

## XU BING, FRANCO-MONDINI-RUIZ, ESKO MÄNNIKKÖ

"New Works: 96.3"

ArtPace

## Cultural Ironies at ArtPace

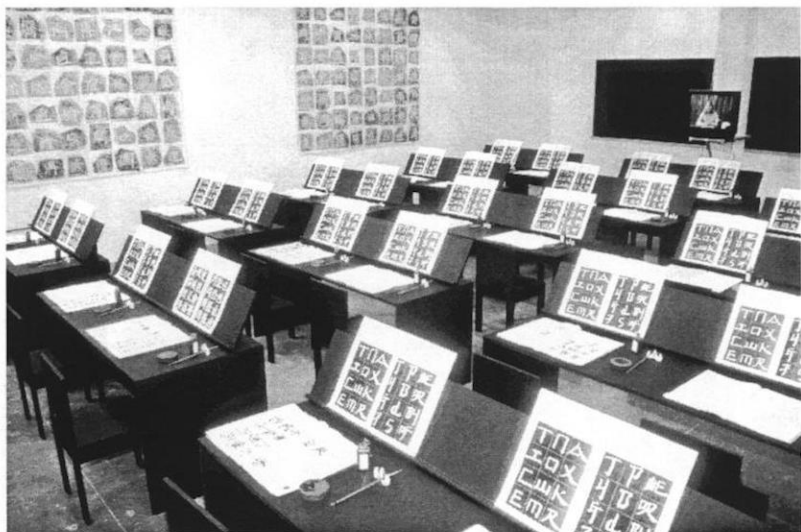
The latest exhibition of the International Artist in Residence Program at ArtPace features three virtually real installations by Xu Bing, Franco Mondini Ruiz, and Eskö Männikkö. Selected by Maaretta Jaukkuri, Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, "New Works: 96.3" surrounds visitors with ironic humor. These distinct realities also find intersections between disparate cultures.

Xu Bing, a New Yorker born in China, concentrates on the symbolic maneuvers of language with *Square Words—New English Calligraphy (Beginner)*. At a glance, the installation seems to enshrine a particular language, Chinese, by evoking an officially sanctioned site of cultural indoctrination, the classroom. Rows of black minimalist desks and rigid, straight back chairs mimic Western attitudes toward the language. Awed by the artfulness of Chinese characters, Westerners are traditionally daunted by the personal discipline required to master them. We are convinced that such exactitude is unique to the Far East. This worshipful austerity is reinforced by a massive, unmarked chalkboard at one end of the gallery and stone impressions of what appear to be Chinese ideograms displayed in cases at the opposite end.

Within this setting (the installation's point of departure) Bing goes about reversing these prejudices and playfully diffuses the cultural standoffishness that separates East and West. Visitors are not prevented from taking a seat and putting brush to paper. In fact, they are encouraged to do so by the positioning of the desks and the abundance of writing materials. At the front of the exhibit, a videotaped tutorial in English gives instruction in the rudimentary use of brush and ink, guiding participants through a "paint-by-numbers" workbook.

This is where the piece gains speed and takes a devilish turn. Painting down the columns of characters, participants discover that the text isn't Chinese at all but, rather, English words disassembled and reconstructed into a block format. For those who have been forewarned this moment carries less of a punch. To the uninitiated, however, it is a thrill to have one's own cultural bias so thoroughly undermined.

Thus begins the third stage of the piece, a resolution of the struggle which pits language symbols against their linguistic and cultural meanings. "Words are beautiful," states the artist/semiotician Bing. "They are cultural material and beautiful objects in any culture." And, indeed, he arrives at something more universal. As the video demonstrates strokes that "resemble a bee's waist, an elephant's tusk, and the muscles joining two bones" the instructor creates "a picture with a precise form that expresses a meaning and a spirit." In a soothing voice she reassures participants by stating, "you will write in a way you've never thought possible, communicating with nature



Xu Bing, *Square Words—New English Calligraphy (Beginner)*, 1996

and experiencing community." Bing's paean to language and culture soars by transcending both.

With *Infinito Botanica* at ArtPace, Franco Mondini Ruiz projects his beloved San Antonio store into a gallery context. The idea, although provocative, guarantees results that are mixed. Mondini Ruiz regards the installation as the "inverse" of his store. "The botanica is a low art forum with fine art treasures tucked into the seams," he states. "The exhibit, on the other hand, is a slick, high-art setting displaying artifacts of mass culture."

