Imagine yourself walking among the glamorous skyscrapers in Beijing’s Central Business District, known as the CBD, an area designed to compete with other global financial centres around the world such as those in London, New York, and Tokyo. You pass by two glass facade towers with the name Caifu dasha (Fortune Towers), a commercial development among many in the CBD that are designed by world-renowned architecture firms and that signify wealth with their luxurious appearances. You glance over the glass atrium that connects the twin Fortune Towers and suddenly catch sight of, hanging from the ceiling of the atrium (which itself looks like a crystal cage), a magnificent view of two giant phoenixes in flight. As you approach the atrium, you discover, perhaps to your unexpected delight, that the pair of birds is assembled from heavy pieces of industrial debris whose traces of prior use are left visible and uncamouflaged. If it happens to be nighttime, when the lights in the atrium are dimmed, you see instead two constellations in the pattern of phoenixes, formed by shining fairy lights that trace the contours of the birds.

The preceding description may very well convey how Xu Bing envisioned the public encounter with this work, which he entitled Phoenix, had it ultimately been accepted by the commissioning client and installed in Fortune Towers’ atrium, the space the artist originally designed it for.

How would Phoenix—which was ultimately constructed, although not for the Fortune Towers atrium—if installed as a public art piece following this original design, intervene in the space of its display? By reintroducing construction waste with heavy traces of production history back into the glamorous buildings and putting labour on grand display, what would Phoenix tell us about labour and capital? How does the labour-intensive process of making Phoenix itself comment on the relationship between art and labour? How does Phoenix’s own entanglement with capital—created upon the request of capital, abandoned by capital, and eventually salvaged by capital—reveal the complicated relationship between art and capital? And as an artwork that has now travelled the globe, how does Phoenix communicate across cultures? It is through Xu Bing’s signature trick—that I call the doubleness of sight—achieved with pronounced materiality of the work up close on one hand, and the creation of an illusion from afar on the other, that Phoenix intervenes in the politics of space, exposes the doubleness of site, and examines the relations among art, labour, and capital.

A Brief Story of Phoenix
Phoenix was originally commissioned by Lee Shau-kee, a Hong Kong-based real estate tycoon, through Ravenel Art Group, to adorn the atrium of
Fortune Towers, a new business complex. Xu Bing, however, intended to use this work as a platform for social critique. The finished product is two giant phoenixes, each approximately six metres wide, twenty-eight metres long, and weighing twelve tons, assembled with the discarded industrial materials and tools that had been used to construct the modern buildings these two birds were intended to ornament. Little by little, Xu Bing and his team convinced the commissioners to accept this “junk”; yet, after the 2008 financial crisis, the commissioning party grew intolerant of the critical and ironic dimension of the work and demanded that the birds be beautified. Having refused the demand because it would defeat his purpose, Xu Bing lost the commission, and ownership of the artwork went into limbo. Later, Barry Lam, a billionaire and one of the foremost art patrons in Taiwan, bought the piece. Phoenix was presented to the public twice in China—outside the Today Art Museum in Beijing and during the World Expo in Shanghai, both in 2010. Phoenix then made its debut abroad at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) with a complementary exhibition that traced the evolution of the project at Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C. in 2013, and then was on view at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York, in 2014.


**Translatio: Transfer and Translation**

“Phoenix” is a common translation and mistranslation for the Chinese word *fenghuang*. The (mis)translation is attributed to James Legge, a noted Scottish Sinologist and one of the earliest translators of Chinese classics. According to the chapter “Shi’niao” (To Explain Birds) in *Erya*, the oldest surviving Chinese encyclopedia known, *fenghuang* is made up of the head of a rooster, the jaw of a swallow, the neck of a snake, the back pattern of a tortoise, and the tail of a fish. *Fenghuang* is basically an assemblage of heterogeneous animal parts. Xu Bing translated the organic components of the bird into industrial ones, and while reinventing the bird’s design, he followed carefully the logic of each part. The hardhats form the comb because they are red and worn on top. The concrete mixer is the stomach because the two share a function of stirring and blending. “The heads of both the male *feng* and the female *huang* are made from the nose of industrial jackhammers, a contemporary translation of their strength and ferocity (historical images of the phoenix often show the powerful bird with a snake in its talons or beak).” The shovels apparently make good claws. A spade becomes a piece of feather because the handle’s function resembles that of the quill. The impellers are on the long tail feathers due to their relation to aerodynamics. Thus the phoenixes are by no means a haphazard assemblage of used materials; rather, the design is careful and thoughtful, and the logic of assemblage follows the anatomical structure of a bird and makes the piece a well-integrated whole.

