Three installations by Xu Bing : November 30, 1991-January 19, 1992.

Xu, Bing, 1955-
Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991

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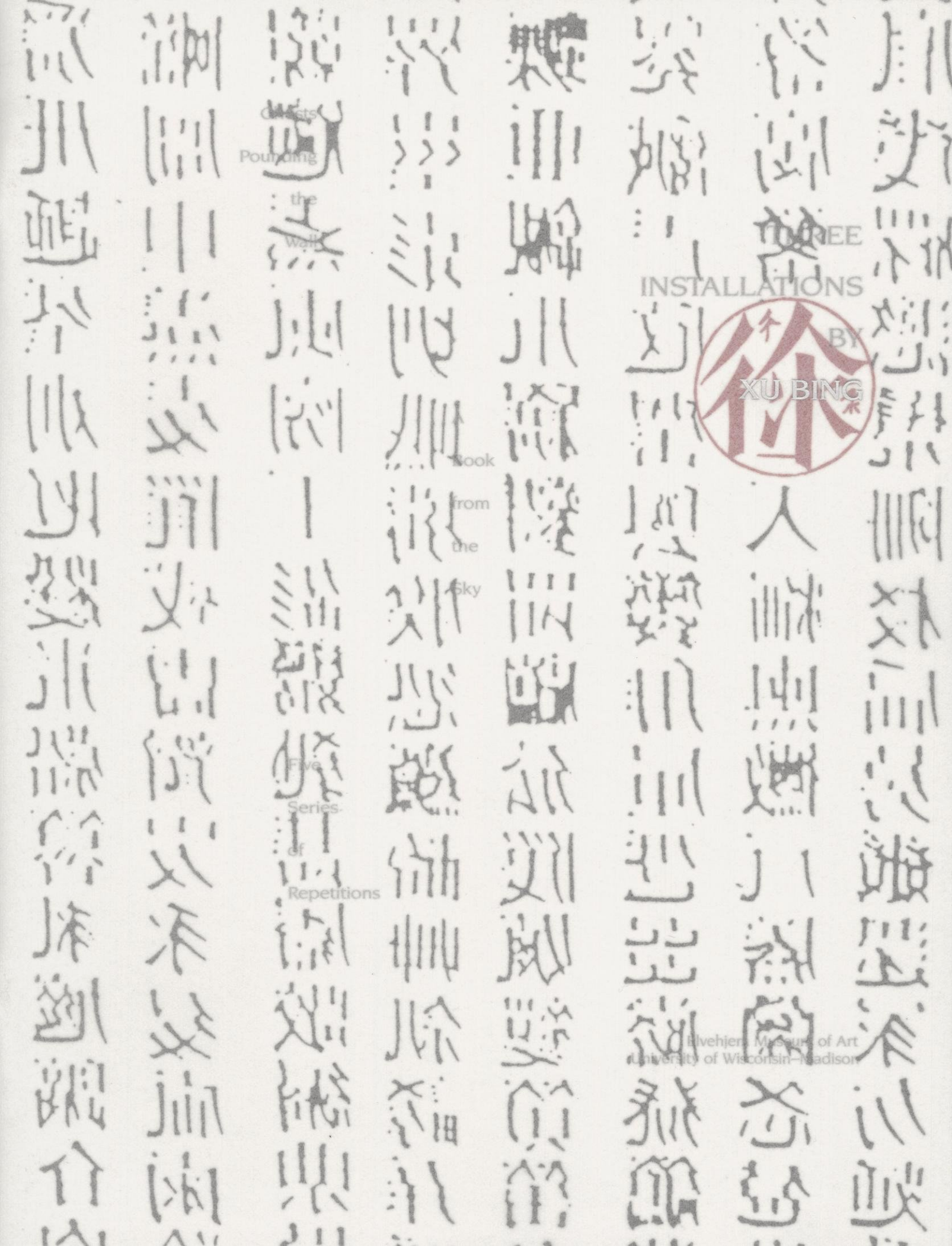
THREE INSTALLATIONS BY XU BING



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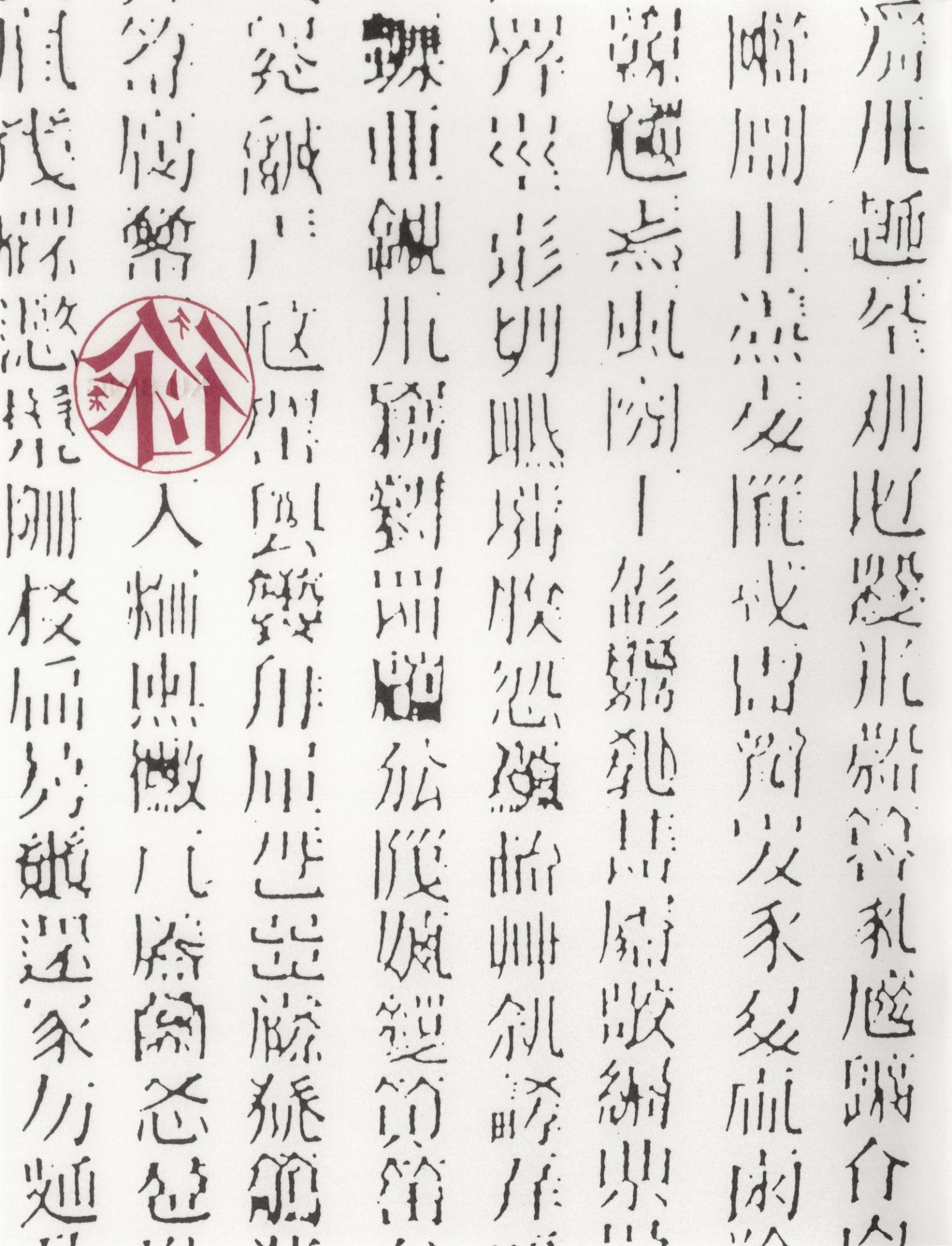

Ghosts

Pounding

the

Wall

THREE INSTALLATIONS BY XU BING

A

Book

from

the

Sky

Five

Series

of

Repetitions

Elvehjem Museum of Art
University of Wisconsin–Madison

THREE INSTALLATIONS BY XU BING

November 30, 1991–January 19, 1992

Russell Panczenko, Curator

"Process and Meaning in the Art of Xu Bing"
by Britta Erickson

Elvehjem Museum of Art
University of Wisconsin–Madison

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FOREWORD

Some exhibitions are conceived after long and careful examination of an idea; others are the result of a fortuitous encounter which leaves one excited and in awe of its possibilities. The three installations by Xu Bing, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, *A Book from the Sky*, and *Five Series of Repetitions* came about in the latter fashion. In the spring of 1989, on the recommendation of Raymond Gloekler, professor in the department of art, I met with Xu Bing and reviewed examples of his custom-designed Chinese calligraphy and photographs of his students precariously perched on bamboo scaffolding doing rubbings of the Great Wall of China. We discussed his ideas on the intellectual parallels between questions of population and the reductive printmaking process. His ideas formed an interesting unity encompassing, as they did, the three aspects of contemporary Chinese culture to which a western audience could relate.

On behalf of the Elvehjem, I wish to acknowledge the many individuals who contributed to the successful installation and documentation of Xu Bing's three works. First of all, I thank Britta Erickson who so graciously provided an expository text for the present catalogue and assisted with labels and docent training. I also extend a special thanks to Yan Ma for her assistance and skill as a translator which made communication possible with Xu Bing during the early stages of the project. Yuanli Ho, a specialist in her field, came from New York City to help Xu Bing back the hundreds of individual rubbings of the Great Wall and to knit them together into an impressive whole. Invaluable assistance with the mounting was also provided by Hong Xu, Sunyu Wang, Dong Han, Shuping Sun, and Rick Hards.

On behalf of the artist, as well as the museum, I wish to thank Mr. Zhuang Yong Jing of the Yi Zhou Company of Hong Kong for his generous donation towards the completion of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* in China. Funding for the Elvehjem exhibition was generously provided by the Anonymous Fund, the Robert B. Doremus Fund, and the Emily Baldwin Bell Bequest.

