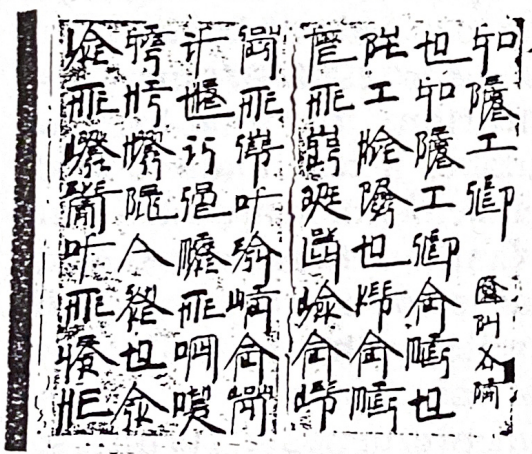


## Introduction

This exhibition features the installations of four, contemporary Chinese artists: Xu Bing, Longbin Chen, Zhao Suikang and Xing Fei. The Chinese, bound by the heritage of an enormous body of treasured books and an extremely complex system of writing, must face the challenge of communication in the future. The works in this exhibition focus on the nature of communication (either English or Chinese) in the context of a literary culture; the function of the book as a transmitter of knowledge; and the future of books within the current age of electronic communication.



# Curriculum Guide: Contemporary Art and the Literary Culture of China

## Background on the Artists & Descriptions of Installations

### Xu Bing

Xu Bing was born in 1955 in Chongqing, China. In 1974, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, the government sent Xu to the countryside to work on a farm, where he stayed for three years. He had finished high school and, like everyone else, was expected to undergo a re-education process. In 1987, he obtained his MFA from the Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing. Well-established as a print-maker in the early 1980s, Xu shifted his attention to the making of installations in 1985. Shortly after the disaster erupted in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and as the political situation became tense for China's vanguard artists, the Art Department at the University of

Wisconsin invited Xu to serve as an honorary fellow. Xu currently resides in New York.

Nearly all of Xu's works address some aspect of the literary culture - whether it be the written character, book form or silk writing surfaces. Xu's work in the exhibition will include *Case Study of New English Words* and *A,B,C. In Case Study for New English Words*, Xu created a new pictographic language which looks like Chinese but is actually comprised of letters of the English alphabet.



## Longbin Chen

Longbin Chen was born in Taipei, Taiwan in 1964. He received his MFA in 1994 from the School of Visual Arts in New York; BFA in 1988 from Tung-Hai University in Taiwan. In protest against our current "disposable" culture, Longbin recycles discarded books, newspapers and magazines by stacking, sawing and polishing them into sculptural forms. Longbin currently resides in New York.

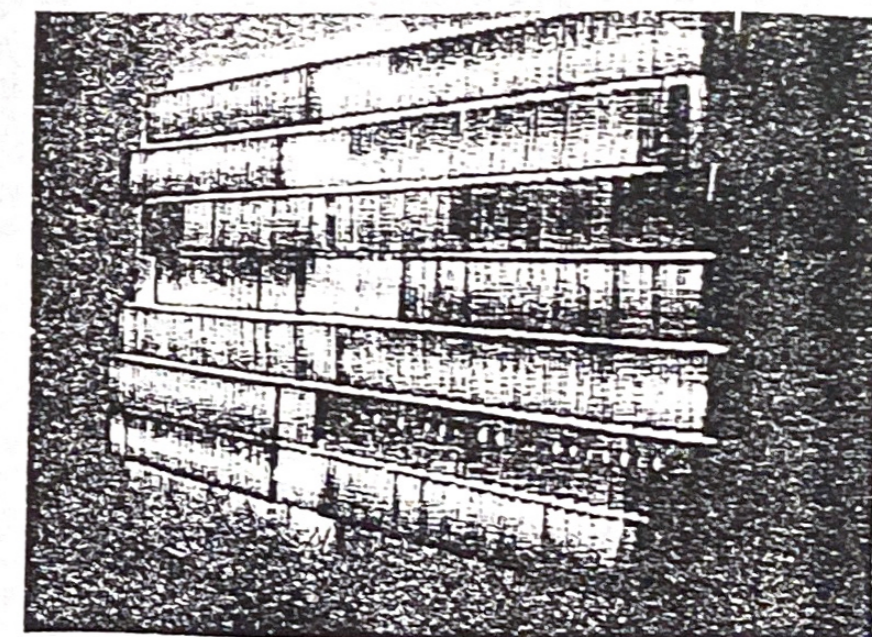
His works of art for the exhibition include *Big Face*, *Twist Angel*, *New Stone Age* and *Endless* a computer installation. *Big Face* (1995) is a sculpture shaped from books; *Twist Angel* (1995) is a celestial female form suspended from the ceiling, her spine a row of brightly-colored joined text books; *New Stone Age* (1995-97) includes imitation archaeological artifacts (axes, mallets and hammers) which are made out of fashion magazines and attached with string to wooden handles. The installation *Endless*, issues documents from two opposing printers; the printed papers coalesce at the center of the installation into a reclining female figure.