Bearing the name of the *fenghuang*, and having been transferred physically from China to the U.S., *Phoenix* can be seen as a paradigm of translation. Although *Erya* also reads “*feng* is the essence of fire,” *fenghuang* does not share the legend of rebirth from ashes associated with the phoenix. The phoenix, “in ancient Egypt and in Classical antiquity,” according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: 

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is a fabulous bird associated with the worship of the sun. . . . Only one phoenix existed at any time, and it was very long-lived—no ancient authority gave it a life span of less than 500 years. As its end approached, the phoenix fashioned a nest of aromatic boughs and spices, set it on fire, and was consumed in the flames. From the pyre miraculously sprang a new phoenix.  

Although Xu Bing’s phoenixes easily can be read as reborn from ashes and waste, the fire extinguishers bundled on their feathers seem at the same time to be a playful reversal of the fire motif and acknowledge the tension in the doubleness of translation. Nevertheless, Phoenix allows for the coexistence of both, as a conglomerate of fenghuang-phoenix, with their similarities and differences. Phoenix thus signifies heterogeneity and multiplicity.

Xu Bing commented on Phoenix’s exhibition at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine that “The birds have different meanings in different places. This cathedral is monumental and very lofty, and the phoenixes now have a sacred quality.” Xu Bing underscored the work’s interaction with the space of its exhibition and the site specificity of Phoenix as an intended public art piece. Unable to be installed in Fortune Towers, the site it was initially conceived for, Phoenix is now constantly on the move. Therefore, the meaning of Phoenix is not fixed, but open to interpretation, and new meaning can be accrued and generated by each new, changing context.

The Materiality of the Phoenixes

“Background Story would, in fact, be an apt title for almost any of Xu Bing’s works, indeed his practice as a whole,” the 2012 MASS MoCA booklet reads, “which consistently reminds us to question what we see and investigate what we are told; that is, to find a deeper reality, which is often messier than the seeming beauty of a story’s surface.” The deeper, messier reality is revealed through the pronounced materiality of Xu Bing’s work. Xu Bing’s belief that God invented us with dust, hence the divinity of materials, may help explain his interest in the materiality of things. How are we to understand what Xu Bing means by divinity? The contemporary Chinese poet Ouyang Jianghe remarked in his article “Xu Bing Fenghuang de yiyi chongdie” (The Overlap of Meanings in Xu Bing’s Phoenix), Those rusty traces of use on the materials the phoenixes are made of, those hardhats once worn, which make one wonder where the heads once underneath those hats have gone and what they are thinking, and those working tools touched by the workers and left with their warmth and sweat, which have transformed into rust over time: the existence and transformations of all these tinctures of life along with the experience of life accumulated in the process
that makes tools and materials into waste become what Xu Bing calls “divinity.”\(^{17}\)

We may therefore understand “divinity” as a repository of possibilities rooted in the creation myth for connections and transformations between the material and the human and the power for the material itself to invoke and speak for the human condition. The most telling example may be another of Xu Bing’s works, *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (2004), which uses dust collected from the streets of New York, blown from the debris of the World Trade Center on the day it was destroyed in 2001. According to Xu Bing’s own article “Guanyu Hechu re chen’ai” (On Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?), a museum contacted him hoping to purchase some of the dust he collected; the museum had collected many things related to the 9/11 attacks but not the dust.\(^{18}\) During the phoenixes’ making, Xu Bing kept “emphasiz[ing] the need to increase the use of materials with the authentic feeling of real buildings,” namely, such materials that readily invoke a construction site, because, presumably, the materials are the strongest pieces of evidence that remind the viewer of the building’s past.\(^{19}\)

In *Capital*, Karl Marx wrote, “The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.”\(^{20}\) According to Marx, value, measured by labour, appears to be determined by seemingly intrinsic use value, rendering labour irrelevant. The pieces of construction waste and tools that *Phoenix* is made up of bore the marks left by prior use; therefore, they are indexical signs that point directly to labour, thus making the obscured labour—as theorized by Marx—visible again.

