Over twenty years have passed since Xu Bing began work on a set of beautifully crafted volumes printed from pieces of wooden type he designed and carved. When first exhibited in Beijing in 1988, these volumes, known collectively as Book from the Sky, appeared to consist of thousands of pages of perfectly legible texts (figs. 10, 17, 19, 20). But when readers, or rather, would-be-readers, took a closer look, everything changed. Instead of real characters, Book from the Sky was seen to contain nothing but meaningless graphs invented by Xu Bing. As this transformation of apparent meaning into revealed nonsense took place, there began a dialogue between Xu Bing and the viewers of his work, a dialogue that continues to this day, in which he shows us one thing and then compels us to discover something very different.

Book from the Sky holds out the promise of legibility and then defeats all attempts to find hidden semantic content. Various works that feature Xu Bing’s square word calligraphy, do just the opposite. In this form of writing, graphs assembled from the basic strokes of brush-written calligraphy appear to be Chinese characters, with a bit of practice, however, they can be read as what they really are: Roman letters spelling the words of nursery rhymes, sayings from Chairman Mao, or exhibition titles (fig. 102). Bird Language, from 2003, consists of a set of metal birdcages, but the skeins of wire that form the sides of the cages are something more: transcriptions of signs have turned into units of a new script, legible to speakers of any language, that Xu Bing has used to write the opening of a novel about a man experiencing the frustrations of travel in a tense urban environment (fig. XXXIII).

In other works, Xu Bing turns language into pictures and pictures into language. His drawings produced between 1999 and 2004, titled collectively Landscape, represent spacious vistas rendered in firm ink strokes on paper, but the landscape elements are actually Chinese characters arranged so that the character shi ‘field’ or ‘stone’, for example, repeated in various sizes, indicates cliffs or embankments, while clusters of the character cao ‘grass’ or ‘vegetation’, familiar pictorial forms that gradually reveal unexpected semantic content appear in one of Xu Bing’s most recent projects, Book from the Ground. For this ongoing experimental work, shown in installations that have included wall texts and computer screens, Xu Bing collected pre-existing logos that constitute a banal ‘lingua franca’ of international travel and advertising, displayed in airports and other public spaces. In his hands, these familiar signs have turned into units of a new script, legible to speakers of any language, that Xu Bing has used to write the opening of a novel about a man experiencing the frustrations of travel in a tense urban environment (fig. 100).

Like a quietly efficient demolition expert, Xu Bing reduces to rubble the normal logic through which words, pictures, and everyday objects are perceived and understood. He gives us in return brilliant hybrids: printed graphs that resemble Chinese but are not, elegant Chinese brush-strokes that spell English words; landscapes made out of writing. In these works, Xu Bing stages recurring dramas of transformation, insisting that we witness one thing turning into something else. But he also makes sure that the transformations are never complete. Forms and meanings oscillate and change, flipping back and forth between one state and another, writing and nonsense, Chinese and English, pictures and words.
In addition to obscuring boundaries between different languages and different forms of visual communication, Xu Bing’s protean inventions embody an essential insight into the nature of art objects and how they come into being. Through the transforming intervention of the artist, a material substance becomes the vehicle of an immaterial concept transcending the immediate physical presence of the object presented to the viewer. In describing this phenomenon, Xu Bing has cited a precept in Sanki’s Art of War: ‘make a noise in the east, attack in the west.’ The material substance of the work of art – the ‘noise in the east’ – is like a strategic feint that facilitates the attack in the west – the production in the viewer’s mind of a flash of insight or feeling that is the artist’s ultimate goal. But these dual elements, material and immaterial, the ‘noise’ and the ‘attack’, exist and are perceived at the same time, and this duality or simultaneity is also an essential property of a work of art.

