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Imagine a book that has all the qualities of a prized relic of Chinese history: crisp, beautiful letterpress printing, hand-sewn bindings, careful layout, detailed margin annotations. Now, imagine not being able to read one word of the book, even if you know some Chinese. Your literacy has been supplanted by an odd sensation that the words are floating right there on the edge of your subconscious, on the tip of your tongue.

Even though it has been 16 years since Xu Bing first exhibited *Book From the Sky*, his monumental, otherworldly work composed entirely of illegible Chinese characters, the piece is still haunting. The work launched the artist's career and defined the conundrums he would puzzle over in the years to come: How can characters be illegible, yet still Chinese? What are the limits of language? What do words symbolize?

Book From the Sky drew praise from the art and intellectual establishment in late-'80s China, as an idea and a creation. But it also drew sharp criticism for its shocking reinterpretation of traditional linguistic forms. In the intervening years, public opinion turned in Xu's favor. Today, the artist is firmly established as a major player in the international art scene, having won a MacArthur "genius grant" in 1999 and appeared in a succession of major exhibitions in the U.S. and in China. In recent years, he has experienced homecoming exhibits in both countries: At the end of 2002, his work was included in the government-sponsored First Guangzhou Triennial and in the Shanghai Biennale—his first shows in China since immigrating to the U.S. in

Chinese artist Xu Bing's calligraphic works blur the divides of language and meaning, past and present, truth and lies.

By Claire Lui

1990. And this spring, Xu will return with new work to the Elvehjem Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, the venue that held his first solo exhibition in the U.S. a decade ago. For an artist who has said, "I worked for many years to create something that said nothing," his ways of saying nothing have spoken very powerfully indeed.

Xu was born in 1955 in Chongqing, China, and raised in Beijing, where his mother was a library administrator and his father chaired the history department at Beijing University. It was an unstable environment for a child, as was school: Among the numerous government-enforced curriculum changes was a push to simplify many of the traditional Chinese characters. Many of Xu's days were spent learning, then unlearning different characters for the same word, a process that made him realize that "to change the language, even a little bit, really changes people's thinking." The connection between the written word and the internal response was to become a fundamental element of his work. As Perry Link, a professor of East Asian studies at Princeton University, observes: "His weird characters are upsetting in ways that weird sounds seem not to be."

When the Cultural Revolution began in the 1960s, Xu's physical landscape changed as well. Large painted advertisements that had always been an established part of the Chinese scenery suddenly turned political, papering Beijing as never before. The

Opposite page: *Book From the Sky*, 1987–1991. The completed work includes hand scrolls and wall panels in addition to books.

posters were shrill and angry, denouncing people by name, and accusing the targets of being “capitalist roaders.” Xu’s father, like many other intellectuals, saw his own name appear. “At that time, you really felt the power of words,” Xu says. “If you wanted to kill somebody, you did it not by gun but by brush.”

In a cruel twist of fate, Xu, because of his excellent writing skills, was chosen by his school to create propaganda posters similar to the ones that condemned his father. It was an experience that gave the student a sense of the darker aspect of writing and words. His eye for balance and structure in composing Chinese calligraphy was now put into the service of something dangerous and alienating. This was a theme that would resonate clearly in his later works, including *Book From the Sky*, a work that’s disturbing, says Perry Link, because Xu “suggests that austere writing might be a fraud, [subverting] value as much as fact.”

After a self-imposed exile to the countryside—where he literally lived in a pigpen, and befriended and sketched farmers and swine alike—Xu returned to Beijing at 19 to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he earned an M.F.A. in printmaking in 1987, and where he later taught and began working on *Book*. Artist Lin Yan, a schoolmate, observes that while Xu’s traditional skills as a calligrapher were much admired at the school, he soon recognized the value of concentrating on content over form. Though Lin laughingly says that Xu could practice his brushwork more, she adds seriously, “How he cre-

