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Anxiety of the Unknown in Art: Xu Bing's A Book from the Sky

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When I began this research project, I set out with a very clear idea of the subject I wanted to write on, as Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* has fascinated me for a long time and I had been waiting on the opportunity to research it more fully. What I was not sure about was the argument I would be tracing throughout my paper. Because of this, I began my research by trying to find as many scholarly articles or museum reviews of the piece as I could. While the piece is relatively recent in the scope of the history of art, and while it has long fascinated scholars and critics of the art world, I had trouble finding resources that I thought could be helpful in my paper. Many of the materials that I found seemed to only be surface-level interpretations that repeated similar information again and again, though the circumstances that these articles discussed were interesting and I knew that there had to be a way I could incorporate them into my paper argument. Similar to research projects I had completed in the past, I knew this paper would require me to scour for resources that would need to be puzzle-pieced together to form a picture of what I would discuss.

I knew at that point that I would have to narrow my search down to a specific argument in order to progress anywhere with my resource search. I decided that my next step would be to meet with my professor to see if he might be able to help me collect some of my thoughts into a clearer idea of what I specifically wanted to discuss in my paper. What interested me most about the work is the way interpretations of it were handled and then discussed by scholars in later articles. I decided I would look at the way the artwork was meant to function as emotionally reflective imagery, relying on the basis of the greater themes of interpretations that surrounded the work. I was able then to spend time finding more specific resources through Inter-Library loan, Jstor, and Ebsco, as well as search through the Hollins and Roanoke College collections of books on Chinese contemporary art once my focus was narrowed further. Once I reached this stage in my research, finding resources became easier because of Xu Bing's status as an important artist in both the Chinese and international art worlds. Had I not picked a contemporary artist of this status, especially out of East Asia, I would have had a harder time finding resources to complete my research as the subject of East Asian art is still underrepresented in scholarly work. At the same time, I purposely picked this topic because my research work on East Asian art will help to expand knowledge and information on it as a whole. I am aware of the challenge ahead of time and am able to sharpen my research skills each time because of it.

Anxiety of the Unknown in Art: Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*

In October 1988, at the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Beijing, Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* installation piece was first put on exhibition and was met with generally good reactions in the academic world.¹ However, over time, the ever-fluid shifts in society, culture, politics, philosophy, and linguistics have raised questions of whether the work acts as cultural commentary, as political commentary, as an active deconstruction of written language, or as commentary on obstruction of meaning.² *A Book from the Sky* is an altogether disorienting piece of installation art in which viewers are faced head-on by the questions it raises and are left actively seeking answers. Perhaps what people sometimes miss about the work is that *A Book from the Sky* is meant to raise these ever changing questions in those who view it but not directly answer them. By its destabilization of space and written language, and thus personal cultural conceptions, it is designed to reflect back the anxieties of peoples' personal cultural confusion and political uneasiness in their interpretations of the work.

A Book from the Sky (figs. 1, 2)³ is made up of Chinese pseudo-characters printed on hand-made books, long hanging scrolls, and large sheets of paper which mimic public newspapers found in China (fig. 5).⁴ The printed books were hand-bound in traditional Chinese style, meaning that they are constructed of rice paper with dark blue covers and held together by stitched binding. They also contain tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries,⁵ making them as true to real form as possible (figs. 6, 7, and 8).⁶ While the characters are printed in a traditional script style, they do not hold any meaning in the Chinese language because they do not exist as real characters. Xu Bing made them up and carved them into a moveable type on squares of wood. There are four thousand hand-carved characters in total.⁷

The piece is an aesthetically conservative and austere show of black-inked characters on heavy, off-white paper. In presentation, the books are laid out in a grid pattern on the floor where they lay opened to

¹ Wang, Sue. "The Chinese Academy and Modern Art: 1980-1990s (Part II): Last modified January 6, 2013. Accessed November 2, 2013. <http://en.cafa.com.cn/the-chinese-academy-and-modern-art-1980-1990s-part-ii.html>

² Harper, Glenn. "Exterior Form Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing." *Sculpture* 22, no. 1 (January 2003): page 51.

³ Leung, Simon. "Pseudo-Languages: A conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay." *Art Journal* 58, no 3, (autumn, 1999): page 89, and Wang, Sue. "The Chinese Academy and Modern Art: 1980-1990s (Part II)."

