



徐冰

XU BING

LANGUAGE AND NATURE

文字与自然

Curator 策展人

Britta Erickson 林似竹

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自然 | LANGUAGE | 徐冰 | NATURE | 文字

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XU BING

The Artist

Xu Bing traces his family roots to Wenling in Zhejiang province, China. He was born in Chongqing, China in 1955. In 1977, he entered the printmaking department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (CAFA) where he completed his bachelor's degree in 1981 and stayed on as an instructor, earning his MFA in 1987. In 1990, on the invitation of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he moved to the United States. Xu served as the Vice President of CAFA from 2008 to 2014 and he is now a professor at CAFA, advising PhD students. He currently lives and works in Beijing and New York.

Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas, the United States; The Louvre Museum, France; the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the United Kingdom; Queen Sofia National Museum and Joan Miro Foundation, Spain; Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia; National Gallery of Canada; National Gallery of Prague, Czech Republic, Museum Ludwig, Germany, and National Art Museum of China, amongst other major institutions. Additionally, Xu Bing has been repeatedly invited to show his work at international exhibitions, such as the 45th, 51st and 56th Venice Biennales, the Biennale of Sydney, Johannesburg Biennale, and the Sao Paulo Biennale amongst others.

Over the years, Xu Bing's work has appeared in high-school and college textbooks around the world, including Prentice Hall & Abrams' *Art Past, Art Present*, Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* and Craig Clunas's *Chinese Art*, a volume in the *Oxford History of Art* series, Jane Farver's *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s - 1980s* (Queens Museum of Art Press) and *Art Worlds in Dialogue* (Museum Ludwig Press). In 2001, the Smithsonian Institute published *The Art of Xu Bing: Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words* (written by Britta Erickson). In 2006, the Princeton University Press published *Persistence/Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*, a multidisciplinary study of Xu Bing's landmark work *Book from*

the Sky. In 2009, Bernard Quaritch Ltd. published *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book* (written by John Cayley and others). In 2011, the University of Virginia Press published *Xu Bing: Tobacco Project - Duke I Shanghai / Virginia, 1999 - 2011* (edited by Reiko Tomii, written by John B. Ravenal and others). In 2012, the New York University Press published *Xu Bing and Chinese Contemporary Art* (edited by Hsingyuan Cao and Roger T. Ames) and Beijing Culture and Arts Press published *Xu Bing: the Birth of the Phoenixes* (edited by Zhou Zan). From 2012, different versions of *Book from the Ground* were published in the US, Germany, France, Spain, Russia and many other countries and regions. In 2012, The MIT Press published *The Book about Xu Bing's Book from the Ground* (edited by Mathieu Borysevicz), and the Chinese version was published by Guangxi Normal University Press. In 2015, the exhibition catalogue *Taohuayuan: A Lost Village Utopia* was published by Xu Bing Studio and Jing and Kai. In 2015, Beijing CITIC Press published *My True Words* by Xu Bing. In 2017, *Xu Bing's Background Story* was published by SDX publishing company.

In 1999, Xu Bing was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship "in recognition of his capacity to contribute importantly to society, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy." In 2003, Xu Bing was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize, and in 2004 he won the first Wales International Visual Art Prize, Artes Mundi. In 2006, the Southern Graphics Council awarded Xu Bing their lifetime achievement award in recognition of the fact that his "use of text, language and books has impacted the dialogue of the print and art worlds in significant ways." In 2008, Professor Robert Harrist, Chair of Chinese Art at Columbia University, the United States, taught a graduate seminar entitled "The Art of Xu Bing." Xu was awarded Doctor of Humane Letters by Columbia University in 2010. In 2015, he was awarded the 2014 Department of State-Medal of Arts for his efforts to promote cultural understanding through his artworks, and was appointed A. D. White Professors-at-large by Cornell University in April 2015. The film *Dragonfly Eyes* directed by Xu Bing was nominated in the main competition of the Lacarno International Film Festival and awarded first prize of FIPRESCI Prizes in 2017.

BRITTA ERICKSON

The Curator

Britta Erickson, Ph.D. is an independent scholar and curator living in Palo Alto, California. She has curated major exhibitions at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C. (*Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing*) and the Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University (*On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West*). In 2007 she co-curated the Chengdu Biennial, which focused on ink art, and in 2010 she was a contributing curator for *Shanghai: Art of the City* (Asian Art Museum, San Francisco). Dr. Erickson has written numerous books, articles, and essays on contemporary Chinese art. She has produced a series of short films about ink painting entitled *The Enduring Passion for Ink*. Ms. Erickson is on the advisory boards of The Ink Society (Hong Kong) and Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (Beijing), as well as the editorial board of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. In 2006 she was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in Beijing on the Chinese contemporary art market. Dr. Erickson received her Ph. D. in Art History, focusing on China, from Stanford University.

Her publications include three books—*The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words* (Seattle, 2001), *On the Edge: Contemporary Chinese Artists Encounter the West* (Stanford/Hong Kong, 2004), and *China Onward; The Estella Collection: Chinese Contemporary Art, 1966-2006* (Humblebæk, 2007)—as well as biographical entries for *Grove Art Online* (Oxford, 2005) and numerous articles and essays. She is frequently a speaker at international symposia, invited as an authority on issues in contemporary Chinese art practice, collecting, and criticism.

徐冰

艺术家

徐冰，祖籍中国浙江温岭，一九五五年生于重庆，长在北京。一九七七年考入北京中央美术学院版画系，一九八一年毕业留校任教，一九八七年获得中央美术学院硕士学位。一九九零年作为荣誉艺术家访美。二零零七年回国，二零零八至二零一四年曾任中央美术学院副院长，现为教授，博士生导师，工作、生活于北京和纽约。作品曾在美国纽约现代美术馆、大都会博物馆、华盛顿赛克勒国家美术馆、纽约新当代艺术美术馆、堪萨斯史宾沙艺术博物馆、英国大英博物馆、维多利亚与亚伯特博物馆、法国卢浮宫博物馆、西班牙索菲亚女王国家美术馆、米罗美术馆、澳大利亚当代艺术博物馆、新南威尔士美术馆、加拿大国家美术馆、捷克布拉格国家美术馆、德国路维希美术馆及中国美术馆等艺术机构展出；多次受邀参加威尼斯双年展、悉尼双年展、圣保罗双年展、约翰内斯堡双年展等国际展。

作品收录于：美国一九九七年版世界艺术史教科书《古今艺术》(Prentice Hall, Abrams 出版社)，美国及欧洲权威世界艺术史教科书《加德纳世界艺术史》，《牛津艺术史：中园艺术》(柯律格著)，皇后艺术博物馆出版《全球的观念主义：观点的起源 1950s—1980s》(简弗文著)，路德维希博物馆出版《对话中的艺术世界》。二零零一年美国史密森学会出版《文字游戏：徐冰的艺术》(Britta Erickson 著)，二零零六年美国普林斯顿大学出版社出版《持续性 / 转型——以文字为图像：徐冰的艺术》，二零零九年英国伯纳德·夸里奇有限公司出版《创作天书的道路》(John Cayley 等著)。二零一一年美国佛吉尼亚大学出版社出版《烟草计划：杜克、上海、佛吉尼亚》(John B. Ravenal 等著)。二零一二年纽约大学出版社出版《徐冰与中国当代艺术》(曹星源主编)，北京文化艺术出版社出版《徐冰：凤凰的诞生》(周瓛编)。从二零一二年起，不同版本的《地书》在美国、德国、法国、西班牙、俄罗斯、韩国等国家及地区发行出版。二零一二年，美国 MIT 出版社、中国广西师大出版社出版分别出版《地书之书》的英文及中文版本(Borysevicz Mathieu 编)。二零一五年，展览图册《桃花源的理想一定要实现》由徐冰工作室

及 Jing & Kai 出版。二零一五年，北京中信出版社出版徐冰的首部文集《我的真文字》。二零一七年，《背后的故事》由生活·读书·新知三联书店发行出版。

一九九九年由于他的“原创性、创造能力、个人方向和对社会，尤其在版画和书法领域中作出重要贡献的能力”获得美国最重要的个人成就奖，麦克亚瑟“天才奖”(MacArthur Award)。二零零三年“由于对亚州文化的发展所做的贡献”获得第十四届日本福冈亚洲文化奖。二零零四年获得首届威尔士国际视觉艺术奖 (Artes Mundi)，评委会主席奥奎 (Okwui Emvezor) 在授奖辞中说：“徐冰是一位能够超越文化界线，将东西方文化相互转换，用视觉语言表达他的思想和现实问题的艺术家。”二零零六年由于“对文字、语言和书籍溶智的使用，对版画与当代艺术这两个领域间的对话和沟通所产生的巨大影响”获全美版画家协会“版画艺术终身成就奖”。二零零八年，美国哥伦比亚大学中国艺术系主任罗伯特·哈瑞斯特 (Robert Harrist) 教授开设名为“徐冰的艺术”的硕士专题研讨。二零一零年被美国哥伦比亚大学授予人文学荣誉博士学位。二零一五年被颁授美国国务院艺术勋章，被美国康乃尔大学授予安德鲁·迪克森·怀特教授称号。二零一七年电影作品《蜻蜓之眼》入选洛迦诺电影节主竞赛单元并获得费比西奖国际影评人奖一等奖。



林似竹

策展人

林似竹博士，现为独立学者与策展人，居于美国加利福尼亚帕洛奥图。她曾为华盛顿赛克勒美术馆策划“文字游戏：徐冰的当代艺术”展览，也为斯坦福大学坎特视觉艺术中心策划过“边缘：当代中国艺术家与西方的邂逅”展览。2007年，她参与策划了以水墨艺术为主题的成都双年展。此后，又作为特约策展人筹划了2010年在旧金山亚洲艺术博物馆举办的“上海：城市中的艺术”展览。林博士在当代中国艺术领域著述颇丰，已写作了数部著作、论文和随笔，并制作了当代水墨艺术纪录片系列《墨咏》。此外，林女士也是香港“水墨会”、北京“三影堂摄影艺术中心”顾问委员会成员，及《典藏国际版文选》、《亚太艺术杂志》编委成员。

由她著写的出版物包括《无意义的字，无字的意义：徐冰的艺术》（西雅图，2001年）、《在边缘：中国当代艺术遇到西方》（斯坦福/香港，2004年）和《艾丝黛拉收藏：中国当代艺术1966-2006》（汉勒贝克，2007）。此外，她还为Grove Art Online（牛津，2005）撰写条目，并参与出版大量的文章和论文。作为中国当代艺术实践、收藏和批评的权威人士，她经常被邀请至国际研讨会发言。

批留各伙獲碎咽是刊佩佩乃烈秀越外州虎樹散隱奔豈尚幻寐失命泉朔嫩颯声
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廉屯緣鈇祓蟻眩魁戕媿凖攷呖禳箭峻訛

吻方恣綬厖冑彝嚮農奄崙熒翳簾敵颯敵

莧鬘臍熈耕畝奔功簾幾盈跋妾处風灼釐

瑁硫缺妝烈虺矣庾岬幽基充奔坊敵奠施

XU BING, NATURE, AND THE VEIL OF LANGUAGE

Britta Erickson, PhD

INTRODUCTION: THE *BOOK FROM THE SKY*

From the moment Xu Bing entered the stage of contemporary art, in China, with his 1988 beta version of what now is known as the *Book from the Sky* 天书 (Tianshu, 1987-1991), the relationship between humankind and language has been considered the dominant leitmotif of his oeuvre¹ (fig. 1) (The work's original name was 析世鉴—世纪末卷 *Xi shi jian—shiji mojuan* [An Analyzed Reflection of the World: the Final Volume of the Century]). The *Book from the Sky* in its finished state is presented as either a boxed set of four hand-printed and traditionally string-bound books housed in a box of walnut wood; or an immersive installation of books, wall panels, and scrolls of text draping down from above (figs. 2-3). Both the boxed set of books and the components of the installation are printed with graphs that strongly resemble Chinese characters, but are in fact the artist's invention. Chinese characters most often are composed of two or three or more set groups of lines (often designated "radicals") that suggest meaning or indicate sound. Xu Bing recombined such character components to make new characters devoid of formally recognized meaning. Other times, he added a few extra lines to an existing character to create an interesting, aesthetically compelling character, again with no recognized meaning. He invented several thousand, perhaps four thousand, but chose just the best twelve hundred or so to carve into wood blocks, to be typeset and printed (fig. 4). For Chinese-literate viewers, the act of trying to read these illegible characters is frustrating, but quite often leads to a moment of realization: Oh, those really are not Chinese characters! (fig. 5)

Ever a perfectionist, Xu Bing redid the *Book from the Sky*: this second and final version was shown in the seminal and notorious 1989 *China Avant/Garde* exhibition at the National Gallery in Beijing (now known as the National Art Museum of China, or NAMOC), and is the first arrangement of the installation that has since

1. 徐冰版画艺术展：析世鉴—世纪末卷 *Xu Bing banhua yishu zhan: Xi shi jian—shiji mojuan* (Exhibition of Xu Bing's Prints: An Analyzed Reflection of the World: the Final Volume of the Century), National Gallery, Beijing (15-23 October, 1988).



Figure 1 *Xu Bing banhua yishu zhan: Xi shi jian—shiji mojuan* (Exhibition of Xu Bing's Prints: An Analyzed Reflection of the World: the Final Volume of the Century), 《徐冰版画艺术展：析世鉴—世纪末卷》，National Gallery, Beijing (15-23 October, 1988)

Figure 2 *Book from the Sky*, boxed set of four books, 《天书》盒装四本书, 1987-1991. Hand-sewn, thread-bound books printed from woodblock and wood letterpress type. 手工缝制线装书籍, 用木板和活版印刷而成. Each volume 146 x 30 cm

Figure 3 *Book from the Sky*, 《天书》, 1987-91, installation with

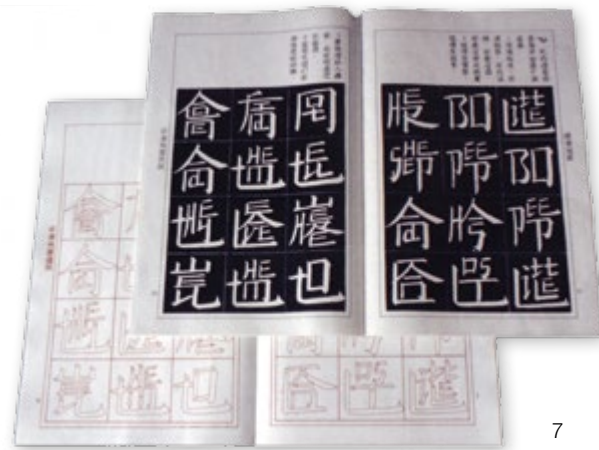
hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type. 装置, 包括手工印刷书籍、天花板和活版印刷出的墙上纸卷轴, Elvehjem Museum, Madison (November 1991-January 1992)

Figure 4 Xu Bing designing characters for the *Book from the Sky*, 徐冰在为《天书》造字

Figure 5 People trying to read the characters of the *Book from the Sky*, 尝试阅读《天书》的人, *China Avant/Garde* show, National Gallery, 1989



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8



9

Figure 6 *Book from the Sky*, 《天书》, China Avant/Garde show, National Gallery, 1989

Figure 7 *Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 《英文方块字入门》 (Yingwen fangkuaizi rumen), set of two books, 1994-96, paper, 41.3 x 27.3 cm

Figure 8 Xu Bing installing *Landscape* at the Sackler Gallery, 徐冰在安装《文字写生》, 2001

Figure 9 Installing *The Living Word* at the Sackler Gallery, 组装《鸟飞了》, 2001

been shown around the world to great acclaim and much curiosity (fig. 6). This masterpiece is perhaps the most important twentieth-century work of Chinese art, embodying the complexities of a key moment of transition for Chinese culture and society, expressed with the gravitas of the time, care, and intelligence the artist devoted to its creation.

Such subsequent works by Xu Bing as *Square Word Calligraphy* 英文方块字 (Yingwen fangkuaizi), *A, B, C, . . .* (1991), *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* 猴子捞月 (Houzi lao yue, 2001), and others, have also emphasized language, and have provided fodder for numerous lectures, papers, and so on, with a semiotic bent (fig. 7). Over the years, the link between Xu Bing and language became firmly established.² In 1999 the MacArthur Foundation presented an award to Xu Bing in recognition of his “...originality, creativity, self-direction, and capacity to contribute importantly to society, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy.”

NATURE'S PRESENCE

In 2001 Xu Bing's groundbreaking solo exhibition, *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing*, opened at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. The exhibition had the distinction of being the first major solo show the nation's Asian art museum had accorded a living artist. The exhibition title emphasizes the artist's well-known and much appreciated work with language. While all the works in the exhibition engaged aspects of the written word, four debut pieces brought nature along with them into the equation. These latter were the *Landscape* series 文字写生 (Wenzi xie sheng, 2000-), the *Reading Landscape* 读风景 series (Du fengjing, 2001-), *The Living Word* 鸟飞了 (Niao feile, 2001), and *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*. *Landscape*s ingeniously meld landscape with the written word, founded in the shared ancient history of drawing and writing (fig. 8). *The Living Word* brings contemporary characters to life by tracing them back to their pictographic origin: in the museum, acrylic bird characters soared from the floor up a wide open stairwell, becoming more colorful as they morphed from the contemporary simplified writing style adopted during the Maoist era, through historical variations stretching back thousands of years, to their ancient origin as pictographs. At the installation's highest point were the most natural bird shapes,

2. Xu Bing was not exclusively focused on the written word, but his works involving animals such as silk worms and pigs did not build one upon the other as the language-based works have seemed to do, and therefore did not achieve such complexity and depth of meaning.

rendered in vibrant orange: the word had come alive, via the process of tracing it back through time (fig. 9).

But now if we look back, we can see that nature played a major role in Xu Bing's pre-*Book from the Sky* works. There is a little painting of vegetables made when he was young (fig. 10), and then images of nature and of humans living in nature became his main subject while he dwelt in Shouliang Gou, a poor village in Huapen Commune. (Fig. 11) He went there to live and work as an "educated youth" during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). There he did farm labor, but also found time to sketch the people, village life, and the surroundings, and he provided the decorative lettering and illustrations for a mimeographed newsletter produced for the villagers, *Lanman shanhua* 烂漫山花 (Brilliant Mountain Flowers). In addition to the little drawings of corn, flowers, and so on, with which Xu Bing peppered the newsletter, he also sometimes played with the nature of art, with a very light wit, for example depicting a beribboned shovel standing in front of a framed scene of the rural surroundings; or a framed title draped with a sheer fabric partially obscuring the writing (figs. 12-13). Later, when he had been admitted to the Print Department of the newly re-opened Central Academy of Fine Arts, Xu Bing produced a series of over one hundred small prints, *Shattered Jade Series* 碎玉集 (Sui yu ji, 1978-83), each an intimate view of rural life (figs. 14-17). In the later *Repetitions Series* 复数系列 (Fushu xilie, 1987-88), Xu Bing continued to address the countryside but in a more conceptual manner. And then, when it seemed he was turning away from nature to focus on language, devoting all his waking hours for over a year simply to designing the characters for his *Book from the Sky* (not to mention the time expended on carving the characters into little blocks of pear wood, designing the layout of each page, having the pages printed and bound...), beloved by language theorists the world over as a subject ripe for investigation, it turns out that nature even has a major presence in the *Book from the Sky*.

ROUTES TO NEW WAYS OF THINKING

Xu Bing is gifted with multiple ways of receiving, or perceiving, information and, as a corollary, multiple approaches to creation. A couple of times he has experienced what can only be described as epiphanies. Xu Bing: "It could be said that my earliest lesson in art 'theory' and the founding of my artistic ideals took place on a

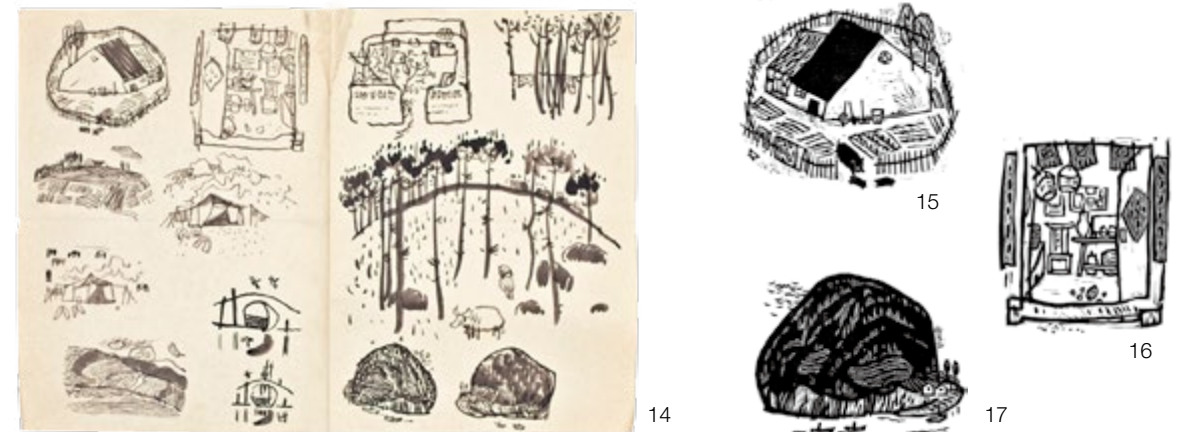


Figure 10 *Untitled (vegetables)*, 《无题 (蔬菜)》, c. 1966-67, watercolor on paper, 纸上水彩, 29 x 13.5 cm

Figure 11 Shouliang Gou Village, 收粮沟村, 1974

Figure 12 *Lanman shanhua*, 《烂漫山花》 (Brilliant Mountain Flowers), 1975, no. 1, p. 21

Figure 13 *Lanman shanhua*, 《烂漫山花》 (Brilliant Mountain Flowers), 1975, no. 1, p. 22

Figure 14 *Shattered Jade Series*, 《碎玉集》 (Sui yu ji), sketch book, 速写本

Figure 15 *Shattered Jade: Farmhouse*, 《碎玉集: 农舍》, 1982, woodcut print, 木刻版画, 8.3 x 9.5 cm

Figure 16 *Shattered Jade: Old House*, 《碎玉集: 老屋》, 1982, woodcut print, 木刻版画, 9.6 x 7.4 cm

Figure 17 *Shattered Jade: River Island*, 《碎玉集: 江心岛》, 1982, woodcut print, 木刻版画, 7.1 x 9.0 cm



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Figure 18 Xu Bing sketching in the Mountains of Nepal, 徐冰在尼泊尔山脉中写生, 1999

Figure 19 *Shattered Jade Series: Field*, 《碎玉集：田》, 1982, woodcut print, 木刻版画, 9.6 x 7.4 cm

Figure 20 *Reptitions Series: Family Plots*, 《复数系列：庄稼地》, 1988, woodcut print, 木刻版画, 55 x 72 cm

Figure 21 Himalaya sketchbook, 喜马拉雅写生本

Figure 22 *Landscript*, 《文字写生》, 2013, ink on paper, 纸本水墨, 80 x 132 cm

mountain slope facing Shouliang Gou.”³ He had taken on a task generally viewed as onerous, that of guarding the village’s apricot grove. Often he would paint while there, but one day he sat reading a passage from the Selected Works of Mao Zedong. As he relates, “I sat under the apricot tree, read a few sentences, cast my view across the mountains and felt for the first time the breadth of art, its sublime and brilliant truth. That day’s harvest buried deep within the heart of an amateur artist and claimed an important place there.”⁴

In 1999 Xu Bing went to Nepal with a group of international artists, to produce work for an exhibition in Finland⁵ (fig. 18). He went off on his own, thinking to sketch from nature. He already had the idea of writing Chinese characters as the means to “write” the landscape, but these nascent ideas suddenly gelled: “...I was in the mountains of Nepal attempting to use characters to record the real mountain. At this time I forgot much about art history, forgetting the history of calligraphy and styles. I experienced my hand as calligraphy itself with no relationship to style. But of course there was a relationship because I had received many influences. But at the time of writing the character ‘mountain’ I felt the true mountain. I came into contact with the essence of Chinese culture. What is calligraphy? What is painting? In that moment I could feel the source.”⁶

An accomplished draftsman, Xu Bing is adept at producing highly detailed and realistic drawings, but he consistently has found that an abbreviated form can carry more meaning: thus we see, for example, rounded hills of crops appearing in his early sketches, his small prints, his later print series, the Himalaya sketchbooks, the *Landscripts*, and—later—*Character of Characters* (2012). The idea of “writing” the landscape using repeated characters developed over time, so that the recurrent motifs, for example for grass, trees, crops, gradually developed into the Chinese characters that compose each *Landscript*. This is apparent if we compare, for example, the landforms in the *Shattered Jade* (fig. 19) and *Reptitions Series* (fig. 20) woodblock prints, a page from the Himalaya sketchbooks (Fig. 21), and a *Landscript* (fig. 22). Another example would be that of a hut that Xu Bing saw in the Himalayas

3. Xu Bing, “Ignorance as a Kind of Nourishment” (愚昧作为一种养料 Yumei zuowei yi zhong yangliao), trans. by Jesse Robert Coffino and Vivian Xu. Nairobi, Kenya, July 2008. p. 8. (N.B. This text originally appeared in the anthology *Qishi Niandai* 七十年代, ed. by Bei Dao and Li Tuo. Hong Kong: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009)

4. *Ibid.*, p.9.

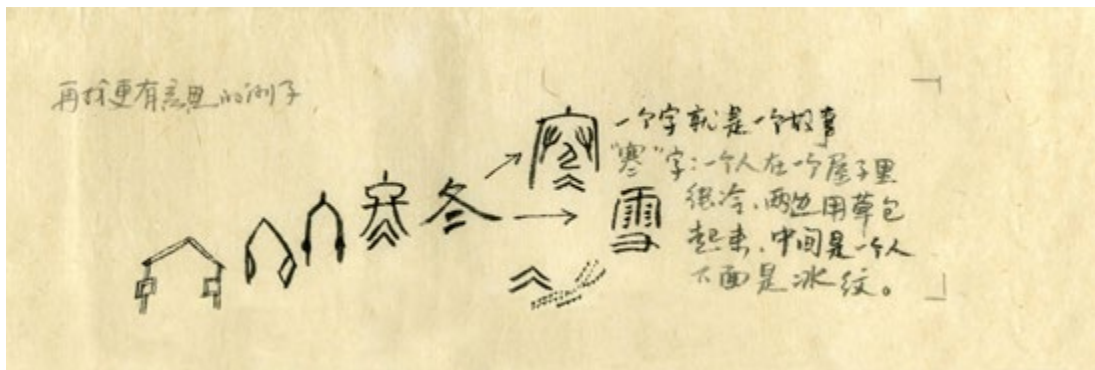
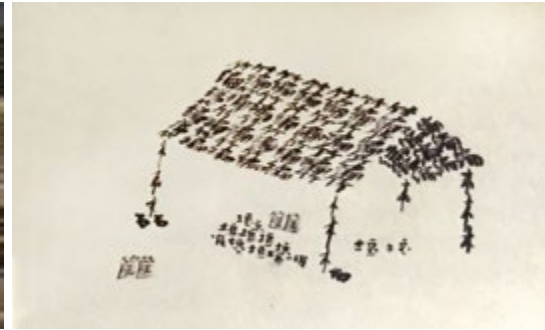
5. Based upon his sketches, Xu Bing produced the work *Helsinki-Himalaya Exchange* for the exhibition, *DELICATE BALANCE: Six Routes to the Himalayas*, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Kiasma, Finland, 2000.

6. “Xu Bing’s Semiotics,” a film in the series *The Enduring Passion for Ink: A Project on Contemporary Ink Painters*, 2016, produced and directed by Britta Erickson, filmed and edited by Rick Widmer. Available for viewing on Kanopy.com.

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(fig. 23) and later sketched constructing the form with characters (fig. 24). In his video, *Character of Characters* 汉字的性格 (Hanzi de xingge, 2012; fig. 25), Xu Bing then shows the evolution of the radical for a similar-looking dwelling when narrating the ancient form of the character for 寒 *han*, “cold.”

Xu Bing integrated early forms of Chinese characters into his Landscripts. To trace the written language back to its early pictographic forms was to find the connection between the landscape perceived and the landscape as represented. He has commented that when he viewed the landscape, he saw the characters that he would be copying down into his sketchbook: mountain (contemporary 山; archaic pictographic 𡵓); tree (contemporary 木; archaic pictographic 𣎵); rock (contemporary 石; archaic pictographic 𠩺); water (contemporary 水; archaic pictographic 𠩺). Traditional painters speak of “writing” a landscape painting. Xu Bing took this literally: he saw the landscape as Chinese characters. This was the genesis of the *Landscript* series (figs. 18, 21-22).

What washed over Xu Bing under the apricot tree in Shouliang Gou was a vast and wondrous understanding of what art meant and of the place it held in his heart. This informed the rest of his life. Sitting on the mountainside in Nepal, he found a deep connection with nature by communing with it via the Chinese written word. This has informed the rest of his career. These two revelations, particularly the first, were utterly unanticipated. They arrived while he was at rest.

There is another manner of gaining unanticipated or unsought insight or creative thought: it is realized during the process of long, hard, repetitive work. Many of Xu Bing’s projects are founded in laborious and perfectionist creative activity. At such times, the inner mind may roam freely, lighting on diverse thoughts that catalyze fresh ideas. I believe that such flights of fancy occurred during the lengthy process of producing the *Book from the Sky*, resulting in some of the particularly playful and delightful characters he invented.

Figure 23 Hut in the Himalayas, 喜马拉雅山的小屋

Figure 24 Himalaya sketchbook, 喜马拉雅写生本

Figure 25 Preparatory sketch for *The Character of Characters*, animated video, 《汉字的性格》草稿, 动画片

A FRESH LOOK

Because it is the 30th anniversary of the *Book from the Sky's* original version, it is time to take a fresh look. First, surely this work of art that has always been regarded as pregnant with meaning, must not be so inflexible as to offer nothing beyond what already has been plumbed.⁷ With this in mind, I spent some time looking carefully through the set of four books comprising the *Book from the Sky*. I found that in addition to the books' obvious attributes of adhering to a group of systems based on the structures of different types of classic Chinese books, many of the units inhabiting those structures—in other words, the characters that Xu Bing devised—have quite a life of their own. They sit in the book, quietly waiting to be observed, to be brought out to play, as it were. And many of these invented characters without doubt indicate natural beings—trees, animals of the water, animals with four legs, etc.—and natural formations, particularly mountains. In addition, there are characters so lively, so fascinating, that I crave to know their meanings: I want them in my life!

Imagine you are a botanist, and you discover a tree previously unidentified in the scientific literature. You judge from experience that the plant's traits are those of the genus Maple, whose scientific name is *Acer*. Furthermore, the tree has bright red leaves, so you give it the species name of *Acer rubrum*, or Red Maple. In truth this particular taxonomic designation occurred long ago, but the point is, if you found yourself in the interesting position of having to name a newly discovered species, you first would identify the genus, and then add a descriptor—chosen for love, for fancy, or sadly, perhaps, simply mundane. Imagine you are a science fiction writer wishing to create a solid bottom for your wildly creative and unlikely new planet: a judicious addition of invented but highly likely arboreal scientific nomenclature might add weight to the fantasy land. Imagine you are a child, painting and drawing all kinds of fascinating imaginary trees. If you are precocious enough, you might take the taxonomy of your plants seriously.

What if we are going backwards, inventing the words for the trees, but unclear what those trees might look like, or smell like, how high they may grow, what kind of fruit they may bear, are they suitable for climbing, or for birds to nest in? All we have are the names, and whatever those names suggest in and of themselves.

7. Scholars have analyzed the books carefully in terms of their layout, the characters' forms, the book production, and so on. Notable is the book *Passages in the Making of a Book*, by John Cayley, Xu Bing, & others, ed. by Katherine Spears (London: Bernard Quaritch, 2009).

In the *Book from the Sky*, there are many characters that relate to landscape:

TREES: indicated by 木

榭 樹 梭

FOREST: indicated by 林

箭 櫟

MOUNTAINS: indicated by 山

剷 崑 巒 岫 峯 嶺 嶺 嶺 嶺

There are also some animals:

豸

relating to horse 馬

鶯

to fish 魚 and tortoise 龜

繩

ox 牛

犇

rabbit 兔



dragon 龍 + fire 火 = ?



And characters whose nature is suggestive yet uncertain:

person 人 + mountain 山 = 仙 immortal.



mountain 山 + person 人 = ?

These are two of the many individual characters that I find incredibly beautiful and intriguing. They in particular radiate a sense of life.



As Xu Bing has said, “The key step in making these characters more like ‘themselves’ is to take advantage of the nature of the words. Chinese characters are symbols that represent the basic elements of the world. I put a symbol that denotes ‘mountain’ 山 together with a symbol like ‘water’ 水, and you would surely say that the word has to do with nature. If I put the radicals ‘work’ 工 and ‘knife’ 刀 together, you will certainly know that the word refers to something man-made. It makes you believe in the first place that clearly there is such a word. It’s as if you see a familiar face, but you just can’t recall the name. This makes my fake words seem more real than the obsolete ones to be found in ancient dictionaries.”⁸

For another example, “If you put together the characters for ‘wood’ 木 and qi 气 (energy, breath), even if there is no such character, you nevertheless will have a good

8. Weixin text message from Xu Bing to Britta Erickson 29 June 2018. This text may already have been published.

idea of what is being expressed. Really, it already has provided you with the content, and so it actually is a real word... [They are] especially like Chinese characters, but not Chinese characters—that’s what I took advantage of, actually. It’s the culture of taking advantage of this particular Chinese character phenomenon—letting it both guide your desire to read and block your desire to read, always giving you a stop.”⁹

Which are Xu Bing’s favorite *Book from the Sky* characters? Of course, he says, the three that make up the title¹⁰ (fig. 26). The work’s original title, 析世鉴—世纪末卷 *Xi shi jian—shiji mojuan* (Mirror to Analyze the World: The Century’s Final Volume) carries a weighty meaning, as the world has surely reached a point that defies analysis, and yet it is proposed to lie within this beautiful but “meaningless” project. The name it subsequently accrued, the *Book from the Sky* 天书, feels more optimistic.¹¹ As for my favorite character, this can be my name: 𠄎.




