What is monumentality? I wish to distinguish this notion from the term monumental in the way it is commonly used. The latter generally refers to those huge, enduring, solemn buildings or statues that are called monuments (or monumental) because of their physical size, symbolism, and form; anyone passing a marble obelisk or bronze statue habitually refers to it as a “monument,” even if he or she has no knowledge about the meaning of these statues or buildings. Monumentality refers to an integral element that lends a building, statue, or any large-scale thing a common, commemorative meaning, or refers to the collective memory contained within these physical models. Early in the twentieth century, in his “Modern Worship of Monument: Its Nature and Origins,” the famous Austrian art historian and theoretician Alois Riegl suggested that monumentality is not just represented by buildings or statues of a celebrated type that are specifically intended to commemorate something, but that its range should also contain examples that were not deliberately conceived as such, as well as anything that accrues value through time, such as the remains of ancient civilizations or important dated historic documents. Viewed from another standpoint, John Brinckerhoff Jackson, an American architectural historian, noticed that after the Civil War, a request came from across the nation to pronounce the Gettysburg battlefield a national monument: “Never before has a glebe of many thousands of acres, across so much farmland and roads, been transformed into a monument to an historic event such as happened here.” This fact made Jackson decide that “a monument could be of any form.” It did not have to be a formidable building, nor an artifice; “a monument could be a rough stone or a log; it could be the relic of the ruined wall in Jerusalem; it could even be a tree or a cross.”

So what is anti-monumentality? This notion is linked closely with the anti-authority and anti-tradition of avant-garde art. As mentioned above, “monumentality” makes a building, a statue, or an object a carrier of collective memory, but traditionally monuments reflect the control and shaping of collective memory by political and religious authorities. The Latin root of monumentality means recalling and admonishing. In order to exercise the function of admonition, official
monuments always are awesome, majestic, and inhuman structures; their huge mass controls the public space in which they are placed. Therefore, French scholar Georges Bataille called such monuments dikes antagonizing humanity: “It is through the forms of cathedrals and palaces that the church and the state can admonish the common people, and keep them silenced.” So it is understandable that avant-garde artists, in their stance as rebels, treat the monument as a persistent object of attack. Actually, we can say that all types of avant-garde art have a tendency to topple official monuments and monumentality. An example of such an artist is Claes Oldenburg, a modern American artist who designed a series of anti-monuments, including a huge pair of scissors that imitated the Washington Monument. He explained this project thus: “Obviously, these scissors imitate the Washington Monument in form, but at the same time present some interesting differences, such as the difference between metal and stone, between urban style and exuberant archaism, as well as the confrontation between flexibility and rigidity.”

The linguistic system of this anti-monumentality thus depends on two factors. One is the corporeality of toppling the traditional monument, including size, quality, and shape, as well as the ideas of immortality, grandiosity, and stillness that these physical factors present. Another factor is overthrowing the monumentality of traditional monuments, principally their authority and public presence, and the social orders and political rules that converge within them. Within contemporary Chinese art, the pursuit of anti-monumentality became an important phenomenon of post-Cultural Revolution art, and its political and social causes speak for themselves. Analyzing closely their magnum opus, we see that artists carry out this pursuit in two directions. One is to create counter-monuments, and the other is an attempt to achieve real anti-monuments. The former topples traditional monumentality by subverting official monuments, as a result of which there emerges a new form of personalized monument. The latter rejects any form of monument and archives a sense of absolute anti-monumentality through this rejection. The magnum opus of the former includes the many experimental art projects that have been sited on the Great Wall, and its cause clearly responds to the traditional symbolism of the Great Wall: as the principle symbol of China, this famous ancient building actually represents a political and historic identification with modern China. Relatively, the works that could be termed anti-monumental are few in number because such work must be entirely conceptual and the form itself becomes the object of deconstructive exercises.

Gu Wenda is one of the contemporary Chinese artists who first probed deeply into the realm of anti-monumentality and made an important contribution to the emergence and development of this trend. Early in the mid-1980s, he created the first series of word-formation work, deconstructing traditional calligraphy. His skillful and powerful seal script retained its focus on calligraphy, pursuing the conventional form of beauty and traditional culture, but their specious and unreadable scripts spurned the function of traditional calligraphy to express meaning. This is important because calligraphy is esteemed on the basis of traditional writing and painting techniques, while seal script has been closely linked with inscription and is always treated as a special media for legal documents (such as inscriptions commissioned by the first emperor of the Qin dynasty). Gu Wenda's series invokes a clear, implicit meaning of anti-authority and anti-monumentality, and thus it became one of the most influential forms of conceptual art in the 1985 New Wave Movement.

The United Nations Monuments, which Gu Wenda began to create at the beginning of the 1990s, reflected a new development of this tendency toward anti-authority. This series of huge installations challenges traditional monuments, meanwhile establishing a new type of antagonistic monument. Like Claes Oldenburg, Gu Wenda abandoned the corporeality of traditional monuments and their overarching sense of the eternal, choosing instead the most meaningless relics from the human body, that is, hair, to create a series consecrated to different peoples and races. The difference from Oldenburg is that Gu Wenda was able to see his project through to the end, whereby, due to the magnificence of these monumental forms, people are encouraged to think not only of a specific fine idea or concept but also a variety of paradoxes in the nature of an antagonistic monument. One of these paradoxes is Gu Wenda's obsession with visual spectacle. Like his earlier word-formation seal scripts, visuality and theatricality are the most convulsive factor of these works. We can say that this interest in visuality is common to all antagonistic monuments, but Gu Wenda's visual spectacle makes the rejection of the eternal a precondition: the scripts and patterns formed of hair are like imprints of water and ink placed in a huge space, without weight and substantiality.