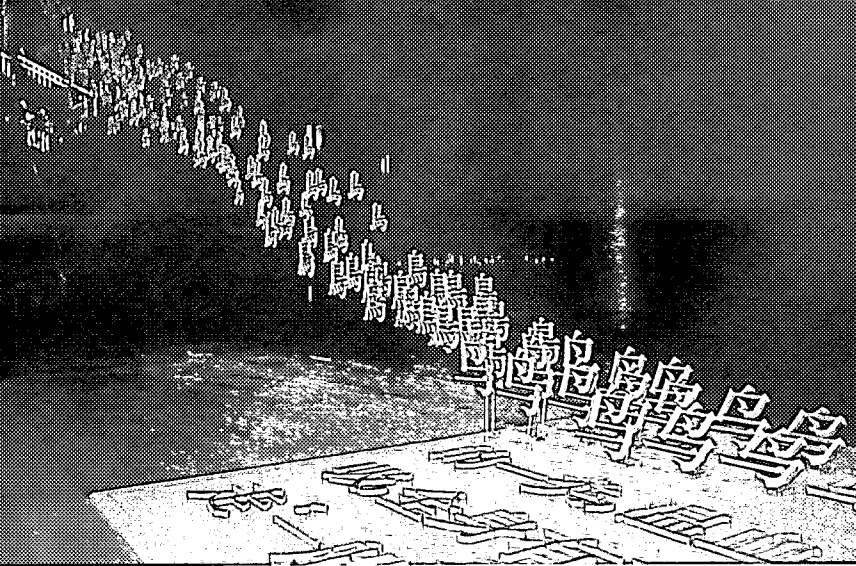
“To change the language, even a little bit, really changes people’s thinking.”

ates these things—these ideas—is more important than his brushwork. When people see his work, people don’t care about [that] anymore.”

In 1990, Xu was named a fellow at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he continued to play with words and began to incorporate a new language: English. *Square Word Calligraphy*, an ongoing project, presents the same challenge as *Book*: The words look Chinese but are not. This time, however, the words are not without meaning; roman alphabet letters are stacked to form English words. “The two works are like brothers with the same father, but with a different mother,” Xu says.

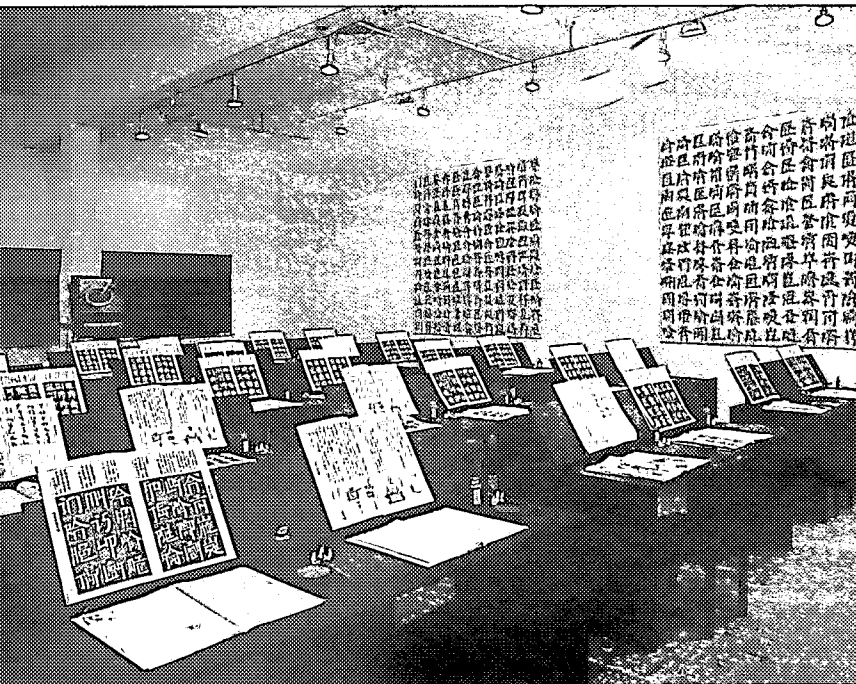
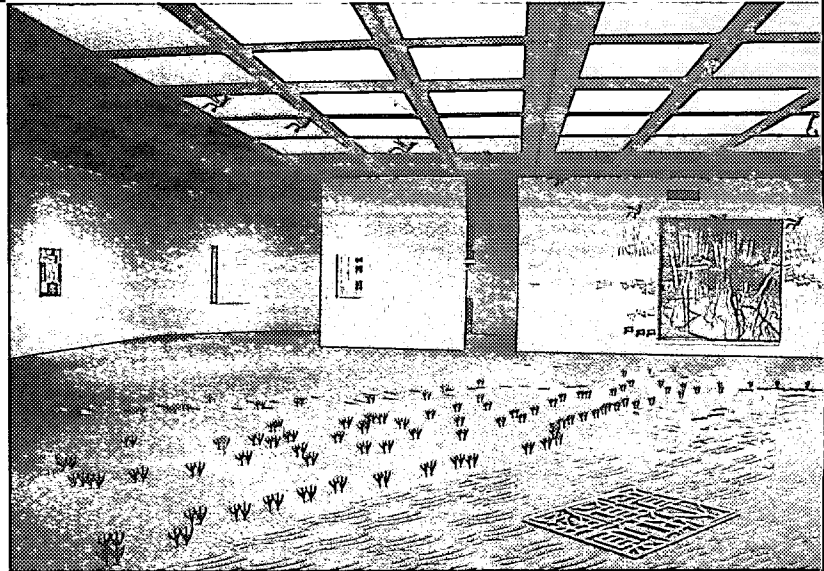
Like *Book*’s physical reference to sacred texts, *Square Word* replicates a hallowed text of the Chinese classroom—the skinny elementary calligraphy workbooks. Xu’s cross-cultural, modern-day take on the books presents lessons on how to write English nursery rhymes in his unique hybrid form of calligraphy. Xu sometimes teaches the letterforms to American students as part of an installation project, where he demonstrates the proper way to form strong, clean strokes, reminding his students that the lines should “be like an elephant tusk, not a mouse tail.”

