

# The Lingual Image

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**‘Just as man’s first speech was poetic before it became utilitarian, so man first built an idol of mud before he fashioned an ax. Man’s hand traced the stick through the mud to make a line before he learned to throw the stick as a javelin.’ Barnett Newman, ‘The First Man Was an Artist’, *Tiger’s Eye*, no.1, October 1947<sup>1</sup>**

One of the surviving initials is that of the letter R in a book of sermons by the Byzantine church father John Chrysostom (345-407) to celebrate the Apostle Paul.<sup>2</sup> It is a large, loosely drawn R, applied with a thin pen. We see a linear play of plants, flowers and birds with, in the margin, in colour, the drawing of a man with a staff that was added without any obvious function. This reinforces my conviction that drawing was of enormous significance in both the thinking and the fabrication processes.

In bygone times, such decorations formed the introduction to a narrative; they were the visual overture. At the same time, they gave the text an order, because there was a small intermission before every initial. The initials of the Irish codicils, including the Book of Kells<sup>3</sup>, were abstract decorations and toyed with

the form of the letter. The text was packed into the image, as it were.

Later, in psalm books, they became more narrative and referred to the main character or the theme of the text. These psalters all began with the B for Beatus – ‘beatified’ – the Beatus initial. Some Beatus initials can expand to form one large richly decorated page, a text that begins with authentic music, pictorial music.

The Russian painter Kandinsky (1866-1944) imagined the same image when he wrote: ‘the colour is the means, the eye the hammer, and the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that deliberately causes the human soul to resonate by means of this or that key.’<sup>4</sup> Kandinsky referred to his abstract paintings as ‘compositions’, thus drawing them into the realm of music. In this context, he quoted Shakespeare:

**‘The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not mov’d with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus:  
Let no such man be trusted. - Mark the music.’  
(Lorenzo, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene I)<sup>5</sup>**

As society developed in technological and scientific terms, language became more stratified and richer. As we come to know more, more significances have

