



THE wheels of the art world turn in widening arcs these days. Globe-trotting operatives, lightning-fast communication and a growing number of international exhibitions generate a scene that tends to circulate widely the work of a chosen few.

The Brooklyn-based Chinese artist Xu Bing is currently one of these. Known for his work with hybrid language and hybrid cultures, and more specifically for elaborate installations of live creatures like silkworms, pigs and sheep that double as sly conceptual and cultural comments, Mr. Xu, 45, maintains an exhausting travel and exhibition schedule. In 1999, his work appeared in 18 separate group shows — 4 in New York City and 14 in other American and foreign cities. He recently installed new work in Australia at the Sydney Biennale, which opened on May 25, then flew to Finland, where he is one of six artists in a show that starts on Wednesday at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki.

The next stop is Prague, where Mr. Xu's retrospective opens next Sunday at the National Gallery. Meanwhile, back home, two large new projects are underway: a solo show this fall at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and a retrospective of language-based works scheduled for the fall of 2001 at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington.

So far this year, in addition to the Sydney and Helsinki shows, Mr. Xu has been in eight international and domestic group shows. He also travels frequently to China. When he's not on the road, he and his companion,

**Xu Bing's flair for the absurd
once got him in trouble in China.
Now, as his career in the West
takes off, it's his trademark.**

the Chinese painter Cai Jin, live and work in a storefront studio and apartment in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. (Ms. Cai also travels and shows widely.)

Most of these exhibitions were booked well before Mr. Xu won a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award in 1999. The six-figure cash prize should have allowed the artist a respite, but its high profile also increased the demand for his work. Mr. Xu is affiliated with the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York (though he doesn't participate much in the gallery world), and Susan Maruska, the director, says neither the gallery nor the artist actively seeks these opportunities; the curators come to him



him. Opportunities, the curators come to

"He has his own momentum," Ms. Maruska says, citing as factors his emergence in the West with other contemporary Chinese artists in the early 1990's; the suitability of Mr. Xu's work for shows whose subject is diversity or education, and the fact that he makes Asian culture accessible to Western audiences.

Mr. Xu puts it simply: "My work relates to current discussions in art, so it is particularly appropriate for a lot of exhibitions. Different curators have different approaches or issues they are exploring. Some have a cross-cultural theme, or they're looking for artists doing something with language, or artists who use animals. Some are interested in performance art, or interactive art."

Fumio Nanjo, an independent curator from Japan who nominated Mr. Xu for the Sydney Biennale, says Mr. Xu's success is about more than just fitting into curatorial agendas: "His work advances the achievement of modernism. Modernism's achievement is good, but too simple for these times. We need a more complex vision, with different points of view," which he thinks Mr. Xu provides.

"In the last 2,000 years, written Chinese spread throughout east Asia, forming a unified Asian culture," Mr. Nanjo continues. "The characters are a kind of symbol of the East. They also represent a non-Western system of thinking that is very intellectual, complex and symbolic. He uses Chinese characters as both material and subject. The time is right for all non-Western artists, but particularly for Xu Bing."

Mr. Nanjo refers to Mr. Xu's earnestly absurd riffs on language, which, in a shrinking world increasingly dominated by English, are drawn from the artist's own nomadic experience. He invented what he calls New English Calligraphy, authentic-looking Chinese pictographs that are really English words. Strung together, they make sentences that look like Chinese but read like

English.

