

Chinese Contemporary Art Series



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Xu Bing

Beyond the Book from the Sky

Chinese Contemporary Art Series

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This series focuses on what is happening to Chinese art in the course of recent decades. Since China has changed greatly, it is now a curiosity and a research task: What is that? Why is that? How can it be that? Culturally, why does Chinese art have its own special image narrative? How to evaluate and criticize Chinese art made today? Is it a continuation of its history and heritage? Is anything new that could be reconsidered further? Is Chinese art an artistic issue or a political one? This series of books will concentrate on such questions and issues and will invite international writers and scholars to contribute their thoughts on the explanation and elaboration of Chinese art today.

More information about this series at <http://www.springer.com/series/13527>

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Editors

Xu Bing

Beyond the Book from the Sky

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Foreword



(Left) Heinz Götze (1912–2001), Founder of the Heinz Götze Foundation. (Middle and right) Xu Bing (b. 1955), Professor at Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing

I remember very well the first time I visited the Alte Aula, Heidelberg University's old lecture hall, 30 years ago. The occasion was a lecture by Golo Mann, and I was deeply impressed by the atmosphere here in this hall. I am glad to open Xu Bing's first Heinz Götze lecture in Heidelberg in this special place.

The Heinz Götze Foundation aims to honor my late father, who was fascinated by a variety of subjects, such as archaeology, art history, music, medicine, and mathematics.

My father was especially attracted to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. His collection was published in the catalog *Chinesische und japanische Kalligraphie aus zwei Jahrtausenden: die Sammlung Heinz Götze Heidelberg*, and I would like to quote from its preface:

In my youth I was privileged to read Richard Wilhelm's books and to visit the Chinese porcelain collection in the Dresden Zwinger. From these I formed a picture of those ancient and distant cultures—vague but perhaps all the more beguiling on that account—which present such an interesting contrast to our European culture with its ancient heritage of Greece and Rome. Then came the troubled years, and they were to push all that to the back of my mind for a long time. My first opportunity to visit Japan came in the early 1960s, when I followed up a business trip with a fortnight's holiday. My friends John and Kimiko Powers were there to introduce me to the landscapes and art treasures of this fascinating country. They did not just show me around temples, they arranged for me to meet with monks and priests; in the same way, our viewings of museums were supplemented by visits to art dealers. My first Japanese acquisitions date from this time. Calligraphy holds a special charm for me, and the more I learned about it, the stronger my interest grew. I began by purchasing separate items for purely aesthetic reasons and I gradually started to build a collection. As always, the more it attracted me, the more I learned about calligraphy. When at last I had the chance to visit China, I was able to satisfy my desire to complete my collection with examples from the mother country.

Against this background, it seemed obvious for the Foundation to cooperate with the Institute for East Asian Art History. We are delighted and proud to say that the Heinz Götze Visiting Professorship and the Heinz Götze Scholarship for Chinese Art History have become vital elements of teaching and learning at Heidelberg University.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the authors in this volume and their contributions to this enlightening journey in contemporary Chinese art.

Thank you very much!

Heinz Götze Foundation Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Cornelius Götze

Introduction

Abstract This introduction provides an overview of the current book project, which seeks to explore the international reception of Xu Bing and address neglected aspects of the artist's work. Most current readings of Xu center on his manipulation of language in visual forms. There is also a need to engage the reader with the relevance of his other works in relation to critical issues of global contemporary art, particularly cross-cultural communication and the roots of his work in socialism. The current volume emerged from a series of symposia and panel discussions between Xu and scholars at Heidelberg University in July 2015. It includes transcriptions of these exchanges, which aim to critically re-examine transcultural issues in Xu's art practice, with a focus on Xu's work since the 1990s.

The current book results from a series of symposia and panel discussions between Xu Bing, scholars, and students held at Heidelberg University in July 2015, in his role as distinguished Heinz Götze Visiting Professor. This introduction provides an overview of the current book project and neglected aspects of Xu's works; the contributions in this publication aim to address this gap. The essays in this volume seek to critically re-examine Xu's trajectory since the 1980s in its transcultural contexts.