Several Elvehjem staff members were instrumental in the successful realization of this project. Dale Malner, the museum's preparator, creatively resolved complex technical matters pertaining to the three installations, while Pat Powell efficiently edited the catalogue. Shipping of the works from China and Japan was coordinated by Lindy Waites and Sandy Rogers. The finances and many administrative details of the project were arranged by the museum's assistant director for administration, Corinne Magnoni, with the able assistance of Lori Demeuse. The exhibition catalogue was designed by Tina Yao of University Publications and production was coordinated by Linda Ruth Kietzer. The installation of the three works at the Elvehjem Museum was photographed by Greg Anderson.

Finally, but most important, I wish to acknowledge Xu Bing himself. Without his creativity, vision, and courage there would be no project, and all of us would be that much poorer in our understanding of a distant and complex part of the world.

Russell Panczenko
Director

PROCESS AND MEANING IN THE ART OF XU BING

Xu Bing, now thirty-six years old, was born into a turbulent time for both the individual and the arts in China.[1] The three works constituting this exhibition demonstrate that Xu possesses the ability, the determination, and the courage to forge his own path through the turbulence. *Five Series of Repetitions*, the earliest work, embodies Xu's desire to explore the boundaries of the process of printmaking. With *A Book from the Sky*, he subverts a primary purpose of printing, the spread of knowledge through the printed word; he subverts language itself, thereby undermining the value of culture; and he may be interpreted as making an audaciously subversive political statement, implying that all pronouncements of the Chinese government, except for the unforthcoming call for a changeover to democracy, are totally devoid of meaning. Finally, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* demonstrates Xu's exploration of the extreme limits of the printmaking process, at the same time propounding the meaninglessness of culture and ultimately, of all human effort.

Although these works address modern philosophical questions and are to be judged in terms of contemporary aesthetic criteria, they are enriched greatly through their wealth of references to traditional culture. Xu Bing thus has attained an elusive goal of much of twentieth-century Chinese art, the goal of creating works that embrace international contemporary art while acknowledging ties to traditional Chinese art.

To understand Xu Bing's triumph, we first must understand the vicissitudes of the Chinese artist during the last fifty years.[2] In China artists have faced changing political doctrines which, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, frequently have included constraints on the form and function of art. Artists also have confronted the challenge of Western art, which at times they have perceived as more advanced than Chinese art.

In 1942, the insurgent communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) pronounced that art must serve the masses: "art for art's sake" was bourgeois and elitist. The communists favored cartoons and peasant art along with woodblock prints, which drew successfully on the style of such European artists as Kaethe Kollwitz (1867–1945) to create images of suffering and oppression. Following the triumph of the communists and the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the government severely curtailed freedom of artistic expression throughout China. The artistic style of socialist realism, an import from the Soviet Union, reigned supreme in the 1950s; it employed Western realism to depict rosy-cheeked peasants and factory workers laboring heroically for the communist cause. Artists adapted traditional Chinese paintings, making them relevant to the people through the inclusion of massive government construction projects such as huge dams and electrical power lines.

The government had an impact on artists' lives not only through its demand that artists create works for the masses, employing appropriate styles and techniques, but also through the successive political campaigns that affected everyone in China.[3] Xu Bing, born in 1955, has lived through most of these movements. In the mid 1950s, with the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the government encouraged people to express themselves freely, but then Mao and the Communist Party reversed their stance and punished

those people who expressed opinions contrary to those of the government, including opinions on the role and form of art. They even imprisoned and tortured the most objectionable. The next major drive against liberal thinking came at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, which spanned the decade from 1966 to 1976. Many intellectuals were sent to the countryside to learn correct thinking through labor in the fields; others were demoted to menial labor in the cities, or were beaten, imprisoned, or tortured. Xu Bing's father, as chairman of the history department at Beijing University, was prosecuted with his wife for being "capitalist roaders" (capitalists in positions of authority), and Xu himself was sent with other middle school graduates to the countryside in Hebei outside Beijing to work in the fields. There, Xu occupied his evenings drawing portraits of the peasants with whom he labored during the day.

With the death of Mao in September 1976 and the fall of the Gang of Four shortly thereafter, the Cultural Revolution came to an end. Subsequent political and economic reforms improved people's lives. Xu enrolled at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1977 and was there for the so-called Beijing Spring of 1979–1980, when artists and writers optimistically expressed themselves in a surge of untrammeled creativity. Following the years of suppression, artists experimented with styles outside officially sanctioned guidelines of acceptability, including different styles of Western art, in their search for a new artistic language. The Star Group astonished its audience with its Beijing exhibition which incorporated both works drawing on a pastiche of Western styles and works that expressed pessimism about society and the government. In 1983 and 1984, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign purged "decadent" influences, including such unsanctioned art, as well as pornography and admiration of things from the West.

Xu Bing belongs to the New Wave of Fine Arts movement begun in 1985. From then through the end of 1986, artists and intellectuals again ignored ideological constraints on their work as part of their renewed, broad surge of optimism and creativity. While films, plays, and stories appearing at this time overtly denounced political oppression,[4] Xu finished his Master of Fine Arts project *Five Series of Repetitions* and began work on his subtly subversive A *Book from the Sky*.

In the last two months of 1986 tens of thousands of students throughout China demonstrated for democracy and freedom. A government "anti-bourgeois liberalization" campaign ended the demonstrations early the following year. As part of this campaign, a representative of the National People's Congress reiterated Mao's 1942 pronouncement that art should serve socialism,[5] but the campaign was over soon, in late June. By the time Xu Bing exhibited his A *Book from the Sky* in his October, 1988, show at the prestigious China Art Gallery in Beijing, artists once again were producing works that tested the limits of government tolerance. In February, 1989, the *Contemporary Chinese Art Exhibition*, a privately organized avant-garde art exhibition, which had been several years in planning, opened at the same gallery and drew widespread attention; included in it was A *Book from the Sky*. Authorities closed the show almost immediately on opening day, when a woman fired a gun as part of a piece of forbidden performance art. A few days later the show reopened. Thousands saw it before it was shut down permanently, probably by the Ministry of Culture.

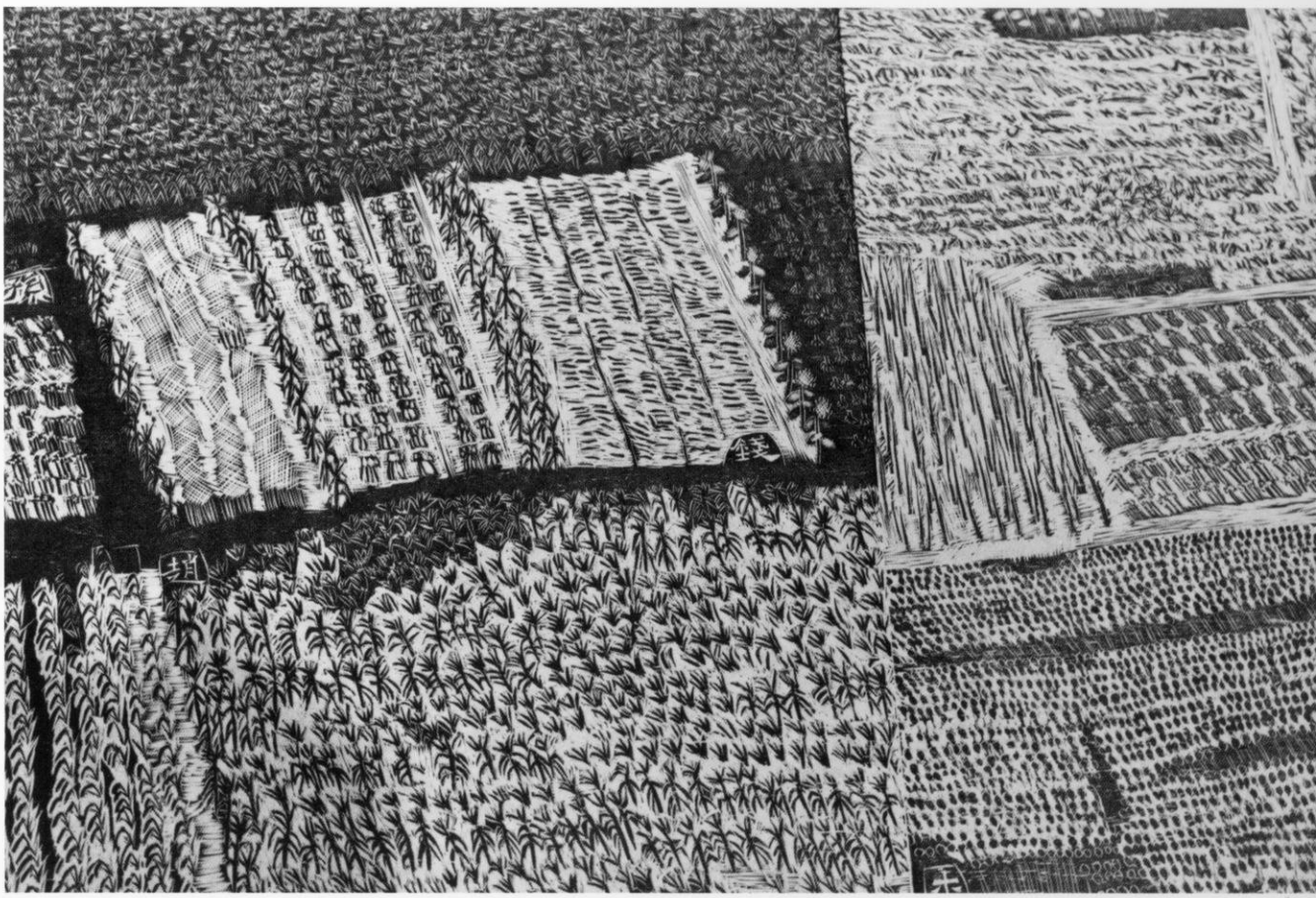
Sketch from Xu Bing's notebooks.

