

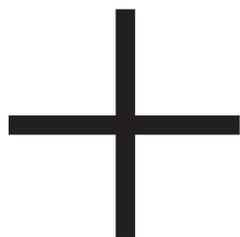
It Begins with Metamorphosis

# XU BING

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Teacher Resource Guide

Asia Society Hong Kong Center



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## It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing

Art is of vital importance to whole person development. It nurtures creativity, develops critical thinking and fosters language and motor skills. Research has shown that engagement in the arts benefits students not just in the classroom, but also in life. Students who are involved in the arts have higher school motivation, engagement in class, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, art allows students to learn about different cultural values and ideologies, and cultivate cultural awareness, which is essential in the increasingly diverse society of today. By gaining a broader and deeper understanding of the world we live in, we are able to explore our own cultural heritage and identity, and nurture a sense of who we are, and where we are in the world.

Asia Society Hong Kong Center (ASHK) is dedicated to helping teachers bring art into the classroom, and to their students. Our gallery regularly hosts exhibitions of renowned artists of Asia and our range of educational programs will help teachers integrate visual arts into their teaching, and provide a convenient starting point for discussion about history, geography and cultures of Asia. *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing* is Xu's first major solo exhibition in Hong Kong featuring some of his latest works. This multi-disciplinary exhibition examines how metamorphosis is at the heart of what art strives to express, and the process and communication of that expression. This resource is also available on the Asia Society Hong Kong Center website at <http://asiasociety.org/hong-kong/exhibitions/current>.

## How to Use This Guide

This resource is divided into three main sections:

**Section One:** The Big Picture is intended to provide a general guideline in looking at art and an overview of the exhibition. It includes general tips for visiting our gallery, a checklist for discussing art with students and specific details of the exhibition including an introduction, artist's biography and a gallery floor guide.

**Section Two:** Look and Discuss includes detailed information of four highlighted works. It includes background information on each piece, how it was created, suggested ways to look at the work, artist's quotes, questions for discussions, and classroom activities. Resources specific to each exhibit are also included to allow teachers to enhance their own knowledge.

**Section Three:** Appendix include additional resources related to the exhibition that may be useful for your general reference.

<sup>1</sup> Martin, A.J. Mansour, M., Anderson, M., Gibson, R., Liem, G.A.D., & Sudmalis, D. (2013). The role of arts participation in students' academic and non-academic outcomes: A longitudinal study of school, home, and community factors. *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

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# Section One: The Big Picture

## Gallery Visit for Schools Program

Asia Society Hong Kong Center's Gallery Visit for Schools Program aims to broaden students' interests, enhance their visual literacy, nurture their creativity, and strengthen their observation skills. We aim to provide fun, yet relevant and inspiring learning opportunities. School visits include docent-led tours of the exhibition on display at Chantal Miller Gallery and exhibition related programs to enhance students' understanding and experience of the exhibition.

In addition to the Gallery visit, school groups have the option to take a guided tour of Asia Society Hong Kong Center. Students will be able to explore and learn about the history of the site and its transformation into an educational organization. Students will discover key natural and man-made features of the site, and learn about the different measures in place to conserve the site's cultural significance and its unique and distinctive architectural design.

## Tips for Teachers Before Visiting

### For teachers who will book a docent-led Gallery tour

- Please make a booking for your group. Please see "Booking a School Visit" on p.2 for details.
- Before bringing your class to Asia Society Hong Kong Center, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read the guide, and decide which aspects of the exhibition will be of most interest to your students.
- Ask about other programs on offer that will tie in with the exhibition to reinforce your Gallery visit.
- Check the ASHK website for printouts, worksheets, and activities.
- Familiarize yourself with our site map beforehand and give your students a brief introduction about ASHK before your visit.
- The maximum number for each tour is 15. We welcome larger school groups to visit and they will be split into smaller groups on-site for Gallery and site tours.
- If you would like to highlight any specific exhibit(s) for discussion, please let us know in advance so that we can inform the docent and arrange a tour that is tailored to your group's interests.
- We welcome teachers to bring their groups to our Gallery and conduct their own Gallery tours. Go to the next page for additional tips.



### For teachers who will conduct Gallery tours on their own without a docent

- Manage your time. Select up to no more than five exhibits to discuss over the course of an hour. Allocate enough time for your students to look closely at an exhibit and organize their thoughts before beginning a discussion.
- Make sure the exhibit you select has enough surrounding space for discussion and viewing.
- If another group is discussing an exhibit that you would like your students to see, please choose another piece for the time being until the other group has finished.
- If you would like to highlight any specific exhibit(s) for discussion, please let us know in advance so that relevant supporting materials (such as images, print outs, pencils) can be arranged for you and your group accordingly.
- You are welcome to conduct your own tour but booking is necessary. Our staff is available to discuss Gallery flow or on-site material support with you.
- We welcome in-gallery activities related to the exhibits but they must be approved by Asia Society Hong Kong Center. As a general guide, only pencils are allowed in the Gallery and any sharp objects are strictly prohibited.
- We welcome all visitors to visit. Let us know if you have any special needs or requests and we will try our best to accommodate.