Our target audience includes non-Chinese readers. For this reason, Chinese sources are consistently translated into English in each of the essays, followed by the original text (in Chinese). For the sake of clarity, Chinese transliteration (*pinyin*) is not usually provided unless it is related to the analysis of the works. For references in the Chinese language, Chinese characters are given when they are first mentioned, but English translations are cited afterwards. Unless noted, only the English version is cited in bilingual references. The following provides an overview of Xu's international reception and how the contributions in this study address dramatic boundary crossing in Xu's work.

The Reception of Xu Bing's Work Since 1988 and the Contributions of This Volume

Xu Bing's interest in exploring mechanisms of communication through language made him a representative figure of global contemporary art. In the 1990s, Xu gradually gained recognition in the U.S., where most of his exhibitions occurred. The earliest art criticism of his work written in English focused on his integration of objects with symbols, notably his *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991), an installation with thousands of invented pseudo-Chinese characters printed in book form, which confuses viewers.¹ Stanley Abe's article in 1998 surveys the general reception of Xu in the 1990s.² Abe points out that the *Book from the Sky* highlights a crisis of modern China through the power of text. In the Chinese content, Xu's project challenged normative dicta by offering an anti-monument. In the new linguistic context of North America

¹ This work is analyzed in Chia Chi Jason Wang's article in this volume.

² Abe, Stanley K., "No Questions, No Answers: China and A Book from the Sky," *Boundary 2* 25, n. 3 (Autumn 1998): 169–92.

pervaded by postmodernism and poststructuralism, Xu's work became empowered to criticize any cultural center (Eurocentric modernism, the Sino-laden tradition, corporate institutions, etc.). Furthermore, the fabricated Chinese scripts can create "in-between" spaces and states of uncertainty or imbalance for a non-Chinese reading audience—since members of this audience lack Chinese reading skills and have total freedom to decode the scripts in any number of interpretive directions.³ Beyond a few exhibition catalogs, most of the monographs on Xu Bing have focused on his manipulation of language. Britta Erickson argues in *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words* that Xu's work is derived from his mistrust of language, and this subversion of a monumental aspect of culture opens up discourses on global contemporary art.⁴ Erickson remarks, "When the *Book from the Sky* appeared, it proved that Chinese art could make a major contribution to international contemporary art without needing to apologize for its indebtedness to the West."⁵ Tsao Hsingyuan compiled the volume *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art*, with a focus on Xu's text-based works. Tomii Reiko's edited volume, entitled *Xu Bing*, which appeared in 2011, is primarily a catalogue raisonné; it offers detailed information about the dating and background information of the artist's work. These writings supplied a supportive foundation on which Xu established himself in an American context; as a New York-based immigrant artist he, in effect, came to represent an identifiable international voice of the metropolis.

In fact, the *Book from the Sky* received vehement critique when it was first exhibited at the National Art Museum of China in 1988. Chinese reviewers saw it as a bold experiment and a turning point for indigenous contemporary art offering new aesthetics that demand active participation from viewers.⁶ Curator and art critic Fan Di'an (b. 1955) identified a gap between the signified and signifier in Xu's fabricated characters, which is a critique of traditional Chinese values creating an effect of alienation: "Xu Bing created a work that derived from his subjectivity yet was independent from it."⁷ Jia Fangzhou observes that Xu eliminates the direct link between the meaning of the text and aesthetic-visual symbols.⁸ An official art critic, Yang Chengyin (b. 1926), published an assessment of '85 New Wave artists and asserted that Xu's fabricated characters were appealing to bourgeois taste, rejecting established art norms in relation to their social function. He criticized such art as "Ghost Pounding the Wall," a Chinese idiom that describes meaningless, nonsensical events occurring repetitively.⁹ In 1990, the Ministry of Propaganda, the Association of Writers and Artists, and the Writers' Association held a meeting to discuss future strategies. Some critics representing leftist orthodox perspectives decried experimental art as a poison of capitalist freedom.¹⁰ Even Xu's admired teacher Gu Yuan implied in his remarks that Xu converted to Western art values and abandoned the Maoist paradigm of art serving the people.¹¹ These critical voices from officials explain the reason why, throughout the 1990s, there was a lack of writing on Xu in Chinese language sources. Still, Yang's critique did not have a long-lasting impact on Xu's career, and Xu went

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–2.

