

Deconstructing Tradition – The Transformation of Mongolian Script in Contemporary Art

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Abstract: This paper explores the transformation of Mongolian script in contemporary art through the conceptual art project *Words No Longer Words*. By deconstructing traditional and modern forms of Mongolian script, the project questions how script, identity, and memory confront changes and crises in a digitised and globalised era. Consisting of four interconnected works – *Textual Blocks*, *Vertical and Horizontal Crosses*, *Boundary Constraints*, and *Garbled Characters Everywhere* – the project engages with the tension between visibility and erasure, legibility and abstraction. Through visual fragmentation, cultural symbolism, and experimental use of media, the project transforms linguistic forms into artistic expressions that reflect the fragility and resilience of “minority cultures”. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from deconstruction, image-text relations, and cultural identity studies, this paper positions the Mongolian script not only as a tool of communication but also as a visual medium for critical reflection and creative resistance.

Keywords: Mongolian script; deconstruction; visual language; digital distortion; cultural identity

Introduction

This project, while rooted in artistic practice, also contributes to academic scholarship by examining how endangered scripts negotiate issues of visibility, cultural identity, and technological transformation in the contemporary world.

There were once words, but I destroyed them. Now, nothing can be understood.

This sentence is the poetic impulse that marked the beginning of *Words No Longer Words*, a conceptual art project that deconstructs Mongolian script (*Mongol bichig*) and reassembles it into fragmented, unreadable forms. It is a visual response to the experience of seeing one’s own language – a core of cultural identity – gradually marginalised and broken, not only by repressive politics and global systems of communication, but also by digital infrastructures that fail to support it. Traditional Mongolian script is written vertically, flowing from top to bottom in a continuous line. In contrast, most global writing systems today follow horizontal structures, making vertical script an anomaly – both visually and technically. As a result, Mongolian script often encounters digital incompatibilities: it appears corrupted, glitched, or replaced by error symbols such as “MVS.” These glitches are not just technical flaws; they are symbolic erasures that reflect deeper cultural and linguistic displacement. This project was born from the pain and resistance of such erasure. It is also an exploration of what happens when

language ceases to function as communication and instead becomes form, image, or trace. Through intentional fragmentation, layering, and visual abstraction, *Words No Longer Words* asks: what is left when language disappears? Can something new – poetic, critical, embodied – emerge from the ruins of written (and spoken) tradition?

Background

Mongolian script, with its distinct vertical orientation and calligraphic lineage, holds deep historical and cultural significance. First adapted from the Uyghur script during the Mongol Empire in the 13th century, it has long served as a visual symbol of Mongolian identity, spirituality, and intellectual heritage. However, the script’s visibility and usage have declined significantly over the past century. In the 1940s, the Cyrillic alphabet was officially adopted in the Mongolian People’s Republic under Soviet influence, pushing traditional script to the margins of public life (Bawden, 1968; Kara, 1996; Sükhbaatar, 2010). Today, Cyrillic Mongolian remains dominant in Mongolia, while the vertical traditional script is used primarily in cultural, ceremonial, or nostalgic contexts. In Inner Mongolia (China), although the traditional script remains official and visible, many younger generations are no longer proficient in reading or writing it fluently.

The digital era has further complicated the use of Mongolian script. Many digital platforms lack full support for vertical typesetting or proper rendering of Mongolian characters. The result is frequent technical errors: broken formatting, misaligned text, or the appearance of mysterious symbols such as “MVS” where meaning

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should be. These “glitches” are more than inconveniences – they are digital metaphors for linguistic displacement and cultural loss. This precarious position of Mongolian script – between survival and extinction, between visibility and erasure – forms the conceptual ground of my project. By transforming the script into unreadable art objects, I highlight not only its beauty and fragility, but also the urgent need to rethink how cultural knowledge survives in technologically mediated modernity.