⁴ Asiart Archive. "Xu Bing 2009-07-18 Today Art Museum, Beijing." Accessed November 20, 2013. http://www.china1980s.org/en/interview_detail.aspx?interview_id=71

⁵ Souchou, Yao. "Books from heaven: Literary pleasure, Chinese cultural text and the 'struggle against forgetting'." *Australian Journal Of Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (August 1997): page 191.

⁶ Artstor. "Book from the Sky, Tianshu." Accessed November 13, 2013. <http://0-library.artstor.org.fintel.roanoke.edu/library/iv2.html?parent=true#>, <http://0-library.artstor.org.fintel.roanoke.edu/library/iv2.html?parent=true>

⁷ Frazier, David. "Xu Bing: Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground." *Art Asiapacific* no. 78 (May 2012): page 151.

various pages as if waiting to be read (fig. 3).⁸ Looking down the length of the books, it appears as if a field of birds has stopped in formation with their wings out. At one end, there is a low wooden platform where a few books sit, as if someone has just walked away from them. The newspaper prints are suspended on either side, seemingly endless lines of unreadable text hanging about the viewer. Overhead, the printed scrolls swoop down toward the books, breaking into the empty space between the paper ground and the paper sky (figs. 1, 2, 4).⁹

The way all three major elements of the piece are composed could easily make a viewer feel claustrophobic and like the space around them has started to become unstable. It is as if the inanimate paper has been animated, slowly creeping downward from above and inward from the sides. There is a definite mass to the hanging elements of the piece; the weight of the paper and ink is almost tangible, despite their compositional separation from the viewer. The whole affect is one of uneasiness. Taking into consideration that the characters cannot be read by anyone, there is not only destabilization of space, but also of the written word. The affect is even more intense on a viewer who expects to be able to read the characters as the realization slowly dawns upon them that there is no use trying to decipher the markings. The characters will never say anything comprehensible and this causes anxiety. Perhaps this is because people begin to feel insecure when they think they are being denied information and are left to wonder what information they are being denied, no matter how trivial.

It is necessary to understand the context in which Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* was created in order to comprehend why the piece functions as it does and why it receives so many varying interpretations. Xu Bing's play of written word in his art stems from his experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution and the period of social confusion that followed it. He first became sensitive to calligraphic forms because of his education in traditional writing before the start of the Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ During this time, political posters bearing painted messages in traditional calligraphy covered the streets. Xu Bing remarked in an interview that at the time, one could tell which messages were more important than others by the different script styles painted on the posters; a type of message hierarchy was created through calligraphic style and careful choice of characters.

⁸ PBS Flashpoint Archives. "Xu Bing's A Book from the Sky, 1988." Accessed November 4, 2013. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/xubing_a.html

⁹ Leung, Simon. "Pseudo-Languages: A conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay." Page 89, and Wang, Sue. "The Chinese Academy and Modern Art: 1980-1990s (Part II)."

¹⁰ Bing, Xu. "The Living Word." In *Hawai'i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, edited by Victor H. Mair, 642-645.

According to Xu Bing, one did not kill an enemy with weapons, but instead with words.¹¹ There is no doubt that the written word was highly powerful at the time.

Because of Xu Bing's experiences growing up in this environment, he became highly sensitive to the power of language, especially written language, as did many others of his generation. For a while during the Cultural Revolution, Xu Bing even spent a large part of his time working in the Propaganda Office in Beijing, using his calligraphy skills to paint such political posters.¹² Both of Xu Bing's parents were intellectuals, one a chair of the history department at Beijing University, and the other a library administrator.¹³ During this time in China, people who belonged to the intellectual "elite," like Bing's family, were deemed to be of bad blood. Xu Bing's parents were imprisoned and he was later sent to the countryside for three years to be reformed from his family's intellectual elite ways. There, Xu Bing took up the act of painting for the Communist Party to prove that he was being ideologically reformed.¹⁴ He also continued to put his calligraphy skills into practice for public use in the village where he was staying, while facing the full effects of the period's confusing "reforms" of culture.¹⁵

In a personal essay, Xu Bing notes that members of his generation were never steeped in orthodox Chinese cultural tradition because of Chairman Mao Zedong's reforms on many aspects of culture. This included the full extent of traditional Chinese writing. During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese writing system underwent major changes from Chairman Mao's reforms and it became clear just how much exceptional power words had. The project to simplify written Chinese characters started with the hope of increasing literacy by making characters easier to memorize, caused great confusion and seemed to be more digressive than progressive. This was largely because people spent time memorizing new simplified characters and learning which old characters had been done away with, only to have them changed or reverted the next year. This had considerable impacts upon many aspects of culture, as even those who were once able to read Chinese writing were suddenly facing a new inability to adequately read or write much of anything.¹⁶

¹¹ Chiu, Melissa. "Xu Bing Artist Notes". *Art and China's Revolution*, page 107-117.