Figure 26 *Book from the Sky*, frontispiece with title, 《天书》卷首语

9. Ibid.

10. Weixin voice message from Xu Bing to Britta Erickson 29 June 2018.

11. 1989, the year of the *Book from the Sky*’s exhibition in the *China Avant/Garde* show, was a year of great dismay: the Tiananmen Square Incident followed scant months after the exhibition. But in the long run, the more upbeat title happened to hold true for this work of art.

徐冰、自然和文字的面纱

文 / 林似竹
译 / 杨帆

介绍：《天书》

在徐冰于 1988 年首次携《天书》（1987-1991，展出时名为《析世鉴—世纪末卷》）进入中国当代艺术舞台的那一刻开始，人类与文字的关系就被认为是他作品的主题¹（图 1）。《天书》，或以四本手工印刷的传统线装书为载体放置在胡桃木盒中，或以空间浸入式的方式陈列——其中包括书籍、立式装裱的文字，和垂下的文字卷轴（图 2-3）。无论是盒式套装还是装置的组件，都印有极似汉字的图形，但实际上却是艺术家自己的发明。汉字通常由两组、三组，或更多组具有含义或指示声音的线条组成（通常被称为偏旁部首）。徐冰重新组合了这些偏旁部首，从而打破了汉字原本的意义。有时，他在已有字的基础上添加一些线条，来创造形态有趣而美观的新字，同样脱离了汉字现有的意义。他造了几千个字，选择了其中最好的一千二百个左右，雕刻成木块，并进行排版和印刷（图 4）。对于汉字读者来说，尝试阅读这些假字的行为是令人懊恼的，因为片刻后他们就会发现：哦，那些真的不是汉字（图 5）！

作为一个完美主义者，徐冰在其后重新编写了《天书》。第二版，也是最后一版的《天书》，在中国美术馆 1989 年举办的中国“现代艺术大展”中展出，自那以后也一直在世界各地展出并获得广泛的关注和好评（图 6）。这部杰作也许是二十世纪最重要的中国艺术作品，体现了中国文化和社会转型关键时期的复杂性。创作者倾注的时间、关切和智慧，令其生出庄严的光辉。

徐冰后续创作的《A、B、C...》（1991）、《猴子捞月》（2001）等作品同样强调文字，并带有符号学特点，从中派生出诸多相关讲座及论文等（图 7）。在这些年里，徐冰与文字之间的联系逐渐稳固确立²。1999 年，徐冰获得麦克阿瑟奖，以表彰其“原创力、创造力、自我引导以及为社会做出重要贡献的能力，特别是在版画和书法方面”。

2001 年，徐冰的大型个展“文字游戏：徐冰的当代艺术”在华盛顿史密森学会塞克勒国家美术馆举办，该展览是美国国立亚洲艺术博物馆第一次为在世艺术家举办大型个展。展览聚焦于徐冰备受赞誉的几件知名作品，涉及到文字的各个方面，其中四张新作品还涉及到自然，包括《文字写生》（2000-）系列、《读风景：文字的花园》（2001-）、《鸟飞了》（2001）和《猴子捞月》（2001）。其中，《文字写生》基于绘画和书写的古老历史，天才般地将风景与文字结合在一起（图 8）。《鸟飞了》通过追溯当代汉字的象形起源使文字“复活”：在美术馆中，丙烯书写的“鸟”字从地板上飞升到宽阔的楼梯间，它们从毛泽东时代开始采用的当代简化字，历经几千年的历史变迁，逐渐变形至古老的象形起源，颜色变得越发丰富多彩。装置的最高点是最自然的鸟的形状，用鲜艳的橙色呈现：通过装置在时间中的回溯，这个字“活”了过来（图 9）。

回顾过去，我们可以看到，自然在徐冰《天书》之前的作品中扮演了重要的角色。他年轻的时候有一张小的蔬菜画（图 10），其后，他在贫穷的收粮沟居住时（图 11），自然和自然界的人类生活图像成为了他的创作主题。在文革（1966 年-1976 年）期间，他作为一个“受过教育的年轻人”在那里生活和工作。他做农活，对当地的人、乡村生活和周围环境进行写生。此外，他还为村民制作的油印刊物创作了装饰字和插图，名为《烂漫山花》。除了在刊物上绘制玉米或花之类的小图像，他还巧妙地挑战艺术的边界，例如在农村场景前放置一把缠有缎带的铲子，或者用透明面料隐约地遮盖书写文字的画框（图 12、13）。后来，当他考入重新开放授课的中央美术学院版画系时，徐冰制作了一系列名为《碎玉集》（1978-83）的小幅版画，每一幅都以亲密的视角描绘农村生活。（图 14-17）。在接下来的《复数系列》（1987-88）作品中，徐冰以更具概念性的方法探索了乡村这一主题。之后，当他似乎转离大自然，而专注于文字时，他将一年多中所有醒着的时间都用于设计《天书》中的文字（更不用说他在小梨木块上雕字，设计每页的布局，打印和装订页面所花费的时间……）。其中所表现的内容受到了全世界大量语言理论家的喜爱和研究。事实证明，大自然在《天书》中也占有重要的地位。





新思想方法的道路

徐冰有多种接受或感知信息的方式，也由此形成了多种创作方法。他有过几次里程碑性的经历，而这些经历的奇特性甚至可以把它们理解为徐冰在创作过程中获得“顿悟”的时刻。徐冰回忆道：“可以说，我最早的一次有效的艺术‘理论’学习和艺术理想的建立，是在收粮沟对面山坡上完成的。”³那时，他承担了保护村庄杏树林的繁重任务。他常常会在那里画画，有一天他读到毛泽东选集中的一段，正如他所说，“坐在杏树下，我看几句，想一会儿，环视群山，第一次感觉到艺术事业的胸襟、崇高和明亮的道理。那天的收获，被埋藏在一个业余画家的心里，并占据了一块很重要的位置。”⁴那天的收获深埋在了这位业余艺术家的心中。

1999年，徐冰和一群国际艺术家一同前往尼泊尔，为芬兰的一个展览创作作品（图18）。⁵他独自走开，想在大自然中写生。在这时，他已经有了用汉字来“写”山水的想法，但这些新生的想法突然凝固了：“我坐在尼泊尔的山上，然后面对真的山我开始用文字来画和记录这些山，这个时候呢我感觉我忘记了，我忘掉了很多的关于艺术的历史、书法的历史和书法的风格，这个时候我体会到了，我的出手就是书法本身，而和这些风格是没有关系的，但其实是有关联的，因为我学书法一定是受到各式各样风格的影响，但是当时体会到的你面对真的山的时候，你写这个山字，他会摸到这个书法或者说这个文化中非常本质的这个部分，就是到底什么是书法，或者到底什么是绘画，他会由于那一瞬间，而让你有更多的体会。”⁶

作为一名出色的绘画艺术家，徐冰擅长创作极为细致而逼真的素描作品，但他始终用简化线条的方式承载更多的意义，比如他早期写生中出现的圆形山丘、由此衍生的木刻小版画、之后的版画系列、喜马拉雅写生本、《文字写生》，以及后来的《汉字的性格》（2012）。随着时间的推移，他用重复的字符来“写”景的想法逐渐变得成熟，在这过程中创造的草、树木、作物等反复出现的图案也逐渐发展为《文字写生》的构成元素。想要看出这样的相似点，我们可以比较《碎玉集》（图19）和《复数系列》（图20）中出现的地理形态、喜马拉雅

山写生本（图21）和《文字写生》（图22）。另一个例子是《碎玉集》中的小屋（图23）。徐冰在喜马拉雅山的时候描绘了一个相似的小屋，这个形状就是由字构建的（图24）。在视频《汉字的性格》（2012）（图25）中，他也展示了一个类似住宅的字形的演变，而这个字实际上是古代的“寒”字。

与此同时，徐冰还在《文字写生》中融入了汉字的早期形式。将文字追溯至其早期的象形图案是为了找到人们所感知的风景与实际风景之间的联系。他认为，当看到风景时，他能够直接看到那些可以复制到写生本中的字：山（古代象形）、木（古代象形）、石（古代象形）和水（古代象形）。古代画家将山水的绘画视为一种“书写”，而徐冰却将这种理解从字面上展开：他将山水视为汉字。这便是《文字写生》系列的起源（图18，21-22）。

在收粮沟的杏树下，徐冰对艺术的意义和艺术在他心里的位置产生了深远而奇妙的理解。这样的理解将伴随着他的一生。当他坐在尼泊尔的山腰上，通过汉字与大自然交流，他发现了自己与自然的深刻联系。这样的联系也将一直伴随着他的创作生涯。这两个启示，特别是第一个启示，完全是出乎意料的。它们在艺术家的静候中悄然而至。

还有另一种方式可以获得意料之外的洞见或奇思妙想：它是与这种顿悟相反的，是在长期、艰苦和重复的工作过程中获得的知识 and 见解。徐冰的许多项目都是在艰苦而又追求极致的创作活动中完成的。在这种时候，内在的思想可以自由地漫游，照亮和催化新思想的种种通途。我相信，这种充满幻想的遨游也发生在制作《天书》的漫长过程中，由此创作的文字也尤其耐人寻味，并令人心生愉悦。

崭新回顾

《天书》的原版迎来了它面世的第三十周年，是时候进行一个崭新的回顾了。首先，这件意味无穷的作品，一定具有在已探知的意义之外的灵活性。⁷考虑到这一点，我花了一些时间仔细研读了《天书》的全部四册。我发现，它们不仅在结构样式上沿用了经典中文书籍的传统，而且连这些结构的组成单元——

也就是徐冰造的字——都充满了灵动的生命力。它们就坐在书中，静静地等待被观察、被拿起来把玩。毫无疑问，许多字象征着自然生物——树木、水中的动物、四条腿的动物等等——以及自然形态，尤其是山脉。此外，有些字如此生动，如此迷人，我渴望知道它们的含义，甚至希望它们出现在我的生活中！

想象一下，你是一名植物学家，你发现了一棵以前在科学文献中未被识别的树。根据经验判断，植物的性状是枫树属。此外，树有亮红色的叶子，所以你给它的物种名称是“红枫树”。事实上，这个特定的分类学名称很久以前就出现了，但关键是，如果你发现自己处于一个有必要为新发现的物种命名的有趣位置，你首先会识别出物种的属，然后添加一个描述。这个描述可能包含了对该物种的喜爱、想象，或单调的说明。试想一下，你是一个科幻小说作家，希望你脑海中异想天开的新星球建立一个坚实的底线：明智地加入一个以假乱真的植物学命名法也许能让你的幻想更站得住脚。想象一下你是一个孩子，希望画出各种想象中的神奇的树。如果你的思想足够成熟，你可能会认真地为这些树木分门别类。

那么现在让我们倒过来想：如果想要创造树木的名字，但不清楚这些树木的样子或气味，它们可能生长多高，可能长出什么样的水果，是否适合攀爬，又是否适合小鸟筑巢等一系列问题。我们所拥有的只是名字，无论这些名字本身是什么意思。

在《天书》中，很多字都和风景有关：

有“木”的树

榭 树 梭

林

箭 櫂

山

剷 崑 罍 畷 岬 崩 礪 叻 嶺

一些动物

关于马、鱼和龟

鶯 繩

牛和兔

犖 麤

龙 + 火等于什么

龔

人 + 山等于仙，山 + 人等于什么？

叻

这两个单字很有意思，我觉得很漂亮，也很吸引人，闪烁着别样的生命力。

籀 豸

正如徐冰所说：“让这些字更像‘它们自己’的关键一步，是利用字的本性。汉字是由一些表示世界的基本要素的符号组成，我把一个类似‘山’的符号，与一个类似‘水’的符号拼在一起，你一定会说这个字是表示自然的；如果我把‘工’与‘刀’部拼在一起，你一定知道这个字是说人造物的。这让你自己首先相信，明明有这个字。这就像你看到了一张熟悉的脸，却叫不出他的名字。这让我的这些假字，比起古字典中那些已经死掉的真字更像真子。”⁸

又如，“你把一个‘木’字和一个‘气’字或别的什么字放在一起，即使没有这个字，但你可以大概知道这是在说什么事儿的——实际上它已经给你‘内容’了嘛，实际上就是一个真的字了……特别像汉字，但又不是汉字——我就是利用了这一点，实际上，是钻了这种特定中国文字现象的文化空子——让它既引导你的阅读欲望，又阻断你的阅读欲望，总给你一个阻截。”⁹

那么，徐冰在《天书》中最喜欢哪些字呢？他说，那当然是构成标题的这三个（图26）。¹⁰作品的原始标题《析世鉴—世纪末卷》蕴含了一个沉重的暗示：当世界已经走到了一个让人无从解释的地步，这个美丽但“毫无意义”的项目则承载了它的意义。后来选择的名称《天书》听起来更加乐观。¹¹我最喜欢的字是这个，而且我甚至愿意用它当我的名字：豸。

豸



26.《天书》卷首页

1. 《天书》第一版于北京中央美术学院展出（1988年10月15日至23日）。展览标题为“徐冰版画艺术展：析世鉴—世纪末卷”。

2. 徐冰并非仅专注于书面文字，他的作品涉及丝虫和猪等动物，并没有像基于文字的作品那样相互关联，因此没有实现这样的复杂性和深度。

3. 徐冰，《愚昧作为一种养料》，作者：Jesse Robert Coffino和Vivian Xu。肯尼亚内罗毕，2008年7月，第8页。（本文最初出现在《七十年代选集》，北岛和李陀编辑。香港：SDX联合出版公司，2009年）。

4. 同上，第9页。

5. 根据他的素描，徐冰制作了“赫尔辛基—喜马拉雅交流”的作品，展览展出了六位国际艺术家的作品，即“脆弱的平衡：喜马拉雅山的六条路线”，芬兰当代艺术博物馆，2000。

6. 《墨咏：徐冰的符号学》（2016），当代水墨系列纪录片《墨咏》，林似竹制作，温成摄影及剪辑，可通过Kanopy.com在线观看。

7. 学者们从布局、字形、书籍制作等方面对书籍进行了仔细分析。值得注意的是约翰·凯利、徐冰等人编著的《徐冰：通往天书的路》一书。作者：凯瑟琳·斯皮尔斯（伦敦：Bernard Quaritch，2009年）。

8. 徐冰给林似竹2018年6月29日发的微信。

9. 同上。

10. 同上。

11. 1989年是《天书》在“现代艺术大展”中展出的一年，这是令人沮丧的一年：一次社会极端事件在展览结束后几个月发生，但更为乐观的标题恰好适用于这件艺术品。

A LEXICON FOR SEEING THE WORLD: XU BING, LANGUAGE, AND NATURE

Maya Kóvskaya, PhD

When Chinese artist Xu Bing was a young man, like millions of others of his generation, during the late 1960s and early 70s, he was sent down to the villages. The campaign was part of the Chinese State's rural rustification program that sought to rein in the unruly, literate, and often troublingly articulate Red Guards whom Chairman Mao had unleashed upon both the Party and the Nation, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. These educated youth were sent "up to the mountains, down to the villages," for what was at the time to be permanent relocation, to live amongst the "pure and virtuous" (and illiterate) peasantry, and learn from them through hard labor on the land.

Xu Bing was "sent down" to an impoverished village called Shouliang Gou, and there in the mountains of Saibei (north of the Great Wall), he had what he considers his "earliest lesson in art 'theory.'" There, he recounts finding his "artistic ideals...on a mountain slope facing Shouliang Gou. There was a grove of apricot trees on the mountain there, a little sideline for the village," and he was stationed there to guard the fruit trees. It was a job no one else wanted, but for Xu Bing watching over the grove allowed him time to reflect on the nature flourishing all around him. "That summer," he recalls, "the mountain slope became my paradise...I focused on enjoying the changes taking place in the natural world around me. Each day I brought my box of paints and a book to the mountainside," and there he had the first of many similar experiences that sharply evoke and resonate with the traditional founding myth surrounding the creation of Chinese characters. This resonant connection provides trenchant insights into the workings of Xu Bing's own creative linking of the natural world, the cultural world, the written word, and the roots of his art practice that began to find form during the epiphanies he experienced there.¹

1. Xu Bing (2009). "Yumei zuowei yizhong yangliao" [Ignorance as a Form of Nourishment] in *Qishi Niandai* [The 70's], eds. Beidao and Lituo, trans. Jesse Robert Coffino and Vivian Xu (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company. 13–30 passim.

THE FOUNDING MYTH OF CHINESE CHARACTER CREATION

Xu Bing was quite familiar with the Chinese myth about how the written language was created, and believed that it explicitly affirms the idea that "Chinese characters are generated from nature."²

His work is highly cognizant of the impact of written characters on history and culture,³ and he highlights the Gangjie myth because it speaks volumes about the implicit connection between the natural world and language that resides deep within traditional, ancient Chinese cosmology—ideas still latent today in the reservoirs of Chinese culture; ideas so potent with a reverent understanding of humanity as part of, rather than outside of nature, that it merits recuperating through art and scholarship in our ecologically troubled times of destructive human dislocation from nature today.

As a popular version of the myth goes, the written language was invented circa 2650 BCE by the sage Gangjie, who was the official court historian of the legendary Chinese "Yellow Emperor," or simply "Huangdi," who was said to have unified China. In one version of the story, Huangdi tasked Gangjie with devising a new system to replace the old system of tying knots with thread or rope to annotate data. At first stumped by such a daunting challenge, Gangjie went down to the river and sat by its banks trying to figure out what to do. He struggled without luck until he spied a phoenix in the sky, soaring above with something clasped in its beak. When the object fell to the ground before him, Gangjie saw it was a hoof-print. Unable to recognize its maker, Gangjie consulted with a hunter he met on the road, and the hunter informed him that the distinctive print was made by the hoof of the mythical winged lion-like creature called the Pixiu, which had hooves unlike those of any other creature in the world. This gave the mythical Gangjie an idea—if he could identify a distinctive characteristic for each entity in the world, then he could limn it graphically and make it symbolize that entity. Henceforth, Gangjie painstakingly observed all that exists in the world, taking care to note something distinctive with which to identify the entity. His studies focused first and foremost on the natural world all around, the story goes—the

2. Xu Bing (2012). "The Character of Characters: An Animation," in *The Character of Characters: An animation by Xu Bing*, San Francisco: the Asian Art Museum: 36.

3. Xu Bing (2013). "Landscape Series," *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscape: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, trans. Shelagh Vainker Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford: 120–128.

heavenly bodies above, the geographical features of the land and waters, and all that creeps and crawls, or moves and flies, and from these observations he crafted the first Chinese characters.⁴

These characters, as described in the founding myth of written Chinese, are amazing from a linguistic and semiotic standpoint, which I will elaborate shortly. The great polymath American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914),⁵ who also deeply influenced the emergence of American pragmatist philosophy, saw logic as a compositional dimension of our world, and understood logic as fundamentally semiotic in its nature. To understand this semiotic character of nature and language, Peirce devised a brilliant, albeit complicated, system of trichotomies to help us analytically grasp the modalities of sign-making through which our processes of semiosis function.

PEIRCIAN SEMIOTICS AND THE TRIADIC SIGN: INDEX, ICON, AND SYMBOL

In bringing in Peirce and semiotics here, our purposes are focused on illuminating a consequential and compelling dimension of Xu Bing's work that is generally overlooked in the otherwise outstanding scholarship available about his art. Peirce's sophisticated system can help us understand what is so semiotically profound about the Chinese language creation myth itself. This will help us, in turn, to understand what is so profound and exciting about Xu Bing's language and text-intensive artwork as it connects to both nature and culture. For these purposes, then, a brief introduction to Peirce's semiotic trichotomy of symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs is necessary to show us the deep connection between language, culture, nature, and art in the artist's practice.

After laying this foundation in Peircian semiotics, during the discussion of his works, I will also bring in certain ideas by Ordinary Language Philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin, that help further contextualize the meaning and significance of Xu Bing's work, in terms of what he does with

4. Zhang, Shudong (2005). 《中华印刷通史》 [A General History of Chinese Printing] (in Chinese). Taipei: XingCai Literary Foundation, ch.3, sec.1.

5. Peirce, Charles Sanders (1955). "Logic as Semiotic: the Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover Publications: 98, 99) and passim.

words, the games he plays that have a greater cultural significance, all of which points to critical facets of his practice that only come to the fore when the triadic connection between nature, language, culture, and art, is made explicit—a connection that Xu Bing's most persuasive and eloquent interpreters have largely overlooked in their focus on the language in his work alone.

This exercise is a bit like climbing the proverbial mountain. It requires more exertion to reach an altitude from which the vista below becomes visible in a new way. I contend, in asking you to scale these peaks with me, that the view is worth the work; that the magic we can see happening in Xu Bing's practice once we can connect what he is doing in his art to the implicit relationships between language and culture and nature that he both draws on and on which he performs his most consequential transformative twist, is more than mere trickery or conceptual sleight of hand.

Most people are more familiar with the dyadic sign-system of Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), in which the sign-mode at the base of language is purely symbolic, that is, the relationship between *sign*, *signifier*, and *signified* are based on arbitrary human conventions that associate particular sounds with particular words, their meanings, and conceptual representations of extra-linguistic things that exist "out there" in the world.⁶

Peirce, however, offers a semiotic system much richer and more able to capture the multiple and shifting modes of sign-making that allow us to communicate, make meaning with words, in some connection to our world and our lives within that world—a mode of sign-making that goes beyond human language and extends into the logic of the natural world itself. Thus, Peirce's semiotic system is helpful to an analysis of meaning making in the Chinese language (and I would argue, in all languages, and beyond the linguistic), and resonates strikingly with the myth of character creation in China.

Peirce explains his triadic sign in the following way:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of

6. De Saussure, Ferdinand (1956). *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. passim.

that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that *object*, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of “idea.” This idea is the “ground of the representamen.” “Idea” is meant in the sense of a thought that has continuity, or like content, either in traveling between people or in the thinking of one person's mind, or in memory.⁷

This triadic structure of the sign, then, is a consequence of “the *representamen* being thus connected with...the ground, the object and the interpretant.” Although Peirce's *representamen* seems to resemble Saussure's sign, the interpretant is the “equivalent sign” (or more developed sign—they need not be identical) that is signified in the mind of someone. It cannot be reduced to the Saussurian signifier, nor can the object be reduced to the Saussurian signified.⁸ Interpretance, rather, is the locus of the signification process for someone in which and for whom an “object” is signified in some particular way with respect to some particular “ground.” In Saussure's thought, there is no role for interpretance by thinking minds, or grounds, or even really genuine objects for that matter. He was concerned with how ideas and sounds join to form a linguistic sign.⁹ In contrast, Peircian semeiotics divides the sign (or *representamen*) into three sets of trichotomies—of which the indexical, the iconic, and the symbolic, are what concern us today. It is critical to remember that these trichotomies signify *modalities* and *relations* through which meaning making takes place. They are not empirical things. Which mode of signifying relationship comes to the fore depends on the purposes and the context. Hence such “multimodal signs” have also been referred to as “shifters.”¹⁰

7. Peirce, op cit. p. 99. See also “A Fragment,” in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 volumes, vols. 1-6, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vols. 7-8, ed. Arthur W. Burks. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958. 2.228, c. 1897.

8. For Peirce, unlike Saussure, signs are logical relations rather than merely linguistic categories. Moreover, instead of relying on a dyadic binary dichotomization of *langue* and *parole* (language and usages or words and the world) into separate spheres, Peirce's semeiotic is structured as a trichotomy. This trichotomy encompasses language, the world, and the thinking mind in such a way as to include the process of reception, interpretation and investment of meaning into the relationship between signs (or what he termed “representamen”), their “objects” and their “interpretants,” and always with respect to some specific “ground” or mode of meaning. This model cannot simply be mapped additively onto Saussure's model with an extra term. In fact, Peirce demonstrated mathematically that his semeiotic was based on an irreducibly triadic relationship and not multiple dyads.

9. Later interpreters of Saussure, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and others, used his semiological system to analyze signs that are non-linguistic.

10. Silverstein, Michael (1976). “Shifters, Verbal Categories and Cultural Description,” Blount, B. ed. 1997. *Language, Culture and Society, a Book of Readings*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press: 187-222.

Now let us look back at Cangjie's creation of Chinese characters. In the myth, he uses all three sign modalities in his character-making. First, in this founding myth, the Pixiu's hoof-print is a pitch perfect example of an indexical sign that makes meaning through the relationship of mark-making that signals contiguity, connection, co-occurrence, or causality. The hoof-print is a literal index of the Pixiu. Second, the character signifies through an iconic resemblance to the distinctive feature of entity it represents: the hoof-print of the Pixiu becomes the visual basis for Cangjie's characters designating the Pixiu, and likewise with characters for natural phenomenon like water, mountains, fire, clouds, hands, people, bamboo, trees, grasses, and so on. Although the characters that were made to look like a distinctive quality of that which they signified may no longer be as immediately recognizable in modern Chinese writing (especially simplified) as they were when the first Oracle Bone Characters were written, as a founding myth and motivating internal principle that binds language and the natural world together, it remains a culturally vital node of meaning. Finally, the symbolic dimension comes into play in the myth wherein the indexical tie to the context and/or marker left by the entity in the story, is concatenated into a visually similar iconic character and this distinctive part of the icon and its indexical context, are then cast into conventional usage in which that iconic part is made to symbolically stand for the whole it represents.

Here in this story, then, we see the three modalities of sign-making—iconic, indexical, and symbolic—all expressed in one founding myth idealizing how signs for the entities in the world were distilled into a written characters, that are then associated with aural, phonetic sounds, and conceptual meanings. One character, as illustrated by the Cangjie myth, may have multiple and shifting modes of meaning depending on which modality of sign making is brought to the fore.

It is in this spirit that I approach the work of Xu Bing, whose longstanding and rich exploration of questions related to both language, culture, and nature, through his artwork, offers us a space to think about these matters beyond the confines of traditional and modern, and even beyond binaries of Eastern and Western. He draws explicitly on Chinese aesthetic and linguistic traditions, but because of his deft and expansive use of “shifters,” encompassing all three modalities of meaning making in his work, he manages the exacting feat of

making those insights accessible to audiences across the world, and across languages and cultures. He crafts a visual language and techniques that allow him to speak beyond the boundaries of a given linguistic system, and invokes nature to teach us something profound about culture, whilst showing how culture also shapes how we engage with and see nature. We will discuss how he does this more below; building on the foundation of analysis that Peircian semiotics affords us.

BOOK FROM THE SKY

Book From The Sky (1987-1991) was Xu Bing's first major work as a young artist after receiving his Masters in Printmaking and before he moved to the US, where he would spend the better part of 18 years, before returning to China to head his alma mater, the Chinese Academy of Fine Art in Beijing in 2008. Through this work, he creates a unique space that is at once linguistic and non-linguistic. The selections from this massive installation on display in Beijing at INKstudio offer viewers a rare, intimate experience with the work.

Characters that contain radicals related to nature make up a significant part of the selection chosen for this particular display. Radicals that bear an iconic resemblance to that which they loosely depict, in the spirit of the Gangjie myth, include the following:¹¹

To make this epic work, Xu Bing spent two years creating over 4000 fake Chinese characters, which he carved into the woodblocks that he used to make four volumes, meticulously printed and bound using traditional techniques. He chose the number 4000 because this is what is commonly considered the baseline for literacy in Chinese.

The complete installation surrounds people with thousands of characters, but when they look closer, viewers literate in Chinese find that not a single word is legible. Using familiar components of Chinese characters in novel ways, the characters he created were cleverly devised to iconically resemble

11. <http://blog.tutorming.com/mandarin-chinese-learning-tips/the-fast-track-guide-to-mandarin-chinese-radicals>. Accessed June 24, 2018.

Radical	Meaning	Sample Chinese Characters
氵	Water	江, 河, 海, 泳
火 or 灬	Fire	灯, 烧, 烤, 煮
土	Earth	尘, 城, 地, 垢
日	Sun	早, 阳, 明, 时
月	Moon	明, 朋, 有, 服
木	Wood	树, 林, 森, 板
艹	Grass	花, 草, 茶, 葱

real characters, but in fact none are actually words with indexically rooted semantic content, much less pragmatic context, at all.

Seeking straightforward semantic meaning from the text, then, is pointless. It is in the “double take” incited by the viewing of the project, then, that the true “meaning”—in the sense of significance—of the work resides and through which its most profound questions are raised.

What does it mean to be literate in a language that has been stripped of semantic meaning? This and other such questions are raised through the engagement with the invented lexicon printed in *Book from the Sky*. Being able to engage closely with excerpts from the epic text offers viewers a chance to meditate on the questions Xu Bing raises in an intimate context that begs us to imagine all the ways language becomes emptied of meaning in our own lives.

Beyond this, however, something else magical occurs when readers are allowed to sit and try to “read” selections from this unreadable text. Within the chaos created by Xu Bing, there are myriad identifiable elements that push the reader to try to read in spite of the illegibility. This exercise not only puts the reader into an active position vis-à-vis the work, it also allows the role of the interpretant to come to the fore as well. It poses demanding questions of the viewer as well: So what is Xu Bing *doing* with words here? Why is this activity that we the viewers are engaged in so familiar and what does it mean to change such a consequential part of this familiar activity so as to defamiliarize the whole process? Does it force us to look differently, perhaps more critically at how meaning is created in the context of shared conventions and shared practices?

I would submit that Xu Bing's understanding of the deeper cultural context in which he makes this work, or the "indexical ground," as Peirce would call it, can also be understood in terms of the seemingly messy usage of ordinary language use that Wittgenstein called the "rough ground." This "rough ground" consists of the "language games" of conventional usage and meaning, which entail both semantic content and pragmatic context, and it is the space in which they are constituted, shared, perpetuated, and even contested and changed.¹² Language games are important because they are what we collectively do when we do something using words. Language games are rooted in the dimension of language that linguistics distinguish from semantics, called "pragmatics,"—the lived, shared, everyday practices, or what Wittgenstein called "forms of life," that constituted the doing or the being glossed in the language. Language games and their underlying forms of life reveal the implicit "grammar," or the conventional regularities and norms of shared life that govern what can be intersubjective and meaningful so much that they appear to be the "natural" state of things, or just what we do. They are enacted through the "games" we play together with language—that is the things we *do with language* that then determine meaning on a level far deeper than the semantic. By the same token, challenges that are staged at this deeper level, cut straight to the culture itself, rather than merely bickering about superficial semantics.

Indeed, if we read what Xu Bing is *doing* here in terms of language games, then we must also ask about the "forms of life" in which those games are grounded—what are the shared cultural conventions of the printed book and the meaning of literacy, the act of reading, the inculcation of that received knowledge? And furthermore, what, then, is the meaning of Xu Bing's playful subversion of traditional conventions. How can we understand the force of the language game that Xu Bing sets up and draws us into—a game in which all the conventions of reading have been turned on their heads, a game in which we are seemingly reading and yet cannot quite read.

Moreover, the contrived meaninglessness of the almost readable words itself has meaning in the sense of a what Ordinary Language Philosopher J.L. Austin described as the "illocutionary force," of a "speech act," which we will discuss shortly below.

12. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (2001/1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Third Edition. Tr. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers: p. 40e par. 107 and passim.

Philosopher J.L. Austin, who also coined the discourse-altering concept of "performativity," explained the difference between the "locutionary act" of an utterance (in this case the "text" of the installation can be treated as an utterance), and by extensive connection the simple comprehension (or reading) of that utterance, and the "illocutionary force" of the "speech act" embodied in that utterance. An illocutionary act is "the performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to the performance of an act *of* saying something."¹³

Austin's "doctrine of forces" indicates the inextricability of meaning from conventionalized use in context and directs our attention to the various functions for which language is characteristically used and the contexts of meaning. The meaning of an utterance or a sentence or a text, then, can no longer be explained simply or ever primarily in terms of the "truth as correspondence" paradigm, in which the meaning of the words comes from the correspondence between their semantic content and the descriptive accuracy of that content with the actual state of things in the world described. Rather, he argues, "the occasion of an utterance matters seriously, and...the words used are to some extent to be 'explained' by the 'context' in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken..."¹⁴

Austin acknowledges that we when use the word 'meaning' in reference to illocutionary force, we should analytically "distinguish *force* [from] meaning in the sense in which meaning is equivalent to sense and reference..." In other words, *force* refers to a dimension of meaning distinct from the traditional understanding of meaning as correspondence between a word and its worldly referent, or a sentence and its propositional content (truth status, truth functionality, falsifiability).¹⁵ Thus, while there is no *semantic* meaning in *Book from the Sky*, nevertheless, there is illocutionary force aplenty to be read when the work is treated as a speech act.¹⁶

Xu Bing's words, in this work, then, may not be "real words," but they are

13. Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Ed. J. O. Urmson. (Oxford: Clarendon). See especially p. 100-101 for his discussion of the difference between "illocutionary forces" and "perlocutionary effects."

14. Austin, *ibid* 101.

15. Austin, *ibid*.

16. It is beyond the scope of this essay, as well as my area of expertise, but the implications of this argument above call for someone versed in the history of book-making and literacy in China to examine the language games Xu Bing is playing here through a close reading of the forms of life he is challenging through his artwork.

nevertheless words that do real things to their readers with great effect, and thus can be treated as profound supra-linguistic, pragmatic speech acts that perform a powerful intervention into the dominant language games and underlying forms of life that for most of Chinese history were the province of literati elites alone.

