

Showing the invisible

Mark Talacko

Life is invisible and stands
Everywhere before us

With language we chisel out a something
Form its word in our mouth and blow forth shadows

In this way do we know the world
An existence of holes and absence

A shape shifting dance of darkness
Playing from the barrier in front of
the light outside our minds

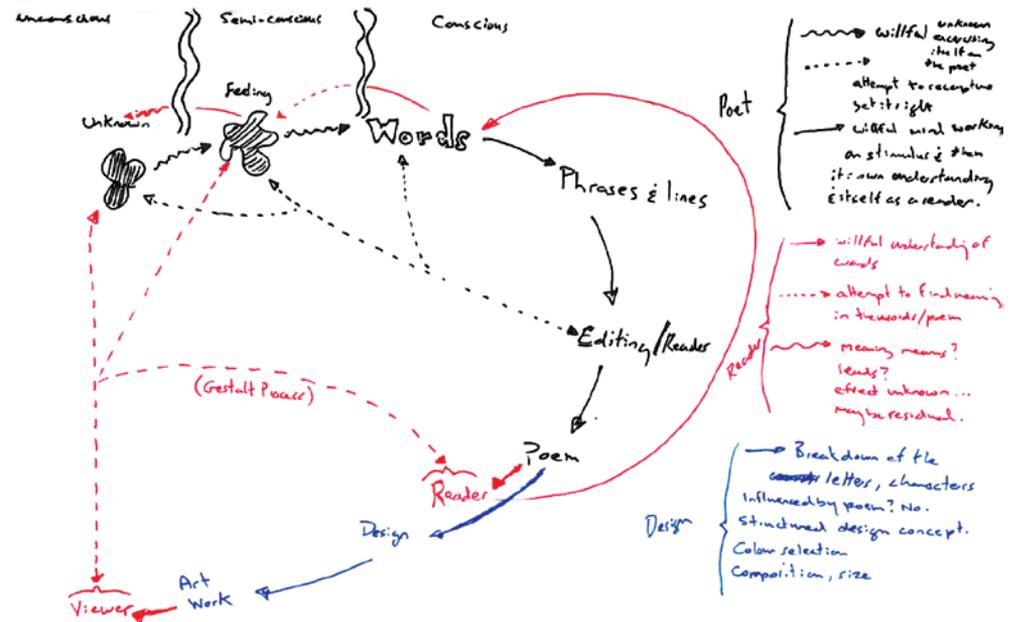
Questions and Answers

Carve. Scratch. Cut. Paint. Write. All synonyms for what we do in order to make sense of existence. It's how we create something to hold on to, build upon, pass on and retain in the face of an overwhelming and fleeting world.

I believe this is what we seek through art – both from the creative and the receptive side – something that can encapsulate that which is not there, create something from the nothingness in order to view it as

something. It is our sound and fury, the idiotic tale of we poor players.

