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A MOMENT IN TIME: XU BING IN ROME

is an exhibition commissioned by the American Academy in Rome to celebrate Xu Bing's residency from April to June 2024.

Curated by Ilaria Puri Purini, Andrew Heiskell Arts Director with Lexi Eberspacher, Programs Associate for the Arts.

The exhibition is made possible by the Tsao Family Foundation Residency in Art.

Gallery Hours: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, 16.00 – 19.00
From May 22 to June 29, 2024.

American Academy in Rome
Via Angelo Masina, 5
00153 Rome

Exhibition Events

Curated by Johanne Affricot, Public Program Curator.

Artist Talk

May 29, 6.00 pm

Xu Bing in Conversation with Ornella de Nigris
Senior Researcher, Oriental Studies,
University of Siena.

Finissage: An Evening of Performances

June 27, 6.30 pm

With Peng Shuai Paolo, *Imaginary Natives* and
Vanshika Agrawal, *Feet of Clay*.

PREFACE

Calvin Tsao, Chair of the Board of Trustees

The Tsao Family Foundation recently endowed a new Residency focused on arts and artists from Asia, as well as a new Fellowship in Intercultural Philosophies. Both the Residency and the Fellowship were established with the aspiration to make connections between the thoughts and philosophies of the globe's myriad and immensely varied cultures. We see the great arc of Rome's history as a perfect portal from which to make these explorations.

I am very pleased to introduce to you Xu Bing, the inaugural Tsao Family Foundation Resident at the American Academy in Rome.

Xu Bing's exhibition fulfills these aspirations wonderfully, bringing into contact and to life the two ancient empires of China and Rome to illuminate the connectivity of human cultures through time and domain.

PORTABLE MONUMENTS: THE RUBBINGS OF XU BING

Ilaria Puri Purini

The new installation of Xu Bing draws objects and ideas together — copies, singularities and divided histories. *The Wall and the Road* (1988–2024) is monumental as it draws these concepts together, and suggests we can participate in this monumentality.

Xu's work is recursive and collaborative. It challenges us to think carefully about how repetition relates to difference. Part of the *The Wall and the Road* is a 22-meter-long ink rubbing of the Appian Way. The rubbing was done near the small province of Marino, a rural part of the Appian Way between mile X and XI, approximately 20 kilometers from Rome's city center. It is far from the Rome that tourists have spent centuries reproducing and copying into pictures that have made Rome an eternal city; the Appian Way the mother to all roads.

Xu Bing returns to this rubbing technique, a practice of copying that reenacts his previous work. He used a similar technique approximately 35 years earlier for another work that documents texture, scale, and grandeur. *Ghost Pounding the Wall* (1988–1991) is a rubbing of a tower of the Great Wall of China. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Xu collaborated with students and a local community of farmers. When he came to Rome, he found a community of Italian and Chinese students from Rome's Accademia di Belle Arti and the Istituto Europeo di Design. Together, in the Roman spring sun and torrential rain, they worked to connect the wall to the road.

For Xu, the technique of rubbing has a rich historical, cultural, and conceptual significance for which duplication is fundamental. Rubbing is a form of duplication used since the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–9 C.E., 25–220 C.E.). The technique has been modernized in Xu's practice but follows ancient principles, first covering the surface with a thin layer of plastic, then with a large covering of Xuan paper, and lastly 'poaching' it with ink-soaked cotton pads. The rubbing is then gently peeled away from the surface, bearing the imprint of the walls. Fragile and vulnerable, it requires further manipulation to be exhibited. The technical realization of the works requires an intense and shared labor.

Folded into the technique is a multisensory history activated in the toil of pounding ink on paper-covered stone. Xu explains that this Chinese practice dates from the 2nd century B.C.E. It bears a cultural attitude towards copying that is distinctively Chinese, one that traverses more modern and Western ideas of original and copy. Xu reflects on how copying hundreds of characters is fundamental to Chinese literacy, where learning to read and write means knowing how a sign

bears the cultural history of other learners. Like the rubbings of the monuments in *The Wall and the Road*, each sign contains traces of past uses and the copy represents a transfer of evidence and a revelatory encounter. Rubbing requires skill and repetition. It combines the incremental diligence of laborers with the vision of artists.

