

**The 14th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes 2003**  
**PUBLIC FORUM**

**A Talk with the Artist**  
**“Xu Bing, Letters from the Sky”**

**XU Bing**

**Date:** 16:00 – 17:30 Sunday, September 21, 2003

**Place:** Sculpture Lounge, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum  
(Shimokawabata, Hakata-ku, Fukuoka City)

**Program:**

Outline of the Forum and Introduction of Laureate

Mr. Yasunaga Koichi (Director, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum)

Talk

Mr. Xu Bing (Arts and Culture Prize Laureate)

Q & A



Hello everyone, my name is Xu Bing. Thank you for holding this wonderful event. The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum feels like a home to me. I am extremely satisfied with the outcomes of both when I presented my work, *Your Surname Please?* here four years ago and of the current exhibition commemorating the awarding of the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize. So many people took part in the course of realizing this show including museum staffs and volunteers. I would like to deeply thank you all for coming here today.

### **【Cultural Revolution】**

During the Cultural Revolution almost thirty years ago, young graduates of middle and high schools had to head out to the countryside to live and work with the peasants. The government preached they had to transmit culture to the farmers who needed it, and at the same time learn from the peasants. Following this, those of them who excelled in calligraphy and painting had to contribute their talents. I spent about three years in a village, taking part in numerous propaganda activities such as making handmade literary journals for the local peasants.

After my father was labeled reactionary, lots of problems befell upon my family. Back then, if one's father had a problem, his family was also considered as having problems by others. I tried my best and worked hard to be seen as a better person. This is not to say that I had an interest in politics. I was rather merely driven by my sincere interest in the beautiful and writing beautiful characters almost to the point that they appeared as though they were printed.

This served as my training period. Years later, when I presented works relating to 'calligraphy' and 'written words,' someone commented, "Your calligraphy is wonderful," and I remember answering, "That is because of the 'training' I received during the Cultural Revolution."

### **【Central Academy of Fine Arts】**

In 1977, I entered the printmaking department of a very conservative school called the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. I received a conventional academy style art education there, and became famous by making many works which depicted images from my experience in the countryside. Some people even call me a good artist today because of this firmly grounded training I received and the so-called "official" path I walked.

### ***A Book from the Sky***

My work started to change between 1985 and 1987.

This is a work called *A Book from the Sky*. The gallery space was literally transformed into a prison of words. Five scrolls were hung from the ceiling, while 500 books were placed open on the floor, and the walls bearing large word panels. These amazingly beautiful books leave a sacred and solemn impression on the viewer. However, as you approach to read them, you cannot grasp any story or information out of them, because all the words written there were imaginary words created by myself. Those who saw this work at that time recall the experience as very strange. You expect those relentlessly beautiful books to carry important messages but in fact they are void of meaning. The moment you discover this, you feel strange and cannot help but to dwell upon human culture that lies beyond them.

These books come in a set of four volumes and the fourth volume takes a form of a dictionary. Small letters explain the large letter that is printed above. However, since these small letters themselves carry no meaning, it is a strange situation of nonsense explaining the nonsense. In front of these 'letters' and 'books' everyone is

equal—educated, uneducated, Chinese, and non-Chinese. After all, they are equal in that no one can read what is written.

I designed every letter, carved them, and had them hand-printed in a small printing house I found. It can be seen as a vast joke that a single person spent many years on making. There is also a deep connection with the Chinese traditional culture as seen in its reference to *Kanxi* Dictionary.



Installation view



Detail of the printed characters

### ***Ghosts Pounding the Wall***

This is a work I made by taking ink-rubbing of the actual walls of the Great Wall. The three-dimensional wall is transformed into two-dimensional through the act of ink-rubbing.

I made this work a few months after the Tiananmen Incident. The cultural and political situation in China had undergone a tremendous change after the incident. It had a great impact on contemporary art. My previous artwork had become a target of criticism by traditional and conservative artists and leaders of the art circle. One of them had called my work 'a ghost pounding the wall art.' 'Ghost pounding the wall,' is an old Chinese idiom suggesting that a person has a mental block. You are stuck in one place without knowing you are actually surrounded by a wall. I was fed-up with the stifling atmosphere of the intellectual circle. So I took some students and local farmers into the mountain, and completed most part of the ink-rubbing after one month. When I found the reference of 'Ghost Pounding the Wall' regarding my work in the newspaper, I thought it was a good title for my new work.

