

# THIS HUNGRY OWL

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2011

## A Review of Xu Bing and Square Word Art

What I love about language  
Is what I love about fog:  
What comes between us and things  
Grants them shine.

- "Fog Suite", Mark Doty

This fall, the [Wallach Art Gallery](#) is showing a fantastic collection from Xu Bing, one of China's most prominent contemporary artists. Despite the growing number of talented Chinese artists exhibiting internationally, Xu Bing's work stands out for its provocative meditations on language. Using calligraphy, Xu Bing questions the possibilities and limitations of language and its writing systems. Within language, we invest all our cultural norms, expectations, politics, and histories, and Xu Bing plays with these linguistic systems of signification to astonishing effect.

Entitled "Square Word Art Calligraphy", the exhibit provides an expansive survey of Xu Bing's square word art, a style of writing which he invented. Using Chinese stroke patterns to create English letters, Bing transforms English words into Chinese doppelgangers. English letters are compacted into a square, and are made to resemble Chinese characters. They are best read top down and left to right, similar to how Chinese characters are typically written. Those who read Chinese may recognize similar stroke patterns in the words but are unable to read the word; those who read English may dismiss it as unreadable (which at first, very much seems so). The mutual sense of estrangement and then re-familiarization in reading square words provides a provocative

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This Hungry Owl is an occasional writer living in Brooklyn. Foraging for food is a major

theme in her life.

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window in testing linguistic boundaries.



In case you can't see the English letters, here's my nifty tracing of the words. (Hint: It's supposed to read, Square Word, Xu Bing.)



Square Word art calligraphy is an artistic sleight of hand. It is a play on not only linguistic, but cultural expectations. I went to an artist talk with Xu Bing several weeks ago, and he explained that when he paints square words, he is not sure if he is writing English or Chinese. He compared the process to that of an arranged marriage, except the spouses purposefully don't match. In contextualizing his work, Xu Bing was an unexpectedly thorough speaker, covering extensive ground from the Cultural Revolution, China in the 80s, the effect of Western art in China, the stunted art scene in cosmopolitan Chinese cities, and his time in New York with Ai Wei Wei.

Bing, a bit bookish with his wavy hair and round glasses, was born in Chongqing and lived in New York in the 90s. In 2008, he was appointed the vice president of the China Central Academy of Arts and is now based in Beijing. His first major work was "Book from the Sky" (天書), a mammoth compilation of books, scrolls, and paintings written in a Chinese looking script that Bing invented. The script was created to resemble Chinese characters, but was in fact devoid of any meaning. In creating a set of signifiers with no signified, the piece suggested that the Chinese government had evacuated all culture and meaning from society, leaving only a fictitiously legible memory of its past. The evacuation of meaning from textual characters implicated the use of the Chinese writing system as a source and medium of political power.

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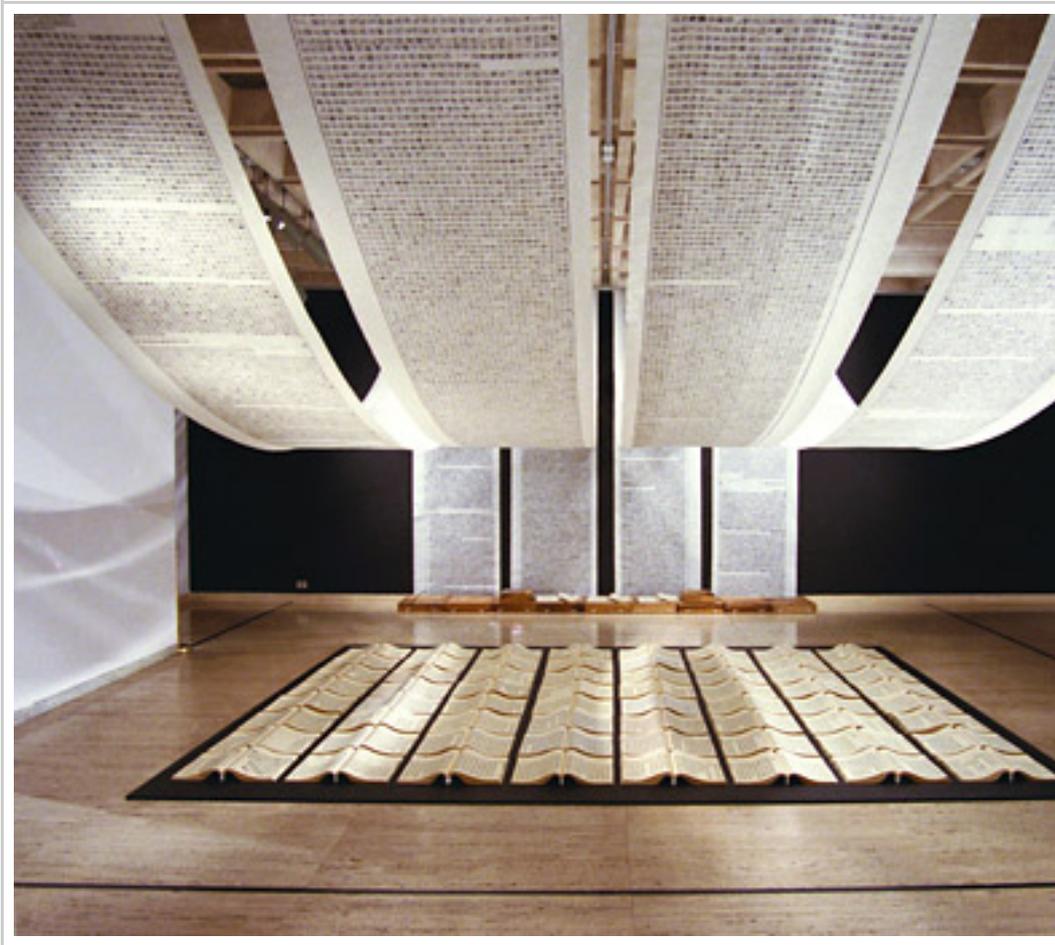
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Perhaps unsurprisingly, Xu Bing left for the United States shortly after the piece was shown in Beijing.

