



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

Xu Bing: Thought and Method

Released July 20, 2018

From July 21 to October 18, 2018, UCCA presents “Xu Bing: Thought and Method,” running in the Great Hall, Central Gallery, Nave and Lobby. This exhibition marks Xu Bing’s most comprehensive retrospective in Beijing; it is a summation of an artistic career that spans more than four decades, including more than sixty works, comprising prints, drawings, installation art, and films, as well as documentary footage and archival material. It is also the first exhibition that UCCA mounts after the complete restoration of the Great Hall to its original 1800-square-meter dimensions. The name, “Thought and Method,” expresses UCCA’s desire to provide a systematic overview of Xu’s corpus, his methodology, and the motivation behind his artistic inquiry. To this end, the works under consideration here have been divided into three sections, indicative of major turning points in the artist’s thinking. Xu’s meditations on signification, textuality, and linguistic aporia are evoked in such artworks as *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991), *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990-1991), and “Background Story” (2004-present); his explorations of hybridity, difference, and translingual practice emerge through works like *A, B, C...* (1991), *Art for the People* (1999), and “Square Word Calligraphy” (1994-present); and his recent investigations on the economic and geopolitical changes that have swept China and the world in the last hundred years are made apparent in works like “Tobacco Project” (2000-present), *Phoenix* (2008-2013), *Book from the Ground* (2003-present), and his first feature-length film, *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017). The exhibition also presents one of Xu’s first artworks, *Duobaota, Calligraphy Practice* (1971), produced in middle school, and *Old Trees, Level Distance* (2018), the newest entry in the “Background Story” series, created specially for this exhibition.

One of the most influential artists on the international stage, Xu Bing has made a profound impact on the history of Chinese contemporary art with his prolific output, wide-ranging vision, and ever-evolving practice. Possessed with a keen sensitivity to the hesitations and ironies within different historical periods, Xu produces artworks that are bound closely to their social and cultural contexts, inspiring viewers to pause and reflect on their surroundings. As he says, “Wherever there are

Editorial Contacts:

Carmen Yuan

+86 10 5780 0258

+86 135 7098 6743

jiamin.yuan@ucca.org.cn

Basha Liu

+86 10 5780 0259

+86 188 1047 3833

yuting.liu@ucca.org.cn

Press material also available for
download from the UCCA website



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

people, there are questions. And wherever there are questions, there is art.” Xu’s vision is multiple and myriad: from the early explorations of culture, language, and traditional knowledge systems, to the investigations into cross-cultural contact and globalization in the nineties, to the recent meditations on technology and modernity in the 21st century. His search for novel methods of articulating new problems, his experimentation with a great number of media, both traditional and new, his conceptual rigor, and his unmistakable creative syntax have all served to make his name a metonym for Chinese contemporary art itself.

In the 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, Xu became one of China’s “sent-down youth,” moving to a commune on the outskirts of Beijing to learn from and assist local farmers. He and a few friends founded and hand-printed a journal, *Brilliant Mountain Flowers Magazine* (1975-1977), for which Xu served as the art editor, creating the cover art and designing different *hanzi* fonts, and acquiring a deep understanding of the structural makeup of Chinese characters. From the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, exploring the special properties of his chosen medium of woodcut art, he produced a series of miniature prints, the most important of which is *Shattered Jade* (1977-1983). In 1986, Xu created *Five Series of Repetitions* (1987-1988), which records the different stages in the genesis, and obliteration, of a print, and marks the decisive turn in Xu’s practice towards conceptualism. These provided the foundation for his later career. For the next five years, he created thousands of non-referential Song-style *hanzi*, hand-carved into individual pieces of movable type, which he typeset and bound in *Book from the Sky*. This has proven to be a defining work of the period; it evokes the doubt—that old and cherished signifiers had lost their referents—that prevailed among intellectuals in post-reform China, many of whom pored over the work, obsessively looking for a single, real character. Xu followed it up with the installation, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, composed of tremendous reams of paper on which he had made an ink rubbing of the Great Wall, a “truthful yet twisted replica” of a historical site, which interrogates the constructs of nation, territory, and heritage.