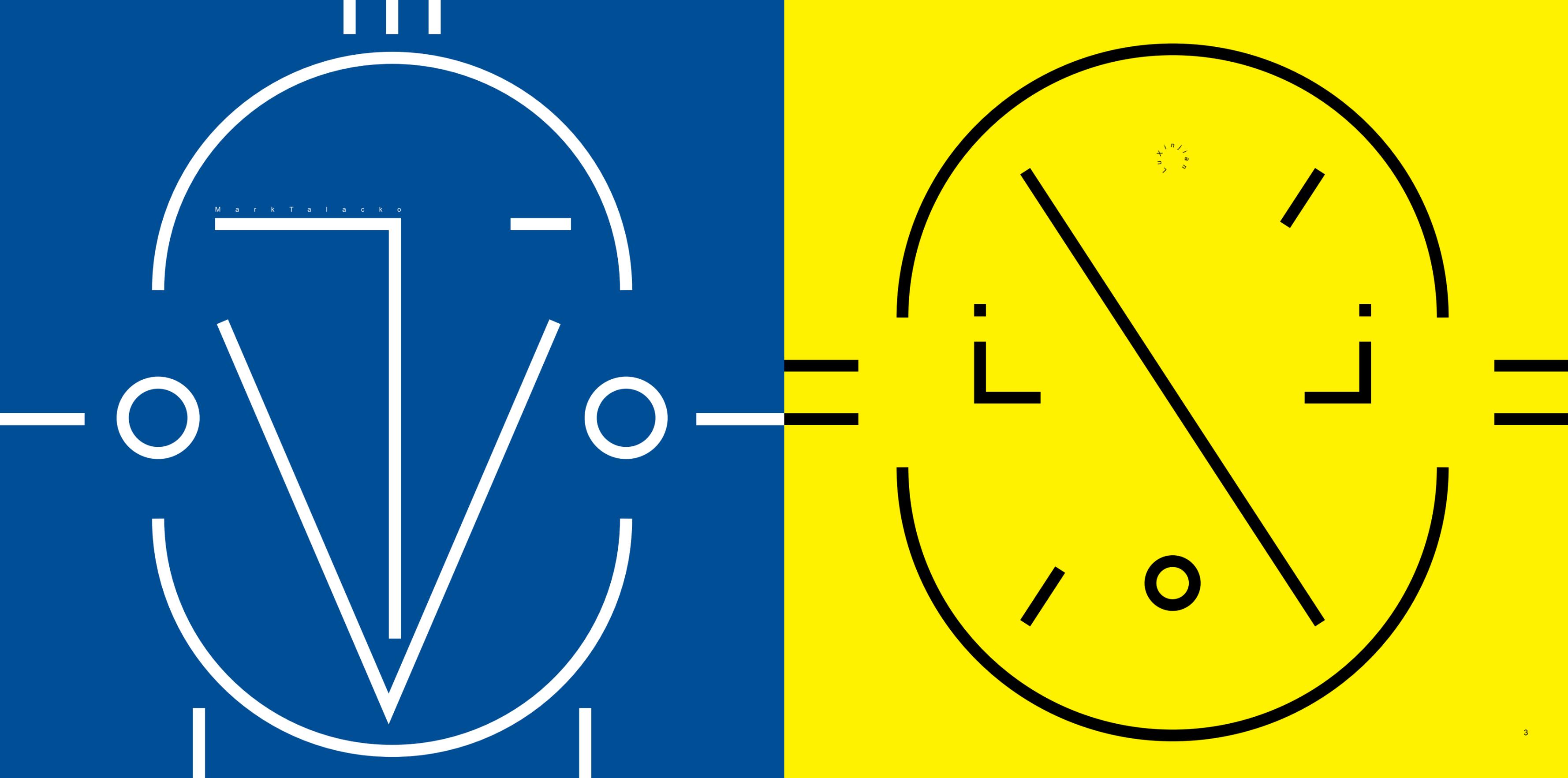
Some of the questions that arise as I try to write an introduction to explain what Lu Xinjian has done in his new series *Invisible Poem* are: Where do the arts blend? Can one arrive at the same place when looking at the painted poem as one does when reading it? Is the route quicker for one over the other?



As one of the poets featured – the only living one, and so the only one with a choice as to which poems to include – I offer no answers since I don't think it's my place to do so. But I do offer ideas, which will hopefully lead to more questions, and perhaps your own conclusions.

By taking poems about Love written by poets from different times and cultures and recoding the letters and characters into his unique design of simple line, shape and colour, Lu Xinjian asks us to rethink language and challenges the boundary between poetry and visual art to see how the two overlap and complement each other while still retaining their own meaning.

Why Love? It is one of the ageless contemplations, particularly for the poet, regardless of culture, ethnicity or nationality. Love is one of those universals that bind us in our shared humanity.



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The poets

You may recognize two of the poets from their words alone. One is English, the other Chinese. Both are canonized and secure in an almost eternal immortality through their words. Their names, like well-known brands, speak for themselves: Shakespeare, Li Bai. The inclusion of my poems, obscure in comparison to the other two, represents a contemporary and globalized poet.

The forms of the poems themselves are each different. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* predominantly fixed in iambic pentameter; Li Bai's poems adhering to the *Jueju* [绝句] form, which predominantly uses quatrains (matched pairs of couplets of either five or seven syllables each); and mine in free verse, which, despite its description, still seeks to create a rhythm through its undetermined structure. The rhythms in each poem are the invisible codes of poetry, and while the meters and structures may differ from place to place and over time, the selection of words remains the art.

The poems

Poetry is a key to change. It allows for a different way of seeing, of being and of thinking about the world – our relationship with it, and our place in it, just as does learning a new language and immersing oneself in a culture not one's own. But poetry is still more. Poetry is a means back to the whole, back to the light.

Xinjian and I discussed which poems to include. Love was the only criteria – any kind of love, be it familial, patriotic or romantic. I gave him around 10 from each poet, from which he made a selection based on the feelings he derived from them.