In April of 1989 students again began demonstrating for reform and democracy. By mid–May the demonstrations drew in workers and farmers as well as students, and the demonstrators' numbers swelled to over one million in Beijing alone. Citing a fear of anarchy, conservative Premier Li Peng and President Yang Shangkun enacted martial law. The more moderate Communist Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was forced to resign. On June 4, the People's Liberation Army opened fire on the protesters in Tiananmen Square; estimates of the number killed range from hundreds to thousands.[6] In August, the government confiscated twelve million books, magazines, and videotapes in a effort to destroy any media which contained dissenting views. The *Guangming ribao* (*Guangming* daily) described this as "cleaning out the 'cultural garbage.' "[7] A *Book from the Sky*, which Xu Bing's colleagues, as well as other artists and critics, had praised as the definitive work of the New Wave,[8] was vilified by the government[9] as standing for all the bourgeois liberal tendencies of the movement. In the spring of 1990, Xu left the tense political milieu of Beijing to spend a few weeks at the Great Wall completing the first phase of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, a somewhat more pessimistic work than he previously had created. Later that year Xu came to the United States, at the invitation of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Department of Art, to serve as an honorary fellow. After the Elvehjem Museum had accepted with enthusiasm his proposal for an exhibition, he had *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* shipped over and has completed it for the present exhibition.

FIVE SERIES OF REPETITIONS

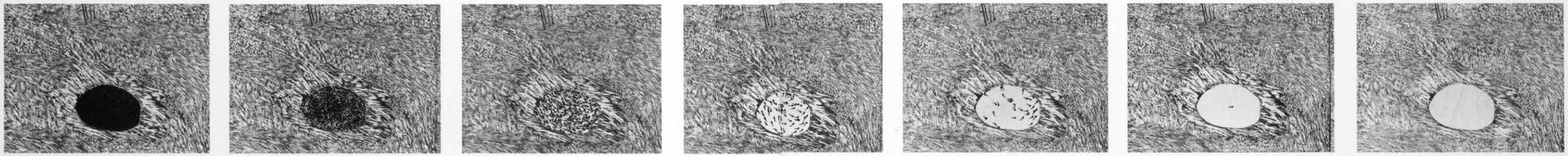
Xu Bing earned his Master of Fine Arts degree from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1987: *Five Series of Repetitions* is the project he completed for his degree and displayed in the MFA graduation exhibition in 1986–1987. This work marks the beginning of Xu's exploration of the process of printmaking; it is designed to record the process which, in woodblock printing, is usually obliterated. Xu preserved the stages of carving the block of wood by printing each stage and mounting the prints successively in a strip. The earliest print in each series is therefore the darkest, printed after only a small amount of the surface of the block of wood was carved away. After extensive carving, the final, minimal image is reached. The final image is thus gradually revealed, but the formative stages are visually satisfying in themselves.

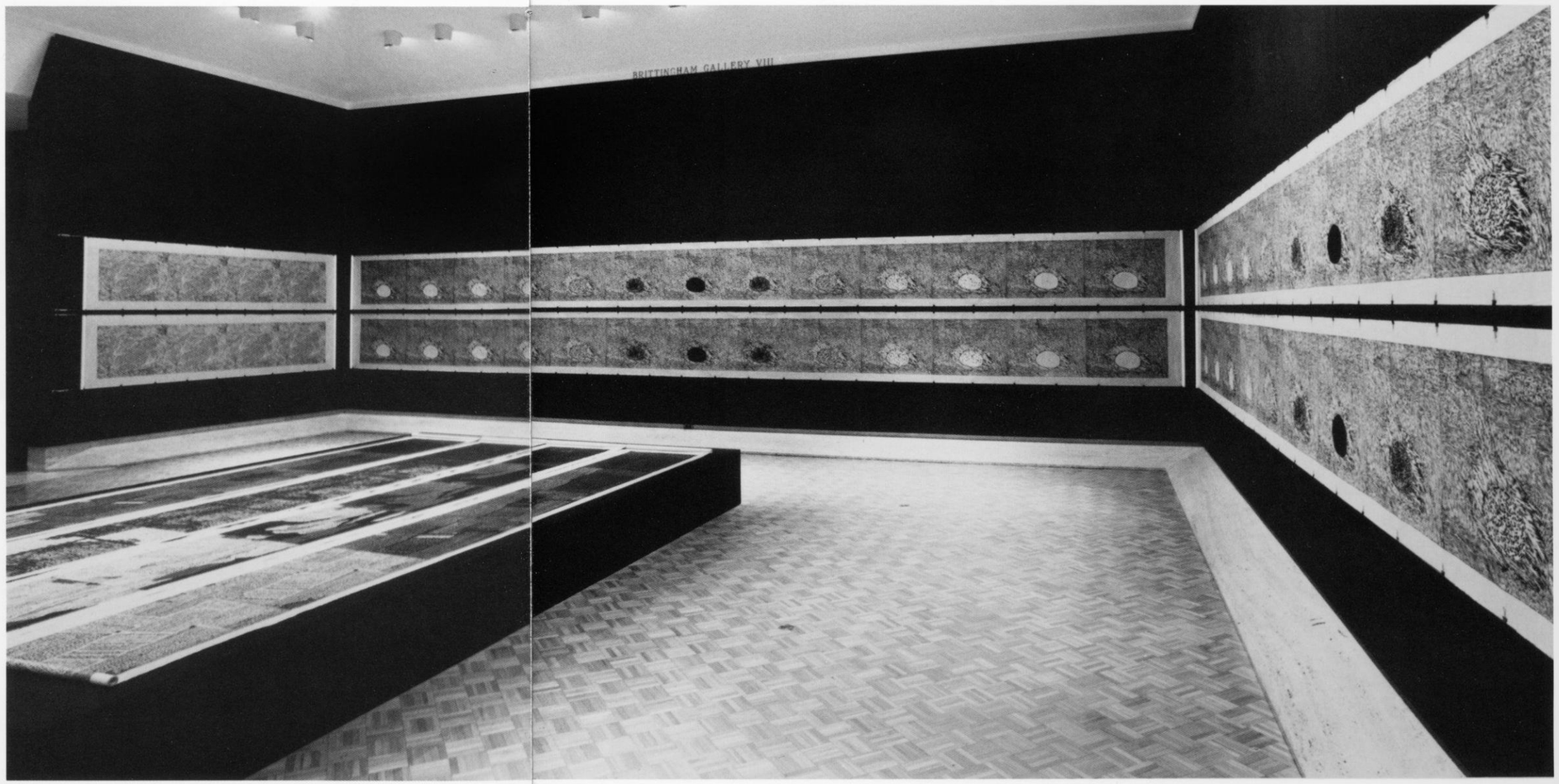
In *Five Series of Repetitions*, Xu depicted subjects reminiscent of his youth on the farms of Hebei. Despite his being sent there during the Cultural Revolution to labor in the fields, Xu thought of the countryside fondly and depicted ponds of tadpoles and fields of vegetables and grains in his prints. Most of these prints encourage the eye to roam evenly throughout by eschewing a central focus; this lack of focus and the overall density of the image are echoed in both *A Book from the Sky* and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*. All three works also share the rich quality of unrelieved, dense, black ink.



Five Series of Repetitions

This is the project which earned Xu Bing his Master of Fine Arts degree from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1987. Each series of prints is composed of images drawn from the same block of wood, printed successively as more and more of the block was carved away. The purpose of this project was to create a record of the printing process, a process which usually is obliterated in woodblock printing. The subjects depicted in the prints, ponds of tadpoles and fields of vegetables and grains remind the artist of his youth spent in the fields of Hebei.




BRITTINGHAM GALLERY VIII

A BOOK FROM THE SKY

> The October 1988 *Exhibition of Prints by Xu Bing* [in which A *Book from the Sky* was exhibited] shook artistic circles . . . You could say the *Exhibition of Prints by Xu Bing* is the outward sign of the real emergence of Chinese modernism . . . It . . . is the turning point of New Wave art. (Chen Weihe, researcher, Research Institute of Chinese Arts, Beijing)[10]

> Xu Bing's new work [A *Book from the Sky*] should be seen as one of the most important modern works of art of the "New Wave of Fine Arts" since 1985. (Yin Ji'nan, assistant professor, Central Academy of Fine Arts).[11]

Xu Bing's A *Book from the Sky* profoundly affected all levels of the Beijing art world. Its installation as the sole work in the show, *Exhibition of Prints by Xu Bing*, at the China Art Gallery in Beijing in October, 1988, and its subsequent display as part of the avant-garde *Contemporary Chinese Art Exhibition* which opened at the same venue in February, 1989, inspired numerous essays in newspapers and fine-arts journals,[12] as well as a discussion session organized by the Central Academy of Fine Arts.[13] A *Book from the Sky* was hailed as the definitive work of the New Wave and as a sign that artists could, indeed, find a valid means of expressing themselves in a new China, a means which even could be construed as participating in a world art.

The effectiveness of A *Book from the Sky* is due to its visual impact, its fineness of execution, and, most of all, its reliance on traditional forms to express profound contemporary ideas. A *Book from the Sky*, installed as it was at the China Art Gallery, or as it is now in the Elvehjem Museum of Art, surrounds the viewer. The somber orderliness of thousands of characters printed in black ink on white paper enshrouds the room, masking the walls, draping down from the ceiling, and

Blocks for A *Book from the Sky* are locked up in the chase (frame) to be printed.

covering part of the floor. It is a very formal arrangement. The prints on the floor are bound together in the form of traditional Chinese books, following traditional proportions and employing the indigo covers and string binding with which Chinese books have been bound for centuries. The prints draped from the ceiling follow the more ancient scroll format of sutras, or religious texts. On the walls, the prints recall the newspapers which in China are pasted on walls daily for the public to read.

The printed word in all its forms has been the foundation of Chinese culture for centuries. However, the reliability of the printed word and the ostensibly calming orderliness of A *Book from the Sky* both are belied by the true meaning of this work. None of the characters is a real Chinese character: all are the inventions of Xu Bing, disturbing (to the Chinese) in their unintelligible familiarity. Stories circulated of people spending hours, even days, at the Beijing exhibitions searching in vain for a readable character.[14] A *Book from the Sky* frustrates the viewer's inescapable urge to decode the written word, and this frustrated act of viewing ties the viewer in with the work, making his passage through it a part of the work of art. Once the viewer can let go of the urge to read, the urge to act upon the work of art, then he can accept and appreciate its beauty. This favoring of the passive over the active reflects Xu's Zen philosophy.

