BOOK REVIEW
Lisa G. Corrin and Miwon Kwon


Britta Erickson

The Art of Xu Bing Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words,
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.
University of Washington, Seattle and London 2001

Do-Ho Suh (b. 1962) from Korea and Xu Bing (b. 1955) from China were born seven years apart, in contrasting political and cultural systems, but today they both occupy the same international space of the global art world. Like so many of the current stars of the glamorous international art exhibitions known as Biennials they are among the most brilliant and privileged artists of their country of origin, but have chosen to emigrate to New York City (or London or Paris) as a base for their careers. They both have passed through excruciating transitions in learning English, in leaving their own countries, in learning the systems of the capitalist art world. But both are successful in reaching a broad international audience that includes both traditional art world specialists and the general public. The similarity of their current status and their celebrity status masks some profound underlying differences between them however, differences which emerge clearly in these two brief books.

One of the primary differences is that Do-Ho Suh after receiving traditional training as an ink painter in Korea, chose to start over as an artist by attending the Rhode Island School of Design as an undergraduate and then Yale University as a graduate student. He therefore was mainstreamed to the center of the American art world. Xu Bing, on the other hand, was already a well-established teacher at a prestigious art school in Beijing, as well as a prominent artist in China. He had produced works (particularly Book from the Sky) that made him famous and then infamous in China at the time of Tiananmen Square. His emigration was a result of harassment in 1989. He brought his major works with him and showed them to great acclaim in the United States. Xu Bing, in addition, is part of an influx of several extraordinary Chinese artists who left China in the early 1990s.

Do Ho Suh came basically on his own and with his own resources. He was not a political refugee. Do Ho Suh is the son of a famous painter in Korea, Se-Ok Suh, known for creating a connection between traditional calligraphy and modern brush painting (27) His mother is a founder of an organization that is working to save the traditional culture of Korea.

He came with the intention of starting his career from the beginning. His exhibition catalog reads like that of any artist who began his career here, exhibition reviews, exhibitions. There is no reference to any of his schooling in Korea. (ck)This catalog includes a straightforward conversation “The Perfect Home: A Conversation with Do-Ho Suh.” with the curator Lisa Corrin about the genesis of Do Ho Suh’s sewn
“lining” of his home in Korea. The piece is called Seoul Home/LA Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home, 1999 after all of the places it has been exhibited.

Do Ho Suh grew up in an extraordinary and unusual house, a replica of a famous historical house built by King Sunjo in 1828 in order to live as peasants lived. Usefully the catalog includes photographs of the original house that clarifies the subtle transparency of the space, the flowing light coming from outside, as well as its scale. It is serenely traditional in its emptiness, the only free standing furniture are 2 low tables. This house is made of magnificent red pine timbers from a palace structure that was demolished. It is long way from the simple peasant house that it emulates. As the son of a famous artist (in a country where artists are honored), Do Ho Suh grew up in a complex of five buildings that included this magnificent historical structure as well as contemporary buildings. Ironically though, his humble New York apartment (348 W 22ndSt) is actually less square footage than the historical pavilion of his childhood home (it is an arbitrary, narrow rectangle as opposed to a harmoniously proportioned square) He has also created a pattern based on the interior of that space and its interior corridor which includes the kitchen and the bathroom (big echo of Claes Oldenberg there, as Corrin points out). Another point that Corrin brings out is that the production of the work is a collaboration with elderly women in Korea. The artist’s mother’s connections among traditional seamstresses in Seoul were important to the production of the work. As he puts it “The actual sewing was done together. I sewed the piece with the seamstresses.” (37) One would like to know more precisely how that relationship worked.

