



Suzhou Embroidery Research Institute

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Su Hui's poem, "Xuanji Tu" in a woven facsimile at the Suzhou Silk Museum in Suzhou, China

In *Su Hui's Reversible Poem*, poet and visual artist Jen Bervin will draw international attention to an innovative and compelling work by the Chinese poet, Su Hui, who wrote and embroidered a remarkable poem in the 4th century with over 7000 possible readings.

Bervin aims to create a deeper conversation around this poem in Suzhou, China between three Chinese women, embroidery masters at Suzhou Embroidery Research Institute, as they embroider Su Hui's poem over the course of a year in a reversible textile medium—a highly specialized double-sided/reversible silk embroidery technique worked on taut translucent silk screens.

Conveying the embroiderers' contemporary experience of reading Su Hui's poem and the conversations and interactions around it is the center of the work, and will result in an art installation with audio, film and textile components inspired by highly interactive Chinese museum environments. The embroidery workshop studio environment is as visually layered as China itself, a mix of ancient and contemporary aesthetic registers.

Su Hui's poem, known in Chinese as “Xuanji Tu” or “Picture of the Turning Sphere”, was composed as a 29 x 29 character grid, written and embroidered in silk. Su Hui used a “reversible” form in which the characters can be read reversibly in any direction—horizontally, vertically, diagonally—within the grid to yield 7,000 possible readings. The poem was written in literary Chinese in five colors in a diagrammatic scheme based on celestial charts of the time. The colored regions of the poem have a recognizable internal rhyme scheme: poems in yellow are five syllables, poems in black six syllables, poems in violet four syllables and so on. A Chinese character can act as any part of speech, depending on context, and the meaning of the character changes according to the characters next to it. There are single characters within the grid that have up to seventy definitions. With all meanings in flux, as Su Hui wrote: “one lingers endlessly in the poem, twisting and turning.”

Su Hui's poem had an explicit intended reader; she sent the poem as a letter to her husband, who had taken a concubine against her wishes and relocated far away for work. The poem brought him back, alone. Both brilliant and effective, the poem, which revolves around the central character 心 *hsin* for heart and mind (once implied, now explicit), is known in China primarily through the narrative of this love story. Only accounts and transcriptions of Su Hui's poem remain. The original embroidery has been lost to time along with her five thousand other poems, and “Xuanji Tu” remains for the most part untranslated and unknown outside of China.

This project stems from Bervin's research for the *Silk Poems*, and is supported in part by an expansion grant from Creative Capital. *Su Hui's Reversible Poem* has been selected, through international nomination and jury, for a Montalvo Arts Center Lucas Artists Program Fellowship in Visual Art, which supports through residencies over the course of three years, the development of new and challenging contemporary work. A publication on Su Hui with Christine Burgin is also planned.

Jen Bervin is an interdisciplinary visual artist and writer whose works combine text and textiles with conceptual elements and a minimalist's eye for the poetic and essential. For two decades, she has worked at the intersection of visual art, reading and writing, poetry and poetics, literary scholarship, textiles, and scientific innovation, pushing the envelope in meaningful ways to reshape the realm of what is considered possible in the field.

In conjunction with Tufts University's Silk Lab, Bervin is currently completing the *Silk Poems*, a poem written nanoscale on silk film, in a form inspired by a biosensor. This project includes consulting nanotechnology and biomedical labs as well as over thirty international textile archives, medical libraries, and sericulture sites in North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The project is supported by a 2013 Creative Capital Grant in Literature, a 2014 Bogliasco Foundation Fellowship, and will premiere in a year-long exhibition at MASS MoCA opening May 28, 2016.

Her work has also been exhibited at venues like the Walker Art Center, The Power Plant, and The Eli and Edythe Broad Museum, and is held in more than thirty collections, including Stanford University, and The J. Paul Getty Museum. Bervin has published nine books, including *Nets*, in its ninth printing, and *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*, with Marta Werner, named a Best Book of the Year by the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Hyperallergic*, and *The New Yorker*.

Bervin's work receives support from the Rauschenberg Foundation, Camargo Foundation, and New York Foundation for the Arts, and has been covered in national and international publications and media outlets such as *NPR*, *The Nation*, *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Frieze*, and *The New York Times*. She is currently an artist in residence at the SETI Institute.