The viewer who does not read Chinese is free to absorb the work's beauty without having to confront its unintelligibility. The frustration experienced by the Chinese audience can be appreciated, however, by turning to the small portion of the installation comprising a book of words made up from jumbled letters from the Roman alphabet—the letters are real, but the words are not.

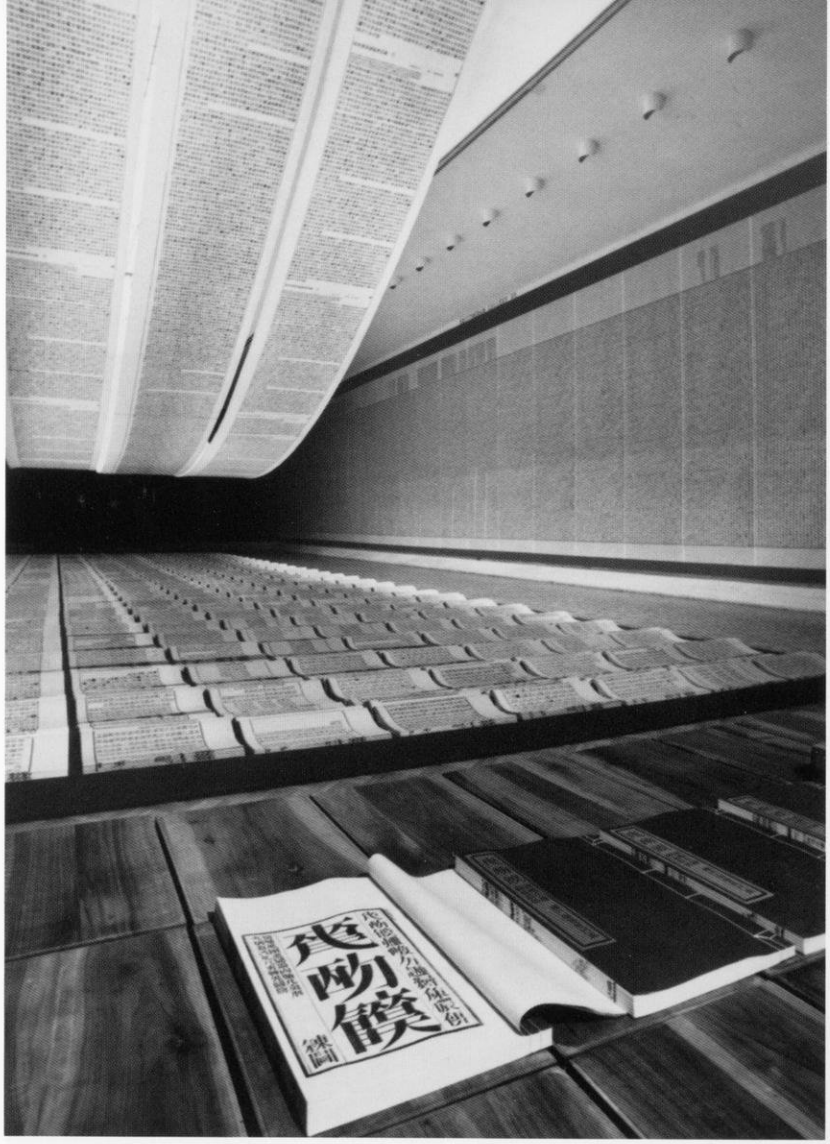
Although reviews[15] describe A *Book from the Sky* as being made up solely of unrecognizable characters, there are actually ten. Xu believed it important to number the volumes and pages in an intelligible fashion and therefore made use of the ten characters that represent the numbers from one to ten and that are used in casual voting. To alter these characters slightly, he inscribed each one within a square: this transformed them into false, but nevertheless understandable characters. The voting numbers are used in casting votes in small-scale elections, such as an election of a factory representative, and are not employed in any other context—there is a different set of Chinese characters for everyday counting. One interpretation of Xu's use of the voting characters as the only intelligible characters in A *Book from the Sky* would be that all is meaningless, except for the opportunity to vote. The Chinese government may make whatever lengthy pronouncements it wishes, but only an announcement that democracy would be enacted would have any meaning: all else is excess verbiage. Xu denies that this is his intended meaning, but admits that it is a possible interpretation. It would be an audacious statement for an artist to make, but it is entirely in keeping with the general desire for democracy expressed by the young intelligentsia during the later 1980s. Such a reading of A *Book from the Sky* has not been discussed in the Chinese media.

Even without the latter interpretation, many Chinese found it difficult to assimilate A *Book From the Sky*'s message of negativism and pessimism. Denying the meaning of Chinese culture by deconstructing the written word has political overtones in itself. It echoes young Chinese intellectuals' frustration with a system of culture tightly constrained by the authorities and questions the validity of a civilization that could produce such a situation. The undermining of cultural symbols and values also can be extended to condemn world culture and, by implication, all human activity.

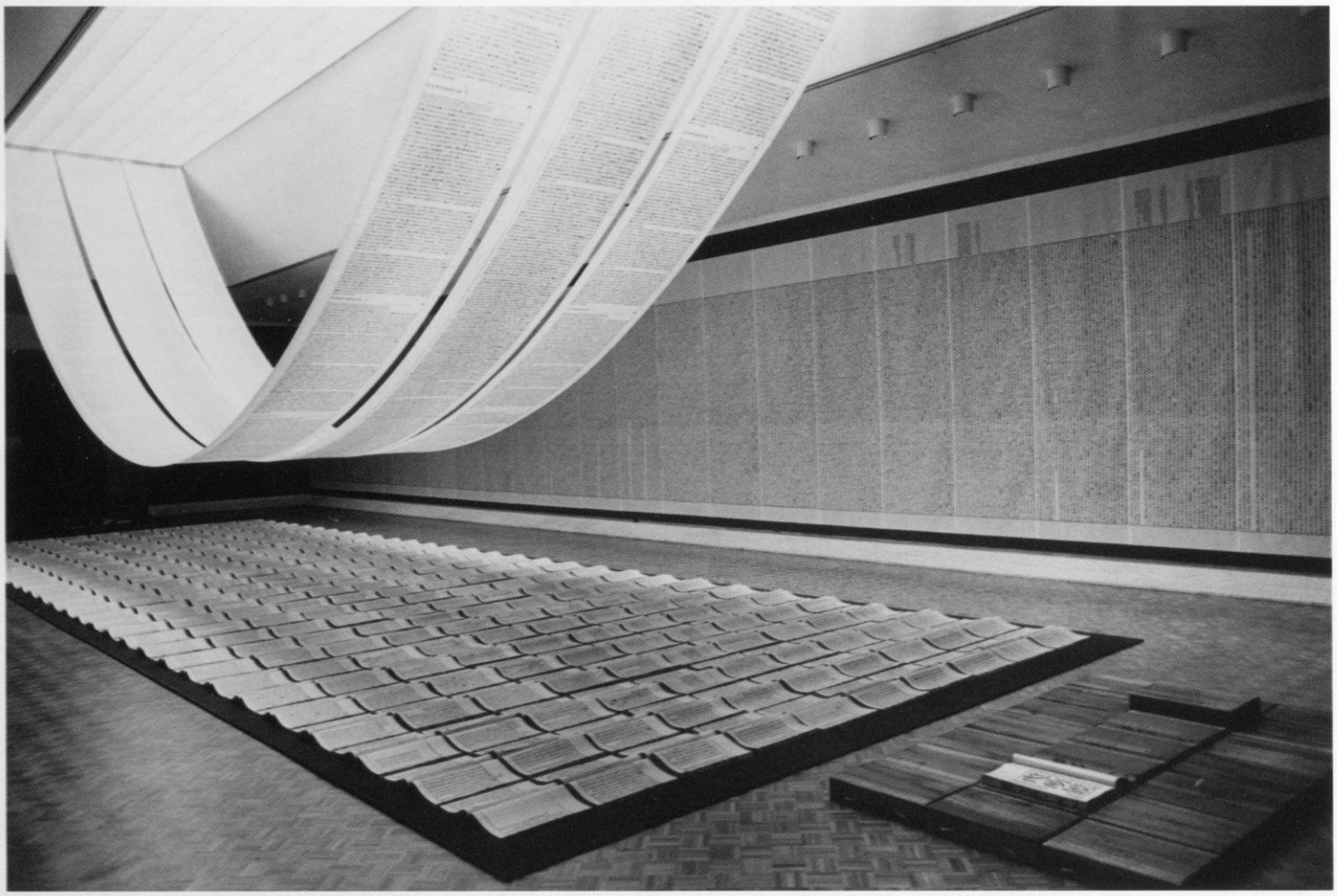
Xu Bing views A *Book from the Sky* at the Elvehjem.

Chinese characters Xu designed for numbers 1 through 4.

Bound volumes of A *Book from the Sky* follow the format of traditional Chinese books, from the title and page number on the folded outer edge of each page to the marginal commentary.



The effort Xu expended to create this supposedly meaningless work of art reflects the notion of the meaninglessness of all human activity: as with Xu's other works the process of creating the work must be considered along with the work itself and is, in fact, a part of the work. Xu spent three years designing and carving the characters and having the books and scrolls printed and bound or mounted. The year he spent carving was a year of isolated contemplation which Xu found relaxing. In his determination to produce characters as like real characters as possible, Xu systematically took one genuine radical (a component of a character) at a time and combined it with other genuine character components to produce thousands of new characters. He eliminated all but those that seemed the closest to real characters and then carved them in reverse on blocks of pear wood, to be typeset and printed in the traditional manner. He claims to have carved about four thousand, approximately the same number as there are frequently used genuine characters. The bound books are laid out in the traditional format, with an index at the front referring to the numbered pages of the main text (using the voting numbers), and commentary inscribed in the margins. There is even a glossary giving definitions of the invented characters using other invented characters. A private printing house in Beijing printed and bound the books, and a village in Hebei built wooden boxes to house the sets of four volumes, as traditionally was done with important sets of books in China. The painstaking devotion to detail serves to highlight the ultimate impossibility of decoding the books.