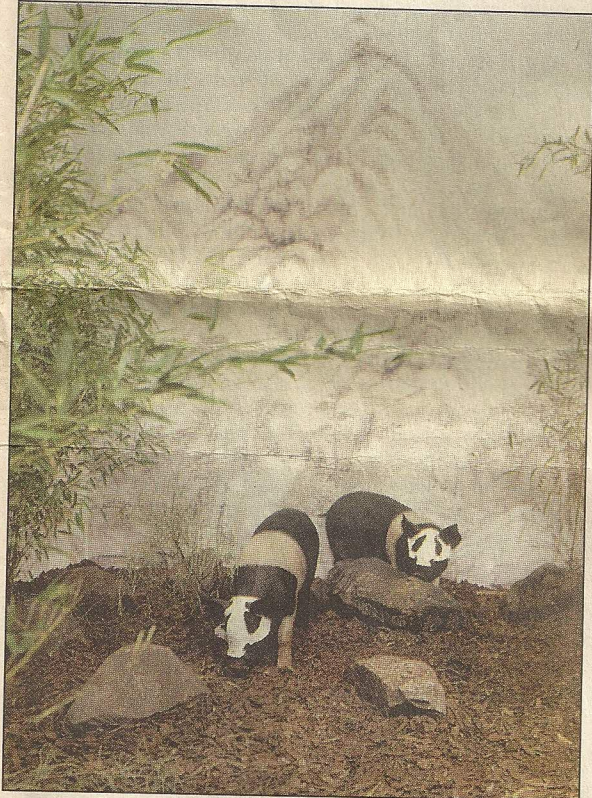
He sets up classrooms in galleries to teach this parallel language, using esoteric Chinese art-calligraphy methods and venerable tools. Curators often frame and hang audience efforts in his shows, while teachers request his traditional-looking manual and his teaching videos. Mr. Xu calls the English version of these videos "Chinglish"; there are also Spanish and German versions. Though he says it's tricky to teach the arcane aesthetic subtleties of Chinese calligraphy to a computer, a Chinglish font is in the works.

Language is fertile ground for Mr. Xu, but his real grounding occurred as an art student in Beijing, in 1974, toward the end of China's Cultural Revolution, when the government sent him to live with farmers in the remote countryside. Westerners assume this was punitive, but Mr. Xu embraced it as "grass-roots living" — a dose of reality giving art new rigor and meaning.

ITS lessons still apply. In a Maoist-inspired banner he designed last year for the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, bold Chinglish proclaimed: "Art for the People, Chairman Mao Said." In Prague, imparting a bit of a frisson to a post-Communist setting, a similar Mao quote will be used in a new calligraphy project.

"After so many years in the contemporary-art world, I feel there's a problem," Mr. Xu says. "I don't very much like the relationship art has with average people. A lot of people, including myself, go to museums and don't understand what they're seeing, they have no relationship with it. Most people think something is wrong with them, or with their education, instead of with the art."

Mr. Xu's unlikely combination of sincerity, accessibility and neo-Dada subversiveness is accounted for in a quote in the Projects brochure in which he explains that his generation of Chinese artists lived "10 years of socialist education, 10 years of Cultural Revolution, 10 years of open-door policy and 10 years of living in the West and participating in the contemporary art world."



Peter Bellamy

Mr. Xu was one of China's New Wave artists who emerged in the West through the infamous 1989 "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Fine Art Museum in Beijing, which was shut down twice by the government during its two-week run. His seminal work for the show, "Book From the Sky," consisted of several 80-foot-long scrolls swagged across the gallery ceiling, walls covered with contemporary Chinese newspapers

Xu Bing's installation "Book From the Sky," above, made for the notorious Beijing avant-garde exhibition of 1989, was shown in Ottawa in 1998; "Panda Zoo," two pigs wearing panda masks, at the Jack Tilton Gallery in 1998.

and a floor filled with traditional, exquisitely hand-bound Chinese books. All texts were handprinted, using more than 4,000 authentic-looking Chinese characters, handcarved by the artist over a year. But the finely wrought characters were fake and the texts were unreadable. This mesh of intense effort, venerable craftsmanship and conceptual absurdity infuriated the Chinese authorities.

Shortly after, the Tiananmen Square confrontation between the government and the pro-democracy movement turned Chinese avant-garde artists into personae non gratae. With the government attempting to silence intellectuals, Mr. Xu went from an acclaimed innovator embraced by Chinese museums and intelligentsia to someone who dared exhibit only in very short, selectively publicized, semi-underground shows. Just before the crackdown, Chinese contemporary artists began to be written about in Western art publications, a few had been shown in Europe and the international outcry over Tiananmen Square increased the West's interest in the Chinese avant-garde.