Artistic Analysis

Textual Blocks. The Textual Blocks series explores the transformation of traditional Mongolian script into abstract visual compositions through a process of fragmentation and deconstruction. In these works, handwritten calligraphy – using both traditional vertical Mongolian and modern Cyrillic Mongolian – is carefully cut into pieces, eliminating its legibility and allowing its visual quality to emerge. The viewer is presented not with information, but with form – text that ceases to function as language and begins to operate as image. One of the works in this series references the famous Mongolian poem *My Hometown* by poet Dashdorjiin Natsagdorj (1906-1937), which praises the majestic beauty of the grassland. By dissecting and rearranging fragments of the poem, the piece reflects the loss of poetic wholeness, paralleling the actual transformation of the Mongolian landscape due to modernisation. The act of cutting becomes both a gesture of violence and an act of re-seeing – destroying meaning while unveiling a new kind of aesthetic.

The compositions are created by pasting rice paper on canvas and working with watercolour, ink, or water-based oil paints. The materials emphasise delicacy and transience, echoing the fragility of disappearing scripts. Each segment reveals portions of letters – looping, curling strokes rendered incomplete – capturing the tension between familiarity and estrangement, beauty and breakdown. “It was originally text, traditional Mongolian

script, but I disrupted it, presenting only fragments... These compositions have been transformed into art, turning words into art”.

Vertical and Horizontal Crosses

The Vertical and Horizontal Crosses series is a direct visual manifestation of the structural conflict between traditional Mongolian script and modern writing systems. In this series, I intentionally intersect vertical lines of traditional Mongolian script with horizontal lines of modern Cyrillic Mongolian alphabet. These compositions form crosses – a powerful symbol of both intersection and sacrifice.

The cross shape evokes the image of a grave – marking the burial of linguistic heritage – but also suggests a moment of confrontation and renewal. The works explore the tension between two systems of writing: one tied to historical identity, and the other to modern communication and power. The overlays are created using a range of techniques: pasted paper strips, erased and layered text, and translucent washes of paint that obscure and reveal the underlying words. In some pieces, red threads, projected light, and wall inscriptions are used as extensions of the written lines – reinforcing the concept of cultural entanglement. The result is a set of hybrid symbols, composed of both readable and unreadable segments, that question the very boundary between language and image. This visual crossroad represents a deeper cultural crossroad: one where tradition and modernity, visibility and erasure, collide and merge.

Boundary Constraints

In the Boundary Constraints series, the frame becomes the core motif. Here, vertical and horizontal fragments of Mongolian script are meticulously arranged into a square border, enclosing a dense central field of calligraphic elements. The composition evokes both containment

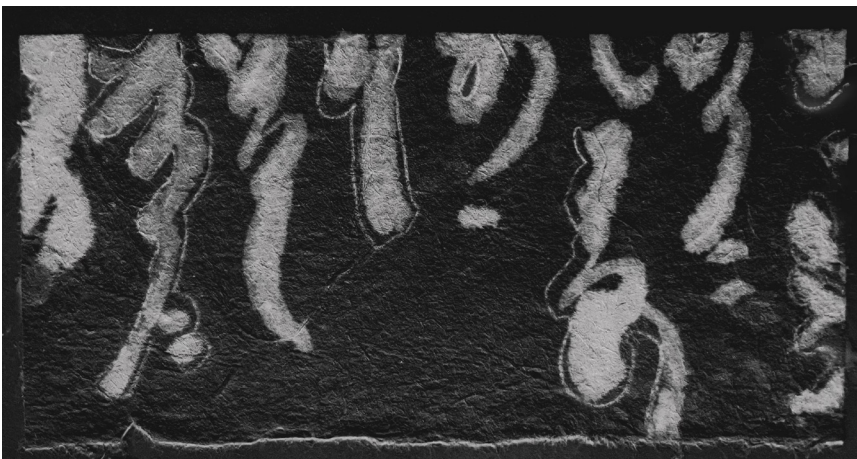


Figure 1. Textual Blocks - “My Hometown” Fragment (Sketch) Ink transfer on textured paper, 2023. Fragments of Mongolian script from the poem My Hometown are partially detached and transferred, turning linguistic memory into abstract traces shaped by erosion and persistence. © Unubaatar Irmuun, 2023, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Textual Blocks - Negative Imprint Study (Sketch) Ink on handmade paper, 2023. Rendered in reversed tonal contrasts, the characters appear as archaeological imprints. Their near-erasure highlights the tension between cultural inscription and disappearance. © Unubaatar Irmuun, 2023, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Cross of Letters - Sketch Mixed media on paper (acrylic, graphite, and handwritten text), 2024. A preparatory study for the Cross of Letters series. Vertical traditional Mongolian script intersects with horizontally oriented Cyrillic forms, establishing the fundamental cruciform structure that symbolises conflict and negotiation between writing systems. © Unubaatar Irmuun, 2024, courtesy of the artist