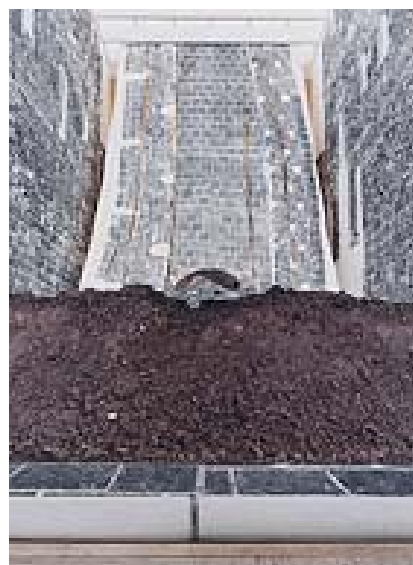
I like ink-rubbing because you have an extremely close contact with the source object. Any image that arises from this method is powerful and is capable of delivering special information. It works the same way with people holding hands or kissing to achieve deeper communication.



Working at the Great Wall

This is contrary from photography where what you get is merely a shadow of an object.

When I finished the outdoor rubbing of this work in 1990, I was invited to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as an honorary fellow. The university museum showed a great interest in the photos of this new work although it was not completely finished then. They arranged the rubbing to be shipped from China and provided me with a large studio space, which finally enabled me to complete this work in the United States.



Installation view

### ***ABC...***

This is a work I made using ceramics. I used Chinese characters to represent the 26 letters of the English alphabets phonetically. For example, A was written as *Ai*, and B as *Bi*. For those English alphabets needing more than one Chinese character, I used two to three characters like *Ai-Ke-Si*. You are left with a very awkward and strange feeling trying to read this.

During this period I was making small installation works and projects and all of them dealt with my personal experience of moving to a new cultural environment in the United States. It is required for every artist to come face-to-face with the surrounding environment. Art emerges out of the very process of questioning and engaging critically with the surrounding.



A Chinese character expressing *Ai-Ke-Si* (X)

### ***New English Calligraphy***

Let us move on to the 'New English Calligraphy.'

In 'New English Calligraphy,' I replaced radicals of Chinese characters with letters of the English alphabet. It is a writing system in which a character appears Chinese when seen as a whole, but it can be decoded and read when you break down the



A scene at the Xu Bing Exhibition

character into small components. It took me many experiments and studies in order to achieve what would appear closest to the Chinese character.

I then took 'New English Calligraphy' to cyberspace as you see here exhibited. The computer program transforms the typed message into 'New English Calligraphy.' I am working together with a Japanese computer company and it is still in the makings.

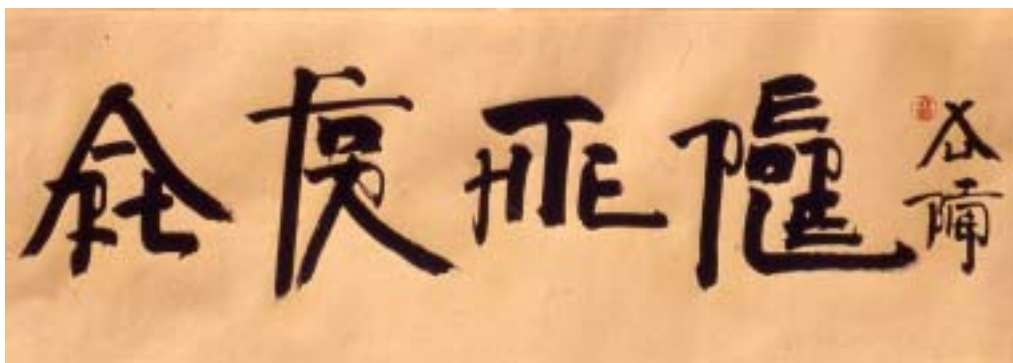
Once completed, we can use the program to even print a whole newspaper using the character set of the New English Calligraphy.

I also use this writing system to make calligraphy works. They appear to be East Asian calligraphy at a first glance, but the truth shocks a viewer. The Western culture is covered beneath the Asian face.

People often ask me, "What is your motive behind designing such calligraphy? Do you wish your own writing system to be extended to English?" and I answer "I use English simply because it is easier and more convenient for communication."

My hope is to shake up the conventional thinking pattern of the people through this calligraphy. For instance, we usually think of Chinese character as something that fits into a square while letters of the can be written by simply adding lines. But in my calligraphy, both rules become impotent. In order to comprehend, we must come up with a new concept from an alternative perspective. Our minds become more open through this process.

