

JACOB DREYER

色即是空 空即是色
Re-Enchanting The World¹



*Sitting on top of a mountain, facing another mountain, I sketched a mountain.
In China, painting and writing a mountain is the same thing.*
Xu Bing²

THE LANDSCAPE 山水

Chinese landscape painting traditionally did not seek to depict any particular landscape; its aim was never directly representative. Rather, the scenes depicted symbolized the entire world as such, with whatever mountains, pagodas, rivers representing the concept of a landscape ordered by human vision rather than the things in themselves. This is a world defined primarily in terms of the relationship between the subject (often the painter himself, a small dab lost in hills and pavilions) and the vastness of the world, with endless particularities and endless resonances; this leaf entirely unique, yet clearly similar to all the other leaves, isn't an attempt to realistically depict a particular leaf so much as the concept of 'leaf'. Urban planning, such as the plan of T'ang Dynasty Chang'an or Beijing, also reflected this wish to echo the cosmos in a manageable miniature: in Beijing, every street is an actual place, but also a symbol of the way that the different components of the world interact with each other, forming a harmonious whole (that's the hope, anyway). As taxi drivers in Shanghai know, it's impossible for any subject to grasp reality as an object; our perceptory organs, whether physical, such as our eyes, or artificial, like a painting or system of thought, necessarily select a part to stand in for the whole, but no matter what apps we are using, surprising things can leap out of the streets at us. Perhaps the whole of reality is an endless, somewhat monotonous set of details which could be classified; but feasibly we could make it simpler, and say that the reality encountered by the subject has two halves: self, and world. It is this relationship, rather than any particular mountain or river, which is the subject of Chinese landscape painting.

Superficially, the world that human subjects encounter in China today can be very dissimilar from that which we observe in those old paintings; less green, more grey; in other words, if the source materials of the world of the Chinese past were mountains and water, today it is people and more people. However, on a fundamental level, in the maps of Qiu Zhijie or the digital worlds of Cao Fei, the structure of the work still resembles a landscape: here is the setting, here is the subject. Whether the setting is a green hill or a grey tower is not of particular importance: what is superficially chaotic is in fact a pattern of eternal return. There's order here, an aesthetic order, but a political one as well.

Why then do artists, particularly successful mid-career artists, who not only have a creative practice, but also a bureaucratic practice as teachers, managers or businesspeople return to depictions of the equation self:world? Depictions are powerful, is the answer. Representations of reality, particularly in contemporary China, have a strange way of becoming real—whatever that means. Qiu Zhijie's maps of communities and worlds illuminate a murky world of emotion and affect; but then again, so do corporate spread charts. Qiu seems to follow Bruce Nauman's dictum: the artist's work is to reveal mystic truths. Yet these social truths, relationships and perceptions only

exist once they are illuminated; and in the illumination, in Cao Fei's choice of, say, a Panda rather than a Polar Bear, a world is summoned into being, one which does echo the pre-existing world, but which also may echo into it, just as every time we say "I love you" we're simultaneously referring to a past and creating a future. In the China that has emerged since 1979, there's no artist whose practice toys with representation, real, tradition and revolution more than Xu Bing: between image and words, politics and art, Xu's career embodies both the peculiar characteristics of contemporary China and also the ancient literati tradition that dates back millennia. Like that leaf in the landscape: particular, yet at the same time, an experience which can help us to understand all the others. The goal of Xu Bing's invented characters, his books from the sky and ground, seem to be to reveal that the words which we have are incapable of articulating the world which they would express; and to try to make sense, to order, that inarticulate muddle into a coherent system. In inventing ideographs which could logically be new words, Xu's project is to make the endless fragments of human life into a coherent, ordered whole. Yes, and this is the goal of China itself.