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This is Xu Bing's "Book from the Sky".



Over the years, Xu Bing has created a stunning portfolio of calligraphic and sculptural pieces. He is perhaps most well known for his square word art, which the Wallach Art Gallery surveys extensively in this new exhibit. The first gallery room is presented as a makeshift tableau of a Chinese calligraphy room. There are low rosewood tables with rice paper booklets of calligraphy paper and tiny bottles of ink. Visitors are encouraged to sit down on the floor pillows or wooden seats in tracing Bing's square word calligraphy with a brushes and ink. At the front, there is a blackboard with Bing's alphabet written in chalk, next to an American flag. The television that's on plays an educational video of how to write calligraphy, in which the woman's emotionless voice serves as a sad substitute for a live teacher.



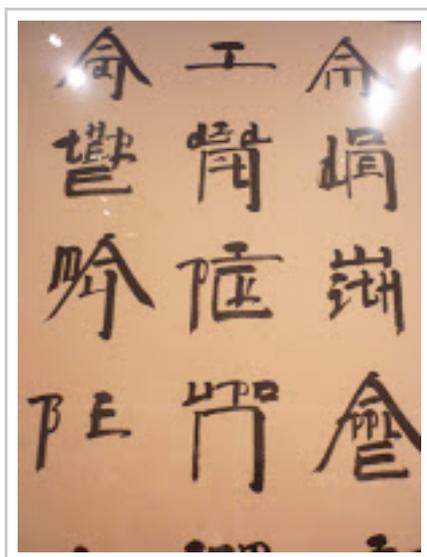
Past the initial classroom setting, the visitor is invited to read Xu Bing's square word art as best they can. In the neighboring space, expansive paintings hang over the walls, and it becomes clear how easily it is to see these words as Chinese writings. Xu Bing noted during the artist talk that he noticed how children seem to have the easiest time reading the words. He attributes this to the fact that as people grow older, they become entrenched in fixed notions of culture, ethnicity, and language, and it becomes increasingly difficult to see the world in a new way. This ability to see past typical, if not stereotypical, markers of culture and language is one which the Australian government assesses, as they recently contacted Xu Bing on using some of his work in an IQ test. And a first glimpse at his square word calligraphy is indeed an exercise in expanding one's cultural expectations of legibility. The visual similarity to Chinese can be jarring for the English speaker, but the moment of semantic understanding is one of victory and enchantment. Reading the words is like reading a puzzle; it can be equally frustrating and rewarding, but it is a lovely bewilderment.



Here's Xu Bing's "alphabetic" guide to writing square words.



Although Xu Bing manipulates linguistic expectations, and indeed situates Chinese/English as an antithesis, it is important to remember that it would be inaccurate to understand Chinese and English as completely opposite forms of writing. The myth that Chinese is an ideographic system of writing is one imagined by early European travelers and repeatedly perpetuated by modern writers. Although Chinese did indeed originate from pictographs, don't let the few remaining characters that vaguely resemble images (sun日, moon月, forest林) fool you! The vast majority of modern Chinese characters don't resemble anything in particular. In fact, Chinese is in fact a phonetic system of writing, and if you ever had the chance to ask the prominent linguist John DeFrancis, he would say that there was **never such a thing as an ideographic language**. Moreover, the irony in square words is the fact that in the digital age, Chinese is an increasingly Romanized language through pin yin. Chinese is, like all others, an evolving language.



Want to try reading some? Here's Xu Bing's rendition of Robert Frost's poem, "After Apple Picking".



And here's an example of how Xu Bing transformed the letters y and z into a Chinese version.