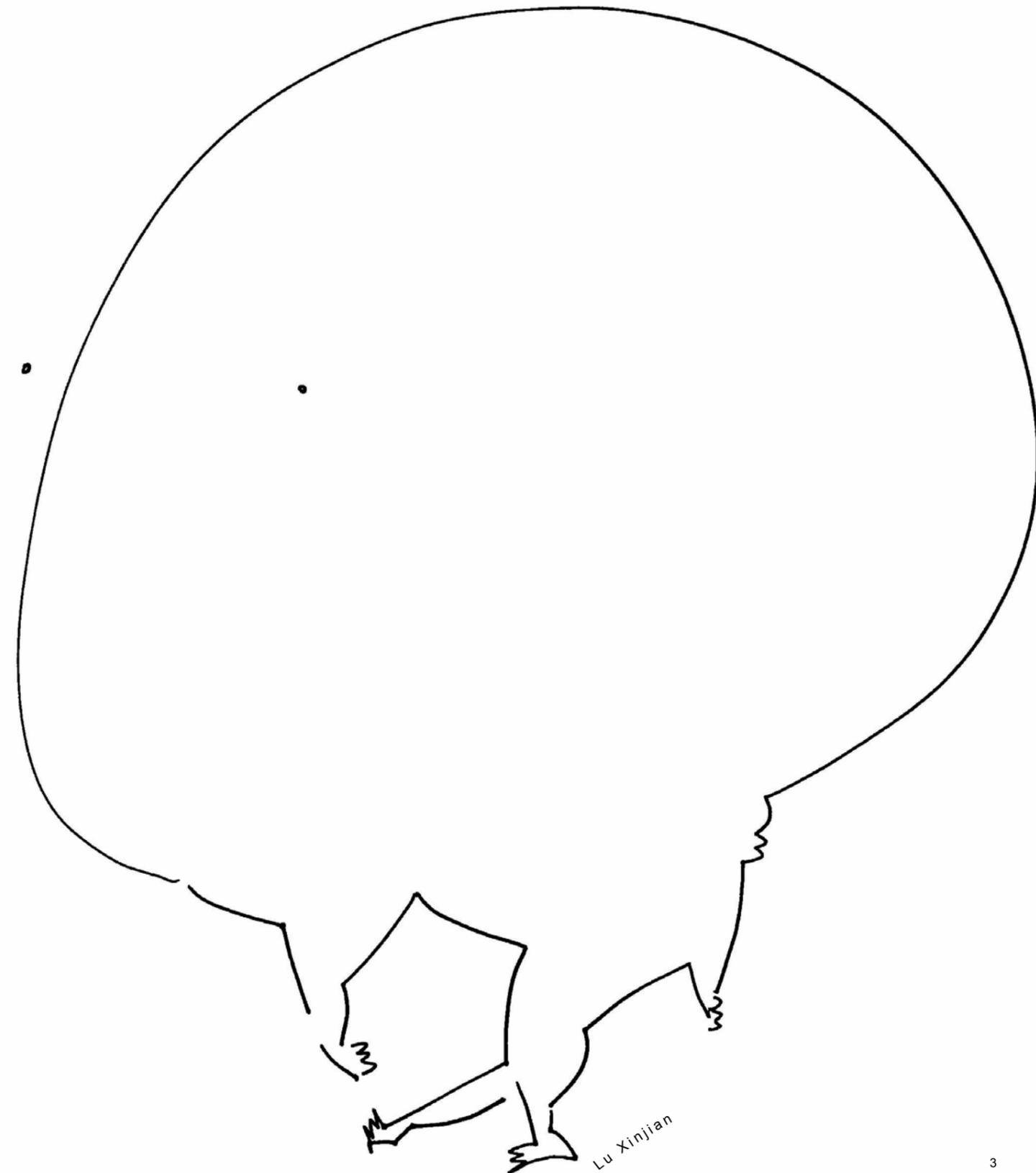
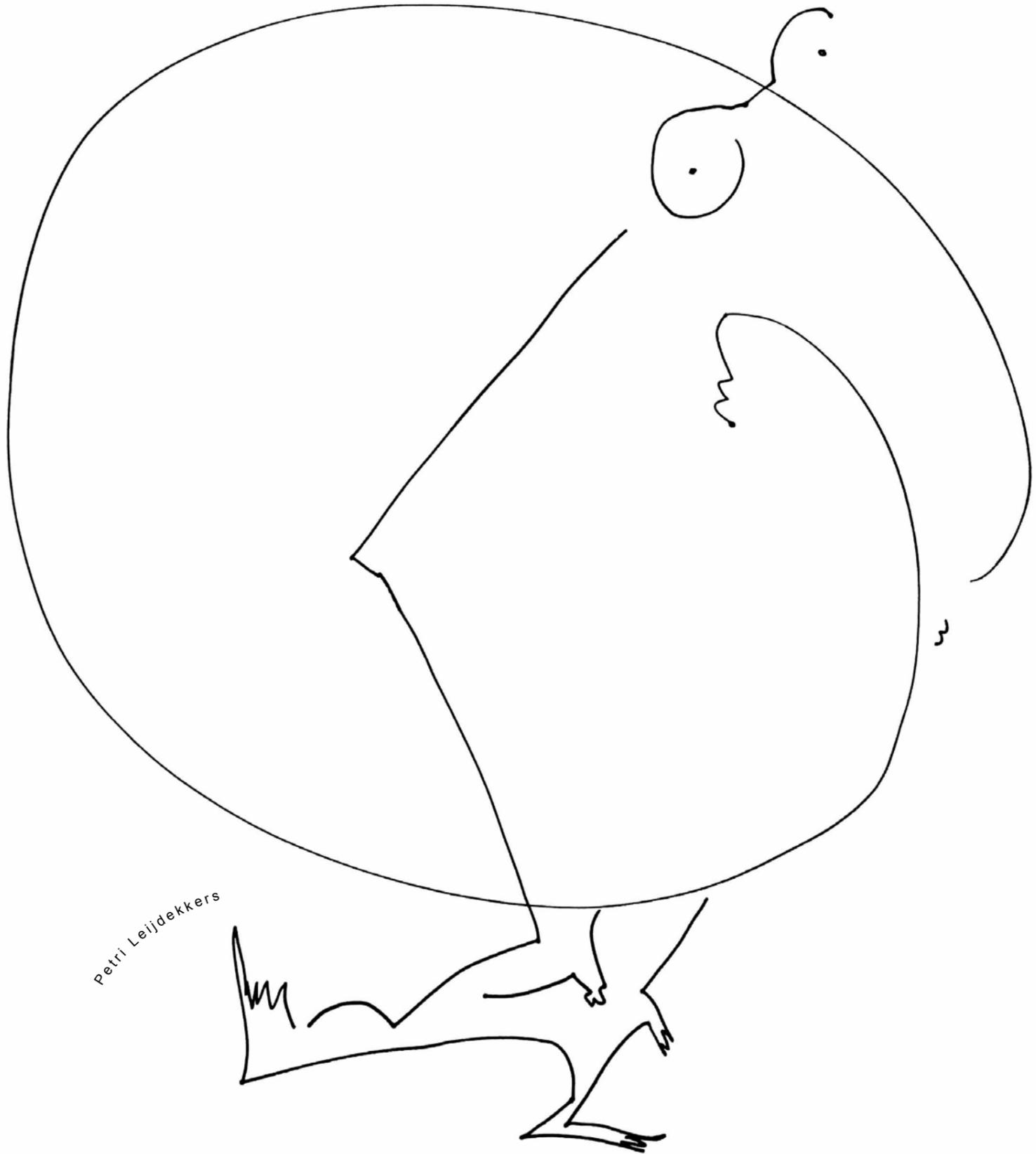
1. John P. O’Neill (ed.), Barnett Newman, Selected Writings and Interviews, Berkeley US 1992, 156-16