Xu has used the calligraphy in other projects. One illustrates several of Mao’s quotations about art with large-scale letterforms that implicitly and simultaneously support and criticize the Chairman’s teachings. One set of scrolls blasts Mao’s call for art for the people, while another set exhorts, “Make the past serve the present. Make foreign things serve our nation.” Xu’s



The Living Word, 2001. The Chinese character for the word "bird" transforms itself from its ancient pictograph form into a bird shape. Courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Reading Landscape, 2001. In this work, Xu uses 3D letterforms to create scenes of nature. Here, mini "tree" characters form a forest. Courtesy North Carolina Museum of Art.



Square Word Calligraphy Classroom, 1996–present. As part of an ongoing installation project, Xu teaches Western students how to render his alphabet of roman letters that "look" Chinese. Courtesy Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

work has followed both of these dictums, even though his use of the quotations is laden with irony.

Square Word Calligraphy has taken on a life of its own—a Japanese company is developing the characters into a digital font, and Xu himself has used it for everything from political scrolls to public bathroom signs. The artist continues to work with Chinese letterforms—though now, he uses the genuine characters.

There's a friendlier quality in the newer pieces, though they retain the reflective sense of his earlier works. *The Living Word*, which shows the character for "bird" morph into rainbow-hued floating forms and then into an actual bird, is a more accessible piece than some of Xu's earlier sculptural works, which feature mating pigs covered in illegible Chinese and English text. Of these newer works, Britta Erickson, an independent curator and scholar who has known Xu for years, observes, "The deep messages are still there. But the entrance for the viewer is easier."

Chinese characters also figure prominently in two other pieces, *Landscape* and *Reading Landscape*, which are 2D and 3D scenes using characters based on the elements of a landscape; e.g., clumps of the tree characters make a forest, and stacks of mountain characters form gentle slopes. This warmth toward the Chinese language has been returned by Chinese critics and artists. In the years since *Book From the Sky*'s debut, China has embraced the legacy of Xu's older works, and his more recent pieces are much in demand. Last year, a group of Chinese art

"If you wanted to kill somebody, you did it not by gun but by brush."

critics named him one of the ten most influential Chinese artists of the 20th century.

For an artist whose tumultuous past could have easily been embittering, Xu regards his history—China's history—as something that has allowed him to forge a new path, separate from the East and the West. Leon Wender, owner of the China 2000 Fine Art gallery, has sold Xu's work in recent years; he says, "Xu doesn't need to do a twist on somebody else's work. He figured out something all by himself. He's on his own. And nobody can copy him." And Xu reflects by saying: "When I was living in the countryside, [my contemporaries from Hong Kong and Taiwan] were at Yale, or in London, in some art school, listening to a contemporary art lecture. But the problem is they just treat art in too formal a way. I treat it in a wild way, not in a fixed way. This is good—you can bring something special, something new into contemporary art. If you can find a correct way to face your background, your tradition, maybe you can change that background in a good way." Xu has not only changed the background, he has given the future a new voice and a new language.

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