¹² Bing, Xu. "The Living Word." In *Hawai'i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, edited by Victor H. Mair, 642-645.

¹³ Lui, Claire. "Being & Nothingness." *Print* 58, no. 2 (March 2004): page 91.

¹⁴ Chiu, Melissa. "Xu Bing Artist Notes". *Art and China's Revolution*, page 107-117.

¹⁵ Bing, Xu. "The Living Word." In *Hawai'i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, edited by Victor H. Mair, 642-645.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Xu Bing believes, and has certainly observed, that the written word directly influences modes of thinking, and to change it is to change a person's thinking; this idea directly applies to the changes that happened in the writing system during the Cultural Revolution. To Xu Bing, the changes in writing and in calligraphy seemed more a form of cultural conditioning than the form of art it was seen as in Chinese writing tradition; calligraphy no longer functioned as an art form and instead functioned as a tool with which the Communist Party conditioned its citizens to a new, selective culture. After the Cultural Revolution, when Xu Bing and others around him once again had access to books, other than Chairman Mao's Little Red Book and certain political texts, he consumed as much knowledgeable material from discussions and books as he could. The influx of information created chaos in the mind of the artist, and he decided to make a piece of work that reflected his personal feelings towards culture, which became *A Book from the Sky*.¹⁷ This deep confusion over cultural tradition still remains relatively recent in the minds of those who experienced it, such as Xu Bing, as well as in the minds of those in the international world. It certainly plays into the interpretations of *A Book from the Sky*, which mimics aspects of Chinese cultural tradition, from both Eastern and Western perspectives. The influences of this time period have definitely had a large impact on Xu Bing's work in general as an artist. This is certainly apparent in *A Book from the Sky*, specifically in the way Xu Bing chose to go about creating the work.

Xu Bing purposely chose to carve the printed characters in sharp and clear Song Dynasty style script, which has evolved over time to be seen as highly representative of the Han Chinese writing system¹⁸ and is similar to newsprint style script of the present (figs. 9 and 10).¹⁹ He wanted the work to be printed in order to avoid the use of calligraphy, which he sees as expressive and emotional, and to make the work as serious as possible in execution. Xu Bing's choice of using a public mode of communication—that of printed, formal script in a sort of newsprint style—made the work one that is void of the artist's direct expressive presence.²⁰ Because traces of the artist's hand—and thus expressive touch—are absent, there is no indication that *A Book from the Sky* is a work that has been made by any particular person. It appears as an anonymous collection of

¹⁷ Bing, Xu. "The Living Word." In *Hawai'i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, edited by Victor H. Mair, 642-645.

¹⁸ Harper, Glenn. "Exterior Form Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing." *Sculpture* 22, no. 1 (January 2003): page 48.

¹⁹ Wang, Sue. "The Chinese Academy and Modern Art: 1980-1990s (Part II)." and Xu Bing. "Book from the Sky, 1987-1991." Last Modified 2009. Accessed November 4, 2013. http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/projects/year/1987/book_from_the_sky

²⁰ Leung, Simon. "Pseudo-Languages: A conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay." Page 89.

print-work. This notion pushes the work squarely under the scrutiny of the public, making it a piece that beckons the artistic custody of the public as well. This aspect of the work plays a large role in its function as reflective imagery. The artist as author is “missing” from the work, which helps to minimize the effects of the artist’s inferred meaning on the interpretations made by the viewer. This absence drains any possible meaning that the printed text might hold and leaves behind a reflective “surface” for the viewer to examine without finding the hidden information that the viewer inevitably seeks.