2. Homiliae 1-VI in laudem beati Pauli apostoli, Museum of the Book, Museum Meermann, The Hague. The manuscript dates from about 900 AD and is probably made in a French convent.

3. Trinity College Library, Dublin.

4. Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, 1911/12, reissued by Nina Kandinsky and Max Bill, Bern 1952, 68

5. Idem, 69



entered language and text contains many more interpretations than was previously the case. In 1964, the Dutch poet and literary critic Hans Sleutelaar wrote: 'Prior to the advent of mass-produced articles, language contained no brand names: the quality of goods was frequently expressed geographically: Barnevelder hens, French perfume, Danish butter and Chinese tea. Modern poetry, too, which developed in all languages into a language within a language, as Valéry stated, underlines the interaction between language and experience.

It is no accident that the structural change in lyricism with which the history of modern poetry began, occurred during the industrial revolution. The expansion of the experiential world was extended in a slimmer, more differentiated poetry.

In turn, that poetry compelled poetic theory to assume a richer arsenal of concepts. In 1935, William Empson gave more than 4000 different interpretations to a sonnet by Shakespeare, which had been approached in blunter terms for centuries.<sup>16</sup>

That was the end of the closed circuit of poetry. This was also the case in

visual art, which increasingly oriented itself directly to the world, without an intermediate form – see, for example, Warhol's soup tins, Arman's compilations, the performances of Gilbert and George, and the actions of Yin Yilin. The last in particular, with his performance entitled *Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road*, managed to affect us by breaking through the grey chaos of reality (literally and figuratively)<sup>7</sup>. Due to the globalization, this chaos has spread to all parts of the world, and we see the same furious traffic and large buildings everywhere, regardless of the political colour of the surroundings.

**'Translation is conveyance from one language to another by means of a continuum of transformations. No abstract domains of equality and similarity.'**

**Walter Benjamin, Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache der Menschen, November 1916.**<sup>8</sup>

But what happens in the switch from text to image? The graphic designer has the task of furnishing a text with optimum significance. As a form of communication, graphic design initiates a semantic process, in which every sign is given 'significance' in order to assume even more meaning until the designer releases it to allow it to function.<sup>9</sup>

Awareness of this coherence became explicit in the first half of the twentieth century. Artists created new letters and ensured that text and image reacted

to one another. The *De Stijl* group, in particular, contained people who wished to present an ideal picture of the world via their work. Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters and Piet Zwart were artists and designers who demonstrated this trend before WWII. They made letters dance, brought them into relation with music, with architecture, and with the newly available type-setting and composing machines that worked increasingly quickly. Image, reality and information intertwined. In 1967, after seeing a Hell Digiset in Düsseldorf a few years previously, designer Wim Crouwel created an alphabet on the basis of a grid consisting of squares.<sup>10</sup> At that time, legibility was not a major issue, because he was concerned with something else, the digital image, the image of the future. On that topic he commented: 'I loved the whole abstract feeling of it and I wanted to make all the letters the same width so that they don't only line up in one direction, but in all directions, which made it completely unreadable.'<sup>11</sup> In this way, Crouwel turned the alphabet into a contemporary image, a spatial construction, a city, and a new ordering of time.

It seems as if Lu Xinjian is building on this foundation, on the strength of his own

intuition. Having studied graphic design at Nanjing Arts Institute in China, he continued his education in the Netherlands at the Design Academy in Eindhoven and at the Frank Mohr Institute in Groningen where he gained his MFA in Computer Media in 2006. Thus, he was cognitively formed in both China and the Netherlands.