### Reminders for Students

- Photography without flash is allowed but video recording without prior approval is prohibited. Please contact us for filming requests.
- Touch the works of art only with your eyes, not your hands.
- Do not disturb other visitors by running, shouting or any rough play.
- No eating (including gum and candy) or drinking.
- Please leave your bags and heavy coats at the Gallery reception.
- Stand at a reasonable distance from the artwork so others can see.
- Please follow all signs, notices, directions and instructions given by Center staff, docent(s), tour guide(s) and security guards in the Center.

### Booking a School Visit

To book a school visit for the current exhibition, please contact us using the details below. Requests for school visits will be processed on a first-come-first-served basis. You will be notified once your booking is confirmed.

### Contact

**Telephone:** +852 2103 9512

**Email:** educationhk@asiasociety.org



### Making it Interactive

An exhibit has many stories. There is the story the artist wants to share with us, and there is the story about the time and place in which it is created. Often, there may be so many aspects to the exhibit, we do not know where to begin, and of course, there are expectations of what we are supposed to see. Where do we start? This section provides some suggestions for teachers to help students look at works of art and more importantly, engage the students to start thinking about what stories the exhibit reveals to them, and what they may take away from it. The engagement and the discussions are what make art so inspiring and a visit to a gallery so rewarding.

#### See: Encourage your students to make observations about the fundamentals

- What can you see?
- What materials did the artist use, and how has he/she used them?
- What strikes you the most about this piece?
- (If relevant) Who is it? What are they wearing?
- (If relevant) Where is it?
- (If relevant) When is it? (Season/time/event)
- What colors have the artist used?
- Describe the imagery you see, is it realistic, abstract or others?

#### Think: Encourage your students to interpret the work

*Discuss in terms of line, shape, color, texture, form, subject matter and composition. Challenge your students to articulate and describe what is right in front of them.*

- What do you think it is about? What is going on here? What makes you say that?
- Have you seen anything like this? If yes, where?
- What do they seem to be doing?
- How does the work reflect the time period/country/contemporary issues?
- What are some words that come to mind when you look at it?

#### Discover: Encourage your students to learn and reflect

*Share with your students what the artist is trying to convey in the work, prompt discussion and encourage students to discover new aspects and discuss.*

- Now you know the story/message the artist is trying to convey, how does it differ from your original thinking? What makes you think that?
- Do you think the artist made a strong statement? Why or why not?
- If you were trying to create the same message/story, how would you do it?
- How does the work relate to us (or the city/time we live in)?
- Is there anything you didn't notice before?

## About the Exhibition



Throughout time, philosophers, scientists, writers and artists have explored the dynamics and consequences of metamorphosis, the process of transformation.<sup>2</sup> Xu Bing, an internationally acclaimed artist, shows how metamorphosis is at the heart of what art strives to express, and the process and communication of that expression. The exhibition highlights how metamorphosis marks the beginning of the process of ideas and methods, and provides a focused look at how this is conveyed in his works.

Xu Bing's own life and career have undergone many transformations, from his reeducation in rural China, his early training in modern woodcut art in Beijing, his work as a professional artist and educator, and later his return to China. His own transformation and continual exploration of cross-cultural interactions nurture Xu Bing's interests in the limitations and possibilities of words, images and culture and how these have, and can be transformed into new meanings and ideas. Using unexpected materials such as tobacco leaves, debris, and silkworms, Xu Bing delves into the transformative power of materials to challenge the values of our society and encourages us to explore our memories, histories and destinies.

While his work celebrates metamorphosis as the core and an important, if not inevitable process in art, one objective remains constant—his interest in making art more meaningful for a society where cultural and geographic boundaries are fluid. With this commitment, Xu Bing transforms Mao's old dictum of "Art for the People" in an ever-increasing post-industrialist world.

