



## Xu Bing: The Glassy Surface of a Lake

The Elvehjem presents an exhibition and installation that showcases the evolution of Xu Bing's work during the thirteen years that the artist has lived and worked primarily in the United States and Europe, where his encounter with alien linguistic and cultural environments stimulated him to explore further issues of communication and authority in his work. Xu Bing's installations are based on elements of language, including Chinese characters and legible English letters deployed within Chinese character-like structures. Combining traditional crafts, techniques, and materials with contemporary conceptualism, his works are often interactive, inviting the visitor's interventions to produce some kind of transformation.

In Brittingham Gallery VII is the installation *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom* in which visitors are encouraged to experiment with Xu Bing's unique and whimsical form of writing, his square calligraphy font. The classroom consists of traditional Chinese desks with traditional writing implements—brushes, brush holders, ink, ink holders—calligraphy copy books, and examples. The gallery will also display his series of Landscipt ink drawings on Nepalese rice paper created for the Elvehjem.

Brittingham Gallery VI premieres Xu Bing's installation *Touching Without Touching*. This series works with new means of communication permitted by current technology, a mutation of Xu Bing's previous language-based works. The design of the installation is based upon works both artistic in nature and scientific in form. The creative process behind making art and making scientific objects is actually similar. The technological series *Slowly Changing Configurations* is comprised of the *Slowly Varying Computer Desktop* that changes position slowly to use all muscles instead of the traditional design that only uses a couple of muscle groups. The sense of movement and graceful use of muscles are closely tied to the traditional Chinese art of Daiqi (Tai Chi). The artistic series *Interactive Adult Toys* provides a method of touching for couples separated by distance. This software offers many choices of settings that can meet the users' own needs.

Xu Bing manipulates language in his art, bringing fresh understandings of the powerful role words play in our lives. Yet many of Xu Bing's innovative works are profoundly tied to traditional Chinese culture.

### CATALOGUE

The Elvehjem will document these installations in a catalogue to be published in late fall or winter 2004. For updated date of delivery and other information, call the Elvehjem Museum Shop 608 263-2240 or e-mail [mussshop@lvm.wisc.edu](mailto:mussshop@lvm.wisc.edu).

### THE ARTIST

Xu Bing is a leading figure in the international art world. His works and installation pieces, including *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (an actual rubbing of the Great Wall done at Jinshanling in 1990) and *Wu Street* (1993), and his ongoing exploration of language have brought worldwide attention to this innovator.

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing, China in 1955 and grew up in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution, in 1975, he was relocated to the countryside for two years, where he saw how language and the written word could be altered and stripped of meaning by political extremists. His forced participation in the revolution led him to question and reexamine all he had known, from the meaning and appearance of Chinese characters to the purpose of the Great Wall of China and the value of art and culture. In 1977 he began studying printmaking at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing and received an MFA 1987.

An accomplished calligrapher, printmaker, and art teacher, Xu Bing turned his simultaneous interest in and suspicion of language into an extended examination of Chinese characters. The result was the *Book from the Sky*, a powerful installation of books, scrolls, and panels for which Xu Bing invented hundreds of new characters in the late 1980s. This uneasy play between the familiar and the unknown—these words without meaning—caused disturbed the Beijing art community and led the Chinese government to censor Xu Bing and his art.

In 1990 he moved to the United States and now lives in Brooklyn, New York. In 1990–91 he presented his first exhibition in the United States at the Elvehjem Museum of Art in Madison, showing *Book from the Sky*, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*—the only time it has been shown in its entirety, and a series of paintings. The works in the 1990–91 exhibition *Three Installations* were all created exclusively as the result of eastern influences. *Book from the Sky* surrounded the Western viewer with thousands of Chinese characters printed in black ink on white paper, suggesting the traditional Chinese scroll format of sutras, or religious texts. Those who didn't read Chinese imagined this must be a profound display of learning, but the text is totally without meaning: all the characters had been transformed slightly from actual Chinese characters.

Over the past dozen years, Xu Bing has emerged as a powerful force in the international art world. His installations have delighted and awed audiences from Beijing to Copenhagen to Sydney. In July 1999 Xu Bing won the MacArthur Award from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in recognition of his "originality, creativity, self-direction, and capacity to contribute importantly to society, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy." In Spring 2002 he had a successful solo show at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, curated by Britta Erickson, who was also curator of his first exhibition at the Elvehjem.

Educational programming for Xu Bing has been coorganized by the Elvehjem Museum and Department of Art History and funded in part by the Anonymous Fund, Center for East Asian Studies, and the International Institute.

### SPONSORS

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20041103164751/http://www.lvm.wisc.edu:80/Exhibitions/PressRelease.asp?PID=83>

The Elvehjem Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison's Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, University Lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, University Lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Elvehjem Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608-263-4421 (voice).

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