



Xu Bing

Picture Writing By Xu Bing

Art can talk. It can talk about a feeling, like feeling happy or feeling sad. It can talk about an idea, like the idea "money" or the idea "television." It can talk about something simple like the word "cherry," or it can talk about something complicated, like how people and the earth are connected.

So today I want you to try to talk with drawing. I want you to write an entire thought or idea in pictures. Make the pictures as simple as possible. In fact, try to make the pictures so simple that your friends and teachers can understand what you are saying just by looking at the pictures. Draw the pictures almost like you are writing a sentence.

Try to get rid of anything from the pictures that doesn't help them to talk in a clear and simple way. Write your thought or idea in pictures and don't tell anyone what you are trying to say. Then show what you have drawn to your neighbor. Let her or him "read" it.

Since 2003, I have been working on a project called "Book from the Ground." The goal is to take all of the simple pictures and icons that we see around us every day and put them in one place. It will be like a dictionary with no words and just pictures that everyone can understand.

This is what art does—it talks.

Activity Summary

Topic: Communicating
without words

Suitable for

- Beginning level
- Intermediate level
- Advanced level

Suggested media

- Drawing

About Xu Bing

Artist's Work



Book from the Ground (detail), Xu Bing, 2007. Ink Jet on vellum, thread binding, and cloth cover, 12 1/4 x 8 7/8 x 1 5/8 in. (31 x 22.5 x 1.7 cm)



Book from the Sky, Xu Bing, 1987–1991. Hand-printed books, ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type using false Chinese characters, dimensions variable. Installation view at "Crossings," National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (1998). Photo courtesy Xu Bing Studio

Artist Biography

Born 1955 in Chongqing, China

Currently lives in Beijing, China

Trained as a printmaker, Xu Bing uses text, language, and books as inspiration for works of art that play with viewers' expectations. For his work *Book from the Sky*, he arranges books, scrolls, and large sheets of paper typeset from thousands of small wooden blocks that he hand-carved with forms resembling Chinese characters. In actuality, each character is of the artist's own invention.

Having lived through China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Xu Bing grew up with a complex relationship with words. When books that were once banned suddenly flooded into the country, he describes feeling as if he had gorged after a period of starvation. His relationship with words was further complicated when he moved to the United States and encountered an entirely new language. Xu Bing's approach to art-making reflects his desire to explore the boundaries of language and the space between understanding and misunderstanding—his own and that of viewers.