Phoenix: Xu Bing at the Cathedral
The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, New York, NY, USA, 2014–2015

Phoenix, contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing’s monumental sculptural work at The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York City, is his recent contribution to global conversations on contemporary art. Through the artist’s printmaking, experimentations with language, and site-specific installations, he expresses the historical continuity of tradition in a time of significant social and political change. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, Xu came to prominence at the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing where he studied, taught, and found his artistic voice. His master’s thesis project, Five Series of Repetitions (1987), confirmed the artist’s unorthodox methods of combining his love of words with his knowledge of printing, elements that became characteristic of his subsequent work. In 1988 he showed prints from the unfinished A Book from the Sky (1987–1991) at the China Art Gallery (now the National Art Museum of China). The following year, he was invited to show A Book from the Sky in “China/Avant-Garde,” a group exhibition of 180 artists. Closed shortly after it opened, the exhibition was officially denounced as standing for bourgeois liberal tendencies of the “avant-garde.”

From 1990 to 2007 Xu lived and worked in New York City, mostly in Brooklyn—where he still has a studio—and has exhibited extensively in solo and group exhibitions in Asia, Europe, and the United States. He participated in the 45th Venice Biennale in 1994 and was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1999. When he returned to China in late 2007 to become vice president of CAFA, he was widely recognized as one of the most talented contemporary artists from China along with Gu Wenda and Cai Guo-Qiang, among others.

Phoenix was first presented at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams (2012–2013) and subsequently at The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York City (2014–2015). The new Phoenix-2015 was presented as part of the China Pavilion group exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale. The backstory of the two-year Phoenix project is detailed in The Story of the Phoenix: Xu Bing’s Phoenix Project (2012), an exhibition catalogue and video that recount the artist’s complicated process. The story begins with an invitation to create an artwork for the atrium of the World Financial Center in Beijing and continues with his visit to the construction site near the buildings, his consternation over the impoverished living conditions of the migrant workers (in contrast to the luxury of the new buildings), the submission and acceptance of his sculptural proposal for the project, his creative planning and design as well as those of the workers contracted at the Yidong Garden Sculpture Production Center outside of central Beijing, the
varied work stoppages, the final rejection of the project by the original developers, and its rescue by a Taiwanese collector who acquired the work and provided the final funding.

Imagine the magnificent soaring presence of the two phoenix birds—Feng, the male, and Huang, the female—facing the central doors in The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine (figs. 1 and 2). Perfectly assembled from thousands of pieces of construction debris over two years, the two sculptures weigh twelve tonnes each and measure more than ninety and one hundred feet (approximately twenty-seven and thirty metres) respectively. Brought through the Cathedral’s great doors in sections on flatbed trucks, they were reassembled and suspended from the ceiling, where they occupy a large space in the nave. Thousands of small LEDs illuminate the Phoenix, who appear poised in arrested flight and resemble a constellation of stars, especially as daylight fades.

The monumental assemblages have hydraulic breakers for heads, the arms of excavators for necks, steel beams for bodies. The male bird’s coronet is built with red fans and the female’s with red hard hats. Bamboo and steel wire scaffolding were used for their claws and their talons are excavator buckets. They have shovels for feathers, picture frames and hubcaps for tails (“[lending] a folk shadow-puppet effect”), and striped safety tarps for tail feathers. Additional construction site debris, including gloves, tires, pipes, saws, screwdrivers, plastic accordion tubing, drills, wheel rims, and fire extinguishers were inventively welded together so that the materials, recognizable as detritus, convey the authentic feel of construction and demolition. In a Chinese saying, “phoenix nirvana” carries the meaning of rebirth, creating a subtle metaphorical connection between trash and wealth. From Xu’s perspective the phoenixes, while scarred (by virtue of their materiality), are “dignified” and thus eloquently represent the enormous labour force that has brought about China’s rapid modernization, a theme also addressed by many contemporary Chinese artists including Ai Wei Wei, Ou Ning, and Wang Jiuliang. Consider, in this broad context, Ai’s photographs Provisional Landscapes (2002–2008), Ou’s film Mesi Street (2006), and Wang’s Besieged by Waste (2011), a documentary on environmental waste.

After Xu researched the form and symbolism of the king of birds in different periods of Chinese history, the artist drew upon the dual aspects of the phoenix—male and female—from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), as well as a rare three-dimensional depiction at the Summer Palace. In Phoenix, the artist again used an unorthodox language to create two auspicious figures within the

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