## About the Artist



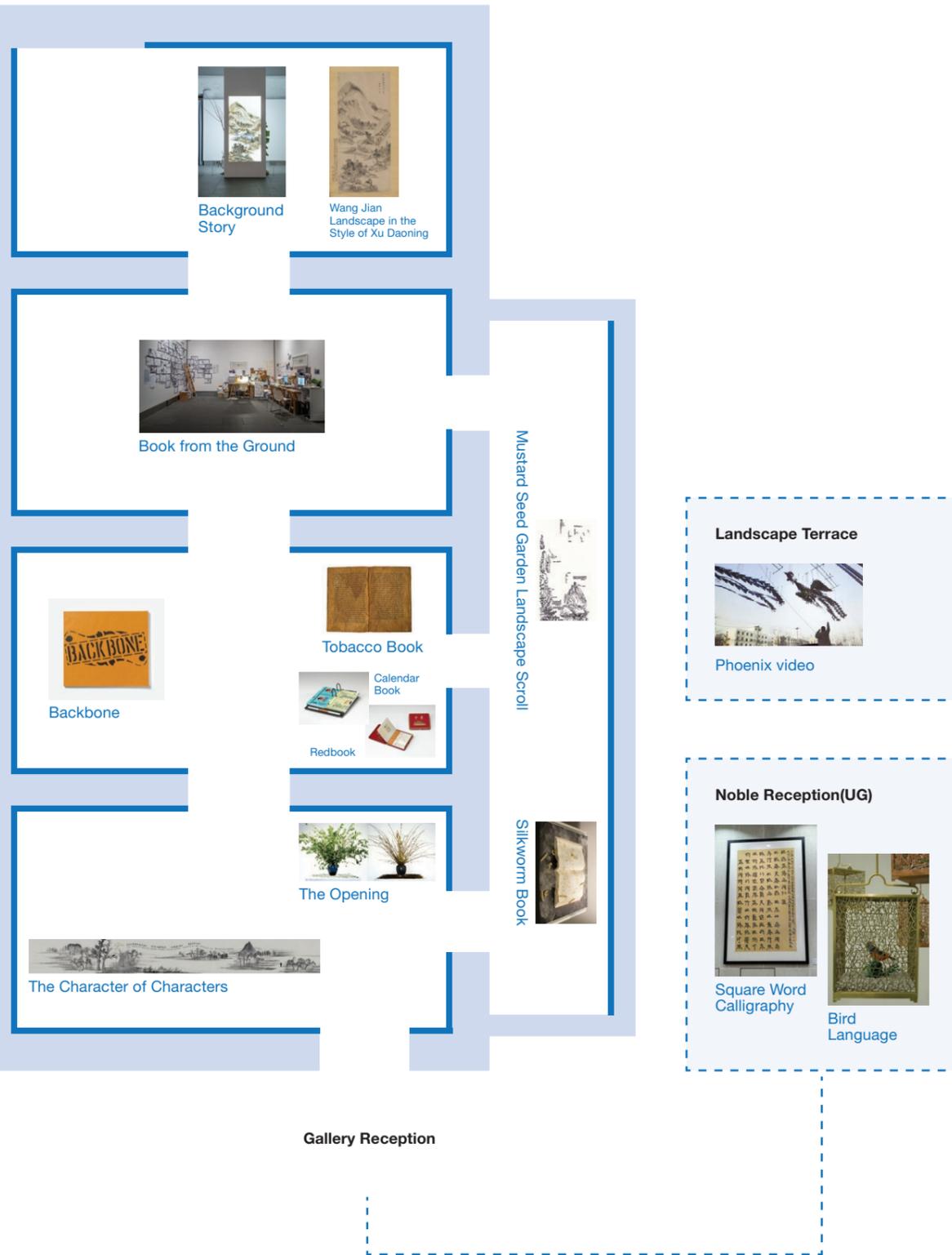
Xu Bing was born in Chongqing, China in 1955 and grew up in Beijing. He entered the printmaking department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (CAFA), where he completed his bachelor's degree in 1981, and stayed on as an instructor, earning his MFA in 1987. In 1990, he moved to the United States and returned to China in 2007 to serve as the Vice President of CAFA.

His works have been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the British Museum (London), Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Museum of Modern Art (New York), Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), and several international biennials. As an artist and educator, Xu Bing has received many honors from institutions worldwide in recognition of his contribution to art education. He was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in 1999 and was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize in 2003. In 2004, he won the first Wales International Visual Art Prize, Artes Mundi and was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree by Columbia University in 2010.

Please visit <http://www.xubing.com> for more information.

<sup>2</sup> Metamorphosis is defined as the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form in two or more distinct stages, from the online Oxford Dictionary <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/metamorphosis>.

