

The Sixteen Years between Xu Bing and Cornell: From The Living Word to The Character of Characters

by Ruixuan Li

"A lot of my work is putting obstacles in the way of people's inertia thinking. It is like to have a computer restarted after it crashes, and then you get new knowledge," Chinese artist Xu Bing summed up his past work in an opening speech at Cornell University's 2018 CCA Biennial, which is curated by Professor Timothy Murray. Xu Bing's video installation *The Character of Characters* (2012) is displayed in an exhibition room at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art as one of the most important pieces of the Biennial. This is Xu Bing's first exhibition at Cornell since he was hired as an A. D. White Professor-at-Large in 2015, however, there has been a long history of his collaboration with Cornell. In 2002, in the same gallery, Xu Bing was commissioned by Cornell to create the first English version of the *Living Word*, when he just finished a major retrospective exhibition at Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington DC. Buzz Spector, head of the arts department at that time, who loves conceptual works and was studying artist's books as well as characters, had a lot of academic cooperation with Xu Bing.

The long term friendship and cooperation between Murray and Xu Bing started from a dinner in New York City's Chinatown more than 10 years ago. The gathering was organized by Yang Shin-Yi, who was studying for a PhD in art history at Cornell. Two other well-known artists, Zhang Huan and Lin Lin, also attended the dinner. In 2002, Murray established the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, and Xu Bing donated some of his books to the collection in the very beginning. In 2013, the International Symposium on "Xu Bing: Background Story" was held in Beijing, where Murray delivered a speech entitled "Frosted Surfaces of Recycling: Archival Events, or The Engaged Aesthetics of Xu Bing", and co-edited a collection of Western scholars' criticism on that piece of work with Yang Shin-Yi. In 2015, Xu Bing was nominated and then granted the Professor-at-Large with the assistance of Murray and Ellen Avril, the curator of Johnson Art Museum and its Asian Art department. Before then, this role had never been given to the arts industry. This year, Xu Bing's 40-year retrospective exhibition *Thought and Methods* was presented at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, where Murray attended an international seminar along the show.

As a member of the Ivy League, Cornell University has always been seen as an ideal institute by Chinese scholars. The most well-known Chinese alumni from Cornell is the leader of the Chinese New Culture Movement, Hu Shi. Hu Shi, who was famous for his promotion of Chinese Language's Modernization after his return from the United States, even joined the radical scholars of the time in proposing the Latinization of Chinese characters. *The Character of Characters* reminds Cornell audiences of Hu Shi. At Xu Bing's lecture, it was inevitable that an audience asked about his views on the theory of "abolition of Chinese character". If Chinese characters were abolished back then, what would happen to the Chinese people later? "Then I think it would be a disaster," Xu Bing said. "In fact, there are so many valuable things in Chinese characters that we don't see the values in it for one or two hundred years, and today's digital age makes those values manifest. He took the speed of typing as an example: because each character contains a wealth of information, Chinese input speed is nearly 1/3 faster than English input. Xu Bing mentioned that the Communist Party had issued full pinyin magazines in Yan' An with great experimental spirit in order to enable farmers to read, but it can still hardly substitute the communicative function of Chinese characters. "Hu Shi's generation saw the development

of the West and then excessively devalued the Chinese traditions. But we now realize that the Chinese system has a unique advantage in the electronic era.”

The Character of Characters deliberates the evolution history of Chinese characters, and at the same time explains how the writing style has caused Chinese people’s personalities, such as looking at the bigger picture, copying classics, and pursuing famous brands, etc. Xu Bing thinks it is for sure that the popularity of mobile electronics would change Chinese people’s cultural character and their way of thinking. In his view, the wubi input method which is based on the shape of Chinese characters is remarkable, but it is difficult to be popularized. When generations of people use pinyin input without directly writing Chinese, the particularity of Chinese cultural character will certainly be gradually weakened or lost. But this loss "is not a pity. It is a natural selection." He also mentioned that the order of writing characters presented through the traffic scene in the animation is actually Chinese people belief in the "unity of heaven and man, and living in line with nature."

In addition to Xu Bing, Murray and the Cornell Council for the Arts have invited well-known American artists, such as Carrie Mae Weems and Ni ' Ja Whitson to the Biennial, and commissioned the university's teachers and students to together create nearly 20 installations and performing projects. Xu Bing summed up three advantages of the university's small-scale Biennial: First, interdisciplinary work-creating can introduce fresh blood from outside of the art world; Second, participating artists can gain inspiration in the creating process, dig into the various disciplines of the university, and facilitate the development in their own fields. He also stressed that the exhibition has greatly utilized Cornell University's comprehensive, multi-field and cross-boundary academic advantages: Artists create works through mutual assistance and cooperation, and closely rely on each other when dealing with and developing the technology.

The arrival of Xu Bing has also brought a lot of inspiration and enlightenment to Cornell's students. In addition to his opening speech, Xu Bing attended professional courses and interact ed with students. He shared his past works, including the most recent *Dragonfly Eyes* with students from the Milstein Program in Technology and Humanity. All the footage of the film comes from surveillance cameras in public places, and the artist fictitious a story and narrates it through selecting and editing the footage. Millstein is a cross-disciplinary program organized by the College of Arts and Sciences in collaboration with Cornell Tech, and students with strong interests in technology and humanities were deeply impressed by Xu Bing's ability to transform something as seemingly modern and mundane as security camera footage into a completely original art form. "What I found most intriguing was Xu’s ability to provide multiple meanings behind a particular character," says one of the students. In another Digital Media class, the group of undergraduate art students watched *The Character of Characters* along with Xu Bing and discussed it. When being asked how new media art would develop, Xu Bing said that the new media art is now too focused on the technological part, while its art part is comparatively too weak. However, since the technology is iterating rapidly, the new media art which is too dependent on technology would be quickly regarded as old art.

Xu Bing has always been very concerned about the social issues that happen at the moment, and his words “Where there is a problem, there is an art” have been cited many times. "The creativity of the art system itself is far less than the creativity of the social scene, ” he explains, "and the new idea is driven by your sensitivity to the social problems of your time, so you have something new to say." Xu Bing believes that previous masters create new words at their times, which can only be referred by people from our time rather than be directly applied to current

problems. It is because of the existing new problems that artists have to use new methods to express their attitudes — That is how new art language is produced. Then, is artist's job to ask questions or solve problems? "No, art doesn't have that much power," Xu Bing said. In his understanding, the ultimate mission for artists is to transform the old art methodology to new ones, or to search for new artistic methods. "My own method is to use special techniques, which may be quite comprehensive and come from an unknown field — it could be a kind of material or a cluster of air, to make a work that can hardly be categorized with our existing knowledge. I leave the work to the art world, to the cultural community, to the critics, or the philosophers, and let them to find clues and put forward new concepts. That is how I let art take effect."

The cutting-edge technology could possibly be used as Xu Bing's new art techniques, and Cornell University has a lot of appealing ones, such as the technology of connecting a fistula to a cow's stomach, allowing people to study the internal organs by observing and touching. Two years ago, Xu Bing visited the famous 3D printing lab at the university. This time, he visited the Cornell Plantations. "Their mission is to explore the relationship between human's cultural diversity and plant diversity. In fact, the symbolization between plant types and cultures is an interesting way of thinking," Xu Bing said. By the end of year 2021, he plans to visit the plantation again, because the materials there are "a new creative inspiration" for him.

(This article is organized by the author according to the interview with Xu Bing and the record of the scene.)