THE PEOPLE 人民³

Our earliest established view of art was a socialist one, which was, roughly: art comes from life, art is higher than life, art returns to and enriches life... I have never departed from this artistic mindset⁴

The Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, which recently celebrated its tenth anniversary,⁵ already seems like a monument to the class of 2008, an unprecedented moment of openness in Chinese history. Recent years have seen artists and galleries leaving Beijing and dark talk of government repression and censorship, a return to the bad old days. And yet, I've never seen an exhibition as intellectually ambitious as the Xu Bing retrospective, *Thought and Method* (July-August 2018), which charts Xu's career from his sketches as an adolescent in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) to his pastiche of surveillance camera footage, *Dragonfly Eyes* (2018) – being as much in dialogue with curator Philip Tinari's *Art And China After 1989 Theater Of The World* (held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2017) as it is with the background noise of the Chinese art world in 2018. Xu Bing's entire career is shown to beautiful effect, most notably his *Book from the Sky* (1987-91), installed in the same space in which it was presented in 2007, during UCCA's opening exhibition. But of course, Beijing and New York City mean very different things for Chinese art; the UCCA exhibition doesn't try to explain Xu Bing to the world so much as to the younger generation. UCCA, despite the many difficulties that operating in Beijing entails, makes it something like a centre of political and cultural optimism in itself, a new sort of public space in China.

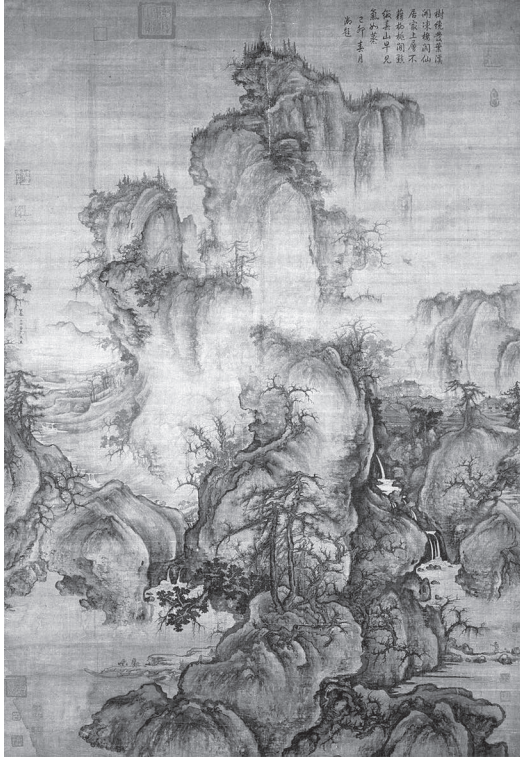
The centre of Chinese utopianism and avant-garde art has been Beijing for over a century. The May Fourth Movement which Xu Bing alludes to so frequently, from his invention of new words to his circular glasses, was a sort of Enlightenment with Chinese characteristics. Following the fall of the Q'ing Dynasty in 1911, students and intellectuals in north Beijing had crystallized around a modernizing desire; protests sparked by the Versailles Treaty, which gave German colonial concessions to Japan, quickly morphed into a populist, nationalist left-wing movement. The ideas and circles of friends that eventually became China's successful revolution began here.

The historical ‘world’ of mountains and rivers had been covered in soot; the language, the images and political forms of old China seemed to be incapable of comprehending what a small group of students began to see on 4 May 1919. And so, the Chinese language redefined its claims to universality: both in the class sense, of universal literacy, as opposed to a literacy being confined to an elite, male group of poets, scholars and government officials who were often the same individuals, but also in the sense that the Chinese language formally floated free from China as a reference point. The Chinese language is etymologically so material—for example, 家, “house, home and family” is literally a pig under a roof. What the May Fourth activists wanted to achieve was to change the Chinese language meant to describe the animals, plants and people found in Beijing into one that would be capable of articulating universal sentiments, of describing the contours of utopia, and today of being used to invent technologies of artificial intelligence.

