

SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

For immediate release

EXHIBITION

Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground: Xu Bing's Book Works

March 3 — April 29, 2007

White Gallery

Please note: a Chinese-language version of this release is available.

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Lawrence, KS — The arts associated with bookmaking (calligraphy, writing and printing) have played a central role in the career of Xu Bing, one of the most significant artists to emerge from China in the years following the Cultural Revolution. ***Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground: Xu Bing's Book Works*** provides an inclusive overview of Xu Bing's involvement with the book as a format for artistic exploration. The exhibition has been organized to coincide with Xu Bing's Lifetime Achievement Award from the Southern Graphics Council during the group's annual meeting in Kansas City (March 21-25, 2007). A publication about the exhibition is made possible by the generous support of Arthur V. Neis. An April 26 lecture at the Spencer by Xu Bing is made possible by the Franklin D. Murphy Lecture Fund.

“While Xu Bing is understandably associated with other artists involved with language, there is more to his art than that,” says Steve Goddard, the Spencer’s senior curator of prints & drawings, who organized the exhibition. “He is also an activist who is concerned with larger issues of ecology, poverty and the connectedness of the peoples of the world.”

The artist’s best known work, *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991), which is usually exhibited as an installation piece, will be represented in the Spencer exhibition by the four volumes of printed text that constitute the book itself. The artist spent several years carving the 4,000 undecipherable character blocks used in printing the unreadable book, which proved to be highly controversial when exhibited in China in 1988 and 1989. *Book from the Sky* became emblematic of the New Wave in Chinese art, which was dealt a serious blow by the events of Tiananmen Square. Since his relocation in the United States in 1990 Xu Bing’s art has continued to challenge our assumptions about language. Some of his more recent works are decipherable by English readers or make use of internationally accessible symbols. Therefore, the exhibition will document the migration of Xu Bing’s book projects from the unintelligible to the readable.

“The two books look distinctly different,” Xu Bing says, “yet they share something in common—they treat everyone equally, regardless of one’s education level or language background. The *Book from the Sky* expresses my frustration toward existing languages; on the other hand, the *Book from the Ground* embodies my pursuit of a universal language. I know it is very ambitious, but trying is all that matters.”

In addition to *Book from the Sky*, the exhibition includes a magazine from the end of the Cultural Revolution with contributions by Xu Bing (*Lanman Shanhua Magazine*); a book that intertwines biblical and secular narrative (*Post-testament*); a volume with a printed title page and Braille contents (*Brailiterate*); a manual for writing in Xu Bing’s hybrid English/Chinese system (*Introduction to Square-Word Calligraphy*); a book made with the help of silkworms (*A Computer Printout Covered in Silk*); projects documented through bound postcards (*Lost Letters* and *Landscape*); a glass book (*Glass Dictionary*); books that take the form of quotations from Chairman Mao printed on cigarettes (*Red Book* from the *Tobacco Project*); and a book based on pictograms (*Book from the Ground*). Also exhibited is *Oxford Dictionary: Bird Definition Piece*, an ink-on-paper work that chronicles a constructed development of written forms for “bird” from pictogram to square-word format to letterpress text. The exhibition will also include two computer workstations with interactive programs developed by Xu Bing that elaborate his language-based Book Works.

Public Programs for Xu Bing's Book Works

All events are FREE and open to the public unless otherwise noted (\$).

3.8

Gallery Conversations / Ai-Lian Liu, intern in Asian Art, and Amanda Wright, graduate student in Art History / on *Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground: Xu Bing's Book Works* / 12:15 PM / White Gallery

3.29

Gallery Conversations / Amy McNair, art history, on "Xu Bing and the Living Word"/ 12:15 PM / White Gallery

3.31

Children's Art Appreciation class: "Handmade Books" / Learn how books and writing can be works of art by looking at the art of contemporary artist Xu Bing and create your own handmade book / 10:30 AM & 1:30 PM / \$ / Pre-registration required / Contact Lauren Kernes, education department, at 785-864-0137, smakids@ku.edu

4.26

Lecture: Artist Xu Bing / on *Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground: Xu Bing's Book Works* / 7 PM / Auditorium

-30-

Spencer Museum of Art

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Also find the Spencer...

- On the Web: www.spencerart.ku.edu
- E-mail: spencerart@ku.edu

Gallery hours

Tues., Wed., Fri., & Saturday 10 AM—5 PM
Thurs. 10 AM—9 PM
Sun. Noon—5 PM
Closed Monday

Museum Shop closes 30 minutes before the galleries close.

- Free parking in Lot 91 after 5 PM on weekdays and all day weekends, excepting home football games.
- Parking garage adjacent to Kansas Union is \$1 per hour weekdays, free on Saturdays and Sundays (but unavailable on home football games).