It is highly possible that Xu Bing’s intent of placing the work directly in the public’s possession touches back to his own experiences of the Cultural Revolution. It is likely that because of the impacts of the politically tense atmosphere surrounding writing during that time, and the confusion caused by subsequent language reforms, Xu Bing chose to present the destabilized pseudo-characters in a form free of the expressiveness of calligraphy. He recognizes that the combination of the non-expressive script form and pseudo-characters opens space in interpreting the work which is free of direct inherent meaning. This enables *A Book from the Sky* to act as a reflective surface for the viewer’s personal anxieties. According to Xu Bing, it is not meant for a specifically Chinese public, but a public in general.²¹ The pseudo-characters in the piece do remain inaccessible to everyone who views them, yet the more one knows about the Chinese written language, the more complicated the work’s perceived meanings become.²² These interpretations are ultimately determined by a viewer’s projection of their personal anxieties, which are bounced off of the work and back onto the viewer. Because of this, a viewer’s amount of knowledge of Chinese history and cultural tradition, or even direct experience of it, certainly plays a large part in the viewer’s interpretations of the work.

The pseudo-characters in fact possess formal elements of real Chinese script. They are made up of real character elements and follow formal writing rules. Ultimately, they do not fail as writing because of their lack of direct meanings, but because their mixed state as various morphed characters and sound elements make them unpronounceable and incomprehensible. They are fascinating because they lie just at the edge of meaning in their state as muddled characters. Furthermore, they are actually an act of innovation and radicalization of Chinese script rather than a blatant destabilization and deconstruction of the Chinese writing tradition.²³ The

²¹ Ibid, page 91.

²² Frazier, David. "Xu Bing: Book from the Sky to Book from the Ground." Page 151.

²³ Nakatani, Hajime. "Imperious Griffonage: Xu Bing and the Graphic Regime." Art Journal 68, no. 3 (Fall2009 2009): 6-29.

pseudo-characters are examples of new possible combinations formed out of existing formal Chinese writing rules. The pseudo-characters act as proof of the perceivably infinite nature of the Chinese writing system, and thus can be seen as a form of innovation and radicalization. The feeling of infinite possibility that arises from this signification of innovation rather than deconstruction seems to ground itself in the sheer size, length, and weight of *A Book from the Sky*. There is something almost frightening about this notion, which perhaps manifests itself in viewers in one form or another. The piece still leaves the space around it compressed and viewers somewhat in a state of frustrated confusion.

When visitors to the gallery first see the work, it takes them a moment to realize that all the words are wrong.²⁴ This creates the disruption in habitual thinking patterns that Xu Bing hoped for in his work. One of the goals of his art is creating obstacles in thinking in order to form a sense of estrangement and unfamiliarity in the viewer. Xu Bing believes that those with the strongest cultural conceptions are often most affected by this disruption in familiar thought processes.²⁵ With *A Book from the Sky*, this means that viewers' ideas of what the text is likely to say are completely upset; their expectations are ruined. There is nothing there except fragments of familiar script elements and yards of paper. What is the artist trying to say with that? This issue of creating barriers in habitual thinking seems to be at the root of a lot of the criticism that has arisen over the piece, such as that in 1990 around the first anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident.²⁶ Xu Bing notes that it is often intellectuals, including art critics and scholars, who are most averse to having their thinking challenged and that the strongest criticisms of the work tend to come from those same intellectuals.²⁷ Because of the impact that historical events in China had, and still have, on the politically charged atmosphere, it is no wonder that politically charged criticism arises over the piece. As it has been mentioned, the more a viewer knows about Chinese cultural tradition and history, the more disorienting *A Book from the Sky* can be to them.

Despite the amount of political interpretation tied to the piece, the work was not meant to be overtly political. In an interview, Xu Bing mentioned that he does not usually think about political factors when he creates, but instead focuses on more concrete issues like methodology. However, Chinese society is, and was in the past, very politically charged, and the artist grew up immersed in that environment. Politics relating back to

²⁴ Leung, Simon. "Pseudo-Languages: A conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay." Page 88.

²⁵ Harper, Glenn. "Exterior Form Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing." page 49.

²⁶ Wang, Sue. "The Chinese Academy and Modern Art: 1980-1990s (Part II)."

²⁷ Harper, Glenn. "Exterior Form Interior Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing." page 49.

one's own experiences cannot ever be entirely avoided in one's thoughts and ideas by nature of human existence.²⁸ Considering the circumstances surrounding his creation of the work, it is understandable why political commentary is often pulled into discussion of the work. This is especially so if people who view *A Book from the Sky* are actively remembering the trials of the Cultural Revolution, from either a personal or international standpoint, and the power that the written Chinese language played in it. These questions of political meaning about the work are further examples of viewers reading their own anxieties in the meaning of the work.