The somewhat legendary figure of the Chinese literati foregrounds Chinese cultural production—these men, such as the poet Li Bai, whose finicky arrogance was too great to subjugate to the daily and practical demands of politics, and who sought primeval forms of the universal in poetry, calligraphy and painting of the landscape. The class called 文人, “people of the word” were defined by an aristocratic detachment. In their poems and paintings, the individual protagonist was rarely, if ever, present; in fact, words like 自我 or “self” did not really exist. The individual and their place in the world related as a body and clothing; the clothing never defines the body, although it may temporarily change its conditions. Each Chinese character then, describes something like a Platonic ideal; never one specific person, but “personhood”—never one specific country, but “country”. Each concept, realized as an abstraction, is cognizant of the mortality of any specific condition; the Chinese language, therefore, is abstract, neutral, and can be used to describe any condition whatsoever. Each concept is defined in terms of distance from the individual cogito. What we (and those who use post-language reform Chinese) consider a ‘self’ seems to be modern, and refer to the ‘committed’ intellectual; the point at which political positions, national positions, or gender roles became actually part of one’s identity, to the extent that we no longer have universal heritage of humanity, but women artists, Chinese-American artists, queer artists. Perhaps, in fact, ‘self’ refers neither to some abstract cogito which lives in us all—that which, in Xu’s film *Dragonfly Eyes* “the character of characters”—a brain with grasping tendrils which sorts phenomena into words—and neither to one’s position, whether as party member, as a holder of a Beijing *hukou*, as a chairman of a socialist *danwei* or a capitalist corporation. Rather, the enmeshedness of the cogito and the material situation, instead of the constituent parts, becomes ‘self’. At the same time, and particularly in Shanghai, the extended family became the nuclear family, the day once indicated by sunrise and sunset began to be split into hours, and the old courtyards that families lived in became urban apartments.

And so, the May Fourth Movement intellectuals, no longer satisfied to take a gentleman’s banishment to write poetry, created the notion of fixed, stable identities: in the writing of Lu Xun or romantic counterparts such as Xu Zhimo, the prototypical feminist Xiao Hong, but also academics and institution builders such as Hu Shi and Cai Yuanpei; these were the first selves in China, the first individual intellects that incorporated political or cultural attitudes into their very flesh. And yet, these selves expressed their subject identities not for themselves alone, but for the many unrealized selves imminent in their own existence. In a vast crowd of people, a few rose to speak; were they the best speakers, or simply the ones closest to the podium? In any case, their words were taken to represent the feelings of everybody else.

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Xu Bing's father was the dean of the history department in Peking University,⁶ the community created by Cai Yuanpei and the May Fourth generation. It's rarely in good taste to discuss the fate of such persons during China's Cultural Revolution, and so I will not, but it's fair to say that many intellectuals, from the caste and class of intellectuals—a historically and materially significant class dating back thousands of years, with specific living facilities, food and drink, and language—a sub-species of the Chinese genus—felt orphaned by this cultural revolution. Xu's banishment to the mountains, where in the 1970s he kept notebooks and drew photorealistic sketches of Handan City, of the Changbaishan mountains, and grubby villages in the south of Hebei—could be understood as an echo of literati in times past who had been removed from power. But if in the T'ang Dynasty, intellectuals sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution understood it as a form of isolation, they were asked to learn from the people, to share the lives of the people, that formerly illiterate group, entirely defined by the small patch of land into which they had been born. If Xu's heritage was the Chinese language and its idea of the world, the peasants' heritage and life-world was the world itself. No paintings of mountains on the walls; just a window looking out to mountains. Returning to Beijing in the 1980s, Xu participated as a sardonic observer in the 文化热, a sort of "cultural boom" that was the result of the many different orphans in the era following the Cultural Revolution—a question never fully answered, and left unanswered—trying to locate themselves, and to discover a sense of self. In those years, artists threw out kitsch on all sides, like a child lost in the woods would throw crumbs to make a trail that they can follow home; the cultural output of this moment, like blips of sonar, had the intended purpose of helping the creators discover where they were. Xu's *Book from the Sky* lampooned this, with a giant scroll of characters which signified nothing; an edict from on high which was as grand as it was incomprehensible. Readers are encouraged to make sense out of nonsense, a feeling that is quite familiar to a person in Chinese cities today, bombarded with meaningless words and exhortations, advertisements, propaganda, fake news. In this hall of mirrors, the city with its advertisements and signs, we only see distorted and puny versions of our self; rarely, if ever, in the words that we see around us do we see any possibility of transcending the self, of leaving this empty form of selfhood behind entirely.