## Gallery Floor Plan



## Section Two: Look and Discuss

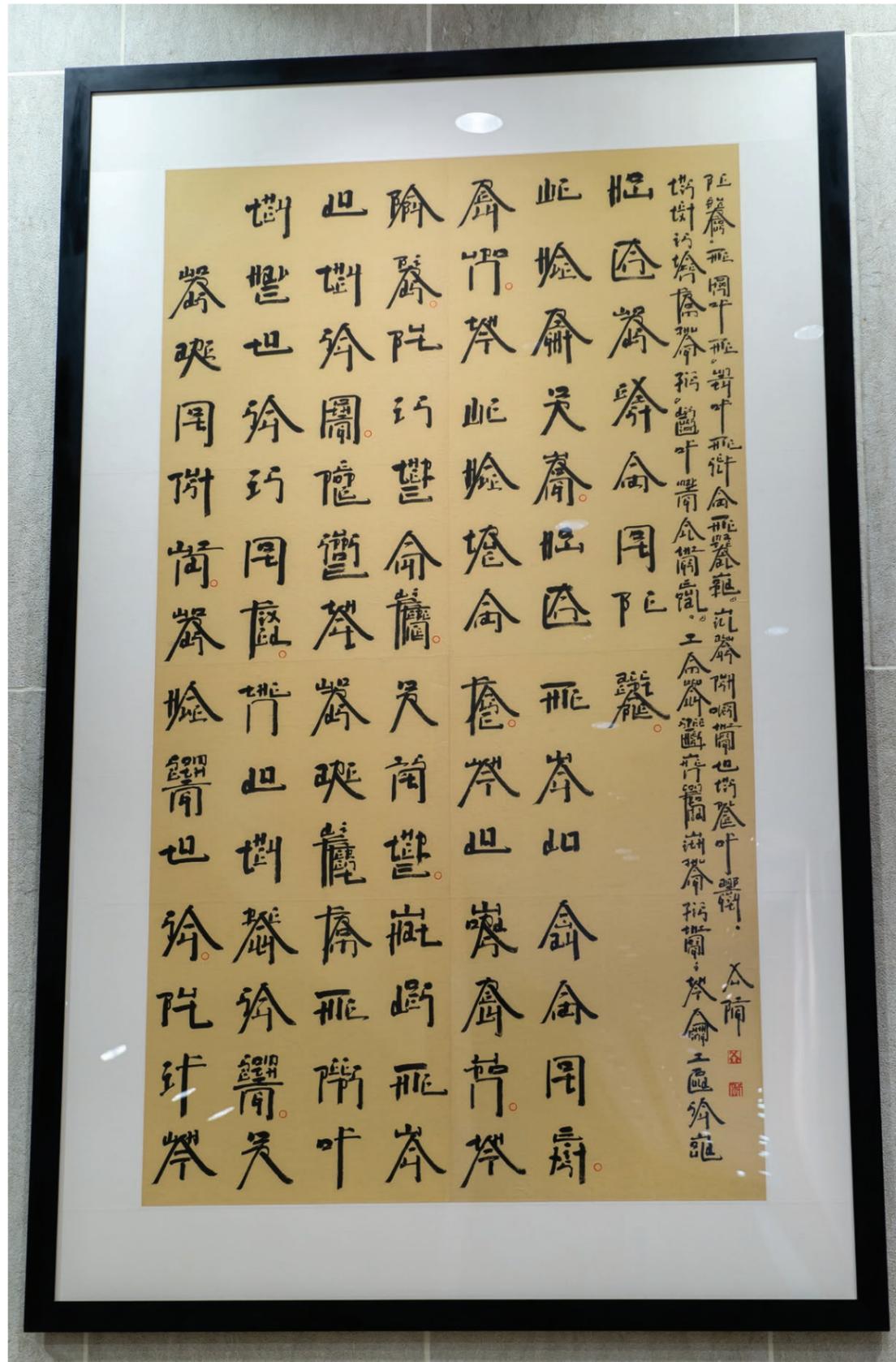
The exhibition highlights major works created during Xu Bing's own metamorphosis, inspired by the myriad of experiences and events he encountered at different stages of his life. Many of his works draw upon the calligraphic principle of using words as art and his exploration of communication and language, the power of the written word and the role it plays in our lives. Xu Bing's fascination with language originated early in his life. He loved books from an early age and enjoyed cutting up newspapers and magazines and pasting them into his scrapbooks. During the Cultural Revolution, he experienced the impact of propaganda and saw his own father, as well as many others, parade through the streets with signs for denunciations. Words became much more powerful than he previously thought. They can bring enjoyment, but also possessed the power to harm. Xu Bing embraced both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, he portrays words (or characters) as transmitters of culture through time, but at the same time, also illustrates how people place unwarranted trust in textual statements.

*"Many people ask me why I'm so sensitive to words. They remark that my calligraphy is very good. I'd reply that Cultural Revolution gave me many opportunities to practice. But its true impact was allowing me to experience the power of words, the role these words play in culture, politics and everyday lives."*

In this section, we will take a closer look at four exhibits that address the above. By blending English alphabets with principles of writing Chinese calligraphy in *Square Word Calligraphy*, Xu Bing successfully creates a visual hybrid that weds the languages of the East and the West, bringing about a new cross-cultural perspective in looking at languages. In *The Character of Characters*, he explores the origins of writing and the connection between Chinese calligraphy, the role of replication in art and society, and the impacts they have on our lives in many more ways than we think. In *Book from the Ground*, he documents his journey in search of a universal language of everyday life and the publication of a novella, which was entirely "written" in this new form of communication he developed based on icons and signs of the contemporary world. Last but not least, his *Background Story* project showcases the deconstruction of a traditional Chinese landscape painting, giving it a new interpretation and subsequently a new life by using discarded materials to replicate the original.

Each exhibit has an enticing tale of metamorphosis waiting to be discovered and a powerful message that art can be, and should be for everyone. By demystifying and deconstructing Chinese culture, Xu Bing makes traditional aesthetics in Chinese culture more accessible and liberating for all, as summed up in his own words:

*"I am very interested in bringing art to the masses, letting them know about my art, and making it relevant to many aspects of daily life."*



## Square Word Calligraphy

2014

Ink on paper

H290 x W178 cm

### Background

In 1993, Xu Bing began a project called *Square Word Calligraphy*, three years after he moved to United States. When he first went to the US, Xu Bing had communication problems. His linguistic frustrations led to experiment with ways to address the English language. His previous work *A,B,C...* (1991) and *My Book* (1992) marked the beginning of this exploration. In 1993, Xu Bing began developing the project *Square Word Calligraphy*.

*Square Word Calligraphy* is a special way of writing designed by Xu Bing. At first glance, it appears to be Chinese characters, but actually it is a system for arranging English alphabets. He combined Chinese calligraphy and English lettering by organizing the 26 Roman alphabets into structures that resemble Chinese characters. With a relatively simple set of rules for the composition of square words, one is able to write English using Chinese calligraphic principles. The result is a calligraphy that looks like Chinese characters, but is actually English. It offers an opportunity to better understand the unique principles of Chinese calligraphy from ink preparation and holding a brush to the techniques in executing individual brushstrokes. Square word calligraphy helps demystify the Chinese written language, making the pleasures of calligraphy available to a wider audience. More importantly, it creates a dialogue between the two cultures.

