

Su Hui's Reversible Poem



Su Hui's Reversible Poem, a video installation in progress by Jen Bervin and Charlotte Lagarde, focuses on a poem written by Su Hui, a Chinese woman poet in the 4th century.

Su Hui composed her poem, *Xuanji tu*, in a 29 x 29 character grid embroidered in silk in five colors in a pattern based on the armillary sphere, an astronomical gauge invented in China in the 1st century. In Chinese culture, the five colors correspond to the elements, seasons, planets, and cardinal directions. Su Hui is one of the earliest poets to use the form, *hui wen shi*, or reversible poems. *Xuanji tu* can be read in any direction to yield nearly 8,000 possible readings.

In the story widely associated with the poem, Su Hui sent her poem as a letter to an explicit intended reader, her husband, Dou Tao, to win back his affections from a mistress. In an earlier version of the story, Su Hui's poem impresses the emperor so deeply that he releases her husband from exile in Dunhuang. In all versions of the story, Su Hui's poem, both brilliant and effective, reunites the couple for life. The original poem was lost, and survived through transcriptions and historic accounts.

With this piece, we aim to draw renewed attention to Su Hui's work, and to start new conversations around how we might read and interpret this ancient Chinese poem today, both as a literary work and as a textile. The approach we are taking with Su Hui's poem is to understand it through relationship, through specific readers, not necessarily expert ones, through the lens of contemporary Chinese women's perspectives, asking how this poem might be considered relevant today.

In the first room of the exhibition, there is a 14-channel video installation (B&W, sound; 7 hrs. 55 min) structured in a circular ring representing the armillary sphere. The viewer moves around the perimeter of the circle to circumnavigate different perspectives on the poem—individual interviews with Chinese women—mathematicians, artists, scholars, translators, astronomers, weavers, embroiderers, writers, mothers—presented in Chinese (subtitled in English).

In the second room of the installation, the viewer encounters textile-based time through projected video on the ceiling. We commissioned expert embroiderers in a studio in Suzhou, China to recreate two versions of the poem (there are many different versions of this poem) in a double-sided silk embroidery technique. It took five months to create these two. The projected footage represents full days of work in the embroidery studio—the poem in progress is filmed from below the embroidery—one hand above the cloth passes the needle to one hand below the cloth. The projection fills the plane of a ceiling or sloped wall; the cloth depicted is a firmament flexing and bending with each passage of the needle.

In the third room of the installation, the finished double-sided embroideries are presented, along with space to read the poem at leisure. It will be available in Chinese and (where appropriate) in English translation.

This project is supported by a Lucas Artist Program Fellowship from Montalvo Arts Center, an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship, and a grant from Creative Capital. A book is planned with Christine Burgin Gallery.

Jen Bervin (Collaborating Artist) is an interdisciplinary artist and poet whose research-driven works weave together art, writing, science and life in a complex yet elegant way. Her work explores acts of reading, writing, listening, often through the lens of textiles or traditional crafts, to facilitate cross-cultural encounter, exchange, and feminist critique. Recent major projects include *Silk Poems*, a poem written nanoscale in the form of a silk biosensor in collaboration with Tufts University's Silk Lab. She is currently a SETI Institute Artist in Residence, a program that facilitates a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas between artists and scientists. Bervin's work has been covered in media outlets such as Huffington Post, NPR, The Nation, LA Times, Artforum, Frieze, Hyperallergic, The New Yorker, and The New York Times, and can be found in more than thirty international collections, including Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Stanford University, Yale University, and The J. Paul Getty Museum. Jen Bervin is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including The Rauschenberg Residency (2016) and a Creative Capital Grant (2013). Her work is the subject of solo exhibitions at the Des Moines Art Center, BRIC, and Granoff Center for the Arts at Brown University, and has been featured in group exhibitions at MASS MoCA, MCA Denver, The Power Plant in Toronto, and the Walker Art Center. She has published nine books, including *Nets*, *The Desert*, and *Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems* with Marta Werner. *Silk Poems* is forthcoming from Nightboat Books in Fall 2017.

