bing's invented characters also appears in the work of Hirabayashi and Ichihara, as they offer diverse visions of Japanese national culture at the turn of the millennium. As for the comparability of these two artists, critic Linda Tyler has observed that Hirabayashi asks viewers "to listen with their eyes," perhaps we can say then that Ichihara asks viewers to see with their ears.¹⁷
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2 For a discussion of the subtle differences between these two campaigns in the context of the domestic exoticization and commodification of Japanese culture, see Marilyn Ivey, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29-65.

3 Personal communication, Hirabayashi Kaoru, 16 January 2003.


6 The twelve zodiac symbols are: rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar.


9 Abe, “From Stereotype to Context” (note 8 above), 654-655.

10 This gender division was complicated by the Meiji period “genbun ichi” (union of spoken and written languages) movement, or vernacular language movement, which tried to bring written language more into accord with spoken language and consequently de-emphasized kanbun and kango. In the process, new gendered pronouns were introduced into spoken language that boldly demarcated the masculine or feminine identity of the speaker. Prior to that, pronouns were seldom used in Japanese, and gender was demarcated more obliquely through speech forms. See Chizuko Ueno, “Vernacularism and the Construction of Gender in Modern Japanese Language,” in *Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 3, ed. Eiji Sekine (Summer 1997), 2-37; and Shirane and Suzuki, *Inventing the Classics* (note 4 above), 14.

11 Abe, “From Stereotype to Context” (note 8 above), 663.


15 Pollack, *Fracture of Meaning* (note 1 above), 49.