The installation embraces creative engagement that spans 35 years. It is a practice that also layers an intimate history — felt at the level of biography and beginning when the world's isolationism of the Chinese State contributed to Xu's move to the United States to later become one of the most prominent Chinese artists of his generation. While living in New York, Xu's work came to advocate Chinese cultural singularity in its struggle with Western materialism. In 2007, he returned to Beijing as Vice President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he had begun his teaching career nearly 40 years earlier. As a resident at the American Academy in Rome, Xu presents a material engagement with ancient cultures, the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty, whose divided monuments are connected through an artistic practice.

The historic context, the social structures, and the cultural experiences that form Western and Eastern cultures are different. Contacts between the two empires were sporadic and very limited. Bringing together a wall and road that are representative of the ancient civilizations that produced them is a way to reflect on history and what remains of time, power, and empire. We are invited to see geographies and eras folded together and to think about the ways in which we consider changes, and how we picture the infrastructures that underpin our freedoms.

Xu's rubbings of unmoving monuments, transferred and made portable, stimulate and challenge our notions of a shared history. The rubbings themselves are not weak shadows of the originals but represent a method for transmission — a means to share culture. They are a communication device, a technology used to reflect on ancient technologies. Xu's work occurs at a time when cultural exchanges between the East and the West are under pressure, and the times and places by which culture is understood can be limited. Nevertheless, monumental artworks can challenge as well as reinscribe conceptions of power and knowledge. And yet these imprints — copies of monuments and monumental copies — offer a unique opportunity to contemplate shared histories, and bring a lightness and possibility to how we picture ourselves.



LOOKING BACK AT EARTH, PERSPECTIVES, REFERENCE DATA, AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION:

The New Works by Xu Bing for the American Academy in Rome

A conversation between **Xu Bing** and
Davide Quadrio, Director of the Museo d'Arte Orientale in Turin

—
Davide Quadrio: From *Book from the Sky* to your emoticon writing, much of your work is related to communication and archaeology, between the tension of tradition and innovation. Compared to your previous works, how do you position this newly commissioned work you created in Rome?

—
Xu Bing: I am currently on the Via Appia. Our rubbing work had to stop because of the scorching sun or rain. Thus, I have the opportunity to answer your questions. Just like you mentioned, the writings in *Book from the Sky* and *Book from the Ground* are all related to communication (Fig. 3). The actualization of human culture revolves around communication. In other words, it is a history of communication. *Book from the Sky* stimulates the mind through non-communication, and thereby achieves a new way to communicate. *Book from the Ground* uses a new wave of hieroglyphs (signs) to rethink the new demands around human communication, technology, and global integration. At the same time, it experiments with the possibility of more efficient ways of communicating.



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My work includes meanings related to archaeology. For example, *Book from the Ground* brings the initial point of thinking back to the origins of signs in the human history of writing (almost all writing systems start with visual signs). In my work, the separation between the classical and contemporary does not exist.

In its essence, the separation between the East and West also does not exist. These are the attitudes my work expresses.

This new piece carries many questions around communication. It reflects the multi-layered meanings, complexity, and boundlessness of issues related to communication. This piece is designed according to the two gallery spaces at the American Academy. One space will exhibit the rubbings I made of the Great Wall in China 36 years ago. Another space will have the rubbings from the Via Appia Antica in Rome. The structure of the exhibition alludes to the concepts of “wall” and “road”. It is, in fact, discussing the multi-layered conversations regarding the values and world perspectives of different cultures.

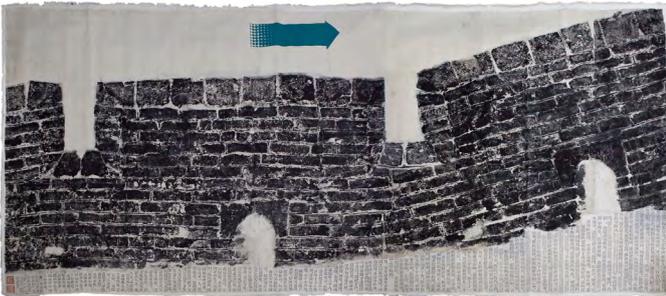
First of all, it is a conversation between two important ancient civilizations. After thousands of years, they enter into conversation once again. The formation of the Roman Empire happens around the time of the Qin Han Empire. In roughly the same period, both civilizations contributed their unique wisdom to mankind. Another layer of meaning is a retrospective of and a conversation with the artist's own creative path. The rubbing of the Great Wall 36 years ago reflects my fascination with traditional culture and my background in printmaking. They serve as an important foundation for my later practice.