For example, 南流夜郎寄内 [A letter home while

heading south to Yelang] moved Xinjian with its feeling of deep love for the family. The poem reflects Li Bai's longing for home after his banishment to the uncivilized areas outside of Tang Dynasty control in the south, then known as the polity of Ye Lang. He missed his family, especially when looking upon the full moon, because a full moon traditionally means familial union. He writes his sadness at seeing the wild geese flying north with the coming of spring to express his isolation. Geese were seen as messengers, much like Hermes in ancient Greece, which implies his letters home have gone unanswered.

Seeing or reading?

Looking at the works of *Invisible Poem* is challenging. They confront us. With what, is not immediately clear, but there is certainly something there that startles us into recognition. There's something there that we seek to understand something we want to see.

From the title of the series we may guess that there is a poem within the works, but where, and which poem? The mind seeks.

The works stand on their own since visual art, like music, is not mediated by language and thus more direct in its effort to communicate. Color is one of these unmediated channels.

Lu Xinjian chose colors to represent the expression and spirit of the poems that he felt when reading them. The colors enhance the presentation of the poems and add another layer of meaning to decipher. They also help create the illusion of motion as vision blurs and the mind tries to separate text from context, foreground from background. Color brings out light. Light creates atmosphere. Atmosphere makes us dream. Dream allows us to reconnect and move on.

Viewed visually, the abstraction of the line, shapes and colors in *Invisible Poems* are pleasurable and transcendent in and of themselves. There is no need for them to reflect a reality or contain a deeper meaning. The poems can remain invisible.

However, for those who wish to see beyond the visual, the poems are there to be read and thought about further on their own terms.

Keep it moving

As you look at the works, trying to see the patterns of the shifting forms and organize them into some decipherable and logical system; one recognizable as language; think about language and its ability to accurately describe that which it seeks to represent.

By making the words, the letters and characters that form them, unintelligible, the works force the brain to Gestalt the fragments into their wholes. Hopefully all the questions that sprang forth as you learned to read, learned language the first time, will come to the fore again. What is a heart? A hand? How do they connect? What else do they connect to? Is a hand always a hand? Could it be a heart?

Even when we begin to learn the code, recognize the letters and characters – relearn to read – even then, the meaning of the combination of letters may not hold from one moment to the next, or even from one person to the next. Can there be concrete meaning in the poem as it is changed from one viewer turned reader to the next?

I hope not. If the poems were solidified in their meanings, then they would be dead. They would – could – no longer serve the universal purpose to allow for different ways of seeing. Think of well written laws, constitutions and scriptures that leave interpretation frustratingly open in order to encourage continuous debate and be adaptable to the evolution of the culture and people who abide it.

Art, in this instance visual and poetic, seeks to remain open in order to allow for change - not necessarily in a cataclysmic or revolutionary way, but in a harmonious way, one that is in rhythm with

the tempo of Life.

Invisible Poem seeks to keep things in motion and in play. In play we can lose the strictures of the normalcy that threatens to solidify our thinking.

Recoding

People familiar with Lu Xinjian's work will see *Invisible Poem* as a natural extension from *City DNA*. In the previous series he designed a language to represent the layout of cities; with *Invisible Poem*, he designs a language to represent the layout of poetry. You may even find yourself thinking that you are still looking at a city. Lu Xinjian's code brings both the physicality of a city seen from above and the physicality of thought, also as seen from above, together through design.

The idea to explore written languages through design came while Lu Xinjian was teaching in Seoul. When he showed works from *City DNA*, a number of people asked if he was painting the Hangul alphabet, particularly as they looked at New York City, where the city's grid structure, when represented by Lu Xinjian's code, made viewers try to read what they thought were Korean words.

Much as *City DNA* allows one to see cities in their basic layout, *Invisible Poem* breaks the visual format of written language into basic components to hide the words of the poem, thereby forcing the brain to Gestalt these pieces back to its original form in order to see and read them.

Invisibility doesn't mean it's not there. For some it's a leap of faith to reveal what appears hidden. For others, it's a process of experimentation. For a poet and an artist, it's a combination of the two to bring the invisible forth, and then infuse it with imagination to make it visible to others.

I asked Xinjian why he didn't make the poems harder to read, by either further encrypting the code or inverting the structure of the poem. He said that he still wanted the poems to be readable, still wanted them to be able to communicate, and didn't want them to be in the background.