Every part of *Phoenix* has been touched twice—first by the construction workers who used the tools and shaped the materials, and then by the art
workers who built the sculpture. Unlike most modern buildings where any visible marks left by their builders have been wiped clean, Phoenix retains heavy traces that reveal the production history of both their component parts and the process of their assemblage. Here, the workers’ hands—the hired hands of wage labour—replace the artist’s hand. The tricolour-striped plastic sheets, hard hats, spades, bamboo scaffolds, excavators, impellers, green pipes, and the belly of the concrete mixer are readily recognizable yet not necessarily namable or articulable signs that are closely associated with a construction site. Unlike real estate moguls, who are each known by a proper name, workers are designated by metonymy, synecdoche, generality, and collectivity.

In the poem “Fenghuang” (Phoenixes) inspired by Xu Bing’s Phoenix, Ouyang Jianghe wrote, “ID photos: a collective face, /Signatures: an anonymity.”21 Despite the fact that every worker has an ID with their photo and signs their name on a labour contract, ID photos and signatures are merely tools for surveillance, control, and exploitation rather than signifiers of individuality or subjectivity. Workers remain faceless nonpersons. When the metonym “hard hat” has replaced the actual labourer, it indicates what Wang Hui calls quzhutihua de laodong (de-subjectified labour).22 The MASS MoCA booklet Xu Bing: Phoenix reads, “In this way his mythical phoenixes can perhaps be seen as stand-ins for the labourers who made them—disposable like the waste materials they used—yet ultimately the source of power and prosperity the creature historically symbolizes.”23 However, I argue that the phoenixes do not merely seek to serve as “stand-ins” for the labourers—if so, the phoenixes would have violated the workers again by replacing them and therefore violently removing them once more from the scene. Rather, the relationship is more complex and multilayered.

There is indeed an analogy between the phoenixes—or more precisely the materials that make the phoenixes—and the workers, as interpreted in the booklet. Zhai Yongming even called the waste materials the “excrement” of the building—used, taken advantage of, necessary, but ultimately to be purged, analogous to the excluded workers after their exploitation.24 The
The paradoxical union of cheapness and beauty is symbolic. Zhai Yongming quotes Xu Bing, “I hope that the methods behind this work resemble those of Chinese folk art, that they possess a strong quality of the people. Folk practices tend to use the least expensive materials to express a strong sense of hope about the future.” Adorned with the most beautiful, albeit mundane, materials available, the two phoënixes are analogous to the people, not the business elite. The red hard hats as the comb of one phoënix, according to Ouyang Jianghe, remind the viewer of the heads that used to wear them and make the viewer wonder where the heads are now and what they might be thinking. The emphasis on traces and on the workers’ hands, as the workers are known by the synecdoche “hired hands” in English, counters the de-subjectifying power of commodity, brings back the history of the phoënixes, and makes the product of labour personal again.

Therefore, by transporting dumped construction waste and used tools back onto the site, Phoenix salvages the sunken history of the building. “[T]he existence of the things qua commodities,” wrote Karl Marx in Capital:

> [A]nd the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. . . . I call this the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so as soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

The relation between the construction waste and the shining building as the finished product signifies a social relationship between those who construct the building and those who enjoy it, and by juxtaposing the rawness of the materials that constitute the phoënixes and the fineness of the grand building, Phoenix highlights the jarring conflict between the two as well as the forgotten exploitation and hidden exclusion of the former.
Doubleness of Sight: Between Reality and Illusion

When Xu Bing first visited the construction site of Fortune Towers, he was shocked by the stark contrast between the almost primitive way of working and the modernity of the skyscraper:

The working and living conditions of the construction workers were basic and humble. The contrast between the modern buildings and the rudimentary conditions of the construction work came as a shock to Xu Bing, who had never set foot on a Chinese construction site. The construction site was entirely debris at that time. So Xu Bing decided to use the architectural excrement of this skyscraper—along with tools and daily necessities of migrant workers—to create a work that would be hung in the atrium of the grand building in all its sparkling magnificence.28

The making of this work was a process of discovery for Xu Bing. How to impart his experience of shock and revelation and replicate such a moment of contemplation to a viewer who may have never seriously observed or pondered the working and living conditions of construction workers became Xu Bing’s primary question, and this revelation could not be presented in a didactic manner; it would have to be a process of discovery for the viewer as well.