The second paradox is the perseverance of collective ideas of nation, race, and state; some projects, for example, the Hong Kong Monument, were created for the memory of an important historic
event (the Hong Kong handover of 1997). If it is said that traditional monuments present the expressions of political or religious authority on such collectives, Gu Wenda used the hair collected from local barbers to symbolize an endless collection of “individuals.” So much hair evoked a sense of tragedy for the viewers, as if the works were less about life than about death. It seems that what these “monuments” commemorated were not the heroic and epic histories of nations and states, but the self-devotion and sacrifices of many people to these histories. On this point, Gu Wenda’s United Nations is analogous to the Vietnam War Memorial designed by Maya Lin and erected before the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

We can think further about the logic and meanings of the Forest of Stone Steles—A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry. Gu Wenda began to conceive of this project from 1993, and twelve years later, in 2004, it was finished. So its invention actually paralleled the United Nations project; both reflected the different aspects of artistic imagination and creativity, and their relationship, similarities, and differences could be understood clearly through comparative analysis. Firstly, these two projects required an epic production process. Both took on similar dimensions and visual convolution. Both could be considered super-eminent, antagonistic monuments, the embodiment of monumental expression at a time when traditional monuments were being challenged in a trend towards personalizing human culture. However, there are important differences between these two works. One of them lies in their corporeality and visuality: if the United Nations were illusory, dimly discernible, and non-material, the Forest of Stone Steles—A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry should be actual, stable, and heavy. These material and visual differences come from the different objects each seeks to commemorate—if the United Nations was framed with the world, in my opinion, the Forest of Stone Steles is a personalized monument that Gu Wenda has erected for Chinese culture. Because the artist is rooted in this culture and retains close links to it, this project’s deconstruction of traditional monuments and construction of anti-monumentality is more difficult, zigzagging, absurd, and imbued with a depth, that, if it were sited within the United Nations, could be incomparable.

Two inspirations for this project—the Forest of Stone Steles and Tang poetry—are both linked with the monumentality of Chinese tradition. As we see in his own introduction to this project,
Thirdly, regardless of whether they were placed above or underground, on steles or epitaph slabs, and whether they were the classics, historical inscriptions, or epitaphs, these stone inscriptions in traditional culture were considered standard and conclusive evidence of history-carving in hard stone itself is an affirmation of the immutability of history. However, Gu Wenda's carved inscriptions in each of the steles in this project have an opposite intention: to express not a historic conclusion but the impossibility of concluding. In his own words, one can experience "the absurd and ironic predicament of a new culture in the course of formation" from these steles, and recognize the phenomenon and results that the imprecision and the impossibility of being precise within cross-culture translations engenders. In my opinion, this is the strongest and clearest expression of anti-monumentality in the Forest of Stone Steles, and it most profoundly reveals the artist's personal identity and his observation of the contemporary world. It is worthy of further analysis.

Forest of Stone Steles—A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry consists of fifty steles with four different forms of Tang poetry carved on each of them, all achieved through three sequential translations of different types as outlined here.

1. Tang poems are translated into English texts based on their literal meanings and carved on the right sides of the steles. Gu employs the most popular and common versions of the Chinese and English texts of these poems devoid of abstruse scholarship. The original Tang poetry is written in the standard Song-style script; the English translations are from Witter Bynner's The Jade Mountain, a popular early English translation of Tang poetry.

2. The principal inscriptions carved in the centre of the steles consist of the Chinese text re-translated from Bynner's English translation based on the sound of the English version. Gu calls this new text as poems made of "Chinese characters simulated from English sounds." But this simulating procedure is not mechanical; rather, it is vulnerable to subjectivity. Gu Wenda has selected the Chinese characters that are close to English sounds but also convey some special meaning, thus providing a non-literary transliteration based on sound with potentials as a reading material. Meanwhile, he has invented the characters that he uses to write these simulated Chinese characters. Therefore, the principal inscriptions manifest a quality of cutting both ways, and, in their spaciousness, seem a mid-phase in the process of transformation, thus implying the possibility of further transformation.
3. The text carved in the left side is the English translation re-translated from the principal inscription based on the meaning. While there is still a strong chance for the illogical, the result of translating further is that the readability of the principal texts in the center of the steles is enhanced and transformed from being a puzzle or an absurd collection of single characters into literal writing with defined rules of grammar and literary sense.

According to Gu Wenda's own introduction, this imprecision and untranslatability have become for him a common puzzle in the course of modern world globalization. He wrote: "Creating a modern Forest of Stone Steles is an idea that came to me six years after I emigrated to the United States. During this time, different world cultures, particularly the American multi-culture, experienced a crisis of identification and re-identification from so-called Americanism to the era of Asia. With the changes of world political and economic modality we are experiencing a transformation and re-combination of culture-centralism and world brinksmanship." Combined with the above discussion, we can see clearly the nature of monumentality and anti-monumentality in Gu Wenda's Forest of Stone Steles—A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry. This monumental work is imbued with a deep sense of history, agglomerating Gu's traditional education with his respect for Chinese culture. On the other hand, this is a contemporary, deconstructive work, reflecting Gu's deep suspicion of the broader complexities of narration and the forces of globalization. The result is a monumental integration of idealism with a sense of crisis. And just in this sense, Forest of Stone Steles—A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry becomes exactly that, "a cultural document of a transforming age," which is what Gu Wenda set out to achieve.

Notes
1 My discussions on this problem are included in "Modernity of Contemporary Chinese Art," see Wu Hung, Works and Exhibitions: Wu Hung's Essays on the Modernity of Contemporary Chinese Art (Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing House, 2005).