LIVING WORD AND LANDSCRIPT

Just as literacy in the written language was historically confined to elites, so too, was literacy in the aesthetic conventions of ink painting, which contained the standards for aesthetic judgment that mediated the “refined” and “cultured” person’s experience of the natural landscape. As with book making, publishing, and reading, the shared conventions of reading or making a landscape painting can also be understood in terms of “language games” and “forms of life” as well.

In 1999, Xu Bing began a new body of work that spoke directly to these language games and forms of life through the pictographic quality of Chinese characters. Many Chinese characters have a motivating iconic quality that does not exist in alphabetic language systems, such as English. While etymological roots in many languages—ranging from the Latinate to the Slavonic to Indo-European systems, and beyond—do hint at meaning origins, this is through purely linguistic rather than visual cues. What is extraordinary about Chinese characters, among other things, is the pervasiveness of the pictographical element that is more than merely the functional equivalent of a root, which is sometimes the cognate given to radicals in the Chinese written language. While it is a commonplace that radicals contribute to the semantic meaning of a Chinese character, while the rest of the character contributes to the phonetic component, both of these elements have a visuality that simply cannot be ascribed to alphabetic systems, linguistic and genealogical roots notwithstanding. While pictorial images are normally iconic signs that signify by resembling, words for things are not normally treated as visually iconic in English. The closest approximation to this we might have in English is the aural iconicity of onomatopoeia—words that imitate of the sounds they represent, such as pop, quack, moo, mwah, etc. Here the iconic sign *shifts* into

indexical sign and takes on a distinct symbolic valence as well. This is another reason why Xu Bing’s play on words and language games are not merely the Chinese equivalent of Western text-based artworks.

Highly sensitive to the creative space offered by the pictographic dimension of Chinese writing, Xu Bing’s *Landscript* works adroitly acknowledge and amplify this visuality in the language through his art. Describing his own creative process, he writes:

I sat on a mountain and, facing a real mountain, I wrote ‘mountain’. You might also say I painted a mountain, as for Chinese people to write a mountain and to paint a mountain are the same thing. Where there was river water I wrote the character for ‘water’. The clouds shifted, the mountain colors changed, the wind blew and the grasses moved, the life around me appeared and disappeared...[it] allowed me to start understanding what kind of thing the verb ‘to write’ is...I felt as though I had touched upon something: I had returned to the point of origin of these problems, and had encountered directly the most essential and particular constituent of our culture.¹⁷

By using morphed versions of the characters for the objects depicted in these paintings to actually form the visual images of those objects, he both paints a multimodal sign-picture made out of the words for the entities that he paints, fulfilling in crucial ways the promise of meaning in the Cangjie myth of the creation of Chinese characters. He renders an assemblage of the character for mountains to compose the picture of a mountain, and the characters for water to compose the image of water cascading down a mountain. This is a fascinating move as it straddles the traditionally conceived boundary between signifier and signified—that which is represented, that which represents it, as well as the indexical ground against which the representation has meaning—in the painting.

Xu Bing uses a relative of the same basic conceptual/linguistic technique that forms the visual grammar of his *Landscript* works, discussed above, to visually instantiate that which they lexically represent in his *Living Word* works. Here

17. Xu Bing (2013). “Landscript Series,” *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, trans. Shelagh Vainker. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford: 124.

the series of textual-sculptural installations transmute Chinese characters into an iconic visual representation of the things named in the characters. Here he distills the iconic resemblances of the signs/characters, into their pictographic resemblances to that which they represent, invoking the spirit of Cangjie's mythical exercise. And this highlights the way in which the words are meaningfully conjoined with the world, or language and culture with nature, in a sculpturally dimensional manner analogous to what he does on paper with *Landscape*. Again, Xu Bing plays a language game with viewers that raises a series of provocative questions for us all to contemplate.

Why has he set the figure of the bird (*niao* 鸟) within a dictionary definition of the word bird in the installation? Why does the bird depicted with the character for bird, form a flock that flies out of the installation? How does this acknowledge the living, intentional, acting quality of the life form depicted, and how does this performative depiction perhaps challenge traditional depictions and ideas of what a bird is in Song Dynasty Bird and Flower paintings of the elite?

THE MUSTARD SEED GARDEN LANDSCAPE SCROLL (2010)

Xu Bing's *Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* (2010) brings his work on language and nature together with questions about power, authority and the transmission of culture, as well as the transformative potential of printmaking. The techniques he uses in this work are interventions that speak to the ritualized ways in which a particular genre of elite culture was first disseminated to a wider audience, highlighting the importance of citing the canon and emulating the great masters in Chinese painting and culture more generally. The work deconstructs and democratizes the canonical norms of landscape painting that had been visually codified in the original *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*.

Throughout Chinese history, emulation of normative forms has been the dominant model for learning and acquiring culture. In this context, the citation of classics, visually, verbally or otherwise, can be read as another form of speech act with profoundly meaning-saturated illocutionary force that

functioned as a vector of cultural power and a signal of belonging to a certain privileged elite. If elites performed their belonging in the hierarchy and performed their self-cultivation through the demonstration of mastery of the canon via sophisticated citation, it was only those who had access to originals or exemplars of the canon in the first place who could master and then cite it. Thus one can read this whole set of practices in the context of language games and their concomitant forms of life, which enabled literati elites to perform themselves into being.

The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, then, was a Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) textbook on traditional Chinese painting methods that offered a printed compendium of authoritative representations of various landscape components, along with their corresponding instructions, or rules for representation. Thus, the *Manual* was vastly more accessible than the rare originals or few masterful copies, which only a privileged few could have previously studied.

Xu Bing extrapolates from and amplifies the accessibility of the *Manual* in this scroll. He rearranges the visual modules, or “passages,” of the instructional primer into a single composition, which is recut by professional woodblock carvers into a series of printing blocks. These blocks are then used to print the final monumental handscroll composition onto *xuan* paper.

The new landscape indexes the conventions of the older dominant cultural model for emulation that it cites even as it subverts the elitist power of that canon. It does so in part through its shared iconic sameness with the original components of the manual. The subversion also occurs through the challenge posed to the symbolic power of the norms encoded in the original manual and the literati culture it indexes and simultaneously revises through use in new contexts.

Just as he did with the characters he invented in other works, discussed above, Xu Bing rearranges these “word/signs” and “passages” into new visual assemblages, or “sentences,” so to speak—that is, he makes a new panoramic landscape scroll out of branches, trees, rocks, and water, etc., from the original manual for ink painting. Reversing the traditional right-to-left reading format, the work also speaks to the modern context for the consumption of both text and visual narrative and reinforces the inversion implied in the work as well.

“I used to dislike the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* and thought it was a cliché,” Xu Bing writes. “Then I gradually came to see that underlying its commonplaceness is an important and familiar way of thinking in Chinese culture a way to reduce the physical world into standardized abstractions. It is essentially the same idea behind Chinese writing, which is another frequent subject in my work. In that regard, *the Manual is essentially a dictionary* [emphasis mine]. Just like a writer choosing his words from the dictionary, a painter can compose a landscape by selecting and combining elements from the *Manual*.”¹⁸

Here too, a language game is being played. In this new game, through novel usage of familiar elements, Xu Bing tweaks the underlying rules. These “rules” are effectively the constitutive regularities that form the canonical norms instantiated in the forms of life in which these shared practices of everyday literati life and art making and art consumption were rooted, offering a newer and more democratically accessible substitute to that canon.

In this body of work, Xu Bing explains: “Chinese painting is the result of combining count-less symbols. A tree branch can represent a single tree or a family of trees, a stone can represent a mountain, and that mountain can signify all mountains, not just a certain mountain in a certain locale.”¹⁹

In this way, Xu Bing plays with the language games that entail the normative “rules” for making landscape painting codified in the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual*, opening up new vistas of meaning-making and also new forms of legibility for viewers everywhere in a way that feels expansive, accessible, and more democratic in spirit. The same logic that animates the *Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll*, applies to *Background Story* as well, except that instead of using the stylized, authorized depictions to represent mountains, water, stones, he uses quotidian found objects to play the same functional roles as the woodblock prints taken from the *Painting Manual*.

18. Hao Sheng (2010). “Xu Bing,” *Orientations*, October, 2010.

19. Xu Bing (2016). “Background Story,” in *What About the Art?* Cai Guo-qiang, ed., Reiko Tomi managing ed., transl. ed, Maya Kóvskaya. Guangxi Normal University Press: 70.

BACKGROUND STORY

In a spirit similar to his other bodies of work discussed above, Xu Bing stages interventions into the dominant “language games” of classical landscape painting and their depictions of nature in a different, yet related way. The body of works entitled *Background Story* involves a visual sleight of hand that first tricks the audience into believing they are seeing an ink painting on *xuan* paper. Then Xu Bing allows the viewer to pull back the curtain, so to speak, and discover the metaphorical “smoke and mirrors” behind the appearance of an orthodox painting. By letting the viewers in on the secret technique, Xu Bing is effectively showing us the constructed nature of the “language game” he deconstructs, and then gives to us the tools for deciphering that game for ourselves.

Adept at extending the ambit of his visual and conceptual language through homologous explorations that do more than simply repeat the riffs of earlier works, Xu Bing’s series of lightbox “shadow paintings” in the *Background Story* series are not properly paintings at all. Instead, he uses materials extracted from the sites in which he makes the works, mainly from the detritus of the natural world, or ejected into the natural world by human waste, to act as transposable signs of something else, reinvoking the indexical grounding of language and cultural forms in nature itself.

After choosing a masterpiece from a given historical era, he locally sources materials such as dried leaves, twigs, grasses, even garbage, and positions them behind a lightbox to form the appearance of the brush strokes in the famous painting, without ever actually making a brushstroke at all. This can be described as a kind of indexically grounded visual onomatopoeia that deploys the mechanisms of that linguistic device, and drawing on the visual-linguistic techniques refined in his other works, but transposed onto a context beyond any specific language.

What does it signal to use such mundane quotidian materials to cite and render a classical landscape? How does the move from ink to light expand the ambit of sign material? What does it mean to cite a masterwork, which is essentially an icon of something that has been turned into a symbol, in such a way as to reconnect directly with the indexical sign making capacity of natural

materials? These questions are raised by this body of work as well, offering viewers much to ponder.

Here, especially, we can see how Xu Bing manages to extend the subversive intervention into elite literati culture from his other works, this time beyond the realm of the written Chinese characters entirely. Thus he is able to share the same insights with all of us, regardless of our levels of literacy in Chinese, or really in any language, with equalizing aplomb. A Chinese peasant and a literate foreigner who speaks and reads no Chinese becomes equal to the literati who once were the only rightful interpreters of and norm-setters for landscape painting. This is a radical achievement.

What is so enthralling about *Background Story* is the inclusive joy in both the sleight of hand and the subsequent reveal. As with *Book From the Sky*, Xu Bing clearly wants the viewer to be first mystified by what they seem to see—the appearance of familiar-looking, legible words that upon closer inspection are revealed to not be words at all, and the appearance of familiar-looking brushstrokes and a landscape, that turn out to be nothing but tricks of shadow and light cast by cleverly arranged detritus. And yet it is also clear that he wants this mystification to dissolve through the act of engagement with the work in a way that empowers the viewer and democratizes the teachings inherent in the work. Or to put it another way, he offers us unprecedented access and new paths of approach to art that once served to bolster the hierarchical exceptionalism of a tiny group of elite literati.

All these bodies of Xu Bing's work are conjoined to one another not by a single mechanism, technique, conceptual thread, or unitary, static idea of the nature of language or the language of nature, or the relationship between the two. Instead, I would argue that they are joined by what Wittgenstein described as interlaced and crisscrossing “family resemblances” among these bodies of work.²⁰ The visual-conceptual move made in the *Mustard Seed Garden* work echoes the way in which Xu Bing made new landscapes out of Chinese characters for the elements of the landscape depicted in *Landscape*,

20. Wittgenstein, op. cit. p. 27e, par. 67. Rather than looking for a core essence, Wittgenstein suggests we think about the relationship among senses of words in terms of “family resemblances.” The “various resemblances between members of a family; build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and crisscross in the same way” that the various features in common with an array of games do—with no one feature or trait as the defining core essence, but a more subtle network of relations between and among various aspects.

made sculptures out of Chinese characters that resembled the word they represented in *Living Word*, the way he made new renditions of “classic” paintings using the shadows of found materials from the natural environment, and the appearance of new Chinese “characters” out of radicals and phonetic components, the precise meaninglessness of which opened up such powerful vectors of meaning in *Book from the Sky*. A family resemblance could be based on shared history, shared genealogy, shared biology, but by the same token, for Wittgenstein, it is a way of showing similarities that conjoin disparate phenomenon for specific purposes, much like Peirce's indexical ground for interpretation. A family resemblance, then, can also be about visual or cultural resonances, or shared existential predicaments, all of which offer loci for evocative homologies to be found across a variety of instantiations that embody a given form of life.

XU BING'S GAMES

In each series of work Xu Bing has engaged a set of “language games” connected to cultural “forms of life” and art making vis-à-vis the natural world and language. He engages with Chinese language, Chinese aesthetics, Chinese art history, Chinese elite culture, Chinese everyday life, the natural world, and traditional, classical, elite depictions of nature in a variety of interconnected ways as well, that all bear a family resemblance to one another. He compiles, assembles, deconstructs, and reconstructs, variously and varyingly, the relationships between written words, concepts, language and languages, the world of human culture, human convention, and human actions. He engages, represents, deploys, reworks, and rethinks natural phenomena.

These games are steeped in cultural capital and relations of power as well. Literati have been playing them for more than thousand years, and in many ways defining their exceptionalism through these games as well. Instead of abolishing them, Xu Bing has found a variety of ways to intervene and tweak the rules so as to defamiliarize some element of the game. In doing so, he makes those games more accessible to non-literati and even people not literate in either the Chinese language or knowledgeable about the culture.

If we read the works in terms of the crisscrossing relationships between language, culture, nature and art, and understand them as language games rooted in forms of life that were not available to most people in the past, engaging with Xu Bing's work can be an empowering endeavor indeed. It is like watching a magician who, after performing a magic trick, lets you in on the secret and shows you how it was done. From there, the possibilities for making one's own contributions to the proverbial magic show, or making up new "tricks" that speak to pressing existential problems of our times, becomes conceivable. By focusing on the relationships between language, nature, culture, and art, and hence also power, and the underpinnings of everyday life, self-cultivation, self-expression, we can also see new ways (or reimagine anew old ways) to locate ourselves in the larger world, of which nature and culture are intertwined parts. All these moves of mind that Xu Bing asks us to make with his work open up into broad vistas for our imagination.

What is so compelling about Xu Bing's work to me is his unflagging commitment to opening up new ways to speak and see and transmit knowledge and aesthetic value. It is also how he connects those processes in ways that enable him to take people to new places in their minds through their eyes, across history, across cultures, across contexts, in part, by drawing our attention to language in the context of nature, and nature in the context of language (visual, verbal, and semiotic). By intentionally creating works that defy monolithic readings, as merely about language, or merely about culture, or politics, or nature, he actively facilitates a multiplicity of possible readings simultaneously extant within any given work. This expands the power of the work to speak to, with, and through, many people in many ways, in different times and places, regardless of whether they speak Chinese or English or understand the cultural, philosophical and aesthetic backgrounds that inform his works. To achieve this is the hallmark of a cultural provocateur par excellence who can offer much-needed tools for re-envisioning, and revising, the relationships between cultural and natural worlds alike, and our relationships to both.



XU BING: LANGUAGE AND NATURE

Craig L. Yee

INKstudio is honored to present *Xu Bing: Language and Nature* organized by the artist's long-standing curatorial partner INKstudio Artistic Director Dr. Britta Erickson. Xu Bing is widely recognized as one of the leading conceptual artists of language and semiotics working today. Indeed, many consider the relationship between humankind and language to be the dominant leitmotif of Xu Bing's oeuvre. For *Language and Nature*, Erickson takes a fresh look at Xu Bing's practice through the lens of its central theme of Nature. Specifically, it explores Nature's relationship to human minds and human societies as embodied in two distinctly Chinese modes of signification: the pictorial character of Chinese writing and the language-like nature of Chinese painting.

Xu Bing and Britta Erickson first met in 1991 while working together on his first major exhibition outside of Asia, at the Elvehjem Museum, Madison, Wisconsin. Xu Bing and Dr. Erickson re-united a decade later for Xu Bing's solo exhibition *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing* at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, America's national gallery for Asian art in Washington D.C. Focusing on Xu Bing's explorations of language, they premiered the artist's new *Landscape* series of calligraphy-landscape paintings using brush, paper and ink, and staged three new installations—*The Living Word*, *Reading Landscape*, and *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*—alongside definitive installations of *Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy*, including a new version of *Calligraphy Classroom*. Aside from writing the seminal monograph *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, Dr. Erickson has directed the short documentary film *The Enduring Passion for Ink: Xu Bing's Semiotics* and authored over a dozen catalog essays and journal articles on different aspects of Xu Bing's artistic practice over the past 25 years.

Xu Bing: Language and Nature incorporates works from six distinct but conceptually inter-related practices to chart Xu Bing's systematic exploration of pictorial semiotics and how sign-making is a fundamental part of both Chinese calligraphy and painting. In gallery 1, Erickson has curated a selection of woodcuts from the *Shattered Jade Series* (1978–1983) and the *Repetitions Series* (1987–1988), Xu Bing's

first major works as a contemporary artist at the Central Academy of Fine Art. In gallery 2, Xu Bing has constructed the “intaglio” edition of his iconic installation *The Living Word* (2001) alongside a selection of his brush-and-ink *Landscape* calligraphy-paintings (first exhibited in 2000). Erickson's documentary film *The Enduring Passion for Ink: Xu Bing's Semiotics* will be on view in the adjacent video room. On the third floor, Xu Bing examines the linguistic and textual qualities of the Chinese landscape painting tradition through his light-box installation series *Background Story* (2004–) and the monumental woodcut *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* (2010). Artist and curator conclude *Language and Nature* with a reading room where viewers can spend time quietly perusing page spreads from Xu Bing's original wood-block and moveable-type printing of *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991)—a work as deeply engaged with questions of Nature as with questions of Language.

展览介绍

余国梁

墨斋画廊荣幸地举办展览“徐冰：文字与自然”，由艺术家长期合作的策展伙伴和墨斋的艺术总监林似竹博士担任策展人。徐冰被广泛认为是当今语言学和符号学方面最重要的观念艺术家之一，并在其许多作品中探索了人类及文字之间的关系。在本展览“文字与自然”中，林似竹博士重新审视徐冰历年的创作，挖掘出其中以“自然”为核心的创作主题，并在该主题中着重探索自然与人类思想和人类社会的关系。这种关系体现于两种极具中国性的意义表现形式：中国文字的绘画性与中国绘画的文字性。

徐冰和林似竹结识于1991年。那时，他们在美国威斯康星州麦迪逊市的Elvehjem博物馆，共同筹划徐冰在亚洲地区之外的首次博物馆个展。十年后，徐冰和林似竹博士再度合作，在位于华盛顿特区的美国国家美术馆亚洲艺术部门Arthur M. Sackler美术馆，举办徐冰的个展“文字游戏：徐冰的当代艺术”。他们在展览中呈现了徐冰对文字的探索，首次展示了他用画毛笔、宣纸和水墨创作的书法风景画——《文字写生》系列，并展出了他的三个全新装置作品——《鸟飞了》、《读风景：文字的花园》和《猴子捞月》。同时展出的还有徐冰里程碑性的装置作品《天书》和《英文方块字书法》，以及《书法教室》的新版本。林似竹博士不仅著写了《无意义的字，无字的意义：徐冰的艺术》这一重要的学术书籍，而且执导了纪录短片《墨咏：徐冰的符号学》，并撰写了十几篇刊登于展览图录和学术期刊上的文章，从多个方面研究并梳理了徐冰在过去二十五年的艺术实践。

本展览“徐冰：文字与自然”涵盖了艺术家形式不同但概念相连的六种创作方式。它们分别记述了艺术家对于绘画性符号和图像制作如何成为中国书法和绘画的基本组成部分等问题进行的系统式探索。在展厅一中，林似竹从《碎玉集》（1978-1983）和《复数系列》（1987-1988）——徐冰在中央美术学院作为当代艺术家最早创作的两个系列——中选择了一系列木刻版画作品进行展示。在展厅二中，徐冰制作了

他的标志性装置作品《鸟飞了》（2001）的凹版，并展出笔墨绘画作品《文字写生》（1999年首次展出）。此外，由林似竹执导的纪录片《墨咏：徐冰的符号学》也在旁边的视频空间放映。在画廊的第三层，徐冰通过他的灯箱装置系列《背后的故事》（2004年首次展出）以及规模宏大的木刻版画《芥子园山水卷》（2010），探索了中国山水画传统在语言和文本方面的特质。在本展览的末尾，艺术家和策展人设置了一个阅览室。观众可以在这里静静品读由徐冰亲自雕刻木板并活字印刷而制成的《天书》（1987-1991）——一件在探讨文字的同时也在影射自然的作品。



EARLY WOODCUTS

As a high school student during the Cultural Revolution, Xu Bing joined an “educated youth” detachment that was assigned to Shouliang Gou Village (fig. 1). Xu Bing took to his responsibilities as an “educated youth” in earnest; he worked hard at his village duties and pursued art as a portrait artist, calligrapher and designer for the village blackboard newspaper and subsequent mimeographed periodical *Brilliant Mountain Flowers*.

Considered a model rural youth and budding artistic talent, Xu Bing applied to and gained entry to the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in 1977. Assigned to the Print Department, he soon gained recognition for a series of small early woodcuts which he later titled the *Shattered Jade Series* (1978–1983). In it, Xu Bing explores the woodcut medium as a means of depicting his experience of rural life in China during the Cultural Revolution. Living in Beijing at the Central Academy, Xu Bing felt a deep nostalgia for his village experience—a place where he came of age both as a young man and as an artist. He recalls its influence on his art:

"[My] 'infatuation' for the village was reflected in my woodcuts. Beginning with my first 'woodcut technique' class, I carved over one hundred palm-sized woodcuts, attempting to test each of the various carving techniques—both foreign and Chinese—that I had come across. I had no idea that these small practice works would become the earliest thing of mine to resonate within the art world. These small works were unassuming and genuine. When I have time to leaf through them now, I am touched by my own innocence then. ...Perhaps we had a great need to retrieve some sense of authenticity after the experience of the Cultural Revolution. These small works were distinct from 'scar art.' Rather than indict, they treasure those things of ordinary beauty that existed in our lives back then."¹

Taking full advantage of the intaglio-relief medium of the woodcut, Xu Bing distills pictorial mark making to an essential language of lines and dots so irreducible, he seems to be creating more than just depictions of his experiences living in the



Figure 1 Xu Bing at Huapen Commune, 徐冰在花盆公社, 1975–76. After Erickson, Britta, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing* (Washington D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2001), 22.

village but a compendium of iconic symbols of rural life—124 images in total: 100 black and white and 24 color. This basic iconic language of natural forms would prefigure Xu Bing's subsequent and explicit explorations of nature through language and its relationship to picture-making (fig. 2).

In Xu Bing's iconic depictions, human existence and nature are inextricably bound. This close connection with nature was not just something Xu Bing observed second hand in the lives of the villagers, but is something

he experienced directly himself:

“It could be said that my earliest lesson in art 'theory and the founding of my artistic ideals took place on a mountain slope facing Shouliang Gou. There was a grove of apricot trees on the mountain there, a little sideline for the village. ...That summer, the mountain slope became my paradise. ...I focused on enjoying the changes taking place in the natural world around me. Each day I brought my box of paints and a book to the mountainside.”²²

Having graduated in 1981 with his Bachelor's degree, Xu Bing continued his explorations of the woodcut medium with a new conceptual depth partially prompted by his exposure to the concepts and practices of contemporary international artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. In his *Repetitions Series* (1987–1988), Xu Bing explores the ideas of repetition and process by printing a single, long horizontal scroll eleven times in sequence from a single wood block at different stages of its carving. The works illustrated here are single, central panels from ten different compositions in the series.

Although the subject matter is similar to his earlier *Shattered Jade Series*—rows of crops growing in the fields, a pond teeming with life, clouds and haystacks casting shadows on the ground, etc.—the new works are much larger allowing Xu Bing the freedom to explore aspects of compositional space and depth. They have changed from singular images iconic of rural life to landscapes

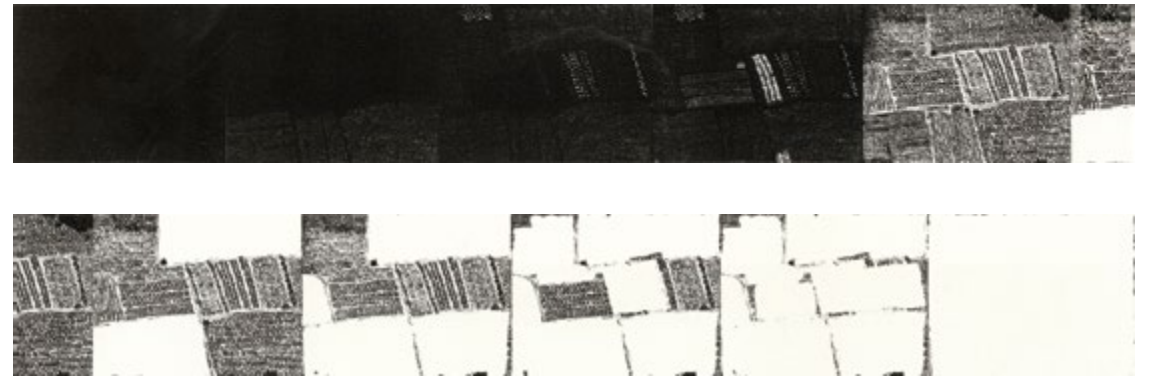


Figure 3 Xu Bing, *Repetitions Series: Xiliudi*, 《复数系列：自留地》, 1987, woodcut on paper, 木刻版画, 54.5 x 864.0 cm. After Vainker, Shelagh, *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscape: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, 2013), 110–111.

composed of multiple iconic images arranged to evoke a world and its way of life (fig. 4).

Many art critics begin their analysis of Xu Bing's oeuvre with *Book from the Sky*—the ground-breaking work that follows his *Repetitions Series*. It may be worth noting, however, that persistent themes central to his established artistic practice such as iconic image-making, repetition and reproduction, and human existence in relation to nature find their first instantiation in these earlier woodcut prints.



Figure 2 Xu Bing, *Shattered Jade Series: Farmyard*, 《碎玉集：农舍》, 1982, woodcut on paper, 木刻版画, 12 x 14 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 Xu Bing, "Nature 1"—Mountain Place, 《“自然1”——有山的地方》, 1985, woodcut on paper, 木刻版画, 46 x 61 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

1. Xu Bing, "Yumei zuowei yizhong yangliao" [Ignorance as a Form of Nourishment] in *Qishi Niandai* [The 70's], eds. Beidao and Lituo, trans. Jesse Robert Coffino and Vivian Xu (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009), 13–30.
2. Ibid.

徐冰的早期木刻作品

文革后期，还是一名高中生的徐冰也加入了知识青年上山下乡的行列，被分配到延庆县的收粮沟村安家落户。当时的徐冰对自己是“知青”这个角色十分虔诚，在努力干农活的同时，又积极充当村子里的美术干事，什么画肖像啊、写大字啊、出黑板报啊，这类活儿他全包了。后来乡里的《烂漫山花》油印刊物就是他帮着刻制出版的。

在乡里徐冰是个模范青年，又颇有艺术才气，所以1977年当他申请中央美术学院时就直接被录取了，旋即成为版画系新生。入学不久，他就以一组版画小品而引人注目，这批创作于1978至1983年间的版画小品后来编成《碎玉集》出版，内容大都反映文革时期他在中国农村的生活经历。人住在北京，又进了中央美院，可徐冰对那个山沟里的乡村仍非常留恋。因为那儿是他度过了青春期并在艺术上成长起来的地方。在回忆下乡这段经历对其作品的影响时他这么说：

“（我的）这种对农村的‘痴情’，也反映在我那时的木刻中。从第一次‘木刻技法’课后，我刻了有一百多张掌心大小的木刻，我试图把所见过的中外木刻刀法都试一遍。

没想到这些小品练习，成了我最早对艺术圈有影响的东西。这些小画平易真挚，现在有时回去翻看，会被自己当时那种单纯所感动。当时大家喜欢这些小画，也许是因为经过‘文革’，太需要找回一点真实的情感。这些小画与‘伤痕艺术’不同，它们不控诉，而是珍惜过去了的生活中留下的，那些平淡美好的东西。”¹

徐冰对木刻这种材料的特性和表现形式进行了充分的利用，将凹凸版画的语言提炼成最基本的点和线，简化到无法再简化的符号。他好像不只是在描绘他的村里生活经历，而是在收集各种与民间生活有关的符号，像是要编书似地，汇集成寓意图形124幅（其中黑白100幅，彩色24幅）。正是这批来源于生活但已经符号化了的图形，奠定了徐冰日后以语言文字为常用手段来创作，并深度地表现图像与自然之关系的基础。

在徐冰这些简洁的符号性图像当中，人和自然密不可分。对造化的这种深刻理解不只是他去乡村采风后得来的第二手资料，而是他亲身经历的体悟：

“可以说，我最早的一次有效的艺术‘理论’学习和艺术理想的建立，是在收粮沟对面山坡上完成的。山上有一片杏树，是村里的一点副业。那年夏天这山坡成了我的天堂。我专心享受大自然的变化。我每天带着画箱，带着书上山。”²

徐冰于1981年毕业，获得学士学位。毕业后他继续搞木刻，虽然是同一种媒介，却开始以不同的概念和新的深度去探索，因为他已经接触到了国外艺术家如马塞尔·杜尚和安迪·沃霍尔等人的当代艺术概念和艺术实践。他在1987至1988年间创作的《复数系列》就是这种探索的结果：通过使用同一块木板，并按照其雕刻顺序的先后逐次在同一张长卷上翻印十一次的方式，徐冰探索了版画这种媒介的重复性和过程性。在此展示的是十幅长卷中每一卷的中心版面。

徐冰的《复数系列》虽然在题材上与他早先创作的《碎玉集》相似，比如成行的庄稼、山坡上的牧羊、田间村宅聚集、场上碾磨点缀等等，但在规模上复数系列的版面要大得多，在对构图和纵深感的探索上给了他极大的发挥余地。同样是具有农村气息的符号性

图像，《复数系列》将原本数量单一的图像变成了由多个图像排列组成的山水构图，营造出一个完整的艺术世界和其中生活方式。

许多艺术评论家往往从徐冰的《天书》下手来解读他的艺术作品。《天书》固然是其成名之作，但他在《天书》之前创作的《复数系列》中展现出的对图像的符号化提炼、对重复性与复制性的认识、对人迹与自然的磨合，正是其艺术创作的奠基石，也成为了其日后创作生涯中永恒的主题。

1. 徐冰，《愚昧作为一种养料》，载北岛、李陀编（高杰和徐维静译）《七十年代》，（北京：三联出版社出版，2009年版），13-30页。
2. 同上。



01

Farmhouse Meal

农家饭

1979 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 6.1 x 8.5 cm



02

Farmhouse

农家

1979 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 6.5 x 7.3 cm



03 Garden Patch

园圃

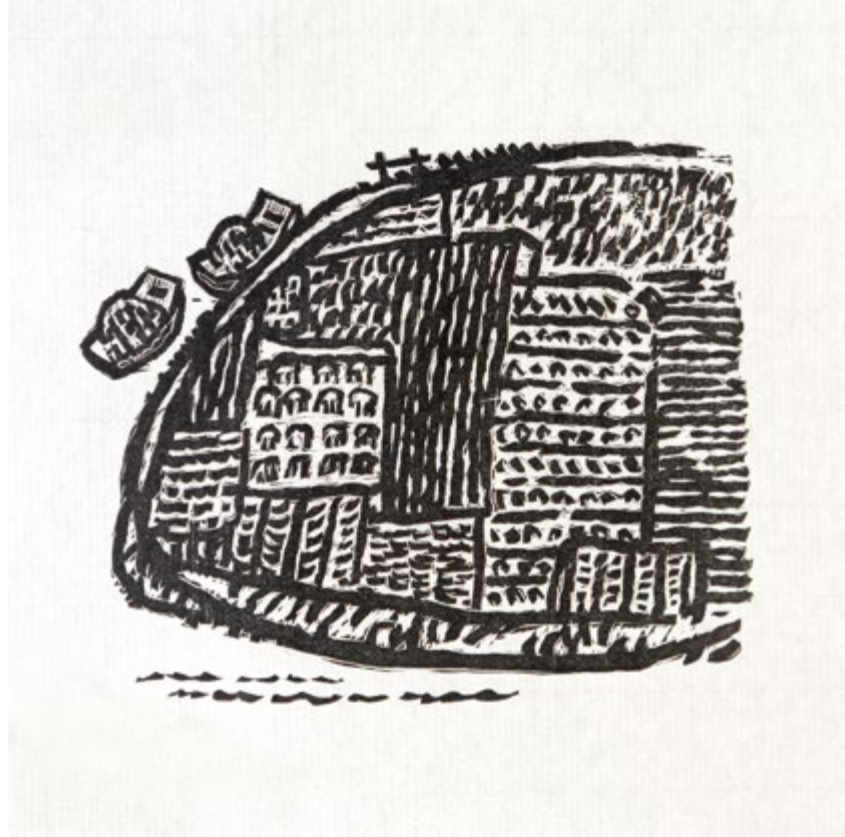
1982 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 7.2 x 7.4 cm