A *Book from the Sky*

Xu Bing spent three years carving the four thousand different characters into blocks of wood; he had the books and scrolls printed and bound or mounted. The books on the floor follow a format which has been employed for centuries in China, and the scrolls draped from the ceiling copy the ancient scroll format of sutras, or religious texts. Text on the walls refers to newspapers which, in China, are pasted on notice boards and walls for the public to read.

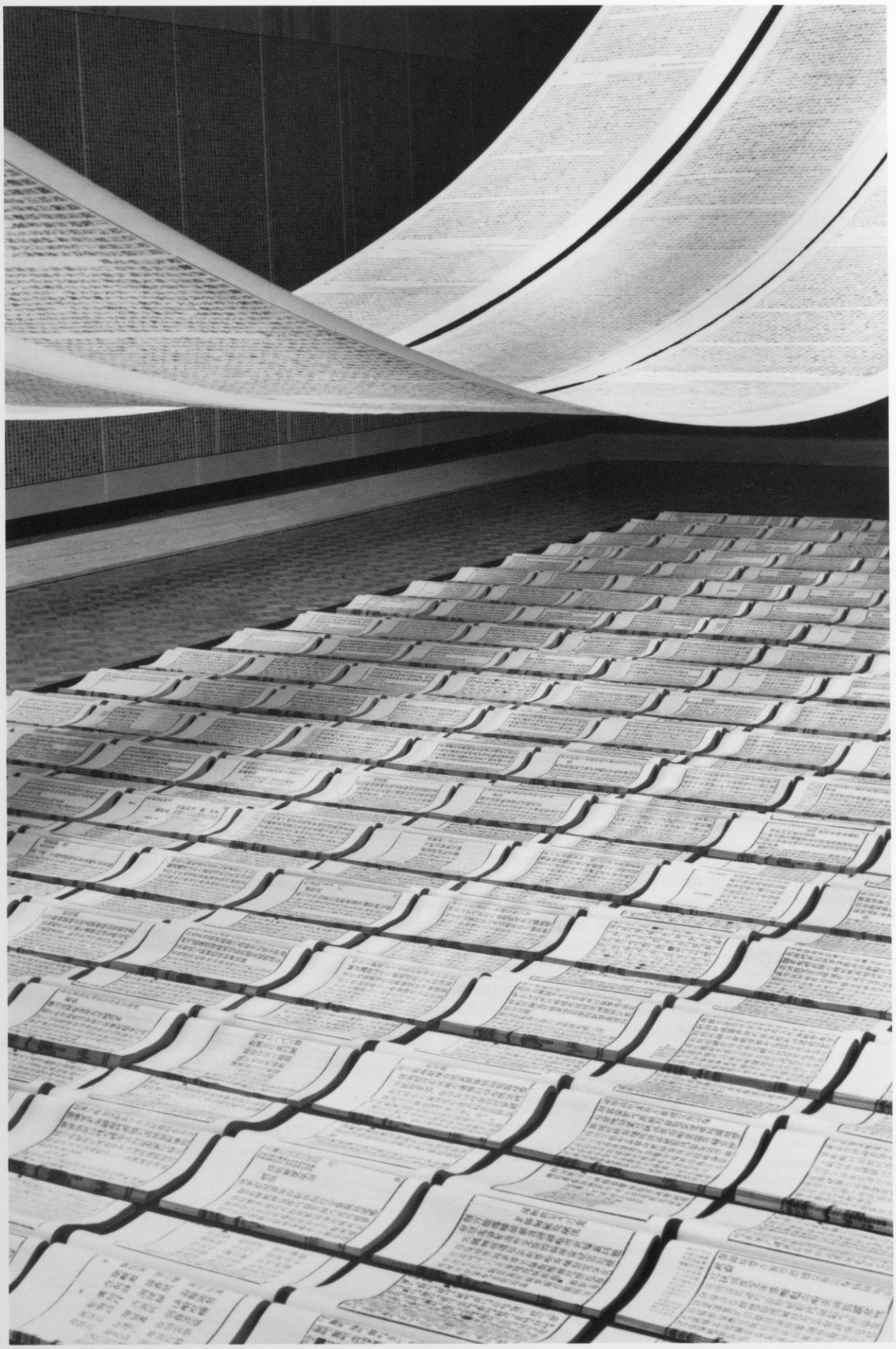
As a conceptual extension of A *Book from the Sky*, Xu proposes to have it printed as a regular paperback book by an established Chinese publisher, with all the trappings of an ordinary book, including an ISBN number. In this way, A *Book from the Sky* would find its way into libraries under the guise of the ordinary and would confound a wide audience which would not otherwise be exposed to such avant-garde ideas. Mass reproduction of A *Book from the Sky* would denigrate it, thus blurring the boundaries of "high art."

Xu originally entitled A *Book from the Sky*, *The Mirror of the World—An Analyzed Reflection of the End of this Century* (*Xi shi jian—shiji mo zhuan*) or, literally, *An Analyzed Reflection of the World—The Final Volume of the Century*. An alternative translation would be *An Analyzed Warning to the World*. The latter title emphasizes Xu's pessimism regarding the direction of twentieth-century mankind and of twentieth century Chinese society in particular. A *Book from the Sky* (*Tian shu*), which also can be translated as "A Book from Heaven" or "Heavenly Book," implies that the book is otherworldly, perhaps existing on earth to help man come to terms with the meaninglessness of existence, forcing the viewer towards profound thought by confounding more pedestrian thought patterns.

The qualities for which A *Book from the Sky* was lauded were eventually the cause of its vilification by the authorities. As part of the reversal of the temporary freedom of expression in China, just two days before the massacre in Tiananmen Square, the following was published in *Wenyi bao* (*Wenyi* newspaper), an agent of the Ministry of Culture:

> . . . I always have felt that when people do something, they cannot follow their subjective desires alone without taking objective laws into consideration. I always have felt that when people do something they must have a clear goal, for themselves, for others, for the people, for all mankind—to have no purpose at all is absurd and dissolute. If I am asked to evaluate A *Book from the Sky*, I can only say that it gathers together the formalistic, abstract, subjective, irrational, anti-art, anti-traditional . . . qualities of the New Wave of Fine Arts, and pushes the Chinese New Wave towards a ridiculous impasse. I am reminded of a Chinese idiom, "ghosts pounding the wall." In the past a traveler was walking in the midst of a dark night. When he lost his sense of direction and lost all reference points upon which he could rely to judge where he was, he spent the rest of the night walking in circles in the same spot. It was as if a ghost had built an invisible wall, making it impossible for [the traveler] to leave its confines. Can't we say that [A *Book from the Sky*] as well as the above-mentioned "non-expressive art" is the phenomenon of "ghosts pounding the wall" in human thinking, activity, and artistic creativity?
>
> Even though the above introduction to the creative production of the Chinese New Wave of Fine Arts is certainly far from comprehensive, still, this sketchy description brings to me a deep understanding that the essence of the Chinese New Wave of Fine Arts is to oppose the laws of art and to oppose society.[16]

Yang Chengyin, the author of the above text, thus condemned A *Book from the Sky* and other New Wave works of art; coined a new term, "ghosts-pounding-the-wall art"; and inspired Xu Bing to return to an old project and entitle it *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.



Although A *Book from the Sky* takes its form from traditional Chinese culture, its message relegates it to the realm of the avant-garde. All of the characters in this work were invented, as deviations from actual Chinese characters, by Xu Bing. By deconstructing the written word, Xu is denying the value of culture, in particular Chinese culture. Xu's expenditure of three years of painstaking labor to create meaningless text also implies the futility of all human endeavor.

GHOSTS POUNDING THE WALL

With *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, Xu Bing extends his exploration of the nature of printmaking and continues his questioning of cultural values and the validity of human endeavor. He frames these explorations and questionings in terms of a massive installation piece, composed of rubbings of a section of the Great Wall and one of its towers, arrayed so as to cover the walls of the Elvehjem Museum's Paige Court and draped from the ceiling at one end to the floor at the other, punctuated by a mound of dirt where the draped section meets the floor. This work is designed to overwhelm its audience through its sheer size, the amount of human effort it embodies, and the unrelenting darkness of the rich black ink rising up on all sides.

Although Xu completed the rubbings of which *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* is comprised in 1990, the concept originated during the period when Xu was a graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, developing projects that expressed his interest in the nature of printmaking. One aspect of this interest was a desire to demonstrate the actual process of printmaking: *Five Series of Repetitions* grew out of this. Another aspect was an urge to extend the boundaries of the medium by actualizing the belief that the surface from which a print is taken need be limited only by technical requirements that it be sufficiently flat or regular; *The Big Wheel* (1986), a print Xu and some of his colleagues took from a truck tire, is a product of this urge. Pushing the boundaries of printmaking even farther, in 1986 Xu took a rubbing from a small section of the Great Wall, exhibiting it in 1987. The project then lay largely dormant until 1990, when Xu felt it both feasible and timely to continue and enlarge on it. It would not have been practical for Xu, as a graduate student in 1986, to organize a project on the scale of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, but in 1990, as a lecturer in the Department of Printmaking at the Central Academy, it was. More

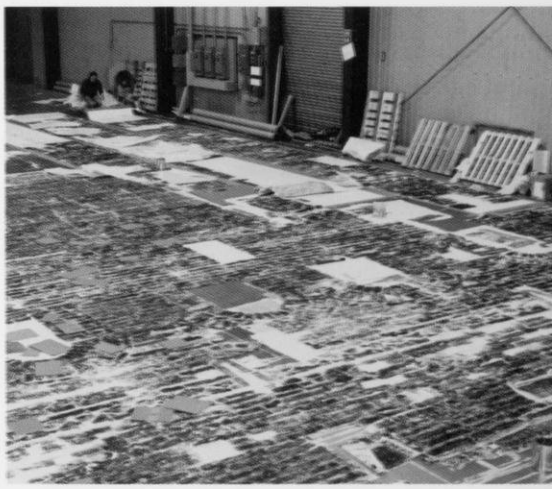
Xu and Ho Yuanli, a professional mounter, repair and mount the Great Wall rubbings in a warehouse in Madison.

important, however, was the fact that by then, Xu had developed the fatalistic philosophy expressed in his A *Book from the Sky* and found that this philosophy meshed with the creation of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*. Furthermore, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* would stand as a grand mockery of those who so recently had formulated the taunting designation, "ghosts-pounding-the-wall art," for his work.