Interestingly, Xu Bing has said in regard to his art-making that, "to me, creating art is the expression of one's sensitivity toward the state of society and culture, which leads to a redefinition or re-creation of the existing methodologies. When society changes, thinking changes, and naturally, art changes as well."²⁹ Naturally, one's sensitivity to the state of society and culture is inexorably linked to political sensitivity. This conception can be applied to the array of interpretations that seek to find meaning in *A Book from the Sky*. The changing sensitivities to society and culture, and thus politics, are made apparent by the viewer's changing perceptions. These are constantly redefining the methods by which people interpret this work of art. The level of sensitivity towards certain issues in society can easily be judged by the way people approach the unknown in art. Most often, it breeds anxiety and insecurity in the viewer. This is the case with *A Book from the Sky*.

The anxiety some face over the meaning of the work seems explainable when one examines the work from even a very base level. The repetitive process of making *A Book from the Sky* became a sort of meditative release for Xu Bing after his experiences during and at the end of the Cultural Revolution. It took him four years to complete the piece, yet the artist refers to it as a humorous gesture that bears text but no comprehensible content.³⁰ Perhaps part of the viewers' confusion over the meaning of the work stems from this notion. They are curious as to why someone would spend so much time and effort on a work that says nothing at all. They feel that the work *has to say something*, and they are uncomfortable until they determine what the hidden meaning may be, so they seek out answers in the artwork.

²⁸ Ibid, page 51.

²⁹ Ibid, page 51.

³⁰ Ibid, page 51.

Xu Bing said in an interview that once words are printed, they gain legitimacy as text, which implies that people feel the need to understand whatever authority stands behind the words. In regard to *A Book from the Sky*'s text specifically, he says that "these characters are devoid of any kind of personality and thus have no concrete implication or emotional significance."³¹ This quotation makes it clear that Xu Bing essentially created a work of text meant to reflect the viewers' projected understanding and feelings about their own environments back onto the viewer. This is possible because it lacks concrete implication and emotional significance. The obscure nature of the piece's content, and its deconstruction—or innovation, depending upon how one looks at it—of the written word create a deep space for the viewer to fill with meaning. Many of these meanings are not part of the artist's original meaning, but they are acceptable nonetheless by the nature of Xu Bing's intentions towards the fluidity of meaning in the piece. These meanings are reflections bouncing off the content-empty *A Book from the Sky* and back onto the viewer; this is ultimately the piece's artistic function.

The work *is* deeply based on Xu Bing's personal experiences with writing, culture, and politics. However, he designed it so that very little of his personal history comes through in the piece. It has been alleviated of inherent meaning nearly altogether. This allows viewers to substitute their own relationship with cultural confusion—including the power of language—and political uneasiness as interpretations of the artwork. Whether one's personal history is steeped in Western culture and politics or Eastern culture and politics, does not matter. Regardless, it is impossible to separate the ideas and questions one has regarding these concepts from one's interpretations of *A Book from the Sky*. The piece is meant to raise these questions, but not answer them directly. By its destabilization of space and written language, and thus personal cultural conceptions, *A Book from the Sky* is designed to come into dialogue with a viewer's personal questions about their world and to reflect back to them the anxieties they face within that world.

³¹ Ibid, page 48.