The culture boom crested in Beijing in June, 1989; the unity of intellectuals and workers which the Communist Party encouraged in the 1970s met its apogee, as Beijing's working classes from the southern part of town and intellectuals from the north, met in the Tian'anmen Square. The government meant to represent both squashed this rebellion; some intellectuals were killed, and commemorated; more workers were killed, and forgotten; and the intellectuals trudged back north, the workers back south, and class began to reassert itself. No longer would there be a 'Chinese self', in which the intellectuals and governors participated in side by side with the workers. The new Chinese class system, in which some persons lives, opinions and struggles were deemed as more important than others, was born in that moment; not in the firing of the tanks, but in the abandonment of the workers. Xu Bing went to New York. He returned eighteen years later, as China had regenerated in his absence, lifted by the anonymous hands of these workers.

Around the time of the Olympics and indeed, his own return to China, Xu Bing began constructing his sculpture *Phoenix* (2008-10), using detritus from construction sites, and with nostalgically egalitarian conversations with workers, a souvenir of youth. Commissioned around

the time of the Olympics for a commercial client, *Phoenix* was two huge statues of China's mythical bird, which rises from the ashes; Xu chose to construct it out of trowels, construction worker safety caps, concrete blocks and other material from worksites that dotted the Chinese capital at that time. Deliberately using popular materials, folkloric symbols and constructing it in a way that recalled socialist-era work units, *Phoenix* seemed to rise from the catastrophes of Chinese socialist history into the real existing socialism of Beijing in 2008.

Phoenix, sadly, was unable to rise from the ashes of Beijing's Central Business District, but did succeed in taking flight to Boston and Venice. It might seem ironic that an artist whose focus is so directly on the Chinese intellectual tradition as Xu should seem more successful in the West than in China; correcting this is one reason why the Ullens exhibition is so welcome. However, Xu's work has often been vulgarized into political statements in the West, shorthand for Chinese development or critique thereof, much like his boorish ex-flatmate Ai Weiwei. In fact, the meditation on the Chinese language has more complex valence points, encompassing the historical divide between governors and poets on one hand, and the people on the other; the ambitions and failures of the May Fourth Movement and its heir, the establishment of New China, and the Cultural Revolution; in Xu's forest of nonsense words, the individual can get lost, and fall asleep, dreaming of China. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that Xu's erstwhile patrons in the CBD did not want to give him space for *Phoenix*; Xu's iconoclastic approach impacted the icons of contemporary China, whereas it meant little more than an amusing spectacle for those illiterate in Chinese.

Phoenix recalls nothing so much as Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which looks backwards onto wreckage and flies forward into the unknown. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin wrote,

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁷

Benjamin arrived at an understanding of history by meditating on Klee's angel, and *Phoenix* gives us something to consider as well; Benjamin observed a world in which mechanization and logic had removed enchantment from it, or its aura. If Marx and his Chinese followers attained selfhood by understanding that it is not enough to observe the world, but rather that one must change it, then *Phoenix* represents an attempt to make useless and discarded objects into a symbol of our collective journey into an unknown future, to imbue the wreckage of a construction site with aura, with the memory of the labour of the people. It is entirely beside the point to complain about the lack of aura, the lack of peace and tranquility, the pollution, corruption, traffic, of contemporary China—even more so when one recalls that the lost idyll of the ancient literati was the fruit of a society in which ninety-seven percent of the population were condemned to endless labour. We must re-enchant our sick world, going through its mountains and valleys casting spells, and finding new ways to

understand it in such a way as to overpower the logic of the economy; instead of seeing space as so much unrealized real estate, and a crowd as so much congealed labour-time, the project that was begun on 4 May 1911 can only continue by insisting on the equal value of all human beings and all places in China, dignifying each and every one, without subordinating any one to economic logic. The self is constricting, and it is difficult to breathe within it; a chrysalis, which we are in the process of outgrowing. In Xu's nonsense words, in his collections of rubble made flying machines, and even in his casual chats with real estate magnates, a serious engagement with a world in which poetry seems to be extinct, and an attempt to revive it, is visible. Art is intrinsically culturally conservative, in the sense that it elaborates upon the forms of the past; Xu's calligraphy certainly does, as do his allusions to mythical creatures and folkloric images. The artist must not be naïve about the past, nor the present which, constantly in motion, will itself soon be the past; and yet, the spirit of new China remains oriented to the future—a dialectical material.