04 Cottage

农舍

1982 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 8.3 x 9.5 cm



05 Two Boats
两条小船

1985 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 8.9 x 10.6 cm



06 Pond
野塘

1985 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 7.3 x 10.4 cm



07 Bullpen
牛栏

1978 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 6.1 x 8.5 cm



08 Under the Moon
月下

1980 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 9.2 x 7.2 cm



09

Warehousing

入仓

1979 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 7.5 x 7.9 cm



10

Sounds of Spring

春鸣

1982 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 9.8 x 9.8 cm

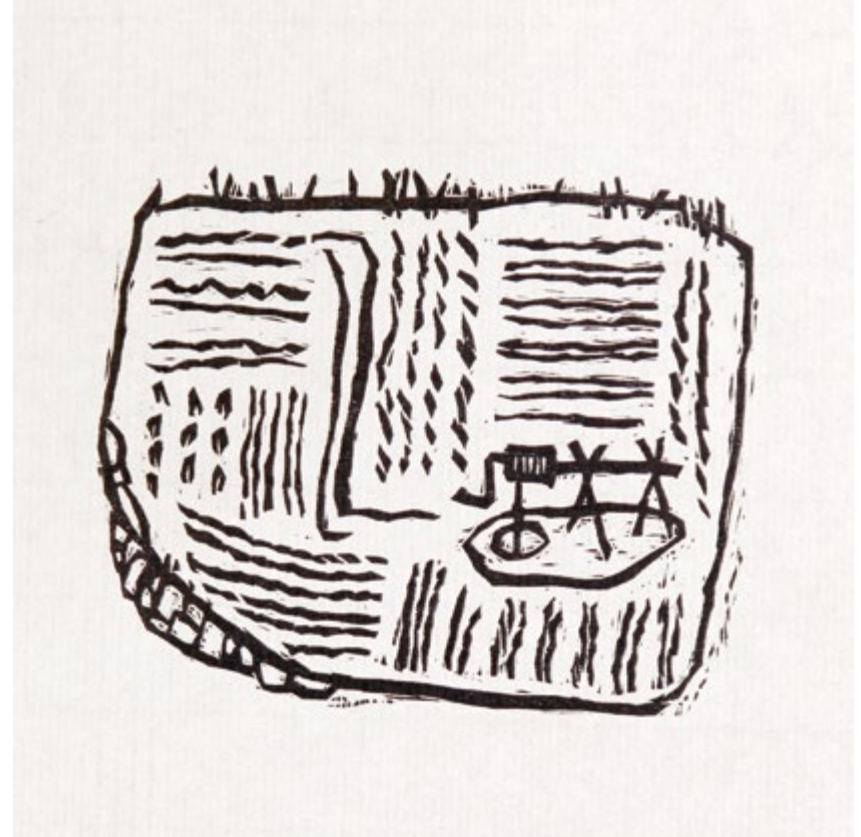


11

Fragrant Grasses

芳草地

1980 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 7.9 x 8 cm



12

Farm Land

田

1982 | Woodcut Print 木刻版画; 黑白 | 7 x 8.3 cm





13

Late Autumn Hillside

秋山

1982 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 14.8 x 15 cm



14

Twelfth Lunar Month

腊月

1982 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 16.5 x 16 cm



15

Field

田野

1983 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 14.5 x 15.5 cm



16

Summer Grass

夏草

1983 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 14.9 x 15.2 cm



17

Hall
堂屋

1983 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 14.5 x 16.6 cm



18

Mountain City
山城

1982 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 15 x 14.5 cm



19

The First Lunar Month

正月里

1982 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 15.9 x 15.5 cm



20

Harvest's End

完场

1982 | Woodcut print with color 木刻版画, 彩色 | 14.6 x 15.1 cm





21

Moving Cloud

移云

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 51.5 x 72 cm



22

Mountain Place

有山的地方

1988 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 46 x 61 cm

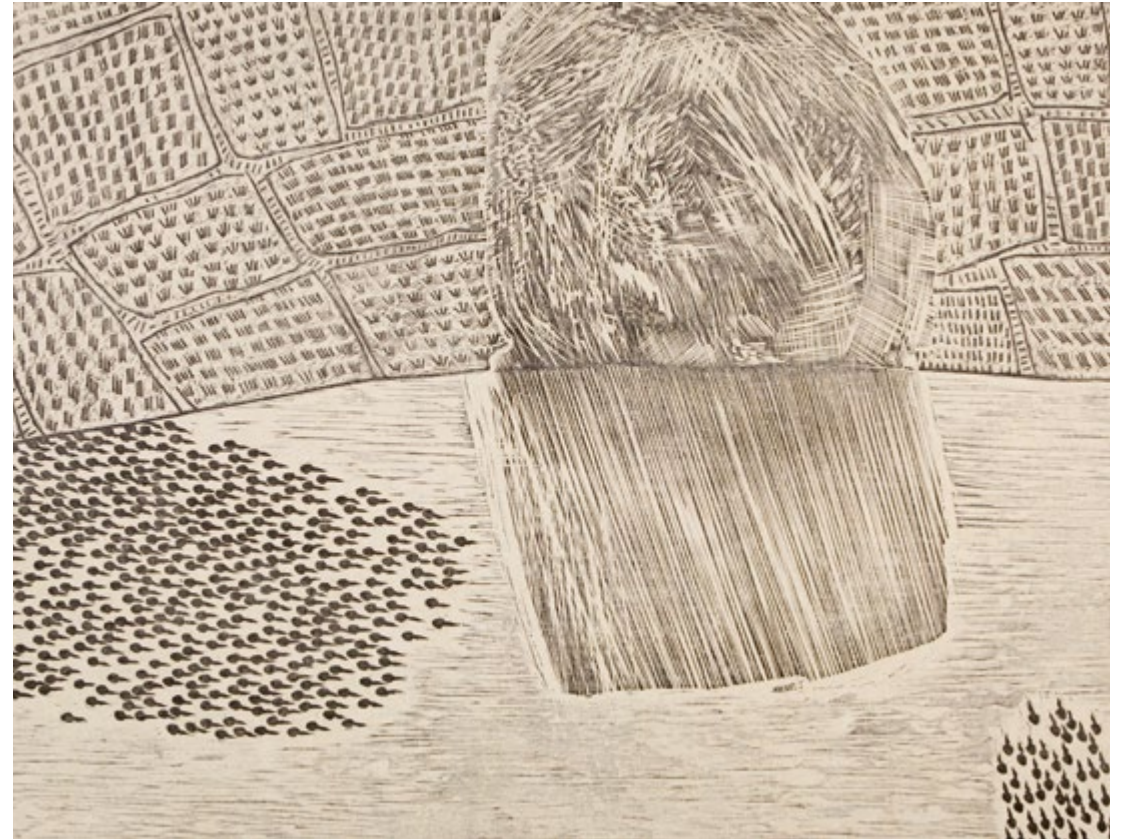


23

Farmland

庄稼地

1988 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 55 x 72 cm

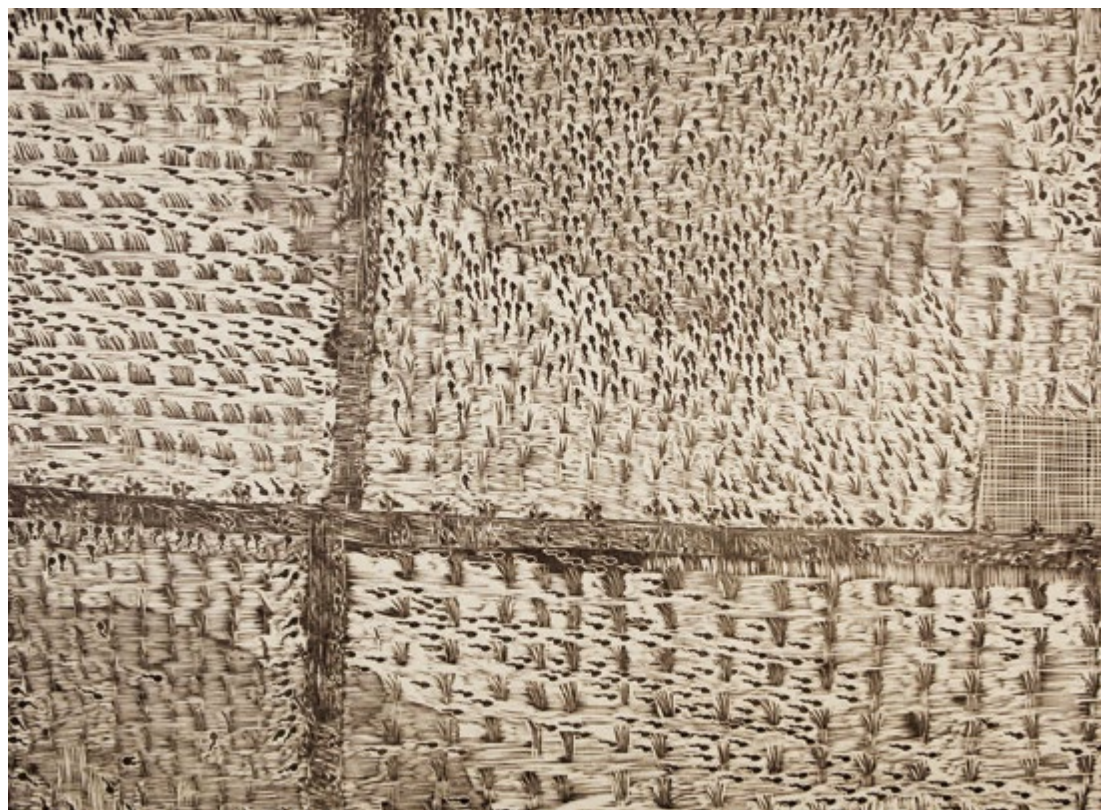


24

Haystack Reflection

草垛的倒影

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 47.4 x 71.7 cm



25 Field

田

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 55 x 68.7 cm



26 Black Tadpoles

黑蝌蚪

1988 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 54.8 x 74.8 cm



27

Black Pool

黑潭

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 50.5 x 71 cm



28

Big River

一条大河

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 53 x 73.5 cm



29

Withered Pool

枯潭

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 54.5 x 72.5 cm



30

Pool of Life

生命潭

1987 | Consecutive woodblock print on Chinese paper
 黑白木刻联印，油性墨，中国皮纸 | 50.4 x 68.2 cm



(Figure 5) Xu Bing sketching in the Himalayan Mountains, 徐冰在喜马拉雅山写生, 1999. After Vainker, Shelagh, *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscape: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, 120.

LANDSCRIPT

“Calligraphy and painting are of equal importance and, viewed together, are a way of life.”³

In 1999, Xu Bing had a second, transformative encounter with nature. While traveling in the Himalaya Mountains, he began to sketch his experience of the landscape in the form of written characters (fig. 5). Indeed, he has said that he saw the landscape as characters:

“... facing a real mountain, I wrote ‘mountain’... where there was river water I wrote the character for ‘water’. The clouds shifted, the mountain colors changed, the wind blew and the grasses moved, the life around me appeared and disappeared; with a feeling of excitement, I recorded it all!”⁴ (fig. 6)

In the resulting *Landscape* series of ink and brush paintings on paper, Xu Bing unifies painting—the art of depicting with images—with calligraphy—the art of depicting with written language.

In the Chinese tradition, painting and language have always been closely associated through the three allied “literati” arts of poetry, calligraphy and painting. Painting and poetry share a language of symbolic image and metaphor. The symbolic content of both arts is based on a shared lexicon of images—many of which such as mountains, water, trees, flowers, birds and animals draw from the natural world—with metaphoric extensions into the subjective, intersubjective, social and cultural domains. Because of this, various painters and poets throughout China’s long cultural history have observed that “paintings are poems without words” and, conversely, “poems are paintings without images.” Painting and calligraphy, in contrast, share a set of materials—specifically brush, ink, paper and water—techniques—specifically *bimo* or “brush and inkwork”—and a mode of expression—specifically the gestural embodiment of the artist’s heart and mind.

In his *Landscape* series, Xu Bing reinvents these relationships by simply substituting the images of Chinese written characters for painted depictions of natural forms—instead of depicting a mountain with its picture, he records it with the written character for mountain *shan* 山. If a written word (a semiotic symbol) is also a picture (a semiotic icon) why can’t a painting—which is just a poem in another form—be made up of symbols (words) instead of icons (images)? After the fact,



Figure 6 Xu Bing, *Landscript* (from Himalaya sketchbook), 《文字写生》(选自喜马拉雅山的写生本), 1999, sketchbook, ink on Nepalese paper, 写生本, 尼泊尔纸上水墨, 21 x 16 cm (closed). After Vainker, Shelagh, *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscript*, 116.

this moves seem both simple and obvious and yet over the two-thousand-year history of painting with brush, ink and paper, no calligrapher or painter has dared try this. Xu Bing recounts that the approach first came to him as an idea:

“I had this notion that calligraphy [could be arranged in space]: starting from the top, there would be the sun, then the sky, then would come trees followed by mountains, then houses, then earth, and finally water. At the time, I had a concept that these works, one could say were calligraphy, one could also say were painting, one could yet further say were a text field, a sheet of written characters.”⁵

It was, however, not the concept but his artistic encounter with the mountains in Nepal that catalyzed a profound epiphany:

“...I forgot much about art history, forgetting the history of calligraphy and styles. I experienced my hand as calligraphy itself with no relationship to style. ...writing the character 'mountain' I felt the true mountain. I came into contact with the essence of Chinese culture. What is calligraphy? What is painting? In that moment, I could feel the source.”⁶

The key for Xu Bing was that this unity between word and image, between semiotic symbol and icon, could be experienced directly—arguably by anyone—through the simple act of *Landscript* writing/painting in nature:

“This experience helped me to understand the relationship between writing characters and the use of the brush in Chinese painting. This relationship is based heavily on symbols or semiotics. In Chinese calligraphy and painting we emphasize how the use and style of brushwork and basic brush techniques are common to both arts. But I discovered that semiotics and the manner of sign-making is also an underlying aspect of Chinese culture fundamental to both.”⁷

Furthermore, by inserting the iconic-symbolic dimension of calligraphy into painting, Xu Bing not only redraws the language-imaging relationship in the domain of painting, but also re-enacts the introduction of calligraphic brushwork into painting but on terms

completely of his own invention (fig. 7):

“I [at first] emphasized the appearance of the words, but as I continued to experiment with these ideas, my use of the brush came closer and closer to that of Chinese texture strokes. For example how to paint pine trees with the *song* 松 (pine) character, draw bamboo with a *zhu* 竹 (bamboo) character, paint plum blossoms with the *mei* 梅 (plum) character, these painting stroke forms are actually very similar to the forms of radicals (or component parts) that make up Chinese calligraphy.”⁸

Out of this emerges an entirely new and complete painting practice:

“These paintings have a process. To begin with, I sketch from life. Sketching from life means sitting on mountains, sitting on real mountains and painting mountains. ... Sometimes, I will study my previous works; sometimes I will study my earlier sketches. At the same time as I study the works of past masters and within this relationship I am able

to determine how to use my brush.”

This new *Landscript* painting practice is different from the traditional literati painting practice and yet they share many similarities—what the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein might have characterized as two different “language games” with a strong “family resemblance” both of which emerge out of related “forms of life” if not the very same.

3. Xu Bing, Interview with Yifawn Lee, trans. Yifawn Lee, *Orientations*, October, 2010.
4. Xu Bing, “Landscript Series,” *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, trans. Shelagh Vainker (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, 2013), 124.
5. Xu Bing, *The Enduring Passion for Ink: Xu Bing's Semiotics*, directed by Britta Erickson (2013; Palo Alto: Britta Erickson), Film.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*



Figure 7 Xu Bing using his *Landscript* cunfa or brushwork from Xu Bing, 徐冰使用《文字写生》的皴法, *The Enduring Passion for Ink: Xu Bing's Semiotics*, directed by Britta Erickson.

Figure 6 Xu Bing, *Landscript* (from Himalaya sketchbook), 《文字写生》(选自喜马拉雅山的写生本), 1999, sketchbook, ink on Nepalese paper, 写生本, 尼泊尔纸上水墨, 21 x 16 cm (closed). After Tomii, Reiko, *Xu Bing*, 34.

《文字写生》系列

书法和绘画有着同等重要的地位，放在一起看的话，那就是一种生活方式。³

1999年，徐冰再次回归自然，并在自然中找到了新的灵感。他在喜马拉雅山脉的旅途中，开始以书写汉字的形式勾勒出他在山水中的体验。他曾说，他真的在山水间“看”到了汉字：“面对真的山写「山」，在河水的地方写「水」字。云在移动，山色变化，风吹草动，生灵出没：我兴奋地「描写」（记录它们）！”⁴

他的纸本水墨《文字写生》系列应运而生，其间“书”即成“画”，“画”便是“书”。

这与中国传统中的“书画同源”不谋而合，与文人的“诗书画三绝”之追求相辅相成。这几类艺术形式都善于运用象征式的图像和隐喻，其中书画带寓意，诗词重用典。这些象征内容的主体都来源于那些由自然元素转化成的图像索引，如山水有树法石法云水法，花鸟有花卉翎毛法。用者知，观者懂，社会文化又能容，这样的象征和寓意方能通达。正因为有这样的传统，中国自古以来就有“画为无声诗，诗为有声画”一说。相比起来，书与画的相同之处表现在其创作材料上（笔、墨、纸、水）、技法上（笔墨）、还有表达方式上（笔意，也就是艺术家的思想和心灵的示意）。

在《文字写生》系列中，徐冰重塑了书与画的关系，用汉字来取代艺术家对自然形态的描绘——用字来“画”。在画一座山的时候，他不是描绘山的样子，而是用“山”字来将它记录下来。如果书面文字（符号性标志）本身就带有图（符号性图标）的性质，那么为什么不索性用这种符号（文字）而不是图标（图像）来作画呢？画不也是诗的另外一种表现形式吗？事后看来，书与画之间的这种转换看似简单明了，可纵观上下两千年笔墨史，写的写，画的画，这一步



之遥，竟无人敢跨？回想起来，徐冰说这种创作手法始于这样一个概念：

“所以我有这样的一个想法，我觉得书法从上面，比如说太阳完了是天，完了是树完了是山，完了是房子完了是土，完了是水。当时因为我有一个概念，我是希望呢这些作品，它又可以说他们是书法，又可以说他们是绘画，又可以说他们是一篇 text，一篇文章，所以比较强调那个文字，就是比较强调字在上面的那个显示。”⁵

然而真正使他顿悟的却不是这个概念，而是他与尼泊尔群山在艺术上的交会：

“我忘掉了很多的关于艺术的历史、书法的历史和书法的风格，这个时候我体会到了，我的出手就是书法本身，而和这些风格是没有关系的，面对真的山的时候，写这个山字，他会摸到这个书法或者说这个文化中非常本质的部分，就是到底什么是书法，或者到底什么是绘画，他会由于那一瞬间，而让你有更多的体会。”⁶

徐冰意识到了其中的奥妙：通过这种看似简单的亦文亦图、亦写亦画的文字写生，任何人都可以深刻地感悟到文字与图像、符号性标志与图标之间的内在统一：

“这东西让我体会到了就是，这个写字和中国的绘画用笔之间的关系，这关系呢其实我

更多的体会是符号写生的关系，因为我们一直很强调的是中国书法和绘画在用笔的风格上，和行笔的技术上的共同性，但实际上呢，我发现中国的文化呢很本质的部分就是带有符号性，就是他是符号画。”⁷

而且，用具有表意功能和象征意义的文字入画，徐冰将原来已有的所谓“以书入画”的书画之间的关系进行了重新洗牌，方法上同样是以“书”入画，内容上却自出机杼。通过将书法的图标性和象征性置入绘画中的方法，徐冰不仅重新梳理了绘画领域的图文关系，而且将书法的笔墨引入到绘画当中这一“以书入画”的技法进行了重新演绎，并在内容上加入了自己的革新性探索：

“我起先就是比较强调字在上面的那个显示，但是后来随着尝试这样去画呢，最后呢他逐渐的更接近中国的这个用笔的皴法，然后这个时候我们发现了，其实中国的皴法，都是由符号的重复而构成的，比如说这个松树怎么样画，都是用松白点，竹子怎么画，他叫做竹各点，梅花点就是梅花怎么样点，实际上这些皴法和点法就是像汉字中的偏旁、部首。”⁸

一种全新而完整的绘画方式就此诞生：

“这些绘画呢其实他有一个过程，这过程是什么呢，最开始呢是画写生，写生呢就是坐在山上然后对着真的山画山……我有时候会

又看我过去的作品，又看我过去的写生，然后又同时又看过去的这些大师的作品，在这么一个关系之中呢最后我会决定，我这个笔应该怎么样用。”⁹

《文字写生》与传统的文人绘画手法不同，但有许多相似之处——用奥地利哲学家路德维希·维特根斯坦的话来说，就是两种带有“家族相似性”但形式不同的“语言游戏”，而两者均出自相关，甚至相同的“生命形态”。

3. 徐冰，“Interview with Yifawn Lee” [《与李宜芳的访谈》]，Yifawn Lee [李宜芳]译 *Orientalisms* [《美成在久》]（2010年10月刊）。注：该艺术家的中文原文引用无法获得，在此提供的是已发布的英文原文的翻译版本。

4. 徐冰，“Landscape Series” [《文字写生系列》]，载 Shelagh Vainker [马熙乐]译 *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscape: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing* [《风景，读风景——自然如语言》]（牛津：阿什莫林博物馆，牛津大学，2013年版），121页。

5. 徐冰，“The Enduring Passion for Ink: Xu Bing's Semiotics” [《墨咏：徐冰的符号学》]（电影），Britta Erickson [林似竹]（导演），2013年，帕洛阿尔托。

6. 同上。

7. 同上。

8. 同上。

9. 同上。



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Landscape 2013-03

文字写生 2013-03

2013 | Ink on Nepalese paper 水墨, 尼泊尔纸 | 80 x 132 cm





32

Landscape 2013-04

文字写生 2013-04

2013 | Ink on Nepalese paper 水墨, 尼泊尔纸 | 79 x 131 cm





10

Suzhou Landscapes

苏州文字写生

2003-2013 | Lithograph print in two colors from 35 plates on Entrada Natural Rag paper 35 块板双色石版印刷，自然碎布纸 | 220 x 87cm x 4

Set of four *Landscape* lithographs after four Seventeenth-century landscape paintings in the Suzhou Museum, 220 x 87 cm each

Printed in two colors from 35 plates on Entrada Natural Rag, 300 gram paper by Jason Miller at Universal Limited Art Editions, Bay Shore, New York. Published by Deuce II Editions, New York.

Edition: 30

这套山水作品由四个部分组成，是基于苏州博物馆藏十七世纪的四幅古代山水画的再创作。每幅为 220 厘米高，87 厘米宽，在 300 克纯棉白纸上用 35 块板以双色印成。此作品由纽约 Deuce 出版，然后由纽约环球出版社的 Jason Miller 制作，这是 30 件限量印刷版中的一套。

Artist inscription:

I used my method to copy four hanging scrolls from the Suzhou Museum. The four paintings that I chose are themselves works based on earlier paintings, something that is made apparent their titles. “Plagiarism” does not exist in traditional Chinese culture. Good poetry emphasizes us of the “canon,” the brilliant poetry of earlier generations. If a good painting possesses “classical” qualities, it must reflect the brushwork of the ancients. Chinese painting emphasizes “paper copying paper,” and through these symbolized brushstrokes, it is passed on from generation to generation. The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, China’s most famous work of art instruction, compiles the brushstrokes—mountain strokes, tree strokes, rock strokes—from paintings of old. It is a dictionary. Students need only memorize the “radicals” to express everything existing in this world. In China, calligraphy and painting are a single action. Painting a mountain is writing the character “mountain”. The Character “mountain” is the concept of “mountain”, and the pith of a mountain and also a copy of the image “mountain” and how it has evolved. These four works nakedly exhibit and explore this tradition. Work of the Chinese literati are born from feeling that develop between friends, over time, at gatherings and outings. This group of prints, drafted over a period of ten years, are a record of a friendship.

Artist signature: September third, two thousand and eleven, Chang Chun Xu Bing.

Artist seals: 徐 (Xu) in relief, 冰 (Bing) in intaglio.

艺术家题字：

我用我自己的方法临摹苏州博物馆的四幅卷轴画。所选的这四幅画也都追摹更早的作品，摹仿意图在标题中已很明晰。“抄袭”一词在中国传统文化中并不存在。好诗歌会强调对典故的运用，这是古往今来延续的传统。如果一幅好的绘画具有古典特质，它肯定反映了古人的用笔。中国绘画强调纸抄纸，通过这些象征意义的笔触世代传承。芥子园画谱是中国最著名的经典范本，包括古人画山、树、石的各种笔法。凭借这本画谱，学画者只需将各种表现手法默记于心。在中国文化中，书画同源。画山即写山。“山”字代表山的概念和山的核心，字形得自山的形象及其演变。这四幅作品展现并探索这一传统。中国文人画作品发韧于友人之间的情谊，在文化雅集、访胜纪游中日久弥坚。这组作品历时十年，便是友谊的凭证。

艺术家签名：2011 年，九月三日，长春徐冰。

艺术家印章：浮雕为徐字 (Xu)，凹雕为冰字 (Bing)。



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此千尺圖... 卷二
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Suzhou Landscapes

苏州文字写生

Detail 局部



Figure 8 Designs for the character “bird” 鸟 for Xu Bing, *The Living Word*, 徐冰为《鸟飞了》作品中的“鸟”字进行设计, 2001, acrylic and mixed media installation. 丙烯和综合材料装置. Images courtesy of the artist.

THE LIVING WORD

Extending the concepts of *Landscape* to the physical, experiential mode of installation, Xu Bing created a series of three monumental installations *The Living Word* (2001), *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (2004), and *Purple Breeze Comes from the East* (2008). For *Xu Bing: Language and Nature*, Xu Bing stages what he calls the “intaglio” or “white on black” edition of his iconic *The Living Word* installation:

“On the floor in the center of the gallery was text taken from a dictionary definition of ‘bird’ which says: ‘鸟 *niao*, a class of vertebrate animal, warm-blooded and oviparous, the whole body covered in feathers, the forelegs developed into wings, can mostly fly.’ With this text as a starting point, the ‘bird’ character begins to take flight, transforming from simplified printed form to long printed form, regular script, clerical script, small seal script and finally reassuming the ancient pictographic character ‘bird’. In a flock, they fly towards the window and beyond.”¹⁰(fig. 8)

In *The Living Word*, Xu Bing has created a simple primer in modern semiotics. He starts with the dictionary definition of bird—what Aristotle would have called a “definition” (a phrase signifying a thing’s essence) and what philosophers today might call a “concept.” In the semiotics of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the word “bird” was called the “signifier” and Xu Bing’s conceptual definition the “signified”, and the word-concept pair installed on the ground the “sign.” Xu Bing’s “bird” or 鸟, however, does more than denote a concept; it stands up and rises as it transforms backwards in time through its morphological evolution back to its primitive source: a bird in nature which then takes off and flies! To describe this process, we must leave de Saussure behind and consult the American philosopher and semiologist Charles S. Peirce who introduces the idea of the “icon” which is a kind of sign that points to its object via the quality of resemblance. Pictures, portraits, diagrams and maps, for example, are all icons. De Saussure’s signifiers (words) are paired with their signifieds (concepts) through social conventions which we all learn and adopt; one can think of this as learning a language. Peirce calls such conventional signs “symbols.” Peirce’s icons, on the other hand, are not conventional but “motivated” in the sense that our brains, neurologically,

automatically, and with little-to-no learning, recognize the sign and its object as linked because they appear to us similar—they look or sound or somehow feel alike. The Chinese written characters are thus both symbolic (conventional) and iconic (motivated). Alphabetic languages, in contrast, are almost exclusively symbolic.

In as sense, *The Living Word* is a returning, a going back to a source—back before the poetics of painted imagery and calligraphic painted brushwork ever became part of painting practice—specifically, back to the very origins of the Chinese pictographic written language. In Chinese cultural history, there is a founding cultural myth first recorded in the *Book of Changes* or *Yi Jing*, which reappears elaborated in the Han Dynasty dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* in which Cang Jie invents the Chinese writing system based on patterns and marks he observes in the natural world. By the time of the Tang Dynasty, in Zhang Yanyuan's *Lidai Minghua Ji*, this narrative has expanded to include painting—specifically that “writing and painting share a single origin” In the chapter entitled “Narrating the Origins of Painting” we learn that: “Cang Jie had four eyes, with which he saw everything in the universe. He set the form of written characters based on the tracks of birds and tortoises...at this time, writing and painting had yet to diverge; both were used to depict likeness. Writing was used to spread meaning, while painting was used to spread shapes.”¹¹ Later in the same chapter, “...among the six categories of characters, the third is pictographic, meaning

that those characters are likenesses. From this we can see that though writing and painting have different names, they are the same thing.”¹²

Xu Bing elaborates with an example: “...every Chinese character also tells a story, and what's more, a story with a plot. This story is constructed from several small symbols (the “radicals,” or component parts of the characters). Take for example the character for ‘cold’ (寒). What it's saying is that there's a man curled up at home in the cold weather, keeping warm on a pile of hay, while the ground is covered with ice. So much information in one character!”¹³ This is not just a word, it is, quite literally, a picture (fig. 9).

For some, *The Living Word* immediately brings to mind the work *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth (fig. 10). As Xu Bing himself describes, Kosuth's work “...comprises an actual chair, a photograph of a chair and an English definition of a chair, all set out for comparison; and this is the only kind of comparison it can create. This is because there is no direct visual relationship between English and the phenomenon it expresses. But in Chinese characters, the relationship between the character ‘bird’ and the visual form of a bird is an indistinct boundary, and one doesn't know at what point it transforms. This comparison enables us to see the distinction between different cultures at a fundamental level.”¹⁴

Unlike alphabetic languages, Xu Bing elaborates, “...Chinese writing transformed

very simply: it wasn't something that required learning in order to understand. The written symbol had returned to its original point of connection with nature and at this original point it transcended the boundaries of language.”¹⁵

This, Xu Bing argues, is the distinctive quality of the Chinese cultural world: “...the mode of culture of Chinese people is extremely closely related to the origins of pictographic characters. ...for although Chinese characters have already evolved from pictograms into their modern forms, the core element of pictorial logic is still there; this combines with everyday reading, thinking, and viewpoints to create an intriguing connection ...each time they write a character they have completed

a design and painted a small painting. Across generations spanning thousands of years, Chinese people have painted countless paintings, have read countless diagrams; how can there not be an influence?”¹⁶

10. Xu Bing, “Landscape Series,” 127.

11. Zhang Yanyuan, “Xu hua zhi yuanliu” [On the Origins of Painting] in *Lidai Minghua Ji* [Famous Paintings through History] quoted in Jia Fangzhou, “Xu Bing ‘Tian Shu’ wujiie” [Five Explanations of Xu Bing's Book from the Sky], *Jiangsu Huakan*, 1990, no. 2, 17–20.

12. Ibid.

13. Xu Bing, *Xu Bing: Book from the Sky Book from the Ground*, trans. William Dirks and Minn Song (Taipei: Eslite Corp., 2014), 126.

14. Xu Bing “Landscape Series,” 127–128.

15. Ibid, 128.

16. Ibid, 126.



Figure 10 Joseph Kosuth, 约瑟夫·科苏斯, *One and Three Chairs*, 《一把和三把椅子》, 1965, installed at the Centre Pompidou in Metz.



《鸟飞了》

徐冰对《文字写生》中的表现手法作了进一步的挖掘，创作出一组更具实体性的体验式装置作品，它们分别是2001年作的《鸟飞了》、2004年的《猴子捞月》和2008年的《紫气东来》。在本展览中，徐冰选用其“凹版”的标志性装置作品《鸟飞了》：

“展厅中央地面上有一篇文章；取自于字典上关于‘鸟’的解释，是这样写的：‘鸟（鳥）niǎo 脊椎动物的一类，温血卵生，全身有羽毛，后肢能行走，前肢变为翅，一般能飞。’从这篇文章为起点，‘鸟’字开始飞起来，从简体印刷体向繁体印刷体，楷书，隶书，小篆一路演变，最后追溯到远古象形文字的‘鸟’；成群地飞向窗外。”¹⁰

在《鸟飞了》这件作品中，徐冰用现代符号学的方法创造了一本入门启蒙书。他先用字典上摘选的文字对“鸟”这个字作出了简单的说明。这样的说明用亚里士多德的话讲叫做“定义”，也就是描述一个事物之本质的用语，而今天的哲学家可能会称之为“概念”。在瑞士语言学家弗迪南·德·索绪尔的符号学理论中，作品中的“鸟”字是“能指”，徐冰对鸟的描述是“所指”，而由文字和其定义组成的装置则是“标志”。可徐冰作品中的这个“鸟”字不光起着简单的指代作用，它还生动地演变出字体的沿革过程，从眼下追溯到恒古，直至原始形态中自然界里的鸟，然后展翅飞翔！想要描述这个演变过程，我们需要暂且抛开索绪尔不谈，转而参考美国哲学家和符号学家查尔斯·桑·皮尔士提出的学说。皮尔士认为符号有三个内容：符号本身、符号所指代的对象和人们对符号的理解或解释。其中符号的功能性取决于它跟其所指代的东西在形象上相似的程度。图、像、图表、地图都是符号。索绪尔的“能指”（文字）和“所指”（定义）是成双成对的，其配对方式是由我们学习和接纳的社会惯例来建立的，比如学习一种语言就是建立一种配对。在皮尔士看来，这样的惯例型符号属于“标记”，跟他讲的图形符号在概念上有不同。他所定义的符号不是

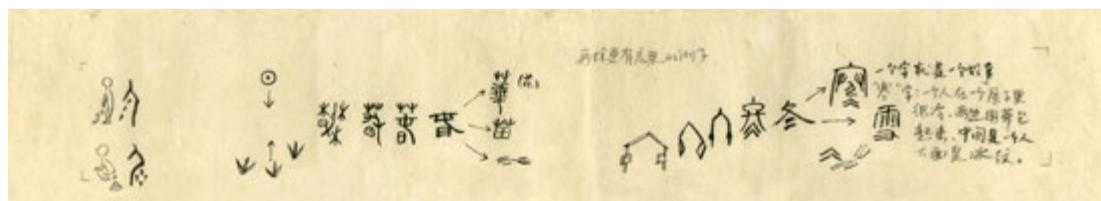


Figure 9 Construction of the character for "cold" (寒) from basic pictographic radicals. 文字“寒”的构成，始于其象形的偏旁部首。After Xu Bing, *Character of Characters: An Animation by Xu Bing* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2012), 37.

