

Xu Bing

徐冰

Printmaker, *1955 Chongqing, Studio Brooklyn, NY, Vice President of CAFA, Beijing (2008)



Xu Bing, 2008

Xu Bing was born in Chongqing in 1955, but moved to Beijing when Xu's father obtained a teaching position in Beijing University, where his mother worked as a librarian. At an early age, Xu frequented the libraries and was fascinated by the enormous amount of characters he did not yet recognize.



“Broken Jade, 1977, block prints

Xu Bing began his studies majoring in printmaking at the Central Academy of Fine Art, CAFA in 1977. After finishing his undergraduate studies, Xu continued to teach in the academy, and completed an MFA in 1987.

“The Book from the Sky” 1987–1993



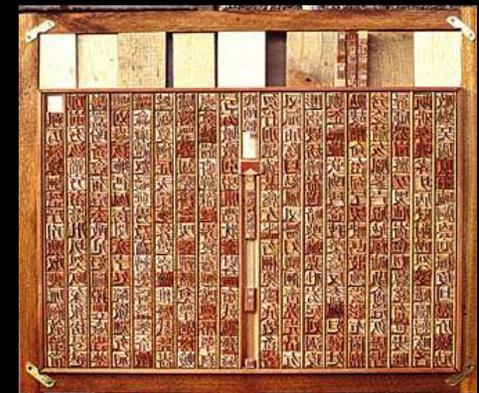
“Book from the Sky”, 1987–1989, Scrolls bound books of Chinese pseudo-characters



Bound book and scroll



Handcut scroll block



Handset book page,
the characters are carved inverted!

In 1987, Xu Bing began working on the installation "Book From the Sky." Different from the calligrapher [Gu Wenda](#), Xu, the printmaker, hand-cut and cast each individual pseudo Chinese character--artificial combinations of legitimate radicals--then printed them in Western book style and on long Chinese scrolls. A tremendous four-year effort, which appears justified only by the Chinese reverence for their 2000 year old writing. - But "no-sense" characters?

When Xu exhibited the first part of the work at a solo show at the National Art Museum of China in 1988, it became a heatedly debated topic--for its metaphorical criticism of authority and traditional culture, as well by its sheer formal gesture of presentation. Shown again at the 1989 China Avant-Garde Art Exhibition in Beijing as its largest piece of work, the installation drew attention from both in and outside of China.

In 1990 Xu was invited to lecture at the University of Wisconsin Madison as an honorary fellow. In March 1993, Xu Bing, like Gu Wenda had already done in 1987, moved to New York City. Xu lived in Ai Weiwei's famous East Village habitat, enjoying Ai's stimulating circle of Chinese artists, directors, composers, as well as encounters with the Beat generation poet Allen Ginsberg and writer Quentin Crisp.

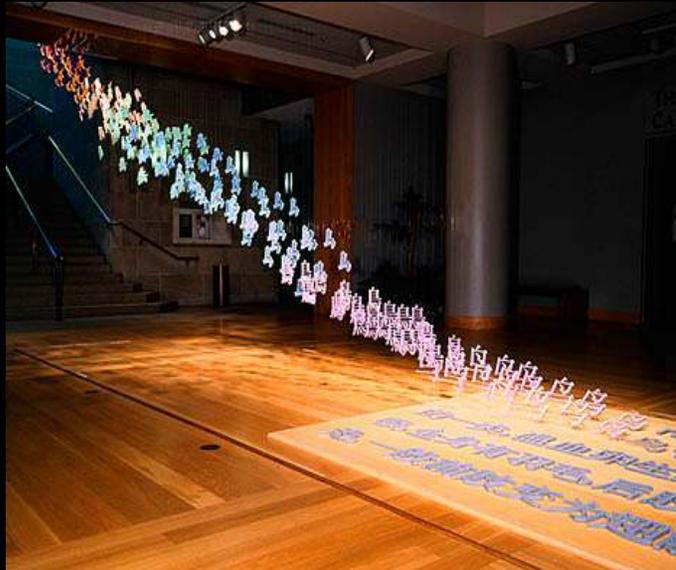
Xu Bing later settled in a Brooklyn studio. Though he has traveled between New York City and China throughout his career, he decided to return to the Mainland in 2008 to serve as vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing. Many regard this move to have been one of the seminal events in China's contemporary art development.

Text [artspeakchina](#)

The Living Word 2002



Development of ideogram for the character 鸟, niao, Bird



“Living Word” 2002, Smithsonian, Washington
Variations on 鸟, niao



Xu's Anglicized character BIRD
(Square Word Calligraphy)

One of the prettiest examples of Xu's method was an installation “The Living Word” (2002) at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. It showed the Chinese etymology of the character *niao* from the ancient pictogram to the present “simplified” character floating from heaven. On the right is his “English” character for BIRD. – Again these “cryptographic” exercises appear puzzling at best but in their absurdity imply a serious critique of the icons of Chinese culture.

[Xu Bings website](#)

The Magic Carpet 2006

Another beautiful example of Xu's philosophy is a huge red prayer carpet for the Kwan-Im Temple, the largest Buddhist Temple in Singapore.



“Magic Carpet”, 2006, handwoven wool, 729 characters, app. 1500x1500 cm

The design of the carpet follows a Qin Dynasty Xuan Ji Tu Rug (1620) whose 841 characters can be read in a number of directions which form nearly 4,000 separate Buddhist poems. Xu Bing selected passages from four significant faith-based texts (one Buddhist, one Gnostic, one Jewish, and one passage from Marx, all in English translation) for his carpet, which he then transcribed into Square Word Calligraphy and synthesized into one text.

See [Xu Bing_carpet](#)

Bird Language

2003

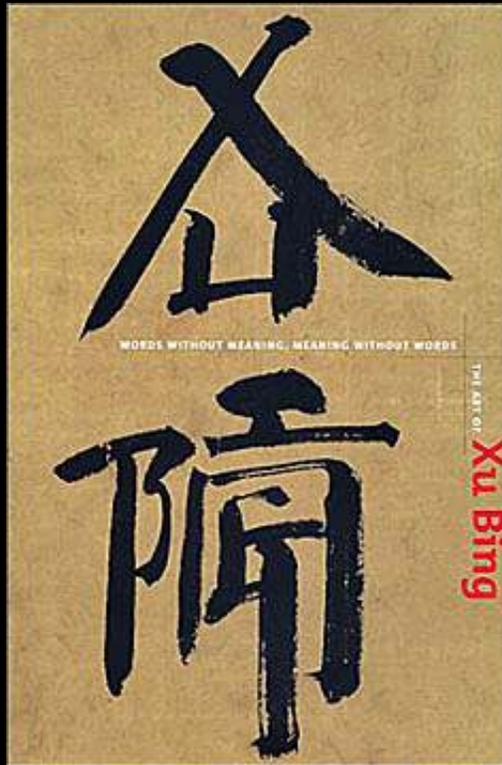


Four Bird Cages, 2003

In a more humorous vein Xu made four Word-Cages, each contains a 鸟, undoubtedly made in China for the European market. He writes:

“I connected letters to form cages of words. The words are questions that people have asked me about art, and my answers. Inside the cages are toy birds that are able to revolve and emit sound. When a visitor asks a question, the birds will respond with a bird's song.”

[Xu Bing bird language](#)



"XU BING"

Xu Bing's signature in pseudo AngloSinese

And if you feel this is all for an 交鸟所盎格鲁中国人



get yourself installed as Vice President of CAFA
and blow this dust into thin air as he did.