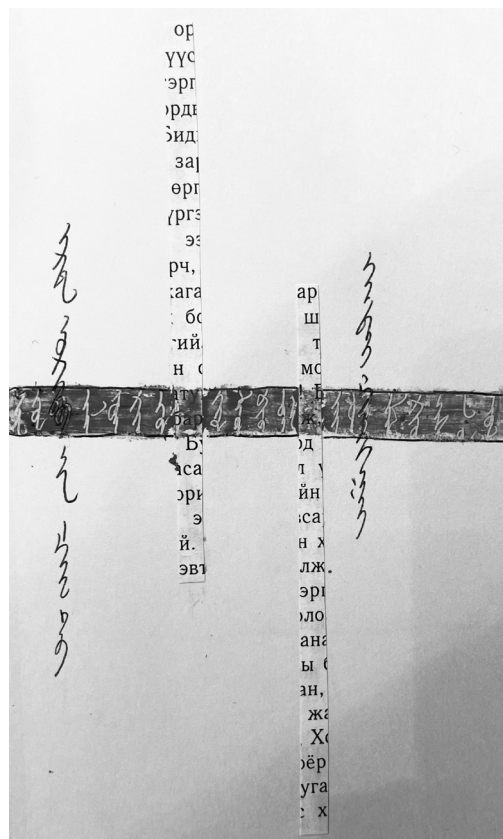


Figure 4. Cross of Letters - Paper Collage Study (Sketch) Collaged printed text with handwritten traditional Mongolian script, acrylic and graphite on paper, 2023. Vertical traditional Mongolian script intersects with horizontally arranged Cyrillic text fragments. The cross structure highlights the conflicted coexistence of historical and modern writing systems. © Unubaatar Irmuun, 2023, courtesy of the artist.

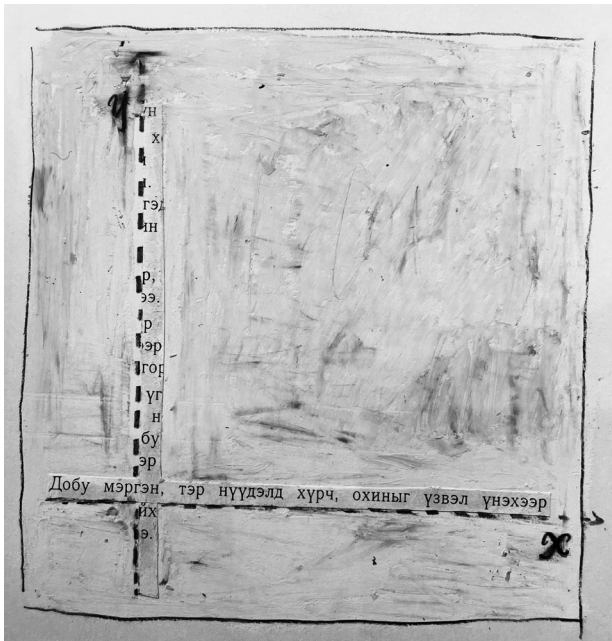


Figure 5. Cross Composition with Obscured Cyrillic Text (Sketch). Mixed media on paper. Printed Cyrillic text is partially embedded into layered paint surfaces, while the cross structure remains visible beneath erasure. The tension between visibility and disappearance reflects the uncertain status of linguistic memory.