## Zhao Suikang

Zhao received his MFA in 1990 from the School of Visual Arts in New York; his BA from Shanghai Teachers' College, Shanghai, China. He currently teaches in the Fine Arts Department at the Fashion Institute of Technology and resides in New York. His work is often multi-lingual and expresses relationships between people and their means of communication. The artist uses sound as well as light projected on sheer materials to create an atmosphere in his installations.

In the exhibition, Zhao will feature *Fluorescent Pamphlet* and a computer installation. In *Fluorescent Pamphlet* (1992) religious texts are written on transparent plastic sheets and are extended across a wall like a Chinese folded book. Behind the written surfaces is horizontal fluorescent tubing that enlightens the religious script. The computer installation includes a computer surrounded by hundreds of strings hanging from the ceiling. An image of the world globe appears on

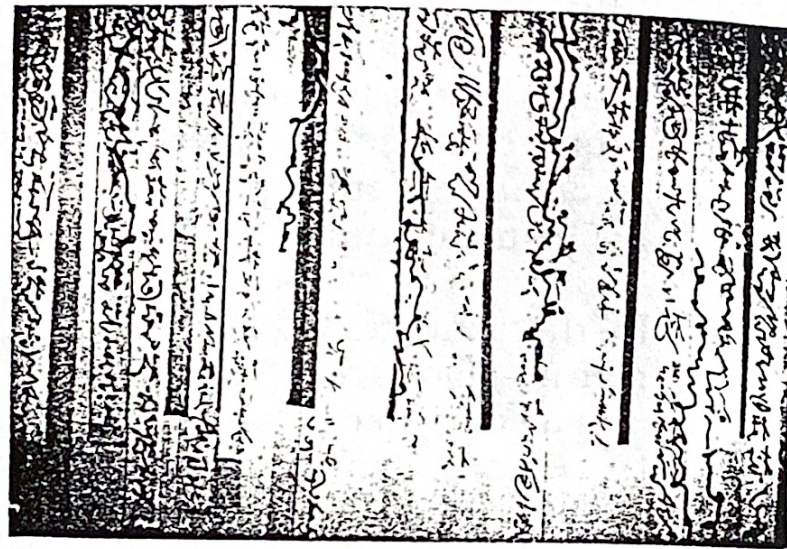
the computer screen, at the same time it is projected onto the strings.



## Xing Fei

Xing Fei was born in Beijing in 1958. As an art student in China, she won admission to the Central Academy of Art, graduating in 1982. In 1984, Xing Fei moved from Beijing to New York, where she currently resides. The artist describes her work by saying, "You could say that the Chinese part of me represents the natural, organic side to my work and New York is the formal or geometric side. They are like two lines which intertwine and mix together and somehow find their own balance."

In the exhibition, Xing Fei will exhibit a series of ink and gouache paintings entitled, *Red Book*, which includes poems celebrating the Yangtze River. She will also exhibit a calligraphy installation entitled, *Huai Su Writing*. In this installation, Xing recreates the distinguished "grass script" type of calligraphy of Huai Su (A.D. 725-775) whose style and movement are defined as free and powerful. Cut into long vertical strips, the text is hung from the ceiling to create a "forest" of calligraphy.



## Suggested Pre- and/or Post-Visit Activities

### Art

Artist, Longbin Chen recycles discarded books and other printed materials to create sculptures. Have your students research other artists (both contemporary artists and artists from history) who:

- recycle "garbage" to create art
- assemble "found" objects to create art
- use the earth itself to create art

What are some of the similarities and differences between these artists? Why did they use these materials to create their art?

In *Case Study for New English Words*, Xu Bing displays his pictographic language on rice paper scrolls. Make a Chinese horizontal scroll or hanging scroll. Attach a wooden dowel to the top of a piece of paper and attach yarn to the dowel for a hanger. After studying calligraphy (see "Math" section), illustrate the scrolls.

