

# Arts

Edited by Kevin Kwong kevin.kwong@scmp.com

Chinese conceptual artist Xu Bing wants everyone to have a way with words. He talks to Kevin Kwong about the joy of text

# CHARACTER BUILDING

**SOME SEE SIGNS** in the recent spate of art biennales in the region – Shanghai, Singapore, Gwangju, Pusan and Taipei – of Asia's rising prominence in the international contemporary art scene. New York-based Chinese conceptual artist Xu Bing offers a different reading.

"People misunderstand and think biennales are important," says the 51-year-old. "But, other than taking place every two years, biennales have no other definition. There's no definition about what's important and what isn't."

That three biennales opened about the same time in September may have given the impression the Asian art scene is booming. In reality, it was just a convenient way for visitors from the west to attend all three events during the same trip, Xu says.

"What it does show is that Asia is eager to present to the western world a convenient window into its own art scene. It shows the eagerness to get the western world to recognize contemporary Asian art."

Not that Xu disapproves of biennales necessarily. "They can help promote contemporary art and enrich a city's cultural fabric," he says.

Xu is best known for works such as *Book from the Sky* (made up of hundreds of fictional Chinese characters) and *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (which features dust Xu collected on September 11 and won him the inaugural Wales Interna-

tional Visual Art Prize in 2004). He has been busy recently visiting the Shanghai biennale and participating in Singapore's equivalent.

He also gave a series of lectures about his works at the Hong Kong Baptist University's Academy of Visual Arts, is exhibiting in Asia and Europe, and is exhibiting his frontispiece for a special portfolio at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). The frontispiece features a line of text written in his trademark "square word calligraphy", which turns Roman alphabets or English words into Chinese-like characters. The exhibition, *Asian Contemporary Art in Print*, is a satellite event of the biennale and will run until November 25, before touring other cities, including Hong Kong.

Xu says it matters little which, or how many, art biennales he takes part in, but this year he chose to showcase two installations at Singapore's inaugural biennale (which ends today), titled *Magic Carpet* and *Prayer Carpet*.

The design of the former, on show at the National Museum, is based on a Qin Dynasty (221BC-206BC) calligraphic text, the *xuan ji tu*. The original is a grid that comprises 841 characters that can be read in different directions and is said to contain some 4,000 separate poems. "Reality can be read in many ways, through diverse layers of meanings and beliefs, and suggest further insights into truth," says the curatorial note. At the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, his *Prayer Carpet* features one huge character made up of letters that spell "belief".

Xu says he accepted the Singapore Biennale invitation not only because it came from artistic director Fumio Nanjo, a critic and director of the Mori Art Museum whom he holds in high regard, but also because he found the "belief" theme meaningful. "It's time for mankind to reflect on the very fundamental concept of what we believe in," Xu says. "Humans really need to re-evaluate and re-think their beliefs because, today, there are so many problems plaguing the world. We have come to a stage where people are disoriented about what standards they should adopt. I'm beginning to probe deeper into the subject in one of my works."

*Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* was created as a result of the September 11 attacks on New York City, which he saw from across the river in his Brooklyn studio. "I felt like I was watching a movie at that moment. I looked out of the window before the second plane hit the tower. It was like watching a Hollywood movie. It all happened right in front of me. Then, memories of Tiananmen Square came flooding back. I was in Beijing in 1989, teaching at the Academy of Fine Art. The school was quite close to Tiananmen Square. Some of my students were involved."

Born in Chongqing but raised in Beijing, Xu moved to the US after 1990, when his work was maligned by conservative art leaders in the backlash against avant-garde art that followed the Tiananmen crackdown.

Original, intellectual and rich in historical and cultural references, Xu's works



Xu Bing's work in progress *A Single Script* (right), on show at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart; and his piece for Singapore's inaugural biennale (above)

are widely exhibited today (*Book from the Sky* is part of the Hong Kong Museum of Art's collection), making him one of the most sought-after Chinese contemporary artists for museums and private collectors.

And just as he collected a bicycle flattened by a tank in Tiananmen Square and bottled air in China on the day the Sars death toll was running high, the artist gathered dust after the collapse of the World Trade Centre twin towers to record a significant moment in history – and to try to make sense of it. "With the collection of dust, I think it's very interesting to see how this common material means differently to different cultures and different beliefs as each has a different interpretation of it," he says.

In his latest project – a work in progress titled *A Single Script* and currently showing at Kunstmuseum Stuttgart in Germany as part of its Pictograms: The Loneliness of Signs exhibition – Xu seeks to break down cultural and social barriers using a tool he's more than familiar with: language. With the help of a computer programme, Xu and two assistants have produced a set of signs that can be read by anyone, irrespective of their cultural or educational background.

"I believe that the significance of a work doesn't lie in its resemblance to art, but in its ability to present a new perspective," says Xu. "I have created many works that are related to language. Today, I have used this new language to write a book that anyone living in the global village can understand. I call it *Book from the Earth*."

He says both *Book from the Sky*, which comprises illegible text, and *Book from the Earth* share a common theme: that, regardless of one's mother tongue or level of education, "they strive to treat everyone equally."

"*Book from the Sky* was an expression of my doubts regarding extant written languages. *Book from the Earth* is the expression of my quest for the ideal of a single script," Xu says. "Perhaps the idea behind this project is too ambitious, but we must make an attempt."