### Artist's Quotes

*"Understanding the inner core of a different language helps you understand a different culture. This difference led me to fantasize about being able to 'wed' them."*

*"If I had always lived in the mainland, this work would definitely never have appeared, because the cultural conflict wouldn't have been so direct. And it wouldn't have become such a 'vital' problem for me."*

*"(It) puts together two utterly different systems of calligraphy, Chinese and English. Like an arranged marriage – even if they didn't fit, they had to fit."*

*"Through this kind of English calligraphy, I gave the West a calligraphic culture with an Eastern form... This text is suspended between two concepts. It belongs, and yet doesn't belong, to either side. When people write it, they really don't know whether they're writing Chinese or English."*

*"The Interesting aspect of this work lies in its ability to transform people's restrictive way of thinking. This is a kind of liberation and it is the liberation of the mind."*

## How to look at this work

For *Square Word Calligraphy* in this exhibition, Xu Bing took an excerpt from *Zhuangzi*, a famous Daoist classic. The selected text is from Chapter Two and discusses how words limit understanding because they do not allow for the multiple identities of things. Please read Appendix 2 for details. It questions the meaning and transformation of sounds into words and the role words play in our speech—is the sound of speech any different from chirping of birds and howls of the wind? How do words become subjects of judgment of right and wrong? What kinds of metamorphosis are we witnessing here?

The text is written in vertical columns from top to bottom and should be read from left to right.<sup>3</sup> There is no punctuation mark for ancient Chinese text, red circles called *jù dòu* (句讀) are used to mark sentence breaks to facilitate reading, but they do not convey any meanings that punctuation marks have.

## How this work was made

This work was based on Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy* project. The paper was divided into a grid before writing following the tradition of Chinese calligraphy. Xu Bing wrote the text in ink.



Xu Bing  
*Square Word Calligraphy Classroom*, 1994-1996,  
mixed media; dimensions variable.  
Installation view from Xu Bing in Berlin, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst,  
Berlin (now Museum für Asiatische Kunst), Germany, 2004.  
Photo courtesy of Xu Bing Studio

<sup>3</sup> Chinese characters follow a square frame and usually can be written in any direction in a square grid. Traditionally, Chinese was written in vertical columns from top to bottom with the first column on the right side of the page with no punctuation.

## Discussion

- The work is about blending the languages of both East and West. Can you think of any events or everyday things that you come across that have East and West elements? They can be words, festivals, food etc.
- In the process of trying to understand the text, viewers break down language, if not cultural barriers. Do you agree?
- This is an excerpt from a traditional classic. Do you think it's possible to do the same with a modern piece? How should it be presented (compared with this being presented as traditional Chinese calligraphy)? Do you think it will have the same effect?

## Classroom Activities

- Using Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy* Alphabet (please refer to Appendix 1), can you write/design your English name?
- Select a poem or a short excerpt from a book, ask students to write the piece in Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy* style.
- Divide your class into groups of 5-6, ask each group to create a system to merge the Chinese and English languages. Groups may follow an approach like Xu Bing—using aspects of Chinese to represent the alphabets or vice versa. Others may opt for different approaches. Allow flexibility and encourage creativity. When completed, ask the groups to:
  - o present and explain their approach to the class.
  - o create an artwork based on their approach. The art work should either:
    - tell the story of their design and transformation of the characters/alphabets or;
    - transform an existing piece of writing into this new “system” of expression.

## Resources

### About Written Chinese

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Written\\_Chinese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Written_Chinese)

### An Introduction to Chinese Calligraphy

<http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/introduction-chinese-calligraphy>

### About Square Word Calligraphy

[http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/xu\\_bings\\_square\\_work\\_calligraphy/](http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/xu_bings_square_work_calligraphy/)

<http://metmuseum.org/exhibitions/past-exhibitions>

Select 2013 > Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China > Exhibition objects > Square Word Calligraphy

## The Character of Characters

2012

Animated film installation,  
16 minutes 45 sec.

Commissioned by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco for the 2012 exhibition "Out of Character: Decoding Chinese Calligraphy" with support from The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation

### Background

*The Character of Characters* is Xu Bing's first animation and presents an analysis of aspects of language, and the impact of language on our lives. Presented in the form of an elegant digital hand scroll, it recalls the history of Chinese characters and the importance of symbols for Chinese people, transcending time and space to reflect upon the social situation and cultural issues in China today in a fun and engaging way. It illustrates how Chinese writing and calligraphy have evolved into many-layered systems, and how they have impacted on the collective subconscious, cognitive habits and even behaviors of the Chinese people.

The heart of this animation is the 13th century artist Zhao Mengfu, whose calligraphy is the source of the first stroke. Xu Bing brings to life Zhao's famous painting, *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains*.<sup>4</sup> Xu Bing turns this painting into an animated land where elements in the traditional painting merge with modern icons to turn the idealized past into active forms that move towards the present. The work also draws parallels between the repetitive and rigorous nature of calligraphy and highlights aspects of Chinese culture such as the origin of writing, the connection between Chinese calligraphy and painting, the role of copying in art and society, and the trust Chinese people have in symbols (and later, logos).

### Artist's Quotes

"My intention in this animated film is to set forth my views on the origins of the Chinese people and their distinctive qualities – respect for traditions and ceremonies, ability to bear hardship without complaining, firmness cloaked in gentleness, and ability to change with the circumstances – by means of analyzing, examining, and reimagining a handscroll by Zhao Mengfu."

"The Chinese people's views on the world and on freedom, their collectivism, their valuing on 'face', their focus on 'big picture' outcomes...all these distinctive qualities may be said to be related to their unique writing system, to Chinese characters and calligraphy. Any single ideology or concept...is dissolved in this unique cultural sphere that originated with Chinese characters and calligraphy."