Nearly 40 years have passed, and I have used a variety of undefinable expressions to create, mutate, or push forward ideas. Reactivating and combining the artists' materials I worked with 36 years ago seems to be a return to my old works in terms of the apparent techniques and forms. However, in my opinion, an artist's past works and present works form a closed “circle” that belongs to the artist only. An artist's life goal is to construct this “circle”. Although the forms of its past and future works may be very different, the inner thoughts and methods must be related. New works are the rediscovery of old works, and old works are the annotations of new works. They can discover and complement each other.

—
D.Q.: The semiotic forms in Chinese language and its reappearance in the world are inseparable from highly complex and sophisticated abstraction. Chinese realism

is in a way a coping mechanism, and the technique of rubbing is a perfect example of this. In the newly commissioned work, you use this technique to copy, while at the same time reinventing and reproducing the Appian Way. What is the message that this work emphasizes?

—
X.B.: Indeed, the particularity of the Chinese language and writing has influenced and determined the many aspects and characteristics of Chinese culture (Fig. 4). The particularity of Chinese square characters — its neatness when written — reflects the way Chinese



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people value the beauty of symmetry, which gave rise to the aesthetics of counterpoint, rhythmic poetry and the unique charm of Chinese literature. The rich relationships between sound, meaning, and shape of Chinese characters make writing and reading Chinese a multidimensional experience. Because of the amount of characters in Chinese, everyone who starts his or her education must spend several years copying thousands of glyphs, which has led to the formation of a unique copying culture in China (Fig. 5). The fact that Chinese people have been writing square characters for thousands of years must have influenced the nation's characteristics and ways of looking at things. It can even provide reasons for why China is the way it is today. The technique of rubbing, which appeared in the 2nd century, can be seen as the result of Chinese people's attitude toward copying.

German sinologist Lothar Ledderose writes in *Ten Thousand Things* that Chinese artists do not seek to faithfully reproduce natural appearances. Rather, they explore methods to replace imitation, and never directly create thousands or even millions of artworks. However, he also points out the changes of stable "casts." For example, the terracotta warriors from the Qin Dynasty are created with casts, but there are some differences in the handling and assembling of each piece.

These unique characteristics of Chinese culture are in fact implicit in the *The Wall and the Road* project. For example, ink rubbing is a traditional Chinese method of copying the patterns and words of an artifact, a technique used before the invention of photography. When you make a rubbing of an object, the object itself remains unchanged, but if you make five rubbings, then the five copies would have subtle differences from each other. This is because of the involvement of

human actions. For example, the pressure of rubbing, different rubbing styles, and treatments of the edges of the rubbing itself, all involve aspects determined by a human.

Of course, the different results of the rubbings also reflect the values of the objects being rubbed and the different timings of when the rubbing is done. For example, the value of a rubbing of a Han inscription at its time is different from a rubbing of it in the Ming and Qing dynasties. This is just like rubbing the Gubei Kou portion of the Great Wall a few decades ago; it would have a different value than if I were to rub the same portion of the Great Wall now. Why? It is because after decades of natural weathering of the wall, the wall itself has changed, and the rubbing will delicately reflect, document, and distinguish the changes of the original object over time. In other words, we rub the Via Appia today, but if we come back to rub it again after a few years, the presentation of the forms would be different. What I have talked about is the technique of copying through ink rubbing, and its techniques and hidden cultural meanings.

To answer your question about the message of reinventing and reproducing the Appian Way, I would like to say that through this project, people can realize that the products of these civilizations, as well as the direction and progress of human civilization that actually, exist in a kind of flux. The other point is that by moving these immovable and valuable historical sites through the technique of rubbing to the environment and cultural context of another civilization, the two civilizations are then juxtaposed, embedded, and are being observed beyond space and time. This displacement allows cultural artifacts that are rooted in a specific historical context to become "specimens" that leave their original context and provide people with new visual and conceptual perspectives. These "specimens" have actually touched the original objects, and the rubbings directly preserve the carbon-based information and the cultural DNA of the original objects. From this



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point of view, the work is fundamentally different from photography and video documentation. It is only a presentation of shadows. The power and value of this piece lie in the technique of displacing the rubbings.

—
D.Q.: Flying to the moon... In the project you recently exhibited in Venice, you created a very idealistic work that uses a satellite as a tool that helps the artist transcend his or her mundane limitations (Fig. 6). Pierre Huyghe depicted a post-human world in his last exhibition in Venice. How do you connect this project to the real possibilities of the last moments of humanity? Is it possible to develop a new Appian Way that can lead us further?