Image List

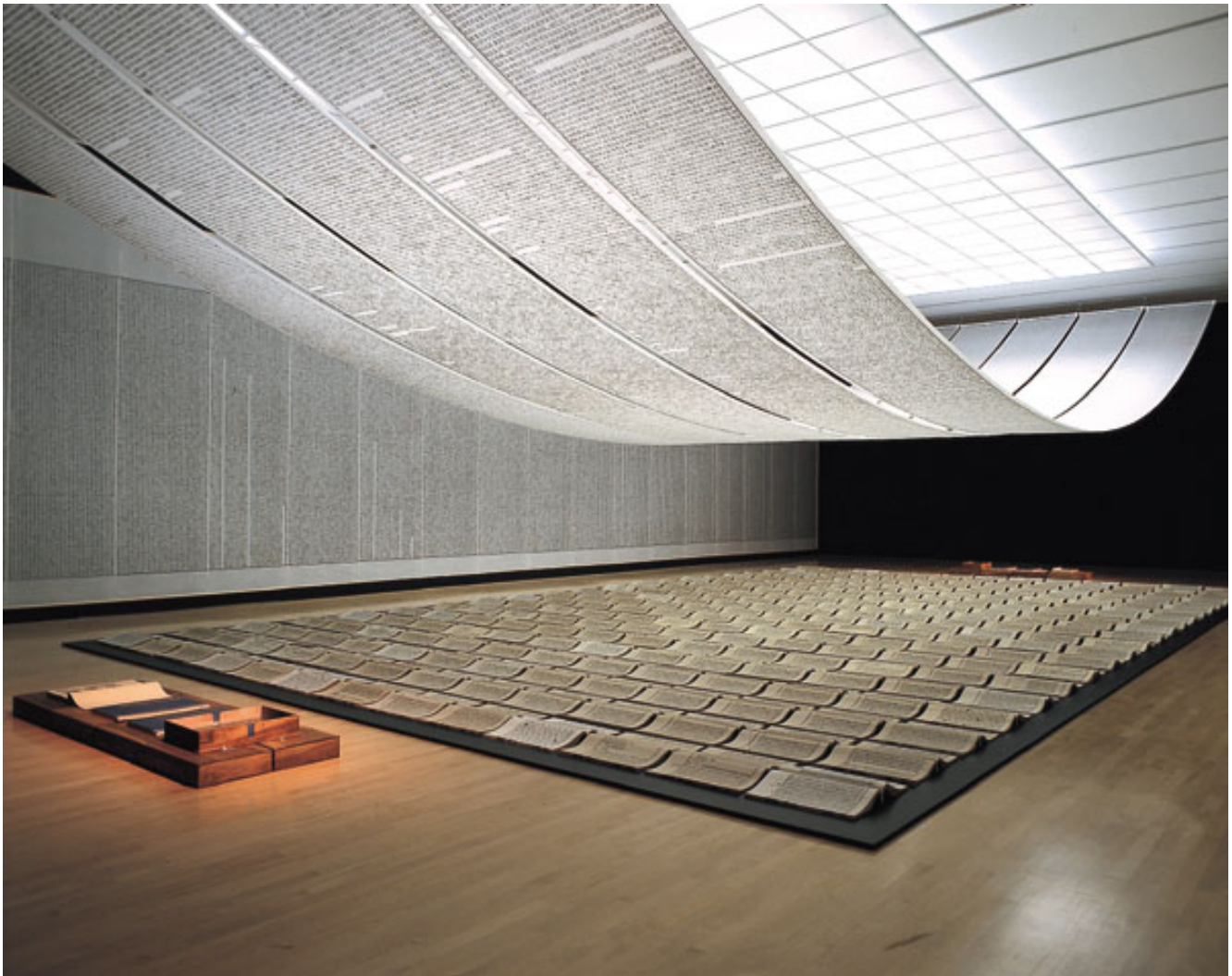


Figure 1

Xu Bing. *A Book from the Sky*, 1987-9 1. Installation with hand-printed books. Dimensions variable. Installation view, The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Figure 2

Xu Bing. Installation view of *A Book from the Sky*, 1999. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.



Figure 3

Xu Bing. *A Book from the Sky*, detail installation view, hand-printed books with thread binding; ink on paper, 1990.



Figure 4

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, detail installation view, printed scrolls, 1989.



Figure 5

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, detail installation view, newspapers and printed books, 1988. National Gallery of Fine arts, Beijing.