A *Book from the Sky* resulted from years of intense, focused, perfectionistic, and yet unappreciated labor performed by one man alone in a small room, intent on producing a superficially meaningless book. The rubbings for *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, also created through a seemingly senseless expenditure of labor, were completed in just one month by a group of people exposed to the open air and to the occasional scrutiny of reporters. The two works' modes of production thus stand in stark contrast to one another, the former being closed and introspective, the latter open and exposed. As a pivotal point between the two stands the period of national and international attention occasioned by the fame and notoriety of A *Book from the Sky*. With the eyes of the Chinese art world focused upon him, Xu could not have retreated again to a private world of concentration, such as surrounded A *Book from the Sky*, even had he wanted to. Instead, the grand gesture of taking a rubbing from the Great Wall was open for all to see, yet physically distanced from the center of criticism in Beijing.

Xu was careful to emphasize the process of making the print of the Great Wall, intending the process to constitute a part of the work of art. To this end, he recorded it through films, videos, and photographs; privileged it through the creation of special uniforms printed with characters from A *Book from the Sky* to be worn by those taking the rubbing; and documented it through the preservation of such paperwork as his working notes and invoices for materials used. Xu originally planned to exhibit these items along with the rubbing itself, thereby ensuring that the process of creation would be considered as an aspect of the final work of art.

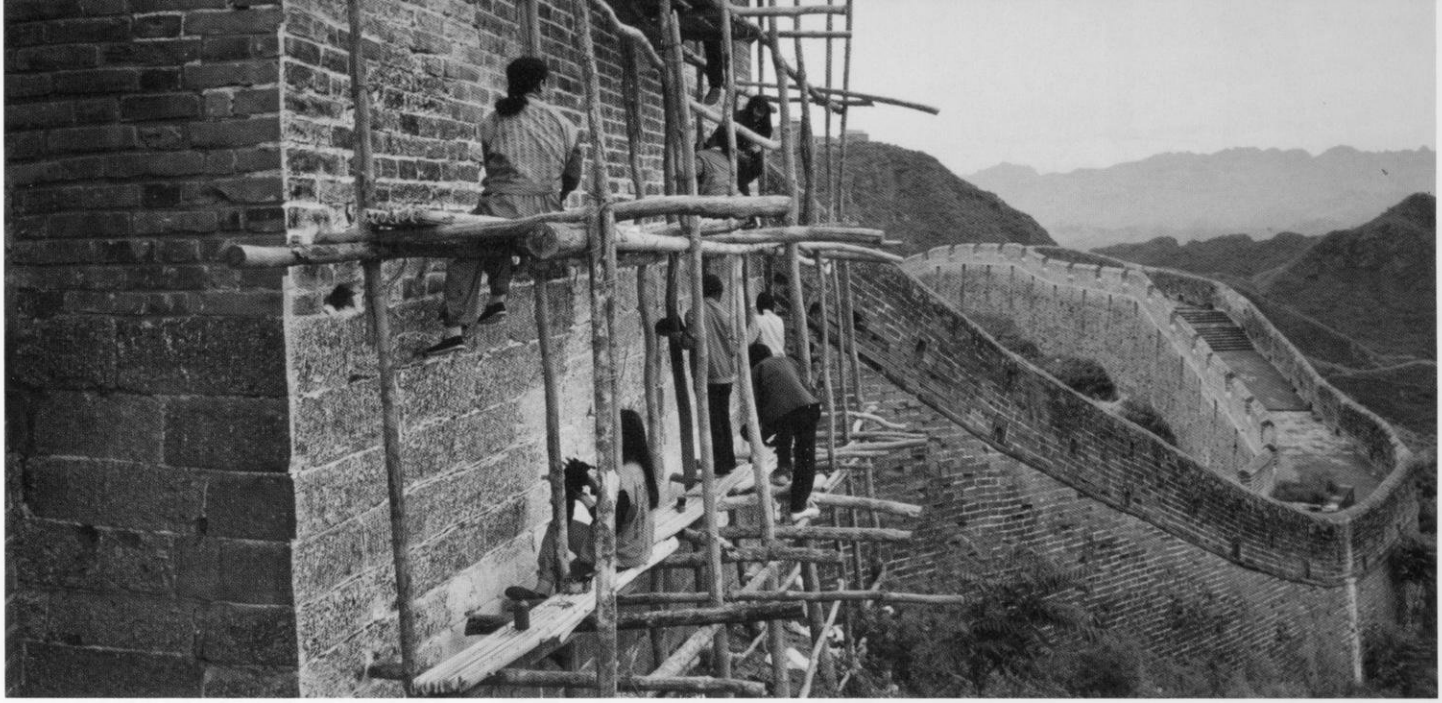
"I hope that this [project] will produce a meaningless result achieved through the expenditure of great effort. For me, this [experience] will bring about a rarefied plane of thought,"[17] Xu explained as he worked on the Great Wall. Leaving aside the question of whether the final work of art is truly meaningless, there certainly can be no doubt but that an extraordinary amount of effort was expended on the rubbing. For twenty-four days during the spring of 1990, from May 18 until June 10, Xu and his crew labored on the Great Wall. At first the crew consisted of seven art students; later, when it became obvious that more help was needed, they recruited eight local peasants. From seven in the morning until sunset at eight or nine, they labored at the wall, breaking only for lunch. Those rubbing the sides of the wall and of the tower perched on wooden scaffolds, in places reaching forty to forty-five feet off the ground. A large sheet of paper was held to the wall, and an absorptive pad damp with ink was patted over the paper, leaving an impression of the wall's uneven surface. The amount of materials consumed in the rubbing process bears witness to the scale of the work involved: three-hundred bottles of ink and thirteen-hundred sheets of paper were used. Rubbing the wall was such strenuous work that, when they finally finished, one member of the crew observed that it was like being released from prison.[18]



Having completed the rubbing, Xu still had to mount it, another major time-consuming task. The rubbing has been mounted with the same materials and techniques used in mounting a traditional Chinese painting or the prints in *Five Series of Repetitions*, using a paste of flour to adhere the extremely thin paper of the rubbing itself to a backing of stronger paper. The difficulty of this task was threefold. First, the sheer scale was daunting. Xu, helped part of the time by various other people, spent four months on the mounting, often working from ten in the morning until nine or ten at night, breaking only for lunch and dinner. The process consumed an additional seven-thousand sheets of paper. The size of the segments as finally mounted required that a warehouse in Madison be rented as a site for the work. The second problem, also connected with scale, was that the thirteen-hundred sheets of paper constituting the rubbing had to be mounted together in perfect order, so that they would form an accurate impression of the section of the Great Wall. This was accomplished through reference to very careful diagrams detailing the order of the segments, all of which had been numbered carefully at the Wall as the rubbing was completed. Third, because the Great Wall had an unusually rough surface for the subject of a rubbing, most of paper segments bore small tears which had to be repaired during the mounting. As people had patted the ink pads onto the paper during the act of rubbing, the roughly shaped bricks had bitten into and torn the paper already weakened by the moisture of the ink. Thus, just as A *Book from the Sky* involved a second, technical step—the printing and binding of the books—so, too, did *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*—the mounting of the rubbings. The third and final step was, of course, installing the rubbings and the pile of dirt.

Xu undoubtedly achieved the desired expenditure of great effort, but whether *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* is as meaningless as the artist avows is, of course, questionable. On some levels it may be, but on others, it is redolent with meaning. Like A *Book from the Sky*, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* employs a traditional Chinese medium to raise questions concerning the value of culture. While Xu adhered rigorously to traditional standards of book production in the former, however, with *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* he strayed far from traditional tenets of the art of rubbing in his choice of object, the unrefined surface of the Great Wall.

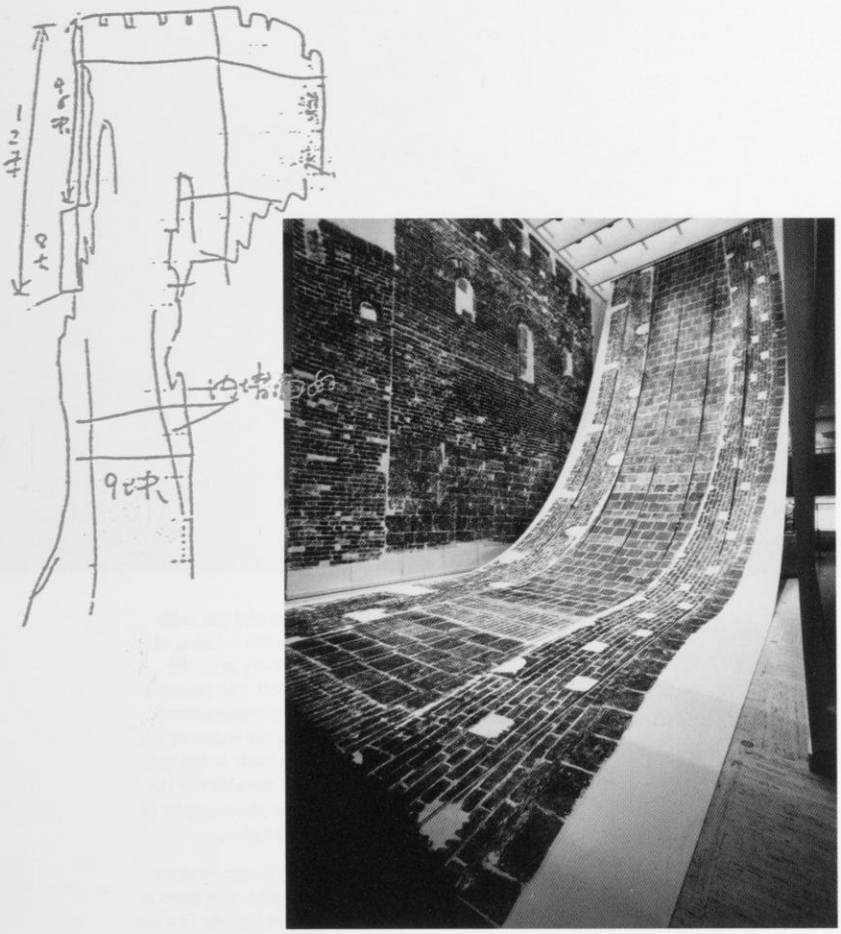
Rubbings usually are taken from stones engraved with text, sometimes many centuries old; these rubbings form the basis for a study of ancient styles of



calligraphy. A less common form of rubbings, those taken by scholars of antiquities, particularly from ritual bronzes thousands of years old, is related more closely to Xu's *Wall*, in that they both record the appearance of a three-dimensional object. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rubbings of ancient bronzes occasionally were elevated from antiquarianism to the realm of art, through their integration into paintings of still-life arrangements: for example a rubbing of a bronze vase would be combined with a painted bunch of flowers. Xu has constituted a rubbing of the Great Wall as art, an act that would have been unthinkable in traditional terms because the Great Wall itself is an unrefined object, the product of common laborers. Furthermore, with traditional rubbings, the skill of the person taking the rubbing is apparent to connoisseurs in the evenness of the ink application, but with *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, those doing the rubbing did not have specialized training in this skill and, indeed, it would have been wasted on such a crude surface.