To create an educational and thought-provoking visual experience for the viewer, Xu Bing created a play between near and far and between light and dark, such that the phoenixes would embody a paradoxical doubleness—the familiar and the unfamiliar—a sight of Freudian uncanny that exemplifies conflicting social relations. According to his original design, during daytime and from afar, the viewer would first be moved by the beauty and magnificence of the two phoenixes that were in harmony with the grandeur of the skyscrapers they adorned. Upon closer examination, however, the viewer would experience surprise, finding out that the objects were constructed of construction waste, at odds with everything such a modern, luxury building represents. Phoenix appears somewhat familiar at night, like Chinese festive lanterns with a common motif of longfeng chengxiang (the appearance of phoenixes is considered to bring a good fortune), yet turns out to be something strange and unfamiliar, a readymade assemblage of industrial debris typical of Western avant-garde art.29 The phoenixes were to appear beautiful, even elegant, in the dark yet become disconcertingly rough in the daylight.

The paradoxes embedded in Phoenix reproduce the conditions of modernity and capitalism. While one might have the impression that modernity is all about technological advancement and automatized production, only upon closer examination does one begin to realize that manual labour is still the basis of many production processes. Phoenix can
thus be seen as a combination of two sides of Chinese society—the harsh realities of cheap labour and environmental pollution as well as the miraculous economic prosperity and the Chinese dream, a dream that looks most splendid when the less splendid realities are hidden in the dark. Interestingly, while Xu Bing transforms harsh reality into illusory constellations, Ouyang Jianghe wrote in his poem, “In the sky, real estate moguls stand / pinching out stars like cigarette butts.” With “pinching out stars,” Ouyang Jianghe smashes the illusion Xu Bing creates and forces the reader/viewer back into reality. Xu Bing’s stars are turned into cigarette butts, back into consumed commodities to be discarded, just like construction waste.

From Sight to Site
Walter Benjamin famously remarked in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Such barbarism, however, is usually repressed and buried. When the contemporary American artist Fred Wilson put a pair of iron slave shackles next to fine pitchers, steins, and goblets used for silver service in his installation *Metalwork 1793–1880* (1992) at the Maryland Historical Society, he salvaged the hidden history of what made the silverware and the lifestyle it stood for possible. The juxtaposition created stark contrasts—one between the fineness of the beautifully designed silverware with shining and intricately decorated surfaces and the dullness of the lusterless, crude iron with a simple, purely functional design, and another between the elegant lifestyle the silverware evoked and the abject life subject to toil and cruelty that the shackles represent. Bringing back what had been hidden away, overlooked, and forgotten, Wilson created shock, tension, and contrast. Xu Bing’s *Phoenix*, however,
is not only about outright antagonism—the relationship he has proposed is also complex, mutable, and deceptive. *Phoenix* suggests a more subtle relationship between labour and capital than sheer enmity. The doubleness of the site, namely, the grand buildings as both a document of civilization and modernity and a document of barbarism and exploitation, is revealed through the doubleness of sight—the promising outlook of prosperity and the harsh view of toil, the harmonious prospect of effaced labour making traceless contributions to the creation of fortune and the crude picture of raw materials bearing scars of labour.

Art historian and critic Rosalyn Deutsche brought forward a perspective on public art in her text "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City,"

Beginning in the late 1960s, contemporary art and criticism challenged modernist tenets of aesthetic autonomy by exploring art’s functions in mutable social circumstances. Artists initiated this critique by shifting attention away from the “inside” of the artwork—supposed in modernist doctrine to contain fixed, inherent meaning—and focusing instead on the work’s context—its framing conditions. Site-specificity, an aesthetic strategy in which context was incorporated into the work itself, was originally developed to counteract the construction of ideological art objects, purportedly defined by independent essences, and to reveal the ways in which the meaning of art is constituted in relation to its institutional frames. . . . Most fruitfully, artists extended the notion of context to encompass the individual site’s symbolic, social, and political meanings as well as the discursive and historical circumstances within which artwork, spectator, and site are situated. . . . But critical site-specific art, as distinguished from its academic progeny, not only continued to incorporate context as a critique of the artwork but attempted to intervene in the site. The newly acknowledged reciprocity between artwork and site changed the identity of each, blurring the boundaries between them, and paved the way for art’s participation in wider cultural
and social practices. For public art, the objective of altering the site required that the urban space occupied by a work be understood, just as art and art institutions had been, as socially constructed spaces.\textsuperscript{32}

