

# TRUNK SHOW

Pioneering contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing on his collaboration with Louis Vuitton, New English calligraphy and his experiences in the New York art scene *by Emily Zhang*



**You've teamed up with Louis Vuitton on a trunk featuring your signature New English calligraphy [an English writing system that looks like Chinese characters]. How did this collaboration come about?**

One of Louis Vuitton's agents came to me and told me about this project. They said Louis Vuitton would open a big centre in Beijing; the trunk would be shown at the opening and then up for auction, with proceeds to fund a public good. They wanted me to use the "four treasures of the study" [the brush, ink, paper and inkstone used in East Asian calligraphic traditions] with the brand's classic trunk. I thought the combination was very interesting and could bring me into a new arena in creation.

**For this project, you spent two years working on the calligraphy, inspired by contemporary Chinese poet Zhai Yongming's *In Antiquity*. Why choose this piece?**

I think this piece is very special among all Zhai's poems; many people love this one. It talks about "distance" – the distance between the past and now. This poem also echoes Louis Vuitton's concept of travel. In fact, this poem was written to me by Zhai when we were in love – she didn't mention it in the poem, but we both know about it.

**You moved to New York in 1993 at the age of 35, which must have been a challenge, as many Chinese during that period were told to settle down in their 30s. What made you decide to go to the US?**

Though I was 35 years old, I didn't think I should settle down like the middle-aged. I was very interested in contemporary art, but there wasn't much information about it in China in the '90s and the cultural atmosphere wasn't good, either. I was thirsty for more knowledge about contemporary art, so when the opportunity arose, I went.

**Did you try to integrate into the New York art circle?**

At the beginning, I was just like other artists coming from all over the world, trying my best to get into the mainstream contemporary art system. But now, it appears to be the wrong approach, because getting into a system also means you have to make your uniqueness disappear and become like everyone else. New York isn't a place for that. Later, when my work was recognised and appreciated by the Western world, people asked about my past and background. I began to think about what made me recognisable and it's the unique cultural gene I have from China – the Chinese culture and my background of growing up in a socialist environment [during the Cultural Revolution]. I didn't like my unique gene and tried to hide it at first. But it turned out to be a great treasure,

allowing me to see contemporary art from a different vision and angle.

**You created New English calligraphy in the US, where the fusion of East and West caught your attention. Was it a natural progression of your art?**  
I think artists should create art anywhere they go. If I hadn't gone to the US, I wouldn't have created New English calligraphy. My early creations, such as New English calligraphy, were mostly related to cultural conflicts and misinterpretations. You can also see from my experiences that art is the response to the issues or problems artists encounter during their lives.

**I heard some companies have made use of New English calligraphy as a way to test jobseekers' Chinese and English ability.**

I think those who use my New English calligraphy in interviews don't want to test people's language ability. Instead, they want to test logical thinking and the ability to solve awkward situations, or even test candidates' sense of humour. You know, the Australian education department wrote to me, requesting permission to use my New English calligraphy in their newly designed IQ-test system.

**Thirty years ago, you created *Book from the Sky* in the style of editions from the Song and Ming dynasties, but composed entirely of meaningless glyphs that resemble traditional Chinese characters, which no one could read. But your work today can be understood by anyone from any country. How have your experiences contributed to your recent works?**

These works have evolved with my understanding of art. After all these years of doing art in the US, I noticed that there are a lot of problems in the art system I followed. There has always been a divide between contemporary art and ordinary people. I don't like that. So in my later creations, I put in more interaction and affinity. I hope my work gets closer to people and invites them to be involved, that audiences can find inspiration from my work. That's what I really want. I've gradually realised that inspiration and creativity doesn't come



from the comparison of art styles or the study of the art system. They stem from the enlightenment of society. So my work now tends to focus more on societal issues.

**You don't want to be defined as a certain type of artist. But how would you describe what you are doing with calligraphy, writing and language?**

The fresh blood of art comes from outside the system. It's a very simple principle. It's really hard to stereotype my recent creations. I work in different domains, spaces and concepts. For example, my project *Book from the Ground* – it's a piece of writing, but it's also a calligraphy design, because I used a new form to tell a story. And also my other projects – I can't find a proper way to describe what I'm doing. I think art is the best way to speak for me. It disturbs people's stereotypical thinking and knowledge.

**You live in Beijing and New York. What roles have the two cities played in your life?**

I think Beijing and New York are the most interesting cities in the world. For me, Beijing is a better place to work, because it inspires me a lot. As for living, New York's a comparatively more comfortable place. If I can't find my

direction or coordinates in Beijing, I'm able to find calmness in New York and think about my work. But I enjoy what I'm doing in Beijing now.

**What are you working on right now?**

We're currently working on *The Dragonfly Eyes* [his first film, based on footage collected and compiled from thousands of surveillance videos]. It's much harder than we thought. I find this project very interesting because it's trying to use a new method to express art and it echoes contemporary culture. And next year in May, we'll have a big exhibition in Rome, based on the civilisation of ancient Rome and the Chinese Jin dynasty. 🇨🇳