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and isolation – a linguistic architecture that confines meaning within structured limits. The use of traditional script in both the centre and the frame creates a layered relationship between interior and exterior, inside and outside the readable system. Viewers may be tempted to “decode” the fragments, but their decontextualisation frustrates any straightforward interpretation. Instead, the viewer is confronted with the impossibility of full comprehension – a metaphor for cultural access shaped by limits of literacy, tradition, and translation. This square format also reflects a psychological and philosophical constraint: that human perception often struggles to transcend inherited conceptual borders. In these works, the writing is no longer about content, but about structure – language becomes a wall. The materials used – including thick acrylic, scratched surfaces, and embedded threads – emphasise the tactile nature of this constraint. Language becomes heavy, physically embedded in the surface, resisting fluidity. In some cases, the border text is looped repeatedly, forming a barrier that must be broken conceptually to access the work’s meaning.

Garbled Characters Everywhere

The Garbled Characters Everywhere series confronts the digital erasure of Mongolian script in the age of technological standardisation. In the modern digital

landscape – especially on global platforms – the traditional vertical Mongolian script often fails to render correctly. Instead of clear writing, users encounter garbled lines, empty space, or the recurring symbol “MVS,” which has become widely recognised among Mongolian traditional script users as a sign of incompatibility. This series takes these visual glitches and elevates them into artistic symbols. By deliberately recreating text input errors – or even writing intentionally “wrong” or meaningless Mongolian script – the work challenges the authority of correct writing and standardised legibility. Over these distorted texts, the artist stamps a large “MVS” symbol, turning a technical error into a cultural artistic statement. One piece borrows lines from classic Mongolian literature, then intentionally distorts or rewrites every word incorrectly. Another piece simulates a corrupted text message – a screenshot in which meaningful language has collapsed into unreadable fragments. The image becomes a haunting representation of lost linguistic connection, echoing the experience of many younger Mongolians unfamiliar with the traditional script. Rather than correcting or restoring the errors, the work preserves and aestheticises them. Glitch becomes concept. Miswriting becomes a medium. These pieces ask: when technology cannot read our script, does it mean we no longer exist in its system?

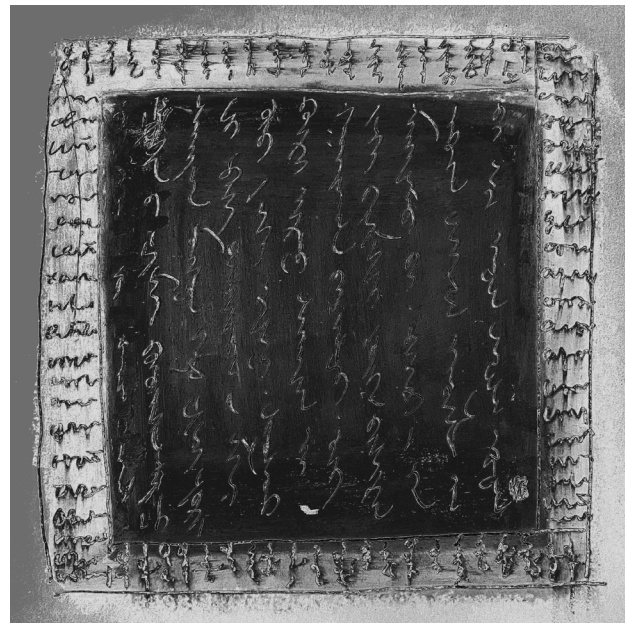


Figure 6. Boundary Constraints (Sketch)

Acrylic, ink, and thread on paper, 2023.

A dense border of vertical and horizontal Mongolian script fragments is stitched around a dark central panel, evoking enforced boundaries and the confinement of language within controlled structures.