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

In the early 1990s, Xu emigrated to New York. Attempting to engage directly with Western norms, and chafing at the narrow confines of contemporary art, he embarked on a series of “cooperative endeavors” with non-human actors, such as animals. Xu attempted to “break free” of the constraints imposed by his country of origin, thereby assimilating himself to his new country of residence. Works like *American Silkworm Series* (1994-present), *Panda Zoo* (1998), and *Wild Zebra* (2002), all fuse Western forms with traditional Chinese elements, dealing with the frustration, and excitement, of transcultural contact. *A, B, C...* and *Post Testament* (1992-1993) seem to reflect the defamiliarizing effects of Xu Bing’s life as an émigré; both works begin as seemingly logical transpositions between different languages, or linguistic registers, but result in uncanny or absurd outcomes. These lexical explorations culminated in Xu’s “Square Word Calligraphy,” a refashioning of the English alphabet according to the structural logic of *hanzi*, and a testament to the transformative potential of linguistic impurity, forcing viewers to question their most basic epistemic assumptions.

Since 2000, Xu Bing’s concerns have shifted to globalization, surveillance, and industrial capital. *Tobacco Project* adopts an almost sociological perspective to scour the movements of international capital and the developments within global labor markets since the 1900s. A response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect* (2004-present) inquires into the potential of the material and the spiritual, on human welfare and political relations. *Book from the Ground*, initiated in 2003, is a response to the standardization of modern symbols, from airline safety manuals to internet emojis, and examines the possibility of an “intrinsic order” that underlies human communication. When Xu Bing returned to China, in 2007, the country’s rapid development inspired him to create a series of related artworks. *Mustard Seed Garden Landscape Scroll* (2010), *The Character of Characters* (2012), and *Landscape* (2013), meditate on *hanzi*, Chinese culture and contemporaneity. *Phoenix* seems to stand in for the complex relationship between development, capital, and workers both industrial and agricultural in the context of China’s rapid urbanization. Comprised entirely of surveillance camera footage, *Dragonfly Eyes* tells a tortuous melodrama in the



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

backdrop of an ever-expanding security network, questioning the nature of performance and reality.

Xu has proven a vigilant and farsighted observer of the era. His layered, interdisciplinary approach is evident in his artworks' multifaceted depth, and his renovation of old artistic language and creation of novel visual rhetoric, offering viewers numerous points from which to explore.

As UCCA Director Philip Tinari has said, "UCCA is particularly honored to mount the first comprehensive presentation work of Xu Bing in the city that he has called home for so much of his life. Rich in both ideas and form, Xu Bing's art helps us to think anew about individual creativity, China, and the world.

We are also delighted to present Xu Bing's early masterpiece, *Book from the Sky*, in the UCCA Nave, the same space where it was shown during UCCA's opening exhibition '85 New Wave in 2007. This is especially meaningful as this exhibition precedes our renovation, during which this gallery will be incorporated into our new entrance area."

About the Exhibition

"Xu Bing: Thought and Method" is curated by Philip Tinari and independent curator Feng Boyi, working with Bian Ka and Guo Xi from the UCCA exhibitions department; a design team comprised of Sun Hua, Zhao Yifeng, and Feng Yu, designed the exhibition space, custom-built to fit the spatial qualities of UCCA's architecture.

Rolex takes pleasure in supporting "Xu Bing: Thought and Method"; Xu served as an advisor in the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. BenQ provided video equipment support for the exhibition, and Genelec provided exclusive audio equipment support; United Art Museum is this exhibition's partner institution. Special thanks to Cao Xiaojing for supporting a series of children's workshops and classes based on this exhibition.



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

As part of the exhibition, UCCA will organize a major symposium on Xu Bing's life and work, chaired by Wu Hung, the Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, on August 25 and 26. The two-day conference will convene distinguished academics, young scholars, and many of the artist's longstanding interlocutors from within and outside of China to present original research. The scholarly contributions to this conference will be incorporated into a major English exhibition catalogue to be released in 2019.

