

Writing on the wall

Chinese artist Xu Bing explores culture and the art of printed language

By GRAHAM SHEARING

I expect you all know by now that there are pigs at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. In the literal sense. It could have been Mr. Ed, Wishbone or Charlie the Chimp. Four legs, not simply porcine, will suffice, and, once installed, "they will come." Certainly, Americans love an animal to pet or gawk at, whether in the home, at the zoo or at the movies. And also the art gallery, even if the phenomenon remains something of a novelty.

I'm not sure that Xu Bing isn't doing himself a disservice in installing four pigs (that's how many I counted) on the fourth floor of the Wood Street Galleries. These piebald pigs, occasionally wearing furry masks, and thus aping the giant panda, are set in a large cage with wood shavings, rocks and bamboo trees against a monochrome backdrop of a Chinese scroll painting of a classical landscape. Bing hopes that this configuration will set off a chain reaction in the minds of the viewers, beginning with an awareness of the different cultural perceptions found in Chinese and Western societies. It may well do for some. The trouble is that small animals win your attention on their terms — no comedian

Xu Bing — Cultural Animal

▶ Through Oct. 10. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; noon to 7 p.m. Saturdays.

will appear on the same stage as one and not expect to be upstaged. A Chinese conceptual artist is likely to fare less well.

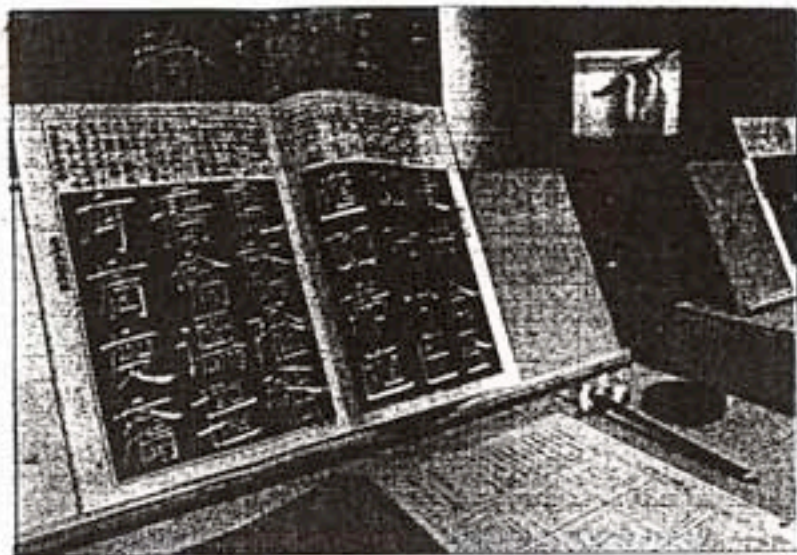
Silkworms, which also turned up at the opening, to my mind belong on mulberry trees, not in "arrangements" of mulberry leaves in a vase. As they munched their way around the arrangement, occasionally dropping off and risking being trodden underfoot by the well-heeled, gallery curator Murray Horne stood guard, waiting for silk to be spun, cocoons to be constructed, and so on, setting off another rash of Sino-American allusions. So far, two one-liners.

But Horne wins hands down for having produced "A Book from the Sky," Bing's signature piece, marvelously installed on the second floor of Wood Street. This work originally was shown at the Chinese Fine Arts Museum in Peking, where it was rapturously received by critics and, with equal vigor, condemned by the authorities. With formidable powers of endurance, Bing created an alternative, meaningless, Chinese alphabet, consisting of more than 4,000 characters, hand-carving each one with

- ▶ Free.
- ▶ Wood Street Galleries, 601 Wood St., Downtown.
- ▶ A symposium on exiled Chinese artists will be held at the Benedum Center, Downtown, at 5:30 p.m. Sept. 25.
- ▶ (412) 471-5605.

surpassing skill. Scrolls, folding books and wall texts were then diligently printed and manufactured by the most exacting of traditional methods, and in the gallery where they are set out, the effect is breathtaking. The hostility with which it was greeted caused Bing to leave China, moving from being a local dissident, a thorn in the flesh of the Chinese authorities, to being an expatriate dissident and a member of a highly visible diaspora.

Consider how "A Book from the Sky" subverts. It is a majestic spectacle of quasi-traditionalism, slowly worked up during the course of many years, something which, to the oriental mind and our own, suggests a profound seriousness of purpose. The labor-intensive practices of installation artist Ann Hamilton have been invoked in this connection. One might perhaps not spot, as a result, the fact that it makes use of the driest wit in its most subversive form. (We know that Bing likes a joke from his work elsewhere in the galleries.)



Ernie Hodson

Word up: Chinese artist Xu Bing's "Square Words: A New English Calligraphy" investigates the interplay between Eastern and Western cultures. The exhibit is at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

Thus, better than Hamilton — who suffers from a lack of humor — consider the case of that most recalcitrant of dissidents, Lord Berners, who was deeply opposed to World War II and whose cult novel, "Far from the Madding War," cites a labor-intensive work of supererogation that has to appeal to Bing. In that bleakly humorous novel, the heroine chooses her "war-work," by which her value to the nation was to be defined. She decides to collect supplies of wool for the war effort. This she achieves by picking apart, knot by knot, day by day, an extremely large and fine Persian carpet, in order to amass its desirable cache of wool. It is a supremely futile act for negligible ends, played out as an analogy to war. To the official mind, it is infuriating.

Back to Bing. "A Book from the Sky" is exactly a parallel to Berners, except that Berners makes a virtue of destruction whereas Bing monumentalizes the act of creating.

There is one more installation by Bing at Wood Street: "Square Words:

Pittsburgh Filmmakers will present a series of Chinese films from Sept. 25 through Oct. 1 at the Harris Theater, 809 Liberty Ave., Downtown. More info: (412) 682-4111.

A New English Calligraphy," where, in a classroom setting, English words can be transliterated into Chinese characters. Handwriting, to the Chinese, is a systematic tradition, a moral activity, something that simply is not grasped in the West. Calligraphy classes of a kind are being offered in conjunction with this installation, and further Bing's mission of exploring the cultural interface between East and West.

The exhibition ends Oct. 10. "Panda Zoo" and "Square Words: A New English Calligraphy" will shortly be presented in exhibitions in New York City.

Pittsburgh is, for once, first off the mark.