



Xu Bing's Square Word Calligraphy (in context with his life)

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In Hong Kong in 1997, artists from that city, mainland China, and Taiwan exhibited works of art with particular relevance to the handover. Many of the works dwelt on fears for the future. By contrast, Xu Bing's contribution, *Square Word Calligraphy*, highlighted Hong Kong's role as a meeting ground for East and West. It proclaimed the possibility of unexpected rewards for those making the effort to communicate across cultures. *Square Word Calligraphy* had been exhibited previously in Europe, to great acclaim, but only achieved its full potential as a poignant message of hope for the future at its Hong Kong venue.

Square Word Calligraphy is a new kind of writing, almost a code, designed by Xu Bing. At first glance it appears to be Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read it but cannot. Western viewers, however, are surprised to find that they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.

The idea of inventing this new form of writing came to Xu Bing when he observed the attitude of awe and respect with which non-Asians regard Chinese calligraphy. Intrigued, he sought to create a work that would demystify calligraphy, and reward the Westerner's engagement. For *Square Word Calligraphy*, Xu Bing designed a system whereby English words are written in the format of a square, so as to resemble Chinese characters.

When Xu Bing exhibits *Square Word Calligraphy*, he installs a calligraphy classroom in the art gallery, with the aim of introducing visitors to a world previously considered too obscure and elitist to bear trespassing by the uninitiated. Desks set for use with *Square Word Calligraphy* copy books, ink stones, brushes, and other writing utensils fill the gallery. When visitors take up the brush and begin working on a page of the red-line copy book, the process of demystifying Chinese calligraphy begins. Eventually, when they realize that they are writing English language nursery rhymes rather than unfathomable excerpts from the Chinese classics, they realize it is not necessary to feel intimidated by Chinese calligraphy.

Xu Bing's fascination with language and books is due largely to his mother's long-term affiliation with Beijing University's Department of Library Sciences, where she was Senior Administrator. Because of her (and his father, who was Chair of the History Department), Xu Bing developed a fondness for historical books at an early age, and was encouraged to investigate the Beijing University Library's important collection of rare books and rubbings. He remembers that he often accompanied his mother to work, where he enjoyed passing the time surrounded by books.

Language and books did not translate immediately into a subject for art, however. Because of his "bad class background," during the Cultural Revolution Xu Bing was sent to the countryside for reeducation through labor. At that time he confined his artistic endeavors to sketching the people and scenes of the countryside. Later, when art schools reopened following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Xu Bing earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the Print Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. There he perfected the techniques of both woodcuts and copperplate etchings. His subject matter gradually evolved from simple

representational scenes of farm life to complex musings on the nature of art, the process of creation, and the possibility of meaningful communication. His consummate technique and existential deliberations came together in his masterpiece, "A Book from the Sky."

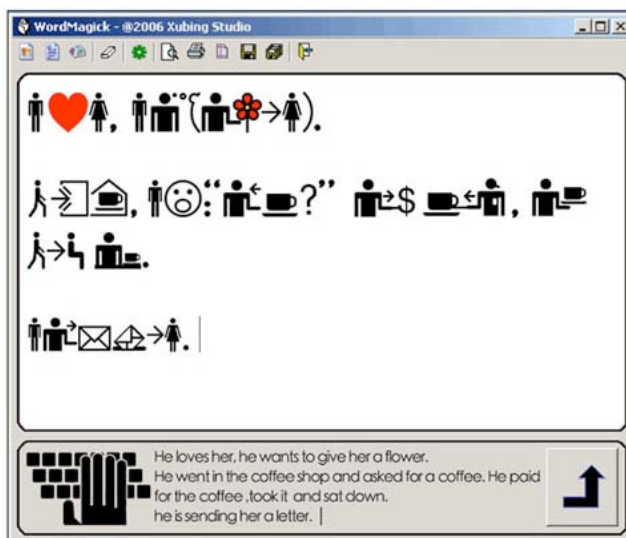
For *A Book from the Sky (Tianshu)*, Xu Bing designed two thousand, imitation "Chinese characters" which he then carved into wooden blocks, to be typeset as books, scrolls, and wall posters and printed in the traditional manner. When installed at Beijing's China Art Gallery in 1988, *A Book from the Sky* drew immediate attention, both positive and negative. Xu Bing's invented "characters" so closely resemble genuine characters that some people reportedly spent days searching for one they could read. In laboriously creating an unintelligible language, Xu Bing denigrated Chinese culture's uncritical reliance on text, as well as questioning the value of all human endeavor.

Close to a decade elapsed between Xu Bing's creation of *A Book from the Sky* and *Square Word Calligraphy*. In that time, a diametric shift occurred in Xu Bing's representation of language. The earlier work presents a view of language as divisive and frustrating, and the latter suggests language's power to unify and delight. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, for Xu Bing at least, communication in the late 1990s is easier and more rewarding than it was ten years ago.

Post Note:

Since Britta wrote her essay above, Xu Bing has since gone on to develop *Book from the Ground*, 2003-present. Similar to the software that was developed for *New English Writing* in 2000, *Book from the Ground* will enable people of all languages to communicate by typing their language into a computer and a universal picture will appear expressing the word or basic concept. This too brings people closer to understanding Chinese, for it was a pictorial language before characters were developed. –R.C.

Erickson excerpts from xubing.com/texts



Above: "Far East", *Square Word Calligraphy*, 1990s

Left: *Book from the Ground*, application software, 2003-ongoing