This forming was visible in his series of paintings entitled *City DNA* of which the first works appeared in 2008. In these maps of large and small cities, while seeking the characteristic feature of each city, he used the computer as his logical instrument to translate the form and infrastructure of many cities into bold lines, which he then painted. In doing so, he converted the individual character of the city – the DNA of its form that had arisen via its history and growth – to an abstract two-dimensional image from which every trace of relief seemed to have vanished. In this way, Xinjian translated the complex information obtained from Google Earth into a paradigmatic image in which history, the colours of emblem and flag, and the historically evolved architecture were forged into a new icon. The Google picture became one large abstract painting. Reality became a sign. All cities form tangles of lines that meander onward in curves and stripes that thus reveal the structure of the city. As a consequence of his consistent approach, the use of linen on a span, digital resources, tape, film foil, acrylic paint and paintbrush, he manages to elevate every city to the status of a glorious icon.

6. Hans Sleutelaar 'De Toekomst van de Poëzie', Museumjournaal, April 1964, 9, 5/6

7. 'On an otherwise unexceptional afternoon in June 1995 a wall of concrete blocks is moved bit by bit across Guangzhou's Lin He Road by the physical exertions of Lin Yilin'. In June 2007, on the occasion of the 12th Documenta, this event performed again in the Nordstadt-Park in Kassel, Germany. Documenta Kassel, 16/06-23/09 2007, 278.

8. Walter Benjamin, 'Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache der Menschen', Gesammelte Schriften, Band II.1, Frankfurt am Main, 1916.

9. Anke Coumans, Als een beeld 'ik' zegt, Leiden 2010.

10. This New Alphabet was published in 1967 as a Kwadraatblad of Steendrukkerij De Jong & Co in Hilversum.

11. Tony Brooks, Wim Crouwel: A graphic Odyssey, London 2011, 73

The illegibility of Crouwel's alphabet is appealing because it gave spatiality to the image of time. And, due to the abstract nature of that representation, it became a spatiality that is relevant to many. That is also the attraction of Xinjian's painting from his *City DNA* series: the city as an abstract fact and as a form in which people feel spatially secure. Its colours and format allow people to advance in many directions, as does the work of Mondrian, Pollock and Haring. These, too, were painters who related very specifically to urban space, each on the basis of his own angle of approach.

### **Appearance of music**

*Invisible Poem* is about (il)legibility as the ultimate spatial experience. Whereas Crouwel was more cognitively engaged in seeking a new opportunity for beauty in the digital era, Lu Xinjian is more concerned with emotions. His translations from text are associative, and form a quest for the visual factor in seeing and reading the poem. He is interested in the relationship between form and content and the significance of that form. He visualizes the rhythms of the letters and the lyricism of the word in a modularized system of shapes and colours.

His poetry choices are social, emotional and occasionally descriptive. In the visualizations, he devotes attention to the appearance of the texts, the simplicity of the characters by means of which image and text manage to stimulate one another to rise above the plain meaning in some marvellous way.

Xinjian's visualizations of the poems of Du Fu (712-770), poet of tranquil nature, war, exile and social abuses of the Tang dynasty, Baudelaire (1821-1867), French poet and art critic who was the first to write experimentally, theoretically and constructively about autonomous expressions of the poets and painters of his times, and Mark Talacko, present-day Canadian poet who lives and works in Shanghai, reflect the process of exegesis. In the paintings that manifest themselves as overall compositions, we perceive the reading, the process, the interpretation, the appearance and disappearance of image and insight, the ambience, and the power of imagination. The works lead us to a dynamic system of lines and colours that are located within a limited area on the surface. They resemble tightly woven tapestries of lines from which the text of the poem itself suddenly emerges from the painting, only to vanish once again and then reappear, depending on the duration of one's viewing.

When they are read, poems become terms, sounds that materialize before us in undulating or hesitant lines, like a sea, a landscape, architecture. Then, all at once, as in the paintings of the *Invisible Poem* series, light breaks through and the lines and shapes

turn out to be letters and words. But also that significance is multiple, multicultural, changing over time. In that way, a poem moves with the ages, retreats into its shell, in order to subsequently reappear in a present-day form.

To Xinjian, each poem consists of a series of masks that conceal the view of truth. His works display these in short lines – diagonal, curved, stippled, perpendicular. The triangles and circles converge in colours and forge façades that disclose the secret of music in poems.