A second Chinese-language publication will be produced in collaboration with YT Pictures, entitled *Art 101: Xu Bing*. The book is the first in YT's "Art 101" series, which centers on a set of questions posed to artists, helping them to relate better, and be more relatable, to readers. It will include introductions of ten key works by the artist alongside a conversation between Xu Bing and Philip Tinari, as well as a special section in which the artist responds to sixty questions from the public.

UCCA will also be presenting a set of curated public programs alongside the exhibition, centering on the artworks on display in "Xu Bing: Thought and Method," Chen Qing (paper artist), Dong Bingfeng (curator and researcher of film art), Guan Zhongping (popup book collector), Ouyang Jianghe (poet, critic, and author of poetry collection, *Phoenix*), and Dadawa (artist and musician), will be contributing performances or curation.

In collaboration with the home furnishing brand ZENS, UCCASTORE will be introducing a series of nine, limited-edition art products, such as a "Book from the Ground π Mug," and a "Book from the Sky Bookmark." This series is inspired by the most influential artworks in "Xu Bing: Thought and Method," and exemplifies the artist's intelligent, cross-cultural worldview.

During the exhibition opening, UCCA Director and CEO Philip Tinari, Xu Bing, and ZENS founder, Zhang Weiping, will jointly announce the release of these "Xu Bing: Thought and Method" limited-edition art products. Customers can purchase them in UCCASTORE, ZENS stores across China and the official ZENS online store.

798 Art District
No. 4 Jiuxianqiao Lu
Chaoyang District
Beijing, P.R. China 100015
T +86 10 5780 0200
F +86 10 5780 0220
www.ucca.org.cn

北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号
798艺术区
邮编100015



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

About the Artist

The work of Xu Bing (b. 1955, Chongqing, lives and works in Beijing and New York) has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C.; the British Museum, London; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Spain; Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; National Gallery of Prague, Czech Republic; and Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Additionally, Xu Bing has participated in the 45th, 51st, and 56th editions of the Venice Biennale, the Biennale of Sydney, and the Johannesburg Biennale, among other international exhibitions.

In 1999, Xu Bing was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in recognition of his “capacity to contribute importantly to society, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy.” In 2003, he was conferred the 14th Fukuoka Asian Culture Award for his “contribution to the development of Asian culture.” In 2004, he won the first Artes Mundi Prize, in Wales. In 2006, the Southern Graphics Council presented Xu with a lifetime achievement award in recognition of the fact that his “use of text, language and books has impacted the dialogue of the print and art worlds in significant ways.” In 2015, he was awarded the 2014 U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts for his efforts to promote cultural understanding through his artworks.

About UCCA

UCCA is China’s leading independent institution of contemporary art. Founded in 2007 out of a commitment to bring Chinese contemporary art into global dialogue, it has since become a cultural landmark for Beijing, a conduit for international exchange, and an incubator for new talent. Located at the heart of the 798 Art District, it welcomes more than one million visitors a year. Originally known as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, UCCA underwent a major restructuring in

798 Art District
No. 4 Jiuxianqiao Lu
Chaoyang District
Beijing, P.R. China 100015
T +86 10 5780 0200
F +86 10 5780 0220
www.ucca.org.cn

北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号
798艺术区
邮编100015



Ullens Center for
Contemporary Art
尤伦斯当代艺术中心

2017 and now operates as the UCCA Group, comprising two distinct entities: UCCA Foundation, a registered non-profit that organizes exhibitions and research, stages public programs, and undertakes community outreach; and UCCA Enterprises, a family of art-driven retail and educational ventures. UCCA's work grows from its core belief that new art can change lives, broaden perspectives, and enrich the conversation between China and the world.

www.ucca.org.cn

798 Art District
No. 4 Jiuxianqiao Lu
Chaoyang District
Beijing, P.R. China 100015
T +86 10 5780 0200
F +86 10 5780 0220
www.ucca.org.cn

北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路4号
798艺术区
邮编100015