Students and peasants work on the rubbing of the walkway atop the Great Wall. The fenestrations and crenellations flanking the walkway are clearly visible in the rubbings of the sides of the wall. See photographs of the installation.

Xu Bing designed vests printed with text from *A Book from the Sky* as a uniform to be worn by those working on the rubbing for *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*.



Ghosts Pounding the Wall

Xu Bing has filled Paige Court with a rubbing he took from a sixteenth-century section of the Great Wall of China at Jinshanling. Rubbings of sides of the section of the Wall and one of its towers cover the walls, and a rubbing of the walkway atop the Wall drapes down from the ceiling. A pile of dirt, reminiscent of Chinese burial mounds, anchors the walkway rubbing to the floor.

There is one historical precedent for Xu's use of a wall's unevenness as a starting place for the creation of a work of art. According to Shen Gua (1031–1095), Song Di (eleventh century) once explained:

> You should first look for a damaged wall and then stretch plain silk against it. Gaze at it day and night. When you have looked for a sufficient length of time, you will see through the silk the high and low parts, or curves and angles, on the surface of the wall, which will take on the appearance of landscape . . . Once [the images] are complete in your eyes, then follow your imagination to command your brush.[19]

Shen Gua's theories were unusual for his time, however, and even he did not advocate presenting the unaltered contours of the wall's surface as art, as Xu has done.

The pile of dirt anchoring the suspended rubbing of the Great Wall's walkway to the floor of the exhibition hall is intended as a reference to the outdoors, to heighten the claustrophobic sense occasioned by the rubbings' representation of a massive outdoor object brought indoors. It also refers to Chinese culture: its shape is similar to that of traditional and ancient burial mounds, and its substance is a reminder of the ancient technique of pounded earth walls. A rock atop the pile of dirt holds down a folded unmounted section of the Great Wall rubbing, mimicking the paper spirit money placed on graves in China, weighted by a rock.

Like such Christo (b. 1935) projects as the wrapping of the Pont Neuf in Paris (1985) *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* draws attention to a landmark generally taken for granted. Both installations emphasize the physical beauty of their subjects, as well as compelling their audiences to consider the subjects' functions. Xu Bing chose to rub a section of the Great Wall at Jin-

shanling, seventy-five miles northeast of Beijing, because although it is almost four-hundred-years old, it is in good condition and is unmarred by recent restoration. In function, the Great Wall itself can be considered an example of "ghosts pounding the wall." Xu cites Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), describing the Great Wall as the product of conservative minds, intent on the impossible goal of closing China off from the world as if in a giant garden: although the wall was strong and was guarded by many soldiers, the nature of humankind rendered its purpose futile.[20] From this point of view, the Great Wall unintentionally represents the meaninglessness of human endeavor on an unequaled scale—it is the largest construction ever built and was worked on intermittently for about two-thousand years. *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* deliberately embodies this meaninglessness. Xu Bing claims to believe that human actions are inescapably futile, and yet the deliberation of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* lifts it above the realm of everyday existence.

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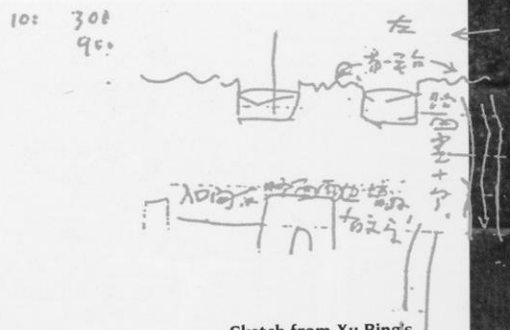
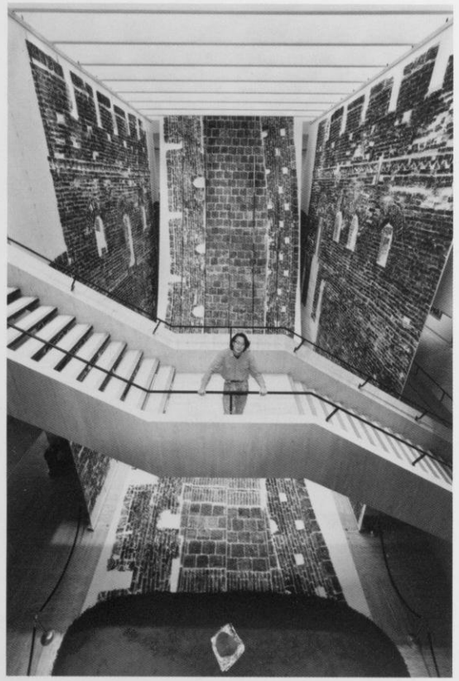


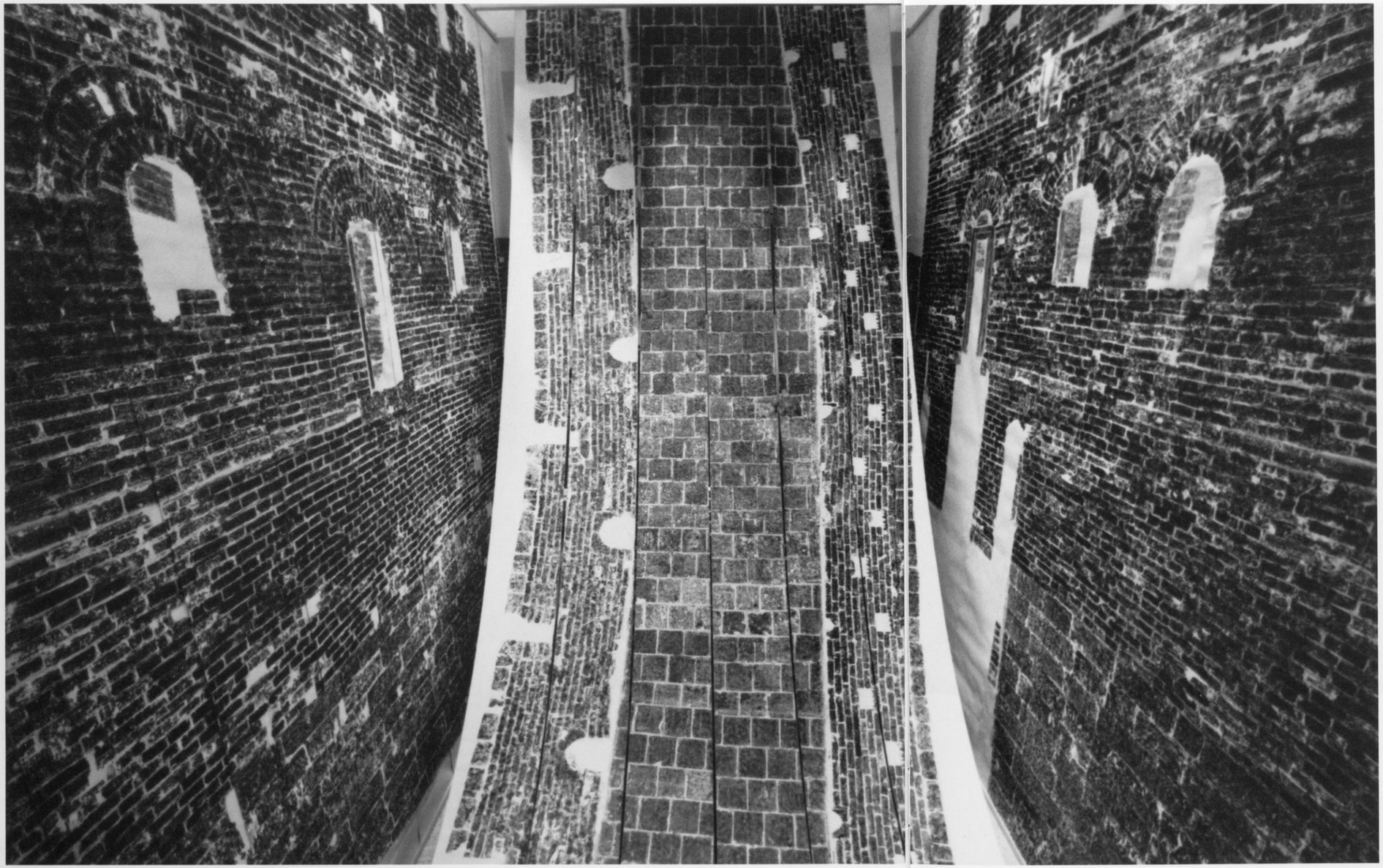
Sketch from Xu Bing's notebooks.

Wooden scaffolding supports the students rubbing the tower, sometimes forty to forty-five feet off the ground. Local people thought the rubbing was a ridiculous idea.