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Figure 7. Installation Frame Concept - Sketch. Ink and pencil on paper, 2024. A conceptual plan for enclosing text-based artwork within a square framework composed of Mongolian script fragments. The sketch explores how linguistic boundaries become physical structures in the exhibition space, and how breaking or extending beyond such frames may suggest deeper cognitive or cultural expansion.
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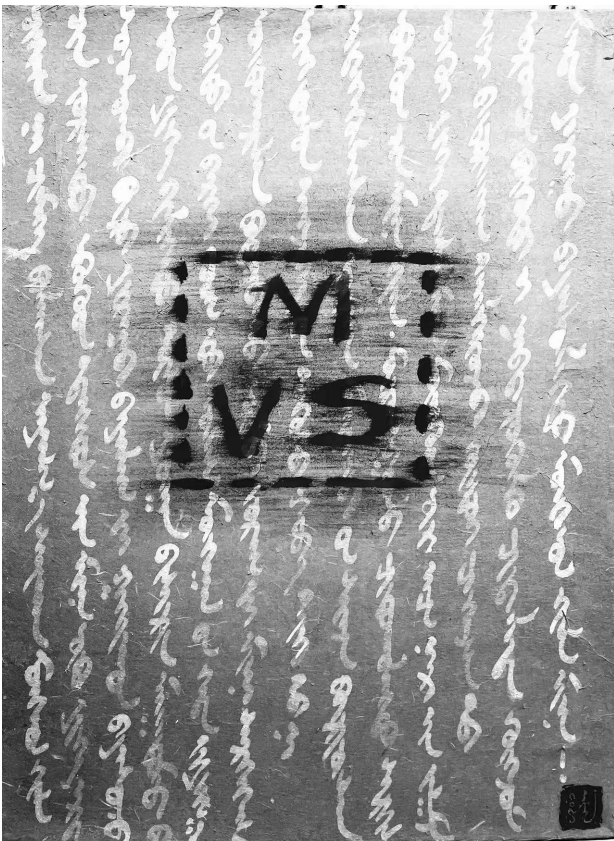
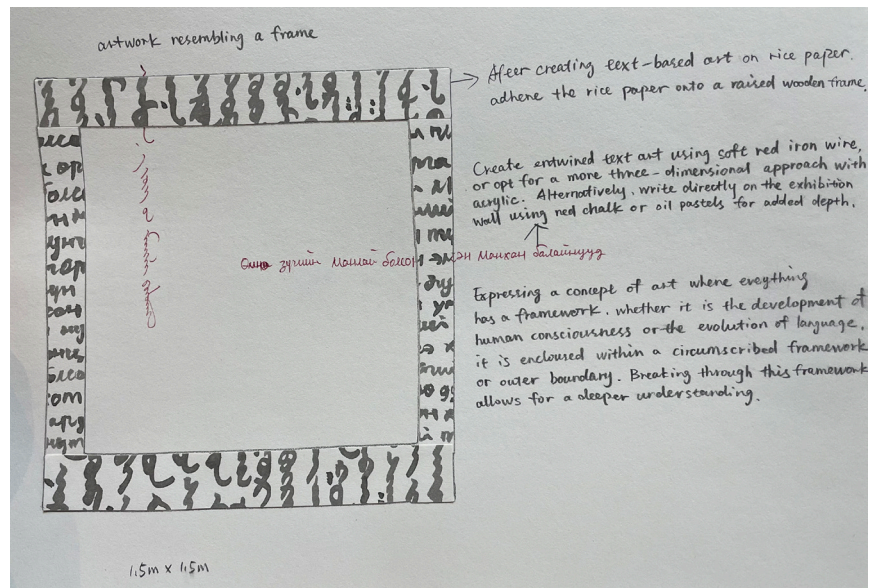


Figure 8. MVS Stamp over Corrupted Text (Sketch)
White ink on handmade paper, 2023.

Traditional Mongolian calligraphic forms are intentionally distorted and overwritten with the stamped letters "MVS," challenging the authority of standard writing and questioning who defines linguistic correctness.

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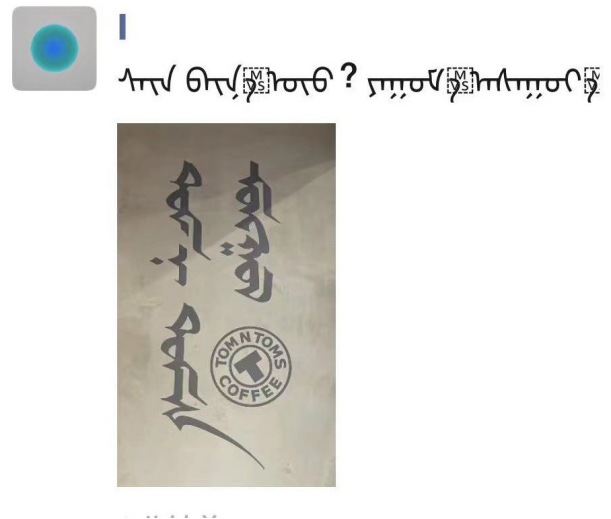


Figure 9. Glitched Message Screenshot Digital print, 2023.
A screenshot of vertical Mongolian script distorted into unreadable system-generated symbols – referencing digital environments where the language fails to be recognised, thus revealing the vulnerability of minority scripts within global technological standards.