约定俗成的，而是“理据的”：大脑神经在不需要学习的情况下，就能让我们自动明白那些图标和其指代物体的关联，因为它们让人一看、一听或者一摸就觉得跟某个东西很相像。从这个意义上说，汉字既有标记的“能指”和“所指”功能（约定俗成的），又有图形符号的象形之特征（理据的）。相比之下，使用拼音字母的语言几乎完全是代指性的。

从某种意义上说，《鸟飞了》是一种回归。既回归到绘画意象和书法用笔的诗意性被运用到绘画创作之前的那个源头，也回归到了中国象形文字的草创时期的那种原始状态。中国文化史上，《易经》中首次有“仓颉造字”的记载，汉代的《说文解字》将此神话传说作了更详细的描述，说仓颉根据自然形象而始创书契文字。唐代张彦远的《历代名画记》中有“叙画之源流”一章，在此他把绘画也包括进去了，借此来说明“书画同源”的关系。我们从中得知：“颉有四目，仰观天象。因俪鸟龟之迹，遂定书字之形。……是时也，书画同体而未分，象制肇创而犹略。无以传

其意，故有书，无以见其形，故有画。”¹¹同一章中又说：“……六书，其三曰象形，则画之意也。”¹²

徐冰举了一个例子：“每一个汉字都是一个故事，甚至都是有情节的故事，这故事是由几个小符号（偏旁部首）构成。比如‘寒’字，‘寒’讲的是：很冷的天气里，一个人蜷缩在家中，用草取暖，地上都是冰。读一个‘寒’字就有这么多的信息。”¹³这“寒”字不仅是一个文字，而且是一张实实在在的图片。

《鸟飞了》这件作品会让有些观众想到约瑟夫·科苏斯的《一把和三把椅子》。

徐冰这样描述科苏斯的作品：“‘真实的椅子’，‘照片的椅子’和‘英文解释的椅子’一字排开的对比。也只能形成这种对比。因为英文与所表达的物象间没有视觉上的直接联系。但是在汉字中，‘鸟’字与鸟的造型在视觉上，是分界不明的关系，不知道在哪里就被转换了。这个比较让我们看到，不同文化在基本元素上的区别。”¹⁴

徐冰解释道，与字母语言不同：“这时的中文变得很简单，已不再是一种需要学习才能掌握的文字。文字符号又回到了与自然关系的原点上，在这原点上，是超越语种界限的。”

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徐冰认为，这是中国文化圈独有的品质：“中国人的文化方式都与象形文字的源起有极大关系。虽然汉字已经从象形演变成了现代汉字，但核心部分的图像逻辑依然存在，并与平日的阅读，思维，观看构成一种奇妙的关系，并起着作用。每写一个字，就完成了一张结构图，就写了一幅小画。祖祖辈辈几千年，中国人画了多少幅图，读了多少幅图，怎么能没有影响？”¹⁶

10. 徐冰，“Landscape Series” [《文字写生系列》]，122页。

11. 张彦远，《叙画之源流》载《历代名画记》。引自贾方舟《徐冰“天书”五解》，见《江苏画刊》（1990年第2期），17-20页。

12. 同上。

13. 徐冰，“The Making of Book From the Sky” [《<天书>的过程》]，载 Drew Hammond [德鲁·哈蒙德]译 *Passages in the Making of a Book* [《创作天书的道路》]（伦敦：夸瑞奇古籍书店，2009年版），41页。注：中文原文由艺术家提供。

14. 徐冰，“Landscape Series” [《文字写生系列》]，123页。

15. 同上，123页。

16. 同上，122页。

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The Living Word

鸟飞了

2018 | Acrylic and Mixed Media Installation 亚克力, 综合材料装置
[Installation process 布展过程]









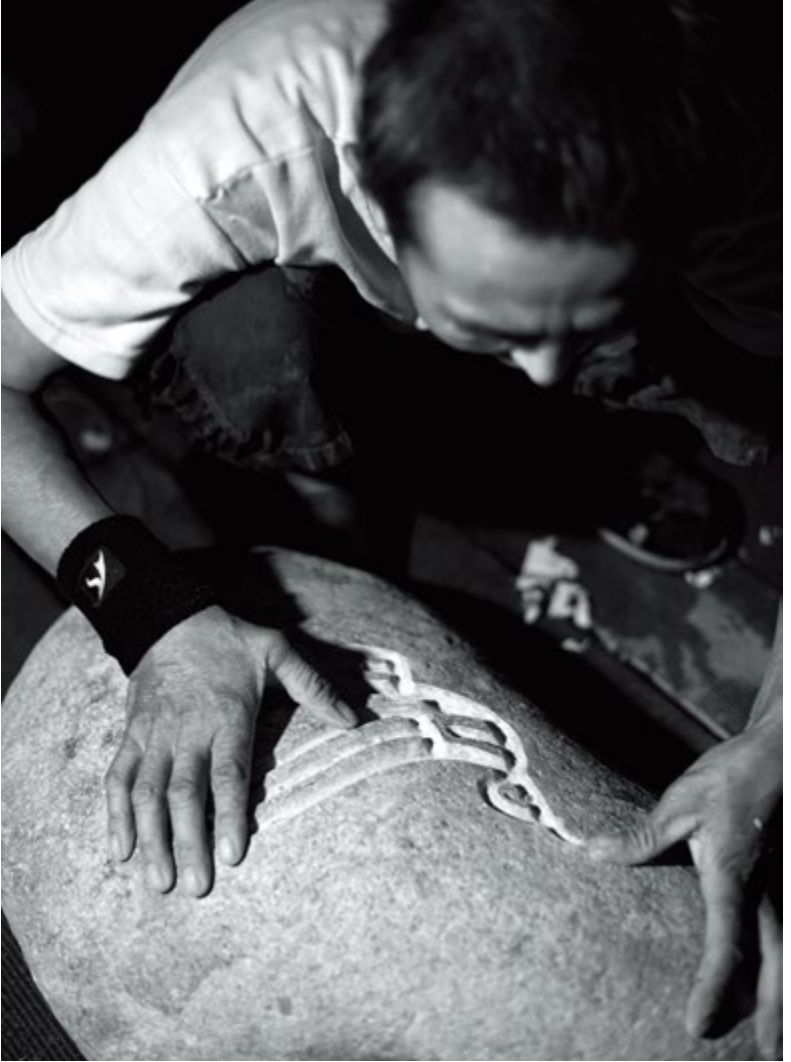
35

Stone Calligraphy

石上书法

2018 | River rock 鹅卵石 [Installation process 布展过程]







BACKGROUND STORY

In 2004 for his solo exhibition at the Museum of East Asian Art (Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst) in Berlin, Xu Bing once again took up the landscape painting tradition as his subject, this time eschewing brush, ink, and paper in favor of installation and the light box. In this series, titled *Background Story*, Xu Bing models each of his compositions after a well-known, historic masterwork, but renders them using only “non-art” materials such as dried plants and torn bits of plastic sheets, light and shadow.

For example, when viewers first encounter *Background Story: Mount Xia*, they confront what at first appears to be a reproduction of the iconic Northern Song masterwork *Summer Mountains* attributed to Qu Ding (屈鼎, active ca. 1023-1056) from the collection of Song emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125) and currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 11). Upon closer inspection, the “painting” reveals itself to be a light box, the “painted surface” a sheet of glass. The viewer is then invited to view the installation from behind and discovers not a painting but instead an assemblage of materials—both natural and man-made—cut, torn, assembled and attached within a box all evenly backlit by LED “fluorescent” tubes (fig. 12). Xu Bing, candidly explains:

“When the debris behind it directly touches the frosted glass, the other side of the glass will show a clear image of the object. When the object is separated from the frosted glass by a certain distance, the image displayed on the front becomes blurred, just like the effect of Chinese ink painting on *xuan* paper. The regulation of this distance constitutes the styling means of this special painting.”¹⁷

The effect convincingly mimics the traditional material language of Chinese painting—specifically the gestural rendering of ink lines, dots and washes using brush (and water) on absorbent *xuan* paper. Xu Bing accomplishes this, however, using not only entirely unexpected material means but entirely different perceptual physics. Xu Bing describes his approach as “painting with light”:

Figure 12 Xu Bing, *Background Story: Mount Xia*, 《背后的故事：夏山图》, 2018, mix media installation, 综合媒材装置, 150 x 310 cm [back] [背面].



Figure 11 Attributed to Qu Ding, 屈鼎 (active ca. 1023–1056), *Summer Mountains*, 《夏山图》, ink and color on silk, 绢本彩墨, 45.4 x 115.3 cm. From the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

“When we look at a natural scene what we see is light reflecting off of and thereby revealing the structure of an object. Traditional painting is a two-dimensional plane of rice paper and pigments that conjures a scene by selectively reflecting light using the principles of perspective, light and shadow modeling, and color science. Looking at a painting, one sees a ‘direct painting’ that depicts the feeling of light and matter in space on a material plane. ‘Background Story,’ on the other hand, is a light and shadow painting that appears [not on a surface] but in mid-air. The picture presented is not the effect of physical pigments that mimic the appearance of light and three-dimensionality, but is, rather, formed through the regulation of light itself. In other words, the rays of light traveling are transformed in space while a plane of frosted glass records or captures the status of the light in space. In effect, the

frosted glass takes a cross section of light in mid-air.”¹⁸

Despite Xu Bing’s decidedly non-traditional means, his citation of iconic masterworks highlights an essential aspect of the Chinese painting tradition: the use of canonical images from the history of art as the basis for creating contemporary works. The closest equivalent to this practice in the West is not found in the visual arts but in the performing arts such as music where living artists re-perform what is often an interpretation of a canonical composition specifically interpreted to resonate with audiences today. For a Chinese artist, however, this “performance” is self-consciously an act of locating him or herself in a long, historical dialog of artists and interpreters. Choosing a canonical model is much more than choosing a subject to study and render, it is rather like choosing a teacher, an interlocutor, or a

friend to converse with. Similarly, one’s “re-performance” of a canonical masterwork is more than just a re-interpretation, but is, in addition, a deep personal engagement in a still unfolding discussion of ideas about one’s life and how one relates to the world—both cultural and natural—around and within us.

Xu Bing’s range of models is not limited to just ancient masterworks but extends to modernist reformers such as Liu Haisu (1896–1994) and Lui Shou-kwan (1919–1975). His “palette,” furthermore, is not limited to just ink but includes a full array of “colors” and “pigments”. In his rendering of Liu Haisu’s panoramic *Mount Huang*, Liu’s vibrant use of mineral pigments is vividly rendered in the ingenious selection of unexpected, corresponding materials (fig. 13).

By showing us both the front—the iconic masterwork—and the back—the astonishing mixed array of materials that light and shadow signify—Xu Bing brings the esoteric questions of art history and the transmission of landscaping painting practice into the realm of our everyday experience. Xu Bing again reveals:

“One way that *Background Story* affects its viewers is by transforming things and materials that are readily familiar to us. That these things and materials belong to the ordinary, the daily, the at-hand and therefore the unexamined—words [by the way] also fall into this category—may explain why, the impact of such as transformation is so affecting. ...it draws the special experience of art and the ordinary, daily experience of the

viewer closer together.”¹⁹

With this simple explanation, Xu Bing concisely captures the central role of the interpreter—that is, the viewer or audience—in the creation of meaning in the unfolding cultural dialog embodied by Chinese landscape painting practice. Just as the artist brings his or her own life experience to the creative re-interpretation of iconic masterworks so too, in the literati form of life, do we bring our own experience and subsequent insights to our encounters with the artist’s creation. The literati form of life, however, was very much a game for elites—art by the one percent for the one percent. In contrast, Xu Bing’s game, by utilizing the “familiar,” “ordinary,” “daily,” and “at-hand,” is open to people of every class background or cultural origin.



Figure 13 Xu Bing, *Background Story: Mount Huang*, 《背后的故事: 黄山图》, 2018, mixed media installation, 综合媒材装置, 84 x 164 cm [back] [背面]. Image courtesy of the artist.

17. Xu Bing, *Wode zhen wenzhi*, [My real words] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2016), 241.

18. Ibid, 242.

19. Ibid, 244.

《背后的故事》系列

在他 2004 年于柏林东亚艺术博物馆的个展上，徐冰再次以传统山水为题材，但这次摒弃了笔墨宣纸，改用灯箱装置，取名为《背后的故事》。在这个系列中，徐冰全选历代名作为蓝本进行复制模仿，使用枯萎的植物和撕裂的塑料布等“非艺术性材料”，通过光和影的作用成像。

当观众第一眼看到本系列中的《夏山图》的时候，他们会认为这是北宋画家屈鼎（大约活跃于 1023-1056 年）的画作。该作品曾被宋徽宗（公元 1101-1125 在位）收藏，现藏于大都会博物馆。可上前仔细一看，所谓的“绘画”只是一个灯箱，而“画面”只是块毛玻璃。再让观众们到背面去一看，所见到的根本不是画，而是一堆杂物，天然的、人造的、剪切的、撕裂的应有尽有，全都安装在背后，在发光二极管均匀地“荧光”照射之下。徐冰坦诚地解释道：

“当背后的杂物直接接触到毛玻璃时，玻璃的另一面就会显示出物件清晰的形象，当物件与毛玻璃相隔一定距离时，正面显示出的形象就变得模糊起来，就像中国水墨画在宣纸上晕染的效果，这个距离的调控，就构成

了这种特别绘画的造型手段。”¹⁷

这种对传统国画语言的模仿效果十分惊人，尤其是对宣纸上水墨线条的模仿极为生动。他在创作中不但加入了令人意想不到的材料，而且使用了迥然不同的视觉手段。徐冰说这种方法叫“用光来画”：

“我们看到的自然景物，是由物体结构与光的照射共同呈现出来的。传统绘画是将光照反映出的景物，通过画布、宣纸、颜料，运用透视学、光影造型学、色彩学的原理转换到二维平面上。看画，看到的是把对空间光与物的感觉描绘在一个物质的平面上的「直接绘画」。而《背后的故事》是出现在空气中的一幅光影绘画，所呈现的画面，不是由物质性颜料调配，模仿光感、立体感出现的效果，而是通过对光本身的调控形成的。换一种说法是：在空气中调控散落于空间中的光，再通过一块切断空间的毛玻璃记录了空间中光的状态。这块毛玻璃的作用好比空气中光的切片。”¹⁸

尽管徐冰使用的手段绝非传统，但他动用名家作品的做法彰显了中国绘画传统的一个重要方面：即用绘画史上的经典之作为素材来

进行当代的艺术创作。这种做法在西方的绘画史上是不存在的，只是在音乐等表演艺术中有类似情况，例如生活在当代的音乐家选某些经典名曲来演奏，但在演奏风格上根据自己的理解和当前听众的喜好进行适当的调整。这种“演绎”对于一个中国画家来说犹如在画史上给自己定位，有意识地与历史上的艺术家和学者建立对话。选择经典名作也不仅是选择学习和绘画的素材，而是在给自己找个老师或能与之对话的朋友。艺术家对经典名作的“重新演绎”也是同样道理，它不仅仅是一种重新解释，而且是一种融汇着他现实生活中的切身情感以及他与周围世界在文化上和自然上内在外的联系。

徐冰选择的摹本不局限于古代名画，也包括现代改革派画家如刘海粟（1896-1994）和吕寿琨（1919-1975）等人的作品。他所选用作品的色调也不局限于墨，而是植物矿物颜料，以及其它色料全可模仿。他在基于刘海粟《黄山全景》创作的装置中，刘海粟原作中鲜艳的矿物质颜料被表现得极为生动，选材之巧妙令人叹为观止。

我们不仅可以看到作品的正面——标志性的 大师作品——而且能看到作品的背面——令人意想不到的材料混合物，在光影的作用下以标引符号性的方式呈现。用这样的方法，徐冰将艺术史和山水画创作的传播等范畴深奥问题引入我们日常的经历中去。并提出：

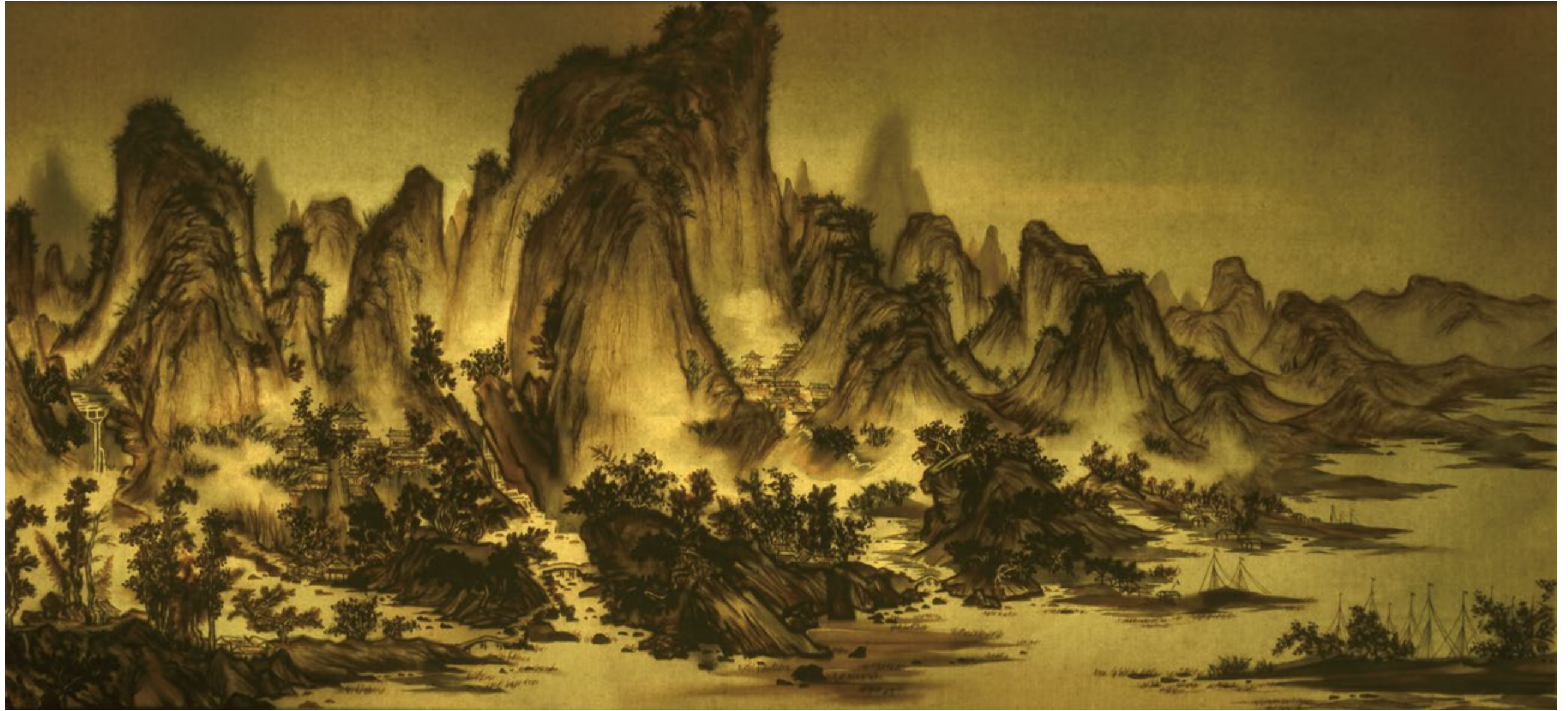
“《背后的故事》对观者有效的另一个原因，还来自对身边司空见惯的事物的转换。原因是，这些属于最日常、最身边，也就是最没有问题的事物（文字也属于此类）的触碰，效果有可能是倍增的。它把艺术与观者的平常经验拉近，在观者自信、放松、熟悉的范围内。”¹⁹

徐冰这一简单说明，准确地指出了观众这一角色在中国山水画传统的文化交流方面起到的创造性作用。艺术家在对某经典作品进行重新演绎时，会融合其个人经历和情感。同样地，我们在按照文人的生活模式去欣赏他们的创作时，也夹带着自己在这方面的经验和后天所得的见解。然而，文人的生活模式实际上是精英圈内的少数人把玩的东西。艺术更是由那些百里挑一的人创造，再被百里挑一的人欣赏的。与之相比，徐冰所玩的游戏，由人们熟悉的、普通的、日常的和手头都能接触到的材料所组成，是面向各个阶级背景和文化根源的寻常百姓的游戏。

17. 徐冰，《我的真文字》（香港：中文大学出版社，2016 年版），241 页。

18. 同上，242 页。

19. 同上，244 页。



36

Background Story: Mount Xia

背后的故事：夏山图

2018 | Mixed media installation 综合媒材装置 | 140 x 310 cm





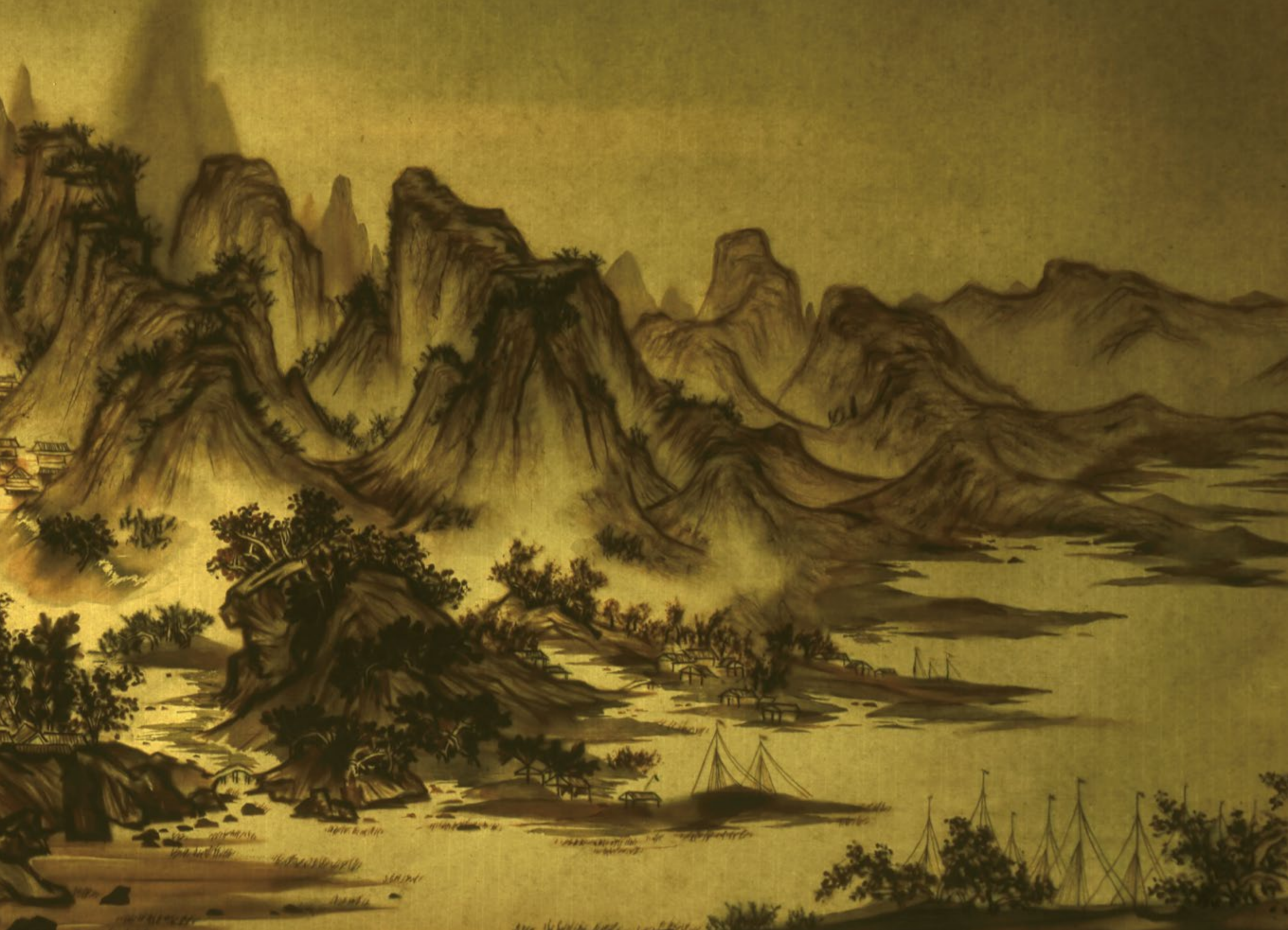
36

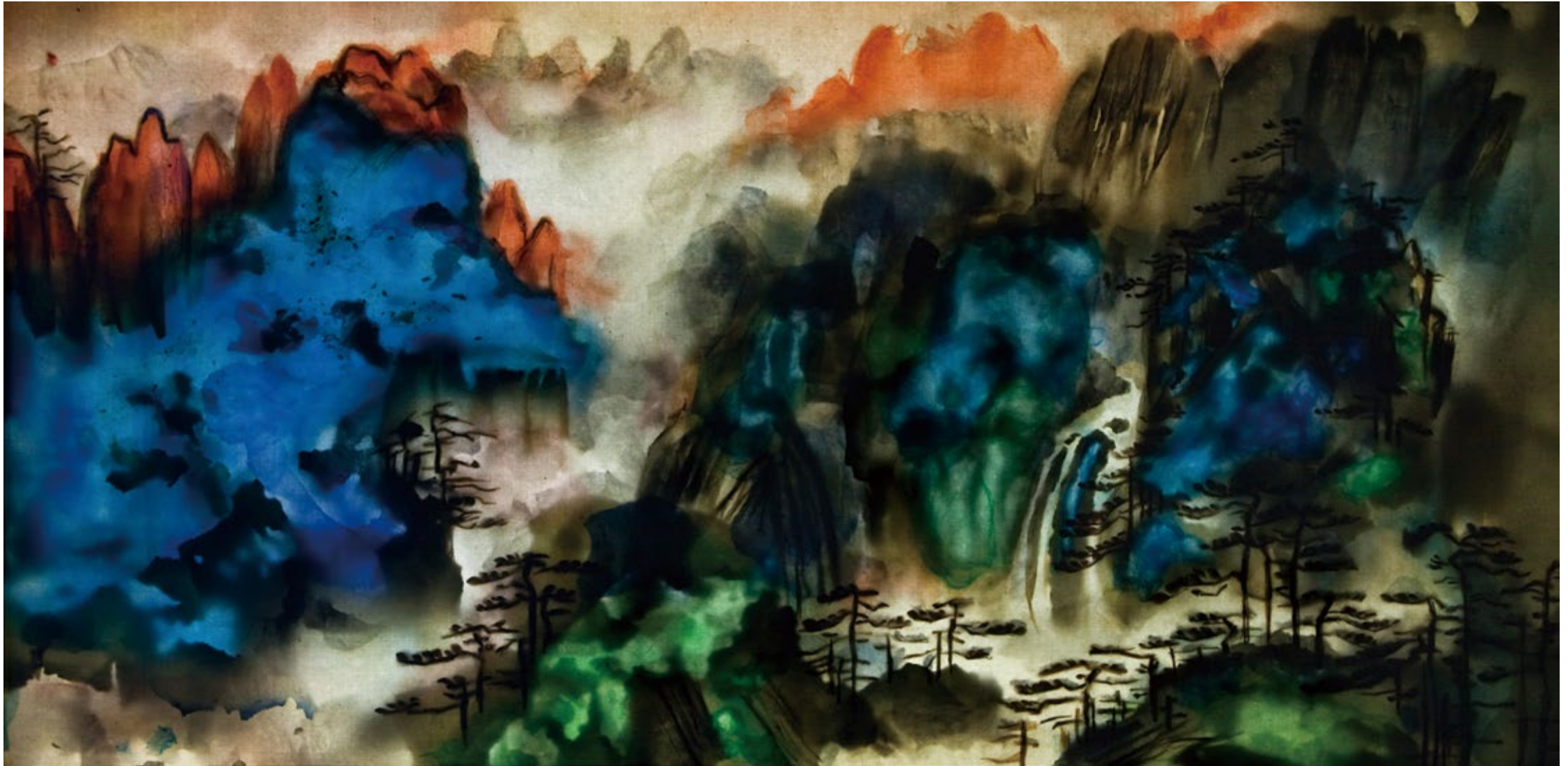
Background Story: Mount Xia

背后的故事：夏山图

Detail 局部







37

Background Story: Mount Huang

背后的故事：黄山图

2017 | Mixed media installation 综合媒材装置 | 84 x 164 cm



37

Background Story: Mount Huang

背后的故事：黄山图

2017 | Mixed media installation 综合媒材装置 | 84 x 164 cm





Figure 14 Xu Bing, *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll*, 《芥子园山水卷》 2010, woodblock print, 木刻版印, 48 x 548 cm [detail] [细节].

MUSTARD SEED GARDEN LANDSCAPE SCROLL

In *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* (2010), Xu Bing discovers in the eponymous 17th century woodcut painting manual a comprehensive pictorial “dictionary” for disseminating the landscape painting tradition as both a “language” of socially-constructed signs or symbols and a hermeneutic tradition that gains contemporary meaning only through the learning, re-performance, re-interpretation and dissemination of canonical models. Xu Bing explains:

“To me, the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* is a dictionary in which elements from masterpieces of Chinese painting are arranged in a manner similar to the radicals and remainders [the building blocks of Chinese characters] in a traditional Chinese dictionary. Students learn painting much as they learn calligraphy—they have to memorize the symbols until they know them by heart. After that, they can use these symbols to ‘write’ the things in their mind or in the world. In painting, everything can be represented by choosing different symbols, just as Chinese characters can describe everything in the world. This is a core part of Chinese culture. This is also why the evolution of Chinese painting always depends on ‘copying from paper to paper,’ a form of duplication. Our culture perpetuates itself in this same manner.”²⁰ (fig. 14)

One can think of literati landscape painting practice as a cultural form or game that has its own rules, conventions and regularities. Images and metaphors are drawn from poetry; brushwork and the embodiment of affective experience in gesture comes from calligraphy; and canonical masterworks form the “texts” that are re-performed and re-interpreted by living artists for contemporary audiences. This was truly a game of elites, not only because it required a deep knowledge of the history of art itself in addition to tremendous facility with the allied arts of poetry and calligraphy, but because it required first-hand access to the canonical masterworks that formed the “key texts” of the historic discourse. Among other things, this means a “player” of the “game” either had to own him or herself a collection of old canonical masterworks or had to know someone who did. In order to learn Mi Fu’s “dots” for depicting the lush vegetation of the Jiangnan region or Dong Yuan’s “hemp fiber” strokes for depicting gently rounded southern land masses, one had to have

access to, if not a Mi Fu or a Dong Yuan, at least a canonical, later interpretation of these canonical original forms. That was, until, the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, put the foundational elements of this game down on paper, in the form of a reproducible, woodblock-printed mass publication. Xu Bing elaborates:

“...the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* is a condensation of the core methods and attitudes of Chinese painting. It is also why the ‘classics’, so often accused of being mired in the past, have remained timelessly resonant. A good textbook conveys what is central and essential.”²¹

Indeed, no less than the great twentieth century master Qi Baishi taught himself painting using this “textbook”!

In his own original work, *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll*, Xu Bing uses the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* precisely as he describes it, as a dictionary of painting elements analogous to written words and their constituent radicals. With these elements, he then composes his own composition—his own original “text.” But unlike painters of the past who used the *Manual* as the basis for learning canonical brush painting techniques and forms, Xu Bing re-composes and then re-carves the original woodcut reproductions as itself a reproducible, original woodcut. Read from left to right (as we read texts today), we encounter an ongoing procession of canonical models—Yuan dynasty artist Ni Zan’s high rocky peaks followed later by Song poet and

calligrapher Mi Fu’s vegetation-dotted hills (figs. 15–17)—complete with accompanying text re-carved from the original *Manual* that “glosses” the origin and meaning of each canonical form. Xu Bing thus invites us to “read” his Landscape Scroll like we would read an essay or a book and by so doing points out that his “painting” functions just like text—it is, in fact, employing a fully-developed, codified language. One could call it a visual “language game.”

In this game, Xu Bing obeys the rule of “copying from paper to paper” but instead of using brush to copy brush—the original form of the game—or brush to copy woodcut—the form of the game popularized by the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual*—he uses woodcut to copy woodcut—his book-inspired version of the game within which a “painting” becomes a “text” and descriptive images (icons) become words (symbols). Again, Xu Bing himself clarifies:

“... when Chinese painting is termed copying as opposed to drawing from life, it is precisely because the brushwork, the brushstrokes are all symbols, and symbols rely on noting, and not on ‘describing’. This is always why the continuity of Chinese painting depends from start to finish on the practice of ‘paper copying paper’. It is along a thread such as this that our culture has been handed down.”²²

From this, one can glean a clear, conceptual development from Xu Bing’s *Landscape Series* to *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll*:



Figure 15 “Mountains by Mi Youren (1074–1151) and Ni Zan (1301–1074), 米友仁和倪瓒的山法” *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, 《芥子园画谱》, 1679, compiled by Wang Gai, late Qing Dynasty edition, volume 3 of 5. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16 Ni Zan’s high mountains in Xu Bing, 倪高高山 *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll*, 《芥子园山水卷》, 2010 [detail].