—
X.B.: Actually, while I am doing the rubbing of the Via Appia, my creative vision also reaches to the distant outer space. As a matter of fact, artistic creation has always discovered new ways of expression alongside the developments of science and technology. People in ancient times invented the technique of rubbing. It is in a way the predecessor of the idea of a photocopier. The Via Appia is also the predecessor of the highways around the world, and the predecessor of virtual information pathways, as well as the predecessor of space satellites. It all comes back to the topic that we discussed at the beginning. Ultimately, it is all related to communication.



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Today's space technology allows the tentacles and footprints of mankind to reach further. Yet, regardless of how far the tentacles of mankind can reach, the ultimate goal is to look back at Earth, the only home for human survival, and to find new perspectives to solve problems on Earth, as well as to add more reference data that aids human thinking and helps us to discover new philosophical outlooks and methods that can help solve the problems on Earth. This goal and concept is similar to the one that ancient Romans had, extending their roads to places afar and into other cultures. That's why I really like the last sentence in your question: "blaze a new Via Appia path that will lead us further."

THE VIA APPIA ANTICA THEN AND NOW

Allison Emmerson

The first branch in Rome's famed highway system, the Via Appia Antica has been celebrated since antiquity as the Eternal City's chief façade. The road was laid out by the Censor Appius Claudius Caecus in 312 B.C.E to link Rome with Capua in central Campania, allowing for easier movement of troops and representing the city's expanding domination of southern Italy. As Rome's power grew, so did the course of the highway. By 190 B.C.E the Via Appia had extended to the major southern port of Brundisium, opening the whole of the eastern Mediterranean to Roman troops. Alongside military action, however, the Via Appia invited new opportunities: for trade, travel, and intercultural connection. From its dedication, Roman elites built status by establishing luxurious villas along the road, and by the early Imperial period, the Via Appia's prestige was unmatched. According to the Roman historian Livy, it formed the entrance hall for the whole of the city (*in vestibulo Urbis*), while the poet Martial called it the most famous of roads (*maxima fama viae*). It was the poet Statius, however, who in the second half of the first century B.C.E gave the Via Appia its most lasting title: the *regina viarum*, "queen of highways."

Today the Via Appia lies forgotten along much of its route, emerging only occasionally under a rural lane or alongside a farmer's field. Xu Bing undertook his rubbing project in such a rural landscape, bringing his team to repopulate the ancient road. In the countryside outside of Rome, however, larger swaths survive, traveled by tourists who come to see the highway itself. As a result, the Via Appia now draws together a population that extends well beyond the borders of ancient Rome. Likewise for the community of artists and scholars at the American Academy, Rome's first highway remains a place of exploration and connection.

As a Rome Prize fellow in 2019, my colleague Liana Brent walked the entire route from Brindisi over a period of three weeks in the spring of our fellowship year; one of my fondest memories from that season was the final day of her hike, when we all trooped down the hill with flowers and champagne to greet her as she reentered the city. As Interim Mellon Professor, I've connected with this year's community on the Via Appia as well.



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We traveled the first mile together on one of the Academy's famed Walks and Talks, discussing life on the margins of Rome and how it has changed through time; in the following weeks, fellows returned to the Via Appia in smaller groups and with their family and friends (Fig. 7). Although the queen of highways emerged from Rome's militaristic past, its role as a connector has been far longer lived, tying the past to the present and us to each other.



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Acknowledgements

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List of Captions

Fig. 1

Makers working on the Chinese Wall, 1988, courtesy Xu Bing Studio.

Fig. 2

Students working on the Appian Way, 2024, photo: Sha Yixing.

Fig. 3

Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991, UCCA, Beijing, China, 2018, courtesy Xu Bing Studio.

Fig. 4

Xu Bing, *The Direction of the Great Wall*, 1988, courtesy of Xu Bing Studio.

Fig. 5

Rubbing of a Text Brick from the Great Wall, Ink on paper 1990.

Fig. 6

Installation of Xu Bing: *Art Satellite — The First Animated Film Shot in Space*, San Geremia, Venice, courtesy Xu Bing Studio.

Fig. 7

Xu Bing working on the Appian Way, 2024, photo: Sha Yixing.

Fig. 8

Xu Bing, *Rubbing of the Inscribed Votive Altar Dedicated to Isis and Sarapis* from the AAR, Norton–Van Buren Archaeological Study Collection, Inv. No. 009449 (formerly 8949), photo: Daniele Molajoli.

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