In the introduction to her book \textit{Evictions}, Deutsche summarized Henri Lefebvre’s idea that “the organization of the city and of space in general is neither neutral nor uniformly advantageous” and that “space is, rather, political, inseparable from the conflictual and uneven social relations that structure specific societies at specific historical moments.”\textsuperscript{33} Deutsche further argued that urban-aesthetic discourses “mobilize a democratic rhetoric of ‘openness’ and ‘accessibility’,” yet they “are structured by exclusions and, moreover, by attempts to erase the traces of these exclusions.”\textsuperscript{34} “Exclusions are justified, naturalized, and hidden by representing social space as a substantial unity that must be protected from conflict, heterogeneity, and particularity.”\textsuperscript{35}

By forcing the waste of the building back into itself, \textit{Phoenix} turns an exclusive space inclusive and imposes heterogeneity back on homogeneity. If on view as a public art piece in Fortune Towers following Xu Bing’s original design, \textit{Phoenix} would have intervened in the space of its display, attacking the boundary that delimits the inside and outside of that space. \textit{Phoenix} would have revealed the conflicting and uneven economic and social relations between those who construct the building and those who enjoy it. Reinroducing the eradicated heterogeneity back to the site, \textit{Phoenix} would have called attention to the effacement of traces of exclusion and question the specious claim of openness suggested by the glass facades’ transparency.

“The market community as such is the most impersonal relationship of practical life into which humans can enter with one another,” wrote Max Weber in \textit{Economy and Society}, “… where the market is allowed to follow its own autonomous tendencies, its participants do not look toward the persons of each other but only toward the commodity.”\textsuperscript{36} “Those who construct the building and those who enjoy it” are in such a market community described by Weber that they do not have any personal relation, hence never “meet[ing] each other.” The relationship between these two groups of people is established through, and only through, the building as commodity.

I have argued that not only are those who construct the building never seen, their existence is consistently in danger of effacement and oblivion. As a typical slogan in Beijing’s CBD goes, Fortune Towers is a place where “those who have created fortune enjoy fortune.”\textsuperscript{37} Such assertions claim that “those who have created fortune” have created it singlehandedly. Unfortunately,
construction workers seem to have no place in this discursive or physical space of fortune. This slogan is more of an alibi to justify the privilege of those who “enjoy fortune” by crediting them for producing it, whereas such privilege actually derives from their acts of consumption through luxury lifestyles. In response to the effacement of construction workers, Phoenix reminds us of the indispensable role these workers provide and asks who has actually created fortune. The construction workers, hired and used to build the walls of Fortune Towers, were, at the same time, building demarcations that eventually fended them off from this privileged space.

Phoenix would not only critique the space where it was to be displayed but also seek to transform it. The atrium of Fortune Towers, with its glass facades, provides an illusion of accessibility for all. The glass wall, however, while transparent, is solid. If you are an average person who passes by or someone who has a manual job in the CBD but who does not enjoy the privilege of a luxury lifestyle, nothing here actually belongs to you. However, if you were to behold the two phoenixes—a public artwork conceived also for you, the luxury building’s discriminatory barrier—the transparent but solid glass partition between the outside and the inside—would become more porous and unstable. Or, if you are lucky enough to be one of those who are comfortable about entering the building as a middle- or high-end consumer, an owner of a luxury apartment, or a white-collar professional, the two phoenixes would reveal what you do not see but has been supporting your lifestyle.