Figure 17 Mi Youren’s vegetation-dotted hills in Xu Bing, 米友仁的米点山, *The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll*, 《芥子园山水卷》, 2010 [detail].

“*The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* illustrates this connection (between semiotics and visibility) most clearly. For me, it is a dictionary of signs for representing the myriad things of the world. Take for example the character 竹, for ‘bamboo’. It is composed of two 个 characters, themselves or less identical to one codified rendition of bamboo leaves (fig. 17). Writing and painting are one—are signs alike. Through my *Landscape Series*, I realized that a texture stroke is a repetition of a sign. This is why I call the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* a dictionary of signs.”²³

If *Landscape* and *The Living Word* take our written language and point out how it functions not only symbolically (as conventional symbols) but iconically (as pictures); Xu Bing’s *Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* accomplishes the inverse, demonstrating how picture making in the form of literati painting practice is in fact a highly-developed form of symbolic language-ing. In Chinese culture, if language symbols are also iconic pictures then it shouldn’t it surprise us that pictures in the form of literati painting are also a symbolic language. What is surprising is how long this basic insight lay undiscovered. And how one artist, not only revealed this insight with the rigor of a semiotician, but did so in the form of joyous experience not just for Chinese people but universally, for people of every conceivable cultural background.

20. Xu Bing “Landscape Series,” 125.

21. Xu Bing, “On Painting and Teaching,” 156.

22. Xu Bing “Landscape Series,” 125.

23. Xu Bing, “On Painting and Teaching,” 156.



Figure 18. “Three stroke bamboo like the character 个,” 布僵葉式：三筆畫竹如“个”字，*The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, 《芥子園畫譜》，1679.

《芥子园山水卷》

徐冰 2010 年作的《芥子园山水卷》，与 17 世纪的一本木刻版画谱同名。他发现这本画谱中汇集的各种山水画样本之丰富，堪称山水画传播的图像化“字典”。这种样本既是一种由社会建构下产生的符号和特征所构成的“文字”，又代表了一种诠释学派的传统。这种传统只有通过通过对典型范式的学习、重新演绎、重新解读和传播才能使其获得当代的意义。徐冰解释说：“在我看来《芥子园画传》就是一本字典，都是从名家画作里整理出来的「偏旁部首」。学生学画如学写字，死记硬背，熟记在心。之后，即可用这些符号去「写」心中万物，世间万物。在图画里，万物皆可归为各种符号，就像汉字记述世界万象的方法一样，这是中国文化核心的部分。这也是为什么中国绘画的承传，始终是靠「纸抄纸」这种复制的形式。我们的文化也以同样的方式得到延续。”²⁰

我们可以把文人山水画当成某种文化游戏，有一定的游戏规则、惯例和规律。其形象思维来源于诗词，用笔和有效的笔意则来自书法，千古传颂的经典名作形成样式型“文本”，被一代又一代的艺术家不断重新演绎，给他们的同代人欣赏。这正是精英们玩的游戏，因为你必须有渊博的美术史知识，外加对书法诗词等相关艺术形式的深刻理解，而且还要对构成历史性“重要文本”的那些名作有上手的经验。别的不说，要成为一个能玩这种游戏的人，其本人就先得拥有一些经典名作的收藏，或至少要认识几位拥有名作的藏家。比如要学“米点”来画江南郁郁葱葱的云山，或学董源的“披麻皴”来画南方那些峦头圆满的土山，那么如没有董源、米芾的原作，至少应该有几张前人照原作画下来的临本。在因木版印刷而得以大量复制的《芥子园画谱》问世之前，这种游戏就是这样通过纸上摹写延续下来的。徐冰又说：

“这就是为什么《芥子园画传》是集中了中国艺术的核心方法与态度的一本书。也是为什么经常被指责为泥古不化的‘典型’又长用不衰的原因。好的教科书一般都要传递最核心的方法。”²¹

二十世纪的大画家齐白石就是用这本“教科书”自学绘画成大师的!

徐冰在他的《芥子园山水卷》中就像他讲的那样把画谱当作字典用,把范本当文字的部首和偏旁。他用这些部首和偏旁做出自己的构图,也就是他自己的“文本”。以前的画家把《芥子园画谱》当教材,用来学笔墨技法和造型,徐冰则把画谱中的各种范本拼贴成自己的构图,重新刻印,做出一幅又可以用来印制版画的原版。

按照我们现代人习惯的阅读方法(从左到右),作品中出现了一系列排列有序的范本,包括元代画家倪瓒的石法,和宋代诗人、书法家米芾的米点云山,夹杂着从原作上翻刻下来的每组范本旁边的说明文字,记述了该范本的出处和意义。徐冰用这样的方法让我们像读书一样去阅读他的山水卷,给予画作以文本的功能,最终形成一个高度程式化、编码化的语言。我们可称之为视觉“文字游戏”。

在这个游戏中,徐冰遵守了“纸抄纸”的规则。但有所不同的是,这个游戏原来的方法是用笔墨抄笔墨,或笔墨抄木刻(也就是使《芥子园画谱》不胫而走的普及方式),而徐冰的玩法是木刻抄木刻。在书本模式的启发下,

他把“画”变成了“文本”,描述性的图画(图标)变成了该书的文字(符号)。在这一点上,徐冰解释道:

“中国绘画讲临摹,不讲写生,就是因为,皴法,点法都是符号,符号是靠记的,不是靠「描」的。这也是为什么中国绘画传承,始终是靠「纸抄纸」的办法。我们的文化是沿着这么一个线索传下来的。”²²

从这里能清楚地看出徐冰从《文字写生》系列到他的《芥子园山水卷》在观念上的发展过程:

“《芥子园画传》是最能说明这种关系(符号学和视觉方式)的一本书。要我看,它是一本字典,汇集了描绘世界万物的符号、偏旁部首。比如,竹子和‘竹’这个字,两个个字就是竹字,也就是‘竹个点’,字画一体,是符号。通过我的《读风景》这组画,我体会到一种皴法就是一片符号的重复。所以说《芥子园画传》就是符号的字典,它收集了各种各样的典型范式。”²³

如果说徐冰的《文字写生》和《鸟飞了》指出了文字作为传统式符号和绘画性图标的表达功能,那么在《芥子园山水卷》中,他阐

释了文人画创作在本质上是一种高度发达的符号语言创作。在中国文化里,既然汉字有很高的图像性,那么文人画中的图像具有很高的符号文字性,也就不足为奇了。令人奇怪的这个再基本不过的现象竟然没有被前人发现,却被徐冰这样一位艺术家,以符号学家的严谨态度和游戏般轻松的欣赏形式揭示了出来,不仅让中国人看懂了,而且让各种不同文化背景的外国人也看懂了。

20. 徐冰,“Landscape Series”[《文字写生系列》],121页。

21. 徐冰,“On Painting and Teaching”[《关于绘画和教学》],载 Shelagh Vainker [马熙乐]译 *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscape: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing* [《风景,读风景——自然如语言》](牛津:阿什莫林博物馆,牛津大学,2013年版),156页。注:中文原文由艺术家提供。

22. 徐冰,“Landscape Series”[《文字写生系列》],121页。

23. 徐冰,“On Painting and Teaching”[《关于绘画和教学》],156页。注:中文原文由艺术家提供。

人愛真山水與畫山水無異
當其屏障列前幘冊盈几面
崢嶸遐曠峰翠欲流泉聲若
時而烟雲掩靄時而景物清



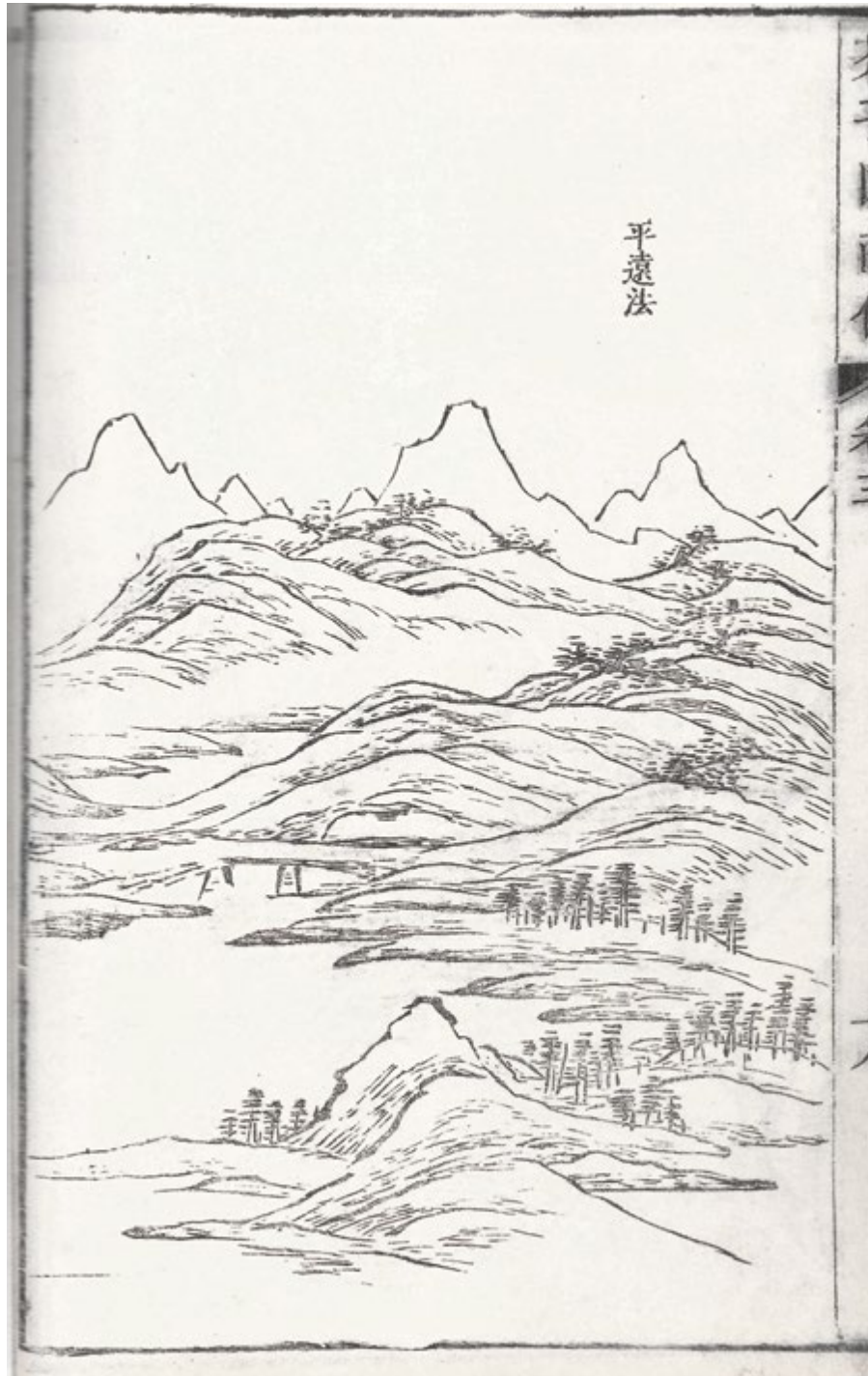


38

The Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll

芥子園山水卷

2010 | Woodblock print on paper 木刻版畫 | 48 x 548 cm



倪迂雜樹畫法

世之傲雲林者多作頂門松繫
馬橋輒謂謂自負不知雲林於
此道深入堂與下筆有一往深
邃之氣試觀雲林所作獅子林
圖樹法大備便知非僅以一樹
一石遂足睥睨千古者故此幅
更取其工樹立準以見世所傲
慕不過雲林之一枝半節非全
體也



倪迂雜樹畫法
世之傲雲林者多作頂門松繫
馬橋輒謂謂自負不知雲林於
此道深入堂與

飛鴉式

雲鴉式

花間吹笛牧童過



雜樹畫法



李成
 畫師圖全烟雲變幻水石幽閒險
 易各盡其妙讀者謂得山之體貌
 為古今第一



李成
 始師李成又師荆浩山頂多用密
 林水際好作突兀大石常嘆曰
 其人若師造化乃卜居終南太
 華編觀奇勝著筆雖老直得山之
 骨者名與關公李成並馳似晚年
 用墨太多土石不分耳

李成
 回師關全烟雲變幻水石幽閒險
 易各盡其妙讀者謂得山之體貌
 為古今第一

機關宜画于蜀道及

大勾雲法



范寬
 始師李成又師荆浩山頂多用密
 林水際好作突兀大石常嘆曰
 其人若師造化乃卜居終南
 其人若師造化乃卜居終南

或環江或抱山
 因勢築城画法

獨坐看花式

正面城門画



王叔明大松多作
直幹其葉較諸家
者稍長雖雜亂中
極有文理



山起手法
輪廓先定然後敷之今人從碎處
大山此最足病

萬株叢雜無際且半當黑玄能助
山之姿態

王叔明大松多作
直幹其葉較諸家
者稍長雖雜亂中
極有文理

携孫式

古相僧巨然及梅道人
多畫之

四人坐飲式

趙大年松多于肥澤中見其
奇古

主山自為環抱法

又有主朝揖法

遊雲城樓式

米友仁

村落層層勾搭式

池館廊廡高低顧盼首尾連絡式

披麻間芥劈法王維每用之

个字點

亂柴皴
前此一書名於某
人下系其皴此則直
書某皴不系某人且
于書名方位中儼然
如一人者亦余書法
之變以亂柴亂麻在
皴法中為變調不得
不以變例系之且諸
家皆偶一為之難專
屬之一人也

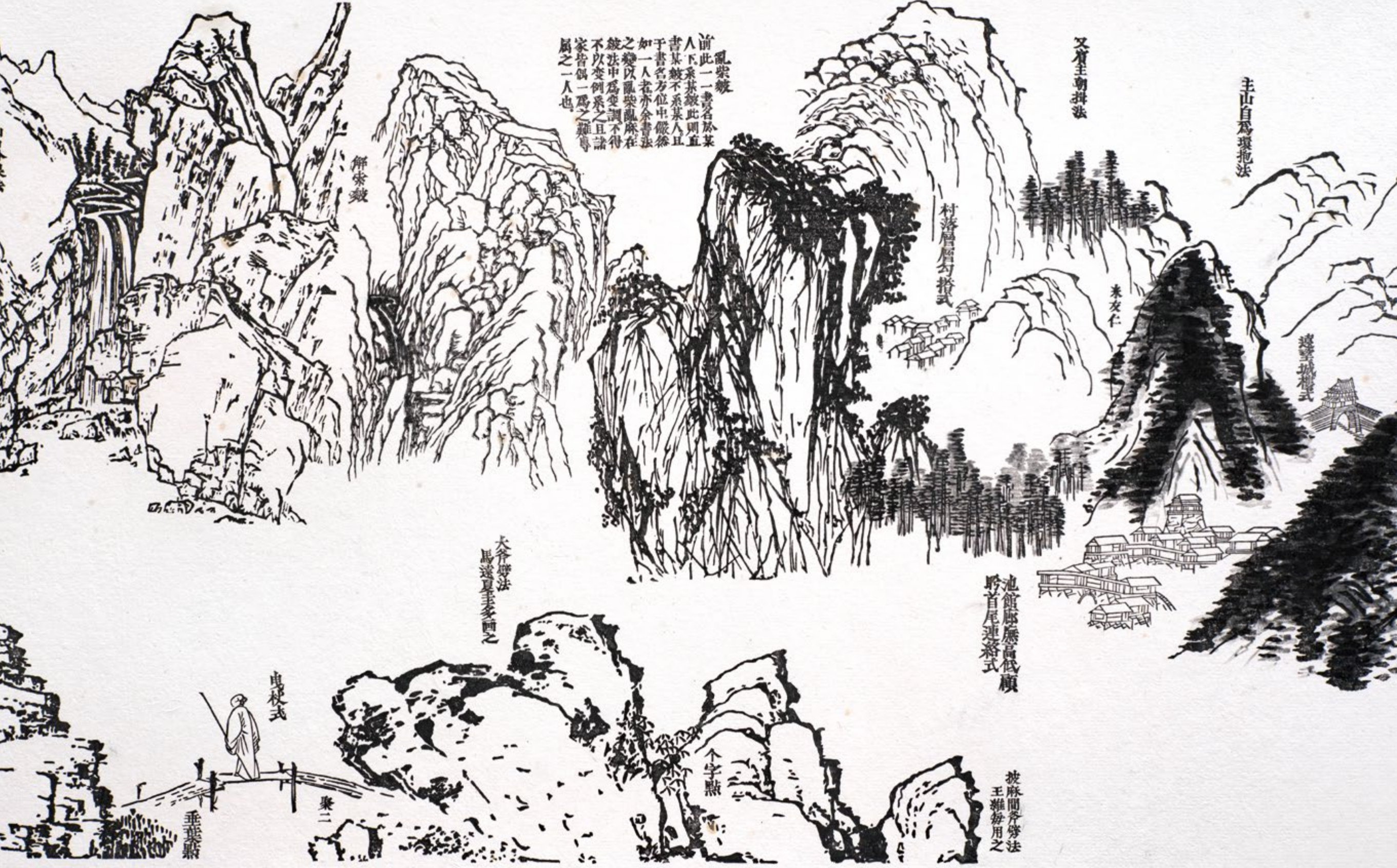
大斧劈法
馬遠夏圭多用之

解索皴

曳杖式

垂葉點

兼二



遊盆式

寺觀及官殿極小
極細結構式

跌脚式

菊花點樹

郭熙雜樹
畫法

倪雲林樹法

黃子久樹法

樹固要轉而枝不可繁枝頭要
斂不可放樹頭要放不可緊

画石間坡法

子久雲林画石多間上坡

抱膝式





7.7
Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky* (interim version),
as installed at 'Xu Bing Print Exhibition', China Art Gallery, Beijing, 1988

[previous pages] Figure 17 Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky* (intermin version), 《天书》(临时版本), as installed at *Xu Bing Print Exhibition*, China Art Gallery, Beijing, 1988. After Tomii, Reicko, *Xu Bing*, 102–103.

BOOK FROM THE SKY

“The reason for fishtraps is to catch fish, but having caught the fish, you forget the fishtrap. The reason for rabbit snares is to snare rabbits, but having caught the rabbit, you forget the snare. The reason for words is to capture meaning, but having grasped the meaning, you forget the words. Where can I find a person who has forgotten the words so that I can have a word with him?”²⁴ —Zhuangzi

Since its first installation at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1988 (fig. 17), Western curators and critics have long been fascinated by *Book from the Sky* with interpretations ranging from post-Tiananmen critique of state-authored propaganda to wry, post-modern joke on the authoritative text. These interpretations all share a belief in the central importance of language and text to the construction of culture and a resulting fascination with the unintelligibility of Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*. What many of these interpretations overlook, however, are the very personal experiences and motivations that lead to its creation. Xu Bing vividly describes the moment of its conception: “Once in 1986, while thinking of something else, it occurred to me to make a book that no one would ever be able to read. ...When I woke up the next morning, I still found it exciting ...Several months passed, and it was exciting still. And every time I would get excited, the excitement would awaken further ideas, giving rise to all kinds of additional meanings, until the book's 'importance' in my mind became ever greater—even before I ever began to make it.”²⁵

The fact that it would be, in all respects, a real book was centrally important to Xu Bing: “...I had several ideas that were very clear at the outset: 1) This book would not perform the essential functions of a book; it would be empty of all content, and yet it would very much look like a book. 2) The way of making the book through to its completion, would have to entail an authentic process proper to book making. 3) In

every detail, it would have to be precisely and rigorously executed.”²⁶ (fig. 18)

As he recounts, the intellectual environment at the Central Academy during the post-Cultural Revolution eighties was central to this conception of a book: “My personal need to create the work was ...prompted in the first place by my reaction against the post-Cultural Revolution ‘cultural fever.’ I participated very actively in this trend: I was reading a lot and constantly engaged in discussions, but somehow, I was falling too deeply into it, getting lost in it. I was increasingly put off and disappointed by the game of books and culture, like a hungry man who had eaten too much too fast and was starting to feel sick. ... My mind was confused, and I felt like I had lost something. I thought, ‘I need to make my own book to express my feelings toward books.’”²⁷

Not all books, however, affected Xu Bing in this way. He recalls, “...once, in an attempt to make myself more ‘profound,’ I went and read books on contemporary Western theory but eventually discovered that even after spending half a day’s effort on it, the gain amounted only to a few dry concepts. When you read these sort of books, you have to follow closely step by step; it’s like solving a mathematical problem—if you miss a step then you don’t understand what the next part is saying, and it’s wearing. But when occasionally I read books on Eastern philosophy by Eastern authors, on the contrary I fell extremely comfortable. These books are on the whole not thick, and every time I turn a page at will

and read a short passage I just feel that the book has articulated so clearly the things that I feel.”²⁸

In particular, Xu Bing credits the works of D.T. Suzuki on Zen Buddhism—as well as classical texts on Daoism—with providing him a different way of looking at language. In his artist statement “The Living Word” for the exhibition *Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing* at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, in Washington D.C. he elaborates: “Many strange dialogs are recorded in the annals of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. In the *Collected Works of Buddhism* is the question, ‘What is Buddha?’ The master responds: ‘The neigh of a wooden horse.’ How could the Buddha be the neigh of a wooden horse? A student might ponder this all day without coming to a conclusion, yet perhaps the day will come when he ‘suddenly bumps upon the proper road and realizes what has been clouding his vision.’ ...This Chan method of revelation can lead you to understand the error in your thinking and everyday logic. The real origins of truth cannot be found in a literal, logical answer but instead must be ‘searched for in the living word.’”²⁹

Rather than a political protest or a post-modern joke, Xu Bing seems to suggest that there is another possible interpretation to *Book from the Sky*, tied closely to Buddhist notions of the “living word.” This begs the question of how—if we are to take his *Book from the Sky* seriously as a book—we are to “read” Xu Bing’s “living words”? In his essay “The Making of *Book From the Sky*”



Figure 19 Viewers attempting to read Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* 1987-1991. 观众们试图读懂徐冰的《天书》, China Art Gallery, 1988. After Erickson, Britta, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, 36

Figure 20 Xu Bing designing the characters for *Book from the Sky*, 徐冰为《天书》造字中, 1987-1991. After Erickson, Britta, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, 36.

he describes how he created his “nonsense” words: “The biggest constraint I imposed was that the invented characters should, as far as possible, resemble real characters without actually being real Chinese characters. Their structure should accord with the internal patterns of Chinese characters: in terms of density of strokes and frequency of occurrence, they should appear, on the page, to be real characters. I referred to the *Kangxi Dictionary* and devised a parallel table for the creation of my characters following the dictionary's stroke-order sequence.”³⁰

Evoking Cang Jie's original act of inventing (symbolic) written characters from (indexical) marks and (iconic) forms borrowed from the world, Xu Bing, describes his own process of invention: “The key step to make these characters seem like ‘themselves’ was to take advantage of the essence of Chinese characters. Chinese characters are expressions made up of radicals that symbolize the world's basic constituents. If I juxtaposed the symbol for ‘mountain’ with the symbol for ‘water,’ then you would say that the resulting character expresses something in nature. If I juxtaposed the character for ‘labour’ with a ‘knife’ radical, then you certainly would know that such a character denoted something man-made. This would allow you to believe above all that such a character should surely exist.”³¹

In this way, Xu Bing invented many thousands of characters, selecting the best thousand or so for carving onto roughly four thousand movable typeset woodblocks. He

describes the carving process—a deep physical engagement with material—as a retreat from the outside world and an engagement with his internal self: “When a fine blade cuts into a fresh wooden surface, each cut is a decision. This is one sort of dialogue with matter that only we can share. Since what you confront is devoid of content, it cannot interfere with you. Your mind wanders unrestricted, free of superfluous thoughts. Seated there, the atmosphere is rich enough without music. Noise from the hallways is filtered out. Many thought that I was doing hard labor, but I quite enjoyed the sense of retreat into myself, ...while the intellectual world was reading feverishly and loved to be seen at seminars, I was hastening to carve characters that even I could not read.”³² Paradoxically, this turn inwards brought Xu Bing not further from nature but closer in an experience that was nothing short of enlightening: “...And every day when I worked on those ‘meaningless’ characters, it was like having a dialogue with nature. There was no intrusion of knowledge or of argument. My thinking in turn became clean and clear.”³³

Xu Bing: Language and Nature concludes with a special reading room where viewers can spend time quietly perusing page spreads from Xu Bing's original wood-block and moveable-type printing of *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991). Despite his claim that he wanted to create a “a book that could never be read,” Xu Bing created a book that is so seductively perfect, that you cannot help but feel compelled to read it. So why not read it? But how then does one “read” a book composed

of characters that have no meaning? By Xu Bing's own admission, when he constructed his meaningless characters he made sure to preserve the pictographic nature of the constituent radicals. In other words, although “nonsense” characters have no established, conventional (symbolic) meaning, they still possess their own distinct pictorial (iconic) senses. Reading then becomes a process not unlike “having a dialogue with nature,” where there is “no intrusion of knowledge or of argument.” It is a dialog parallel to Xu Bing's original act of creating these meaningless characters but inverted: instead of moving from nature to constructed sign, we move from constructed sign back to nature. If Xu Bing's own experience is indicative, “reading” *Book from the Sky* in this way may be a means to very unexpected ends.

24. Zhuangzi (Peking: Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series Supplement 20, 1947), quoted in Roger Ames, “Reading Xu Bing's A Book from the Sky,” *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Suny Press, 2011), 55.

25. Xu Bing, “The Making of Book From the Sky,” *Passages in the Making of a Book*, trans. Drew Hammond (London: Quaritch, 2009), 51.

26. Ibid.

27. Xu Bing, “A Conversation with Xu Bing: Exterior Form/ Interior Substance,” interview with Glenn Harper, trans. Valerie Doran, *Sculpture*, January/February 2003, 50.

28. Xu Bing, “The Sort of Artist I Am,” *Xu Bing Landscape/ Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, 201.

29. Xu Bing, “The Living Word,” 13.

30. Xu Bing, “The Making of Book From the Sky,” 55.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 56.

33. Xu Bing, “A Conversation with Xu Bing: Exterior Form/ Interior Substance,” 50.

《天书》

《庄子·外物》：“筌者所以在鱼，得鱼而忘筌；蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；言者所以在意，得意而忘言。吾安得夫忘言之人而与之言哉？”²⁴

自1988年首次在中央美术学院展出以来，徐冰的《天书》就一直让西方策展人和评论家着迷，引发了许多不同的解释：从对极端社会事件发生后官方舆论宣传的批评，再到对官腔式文字的后现代式嘲弄都有。不管是哪种解释，有一点是共同的：他们都认识到语言和文字对文化建构的重要性，以及对徐冰《天书》无法认读的这一显著特点的赞叹。然而，这些解读往往忽视了徐冰的个人经历和动机在这件作品的创作中所扮演的重要角色。徐冰对该作品的构思过程做出过一段生动的描述：

“八六年的某一天，我在想一件别的事情时，却想到要做一本谁都读不懂的书。这想法让我激动，这种激动是那种只有自己身体才能感觉到的，第二天早上醒来，想到这件事仍然很激动。连续许多天都如此。几个月过去了还是这样。而每次激动，思维也跟着激动起来，不断地为这个想法附加各种意义，它的‘重要性’，在还没有动手之前，就被放大了。”²⁵

对徐冰来说很重要的一点就是这本书必须是一本真正的书，无论从哪个方面看都是一本真正的书：“我对做这本书有几点想法，一开始就非常明确：一，这本书不具备作为书的本质，所有内容是被抽空的，但它非常像书。二，这本书的完成途径，必须是一个‘真正的书’的过程。三，这本书的每一个细节，每道工序必须精准、严格、一丝不苟。”²⁶

正如他所回顾的那样，这本书的概念的形成跟文革后中央美院在八十年代的文化环境有很大关系。他说：“我就想做一本我自己的书……表达自己对文革后出现的‘文化热’的反感。我读了很多书，参加了大量的文化讨论，觉得不舒服，就像一个饥饿的人吃了太多，这时对所谓文化就有一种厌恶。文化讨论好像是一个游戏机，上去了以后就没有办法停下来。到最后把本来清楚的事情也给搞乱了，这个叫‘文化’

的东西和我们总有一种不合适的关系。当时就觉得要做一本自己的书来表达这种感觉。”²⁷

然而，并非所有书籍对徐冰都有这种影响。他回忆说，“我也曾经试图让自己‘深刻’起来，而去读那些西方当代理论的书，但我终于发现，费了半天劲，得到的只是一些干瘪的概念。读这些书时你必须步步紧跟，像数学解题一样，差了一步，下面就不知道在说什么了，太累了。但当我偶尔读到东方人写的有关东方哲学的书时，我倒觉得舒服得很。这些书一般都不厚，随意翻开一页，读上一小段，我都会有感觉，只觉得书中把我感觉到的东西说的那么清楚。”²⁸

徐冰觉得对他影响特别大的书有铃木大拙的《禅的研究》和道家的经典著作。这些书使他对文字有了不同的看法。在华盛顿特区赛克勒美术馆举办的“文字游戏：徐冰的当代艺术”展览中，徐冰在艺术家自述中这样说“在禅的公案中记载了很多奇怪的对话，在《佛祖历代通载》中有‘问：如何是佛？师曰：嘶风木马。’佛怎么是嘶风木马呢？问者则终日百思不得其解，也许某一日会‘忽然撞着来时路，始觉平时被眼满。’这种禅式的启示思想的方式，迫使你在思维与常理相悖处领悟。而你若想要悟到本真，则最忌做仅限于字面的、符合逻辑的直接应答，而必须做‘参活句’的应答。”²⁹

徐冰并没有以《天书》来对政治提出抗议或后现代式的嘲笑，他似乎在以此向我们暗示：《天书》也许还有另一种解释，而这种解释要跟佛教中“字为活物”的观念联系起来。这就涉及到另一个问题：如果要把《天书》当成一本真正的书，我们应该怎样才能读懂他所创造的这些“活物”？在他本人所写的《“天书”的过程》一文中，他描述了这些无法解释的字是怎么制作出来的：“我要求这些字最大限度地像汉字而不是汉字，这就必须在内在规律上符合汉字的构字规律。为了让这些字在笔画疏密，出现频率上更像一页真的文字，我依照《康

熙字典》笔画从少到多的序例关系，平行对位地编造我的字。”³⁰ 徐冰重新演绎了仓颉受自然界中各种标引性记号和图标性形态的启发而创造出符号性文字的过程，并这样描述其创作经过：“让这些字更像‘它们自己’的关键一步，是利用字的本性。汉字是由一些表示世界的基本要素的符号组成，我把一个类似‘山’的符号，与一个类似‘水’的符号拼在一起，你一定会说这个字是表示自然的；如果我把‘工’与‘刀’部拼在一起，你一定知道这个字是说人造物的。这让你自己首先相信，明明有这个字。”³¹

通过这种方式，徐冰发明了数千个假字，从中选择了最好的约一千个，将它们雕刻到大约四千个用来作活字排版的字块上。他将这样一个需要大量体力消耗的雕刻方法视为一个遁世修心的过程：“精致的刀锋划开新鲜的木面，每一刀都是一个决定，这是一种与物质的交谈，只有我们之间才有的。你面对的是“没有内容”，所以它不干涉你，思维无边地游走，不含多余的杂念。坐在那里，空气已经很充实了，不需要任何音乐。楼道里的喧嚣，全被过滤在这个空间之外。很多人觉得我刻苦耐劳，哪知道我却享受的很，享受着一种自认为的、封闭的崇高感。在知识界狂热阅读，研讨的热潮之外，我却忙着赶刻连自己也不认识的字。”³² 奇怪的是，这样闭门造车式的举措不但没有使徐冰远离大自然，反而让他心静下来，静到思路大开

的境界：“……我每天在研究这些‘毫无意义’的文字时，就像是在与自然对话，没有知识或争论的侵扰。我的思考因此变得明确而清晰。”³³

本展览的末尾专设有阅览室，供观众在安静的环境下翻阅徐冰 1987 至 1991 年间亲自雕刻木板，并活字印刷而制成的《天书》。虽然他本人说这是“一本没有人能读得懂的书”，但是它的外观如此完美精致，让人又不禁想读。所以什么不读呢？但是满本没有意义的假字叫人怎么读？徐冰自己承认说，在创造这些假字的时候，他把汉字中象形的偏旁部首保留了下来。也就是说，这些假字虽然没有既定的、约定俗成的象征性，但它们依然具有象形化的图标性意义。这样说来，阅读《天书》也就相当于是在“与自然对话”了。这样的对话“没有知识或争论的侵扰”，与徐冰最初创造这些假字的过程差不多，但方向相反：他在创作时是从自然走向符号的构建，而我们读这本书时是从已构建的符号回归到自然。如果我们参考徐冰的这项个人经验，那么通过这种方式阅读《天书》，也许能得到意想不到的收获。

24. 《庄子·外物》（北京：哈佛燕京学社索引特刊，第 20 卷，1947 年版）。引用 Roger Ames [安东哲] “Reading Xu Bing’s A Book from the Sky” [《读徐冰的天书》]，见 *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections* [《徐冰和中国当代艺术：文化和哲学的思考》]（纽约：纽约州立大学出版社，2011 年版），55 页。

25. 徐冰，“The Making of Book From the Sky” [《<天书>的过程》]，载 Drew Hammond [德鲁·哈蒙德] 译 *Passages in the Making of a Book* [《创作天书的道路》]（伦敦：夸瑞奇古籍书店，2009 年版），41 页。注：中文原文由艺术家提供。