In pictorial art, a state of simultaneity arises from the fact that pictures show the viewer both a virtual, fictive subject and a configuration of colour, tone, and lines created in ink, paint, or some other medium. To be seen as a picture, a painting or drawing must be perceived as both form-embodying image and a marked surface; otherwise, there is no way to distinguish between looking at a picture of something and looking at something real. In the words of Michael Podro, ‘the subject [of the picture] must … be seen and conceived as distinct from the medium in which it is represented, unless we suffer delusion.’ The philosopher Jennifer Church explains Podro, ‘the subject (of the picture) must … be seen and conceived as distinct from the medium in which it is represented, unless we suffer delusion.’ The philosopher Jennifer Church explains Podro, ‘the subject (of the picture) must … be seen and conceived as distinct from the medium in which it is represented, unless we suffer delusion.’

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XXXV
Anonymous, Landscape, Momoyama period, Japan, c. 1600, six-panel screen, ink and light colours on paper, 150 - 360 cm. Stolen by the Red Army during the Second World War; whereabouts unknown.

XXXVI
Dai Jin (1388–1462), Birthday Celebration in the Pine Pavilion, Ming dynasty, China, second half of fifteenth century, hanging scroll, ink and light colour on silk, 183 - 108 cm. Stolen by the Red Army during the Second World War; whereabouts unknown.

XXXVII
Although the resulting images look like shadows, and Xu Bing has spoken of these works as attempts to capture the ‘shadow’ or spirit of landscape, he points out that actual shadows play only a small role in the installations: it is the shapes of the objects themselves seen through the glass that create the virtual landscapes. Most remarkably, the installations employ one medium – a bizarre form of relief sculpture on the verso side of the glass – to create the illusion, on the recto, not of landscape but of landscape form. Two later Background Story installations to appear in the correct orientation on the opposite side, the original compositions on which they are based have to be flipped or reversed. Evidence of this process in action can be seen in a photograph taken during the production of the installation in Gwangju, where reversed print-outs of the Huh Baek-ryun painting are taped to the glass as visual guides for Xu Bing and his assistants as they go about their work (fig. xl).11

Xu Bing’s re-creations of paintings stolen from the Museum of East Asian Art in Berlin were like disembodied spirits summoned back fleetingly in an altered but recognizable corporate form. Two later Background Story installations were based on paintings that still exist. For the 2000 Gwangju Biennale, Xu Bing produced a monumental version of an album painting by the Korean artist Huh Baek-ryun (1891–1946), transforming this modest work into a nine-metre-wide installation from ‘Gwangju Biennale 2006: Fever Variations’, Gwangju, Korea, 2006.

The title Background Story can be understood as an allusion to the history of how works in the Berlin museum were lost during wartime and as a reference to the unusual process through which Xu Bing re-created them. Using the traditional nomenclature of Chinese painting and calligraphy criticism, what Xu Bing achieved combines aspects of freehand copying, or li sha, which preserves an original composition but introduces variations and simplifications of brushwork, and creative reinterpretation, or zong, which more freely distills essential traits of an artist’s style. To re-create a landscape screen painted in ink on paper by an unidentified Japanese artist of the late Momoyama period (1568–1615), Xu Bing radically altered the proportions of the original composition by eliminating the extensive area of sky indicated by empty paper in the Japanese painting and by simplifying and elongating horizontally the landscape scene (fig. xxix and first panel of fig. xxx). For his re-creation of a vertical hanging scroll by the Ming artist Dai Jin (1388–1462), or silk.9 What the unsightly arrays of trash behind the glass panes are designed to represent are not simply mountains, water, or buildings, but ink washes, modulated contour lines, and texture strokes that constitute the basic pictorial vocabulary of East Asian painting.

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Xu Bing, Background Story 2, in Gwangju, 2006.
had gradually prepared him. More than in any of the other Background Story installations, the contrast between the seemingly chaotic array of materials, in this case skeins of hemp and various plants, and the illusion of richly textured brushwork they create is astonishing (figs XIX, XXII).