All these factors eventually landed Mr. Xu in the art-world capital, New York City, but it was a Middle Western university that opened the door for him. Through a Chinese friend already in residence, the University of Wisconsin in Madison sponsored Mr. Xu's immigration to the United States. In 1991, he was given a solo show at the university's Elvehjem Museum of Art. Britta Erickson, an independent curator and scholar of contemporary Chinese art, wrote the catalog essay for that show and is also organizing the forthcoming retrospective at the Sackler Gallery.

Ms. Erickson says Mr. Xu, who labors prodigiously

Continued on Page 37

An Artist Who Bind

Continued From Page 35

to connect audiences to Chinese conventions, invests more in his projects than many other artists do. "They are extremely well thought out, they're beautiful and they're fun," she says of his works. "Asian culture is usually presented as something dead and glorious. Xu Bing demystifies it in delightful ways. There's also a subtle subversion of the art establishment in his work."

This wryness is nearly a by-product. In a 1994 Beijing performance piece, "A Case Study of Transference," two breeding pigs were inked up with Mr. Xu's nonsense texts, the female with faux Chinese characters, the male with nonsense words in the Latin alphabet. They were then allowed to mate in a pen strewn with books, while invited intellectuals watched and, Mr. Xu recalls, excitedly discussed cross-cultural ironies.

"The people became very awkward during the mating," Mr. Xu says. "The pigs were very cool, very focused." Since then, he has used talking parrots that expound on modern art, set up installations in which silkworms gradually envelop computers, books and other information devices with their gossamer spinings, and twisted long wire leashes into poetic scripts that viewers both read and follow through museum galleries, eventually to find docile sheep at the other end.

Beyond the art world, Mr. Xu's emphasis on language, Asian culture and pedagogical technique makes his work appealing to universities and colleges, though his plans for Duke University have veered from the use of animals or calligraphy classes to perhaps a sly, more site-specific take. Stanley Abe, a curator of Mr. Xu's forthcoming show there, says the area's tobacco industry has piqued the artist's interest: "There's a historic connection between China, Duke University and the early tobacco merchants in the area — prominent people, founders of the university, who made their money selling tobacco to China.

"Bing is wonderfully inventive. I could be wrong, but I don't feel this is a star that's going to burn out too quickly. Though he's in the limelight now, his work does not draw on that energy maybe as much as that of other artists does. His relatively low profile in the gallery scene reveals

something about his position."

Indeed, one suspects that the artist himself will choose when and if to opt out of the limelight. Last fall, he jumped at the chance to revisit his "grass-roots living" experience, during a monthlong trek through the Himalayas that was a prelude to the Kiasma Museum show in Helsinki.

Arriving in Katmandu, Nepal, with a sketch pad and camera, he said, he found that in the nearly 30 years between his being "sent down" as a student and his current status as an international artist, his "eyes had changed."

In a poignant essay for the Kiasma show, he writes that they had become "the eyes of Western tourists that I myself had seen before in China."

"I wasn't used to the feeling of understanding the way it felt to be the onlooker rather than the looked-upon," he continues. "There was a profound shift in my identity and viewpoint, and I was overcome with a feeling of uncertainty and rootlessness."

Maaretta Jaukkuri, the chief curator of the Kiasma Museum, said Xu Bing was among the first artists chosen for the Himalayan trek. "He has the kind of presence of mind and integrity needed for this kind of strenuous project," she says. This spirit and his unblinking inner vision, combined with wit and down-to-earth philosophy, curators say, will very likely sustain Mr. Xu well beyond the usual art-world cycles. □