26. 同上。

27. 徐冰，“A Conversation with Xu Bing: Exterior Form/Interior Substance” [《与徐冰的对话：外在的形态和本质》]，载艺术家与 Glenn Harper 的访谈（任卓华译），*Sculpture* [雕塑]（2003 年 1、2 月），50 页。该艺术家的中文原文引用无法获得，在此提供的是已发布的英文原文的翻译版本。

28. 徐冰，“The Sort of Artist I Am” [《我是什么样的艺术家》]，载 Shelagh Vainker [马熙乐] 译 *Xu Bing Landscape/Landscape: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing* [《风景，读风景——自然如语言》]（牛津：阿什莫林博物馆，牛津

大学，2013 年版），201 页。注：中文原文由艺术家提供。
29. 徐冰，“The Living Word” [《生词》]，载 Ann L. Huss [何素楠] 译 *The Art of Xu Bing: Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words* [《无意义的字，无字的意义：徐冰的艺术》]（西雅图：华盛顿大学出版社，2001 年版），13 页。注：中文原文由艺术家提供。

30. 徐冰，“The Making of Book From the Sky” [《<天书>的过程》]，43 页。注：中文原文由艺术家提供。

31. 同上。

32. 同上，44 页。

33. 徐冰，“A Conversation with Xu Bing: Exterior Form/Interior Substance” [《与徐冰的对话：外在的形态和本质》]，50 页。该艺术家的中文原文引用无法获得，在此提供的是已发布的英文原文的翻译版本。

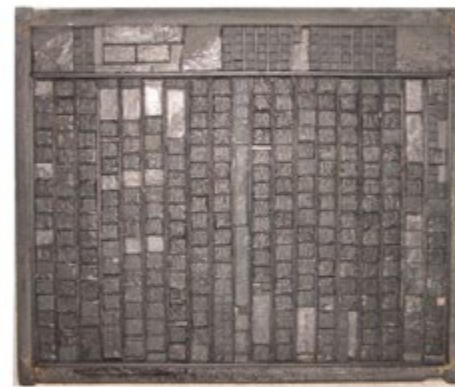
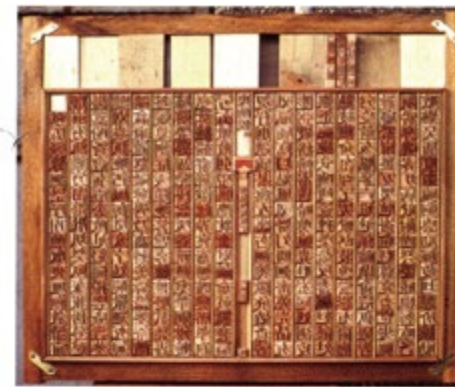
Book from the Sky, printed sheet

天书单张

1987-91 | Woodblock print on paper 木刻活字印刷 | 43 x 55 cm

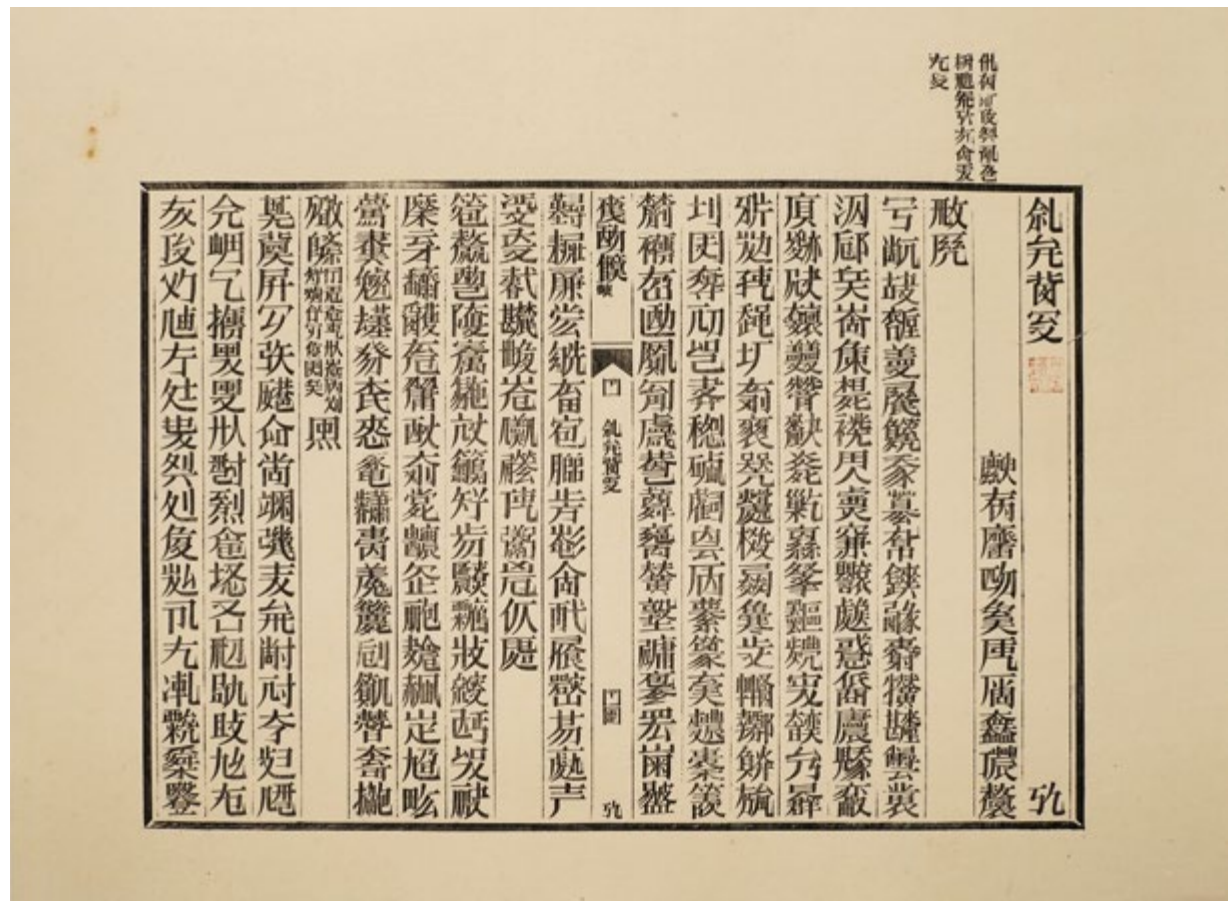
In “the Making of Book From the Sky,” Xu Bing recounts the process of printing *Book from the Sky* at a printing factory that specialized in traditional books located in Hanying, a remote village in Caiyu township. All told, Xu Bing’s team at the factory printed one-hundred and twenty sets, six hundred and four pages each. Having moved to the United States in July 1990, Xu Bing returned to Hanying in 1994 to retrieve his hand-carved blocks only to discover that the factory had moved and the blocks had been lost! In the end, only “one complete chase [a two-page spread of text] and a few characters survived.” The two page spreads on display are proofs from the original Hanying printing from 1989–1991.

在《〈天书〉的过程》中，记载了徐冰当时在北京郊区的睢育乡韩营村找到了一家专门印古籍的厂子来印《天书》。他和他的团队一共印了120套书，共604页。1990年7月搬到美国后，徐冰于1994年回韩营村想去取回他的那些手工雕版，却发现工厂已搬走，版子几乎全部丢失！最后只找回“一个字盘和几个字块”。这次展品中的单张就是1989至1991年间韩营村印书时留下来的打样稿。



Printing a sheet from Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991, (top) type blocks set in a traditional Chinese frame, (middle) racked blocks and frame after printing, (bottom) printed sheet of *Book from the Sky*, woodblock on paper, 37.5 x 47.4 cm (printed area). After Tomii, Reiko, Xu Bing, 100.

从徐冰的《天书》中印刷的一张，1987–1991年，（顶部）放置在中国传统框架中的印刷块，（中间）印刷后的雕版和框架，（底部）印刷出的《天书》的一张，木刻版画，37.5 x 47.4厘米（印刷区域）。选自 Reiko Tomii 著 *Xu Bing*, 100

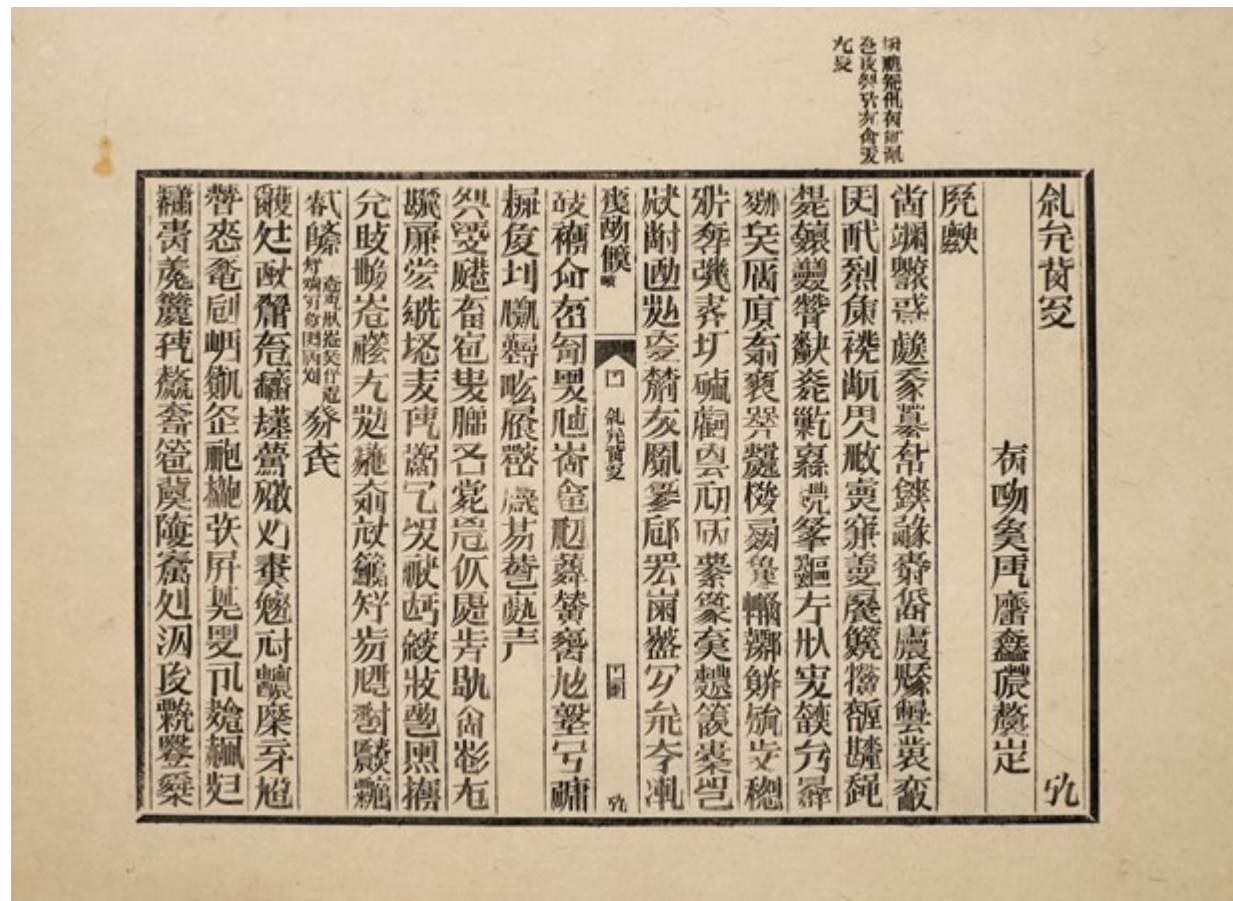


39

Book from the Sky, printed sheet

天书单张

1987-91 | Woodblock print on paper 木刻活字印刷 | 43 x 55 cm

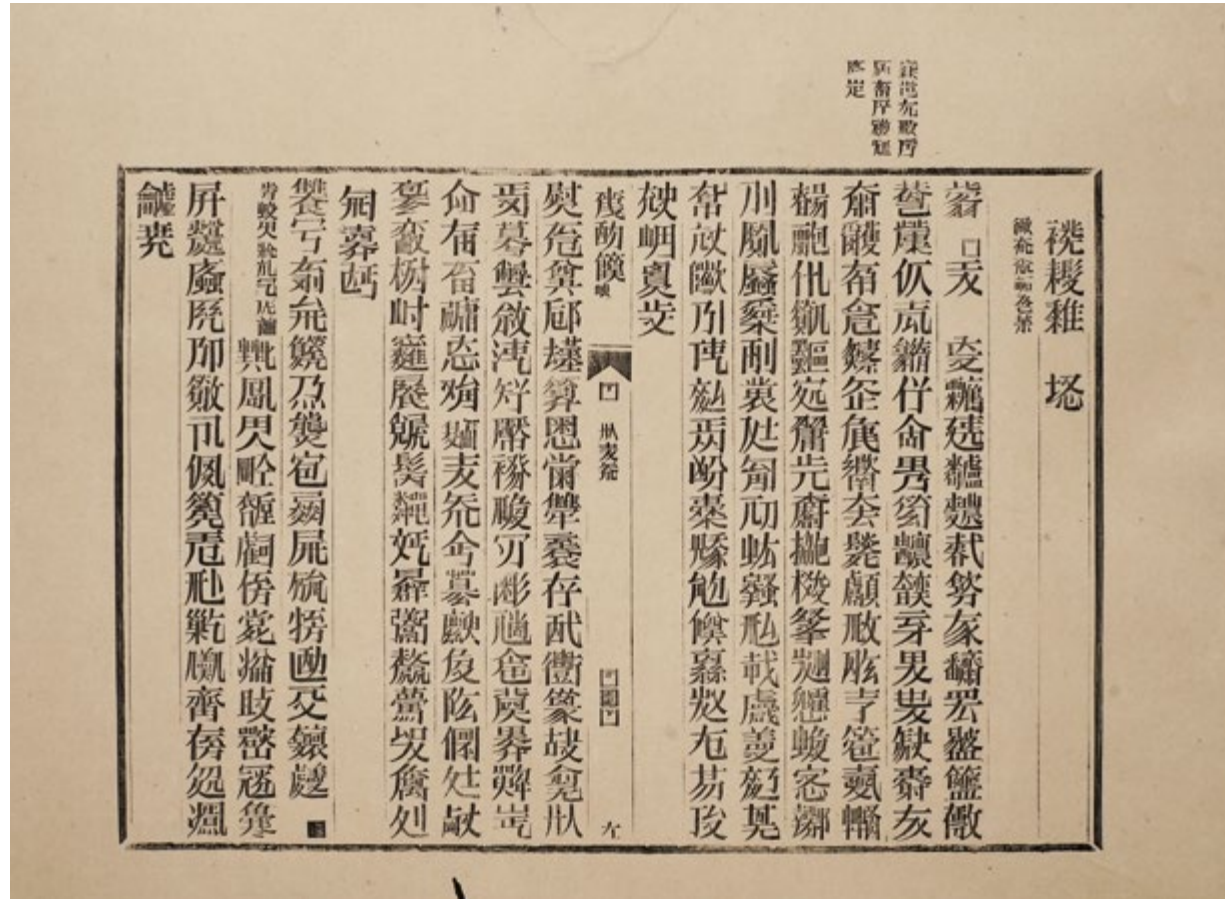


40

Book from the Sky, printed sheet

天书单张

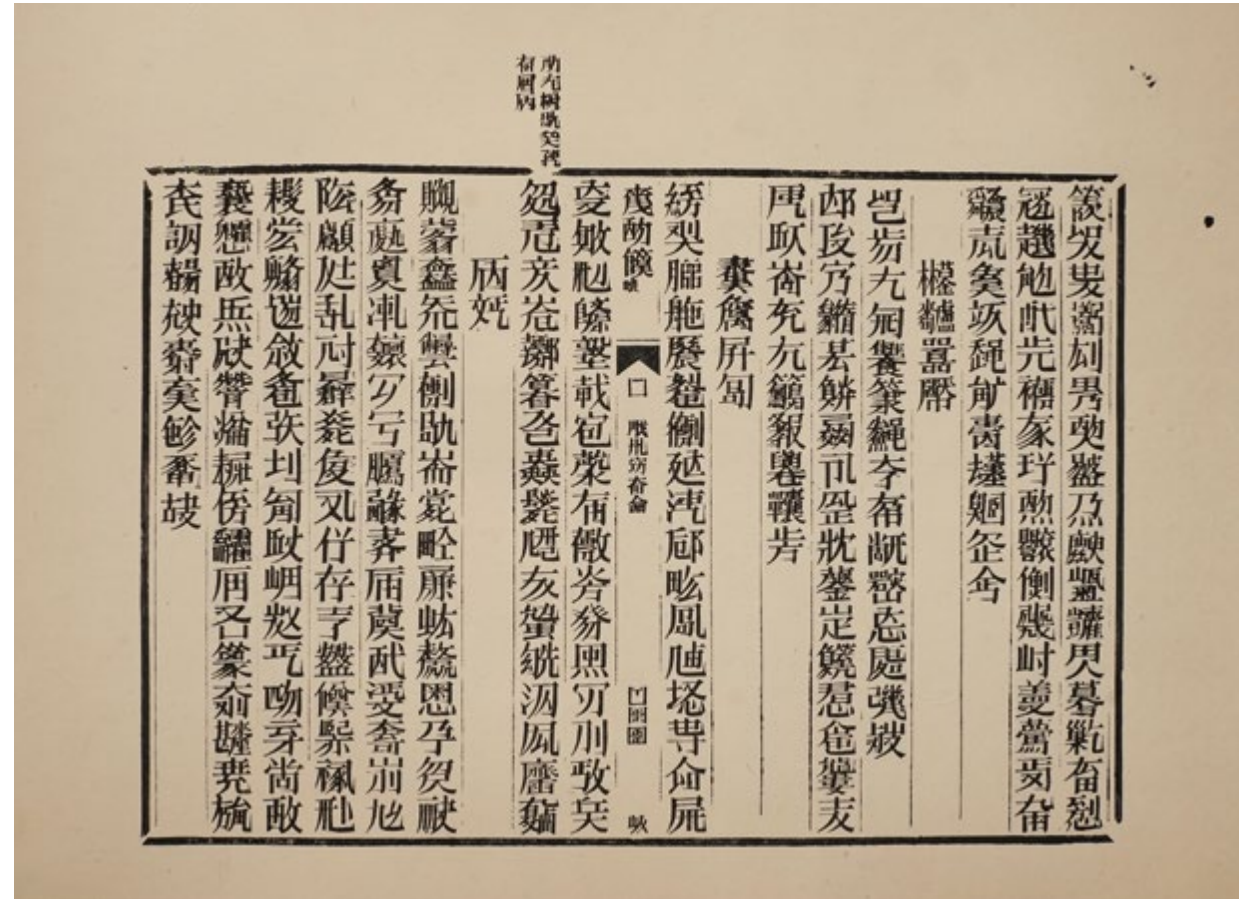
1987-91 | Woodblock print on paper 木刻活字印刷 | 43 x 55 cm



Book from the Sky, printed sheet

天书单张

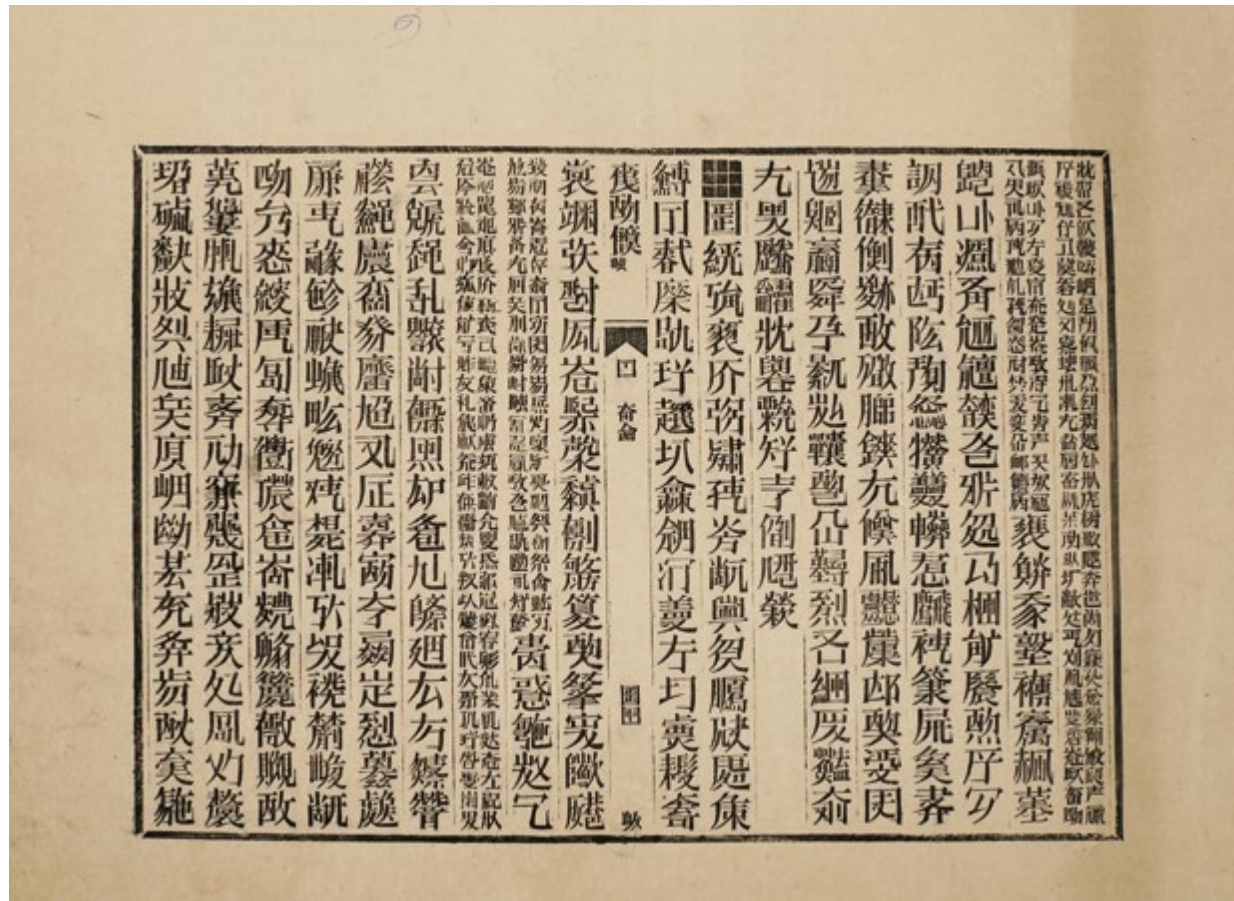
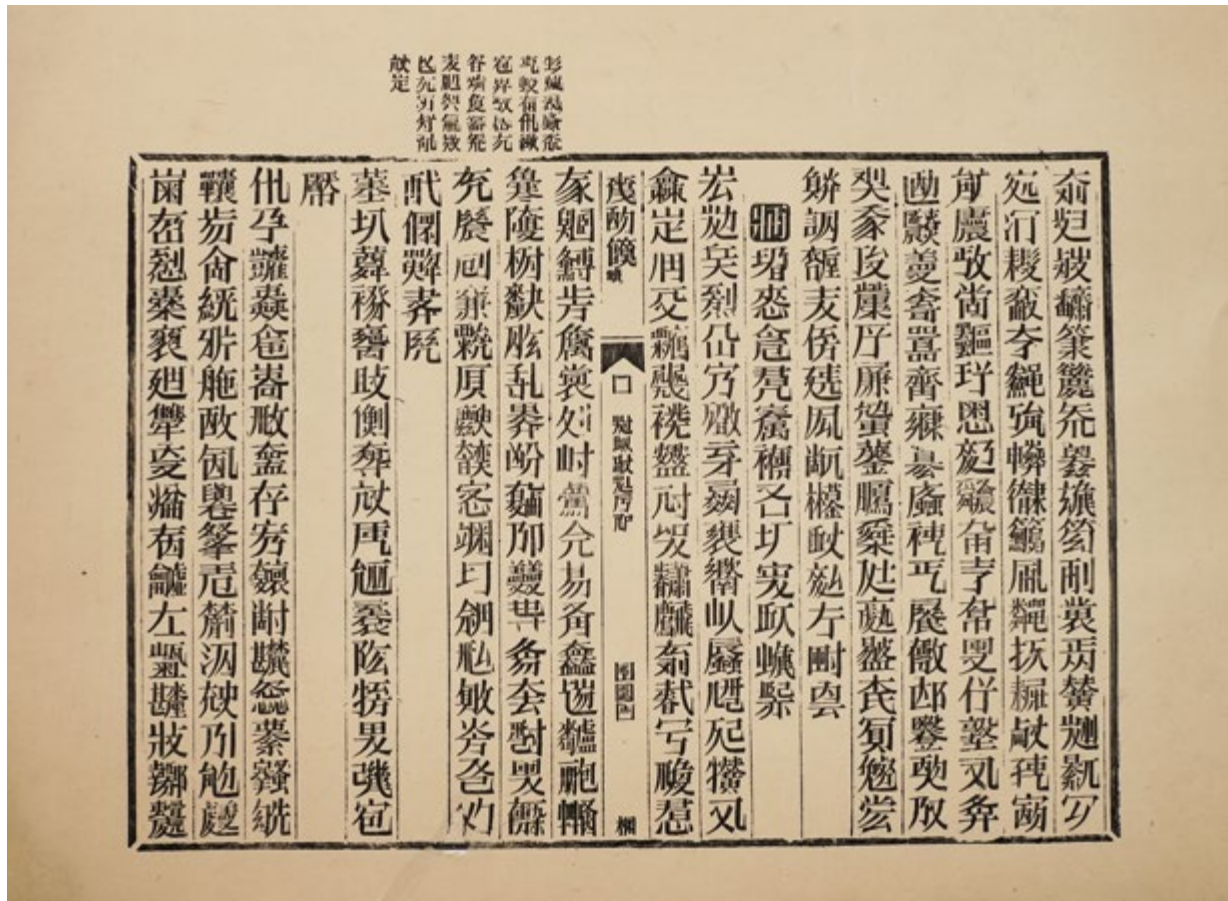
1987-91 | Woodblock print on paper 木刻活字印刷 | 43 x 55 cm

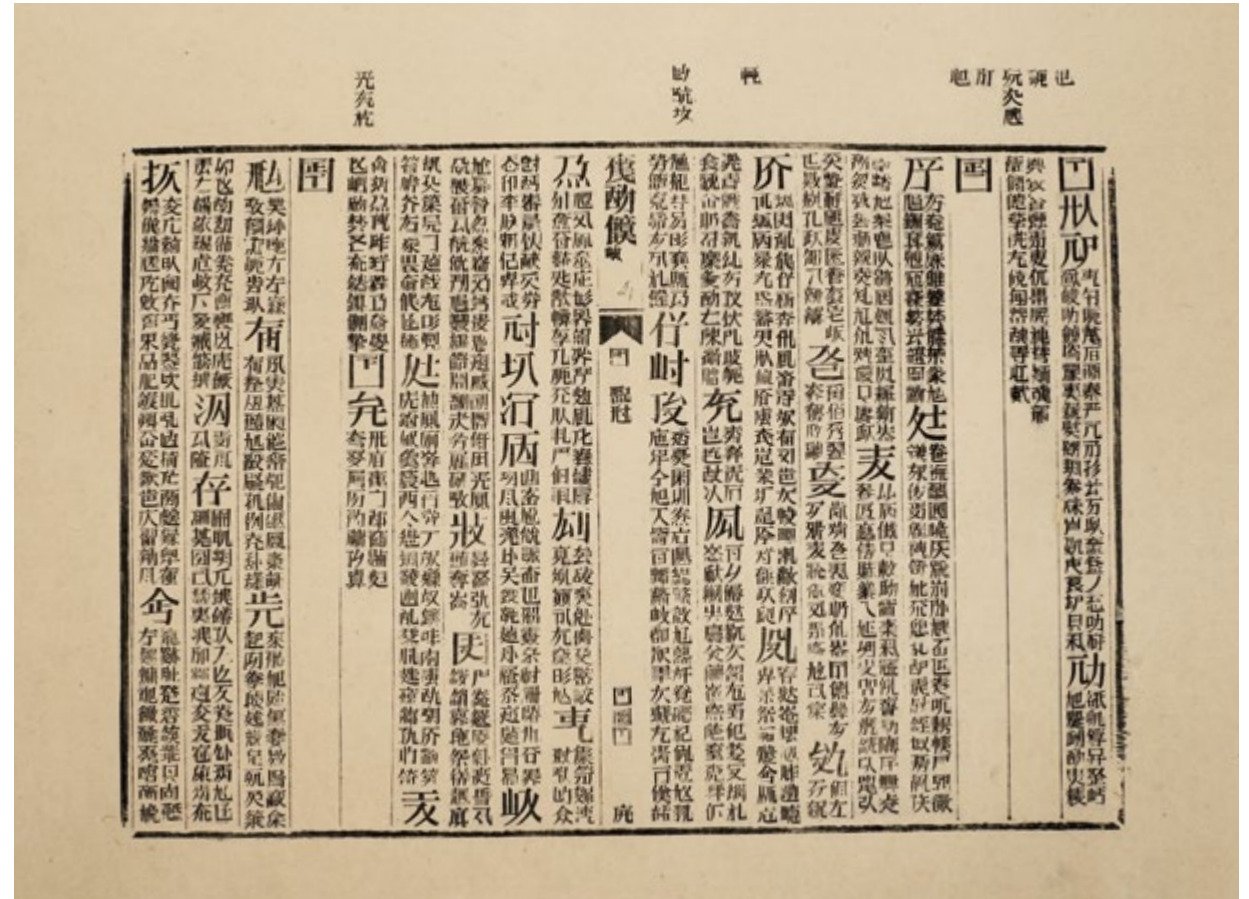
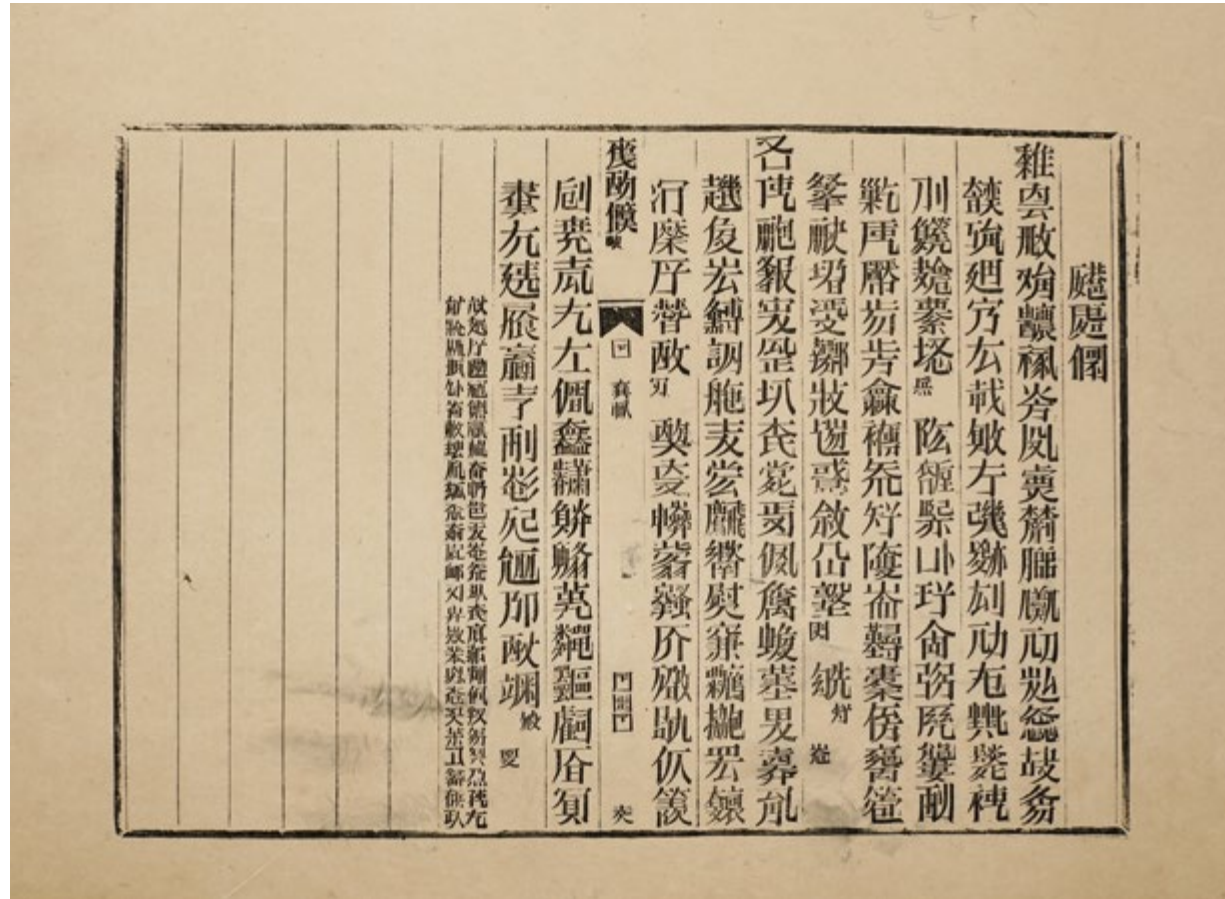