Background Story 3 at the Suzhou Museum also evokes a strong sense of ‘hand’, of the tactile dialogue between the brush and painting surface that lies at the heart of the Chinese painting tradition. Xu Bing’s success in creating this effect was emphasized by placing the Gong Xian scroll in the same gallery, thus staging a visual and historical dialogue between the two works and reminding the viewer, by the physical presence of the original, that what Xu Bing had created was a replica, though one radically different in scale and in medium. The installation also produces a visual and art-historical pun that cognoscenti of Chinese painting who look behind the glass pane would easily grasp. In Chinese painting criticism, long, ropey applications of ink like those in the Gong Xian painting are known as ‘hemp-fibre’ texture strokes. Turning this centuries-old metaphor into a material fact, Xu Bing reproduced the effect of Gong Xian’s brushwork through the use of real hemp.

Although each Background Story looks like a large-scale ink landscape painting produced through movements of a painter’s hand, wrist, and arm, this effect is not the result of gestural motions or painting of any kind but is generated by the unusual process Xu Bing invented for these works. He explains that his technique of placing objects behind frosted glass would not be suitable for reproducing paintings on a small scale because the shapes created in this way are too diffuse and too generalized to replicate details of brushwork easily achieved by a landscapist working with brush and ink. Xu Bing points out also that the method he developed for the Background Story series, which is well suited to creating the illusion of broad ink washes and contour lines typical of Chinese paintings, would not work for the reproduction of Western paintings based on gradations of colour and shading.

Some of the forms seen through the frosted glass can be recognized as actual plants. In these passages, small fragments of nature stand in for their larger counterparts—a twig, for example, representing an entire tree, or rather, evoking the conventions of brushwork through which trees are represented in traditional Chinese painting. But in most areas the relationship between the assembled objects and the forms they represent is indirect and ambiguous. Viewed from the recto side of a milky pane of glass, draped hemp or crumpled paper are unrecognizable, transformed into the illusion of ink-painted mountains or clouds—an illusion dispelled, of course, by exposing these materials to the viewer.

Xu Bing’s process of transforming perceptions of his medium differs radically from the approach of another contemporary artist, Kara Walker, whose work also incorporates shadowy back-lighted forms. In Walker’s recent films the viewer is constantly aware that what is being manipulated behind a screen are paper-cut silhouettes—a reductive medium that ‘calls up a stereotypical response’ to ideas about race and physiognomy that her art aggressively challenges and subverts (fig. XLIII). For Walker, recognition that the medium is exactly what it appears to be is essential to the power of her images. For Xu Bing, the viewer’s experience of a Background Story is complete only when the illusion of one medium—ink painting—is discovered to be nothing more than a jury-built assemblage of three-dimensional objects behind a pane of glass. Ann Wilson Lloyd writes that when the secret is revealed, when the illusory nature of Xu Bing’s constructed landscape paintings becomes apparent, then “[w]ith the detachment of a Zen master, the artist...”
dashes our perceptions, exposing the humble materials with which he fabricated his shadow images’. But in shattering the illusion, in exposing how the magic is achieved, Xu Bing demonstrates once again how a work art arises from the transformation of inert material into a new reality embodying feelings and ideas inexpressible through other means – a transformation that yields a dynamic relationship ‘between outward appearance and inner content’.

Xu Bing likens the pane of frosted glass through which a Background Story landscape is seen to a filter. Material or cognitive, a filter transforms what passes through it in two ways, blocking out some things while letting others pass through. As his work over the past twenty years should prepare us to expect, what we think we see through the filtering glass Xu Bing places before us is very different from what is really there. Ultimately, the filter that Xu Bing wishes us to understand probably is that of the mind itself – a filter woven from our cultures, languages, and personal histories. The filter of the mind grants only limited access to the world, but it is through this imperfect screen, both opaque and translucent, receptive to some stimuli but oblivious to others, that art and reality are perceived.

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14. Xu Bing uses this phrase in describing Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy: ‘The greatest existing contradiction is between outward appearance and inner content. It’s like wearing a mask. It gives you something familiar or unfamiliar, but you can’t figure out exactly what it is going on.’ This statement could well apply to much of Xu Bing’s art. The interview conducted by Peggy Wang in 2006 appears in Wu Hung, Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art, New York, China Institute in America, 2006, p. 85.