The rest of the catalog is a pithy essay by Miwon Kwon “The Art of Otherness: The Art of Do-Ho Suh” Kwon, founder and publisher of Documents, a contemporary art journal, teaches contemporary art and theory at UCLA (notes?) and is a specialist in the history of site specific art. (One Place After Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity, (MIT Press). She links Do Ho Suh to the new globalism and distinguishes his work from traditional site specific work in the fact of its mobility from one site to another. Do Ho Suh’s work is, according to Kwon, flirting with the “older fantasy of a collective body that functions as one.” (16) His 60 military/highschool uniforms “Highschool Uniform,” (1996) sown together to create a single headless phalanx certainly suggest that, but the mindlessness of this mass marks it as powerless. Likewise Floor (1997 -2000) and Doormat: Welcome (Amber) 2000 formed of hundreds of tiny plastic figures holding their arms up, in one case holding up the glass floor that we are tramping on, in the other ready to be crushed has that same sense of a powerless mass that is being trampled by larger powers. DO Ho Suh grew up under the military dictatorships that have led Korea since the Korean war ended in ….. His experience as a child would certainly have been marked by that oppression. Kwon does not mention that straightforward connection. Instead she dwells on Do-Ho Suh in the international context, as offering a new alternative to the diversity of international art, she speaks of the shift from support of “otherness,” to the embrace of “otherness” as signs of a universal experience” (22) (error social realism, p. 16)

I would disagree with that analysis. I think today’s international artists are still embraced for their otherness, their cultural exoticism, but only if that exoticism is not too exotic,
only if it is perfectly readable and can be blandly assimilated without too much stress on
the part of the busy viewer who only has 10 seconds to spend looking at an art work. Do-
Ho Suh by putting himself through the American system of art education has assimilated
a high level of mainstream technique that ensures instant readability at the same time, for
those who are willing to see it, he is also critiquing recent Korean history. The question is
whether in that readability he has lost his ability to affect people with what he is saying. I
do not think so. His work is a brilliant synthesis of technique and content. It is
unfortunate that this catalog did not include some of that analysis. It unroots the artist as
much as his floating house lining is unrooted from its source.

The Smithsonian book on Xu Bing, in contrast, carefully embeds the artist’s work in his
Chinese roots, both recent and historical, as well as going into specific and helpful detail
on the nature of calligraphy itself. In addition to a short and illuminating article by the
artist, the author, Britta Erickson provides five short chapters that cover different
perspectives on Xu Bing, The Quiet Iconoclast (his early experiences particularly with
regard to the rustification project), Mistrust of Language, and the Book from the Sky,
Language as Intellectual Game, To Be Human and Serve the People.

Xu Bing was eleven years old (ck) as the cultural revolution in China began and, only a
few years later, as a young man, he embraced the rustification project of Mao Zedong.
He not only tended the land in a rural area, his cadre also had their own animals (pigs,
which have also played a part in his art) and even found the time and resources to
produce a student newspaper. Xu Bing’s father was a history professor and his mother in
library science. Both were vilified as reactionaries. That profoundly marked his deep
desire to demonstrate that he truly believed in the new society that Mao was building, that
he believed in socialism. At the same time it made him aware of the treachery and power
of words, books and slogans. “To strike at the written word is to strike at the very essence
of culture.” (14) His work centers around that experience.

During the 1980s, however, with the beginning of Westernization, the influx of
modernism and postmodernism, introduced techniques into his work that led to the
creation of installations which have dazzled the world.

Ghosts Pounding the Wall, 1990-1991 (an immense print made with 1300 sheets of
paper, taken from the Great Wall, using art students and peasants taking rubbings for
three weeks) was a major collaborative installation, Book from the Sky, 1986-88, a set of
four books printed with a thousand different characters that Xu Bing invented, is by now
a familiar if still overwhelming work. The discussion here emphasizes its relationship to
historical book formats, the specific process of conceiving it and creating it, as well as its
widespread reception and discussion in ChinaThat discussion which changed to critique
after Tiananmen Square was also the catalyst for his departure for the United States.
The last part of the book outlines his later work since coming to the United States, including his desire to continue to function in a public sphere that reaches out to people. He continues to carry the flame of anti-elitism in his spirit. As a result he has developed Square Word Calligraphy, which is a classroom project to teach people how to write calligraphy correctly, but to make it more accessible through using English words. The detailed description of this project is a valuable chapter in the book. Erickson is humble in this book. She does not impose on the artist any arcane theory or critical judgement. She creates a source of information that will greatly enrich our understanding of what his project is about in its historical and contemporary contexts.