

INTRODUCTION

The artists on this site gathered at the Chateau de Vogüé in Ardèche (France) in summer 2009 for the exhibition "Le geste suspendu". They were selected by Christine Macé, the curator of the exhibition and founder of the "Terres d'écritures" association based in Grignan, France.

The idea of the exhibition was to present the world's three main writing systems through the work of contemporary artists, who are distinguished not only for the originality of their art work but for their knowledge of the civilisation behind each form of writing.

In the ocean of ink, the mind must hold firm, Shitao told us in the 17th century.

Some wield a pen, others are masters of the single brush stroke, but all these artists keep the spirit of ink alive for us. They come from France, Italy, Switzerland, Morocco, Iraq, China and are calligraphers, painters, graphic artists, sculptors and poets. They know and enjoy the classical poems but also explore the work of contemporary authors and often draw their inspiration from nature.

Their art takes us on a journey through the landscapes of the three great writing systems, which originated in Western Europe, the Middle East and China.

Each artist takes us into an imaginary written or painted world: contrasting textures, fluid brush strokes, the magnificence of the calamus. They all play the music of the legible and the illegible by means of the lightest strokes, capitals or cursive, dense or washed, laid on a wide range of materials – paper, wood, canvas, iron, fabric and even human skin.

Their works are full of tension, energy, breath. Made of contrasts, silence, spaces and solids, but also light and darkness and colour. Some are learned compositions, playing on textures, arabesques, ornaments. But we are always astonished by the sense of movement caught in mid-flight, the "suspended gesture". There is beauty and harmony, but also power, and even violence in what they have to say.

Denise Lach invents extraordinarily complex Jeux d'écriture (writing games) and dialogues with the textures of sense and the textures of imagery. Laurent Rébéna, in a learned balancing act, asks the eternal question of art in black and white.

Kitty Sabatier spins airborne threads of signs that scarcely touch the canvas, underpinned by a secret, rigorous composition, while the delicate traces left by Anne Gros-Balthazard resonate visually in us like the scrolls of a violinist's bow.

The avant-garde artist Monica Dengo commits herself physically and chooses the human body as a blank page. Her utterly innovative work is a philosophical meditation on the body as text.

The scholarly poet Ye Xin draws and writes stories and whether he tells the legend of Wang Wei or the history of Victor Hugo, his supple, flowing,

joyous brush is anchored in the background wash while Christine Dabadie-Fabreguettes returns to nature through abstraction and draws from calligraphy the energy and rhythm she needs for her compositions. Abdallah Akar looks at the beauty of Arabic or Western poetry, elucidates, deciphers and inscribes it on unexpected materials, releasing its powerful energy.

The great Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudy was one of the first to introduce gestures and colour into his works. He goes back to “the dawn of writing when words were still the brothers of images” (Jacques Lacarrière) and tirelessly pursues a dialogue between past and present, east and west. He gives us the key:

Calligraphy is an art which traces the essence of things and not the visible.

Christine Macé, curator of the exhibition

THE ARTISTS

Abdallah Akar

Born in the far south of Tunisia in 1952, Abdallah Akar came to Paris in the late 1960s, where he met and trained under the master Ghani Alani. Akar has worked on the art of calligraphy for nearly thirty years and has taught at the Institut du Monde Arabe since 1993.

He exhibits in France and abroad and has published many works including *Les poèmes suspendus* (Alternatives) and *Les Sept Dormants* (Actes Sud), a collective work for which he penned all the Arabic texts.

As a painter and calligrapher from the desert, Abdallah Akar takes us on an inner journey.

He draws his inspiration from Arabic and Western poetry using a luminous palette with a balanced mix of writing and colour, on materials as diverse as textile, wood and iron.

The Mu'allaqats or suspended odes are one of his main areas of research: these monumental hangings inspired by the great pre-Islamic odes were veritable archives (diwân) for Arab peoples. Here they are displayed by the artist as “imperishable fabrics, God’s living clothing.” The combination of the contemporary material and the Kufic script, one of the oldest in Arabic calligraphy, uses transparent effects to catch the light and enhance the poetic power of the texts.

