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Xu Bing finds his family roots in Wenling of Zhejiang province. He was born in Chongqing, China in 1955. In 1977 he entered the printmaking department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing (CAFA) where completed his bachelor's degree in 1981 and stayed on as an instructor, earning his MFA in 1987. In 1990, on the invitation of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he moved to the United States. Xu served as the Vice President of CAFA from 2008 to 2014 and is now the professor of CAFA, advising PHD students. He currently lives and works in Beijing and New York. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC; the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; the British Museum, London, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Joan Miro Foundation, Spain; National Gallery of Prague and the Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas, amongst other major institutions. Additionally, Xu Bing has shown at the 45th, 51st and 56th Venice Biennales; the Biennale of Sydney and the Johannesburg Biennale amongst other international exhibitions.

Over the years, Xu Bing's work has appeared in high-school and college text-books around the world including Abram's "Art Past – Art Present," Gardner's "Art Through the Ages" and Greg Clunas's "Chinese Art" a volume in the "Oxford History of Art" series, Jane Farver's Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s – 1980s (Queens Museum of Art Press) and Art Worlds in Dialogue (Museum Ludwig Press). In 2006, the Princeton University Press published "Persistence/Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing" a multidisciplinary study of Xu Bing's landmark work "Book from the Sky." In 2008, Professor Robert Harrist, Chair of Chinese Art at Columbia University, New York, began teaching a graduate seminar entitled "The Art of Xu Bing." In 2011, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts published "Xu Bing: Tobacco Project" and Albion published "Xu Bing". In 2012, the New York University Press published "Xu Bing and Chinese Contemporary Art"(edited by Hsingyuan Cao and Roger T. Ames) and Beijing Culture and Arts Press published "Xu Bing: the Birth of the Phoenixes"(edited by Zhou Zan).

In 1999, Xu Bing was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in recognition of his "capacity to contribute importantly to society, particularly in printmaking and calligraphy." In 2003 Xu Bing was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize, and in 2004 he won the first Wales International Visual Art Prize, Artes Mundi. In 2006, the Southern Graphics Council awarded Xu Bing their lifetime achievement award in recognition of the fact that his, "use of text, language and books has impacted the dialogue of the print and art worlds in significant ways." He was awarded Doctor of Humane Letters by Columbia University in 2010, the 2014 Department of State-Medal of Arts for his efforts to promote cultural understanding through his artworks in 2015. He was appointed A.D. White Professors-at-large by Cornell University in April 2015.