⁴ Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

⁵ Erickson, *Words without Meaning*, 39.

⁶ Yin Ji'nan, "Xu Bing and Lu Shengzhong Bi-Solo Show 徐冰、呂勝中藝術展觀後," *Fine Arts in China*, November 14, 1988, 1; Zhong Hua, "The Emergence of Chinese Modernism, A Realization of Consciousness of our Time 中國現代主義的出現, 時代普遍意識的體現," *Fine Arts in China*, November 14, 1988, 1.

⁷ Fan Di'an, "Pursuing Eternity: On Xu Bing's Art 追求永恆: 徐冰創作線索探尋," *Research in History of Art 美術研究*, n. 1 (1989): 37.

⁸ Jia Fangzhou, "Five Explanations of the 'Book from the Sky'," *Jiangsu Pictorial*, issue 2, 1990.

⁹ Yang Chengyin, "Summary of 'New Wave' Aesthetics '新潮' 美術論綱," *Arts Journal 文藝報*, June 2, 1990, 5. It is said Yang was an agent in the Ministry of Culture. Xu adopted the phrase "ghost pounding the wall" as title of his work made of monumental rubbings of the Great Wall in 1990.

¹⁰ Erickson, 41.

¹¹ Letter from Feng Boyi to Xu Bing, June 8, 1990, cited in Erickson, 41.

abroad soon thereafter, as visiting scholar at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, following a brief stint in South Dakota.

Due to the success of *Book from the Sky*, the period from 1987 to 1988 is often identified as the turning point of Xu's artistic trajectory. Xu carved five thousand fabricated Chinese characters on movable type and printed them in book sets, posters, and scrolls, and installed them as a comprehensive environmental work. In this volume, Jason Wang offers a new reading of the *Book from the Sky* as a reaction to the counterfeit culture and empty slogans during the Cultural Revolution, with an analysis of Xu's oeuvre from the late 1970s to 2015 in relation to his consciousness of leftist positions in art. Curator Wu Yao returns to Xu's less explored practice in the early 1980s and discusses his earliest woodblock prints and etchings—a phase during which he transitioned from an “official” and “academic” artist to an experimental printmaker.

Xu consciously revised his working method in order to cultivate an artistic presence in two worlds, one in New York as an international artist and another in Beijing with socialist roots. His works since the 1990s, such as *Cultural Animal*, *English Square Calligraphy*, *Background Story*, and *Phoenix*, although radical, are subtle investigations of audience participation and transculturality. This trajectory demonstrates that Xu utilizes different transformative materials connected to the idea of printing and reproduction to explore new possibilities of medium. Wu Hung was the first to observe the formal links of Xu's installation work to monumentality.¹² Indeed, Xu's work extends to social projects and digital elements that are interactive. And his experience of exhibiting in North America in the 1990s triggered him to reconsider installative space in relation to his audience. In the current volume, Yu-Chieh Li suggests that the aspect of two-dimensionality is crucial in understanding Xu's early installation works; this issue is especially relevant from the 1980s to the 1990s when Chinese artists developed new spatial schemes for their exhibitions overseas. Sarah Fraser discusses the medium specificity of contemporary ink and argues that ink is transferred into multiple expressions that re-enact calligraphy strokes. In different expressions of ink performativity, the material of ink becomes secondary. As pointed out by Meiling Cheng, in *Monkeys Grasp the Moon* (2001) and *The Living Word* (2001), Xu problematizes the complex relationship between reading the textual and the visual. Her article is the first study on the convergence of the use of animals and visual reading in Xu's installation works.