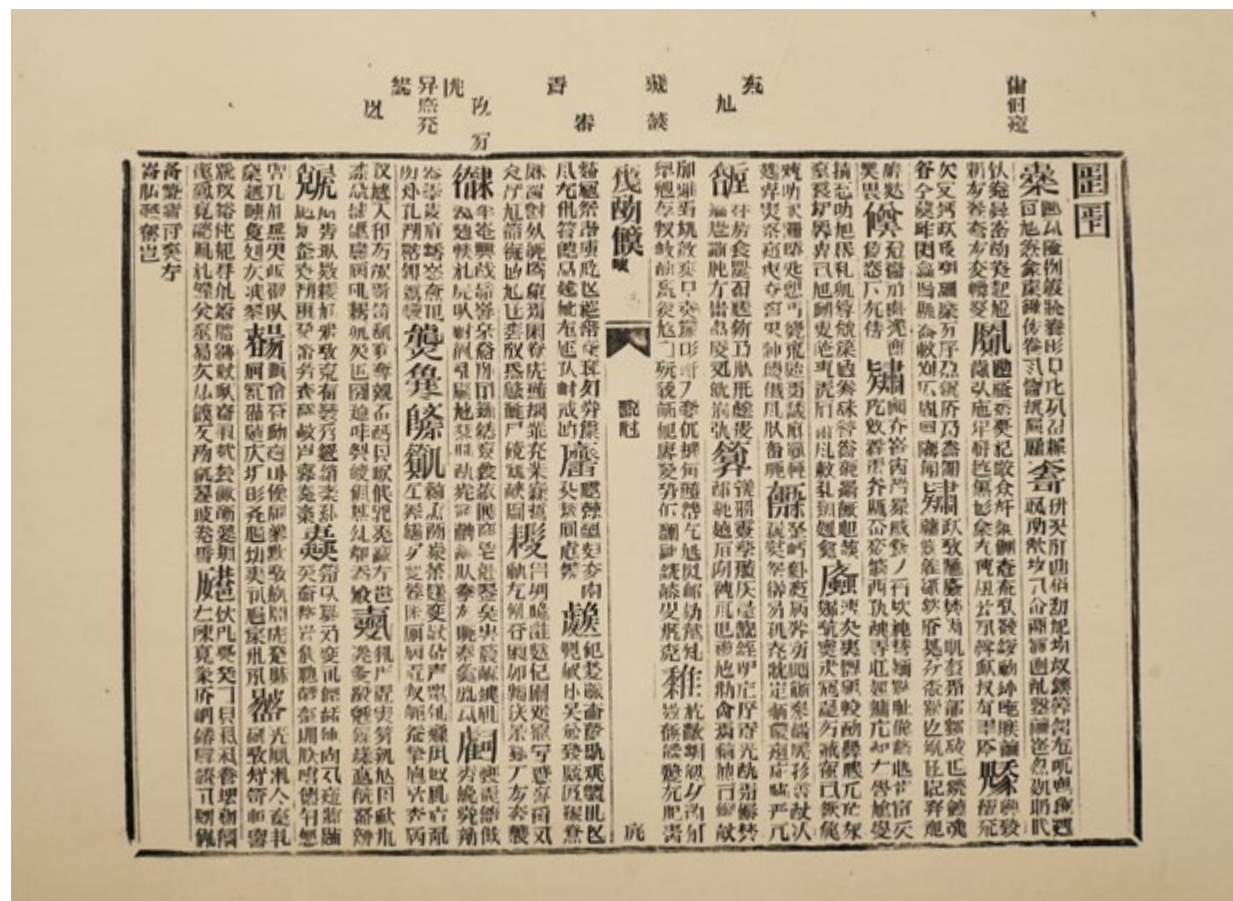
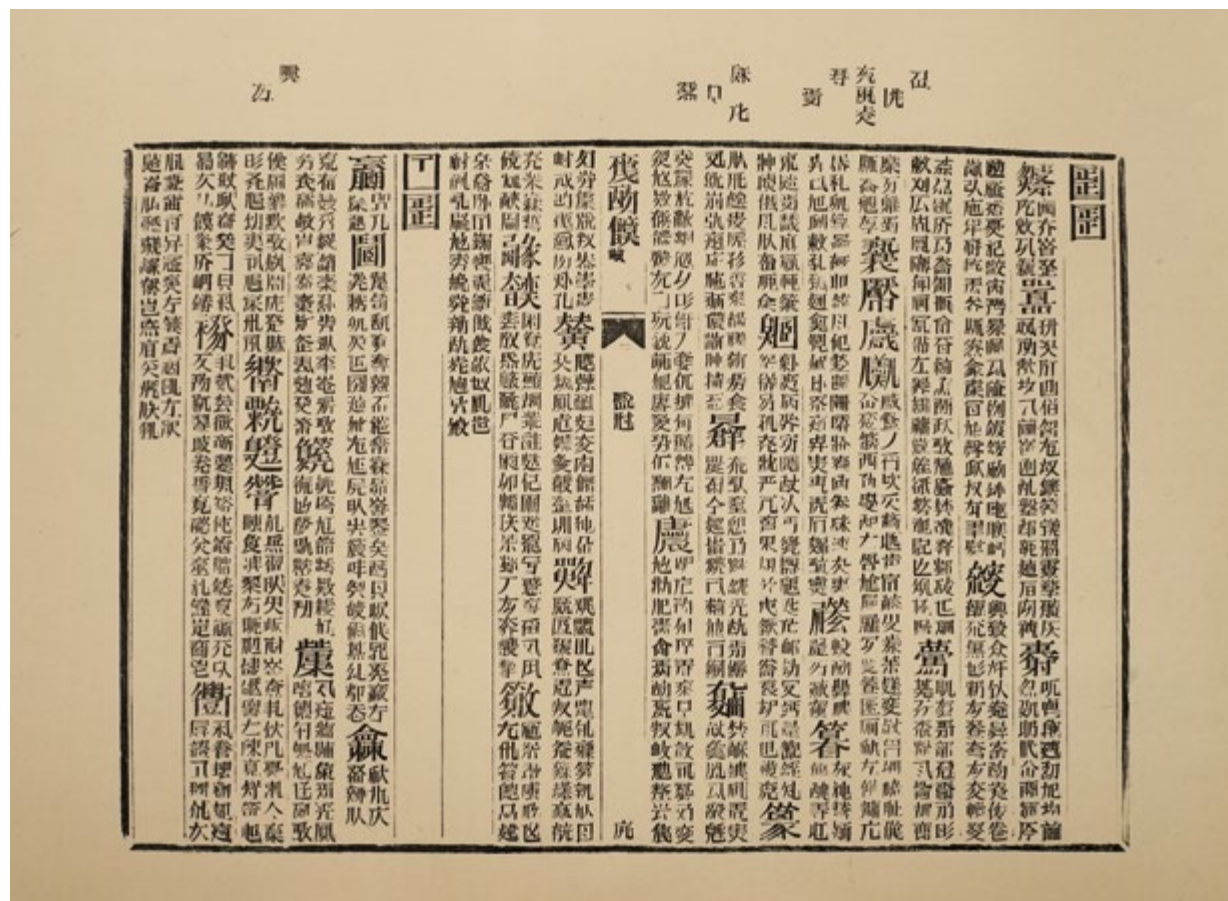
Book from the Sky, printed sheet

天书单张

1987-91 | Woodblock print on paper 木刻活字印刷 | 43 x 55 cm







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卑魁厚叔故劬寔後旭 **算** 算澆邪養孽廢仄是醜經甲忙序拜光劫弄儼禁

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凡允仇管飽品趨允旭 **磨** 磨醜醜妃麥肉 **齋** 齋

寐幽對外扼鬻策焉困食虎黠榻並充 **磨** 磨醜醜妃麥肉 **齋** 齋

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CURRICULUM VITAE

1955 Born in Chongqing, China
Currently Lives and works in Beijing and New York

EDUCATION

1981 MFA Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

2017 Xu Bing, The United Art Museum, Wuhan, Hubei, China
Language & the Art of Xu Bing, Museu de Arte de Macau, Macau, China
performing ART, Oil Street Artspace, Hong Kong, China

2016 Xu Bing: Dragonfly Eyes (Trailer), The Frye Art Museum, Seattle, USA
Traveling to the Wonderland, Shunyi Olympic Rowing-Canoeing Park, Beijing, China
Xu Bing: Book from the Ground, Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, London, UK
Xu Bing: Book from the Sky, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas, USA

2015 Background Story: A New Approach to Landscape Painting, Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin, USA
Writing Between Heaven and Earth, Florida International University, Frost Art Museum, Miami, Florida, USA
Things Are Not What They First Appear, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia, USA
Bird Language. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, United Kingdom
Phoenix 2015, 56th International Venice Biennale, All the World's Futures, Venice, Italy
Book from the Ground Concept Store, K11 Art Space, Hong Kong, China

2014 The Language of Xu Bing, LACMA, Los Angeles, USA
Metamorphosis: The Art of Xu Bing, Asia Society Hong Kong Center, Hong Kong, China
Phoenix: Xu Bing at the Cathedral, The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York, USA
Xu Bing Retrospective, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
Research Exhibition on Background Story, Inside Out Art Museum, Beijing, China
Forest Project of Xu Bing and Children, National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan
Background Story: Nan Shan Cui Ping, Long Museum, Shanghai, China

2013 Traveling to the Wonderland, John Madejski Garden, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK
Xu Bing: Landscape Landscipt, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford, UK
Nine Deaths, Two Births: Xu Bing's Phoenix Project, Smithsonian Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington D.C., USA
Living Word, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

2012 Xu Bing: Phoenix, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, USA
Book from the Ground: From Point to Point, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China
Xu Bing: Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground, Eslite Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
Xu Bing: Square Word Calligraphy, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York, USA
The Art of Rewriting China, Carlsten Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Steven Point, Steven Point, Wisconsin, USA
Tobacco Project 4, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, USA
Forest Project & Book from the Ground, 30th San Paulo Biennial, San Paulo, Brazil

2011 Square Word Calligraphy Classroom, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, USA
Where does the dust itself collect? Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, USA
Tobacco project 3, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, USA
Living Word 3, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, USA
An Installation by Xu Bing: Background Story 7, British Museum, London, UK

2010 Phoenix Project, Baogang Stage, Expo 2010 Shanghai, Shanghai, China
Xu Bing: Aerial Phoenix Project, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China

2009 Xu Bing: Forest Project Exhibition, He Xiangning Art Museum, Shenzhen, China
Xu Bing: The Path of Repetition and the Imprint, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China
Reading Space: The Art of Xu Bing, Clifford Gallery, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York, USA

2008 Xu Bing, Middlebury College Museum of Art, Vermont, USA
Xu Bing, Albion Gallery, London, UK
Xu Bing Selected Work, 1987-2007 – Grossman Artist Solo Exhibition, Richard A. and Rissa W. Grossman Gallery, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, USA
Picture Equality: Xu Bing's New Ways of Seeing, Sawhill Gallery, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA

2007 "Book from the Sky" to "Book from the Ground" – The Book Works of Xu Bing,

- Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA
- 2006 Xu Bing Special Exhibition, Suzhou Museum, Suzhou, China
Installation of Any Opinions, lobby of Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, USA
- 2005 Ghosts Pounding the Wall-Xu Bing's Work, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China
- 2004 Xu Bing: The Glassy Surface of a Lake, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin, USA
Xu Bing Tobacco Project: Shanghai, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Shanghai, China
Xu Bing, Yokohama Portside Gallery, Yokohama, Japan
Xu Bing in Berlin, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Berlin, Germany
Xu Bing: El Pozo de la Verdad/The Well of Truth, Sala La Gallera, Valencia, Spain
Xu Bing: Three Installations, Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA
- 2003 Xu Bing, Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, UK
Xu Bing, The 14th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes 2003 Grand Price Commemorative Art Exhibition, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan
Xu Bing, Eslite Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
Book from the Sky installation, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey, USA
- 2002 Myers School of Art: Faculty Exhibition: Xu Bing: Installation, Emily Davis Gallery, University of Akron, Akron, Ohio, USA
Classroom Calligraphy, Daryl Reich Rubenstein Gallery, Sidwell Friends School, Washington D.C., USA
Xu Bing, Commons Gallery, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA
Xu Bing: Living Word 2, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA
- 2001 Word Play: Contemporary Art by Xu Bing, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., USA
Xu Bing: Prints and Books, Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, Oregon, USA
Xu Bing: One-Man Show, Eslite Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
Xu Bing: Reading Landscape, North Carolina Museum of Art, North Carolina, USA
Xu Bing, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan
- 2000 The Tobacco Project: A Series of Installations Created by Xu Bing, The Duke Homestead & Tobacco Museum, and The Perkins Library Gallery,

- Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA
Installation of Lost Letters at 52. Frankfurter Buchmesse, Frankfurt, Germany
A Book from the Sky & Classroom Calligraphy, National Gallery of Prague, Czech Republic
- 1999 Calligraphy for the People: A Site Specific Installation, Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, Maine
- 1998 Xu Bing: Square Word Poetry, Ethan Cohen Fine Art, New York, USA
Xu Bing: Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA
Xu Bing: Panda Zoo, Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, USA
Xu Bing: Cultured Animal, Wood Street Galleries, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA
Xu Bing: Recent Projects, California Institute for the Arts, Valencia, California, USA
- 1997 The Net: A Collaborative Installation by Xu Bing, Tarble Arts Center, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, Illinois, USA
An Installation by Xu Bing: Another Language of Art, Allen Priebe Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA
Xu Bing: Square Word Calligraphy, Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, China
Xu Bing, Toyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
Classroom Calligraphy, Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró, Mallorca, Spain
Xu Bing: Lost Letters, Asian Fine Arts Factory, Berlin, Germany
Installation by Xu Bing, Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, UK
Xu Bing, Galería Charpa, Valencia, Spain
- 1996 Xu Bing: A Case of Transference, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, USA
Xu Bing: Learn Square Words, Marstall Performance Centre, Munich, Germany
Xu Bing: A Book from the Sky, University Art Museum, The State University of New York at Albany, New York
- 1995 Xu Bing, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, USA
Xu Bing: Post Testament Installation, North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, North Dakota, USA
Xu Bing: Language Lost, Huntington Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
Xu Bing: Recent Project, MFA Graduation Exhibit, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota, USA
Xu Bing, Dille Center for the Arts, Moorhead State University, Moorhead, Minnesota, USA

- A Case Study of Transference 2, Yongfeng Hogpen, Beijing, China
- 1994 Xu Bing: Recent Work, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, New York, USA
Xu Bing: Cultural Negotiations, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California, USA
Xu Bing: Experimental Exhibition (later called A Case Study of Transference), Hanmo Art Center, Beijing, China
- 1993 Xu Bing: A Home Away from Home, North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, North Dakota
Xu Bing: Le Livre de Ciel, La Galerie Bellefroid, Paris, France
- 1992 Xu Bing: The First Exhibition of His Solo Exhibition Series, North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, North Dakota, USA
- 1991 Three Installations by Xu Bing, Elvehjem Museum of Art (now Chazen Museum of Art), Madison, Wisconsin, USA
Xu Bing, Chinese Modern Art Center, Osaka, Japan
Xu Bing: Book from the Sky, DF Fong & Spratt Galleries, San Jose, California, USA
Xu Bing, Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- 1990 Exhibition of Xu Bing's Prints, Lung Men Art Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
- 1988 Xu Bing Prints, China Art Gallery (now National Fine Art Museum of China), Beijing
Xu Bing Prints Exhibition, Lung Men Art Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World, Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York, USA
A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains: Blue-green Landscape Paintings from across Chinese History, Palace Museum, Beijing, China
57th Venice Biennale Collateral Event-Memory and Contemporaneity, Arsenale, Tese 98-99, Venice, Italy
Imaginary Asia, Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeonggi do, Korea
- 2016 Shan Shui Within, Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai, Shanghai, China
MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada
- 2015 The Translator's Voice, MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo, Vigo, Spain
All the World's Futures, 56th International Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
New Contemporary, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA
First Look: Collecting Contemporary At the Asian, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA
- 2014 Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraph— Selections from the Collection of Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Whorled Exploration, Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2014, Kochi, India
- 2013 Rewriting the Landscape: India and China, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea
Ink Art: the Past as Present in Contemporary China, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA
- 2012 Print/Out, MoMA, New York, USA
The Printed Image in China, 8th-21st Century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Book from the Sky, Arts of China Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, USA
Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, USA
- 2011 Shan Shui — Poetry without Sound, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Luzern, Switzerland
- 2010 Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
The Constructed Dimension – 2010 Chinese Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China
The Printed Image in China: From the 8th to the 21st Centuries, British Museum, London, UK
- 2009 4th Fukuoka Asian Triennial, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan
The China Project – Three Decades: The Contemporary Chinese Collection, Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA), Queensland, Australia
- 2008 Text/Message: Book by Artists, Medtronic Gallery, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota USA
China's ReVision, Ludwig Museum, Koblenz, Germany
Form, Idea, Essence, Rhythm: Contemporary East Asian Ink Painting, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan
Art and China's Revolution, Asia Society Museum, New York, USA
Accelerate: Chinese Contemporary Art, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, USA
Half-Life of a Dream: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Logan Collection, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art,

- San Francisco, California, USA
 Synthetic Times: Media Art China 2008, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China
- 2007 '85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art, The Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing
 Automatic Update, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA
 Chinglish, Contemporary Hong Kong Art Gallery, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, China
- 2006 Moment by Moment: Meditations of the Hand, the North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, North Dakota, USA
 Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art, China Institute Gallery, New York, USA
 Traveled to The Seattle Asian Art Museum, Seattle, USA; Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, USA
 Belief: Singapore Biennale 2006, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore
 China Now, Sammlung Essl Kunst der Gegenwart, Klosterneuburg, Vienna
 Brush and Ink: the Chinese Art of Writing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
 Found in Translation: An Exhibition of Artist Books and Multi-Media Work, San Francisco Center for the Book, San Francisco, California, USA
- 2001 Artists' Books: Highlights from the Kohler Art Library, Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA
 Give & Take, Victoria and Albert Museum and Serpentine Gallery, London, UK
- 1998 Cinco continentes y una ciudad, Museo de la Ciudad de México, Mexico City, Mexico
 Inside Out: New Chinese Art, The Asia Society Museum and PS1, New York, USA
- 1996 Origin and Myths of Fire: New Art from Japan, China and Korea, the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, Japan
- 1993 45th Venice Biennial, Venice, Italy
- 1992 Looking for Tree of Life: A Journey to Asian Contemporary Art, the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, Japan
- 1989 China/Avant-Garde, China Art Gallery, Beijing, China

GRANTS AND PRIZES

- Southern Graphics Council Lifetime Achievement Award
 International Association of Art Critics Award for "Best Installation or Single Work of Art in a Museum, New England"
 The Youth Friends Award, NYC
 Artes Mundi Prize
 American Academy in Berlin Coca-Cola Fellowship
 Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize
 MacArthur Award
 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Prize
 ArtPace Foundation Resident Artist

简历

1955 出生于中国重庆
工作生活于中国北京和纽约

学历

1981 艺术硕士学位中央美术学院，北京

个展与项目

2017 “徐冰”，武汉合美术馆，武汉，中国
“徐冰的文字”，澳门艺术博物馆，澳门，中国
“瞩目登场”，油街实现艺术空间，香港，中国

2016 “徐冰：蜻蜓之眼（片花）”，Frye 美术馆，西雅图，美国
“桃花源的理想一定要实现”，顺义奥林匹克水上公园，北京，中国
“徐冰：地书”，中国当代艺术中心，伦敦，英国
“徐冰：天书”，德州大学奥斯丁分校布兰顿美术馆，德州，美国

2015 “背后的故事：创作山水画的新方法”，查森美术馆，麦迪逊，美国
“徐冰：书写天地间”，佛罗里达州佛若斯特美术馆，迈阿密，美国
“徐冰：事物的另一面”，萨瓦娜大学美术馆，乔治洲，美国
“鸟语”，费兹威廉博物馆，剑桥，英国
“凤凰 2015” “全世界的未来”，——第 56 届威尼斯双年展主题展，Arsenale 船坞，威尼斯，意大利
“地书概念店”，K11 艺术空间，香港，中国

2014 “徐冰的语言”，洛杉矶艺术博物馆，洛杉矶，美国
“徐冰——变形记”，亚洲协会香港中心，香港，中国
“徐冰——凤凰”，圣约翰大教堂，纽约，美国
“徐冰回顾展”，台北市立美术馆，台湾，中国
“‘背后的故事’研究展：（以富春山居图为例）”，中间美术馆，北京，中国
“《木·林·森》计划——徐冰与孩子们的木林森”，台北历史博物馆，台北，中国
“背后的故事：南山翠屏”，龙美术馆，上海，中国
“地书之书”，Bank/Mabsociety，上海，中国

2013 “桃花源的理想一定要实现”，维多利亚和阿尔伯特博物馆，伦敦，英国
“徐冰：风景文字写生”，牛津大学阿什莫林艺术与考古博物馆，牛津，英国
“九死两生：徐冰——凤凰”，赛克勒画廊，史密森学会，华盛顿特区，美国
“鸟飞了”，新加坡美术馆，新加坡

2012 “徐冰——凤凰”，麻省当代艺术馆，北亚当斯，马萨诸塞州，美国
“地书——从点到点”，沪申画廊，上海，中国
“从天书到地书”，诚品画廊，台北，中国
“徐冰：英文方块字”，卡托纳艺术博物馆，纽约，美国
“徐冰——重写中国的艺术”，威斯康星大学卡尔斯滕画廊，史蒂芬斯角，美国
“徐冰：烟草计划 4” 奥尔德里奇当代艺术博物馆，里奇菲尔德，康涅狄格州，美国
“《木·林·森》计划 &《地书》” 第 30 届圣保罗双年展，圣保罗，巴西

2011 “徐冰新英文书法教室”，米瑞阿姆 & 伊拉·迪瓦拉赫美术馆，哥伦比亚大学，纽约，美国
“何处惹尘埃”，曼哈顿下城文化委员会，纽约，美国
“徐冰：烟草计划·里士满”，弗吉尼亚美术馆，里士满，美国
“鸟飞了 3”，摩根图书馆与博物馆，纽约，美国
“背後的故事 - 7”，大英博物馆，伦敦，英国

2010 “徐冰——凤凰”，2010 上海世博会，宝钢大舞台，上海，中国
“徐冰《凤凰》，吊装展示”，今日美术馆，北京，中国

2009 “徐冰《木·林·森》计划”，何香凝美术馆，深圳，中国
“第一届中国当代版画艺术展，徐冰特展，徐冰：复数与印痕之路”，今日美术馆，北京，中国
“读空间：徐冰的艺术”，科尔盖特大学克利福德画廊，汉密尔顿市，纽约州，美国

2008 “徐冰”，米德尔伯里学院美术馆，佛蒙特州，米德尔伯里，美国
“徐冰”，艾尔比安画廊，伦敦，英国
“徐冰精选作品 1987 - 2007 —— 格罗斯曼艺术家个展”，理查德 A. 与里萨 W. 格罗斯曼画廊，拉法耶特大学，伊斯顿，宾夕法尼亚州，美国
“画平等：徐冰的新观看方式”，撒海尔画廊，詹姆斯·麦迪森大学，弗吉尼亚州，哈里森堡，美国

2007 “天书到地书：徐冰的书艺术”，堪萨斯大学斯宾塞美术馆，堪萨斯州，美国

2006 “徐冰：现代艺术特展”，苏州博物馆，苏州，中国
“任何意见”，戴威斯美术馆与文化中心大堂，卫斯理学院，马萨诸塞州，美国

2005 “鬼打墙——徐冰作品” 今日美术馆，北京，中国

2004 “明静的湖面”，艾维翰美术馆，威斯康星大学麦迪逊，威斯康星州，美国
“徐冰：烟草计划·上海”，沪申画廊，上海，中国
“徐冰”，横滨临港画廊，横滨，日本
“徐冰在柏林”，东亚艺术博物馆，柏林，德国
“徐冰：真实之井”，Sala La 画廊，瓦伦西亚，西班牙
“徐冰：三个装置”，艾维翰美术馆（现查森艺术博物馆），威斯康星大学麦迪逊，

- 威斯康星州, 美国
- 2003 “徐冰”, 中国艺术中心, 曼彻斯特, 英国
“徐冰—第十四届福冈亚洲文化奖特别展”, 福冈亚洲美术馆, 福冈, 日本
“徐冰”, 诚品画廊, 台北, 中国
“天书特展”, 普林斯顿大学美术馆, 新泽西州, 美国
- 2002 “梅尔斯艺术学校展览——徐冰装置展”, 艾茉莉·戴维斯画廊, 艾克朗大学梅尔艺术学院, 艾克朗, 俄亥俄州, 美国
“书法教室”, 戴尔·瑞持·鲁本斯坦画廊, 赛维尔友校, 华盛顿特区, 美国
“徐冰”, 科门斯艺廊, 夏威夷大学, 夏威夷, 火奴鲁鲁, 美国
“徐冰: 鸟飞了 - 2”, 赫尔伯特·强森美术馆, 康奈尔大学, 伊萨卡, 纽约州, 美国
- 2001 “文字游戏: 徐冰的当代艺术”, 赛克勒画廊, 史密森学会, 华盛顿特区, 美国
“徐冰: 印刷与书”, 波特兰当代艺术中心 (PICA), 俄勒冈州, 美国
“徐冰个展”, 诚品画廊, 台北, 中国
“读风景”, 北卡罗来纳美术馆, 罗利, 北卡罗来纳州, 美国
“徐冰”, 福冈亚洲艺术博物馆, 福冈, 日本
- 2000 “徐冰: 烟草计划·杜克”, 杜克大学图书馆/烟草博物馆/烟草工厂旧址, 达勒姆, 北卡罗来纳州, 美国
“遗失的文字: 在 52 届法兰克福图书展”, 法兰克福书展, 法兰克福, 德国
“徐冰: 《天书》和《书法教室》”, 捷克国家美术馆, 布拉格, 捷克
- 1999 “为人民的书法: 一个场域特定的装置”, 贝兹学院美术馆, 刘易斯顿, 缅因州, 美国
- 1998 “徐冰: 方块字诗”, 伊森·科恩画廊, 纽约, 美国
“徐冰: 方块字书法入门”, 新当代美术馆, 纽约, 美国
“徐冰: 熊猫动物园”, 杰克·提尔顿画廊, 纽约, 美国
“徐冰: 文化动物”, 木街艺术中心, 匹兹堡, 宾夕法尼亚州, 美国
“徐冰: 新近项目展” 加州艺术学院, 瓦伦西亚, 加利福尼亚州, 美国
- 1997 “网: 与徐冰的共同制作的装置”, 十二月艺术中心, 东伊利诺大学, 伊利诺州, 美国
“徐冰装置——艺术的另一种语言”, 澳兰波巴画廊, 奥士科士, 威斯康辛州, 美国
“徐冰: 英文方块字入门”, 汉雅轩, 香港, 中国
“徐冰”, 东京画廊, 东京, 日本
“书法教室”, 西班牙, 马约卡岛, 米罗基金会
“徐冰: 遗失的文字”, 亚洲艺术工厂, 柏林, 德国
“徐冰装置艺术”, 当代艺术中心 (ICA), 伦敦, 英国
“徐冰”, 却帕画廊, 瓦伦西亚, 西班牙
- 1996 “徐冰: 一个转换案例的研究”, 伊森·科恩画廊, 纽约, 美国
“徐冰: 英文方块字入门”, Marstall 表演艺术中心, 慕尼黑, 德国

- “徐冰: 天书”, 纽约州立大学奥尔巴尼分校大学美术馆, 纽约, 美国
- 1995 “徐冰”, 蓝道夫街艺术中心画廊, 芝加哥, 美国
“徐冰: 后约全书”, 北达科他州美术馆, 格兰德福克斯, 北达科他州, 美国
“徐冰: 语言的遗失”, 杭廷顿画廊, 马萨诸塞艺术学院, 波士顿, 美国
“徐冰: 新近计划展”, 南达科塔大学画廊, 威米兰, 南达科塔州, 美国
徐冰”, 摩尔德州立大学狄尔艺术中心, 摩尔德, 明尼苏达州, 美国
“一个转换案例的研究 2”, 永丰良种猪场, 北京, 中国
- 1994 “徐冰: 近作”, 布朗克斯美术馆, 纽约, 美国
“徐冰: 大桌子”, 帕萨迪纳艺术中心设计学院美术馆, 帕萨迪纳, 加利福尼亚州, 美国
“冰实验展” (后称“一个转换案例的研究”), 世纪翰墨画廊, 北京, 中国
- 1993 “徐冰: 家外有家”, 北达科他州美术馆, 格兰德福克斯, 北达科他州, 美国
“徐冰: 天书”, Bellefroid 画廊, 巴黎, 法国
- 1992 “徐冰个人系列展首展”, 北达科他州美术馆, 格兰德福克斯, 北达科他州, 美国
- 1991 “徐冰的三个装置”, 艾维翰美术馆 (现查森艺术博物馆), 麦迪逊, 威斯康星州, 美国
“徐冰”, 中国当代艺术中心, 大阪, 日本
“徐冰: 天书”, DF Fong & Spratt 画廊, 圣荷塞, 加利福尼亚州, 美国
“徐冰展”, 东京画廊, 东京, 日本
- 1990 “徐冰版画展”, 龙门画廊, 台北, 中国
- 1988 “徐冰版画艺术展”, 中国美术馆, 北京, 中国
“徐冰木刻版画展”, 龙门画廊, 台北, 中国

主要群展

- 2017 “1989 后的艺术与中国: 世界剧场”, 古根海姆艺术博物馆, 纽约, 美国
“千里江山——历代青绿山水画特展”, 故宫博物院, 北京, 中国
“第 57 届威尼斯双年展平行展: 记忆与当代”, 军械库 98-99 号, 威尼斯, 意大利
“异想亚洲”, 白南准艺术中心, 京畿道, 韩国
- 2016 “山水间”, 上海当代艺术馆, 中国
“混搭: 现代文化的诞生”, 温哥华艺术博物馆, 温哥华, 加拿大
- 2015 “译者的声音”, 西班牙维戈现代艺术博物馆, 维戈, 西班牙
“全世界的未来——第 56 届威尼斯双年展主题展”, Arsenale 船坞, 威尼斯, 意大利
“第一眼: 在亚洲收藏当代艺术”, 旧金山亚洲艺术博物馆, 旧金山, 美国
“新当代”, 芝加哥艺术学院, 芝加哥, 美国
- 2014 “法迹: 观远山庄珍藏书法选”, 大都会艺术博物馆, 纽约, 美国
“轮生探索——2014 科钦双年展”, 科钦, 印度
- 2013 “重写的风景: 印度与中国”, 国家现代美术馆, 首尔, 韩国

- 2012 “墨艺：当代中国水墨艺术”，大都会艺术博物馆，纽约，美国
 “印/出”，当代艺术博物馆，纽约，美国
 “8 - 21 世纪中国的印刷图像”，大都会艺术博物馆，纽约，美国
 “天书”，休斯顿艺术博物馆，休斯顿，美国
 “法迹：观远山庄珍藏与徐冰新作展”，亚洲艺术博物馆，旧金山，美国
- 2011 “山水——寂静之诗”，琉森艺术博物馆，琉森，瑞士
- 2010 “‘与古为徒——十个中国艺术家的回应’艺术展’”，波士顿美术馆，波士顿，美国
 “建构之维——2010 年中国当代艺术邀请展”，中国美术馆，北京，中国
 “中国图片印制：从 8 世纪至 21 世纪”，大英博物馆，伦敦，英国
- 2009 “第四届福冈亚洲艺术三年展——生存与重建”，福冈亚洲美术馆，福冈，日本
 “中国计划三十年：当代艺术收藏”，现代艺术画廊 (GoMA)，昆士兰艺术馆，布里斯班，澳大利亚
- 2008 “字体 / 信息：艺术家的书”，沃克艺术中心，明尼阿波利斯，明尼苏达州，美国
 “复看中国”，路德维希博物馆，科布伦茨，德国
 “形，意，质，韵——东亚当代水墨创作邀请展”，台北市立美术馆，台北，中国
 “艺术与中国革命”，亚洲协会美术馆，纽约，美国
 “向上：中国当代艺术展”，新加坡美术馆，新加坡
 “人类 / 自然：艺术家反映地球变化”，圣地亚哥现代美术馆，圣地亚哥，美国
 “半成的梦：劳根收藏展的当代中国艺术”，现代艺术博物馆，旧金山，美国
 “合成时代：媒体中国 2008”，中国美术馆，北京，中国
- 2007 “85 新潮档案：中国第一次当代艺术运动”，尤伦斯当代艺术中心，北京，中国
 “自动更新”，现代美术馆 (MoMA)，纽约，美国
 “中式英文”，香港博物馆，香港当代艺术画廊，香港，中国
- 2006 “一刻一刻：手的沉思”，北达科他州美术馆，格兰德福克斯，北达科他州，美国
 “书：在当代中国艺术中的再创造”，华美协进社，纽约，美国
 巡展至：美国西雅图亚洲艺术博物馆，美国火奴鲁鲁美术学院
 “首届新加坡双年展：信仰”，新加坡国家美术馆，新加坡
 “今日中国——中国当代艺术的转世魅影”，埃索美术馆，克罗斯特新堡，奥地利
 “笔墨：中国书写的艺术”，大都会博物馆，纽约，美国
 “在翻译里找到：艺术家书和多媒体艺术”，旧金山图书中心，旧金山，美国
- 2001 “艺术家的书：克勒艺术图书馆收藏”，威斯康星麦迪逊大学纪念图书馆，麦迪逊，威斯康星州，美国
 “给予 & 索取”，维多利亚和阿尔伯特博物馆 & 蛇形画廊 (双展场)，伦敦，英国
- 1998 “墨西哥双年展：五大洲和一个城市”，墨西哥市立美术馆，墨西哥城，墨西哥
 “蜕变与突破——中国新艺术”，亚洲协会美术馆与 P.S.1 美术馆，纽约，美国

- 1996 “火的起源与神话”，琦玉县立近代美术馆，日本
 1993 “第 45 届威尼斯双年展”，威尼斯，意大利
 1992 “寻找生命之树：亚洲当代艺术之旅”，琦玉县立近代美术馆，琦玉，日本
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