Upon a first look, he thinks the works will appear simply as paintings. But upon a closer look, he hopes people will see that it is a poem and feel surprised, joyful at the discovery of something in the abstractness, perhaps like when we, humanity, came upon language in the first instance.

He told me that when he was growing up he could recite hundreds of poems from memory, but now could barely recite one. This makes him feel like he's losing a connection to his culture. And while even though he has a respect for poetry, it comes from the notion that it should be respected, much like foundation myths and history. Poetry seems like just a quaint notion to refer to in passing – like mentioning the title of a poem or a poet to show either erudition or affirm an identity.

Invisible Poem is an attempt to revivify poetry, encourage people to 1) see poetry, perhaps again, or in a new way, and 2) create a bridge between the visual and written languages.

The visualization of language

The link between written languages and visual design is natural. They are both functional and seek to create a visual representation of ideas and messages.

There are poets who have designed the shape of their poetry to create images, such as George Herbert's *Easter Wings*, a poem laid sideways across the page whose line structure resembles birds in flight (actually more like bats); the Calligrams of Guillaume Apollinaire; and the concrete poetry of the de Campos brothers in Brazil.

And a number of artists have explored words through their art, or words as art, such as Robert Indiana's

sculptural poems, particularly *To Love*; Alighiero Boetti's , *I sei sensi* (the six senses) from the series *Lavori biro* (ball pen drawings); and Bruce Nauman's neon words, such as *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, in which he sees the artist as interpreter and commentator.

It seems that historically, the connection between art and the written word is stronger in China where there exists a tradition of an artist writing a poem on a work, or an owner of the work writing a poem on it at a later date. This is an area that requires further looking into.

There are a number contemporary Chinese artists exploring written language in their works, artists such as Wang Tiande [王天德], Shen Fan [申凡], Zhang Huan [张洎] and Xu Bing [徐冰], whose *Book from the Sky* and *The Glassy Surface of a Lake* play with the intelligibility of written words and characters, challenging us to think of the assigned importance we've given them.

Lu Xinjian has created something different from these artists, who, by working with a word or a phrase, choose either to explore it's meaning in and of itself, or question the reverence for the written word.

By using poems, works of art on their own, and presenting them in his design of simple forms and shapes, he is not only challenging the boundaries between the two art forms and forcing us to relearn to read, but he is also reversing the evolution of language, taking it back to its original meaning as a visual representation for something.

Western alphabets and Chinese characters are images, their links more easily seen in the characters perhaps than in the alphabets as we try to work back from Latin to Greek to Phoenician to Proto-Sinaitic to Hieroglyphs to Cuneiform since characters are logograms and the Latin alphabet has evolved into graphemes.

See the chart below, which leaves off Hieroglyphs and Cuneiform, for a progression of 'western' languages. Oracle bone scripts (甲骨文) show a similar progression in Chinese characters, although they remain logograms.

Proto-Sinaitic	Phoenician	Phoen. value	Phoen. name	Hebrew	Greek	Latin	Cyrillic	Arabic
		'	'alp "ox"	א	Α	A	А	ا
		b	bet "house"	ב	Β	B	Б, В	ب
		k	kap "hand"	כ	Κ	K	К	ك
		m	mem "water"	מ	Μ	M	М	م
		'	'en "eye"	ע	Ο	O	О	ع
		r	ro'sh "head"	ר	Ρ	R	Р	ر

Proto-Sinaitic script
From Wikipedia,
the free encyclopedia

Not being an expert on Chinese characters, I find it interesting that the characters for write (写) and carve (刻) are not present in the oracle bone script, nor in bronze script (金文编), which followed oracle bone script. For me, this means that there was no consciousness associated with the act of 'carving/writing' words; it was just done. Of course, perhaps the antecedents for carve and write have been lost to the dust.

Showing the invisible

Visual and poetic arts go beyond life as it stands before us. They reach into the abyss as it is represented through our five senses, our memory and our thoughts – that is they reach out into the invisible to make it visible. This motion of reaching into is not forward in a linear sense, nor is it similar to the idea of progress.

If it is in any direction it is circular - a reaching forard

to go back, or a reaching back to go forward. In either direction, it is a connection with itself, with that which has been buried and forgotten – a connection with our pre-conscious selves.

It is this step beyond which poetry seeks to plumb. It is this unseen thing that *Invisible Poem* seeks to show.