

144. *A Book from the Sky* (1987-91), overall view and wood blocks ready for printing. Bound books and wood engraving on rice paper, printed with Chinese ink, vitrines. Collection of the artist, with portions in various museums



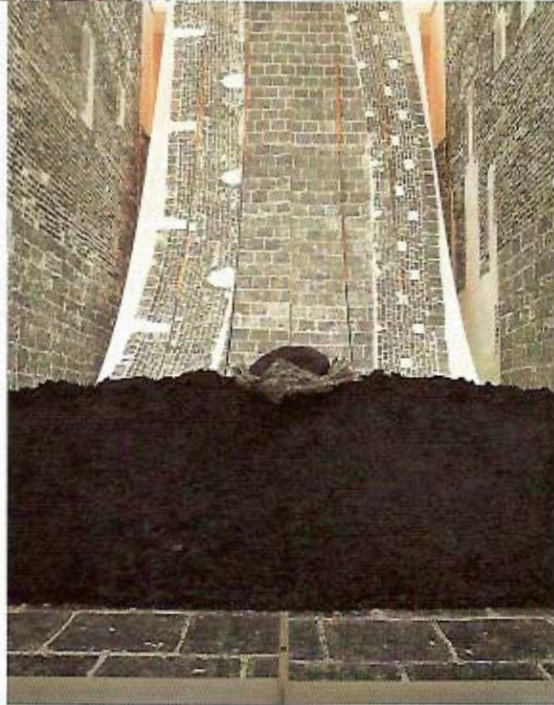
Xu Bing has regularly been characterized as the paradigmatic artist of a "New Wave" of experimental art that emerged in China during the cycles of relative artistic freedom in the 1980s. Sent as a youth to work on the land during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Xu later mastered and taught traditional forms of art-making in Beijing. Some of these forms, critically examined, are at the heart of the work he has made since, in China and abroad. His *chef d'œuvre* of printmaking,

A Book from the Sky, debuted in his first solo show and was later a centerpiece of the infamous 1989 survey exhibition of Chinese avant-garde art in Beijing. The show was closed by the authorities shortly after its opening, marking the end of this period of cultural openness, and anticipating the violent suppression of student demonstrators that would occur in Tian'anmen Square just months later.

A Book from the Sky (1987-91) is based on about 4,000 pseudo Chinese words (about the same number as are used in everyday speech), which Xu invented by recombining the ideogrammatic roots of real characters. After completing the year-long task of carving a small printing block for each authentic-looking but false character, the artist printed his new almost sensical lexicon in the three most important forms of the printed word in China: the book, in the traditional binding, proportions, and layout of classic texts; the newspaper sheet, which in China is posted on public boards; and the religious scroll. Large quantities of these elements cover every dimension of the room, with sweeping scrolls above, waves of books on the floor, and sheets lining the walls. The title, which refers to the



145. *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990–91), work in progress and installation view. Mixed media installation. Rice paper, dirt, ink rubbings



mysterious patterns that burn onto skin hit by lightning, conveys a sense of the immediate, immaculate strangeness that this seemingly complete system of knowledge presents both Chinese-reading and other audiences, though in significantly different ways. One must appreciate the subversive impact of these non-words on Chinese readers: for a culture based on the written word (not least as the only means of communication between different dialects), these deceptive characters might shake the very foundations of its identity. A

non-Chinese-reading audience, on the other hand, does not have to contend with illegibility. Instead, "a lack – the inability to read Chinese – is transformed into a site from which the Western audience can generate enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure."¹ In other words, the experience of beauty in the work is made possible by the suspension of meaning. *A Book from the Sky* puts a twist on the old structure of orientalist reverie, replacing the demure and exotic subject of the Western gaze with another subject, also for aesthetic contemplation, but resolutely impenetrable and slyly defiant.

Villified in official circles for the overt meaninglessness of his venture, Xu next undertook a project that would be, at least superficially, an equally futile effort. Over several weeks, Xu and fifteen helpers made ink rubbings on thin rice paper of a towering section of the Great Wall of China. As a monument to the expenditure of human energy solely for the unexamined purpose of cultural protectionism, walling out the rest of the world, the Great Wall seemed the appropriate subject for Xu's record of pointless human enterprise. The thousands of individual sheets of *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990–91) could be mounted together only after the artist had emigrated to the United States in 1990.

The loss of meaning involved in these works might seem to betray a pessimistic view of social endeavour, but other ambitious works actually suggest that a loss of

culture, or a displacement of it, can be a node for cultural exchange. *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* (1994-96) is a classroom outfitted with practice books and an instructional video for learning a system, devised by Xu, of "Chinese" calligraphy of English words. The attentive Western viewer will quickly begin to understand the principles of what might first have seemed irreconcilably foreign. In fact, the system is a hybrid: an estrangement of one language through a fanciful structural transposition into another. The question of translation

explored in this piece was anticipated by Xu's *A, B, C...* (1991), a set of ceramic blocks, each bearing a Roman letter of the alphabet and a Chinese word whose pronunciation approximates the name of the English letter. For example, "A" is represented by the Chinese character *ai*, "sadness," while "W" requires three Chinese words, *da*, *bu*, *liu*, meaning "big," "cloth," "six." The unexpected resonance of these chance combinations is a way of revelling in the randomness of linguistic signifiers. By embracing slippages of meaning, the work opens a rich space for the generation of new, poetic or aesthetic, meaning. The suggestion is that some kind of genuine cultural exchange, to the side of literal translation, can be realized through these absurd elisions and structural transpositions.



146. *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* (1994-96). Preparatory drawing and installation view of classroom with study material

Notes

1. Stanley K. Abe, "No-Sense from Out There: Xu Bing's *Tian Shu* in the West," unpublished paper, 1997, p. 6.

2. *Ibid.*

148. *Tsan Series* (1994-95).
Mixed media installation with live
silkworms, live eggs,
books, portable computer

147. A, B, C... (1991). Thirty eight pieces
of ceramic. Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong
Kong



Although Xu's work is literal and understated on the surface, its delayed humour and irony is essential. Whereas Stanley K. Abe rightly notes that the reception of the artist's work is significantly different in China and the West,² Xu actually privileges an intercultural viewer, like himself, or at least one informed of and sensitive to the ways in which the works signify on different fronts, and accepting of the points at which literal meaning is not available.

The state of not knowing, of losing language and suspending cultural benchmarks, was important to another work by Xu involving transposition. In the first part of *Tsan Series* (1994-95), thousands of tiny silkworm eggs (bred by the artist) were arrayed across open books, like the points of Braille or dot-matrix text, in patterns that evolved and disintegrated as the eggs hatched. In the second part, the mature silkworms were placed on a number of communication tools, such as a notebook computer, a natural science book, and a newspaper, which they gradually encased with their spun silk. While on its face a rather literal statement against rhetorical structures, the work also permits quiet thinking about cyclical processes, about the beauty of relinquishing received structure in favour of an openness, and about process as a pleasurable end in itself (a view that

Xu developed during his time labouring in the country, and which speaks throughout his work). The Chinese word for silkworm, *tsan*, has the same pronunciation as the word for fragment or fragmentation, a coincidence that enriches the sense, embodied in this work, of the productiveness of dissolution.

Xu's laborious re-creation and simultaneous subversion of traditional cultural structures belies both a deep respect for these structures and a scepticism about the narrow ends to which they are put. His thwarting of communication systems and other cultural symbols has less to do with negation than with seeking common ground, with cultivating a space of openness and permeability that recognizes and finds value in points of untranslatability. G.K.