This question of orientation is central to the piece and to a thoughtful discussion of Mondini Ruiz's work. What succeeds in the store suffers in its translation to the gallery. The white walls and vinyl flooring (the artist's reference to the mod *2001: A Space Odyssey*) are in stark contrast to the arrangements of found objects, food, dime store trinkets and religious paraphernalia. These formal creations, so lively and extemporaneous in the store's busy, candle lit atmosphere, seem stilted and fragile in the gallery's bright, neat setting.

This weakness is perhaps the key to the piece. Like magic under a microscope, the context focuses a clinical eye on the artifacts. In some instances this focus emphasizes aspects which are overlooked in the more congenial, haphazard environment of the store. A collection of bakery goods is particularly striking. Cupcakes topped with miniature figures engaged in sexual play achieve a sharp, anarchic comedy in the gallery's pristine whiteness.

The artist himself is part of the installation and subject to the same cool rationality of the setting. Mondini Ruiz's signature greetings "Are you having fun?" and "I make deals" have a hollow ring because the artist and his objects are away from home, with a certain poignancy. The artist and his objects are



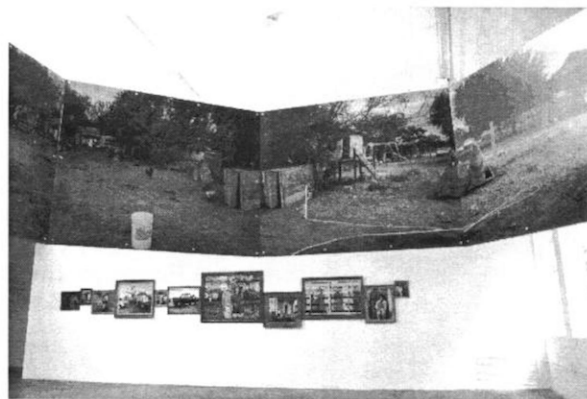
Franco Mondini, *Infinito Botanica at Art Pace*, 1996

away from home. This is a field trip away from their base of creation to a static site of evaluation and critique. Mondini Ruiz's work is not only a metaphor for the relationship between class and culture but also addresses the connection between art and exhibition. The cluttered, magical heartbeat of the botanica is dressed up and buttoned down, sterilized en route to the gallery. Without the floor, ceiling, walls and history of the store to sustain it, the soul of the botanica is unconsciously betrayed and the artist's vision compromised.

Like the previous artists, Finnish photographer Esko Männikkö challenges perceptions by immersing visitors in a total environment. *Mexas*, a series of photographs of rural South Texas, is more a study of the way we look at a culture than a portrait of the culture itself. That motivation isn't disclosed at first; like Bing's coy *Square Words*, Männikkö's installation generates assumptions in order to subvert them.

Entering the gallery, visitors see an array of photographs hung in a conventional manner. Perhaps unusual or exotic to those outside the culture, these formal portraits present faces, settings, textures and colors which are familiar to South Texans. The frames vary in size and construction but are also nondescript, encouraging visitors to draw but one disconcerting conclusion, "nothing new here."

This feeling of disinterest is only the first layer of *Mexas*. Against the far side of the gallery is a peculiarly unassuming and uninviting plywood construction. Cylindrical in shape, it hangs midway between floor and ceiling and is entered by ducking in from below. Instantly, Männikkö reveals his piece in one kinetic whirl. The inside of the cylinder is a panoramic col-



Esko Männikkö, *Mexas*, 1996



Esko Männikkö, *Mexas (detail)*, 1996

lage depicting a South Texas farm. Horses, chickens, equipment and wooden structures encircle the viewer with lyrical animation. Recalling strains of "Old MacDonald," the cyclorama induces a giddy spinning past farm animals. A horse seems to move and acknowledge the viewer with the stroboscopic jump cuts between photographs.

One is aware that the gallery exists above and below the cylinder, but at eye level, the level at which we orient ourselves and perceive reality, we are immersed in another world. In an uncanny revelation we understand the message: the key to knowing a culture is envelopment, not scrutiny. Returning to the gallery space, we have a new place among the portraits. We are surrounded now by a community of singular, animated faces.

In these installations, the artists find ways to disconnect us from our cultural preconceptions. With humor and reverence, they surround us with fuller, more lively visions.

John Ewing