"This animation attempts to express the inner core and strength of Chinese culture, and its role in the establishment of the new human civilization of the future."

### How to look at this work

Stylistically, this animation is completely hand-drawn. It is imaginative and continuously evolving. It features a mixture of styles and techniques used in dramatic film, calligraphy teaching tutorials, documentaries and photography all weaved together to create cartoon-like episodes with action and humor. It appears primarily in black and white, with a few segments in red with an old rice paper background.

The narrative proceeds chronologically in the three major segments:

- The birth of Chinese characters and how the Chinese character for "one" (and as a single stroke) is the source of all that is to come;
- The relationship between Chinese calligraphy and Chinese principles for living;
- The idea of "reproduction" in Chinese painting and its impact on modern China.

As the animation draws parallels between the story of calligraphy and aspects of Chinese culture, you will find reference to both contemporary and historical icons such as the construction of the Great Wall, of mass production in Chinese factories, reference to orderly masses at the Beijing Olympics and in military ceremonies, and even the current Chinese passion for name-brand luxury goods.



<sup>4</sup> The painting, made when Zhao Mengfu was an official in Shandong, captures the artist's internal conflict while working for new Yuan rulers, but yearned for the former Song dynasty.

## How this work was made

The original drawings were processed as animation, in the form of a horizontal handscroll reminiscent of traditional ink art. It is screened at this exhibition using three projectors. The animation is 16 minutes and 45 seconds in length. Six of Xu Bing's hand-drawn sketches are also on display.

### Discussion

- Are there any icons of Chinese culture or events you saw in the animation? What are they?
- Can you think of other more recent examples where traditional works have been given a modern touch?
- Xu Bing used the work of 13th-century artist Zhao Mengfu in the beginning of his animation. If you were to create an animated film such as this for the Hong Kong community, what original "work" will inspire you? Why?

### Classroom Activities

- *The Character of Characters* was about exploring the origin of Chinese calligraphy and its impact on Chinese culture and thinking. Many Chinese icons were used. If you were to make a Hong Kong version, will you use Chinese calligraphy too? If not, what else would you use? What Hong Kong icons or events will you use? Divide the class into groups and ask each group to create a work based on this discussion. The groups can either:
  - o create a 2D "animation" (or a comic book) of their story based on a series of panel (say 3 -6 panels) subject to number of students or;
  - o create one drawing that embodies layers of different elements to illustrate changing times/icons (e.g. individual layers of drawings for the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s etc, or individual layers for food icons, for significant events etc). One approach which students can take reference from is graphic designer and cartoonist Ah To (阿塗)'s comic called *The Great Canton and Hong Kong Proverbs*. You may find more information at: <http://writecantonese8.wordpress.com/2014/02/25/cantonese-proverbs-in-one-picture/>.

Xu Bing gave life to elements from the 13th-century painting and brought them to modern times. Compare this work with the recent interpretation of *River of Wisdom* (清明上河圖), originally painted by Zhang Zeduan (張擇端) (1085-1145). Watch it together in class and discuss the techniques/approaches used. What is similar? What is different? Which one do you like better? Why or why not? Search for excerpts of *River of Wisdom* online. One example is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeK0DYHLWgE>

## Resources

An online guide about **Zhao Mengfu**

<http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-zhao-mengfu.php>

A reading on a **History of Chinese Characters**

[http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/languages/pdf/Yin\\_chapter1.pdf](http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/languages/pdf/Yin_chapter1.pdf)

### About *The Character of Characters*

Xu Bing, *The Character of Characters: An animation by Xu Bing*. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2012.

Asian Art Museum, Excerpt from *The Character of Characters*, 2012, by Xu Bing, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQ1mpKllxhQ>



"The Great Canton and Hong Kong Proverbs" In 1559, Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel created the oil painting "Netherlandish Proverbs" which illustrates many Dutch proverbs to praise the Dutch culture. In 2014, Ah To imitated the idea and created "Great Canton and Hong Kong Proverbs" illustrating 81 Cantonese proverbs to propagate the Cantonese culture and defend Cantonese.

## Book from the Ground

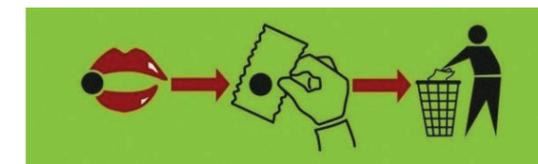
2014

Mixed media

Dimensions variable

### Background

*Book from the Ground* evolved from Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (1987), a pivotal work which placed Xu Bing on the international art map. In the earlier work, Xu Bing designed a "vocabulary" of 4,000 characters which appear to look like Chinese, but which are entirely illegible and emptied of meanings. Over the next two decades, Xu Bing spent much time travelling to different exhibitions and was fascinated by how airline-safety manuals are based upon image recognition, and using icons and symbols to explain relatively complex matters with minimum words.