The sheer size of the phoenixes and the issues this work is concerned with bear resemblance to an earlier work by Xu Bing—Gui da qiang (Ghosts Pounding the Wall) (1990–91). Ghosts is a series of large-scale rubbings of parts of the Great Wall. The Great Wall is a document of both civilization and barbarism, a record of technology and stamina as well as corvée labour and suffering. About the Great Wall, “a legend also circulated,” as art historian and critic Wu Hung recounted, describing the popular Chinese folktale of a woman, Mengjiang, in his article “Counter-Monument”:

It tells of an ordinary woman, Mengjiang, whose husband had been sent to the wall construction site. In winter, worrying about his welfare, she set out to take him warm clothes, only to learn after the long journey that she was too late: her husband had already perished and his body had been buried under the wall. Overcome, the woman knelt down and cried. Her grief miraculously caused the wall to break open and reveal her husband’s bones.38

According to the legend, Mengjiang’s husband, Wan Xiliang, as an individual labourer, is physically used as building blocks for the wall. As the wall is built upon his body, his body as proof of barbarism is literally buried. Mengjiang’s weeping miraculously uncovers such barbarism on the verge of its falling into oblivion. “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke),” argues Walter Benjamin, “It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”39 Both Ghosts and Phoenix are monumental “works” that entail real work and manual labour;
much like the marks left by the workers on the phoenixes, the rubbings of the wall are indexical signs made by the hand of the art workers, pointing to the actual bricks of the wall laid by the labourers in the past. *Ghosts* and *Phoenix* therefore seize hold of the memory of labour at a dangerous moment of it being repressed under what is now viewed as a monument of civilization. Indeed, Wu Hung calls *Ghosts* a counter-monument:

This primary meaning of the project becomes implicit when the paper Long Wall [a literal translation of the Chinese word *Changcheng*, a.k.a., the Great Wall] is shown in an art gallery. What we encounter now is the final consequence of a transformation: the solid brick-structure is transformed into its volumeless shadow; the national symbol is transformed into an installation by an individual artist; and the Long Wall—a prime monument of China—is transformed into a counter-monument. I call it a counter-monument because its violation of a conventional monument is still measured against the conventional monument, and because this violation has resulted in a new monumental form. Like his creator, this paper Long Wall has been dislocated; but its significance still lies in its juxtaposition with its origin.40

*Phoenix* can also be considered a counter-monument. The grand, glass-facade skyscrapers are conceived as monuments of fortune that occupy a position as objects of worship to be looked up to and that distinguish themselves from the baseness of their own construction waste.

**From Spatiality to Temporality**
The making of *Ghosts* was no less painstaking than that of *Phoenix*, and, like *Phoenix*, the process of its making is meticulously documented. According to Wu Hung in the same article:

With a crew of students and peasants, he laboured for twenty-four days to make ink rubbings from a thirty-metre-long section of the Wall. The project was planned and conceived as a grand happening. Every stage of its process was meticulously documented, including the endless, monotonous sound and motion of "pounding the wall," which was recorded on film and video.41

The photographs of workers on the scaffold making the rubbings, however, create an anachronistic illusion, as if the modern-day workers were building the Great Wall on a construction site. Yet, this work is not a reenactment of constructing the wall; the workers are actually making art, which may not be as labourious as building the Great Wall but still demands considerable toil. Therefore, like *Phoenix*, *Ghosts* plays with the viewer’s first impressions, expectations, and, upon closer examination, reconsideration of their experience of it.
Under a pre-capitalist economic system, it was political power that mobilized labour; the Great Wall literally buried the personal traces of its producers. Nowadays, it is mostly economic forces that drive labour, and the actual makers are again wiped away. If we examine Xu Bing’s earlier work Ghosts and his later work Phoenix side by side, we find simultaneity of past and present: the age-old icon of fenghuang and the modern industrial material, the eternity of fenghuang and the cyclical rebirth of the phoenix, as well as the ancient wall and the contemporary art workers. “The time is out of joint.”42 Such anachronism, or perhaps even achronicity, seems to question the linear-progressive narrative of history. Xu Bing’s works make ingenious statements on time and progression: Is the condition of labour today better than that some millennium ago, long since we supposedly entered a more civilized and modernized age? Since the phoenix is reborn again and again, does exploitation remain the same, as the history of labour repeats itself, regardless of its upgraded, mechanized context? “This is how one pictures the angel of history,” described Walter Benjamin vividly:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.43

What if we replace Benjamin’s angel of history (which is itself inspired by modern art, Paul Klee’s painting Angelus Novus (1920) with Xu Bing’s fenghuang-phoenix? His face and hers are forever turned toward the present, with one eye into the past, the other into the future. The fenghuang-phoenixes would like to advance, flying upward toward Paradise, but a whirl of wind has caught their wings with such violence that they keep revolving. Even if they were to catch fire, a fire called progress, they would not stop. They shed their old feathers that have turned into ashes and start anew, with more and more sleek plumage, yet they are always haunted by the idea that they are merely the return of their own specters from the past and the future.