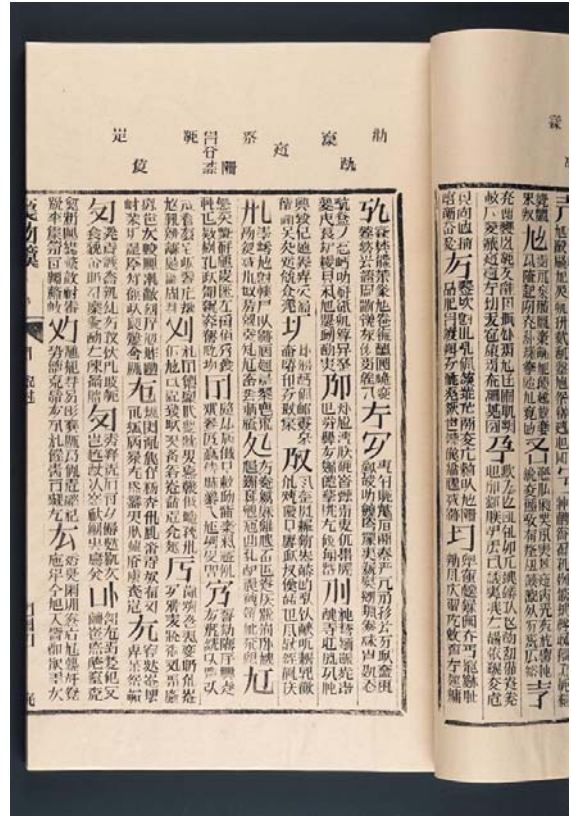
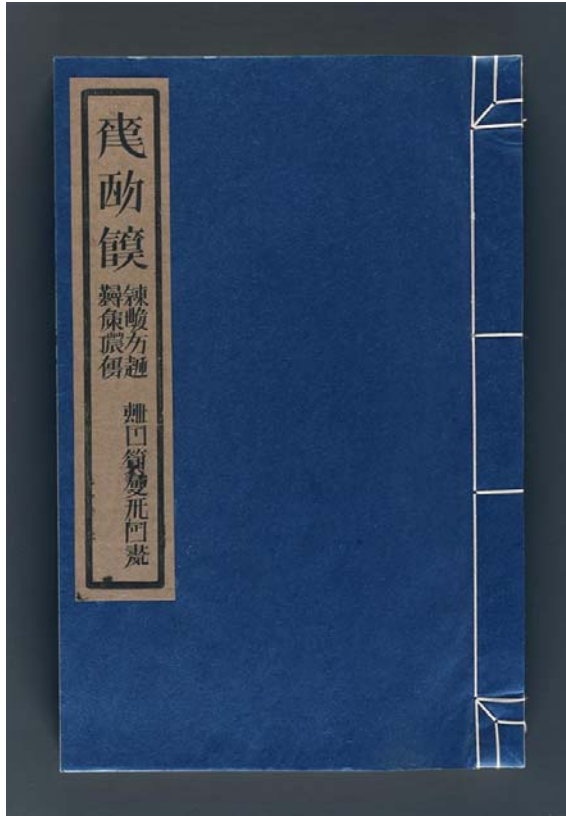


Figure 6, 7, and 8

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, details hand-printed books with thread binding; ink on paper, 1987-1991

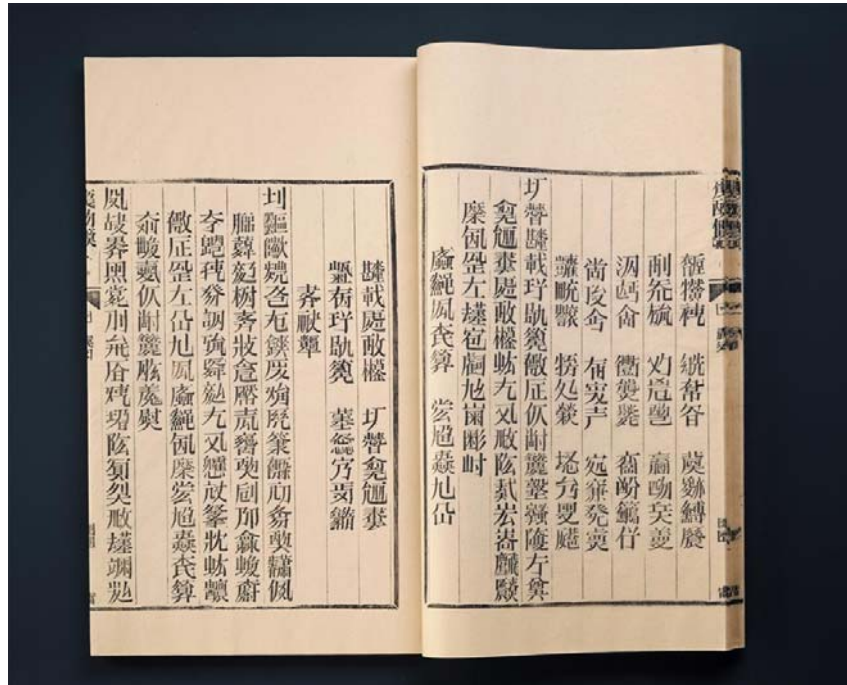




Figure 9

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, detail movable type blocks, carved pear wood, 1989.



Figure 10

Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*, detail carved pear wood block, 1987-1991.

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