Xu Bing is no gentleman poet, but a worker, willing to get his hands dirty with the soil and ashes of the Beijing landscape. His being has left an imprint in his time and his institution (as vice-president of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing). One might wish for the luxury of detachment, of not having to care, but this is not a luxury which is afforded to residents of contemporary Beijing.

HOMELAND 家园⁸

*Now artists and the government are basically the same.*⁹

When I was hit by a taxi on Fuxing Road, central Shanghai, on the evening of 15 April 2018, I easily could have died. I was both hurt by, and rescued by, a system alien to me—the Chinese urban network—within which, however, I've spent a decade by choice, dwelling and thinking (and, by writing, hoping to build as well). So many different objects and movements all flung together: to call this collective 'China' insisting on their unity, is a work of the aesthetic imagination—not of mine, but of the Chinese government.

At different times, I've felt paranoia and intense frustration with this system which has, on the face of it, given me so much. This network of cars and roads, mobile phone apps, CCTV cameras and of political secrets which produce gardens filled with fruits which may or may not be edible. The hospital I was sent to, less than a kilometre from my apartment, is apparently among the best in Asia for brain injuries; I was told that this felicitous expertise exists as Jiang Zemin, the former President of the PRC (1993-2003), lives nearby as well, and the hospital is anticipating the day when he might have a stroke or other injury. China—not the people, not the land, but specifically the political organization that rules the country—confuses me so much that it has driven me to drink, and careening to near-death, but then saved me: and as I write now, on a tranquil terrace, observing 'China', or individual components thereof, it is difficult to say whether my relationship with this phenomena is love or hate; the only certainty is that in either case, it is unrequited. The cogito 'China', e.g. the Communist Party, is seeking to sort out and understand the individual pieces—human beings, parcels of land—under its administration with ever more scrutiny. This is partly a contemporary political phenomenon, but is also reflective of the fact that those individual pieces are ever more individual and less predictable; prosperity brings complexity, and if a village watchman worked for a village, then banks of glowing screens are necessary for the twenty-five million person city.

Implicit in the acceptance or rejection of authority in Western modernity is the understanding that 'we' ourselves resemble that authority—as in Freud, or in Sartre, or wherever else you care to look; if the archetypal Chinese genre of representation is a landscape which contextualizes the subject, in the West we've traditionally painted portraits of the subject, one which is often capable of dismantling, blowing up, or otherwise transforming whatever landscape one happens to find oneself in. 'We' see ourselves in a Holbein or a Goya, in a way that we might not in a Song Dynasty winter landscape. In saying that, one is forced to admit that this 'we' is not universal; just as the history of representation in China has been historically intertwined with power, our portraits of kings, ancestors and ambassadors have been as well.

For the entire period in which the discipline called art history has existed, the world has been dominated by persons who physically resemble the subjects of Holbein's portraits; but that seems to be less the case today, as I discovered in my encounter with the alien and competent authority that saved my life. China means different things for different people: 'Chinese' people may speak for themselves. For me, China is a word signifying alterity, an alternative to the alienation of the capitalist world my ancestors created. And even if the wreckage that Xu's *Phoenix* is made from resembles that which *Angelus Novus* observes, the former seems to move more quickly.