I also made a large banner that says "Art for the People" in 'New English Calligraphy' for the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



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FOR

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### ***Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy***

I have also taken the ‘New English Calligraphy’ into a classroom setting inside a gallery space. Inside, I place textbooks entitled “Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy,” various calligraphy tools and a television. Visitors are invited to experience the ‘New English Calligraphy.’ It is open for anyone to experiment. The ‘New English Calligraphy’ seems strangely familiar, and at the same time opens a very new sensation to a viewer. Asians may think of them as Chinese characters from their appearance but cannot read them without the knowledge of English. In contrast, a Westerner might find the Chinese-like writing to be exotic and appealing but may think impossible to appreciate it on a deeper level unless you understand the culture of Chinese characters and calligraphy. However, once you experiment with it, you will experience a surprise you have never known before.

This work has been exhibited worldwide.

Once a school even placed an order for the teaching materials of ‘New English Calligraphy’ for they wanted to nurture a thinking that was open to art and other cultures.

Two days ago I also visited a high-school in Fukuoka and held this class. When I asked the students for their impressions afterward, one of them made a very interesting comment, “My mind opened up. From today, I choose not to blindly follow what books or teachers tell me, but try to think independently.”



A scene at the “New English Calligraphy” workshop



“New English Calligraphy” practice book

### ***Landscape***

This work also deals with words. I use the New English Calligraphy to write characters on large windows of the museum lobby so that they match with the landscape outside. When a visitor stands at the particular point, the written calligraphy on the glass match exactly with the landscape.

For instance, if you see a concrete building outside, I write the character for concrete, if you see a sculpture, I write the character for art in 'New English Calligraphy' on the window.

As a viewer moves inside the gallery, the relationship between the viewer, the artwork, and the landscape changes constantly. Owing to the characters written on the window, the viewer finds the gallery space extending beyond.

I have also made landscape paintings that are composed of Chinese characters. Since Chinese characters are pictographs originally, when we write bamboo, we are also 'drawing' bamboo. The same applies also to the characters for rock, rice seeding, tadpole, water, boat and various kinds of vegetables.

I began this series in 1999 when I went to the Himalayas. I sat down on the mountain and 'painted' the mountain in front of me using Chinese characters. I tried to follow the movement of nature by tracing the clouds, direction of lights, the ups and downs of the mountain ridges. I found out that once you transfer the writing to English, the outcome appears like an avant-garde poem.

Chinese or Asian literati are proud of traditional art, which combines calligraphy, painting and poem in one piece. I believe I have found a way to unify those three elements even stronger through this work. It is at once calligraphy, painting and poem.



Installation view

### ***Reading Landscape***

This installation work at the North Carolina Museum of Art developed out of the idea for *Landscape*. The museum gallery had some windows, beyond which you found a beautiful green landscape with a pond. So I used characters for 'water' and 'tree' and transferred and reconstructed the outdoor landscape inside the gallery space.

The exhibition room was a space for their permanent collection. Using Chinese characters, I extended the space. For instance, if there was a mountain depicted in the painting, I extended it outside of the painting frame by writing the character for 'mountain.' There were even birds flying out of the paintings. I did the same for rocks and rivers.



Installation view

### ***The Living Word***

This work also developed from the same idea. The work begins with the description of the word, 'bird,' taken from a Chinese dictionary written in simplified characters. The 'bird' then undergoes a transformation from the simplified (implemented by Mao Zedong) to *Kaishu*, *Lishu*, *Zhuanshu* and finally a pictograph. We can understand the culture of Chinese characters through this work. In this culture, the relationship between the concept of the word and the signified object is ambiguous.

The interesting contrast to this work is a work by Joseph Kosuth, an important conceptual artist. In his work, *One and Three Chairs*, the dictionary entry for chair is juxtaposed with a drawing of a chair, and a real chair. In the Western cultural system, the concept and the signified object have a clear comparative relationship.



Installation view

### ***Monkey Grasping the Moon***

In my new installation work, the word for monkey in twenty-one different languages is represented abstractly. Every word is designed by taking the cultural context of the region in consideration. There is one made according to the tradition of a Korean folk calligraphy. The Hebrew one is written from right to left. Also included are French and Indian languages.

The abstracted monkeys link with each other and together forms a long chain.

The space used to exhibit this work is also very unique. There is a high ceiling, and an opening at the top through which outdoor light penetrates, and a pond at the bottom. Considering every monkey is four feet long, you can imagine how high the space is.