Artificial and natural waste became a major material through which Xu would connect art with society. John Clark's essay includes a detailed analysis of how *Background Story Series* combines the technical and the semiotic into hybrid images, through recycling and recreating cultural signs to create the simulacra of painting. Birgit Hopfener proposes in her remarks during the third Xu Bing panel that the *Background Story* realized in Berlin (2004) demands that viewers position themselves in relation to the historical issues addressed in the work, situating their personal histories within national histories in the performative act of viewing. Xinran Guo analyzes the making of *Phoenix*, a recent work made of industrial debris that emerged in China's radical urbanization, with a particular focus on how the aestheticization of labor and social realities connects. Yang Xiao traces the tradition of realism and its intertwined relationship with political ideology since China's Modernism and how Xu's notions of realism developed into social projects. What she calls “critical realism” results in capitalizing labor. Xu's various approaches to highlighting contemporary society in his work can be seen as his responses to Gu Yuan's critique of him; and yet, his branding of art as serving the people by integrating working-class creativity may also be interpreted as complicit with neo-liberalism—a realistic picture of contemporary China's economic system. In the third panel, Xu further shares his insights on audience participation.

We include a timeline of important events of contemporary Chinese art in this volume, which is divided by geographic location; Xu's participation is highlighted in bold. This

¹² Wu Hung, “A ‘Ghost Rebellion’: Notes on Xu Bing's ‘Nonsense Writing’ and Other Works,” *Public Culture* (1994): 411–18.

structure allows the reader to easily trace and map the reception of post-Mao Chinese art. It also indicates the ways in which Xu's trajectory intersects diachronically and synchronically with the larger history of art; this enables us to see shifting cultural borders.

Transculturality: Art as Boundary Crossing

Contributions in this volume address boundary crossing between social realism and social art; they also critique the question of censorship and the freedom of viewers. Particular attention is directed toward new material in Xu's oeuvre that has not been adequately or systematically analyzed, including *Background Story*, *Phoenix*, animal works, and his early prints. The exploration takes place through a multitude of voices: curatorial perspectives, scholarly analysis, and the artist's direct commentary.

Already in 1992, Jonathan Hay predicted that the international interest in contemporary Chinese artists would inevitably reduce them to cultural symbols.¹³ Two decades have passed, and Xu proved that it is through complicating representations that he can subvert the old power structures of Euroamerica that render it as the center. His accomplishments are recognized by his receipt of several American grants, including fellowships from the MacArthur and Coca Cola Foundations. As illustrated in the timeline, Xu represented Chinese experimental art and established himself internationally through solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C., as well as group shows during the 1990s in Berlin, Hong Kong, Ohio, and Venice. His first large-scale retrospective took place in Germany in 2004 at the Asian Art Museum in Dahlem in the Berlin suburbs. Xu's influence in Asia was in fact translated from the U.S. to Chinese-speaking regions. Taiwanese galleries such as Longmen and Eslite were the earliest to exhibit Xu and other contemporary Chinese artists in the early 1990s. Hong Kong established outlets for contemporary art from the mainland very early, and one of the four editions of *Book from the Sky* is collected by the Hong Kong Art Museum. Still, Xu had fewer events in the Asia Pacific regions until the 2000s. In Japan, he won the first Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize in 2003. Australia, India, Korea, and Singapore also demonstrated growing efforts in facilitating art exchanges among Asian artists; Xu has sporadically participated in small- and large-scale exhibitions in those countries since the turn of the twenty-first century.

The transcultural aspect of Xu's work does not merely rely on cultural translation; it depends on his art of contradiction. Barbara Mittler remarks in the third Xu Bing panel, "Audience Participation in Xu Bing's Works," that the political function of art in Chinese tradition is not discontinued in socialism; the beauty and function of art, and the meaningless meanings, also co-exist in Xu's work. In addition to paralleling Chinese and Euroamerican cultures, his works boldly transgress the boundaries of ethics and art. *A Case Study of Transference* (1991) presents the mating between a pig and a sow (triggered by hormones); their surfaces are inscribed with pseudo-English and Chinese scripts respectively, which brutally perform cultural conflict. *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (2000) is an installation of poetry made of dust from the remains of the 9/11 disaster—a site of communication between art and non-art that challenges conventional values.

The border, as described by Étienne Balibar, consists of peripheral areas where differences are confronted and formed.¹⁴ This border is not the margin *per se*, nor is it a solid form; it is a zone where communication occurs across two entities. Thus, the border accommodates a wide

¹³ Jonathan Hay, "Ambivalent Icons: Works by Five Chinese Artists Based in the United States," *Orientations* 23, n. 7 (July 1992): 37–43.