Is this system omnipotent? It scarcely seems human, and indeed it is not; the American President may express himself and his wishes via his Twitter account and the subjective individuality that we have come to be familiar with, but the Chinese government does not. In fact, although power is concentrated in the person of Xi Jinping, decisions are invariably attributed to Zhongnanhai (CPC headquarters)—not a person, but a place. The operative assumption of most Western observers has been that this power is malign; inscrutable, wicked, and likely to displace 'Us'. But it seems childish to assume that this authority is malign simply because it exists. Our own patriarchal structures seem barely capable of supporting themselves, and when they were able to, it was only at great cost of life; a loss of life that commenced at the beginning of our empires, at the beginning of our enlightenment. Just because every Western monument to civilization has been also a monument to barbarism, does that necessarily imply that the Huashan Hospital, where I was nursed back to health by authoritarian nurses and efficient machines, is as well?

What is quite evident to any observer of America's media wars, of the fraught politics surrounding fictional categories such as race and gender, but also the notion of 'China' threatening us, is that representations have a reality, indeed constitute reality. Representations of reality which reshape our perceptions, or as Nauman would have it, art, relate to political power in a very direct way. I spent years fretting about 'China'. What is 'China'? Defining that is, properly speaking, the task of Chinese art, of the Chinese language, of the People's Republic of China; of Xu Bing, who has at different stages in his life represented Chinese art, Chinese language, Chinese government. I hesitate to describe the Cultural Revolution in detail because my parents weren't involved, but I can speak for the desire to transcend restrictive categories of identity which serve to separate me from my comrades, whether they are 'Chinese' or not. Viewing one's own subjectivity and behavior with the detachment of a neutral observer is one of the most difficult challenges a person can set her/himself; to do so requires extraction of the cogito from the self; a reversal from the process of individuation that I argue took place during the Enlightenment for my ancestors, and during the May Fourth Movement for Xu Bing's. And so, it is very difficult for me to know what the impact upon me of a decade of Chinese life has been; upon my self-awareness, upon my sense of identity, upon my reaction to the notion of privilege.

色即是空 空即是色 *Re-Enchanting The World*

In the population enclosed by globalization, the dream of a universal subject has come close to realization. From New York to Beijing, we drink the same coffee, get hit by the same cars. However, our experience of the human world remains as fundamentally alienated as the experience memorialized in classical Chinese poetry and painting; the world is a thing of itself, and the human cogs whom we encounter are generally of interest only for the ways that they can serve a predestined economic function. When we've consumed until we don't want to consume any more, there's no reason to speak to the People anymore. Unsurprisingly, this world is lacking in magic and colour; our cities feel more like wreckage than like gardens. The participant-observer form of subjectivity which we call 'artist' must weave this wreckage together into a beautiful tapestry of life, one upon which we can fly into whatever future materializes; must re-enchant the world; must turn the apartment complexes into homes and the airports into clouds; must sleep and, in sleeping, let their minds weave the constituent moving parts of this world into a totality, in which every human experience glows from within.

Notes

¹ A Buddhist sutra meaning "emptiness is the world, the world is emptiness"—reflecting on the hollowness of mortality and human power

² Xu Bing, quoted in En Liang Khong, 'Xu Bing: Landscape Landscript, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford—Review', *The Financial Times*, 2 April 2013; <https://www.ft.com/content/86f48960-9ac1-11e2-97ad-00144feabdc0>

³ While a direct translation there are several terms for "people"—this one has intentionally democratic socialist connotations of modernism

⁴ Quoted in Shelagh Vainker, *Landscape/Landscript: Nature as Language in the Art of Xu Bing*, Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2013; see <https://issuu.com/accpublishinggroup/docs/xubingissuu>

⁵ See Robin Peckham, 'The Loss of Centre', *di'van | A Journal of Accounts* 2, 2017, pp. 100-107

⁶ Even though situated in Beijing, the university still calls itself, in English, Peking University. In Chinese of course, Beijing and Peking are the same characters

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 1940. An English translation by Harry Zohn is included in the collection of essays by Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), New York: Randon House, 1968

⁸ A direct translation, literally meaning "Home garden", the latter character having resonance with landscape painting

⁹ Xu Bing, quoted in David Barboza, 'Schooling the Artists' Republic of China', *New York Times*, 30 March 2008; <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/30/arts/design/30barb.html>