**Flight Within the Cage**

The making of Phoenix itself produces waste; therefore, Xu Bing’s move is nothing redemptive. He is practical about what art can do in today’s society. With “the atrium space like a crystal box,” Xu Bing envisioned for the phoenixes “an image of arrested flight.”44 The image of flight within a cage is metaphorical for the artist’s situation in a capitalist economy. The
Phoenixes themselves are extremely heavy and costly to move. The wires that bear the weight of the birds, the hoists that are expensive to rent (as many as six hoists were used in the outdoor exhibition in front of the Today Art Museum), and even Fortune Towers where the giant phoenixes would have been hung all serve as a metaphor for how capital supports the weight of art and how art heavily depends on capital.45 “It is almost impossible for art to function independently of capital in the contemporary society,” as the contemporary Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke commented. The relationship between art and capital is intricate, with both tension and gongmou (collusion).46

Xu Bing uses art to draw attention to the system within its own limitations. Phoenix is a labour-intensive, collaborative project finished in an art factory led by Xu Bing. Although Xu Bing’s own status as one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese artists was necessary for making such a work possible, Phoenix is presented as a group effort. Xu Bing has allocated the workers and other participants visibility and agency. The copyright of The Story of the Phoenix: Xu Bing’s Phoenix Project does not belong to Xu Bing, but to Xu Bing Studio. The Story documents Phoenix as a collaborative project finished by Xu Bing’s team and records the names and faces of various contributors such as Xu Bing’s assistants, friends, and the workers at the art factory. The Story acknowledges Dan Bo’s important contribution and gives voice to different people such as Da Lang, one of the workers:

Professor Xu Bing would say, “ Doesn’t it look great if you put this thing in that position? ” So I would think about it myself and realize that it was better than before. I slowly began to try my own hand at it. Professor Xu was not willing to let you make changes and, in fact, wanted you to propose changes. That doesn’t work with other artists. “Take that thing down, switch this for me!” They usually have that attitude.47

Da Lang was inspired to make pieces of furniture with construction waste, and his works have been exhibited along with the phoenixes. In addition, a documentary accompanies the exhibitions, which gives credit to the art workers who assembled Phoenix with their hands. Hence, the relationship between Xu Bing and the art workers is different from what Phoenix is trying to critique, namely the relationship between those who construct the building and those who ultimately enjoy it.

Calling attention to the condition of workers, Xu Bing faces the ethical problem of how to represent labour and the labourers. He avoids appropriating “iconic” images of others—what Wang Hui called “gening de biaojianhua” (branding revolution).48 By not putting on display the images of the workers labouring in an undignified condition (though he includes some photographs of workers at work in the documentary video made
to accompany the work), Xu Bing avoids the possibility of subjecting the workers to the gaze of idle onlookers.

By allowing the workers’ voices to be heard, their names to be credited, their faces to be seen, and their contributions to be recognized, Xu Bing intends to avoid an ethical mistake—what Craig Owens called “the indignity of speaking for others.”

Owens criticized Marx’s argument about “the small-holding peasants in France,” in particular Marx’s own remark that, “they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”

Owens continued:

Here, Marx uncritically assumes the traditional role of politically motivated intellectual—or artist—in bourgeois society: he appropriates for himself the right to speak on behalf of others, setting himself up as their conscience—indeed, as consciousness itself. But in order to occupy this position, he must first deny them (self-) consciousness, the ability to represent themselves. In other words, Marx overlooks the constitutive role of his own discourse, which is held to be merely representing—and representative.

Hence, regarding the social function of art, the main dilemma is how art should intervene. With Phoenix, Xu Bing is interested in intervening in the fundamental workings of the relations between production and social spaces.

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Notes


4. Ibid., 46.

5. Ibid., 47.

6. Ibid., 57.

7. Ibid., 73.


19. Ibid., xiv.

20. Ibid., xiii.

21. Ibid., *Evictions*, xiii.


27. Ibid, 32.


31. Ibid, 72.


36. Ibid.


39. Ibid., 7.

40. Ouyang Jianghe, "Xu Bing Fenghuang de yiyi chongdie.”


44. Ibid, 261.

45. Ibid.