

Backbone

脊骨

Backbone: Two Friends at Work

René Balcer

In the spring of 2011, Xu Bing was preparing a third iteration of his *Tobacco Project* for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. In the course of his research at the Valentine History Center, he came across some 400 stencils dating from the 19th century. The stencils had been used by tobacco plantations in Virginia to mark their canvas-wrapped bales of tobacco for shipment to market. Each stencil represented the whimsical and unique brand name by which the plantation's tobacco was known.

Xu Bing sent me samples and asked if I could see a way to use the stencils to write a poem, which he would then incorporate into a larger work. Xu Bing and I had been friends for a few years, but this was the first time he had asked me to collaborate on an artwork. Of course, I jumped at the opportunity. Bravely, he gave me carte blanche to do whatever I wanted.

As a challenge, I limited myself to using only the words in the stencils. As I stared at the stencils covering my dining room table, I saw the too-human yearnings and hardships behind the names. A theme began to suggest itself: An ode to the black women – slaves all – who worked the tobacco fields, an ode to their dignity and grit, to the travails of their backbreaking work, to their pleasures and simple comforts. An ode that would turn the stencils, these tokens of their oppression, into a celebration of their invincible spirit.

I saw Xu Bing a few times during this period. I didn't tell him what I was doing – and he never asked. We each had our area of responsibility – he the calligraphic, I the writing – and he respected that. I appreciated his trust. He in turn appreciated my sense of humor – I enjoyed making him laugh. I suspect it's one of the reasons (and maybe the only reason) he asked me to collaborate with him on this particular work.

One subject that did come up was the writing process. Xu Bing had begun writing about his experiences on the collective farm where he'd been sent down during the Cultural Revolution. He was enjoying the process, and he was curious about my process. We talked about the immediacy and directness of writing, the freedom from unyielding materials, the sublime (and sometimes torturous) solitude of writing.

I finished the poem and sent it to Xu Bing. He said he was very pleased with it, he liked the subversive intent of the work. He had no notes and incorporated it as is into the larger work. I then had the idea of setting the poem to music, specifically to the tobacco-country blues. The song would serve as another way to immerse the audience into the culture of tobacco. Xu Bing immediately embraced the idea. Though he professed to know nothing about music, he was intensely curious about the blues, an attitude entirely consistent with his deep interest in authentic and indigenous art forms and systems of communication.

I saw the finished work for the first time during its installation at the VMFA. I was surprised that a collaboration that had been so loose, open and free-flowing could result in such a precise and engaging work. For that I thank Xu Bing.

脊骨：兩個朋友合作 包茹耐

2011年春天，徐冰開始為里奇蒙城的弗吉尼亞美術館準備《煙草計劃》的第三回展覽。當他在華倫坦里奇蒙城歷史中心進行研究時，他找到了近四百個十九世紀的模板。當年，這些模板被弗吉尼亞的煙草種植場用來標示一捆捆用帆布包裝，準備運往市場的煙草。每一個模板都代表了不同種植場的獨特品牌名稱。

徐冰給我寄來了一些樣板，問我能否構思一下如何利用這些模板來寫詩，並計劃把詩作加進一個更大的作品中。我跟徐冰認識了幾年，但這還是他第一次在創作上找我合作。我當然樂意之至，他亦大膽地讓我隨心而行。

我準備挑戰自己，僅用模板上的字作詩。望著飯廳裡滿桌的模板，我看見這些牌子背後的人性渴求及辛勞。一個主題開始浮現：歌頌在煙草園裡工作的黑人女奴吧，歌頌她們的尊嚴、堅忍、艱苦和簡單的快樂。寫一首可以把象徵壓迫的模板，變成頌揚她們不屈不撓的精神的詩篇吧。

這段期間我見過徐冰數次。我沒告訴他我在幹甚麼，他也沒過問。我們各司其職，他作書法，我寫內容，對此他十分尊重。我很欣慰他對我這麼信任。他則很欣賞我的幽默感。我喜歡逗他笑，我一直懷疑這可能是他找我合作的原因之一，甚至是唯一動機。

其中一個我們確實有討論到的主題是寫作過程。徐冰開始寫他於文革時期在集體農莊插隊的經驗。他很享受這個過程，也對我的進度很感興趣。我們談到了寫作的即時性和直接性，從不屈的素材中找到的自由，還有寫作時崇高（有時熬人）的孤獨。

我完成詩作後交給了徐冰，他說他很滿意，尤其喜歡作品的顛覆性。他沒有在詩裡增加任何注腳，直接套用在他的藝術上。我後來有了個新主意，想把詩譜成樂曲，尤其那種煙草鄉村藍調。這首曲子會為觀眾帶來另一個沈浸在煙草文化的方式。徐冰聽罷大表贊成，雖然他說他對音樂一竅不通，但對藍調卻十分好奇，這點與他對真摯、本土的藝術形態及溝通方式的興趣十分一致。

我在作品於弗吉尼亞美術館組裝時始見成品。一個如此輕鬆、自由、開放的合作，最終可以成為這樣精準深入的作品，這讓我很驚喜。為此，我感謝徐冰。