The sense of satisfaction in reading the square words arises, in part, from the stereotype of inscrutable Chinese symbols. For those who cannot read Chinese, the moment of legibility is one of conquering the *surfaces* of un-readability. In juxtaposing English and Chinese, Xu Bing ostensibly creates, as mentioned earlier, a “marriage of opposites”, as English is commonly portrayed as an alphabetic writing system, whereas Chinese is described as an ideographic system of symbols. The over-romanticized distance between English and Chinese is an incredibly overworked binary, but the idea seductively persists. The luscious strokes of Chinese calligraphy are a compelling visual departure from the careful print of English letters. The square words, in their masked legibility, suddenly become readable, as if Chinese has somehow just dropped its maddening shroud of inscrutability.

But what, or who, are we reading in these square words?

Xu Bing renders familiar American/European writers into his disingenuous Chinese script. He paints poems from Yeats, Pound, Bob Dylan, and Robert Frost, in addition to writings from Chinese writers like Zhu Xi. In capturing Chinese and English speaking writers through this medium, Xu Bing's work comments on how cultures engage in *reading others*. Xu Bing's work in this form has sometimes been reductively cast as an east meets west moment, in which his art is seen to function as some kind of cultural broker. But it is definitely more than just a bland blend of languages. As an aesthetic play on Chinese and English words, these square words implicate more than language, but ethnicity itself, as one's native language always implicates one's ethnicity. The simultaneity of his work as part Chinese and part English points towards the familiar yet uneasy tension that many Asian Americans may be familiar with – that unsettling feeling that we are read first as ethnic others, and not ourselves.

The square words, despite all their quixotic romance, are not a reflection of some happy hybrid in the Western world. Instead, they are meant to alienate readers in their seemingly impossible legibility. After all, language is an alienating experience. It is one of the most common boundaries between *us* and *them*. This is perhaps the most obvious takeaway from the gallery. For English speakers, the rooms full of Chinese looking script are beautiful yet unreadable; for Chinese speakers, the words are familiar and yet meaningless. The sense of estrangement in reading the square words is not unlike the sense of estrangement in learning, seeing, or hearing a new language. However, square words, despite all their Chinese trappings, are clearly English words, and this important aspect suggests an act of deception. The words are copy cats, although it is unclear if they are mimicking English or Chinese. Are they English words masquerading as Chinese, or vice versa?



In considering Xu Bing's square words in this way, we see how writing systems quickly take on the loaded baggage of ethnic encounters. The

play on linguistics is a play on cultural expectations, of being mis-read as some other. I bring this up because the square words remind me in many ways of recurring issues affecting Chinese Americans and Asian Americans. For Chinese Americans, as is often seen in other ethnic groups in Western societies, fidelity to one's "original" ethnicity (or ancestry) often functions as a litmus test for how authentically ethnic one is. Yet they are often caught in a double bind: they are either not Chinese enough (*twinkie, banana, sell out*) or they are too Chinese (*ESL kid, perpetual foreigner*). In both cases, Chinese Americans must mimic Chinese or American sensibilities and play their parts convincingly in order to successfully inhabit both cultures. Otherwise, they run the risk of becoming illegible altogether in failing to be recognized by their Chinese or American communities.

Like the square words, Chinese Americans are semantically trapped between cultures. The term, Chinese American, refers to geographical boundaries, even though the generations of kids following the ongoing waves of Chinese immigration may have never been to China or Asia. With the fall of Orientalist studies, ethnic studies became regional studies, but the seemingly innocuous ethnic qualifier via geography carried with it its own set of issues – namely, that the very term/category of Chinese American imposes an obligation to live up to that name, a dilemma which speaks to the heart of why bi-cultural Americans often feel so conflicted in their identities. This (sometimes) hyphenated term, Chinese American, demands that those who categorically fall in its camp must demonstrate and mimic ethnicity precisely because of this semantic, geographic tie. The square words, like hyphenated terms within identity politics, demonstrate a kind of purgatorial space, a stressed connection that seeks to sustain tenuous links to an ancestral place and the current situation. This underlying tension, the subtle demand that hyphenated Americans perform their ethnicity, points towards one last thought: that Chinese Americans, in failing to fully occupy their "Chinese-ness", are always copies of the original Chinese person in China, that the Chinese who are born abroad are mere look a-likes and never the real thing.

Xu Bing was born and raised in China, yet his work speaks to many issues propelling ethnic studies. He animates the tension between cultures, languages, and semantic signifiers to beautiful effect, radically transforming the form of a language to the contours of another. In seeing Xu Bing's work, it becomes clear how the grammatical *you* and *I* are literally built into language.

Language is an opening; it is a barrier. It is a far off place; it is home. In these beautifully disingenuous square words, we see phantoms of the

other, moving, hiding, dancing through language.

POSTED BY THIS HUNGRY OWL AT 7:44 PM 

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**SANA MIR** May 15, 2018 at 5:25 AM

**Chinese language**The varieties of Chinese are usually described by native speakers as dialects of a single Chinese language.

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