Christine Dabadie-Fabreguettes

“The words of the poem fill my mind with images. I associate them with the

ancient forms of Chinese writing, which are so close to natural shapes. I find in calligraphy the energy and rhythm which bring my compositions to life.”

Christine Dabadie-Fabreguettes was born in Bordeaux in 1943. The forest of the Landes left her with a love of nature which shines through in her work. A disciple of Ung No Lee, a great 20th-century Korean master whose teaching she followed at the Académie Orientale de Peinture in Paris, she quickly chose abstract calligraphy on the one hand and learned Oriental landscape painting on the other.

The first of these two forms is akin to contemporary abstract art based on humanism and the second focuses on landscapes infused with poetic imagination. Christine Dabadie-Fabreguettes has produced a series of abstract works inspired by LI Qing Zhao, a poetess of the Song dynasty.

Winner of a special prize at the first biennial of calligraphy for Europe and America in Seoul in 2005, she now works as an artist and set designer in Avignon. She founded the Mouk-ki group and passes on the teaching of Ung No Lee.

Monica Dengo

Artist and designer Monica Dengo was born in Italy in 1966. She lived in San Francisco (USA) from 1993 to 2003 and now lives in Arezzo.

She teaches in Italy and the USA (Academy of Art, University of San Francisco), organises international workshops, and exhibits in Italy, Belgium, Finland and the USA. She studied design in Venice, ligature and calligraphy at Roehampton Institute in London, and miniature and gilding with Thomas Ingmire.

Publishing is an important part of Monica Dengo's multifaceted creation. The book BAB (Book As Body) was the result of an ambitious project to write the human body.

Nudity is our medium. Writing shapes nudity, turns it into a body-text, then dresses it in a skin-like mesh of indecipherable signs.

The idea of the suspended gesture and the body fully engaged in writing led Monica Dengo into a quasi scientific exploration of the physical process of writing and to this magnificent metaphor of the written body. To gain a better understanding of the act of calligraphy, she focused on the face of words, the sounds of language in the work of eastern calligraphers, Yu-Ichi Inowe in particular, and immersed herself in them before returning to her Western origins, invigorated by her journey into unknown scripts.

Anne Gros-Balthazard

A talented young designer invited to Vogüé, Anne Gros-Balthazard was born in 1984 and has always been passionately interested in calligraphy. Trained by the best in the field (Monica Dengo, Denise Lach, Kitty

Sabatier, Brody Neuenschwander), she recently moved to the Drôme. She has taught calligraphy at Terres d'écritures, at Grignan, since 2007, and exhibited her work there for the first time in December 2008. She has also done graphic design work for advertising campaigns and took part in the Calligraphie sur le pont St Laurent operation in Grenoble, in 2003 and 2004.

Kitty Sabatier invited her to exhibit in Toulouse in May 2009

Keenly interested in the meaning of words, she transcribes texts by contemporary authors, Christian Bobin in particular.

"I believe in words, in their power, I choose words which radiate light."

Her work is rigorous, with a light touch. A musical rhythm suggesting contemporary music emanates from many of her pieces.

Her motto could be: simplicity and height.

Denise Lach

Calligrapher Denise Lach teaches screen printing and script design at the Ecole de Design, Basle, Switzerland. The playful potential and textural aspects of writing are a major part of her research. She regularly exhibits and teaches in France and abroad. She contributed to André Gürtler's book Experiments with Letterform and Calligraphy and published *Libres et égaux* and *Préfaces et Préambules (Alternatives)*.

Her aim is not to illustrate the texts. She singles out an emotion, a colour, a word which she translates with her graphic vocabulary. Working with many different media gives her an opportunity to experiment and share her skills with other artists.

"I have left the paths of meticulous, legible calligraphy. But something of its discipline and rigour has remained. The opportunity for discussion and emulation in an art school was a powerful stimulus and stirred my curiosity. The weaving of words and the resulting textures fascinate me. The inexhaustible play of writing on media of all kinds broadens the vocabulary of graphic art and enriches personal expression."

Dialogue 1 is published by Haupt, in "Jeux d'écriture".

Hassan Massoudy

Hassan MASSOUDY was born in Najef in southern Iraq in 1944.