In 2003, he came upon three signs printed on a chewing gum packet, which contained an important message: *Please wrap the used gum and dispose of it in a trash bin.* He began exploring the idea of using icons not just to explain something, but actually

connecting them together to tell a story. He began collecting and organizing logos, pictograms and signage from around the world as well as those used in specialized fields such as chemistry and math. This marked the beginning of *Book from the Ground* and after nine years of research and development, *Book from the Ground* was finally published in 2012 as a formal book with its own International Standard Book Number. *Book from the Ground* is Xu Bing's statement about the development of languages and his quest for the ideal of a single script that transcends cultures, an international language of "everyday life" that can be read and understood by all in the contemporary world—a mission very much in line with Mao's dictum on "Art for the people" in the global context.

### Artist's Quotes

*"To what degree can signs and symbols function as a language? This is my main interest in Book From the Ground. I hope my job has maximized the existing capacity of signs and symbols."*

*"Comprehension is not contingent upon the reader's level of education or knowledge of literature but instead stems from their experiences and way of life."*

*"Regardless of your cultural background or mother tongue, you should be able to read this book as long as you have experience of the modern world. The educated and illiterate can equally enjoy the pleasures of reading."*

*"When reading Book from the Ground, your education level isn't important. What matters is how engaged you are to contemporary life."*

*"The true inspiration for this work is deeply rooted in my own cultural tradition. My sensitivity to sign language lies in the fact that I am bound to the picturesque tradition of the Chinese language, and I have grown a habit of image-reading in this culture."*

*"I started writing the Book from the Ground because I wanted to create a book that everyone in the world can read."*



## How to look at this work

This installation is a reconstruction of Xu Bing's studio in New York, and offers an intimate glimpse of his life. Viewers can examine original materials and drafts from the process of organizing these icons and the creative process of turning these icons into stories. It is a snapshot of a real project in progress. The novella tells a story of a day in a man's life.

Nearby, two terminals are set up. As part of the project, Xu Bing asked software engineers to design a font program (known as Icon Chat software). Visitors can input either Chinese or English on the keyboards, and the screen will automatically convert the words into Xu Bing's language of icons. The idea is that users speaking different languages can still engage in simple communication with one another directly in real-time by using this icon system. Do encourage the students to try out this interactive software.

## How this work was made

The original drawings are ink on paper and are part of Xu Bing's studio. The editing software developed by Xu Bing and his software engineers is a program that turns English and Chinese text into commonly recognized pictographs, signs, icons and symbols. Users can send messages to the person on the other terminal.

### Discussion

- Are there any icons here that you do not understand? Are there any icons here that may have more than one meaning? What are they and what are the different ways to interpret them?
- Do you agree this "language of icons" is truly universal? Can you think of some icons or signs that are unique to a particular place or culture (hence, difficult for "outsiders" to comprehend)?
- What kinds of impact have such a transformation in communication made on our lives?
- What are some of the constraints of this "language of icons"? What makes it less effective than written languages? What makes it more effective than written languages?

### Classroom Activities

- Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* is a quest to establish a universal language of everyday life. Has he succeeded? Divide the class into groups and select a chapter (i.e. an hour) out of Mr. Black's life in the book. Ask each group to interpret what Mr. Black did during that hour and present their understanding to the rest of the class. Were the interpretations the same or different? What are the factors that made it a success? If they were different, what are some factors that contributed to the difference in interpretation?
- Using icons like Xu Bing did, map out a typical day (or it can be morning or afternoon to make it shorter) in your life. It can also be a day on the weekend. Ask the students to share it with someone outside of the class or who has not been to the exhibition. Document their findings and exchanges, could other people comprehend what they were trying to illustrate? The class can then share their findings and bind the drawings together into a book for display the school library.

## Resources

### About **Book from the Sky**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Book\\_from\\_the\\_Sky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Book_from_the_Sky)

<http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/assets/archivedmaterials/Xu%20Bing%20handout.pdf>

### About **Chinese Characters as Logograms**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_character\\_classification](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_character_classification)

### About **Book from the Ground**

Borysevicz, Mathieu (ed.), *The Book About Xu Bing's Book From The Ground*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014.

<http://www.thisisart.eu/Xu-Bing>



## Background Story

2014

Natural debris, glass panel and lightbox  
H395 x W150 x D60 cm

### Background

*Background Story* is a project about lives and afterlives, and about a dialogue with our past and traditions. When this project first began in 2004, Xu Bing reconstructed three artworks stolen by the Nazis during World War II. Using old photographs as references, he used broken branches, dried leaves, and torn paper to recreate the lost works through light and shadows. This was the beginning of a series known as *Background Story*. Since 2004, Xu Bing has continued to develop *Background Story* projects, reflecting the spaces and spirit of the host institution he is at.



In more recent *Background Story* projects, Xu Bing deconstructs classical Chinese paintings with light and shadows. Using three-dimensional materials to create two-dimensional brushstrokes, Xu Bing replicates a traditional Chinese painting. From the front, it resembles the mountains, rivers and trees one sees in a traditional Chinese landscape (*Shan Shui*) painting. From the back, it is in fact made with the light and shadows as a result from the layering of debris. From afar, it looks like brushstrokes, but in fact, there is not a single brushstroke there. Xu Bing challenges his audience's assumption and shows them that everything is not always as it first seems.