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Charlotte Lagarde (Collaborating Artist) has directed and produced twenty documentary films. Her films have aired on PBS series POV and Independent lens, the Sundance Channel, HBO, Canal +, and have been exhibited at MASS MoCA. Lagarde's love of the ocean has led her to document magnificent women surfers in her award-winning short films *Zeuf* and *Swell*. The feature-length documentary she directed about the Hawaiian surfing legend, Rell Sunn, *Heart Of The Sea*, was broadcast in over 30 countries and won numerous awards including the PBS Independent Lens Audience Award and Best Documentary Award at the Ashland Independent Film Festival. A 2016 Camargo Foundation Fellow, Lagarde is currently developing a new essay film *Dear Zeuf*, a reflection on the fluidity of friendship, mortality, film, and the ocean. Her producing credits include Shaleece Haas' *Real Boy* (PBS/IL 2017), Deann Borshay Liem's *In The Matter Of Cha Jung Hee* (PBS/POV 2010), and Carrie Lozano's Academy award-winning *Reporter Zero*, which premiered at the 2006 Berlin International Film Festival. Her latest documentary *The Ballad Of Fred Hersch*, about the legendary jazz pianist and AIDS activist Fred Hersch, premiered at the 2016 Full Frame Film Festival. Lagarde's video, *Jen Bervin's Silk Poems*, was recently on view in the exhibition *Explode Every Day: an Inquiry into the Phenomena of Wonder* at MASS MoCA. Bervin and Lagarde are collaborating on an upcoming project in Suzhou, China, titled *Su-Hui's Reversible Poem*.

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Violet Du FENG (Producer) is an Emmy Award winning documentary film producer. She produced *Maineland* about two "parachute" students from elite Chinese families which premiered at the SXSW 2017 and won a Special Jury Award for Excellence in Observational Cinema. *Please Remember Me*, a film of an intimate love portrait of an elderly couple in Shanghai, premiered at IDFA in 2015 and won three jury awards at China's biggest documentary film festival GZDoc. In 2008, she co-produced *Nanking*, which received a Peabody Award and a Sundance Grand Jury Award. It was the highest grossing documentary in China. Her first documentary short *Changing the Taste of Mud* was nominated for the Golden Gate Award. From 2011 to 2013, Feng worked as the in-house producer at CNEX in Beijing. The films she produced received support from Sundance Documentary Fund, Ford Foundation, ITVS and co-productions from Asia and Europe. Her producing credits for the CNEX projects include: *A Young Patriot* (2015) won the Jury Prize at Hong Kong Intl. Film Festival, *Look Love* (2015) won the Mecenat Award at Busan Intl. Film Festival. Feng received a M.A. from UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism in 2004. Before that, she was a broadcast journalist for Shanghai Television and later for the BBC's Shanghai Bureau. Feng is currently producing a documentary series on Chinese Millennials and a video installation project about Su Hui's Reversible Poem.

Andrea Lingenfelter (Literary Translator) has a BA in Chinese Studies from UC San Diego, an MA in East Asian Studies from Yale, and a PhD in East Asian Languages and Literature from the University of Washington. She is a poet, scholar of Chinese literature, and a widely published translator of contemporary Chinese-language fiction . Her translation of selected poetry by Zhai Yongming, *The Changing Room*, won a 2012 Northern California Book Award. A 2008 PEN Translation Fund grant winner and 2014 NEA Translation Grant awardee, she is currently translating Wang Anyi's historical novel, *Scent of Heaven*. She has taught Chinese literature at UC Davis and was 2013-14 Kiriyama Fellow at USF's Center for Asia Pacific Studies.

Asian Cultural Council works to advance international respect and understanding between people and cultures through transformative cultural exchange. **Montalvo Art Center's Sally and Don Lucas Artists Residency Program** supports the development of new and challenging contemporary work. Lucas Fellows are identified through an international nomination process then juried by professionals in their respective fields. **Creative Capital** is a national nonprofit organization that awards major grants to individual artists pursuing innovative approaches that are bold, innovative and genre-stretching.