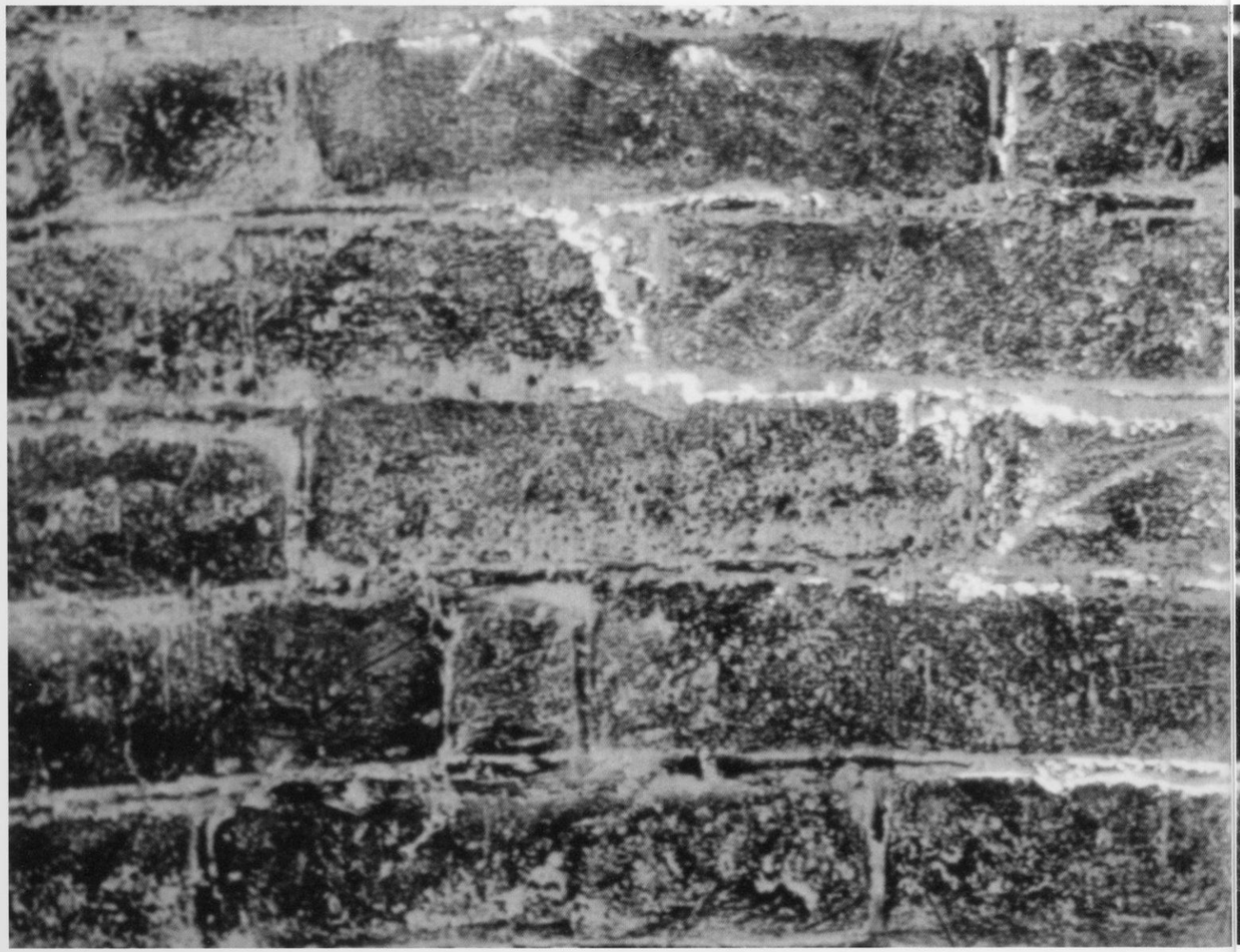


Xu took the title of this work from the term "ghosts pounding the wall art" which Chinese officials used to condemn A *Book from the Sky*. Like A *Book from the Sky*, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* is intended to reflect the futility of human effort and the meaninglessness of China's cultural icons. Both *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* and the Great Wall itself are products of extended human labor, and both, according to Xu Bing, are ultimately meaningless—the Great Wall never could be successful in its goal of keeping China isolated from the rest of the world.

Ghosts Pounding the Wall



With *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, Xu continues his exploration of the possibilities of printmaking, begun earlier in his *Five Series of Repetitions*. Xu's choice of the Great Wall's crude surface as the subject of a rubbing was unorthodox; the art of rubbing previously had been reserved for calligraphic engravings and ancient bronzes. The size of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* also is highly unusual for a print. Xu, assisted by art students and workers, spent three-and-a-half weeks taking the rubbing from the Wall. Mounting the rubbing onto a strong backing paper required another four months and was done in Madison expressly for this installation in the Elvehjem Museum.



A section of the Great Wall with a doorway has the thin paper affixed to its surface.

ENDNOTES

1. "Xu" is Xu Bing's surname; "Bing" is his given name. Throughout this essay, Chinese names have been represented in the Chinese manner, surname first.

2. For more information on Chinese art during the second half of the twentieth century, see the following: Arnold Chang, *Painting in the People's Republic of China* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980); Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting*, 1949–1986 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987); Maysching Kao, ed., *Twentieth-Century Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1959; new edition to be published soon: Berkeley: University of California Press).

3. For an outline of political and economic campaigns in the People's Republic of China, particularly during the last decade, I have referred to The Associated Press, *China from the Long March to Tiananmen Square* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990).

4. For example, Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman*, and the play WM. See Associated Press, 218.

5. Associated Press, 228–29.

6. The official government figure was below three hundred. Associated Press, 304.

7. Quoted in Associated Press, 313.

8. For example, see Chen Weihe, "*Lun Xu Bing ji qi 'Tian shu'*" (Discussing Xu Bing and his A *Book from the Sky*), *Zhishi fenzi* (Intellectuals), no. 1 (1990): 81; and Yin Ji'nan, *Xu Bing banhua zhan* (Xu Bing prints exhibition) (Taipei: Lung Men Art Gallery, 1990), 7.

9. Yang Chengyin, "*Xin chao" meishu lun gang* (A discussion of the main principles of the "New Wave" of fine arts), *Wenyi bao* (*Wenyi* newspaper) (June 2, 1990), 5.

10. Chen Weihe, "*Lun Xu Bing ji qi 'Tian shu,'*" 81.

11. Yin Ji'nan, *Xu Bing banhua zhan* (Xu Bing prints exhibition) (Taipei: Lung Men Art Gallery, 1990), 7.

12. For example Chen Weihe, "*Lun Xu Bing ji qi 'Tian shu,'*" 81–82; Fang Zhou, "'*Xi shi jian' wu jie*" (Five segments of *An Analyzed Reflection of the World*), *Jiangsu huakan* (Jiangsu painting journal), (February, 1990): 17–20; Wang Hua, "*Xie bu qing de shijie—kan Xu Bing 'Tian-shu' you gan*" (A world that cannot be written clearly—reactions upon seeing Xu Bing's A *Book from the Sky*), *Zhongguo qingnian* (Chinese youth), no. 4 (1989): 33–34. A *Book from the Sky* also received wide acclaim upon exhibition at the Longmen Art Gallery in Taiwan in March, 1990. Reviews include Lu Rongzhi, "*Xu Bing banhua zhan—'Xi shi jian-shiji wei zhuan'*" (Exhibition of Xu Bing's prints: *An Analyzed Reflection of the World—The Final Volume of the Century*), *Meishujia* (Artist) (April, 1990): 271; Chen Weihe, "*Zhenshi yu huangmiu*" (Truth and absurdity), *Xiongshi yuekan* (*Xiongshi* monthly), no. 217 (1989): 147–51.

13. The discussion session, held at the Central Academy in October, 1988, was attended by artists, art theorists, and scholars of the Central Academy and elsewhere.

14. These stories have been circulated by word of mouth and are recorded in an unpublished transcript of a March 20, 1989 conversation between Xu Bing and Xie Bo (Xuanjun), coauthor of the famous 1988 television documentary *He shang* (River elegy) that, like A *Book from the Sky*, was condemned officially for its expression of negative sentiments concerning contemporary Chinese society. For his opinions, Xie was forced to flee China.

15. See footnote twelve.

16. Yang Chengyin, 5.

17. Duan Gang, "*Chuanru lishi de shengyin*" (The sound transmitting history), *Nongmin ribao* (Farmers' daily), June 30, 1990.

18. Yin Ji'nan, "*Gui da qiang yu wu yiyi*" (*The Ghosts Pounding the Wall* and meaninglessness), *Xiong shi yuekan* (*Xiong shi* monthly), no. 235 (September, 1990), 125.

19. Shen Gua, *Mengqi bitan*, Book 17, in *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, trans. Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), 122.

20. Gu Yanwu, *Changping shanshui ji* (Notes on the Changping landscape), vol. 1, 18 verso.

XU BING

1955	Born in Chungking, China
1977	Admitted to Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China
1981	Graduated from the Central Academy; retained to teach
1984	Admitted to Central Academy for graduate studies
1987	Awarded the Master of Fine Arts
1988	Instructor, Central Academy of Arts Committee member, Academic Committee, Central Academy of Arts Director, Chinese Artists Association
1990	Honorary Fellow, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Department of Art

Selected Exhibitions

1991	A *Book from the Sky*, Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
1991	One-man Show, Chinese Modern Art Center, Osaka, Japan
1991	Group Show, D.P. Fong & Spratt Galleries, San Jose, California
1991	Group Show, Pacific Asia Museum
1990	*Xu Bing's Prints Exhibition*, Lung Men Art Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
1989	China/Avant Garde Museum, Beijing, China
1988	*Xu Bing's Woodcut Show*, Lung Men Art Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
1988	*The Fourth International Drawing Exhibition*, Nuremberg, West Germany
1988	One-man Show, Chinese Fine Arts Hall, Beijing
1987	*Ten Printmaking Artists from China*, Switzerland
1986	International Graphic Art Biannual Show, Turkey
1986	International Fine Art Show, Algeria
1982	Spring Salon Exhibition, Paris, France

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