

MEET XU BING

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Landscape/Landscript Exhibition





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THE FIRST TIME IN 400 YEARS

Client: Oxford University Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology

Date: 2013

The Challenge

The Ashmolean Museum, the oldest public museum in the world, was putting on their first ever installation of a contemporary artist, Chinese illustrator, Xu Bing. The *Landscape/Landscape* exhibition is, “a cerebral submersion in nature, as well as a vivid set of reflections on the power and treachery of words. Xu’s Landscapes teach us another way of seeing the world...” ([Financial Times](#)).

Xu’s work is complex and uses Chinese language characters to create beautiful landscape scenes. The museum wanted to layer digital interpretation and interactivity into the exhibition experience, a digital guide, that would help visitors to explore, investigate and understand the artist and his artworks.

MEETING AND UNDERSTANDING

Our Response

Working with the curatorial team and the artist himself, we created MeetXuBing – a free-to-access/no download digital exhibition guide, for any smartphone tablet and PC.

Using original and archive interviews with Xu Bing and a range of multimedia content, MeetXuBing created layers of digital interpretation that explored Xu's life and work, his motivations and inspirations.

Many museum and exhibitions worry that digital guide distract people from the artworks themselves. Knowing this, we always try to ensure a range of interactive, as well as informational experiences. one aspect of the digital guide was a series of ways of interactive with and investigating the artworks. This included a children's trail where visitors were shown elements within the artworks, had their meanings revealed, and were prompted to search them out.

During the live period, and while promotion of the experience was still being consistently carried out, MeetXuBing managed around an 80% visitor uptake.

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LAYERING INTERACTION AND EXPERIENCE

Learning

- **Consideration:** The uneasiness that many museums and exhibitions feel around digital interventions and layering is understandable – we don't want people glued to their screens. By understanding how visitors like to experience and explore artworks and exhibitions – some like to explore, some like to drink them without comment, some like to know every detail about how something was made, some like to know what the artist was thinking, etc. – you can curate the content so as to create a diverse range of experiences. Digital content can also be used to inspire and prompt people to put down their devices and have different types of physical experiences and interactions.
- **Promotion:** MeetXuBing had an incredible uptake during the first months of the live period of around 80%. This is because staff and volunteers at the museum were making a concerted effort to make people aware of the digital guide's existence and assuring them that using their smartphones in the gallery was not only permitted, but encouraged. After several months, the promotional effort somewhat fell by the wayside and the uptake dropped significantly. As you can see, you can have the most amazing digitally enhanced visitor experiences in your arsenal, but if no one knows they are there, or to borrow a phrase, 'permission to play' is not made clear, then they will not be successful. To help counteract this we developed a Five Point Prompt Strategy to inform and engage visitors.

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