### Artist's Quotes

*"My aim is to transform discarded materials and natural debris into work of art that is beautiful, classic and elegant."*

*"I used the most common and inexpensive materials around us, so they are unlikely to be kept, preserved for a long time. The result is, what people see is not a real concrete painting, but a painting of shadows."*

*"The process of making this work is a dialogue... with classics, with traditions, with the past. A core element of human culture is dialogue with the past."*

*"I still wonder why we can replicate Chinese landscape painting with this technique but not on realistic oil paintings though we are using actual tree branches. Through this creative process, I begin to understand, that although Chinese painting is based on imagery, it has a deeper relationship with nature."*

## How to look at this work

Before looking at Xu Bing's *Background Story*, please direct the students to look at Wang Jian's *Landscape in the Style of Xu Daoning* (1672). Wang Jian is an artist from 17th Century who adhered to the traditions of Northern Song landscape painting. This painting is part of a collection from the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

After this, students should return to the entrance of the chamber and look at *Background Story* from the front. When the light-box is switched on, a beautiful replication of Wang Jian's *Landscape in the Style of Xu Daoning* comes to life. It appears to be a beautiful Chinese painting initially, but when the audience moves behind the artwork, they will see the actual humble mosaic of materials from which this beautiful landscape painting is made from and the way Xu Bing has skillfully replicated and transformed a traditional 2D Chinese landscape painting into a three-dimensional installation.



Wang Jian, *Landscape in the Style of Xu Daoning*, dated 1672  
Vertical scroll, ink on paper  
L127.5 x W55 cm  
Collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, Leisure and Cultural Services Department



Back view, *Background Story*, 2014

## How this work was made

The work is created using a light box, glass and debris found. The landscape painting is created with a collection of broken or discarded objects such as dead leaves and sticks. They are then attached together and placed strategically to create the composition required. The fluorescent light reaches the textured surface and the debris used, which then generates complex visual contrasts and reproduces Wang Jian's *Landscape in the Style of Xu Daoning*.

### Discussion

- Do you think it is a good modern interpretation of the original? What makes you say that?
- Have you seen anything like this before? Have you come across any other artwork (or object) where you were deceived by its surface appearances?
- In Chinese calligraphy and painting, copying and replication are very important. It allows one to study the masters' work, nurtures one's patience, and allows one to master the techniques and skills of the experts. In Chinese calligraphy, we even have templates (字帖) for practicing calligraphy. What do you think about this concept of copying and replication? What are the impacts of such practices on our creative process? Are works created this way still considered original? Is creativity lost or given a new interpretation?
- Have you seen other exhibits elsewhere that utilize unwanted materials? Was the treatment of the materials similar, or different?

### Classroom Activities

- *Background Story* is a series of projects that Xu Bing developed using similar materials and techniques. Xu Bing would often create new *Background Story* projects for the series by using new landscape paintings and sourcing local materials to reflect the spaces and spirit of the host institution. He has done projects in Berlin, Taipei, London to name just a few. Ask students to check out or research on other *Background Story* projects and select a destination. Present their findings to the class and discuss:
  - o What are the similarities and/or differences?
  - o Were there any changes in materials used?
  - o Was there an evolution of techniques? Or was it the same for all of them?
- Ask your class to try and learn to deconstruct an artwork like Xu Bing did. Select a painting (it can be traditional or modern) and using light and discarded materials, try to reproduce the painting. This can be a group or individual project. Students can use old cardboard boxes or shoe boxes as a frame. Instead of glass, opt for tracing paper and the light can be a desk lamp rather than a light box. Encourage interpretation and creativity. The final product may not be an exact replication like Xu Bing's as students may bring their own interpretations to the work. Ask the groups to share the creative process with the class. What was it like to "deconstruct" an existing artwork like Xu Bing did? What was difficult? What was easy? How close was it to the original? Was that the intention? The focus is on the creative process in this exercise.
  - \* For younger students, a modern simple image/work maybe easier to replicate.

## Resources

About **Background Story** (at the British Museum)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID7BHI5W86Q>

A list of **Background Story** Projects  
<http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects>.

# Section Three: Appendices

## Appendix 1: Square Word Calligraphy Alphabet

The page contains several sections of calligraphic characters and text:

- Top Left:** A vertical column of text: 文屬叶匪欄愈。 容察飛陰叶叶尚致陰高琴臣臣齋叶匪蘭 容察飛陰叶叶尚致陰高琴臣臣齋叶匪蘭 容察飛陰叶叶尚致陰高琴臣臣齋叶匪蘭
- Top Right:** A grid of characters with English letters F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z.
- Middle Left:** A grid of characters with English letters A, B, C, D, E.
- Middle Right:** A grid of characters with English letters F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z.
- Bottom Left:** Four calligraphic strokes with labels: 豐人匪苑, 豐人匪苑, 豐人匪苑, 豐人匪苑.
- Bottom Right:** Three calligraphic strokes with labels: 匪峯叶人峯, 匪峯叶人峯, 匪峯叶人峯.

Text pages from *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 1994-1996, wood block hand-printed book and ink rubbing with wood cover; water-based ink on grass paper, 39x23x2.7cm. Photo Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

## Appendix 2 : Excerpts from *Zhuangzi's* Discussion on Making All Things Equal

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn't there? What does the Way rely upon, that we have true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right or wrong? How can the Way do away and not exist? How can words exist and not be acceptable?

**Artist's notes:**  
This text is taken from Zhuangzi's Discussion on Making All Things Equal. I am often speechless when confronted with Zhuangzi's thinking; that everything I could say would be superfluous. The notion of the 'unity of the self and the material world' will always push one's thinking into this place of ambiguity.