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Theoretical Reflection

At its core, *Words No Longer Words* is a visual deconstruction of language. This gesture resonates with the theoretical framework of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction (1976), which challenges the stability of linguistic meaning. According to Derrida, language is never fixed; signs are always in flux, their meanings endlessly deferred. In my practice, I embody this concept by fragmenting Mongolian script – destroying its legibility to reveal a different, unstable visual logic. Meaning becomes unstable, but aesthetic potential emerges.

By cutting, erasing, and reassembling the script, my work turns language into an object of reflection. It ceases to function as a transparent medium of communication and becomes a textured surface, a site of memory, loss, and reinterpretation. This aligns with W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of the "imagetext," which argues that visual and verbal elements are entangled forms of representation rather than separate domains (Mitchell 1994), where he argues that language and image are not opposites but co-constructive forces. My compositions blur this boundary: letters behave like brushstrokes, while abstract shapes still carry linguistic memory.

Furthermore, this project reflects a concern with cultural identity, echoing the theories of Stuart Hall (1996). Hall viewed identity as dynamic and constructed through cultural representation. In my case, Mongolian script operates as a marker of belonging – but one that is technologically threatened and fragmented. My work reclaims this visual form by turning it into a site of resistance and reimagining, asserting the survival of identity through creative transformation. Ultimately, *Words No Longer Words* is not about mourning the loss of language, but about exploring its regenerative potential. Through fragmentation, contradiction, and visual disruption, it opens space for new modes of cultural meaning.

Comparative Artistic Context

The exploration of language as both medium and message is not unique to my practice. Several contemporary artists have similarly worked with script-based forms to interrogate meaning, identity, and power. While each operates within different cultural contexts, these comparisons help situate *Words No Longer Words* within a broader international conversation.

One key reference is Xu Bing, a Chinese artist renowned for his *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991). In this work, Xu created thousands of pseudo-Chinese characters – visually convincing but entirely unreadable. The work questions the authority of language and the trust we place in written systems. Much like *Textual Blocks*, Xu Bing's

practice demonstrates how unreadability can become a tool for conceptual critique and poetic ambiguity.

Another relevant figure is Shirin Neshat, an Iranian-born artist who often overlays Persian script on black-and-white photographic portraits. Her work reflects on gender, language, and cultural displacement. Like *Vertical and Horizontal Crosses*, Neshat's use of overlapping scripts challenges linear readings and creates emotional tension between what is seen and what is read.

A third comparison can be drawn with Glenn Ligon, a Black American artist whose text-based paintings repeat phrases from literature, often to the point of abstraction. His work grapples with identity, legibility, and historical trauma. Like my own *Garbled Characters Everywhere*, Ligon's repetition of semi-legible text visualises the struggle for recognition within dominant cultural systems.

These artists offer different models of how language can function not just as communication, but as a field of resistance, opacity, and transformation. My work builds on this lineage by inserting the endangered Mongolian script into this global conversation – not just to preserve it, but to evolve it through conceptual practice. Unlike these global references, my project uniquely engages with Mongolian script – a writing system that is both historically significant and currently endangered. Rather than working with widely recognised scripts, I focus on a vertical script that faces digital marginalisation and generational loss. By transforming its fragments and even its digital "glitches" into artistic forms, my work turns vulnerability into a source of conceptual strength. This dual role, as both aesthetic practice and cultural resistance, distinguishes my contribution from other international text-based artworks.



Figure 10. Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991. Hand-printed books and scrolls using invented Chinese characters, ink on paper.

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