This exhibition opened at a national museum in Washington D.C. immediately after the 911 attack of the World Trade Center in New York, which led many people to ponder on the issue of how humans can join hands with each other as they looked at this work. As you all know, in the basing story for this work, monkeys try to catch the moon that is reflected on the water at the bottom, but the moon disappears the moment they touch the water.



The design for the Korean word for “monkey”



Installation view

### 【Question from the Audience】

**Question 1:** Is it possible to decode the ‘New English Calligraphy’ if you know English or is there a certain rule needed?

**Xu Bing:** Perhaps it is easier for English speakers to read the letters. But as in any of my work, there is always a gap between the appearance and what is actually inside. Although they appear to be Chinese characters, they are English inside. The amalgamation of something completely different is at work here.

When I gave a lecture in the USA before, a person in the audience asked “weren’t you criticized for changing Chinese to English?” and I said “the fact is that I changed English to Chinese, so they are actually happy.” This work is neither English nor Chinese but it lies somewhere in between.

I live in the USA now and I have Chinese friends who live in the USA. One of them was extremely frustrated about his son would not learn Chinese. He wanted his son to retain his culture even living abroad. To our surprise, his son upon discovering ‘The New English Calligraphy,’ started to practice it, although he still resisted writing Chinese characters.

In China, it is common for people to use calligraphy by famous people in the company or restaurant logo. I often get asked in the United States to use the ‘New English Calligraphy’ as the logo. The Hong Kong University Press also uses the ‘New English Calligraphy’ in their logo.

Thus, we can say that the ‘New English Calligraphy’ is also promoting the culture and tradition of using calligraphy in masthead to the West.

**Question 2:** I think that the New English Calligraphy reflects the culture and customs carried in each language or letters. For instance, looking at Japanese names spelled out in the ‘New English Calligraphy,’ the letters A and O and diagonal lines strike out the

most. This is deeply connected to the structure of vowels and consonants in the Japanese language. I think that by replacing Japanese with English alphabets, the characteristics of Japanese become apparent in return, what do you think?

**Xu Bing:** It is true that there are many letters of A and O in Japanese and Japanese names. Such linguistic pattern is probably reflected in my work as well.

**Question 3:** As a Westerner, the realm of Chinese character seems forbidden and unapproachable. There is a huge wall in front of it. The New English Calligraphy also took me almost 20 minutes to figure out it was English. For someone like to me to study Chinese characters, how should one deal with this wall?



**Xu Bing:** The fact that you feel the presence of the wall tells that you have received a very solid education, for it does not take too long for children to learn the ‘New English Calligraphy.’ My works always deal with the issue of intellectuals. They spend their lifetime immersed in books. With my work such as the Book from the Sky, they find it extremely frustrating to encounter a book that is unreadable no matter how much effort they put in. So, in order to read the ‘New English Calligraphy,’ my advice is to put your education aside, and approach it with an attitude of recalibrating your pre-established concept of culture.

The ‘New English Calligraphy’ follows the rule of Chinese characters. Your stroke is always from top to bottom, left to right, from outside inward, and must fit within a square. Only a slight change has been made, but we feel this change to be drastic.

**Question 4:** I just saw your work *First Readers*. There were many shapes including a cloud-like or an ice-cream cone like shape with their names carved in English and Chinese, but why do they carry different names in the two languages?

**Xu Bing:** My previous works may have been rather intellectual or gave the impression of a solemn literati style. Some people say my work gained a bit more humor since my daughter was born 3 years ago. It is true that the birth of my daughter has given new inspirations in my creation.

My daughter is being raised in the United States and speaks in English and Chinese. Once she held a banana to her ear and said “Hello, daddy.” Unlike us, she still has not made a close linkage between objects and words. The relationship between the word or concept and the actual object has not been established yet. For her, this can be pooh or an ice cream cone at once. This can be a potato or a cloud.

The views of we adults are quite limited as if we are placed inside a box, but unlike us, their fields of view are open widely.

*Following the question and answer session, there was an open drawing to win the New English Calligraphy practice books and Chinese folk paper cuts. The forum ended with Xu Bing himself drawing the numbers and handing out the gifts. The excitement lingered on with the audience crowding around Xu Bing, asking for handshakes and*

*autographs, and viewing the works on exhibit.*



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\* The above text summarizes the lecture and remarks made by Mr. Xu Bing, the Arts and Culture Prize laureate of the 14th Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes 2003 at his forum.

**Website of Mr. Xu Bing** <http://www.xubing.com>