¹⁴ Étienne Balibar and Erin M. Williams, "World Borders, Political Borders," *PMLA*, v. 117, n. 1, (Jan. 2002): 71–78.

range of values, which reciprocate and inform Xu's attitudes about the praxis of art. In fact, his work never confronts the policy and ideology of the Communist Party directly. Instead, he maneuvers between the global and the local, neoliberal and socialist paradigms. As pointed out by Xinran Guo in this volume, Xu draws a parallel between artistic production and working-class labor in *Phoenix*; however, he does not eliminate the hierarchy between art and labor in this project. The goal is not so much to confront institutions as to blur the aesthetic hierarchy between high and low. According to Jason Wang, the obscure ideologies revealed in Xu's work are related to his childhood trauma during the Cultural Revolution. His father was labeled a rightist and removed from his position at Peking University. In order to be admitted into an art academy, one needs to have a good family record, and Xu volunteered to work in the rural area for this purpose. From 1981 to 1990, he taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and represented China in several diplomatic exhibitions overseas. After being a modern-day "globetrotter" for approximately two decades, Xu returned to the system with his appointment as vice president at CAFA in 2007, representing China's indigenous contemporary art with new dimensions and expectations. In this official role, Xu had to consider manifold and obscure symbols to be productive inside and outside China. In fact, most Chinese experimental artists who grew up in the 1980s employ similar ways to survive internationally. They were exposed to European theories and philosophies and combined them with grassroots culture. For example, the fabricated characters in *Book from the Sky* are by no means representative of Chinese orthodox philosophies, but they leverage a border zone for flexible interpretation. Xu has repeatedly quoted Mao Zedong's view on art's relation to society as a major source relevant to his work process, but there is flexibility behind such claims.¹⁵ He can appear to be both a socialist in China and an activist outside of China. One might argue that his projects exist at the boundary between these worlds, as people from different backgrounds contribute their distinct readings to his work based on their own knowledge, rather than challenging it.

Xu's act of boundary crossing includes a similar logic found in postmodern theory in French literature, notably Jacques Derrida's writing on deconstructionism. Derrida and Xu met in person at a conference at the State University of New York at Albany in 2000.¹⁶ Xu confessed to not fully understanding Derrida, although his work certainly problematizes the gap between the signifier and signified in languages (both Chinese and European), which became a powerful tool to challenge the logic of the Western-centric art world.¹⁷ Derrida uses the neologism of *différance* as an example to challenge the nature of writing and speaking: in both English and French, the differences between the English word "difference" and the French "différance" cannot be heard or distinguished.¹⁸ The French verb *différer* has the meaning of both to defer (in time) and differ (in space) in its Latin etymology. As a consequence, the signifier does not depend on the signified, but cross-compares with other signifiers. These perpetual cross-references among symbols and texts are summarized as *différance*—here meanings are expanded and generated, and even lead to misunderstandings in a communication process. *Différance* is an attempt to blur this hierarchy in language and its representations, which parallels the representational strategies in Xu's text-based works. The individual differences in the communication process largely mapped out the epochal spirit of globalization in which art is a medium for exchange, yet everyone interprets their own version.¹⁹ Linguistic and visual structures are two entangled elements in Xu's work. In his text-based projects, language does

¹⁵ See Xu Bing, "Re-activating Tradition."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Xu Bing, "To Mr. Jacques Derrida 致: 雅克德里達先生," (written December 20, 2005) *My True Scripts* (Beijing: CITC Press, 2015), 63.

¹⁸ See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

not reside behind the image, one can no longer differentiate the text from the visual. The viewer encounters a hybrid entity that occupies a space between both arenas. For example, *Landscape* (1999–) and *Background Stories* (2004–) interact with the Chinese modular system in painting behind the idyllic landscape. Here the hierarchy between image and text does not exist, as the two are entangled.²⁰ It is in this entanglement that boundary crossing takes place.

²⁰ Boris Groys indicates that the image is perceived with a frustrated linguistic desire. Language structure (not characters) is foreign to the image. See “The Border between Word and Image,” *Theory, Culture, & Society* 2, n. 2 (2011): 69–93.

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