Have your students explore the four basic styles of Chinese calligraphy: seal writing, official script, walking script and running script. Use black tempera paint and brushes to illustrate these four styles.

### Poetry

Xing Fei's *Red Book* includes poetry based on the artist's observations of the Yangtze River. In the book, there are two layers of images: one is the calligraphy of the poems, the other is the red color wash along the writing, just like the Yangtze River itself. The artist writes, "As the poetry changes, so does the mood of the wash. I wanted the wash to be as strong as the calligraphy. I tried to weave the two

layers together instead of letting the calligraphy be the leading layer." Take your students on a walk to visit a nearby park. Ask your students to write a poem about this scene from nature. Then using watercolor paints, illustrate the poem, on the same paper - around their written words. Ask your students to let the paints express their words. For example, if strong, vivid adjectives are used, let the paints, also, be strong and vivid. If the tone of the poem is quiet and calm, let the watercolor paints form a transparent wash of color over the words. Later, collect all the pages and bind into a book. Display in your classroom.

## History/Social Studies

All of the artists in the exhibition create installations that confront the nature of communication and the future of books within our current age of electronic communication. In how many different ways do we communicate our thoughts and ideas to others? Working in small groups, have students define and illustrate various modes of communication. Examples can include: print media, television, electronic communications, phones, postal mail, art, etc.

Research Communism in China and how the government has tried to control the arts and public access to information throughout the 20th century. Significant events related to this include:

- May Fourth Incident, 1912, the first student movement in modern Chinese history
- Founding of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, 1921
- The Communist Revolution, 1949
- Cultural Revolution, 1966-76
- Tiananmen Square Disaster, 1989

## Math

Study the structural logic of Chinese calligraphy. An excellent resource is *Chinese Writing, An Introduction*, by Diane Wolff (NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975). To help compose and balance the character, it used to be written in a square. Make a nine-fold square sheet of writing paper over the nine-fold square. Practice placing the parts of each character so that the character is perfectly balanced in the square.

## Science

The discovery of paper in A.D. 105 is credited to a Chinese imperial court official named T'sai Lun. In 1892, the first factory for machine-made paper was established in Shanghai, China. Investigate the many steps involved in papermaking; assign small groups of students to perform the steps over several days; have students observe outcomes and document their findings. An excellent resource is *The Art and Craft of Paper-Making*, by Sophie Dawson (Asheville, North Carolina: Lark, 1992). The steps include the following:

- Find local plant sources (cellulose fiber) for making your own paper
- Soak, cook and ferment the raw fibers
- Beat and prepare the pulp
- Color the pulp, using natural sources, such as berries, bark, plant juices and leaves
- Form the sheets
- Press the sheets to remove as much water as possible
- Dry the paper
- Size and finish; Use the finished sheets to create a book

## Web Sites of Interest

*Lehman College Art Gallery*

<http://math240.lehman.cuny.edu/art/galleryinfo.html>

*East Asian Studies Center: Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana*

[www.easc.indiana.edu/](http://www.easc.indiana.edu/)

*Asia Society Education Center: New York City (AskAsia)*

[www.asiasociety.org/education/askasia.html](http://www.asiasociety.org/education/askasia.html)

*Encyclopedia Britannica online*

[www.eb.com](http://www.eb.com)

*Chinese Type Contemporary Art Online Magazine*

[www.chinese-art.com](http://www.chinese-art.com)

*The Center for Book Arts, New York City*

[www.minsky.com/cbamain.htm](http://www.minsky.com/cbamain.htm)

*Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art, Kyongju, Korea*

<http://lily.myongji.ac.kr/~tpark/sonje/emenu/exhibition/china/china1.html>

Provides information about a current Chinese contemporary art exhibition (*An Aspect of Chinese Contemporary Art: In Between Limits*), including the work Xu Bing.

*North Dakota Museum of Art*

[www.ndmoa.com/xubing.htm](http://www.ndmoa.com/xubing.htm)

Provides information about a past exhibition of the work of Xu Bing.

*Han-Shan Tang Books, London*

[www.hanshan.com/hst182/x1.html](http://www.hanshan.com/hst182/x1.html)

A book distributor which offers information about Xu Bing's artworks, *A Book From the Sky* and *Square Word*. Includes a background on Xu, exhibitions and a photograph of the artist.

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