**"The significance of a work doesn't lie in its resemblance to art, but in its ability to present a new perspective"**



Photo: Dickson Lee

## All you knead is loaf, say Cabbage patch kids

Han Bing and Tatsumi Orimoto provide food for thought in shows celebrating creativity in China and Japan, writes Lisa Movius

"The fewer boundaries you accept – like country, home and possessions – the more love you have," says Han Bing, attempting to explain his performance art *Mating Season*, which features himself, clad in flesh-toned nylon shorts, caressing various inanimate objects. So far, these have included rocks, shoes, a shovel and a giant backhoe.

"I need love," Han says. "I can't say society needs love, just that I do. I love what is in life. And that's why I love China's rural folk, because I'm also from the countryside."

Based in Beijing, Han is from a small town in eastern China's Jiangsu Province. His various works affectionately and whimsically explore the changing nature of urban identity and particularly the situation of impoverished peasants and migrant labourers, China's silent majority.

Along with *Mating Season*, his series include one with bricks, the universal element of the demolition and construction frenzy, and another where he walks a cabbage like a pet dog.

Han's cabbages provide a tenuous thematic link with the works of Tatsumi Orimoto, Japan's so-called bread man and his exhibition mate at

Quotidian, a show at Shanghai's Jing Art Gallery. Quotidian Iconic and Quotidian Holy Mother, the titles given to Han's and Orimoto's respective sections, opened a fortnight ago and marked the second exhibition for the gallery, located in the western Minhang suburb.

Jing Art opened in September with a show of four Chinese and three Japanese artists. It's the China extension of Makii Masaru Fine Arts, which has been promoting contemporary artists in Tokyo since 1994.

Owned and funded by a stainless steel magnate with a background in the arts who is interested in the city's burgeoning art scene, the galleries were set up to facilitate more creative interaction between China and Japan.

"Japanese and Chinese artists' mutual understanding is too small," says general coordinator Julie Shu, a Dongbei native who lived in Japan for 13 years. "Both Chinese and Japanese artists are focused on the US, rather than each

other. We are geographically close but distant in dialogue. We need a space for that communication."

Exhibition curator Mari Furukawa, who works as an artist under the Chinese name of Wan Li says that whereas "the China-Japan issues are political, art doesn't need language. A lot of the Chinese who criticise Japan don't understand Japan. They don't know what it's like now that the old militarists have all died off. And the Japanese don't understand enough about China."

Furukawa says Chinese contemporary art is externally attractive, with not just ideas but also feelings. "Very simple objects express the most difficult and personal things," she says of Han, who she says is well known in China but not yet abroad, compared with Orimoto, whose reputation is strongest in the west.

Orimoto's trademark performances and photographs feature the artist with his head obscured under a pile of baguettes. "Bread is the cabbage of the west," Furukawa says. "All places have bread. So it allows a communication by frightening people, and you see their reactions. It's a way to harass the audience."

Orimoto's recent works (including those featured in Quotidian



Works by Han Bing (above) and Tatsumi Orimoto (left)

Holy Mother) are dedicated to and depict his elderly, Alzheimer's-stricken mother, looking non-plussed as he harasses her with pieces of bread. He was unable to attend the opening due to her health problems.

Han's artistic expression of love is more broadly directed, and he uses the term *amor mundi*, or love of the world. He has recently returned from visiting Japan, and photographs in the show include outrageously clad Japanese youths posing with his cabbages. The opening featured three Chinese cosplayers walking cabbages on leashes. Han will show in the US for the first time at the end of this year.

He says the cabbage is a potent symbol for him because it was grown in his home village. Now 32, Han left the countryside in 1998 to study art in Beijing, and initially was destitute, surviving by selling cabbages and other sundries between classes. Early in his stay, his flat was robbed, the thief taking his paintings and his sole cooking pot – which he minded more than the paintings. All they left was his stockpile of cabbage. "After that, all I had was a cabbage – but when I had nothing, I still had cabbage," he says with a smile.

Han's mission is to convey the situation of China's migrant labourers. "It's very strange – these peasant labourers aren't peasants and aren't labourers," he says. "The cost of living just gets higher and higher, so people have to leave their land and head to the cities to change their fate, but they're treated like equipment, or worse. And they have to coexist with the urban rich."

The ordinary objects such as bricks that Han uses as props are a large part of life. "What the migrant labourers are tearing down in the city is much nicer than what they could ever build at home," he says. "Their modernity consists of desperately trying to build what the government is desperately trying to tear down. Whose modernity is more valuable?"

*Quotidian Iconic and Quotidian Holy Mother*, Jing Art Gallery, Shanghai. Ends Nov 19

## soundbites

**Why are you involved in next month's International Festival for Inclusive Art?**

**Scottish solo percussionist and composer Evelyn Glennie:**

"This is an opportunity for me to carry the message that all people – no matter what their challenges – can participate in the arts. It's a chance to meet performers and creative people from other parts of the world, so we can exchange ideas, learn from each other and try to inspire each other. This is an important festival to display real integration and show there are no boundaries to what people can do."

**Tell us what you'll be doing:**

My programme will feature conventional percussion instruments, with my piano

accompanist, Philip Smith. The repertoire will be varied and will feature works by living composers from Japan, New Zealand, the US and Serbia. There will be a mixture of melodic percussion such as *marimba* and non-pitched percussion such as the drum kit. There will also be a well-known piece by Steve Reich called *Clapping Music*, which is normally for two players, but I'll play it by myself using wood blocks instead of two pairs of hands clapping.

*International Festival for Inclusive Art Gala Performance, featuring Evelyn Glennie, violinist Yao Jue and Cantonese Opera singer Koi Ming-fai, Dec 3 7.15pm, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Concert Hall, HK\$80. Inquiries: 2855 9548*