As a boy living in a city where images were prohibited he began to practise the art of calligraphy. Then came the years of political turmoil and after many spells in prison, he left Iraq for France in 1969 and enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He exhibits regularly and has published many books. He has also created several shows with musicians and dancers (including *Métaphore* with Carolyn Carlson in 2005). He was instrumental in the revival of calligraphy in the twentieth century.

He looks for spontaneity in writing and the immediacy of expression. His

dynamic work brings poetry alive and his strokes, always in phase with the meaning of the words, reflect power and rigour as well as suppleness and grace.

He quotes Heraclitus: "The world is no more than a harmony of tensions." I look for a vast, unlimited space for my calligraphies. The blank behind the word is an integral part of the form; calligraphy therefore evokes space by its absence.

The poem becomes a parallel song, an ethereal pictogram going back to the dawn of writing, in his homeland, in Sumer, five thousand years ago.

Laurent Rébéna

Laurent Rébéna was born in Paris in 1963. After training at the Scriptorium in Toulouse, he founded the association Scripsit then Calligraphis in Paris, where he teaches at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and La Monnaie de Paris.

He has exhibited in France, Luxembourg, Bruges, and at the Centre for the Union of Russian Artists in St Petersburg; he also creates performances and designs works for corporations such as Acer Finance, Areva (on the theme of A).

Laurent Rébéna is an artist and a tireless researcher.

Calligraphy is certainly the starting point for his work but with an extraordinary mastery of the various Latin alphabets and a wide variety of tools and materials, he does a balancing act with movement, breathing, and marks. He unfurls ribbons of signs written with a pen or a brush and puts all his experiences to use in his pursuit of "exuberant asceticism": The title of the work "Ceci n'est pas de l'Anglaise" sums up the paradox of this artist: a masterly display of a refined script decorated with elliptical rounds, this work lays on canvas the violence, rupture and foundations of contemporary art. In it Rébéna leaves asceticism to ask the eternal question: what is art?

Kitty Sabatier

Freelance graphic artist and calligrapher Kitty Sabatier was born in 1959. She lives in Toulouse where she trained at the Fine Art school and at Bernard Arin's Scriptorium. She opened her first studio with Michel Derre in 1986 and published *Cher maître, lettres de Rilke à Rodin (Alternatives)* in 2002. She exhibits in France and abroad.

Probing the body of the letter to its bony skeleton, Kitty Sabatier uses her immense talent to create spaces that vibrate with matt or velvety blacks and blank landscapes crossed by a streak of ink. When she works on paper, here Moulin de Larroque and Moulin de Pombié, we see real palimpsests being created: the paper is written on, then washed, written on

again and then washed again...the pigments give a powerful stroke as well as great depth of field.

Some of her works are called "Failles" and "Equilibres" and indeed they make us dizzy as we are swept into a labyrinth of light and shade, thrown off balance by dazzling whites surrounded by blocks of black or blue, and we get lost in unlikely charts of enigmatic signs.

YE XIN

Ye Xin was born in Beijing in China in 1953.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, he was exiled with his family to Shanxi, where he worked in a tractor factory but kept on drawing, painting and engraving. As a "worker-artist" he was admitted to the Beijing Fine Art School in 1968; he taught drawing there some years later.

Ye Xin moved to France, in 1986, and defended a PhD in art history at the Sorbonne in 1995 on the relationship between writing and painting. He currently lectures in drawing and calligraphy at the University of Paris VII.

His works are on display in the British Museum, the BNF, the library of the Musée Rodin, and the Méjeannes library in Aix en Provence. He designed the Confucius exhibition for the Musée Guimet (Paris-2003), has exhibited in France and China and published several books including *Hugo, le sac du Palais d'Eté* with Nora Wang and Wang Lou (2003) and *Baudelaire, l'étranger-calligraphies* (You Feng, 1997).

Whether he takes his inspiration from Chinese legends or French poetry, Ye Xin lets his imagination lead his brush and he shows the world as he sees it. In his work, collective and personal memories blend in fragments of images and writing which mingle past and present.

Brush and ink give a drawing which the spectator is free to interpret. The way Ye Xin plays with writing and the relations between frame, medium, surface, sign and sense bring him close to the artist Alechinsky and the poet Christian Dotremont, in their testing of the limits of pictorial writing.