A Chinese I

Continued From Page 35

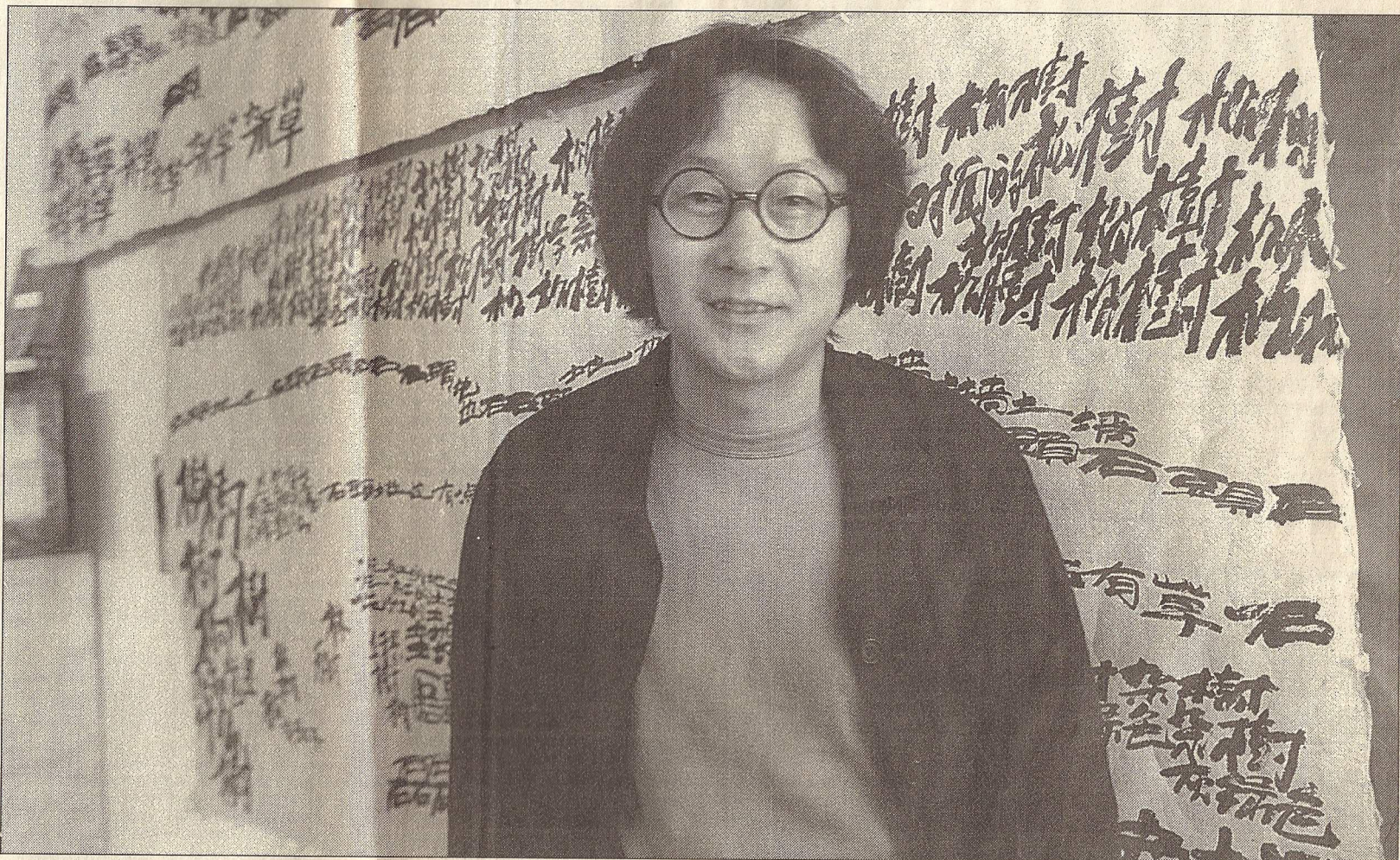
ists" for the fact that he still lives there today.

Despite speaking only Chinese, Mr. Huang manages to mount shows around the world. He says his lack of linguistic ability hasn't gotten in his way. "I have friends in cities everywhere," he says, adding, "And if I'm hungry I can always find a Chinese restaurant."

While he is best known as a Dada-

ART / ARCHITECTURE

ds Together Cultures With Cords of Wit



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

The artist Xu Bing in his Brooklyn studio. Behind him is a piece he's working on for the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Finland.