

New Intentions in Book Selling: Community Building in Independent Art Bookstores



Carly Lin · Follow
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Readers in Bungee Space. Photographed by Zhang Xiao.

“You know, I see us as a bookstore,” said Shisi Huang, “but I also see our store as an alternative way for people to hang out.”

Huang, 34, is one of the founders of [Bungee Space](#), an independent art book store located in the Lower East Side. Walking into the bookstore, you'll find a small cafe counter on your left, an eclectic wall of art books to your right, a few racks of indie designer clothing in front of you, and a small curated exhibition space in the far left corner. Bungee Space is the definition of a multi-functional independent bookstore — and there are lots of them right now.

According to the [New York Times](#), more than 300 new independent bookstores have opened across the nation in the past few years, rebounding after the pandemic hit which had dispirited many booksellers. In the past three years, more people than ever have been staying in and reading, and publishers thrived with [record-high sales](#), but bookstores have been [struggling to stay afloat](#) due to COVID-19 restrictions. Many bookstores have turned to [online bookselling](#) to endure this tough time. Moreover, many independent bookstores like Bungee Space have adopted more innovative approaches to bookselling: creating community spaces within their stores. Some have integrated [gallery](#) and art curation spaces; some hold [live music](#) and poetry reading nights; some host creative workshops, such as AI generative art making and [erotic poem writing](#). Is community building solely the bookstore's effort to solidify a strong customer base, or are there new intentions with this new layout?

Sitting down between an array of books and clothing inventory, Huang told the story of how Bungee Space was first born. “In 2016, I was fresh out of art school and my friends and I were really interested in how art and design can merge in a space. Multiplicity in a bookstore was something we wanted at the very start,” Huang elaborated.

But when the store was first opened in San Francisco in 2016, she realized that the customers were the same group of designers from multi-billionaire tech companies, which made the conversation limited. In an effort to reach a more diverse audience, she decided to bring Bungee Space to New York in 2019, unaware that the world was on the brink of a pandemic.

“During the pandemic, our first store in East Village entered a cycle of shutting down and reopening. I was under a huge psychological pressure because I had to pay rent, and my family back home was worrying. I was questioning why I was living this exhausting lifestyle,” said Huang.

The co-founders of [Accent Sisters](#), Jiaoyang Li and Hongru Pan, share a similar sentiment with Huang. Accent Sisters is a bilingual speakeasy bookstore and art gallery located in New Jersey. Li and Pan explained that since the bookstore opened its in-person location in 2022, it has always been a struggle in terms of management.



Accent Sisters' co-founders Jiaoyang Li and Hongru Pan. Photographed by Xinyi Lin.

Since Accent Sisters sells a majority of Chinese literature and poetry books, most of the inventory is sourced from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, tallying up significant shipping prices. “There’s a difficult balance to maintain when it comes to determining the prices of our books. On one hand, we have rent and shipping prices to cover, on the other hand, we know that people cannot afford really expensive books,” Pan explained.

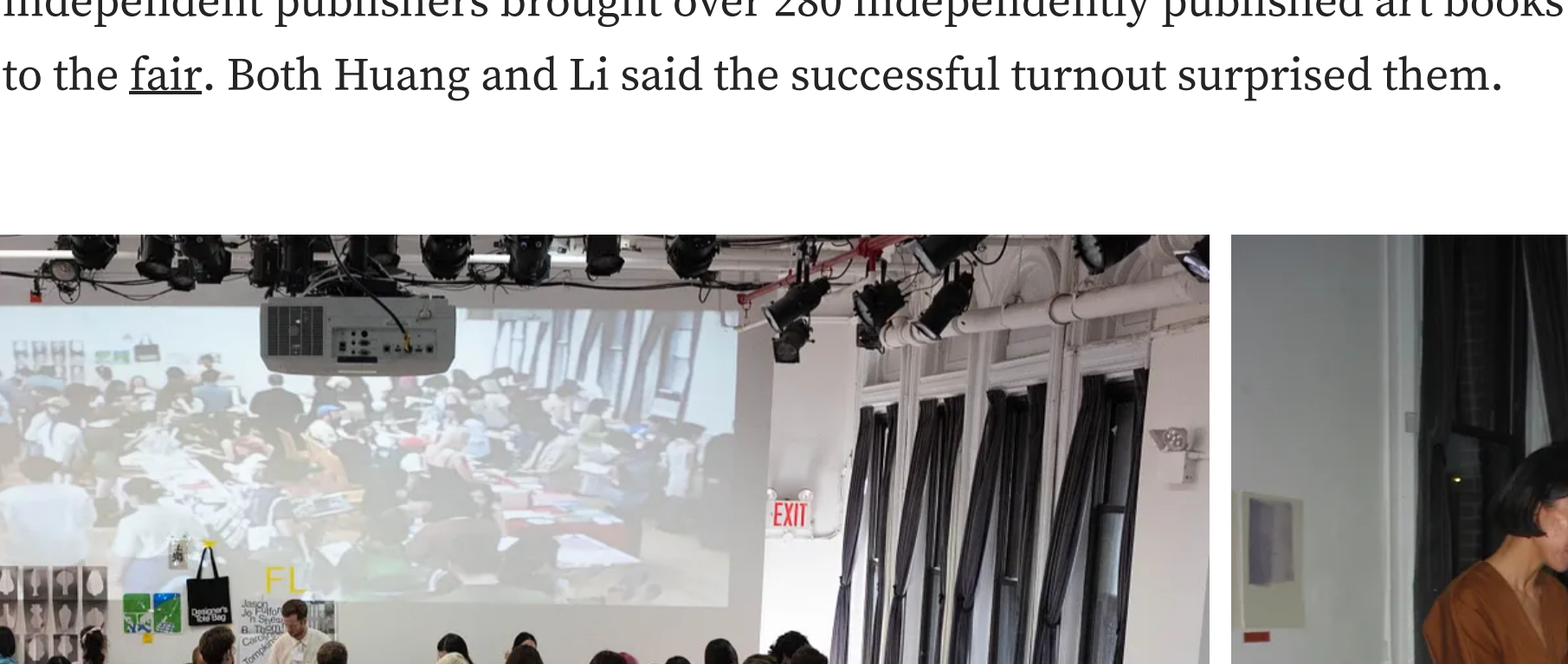
“We are still really confused about this because we are artists and we don’t have degrees in bookstore management, you know,” said Li with a smile, “we just have to try new things and figure our way out.”

Huang is also experimenting with new ways of operating Bungee Space. When she opened the current Lower East Side location in 2021, she decided to bring coffee into the mix. “Coffee can bring many different people together, and what I mean is, it can bring everyone together,” Huang stated.

The cafe aspect works well in supporting the bookstore’s finances, but more importantly, it brings in customers from different backgrounds. “Anyone can afford a cup of coffee over a book or a piece of clothing...The cafe draws many tourists to us, and when they are waiting for their cup of coffee, they realize we have so much more to offer here,” said Huang.

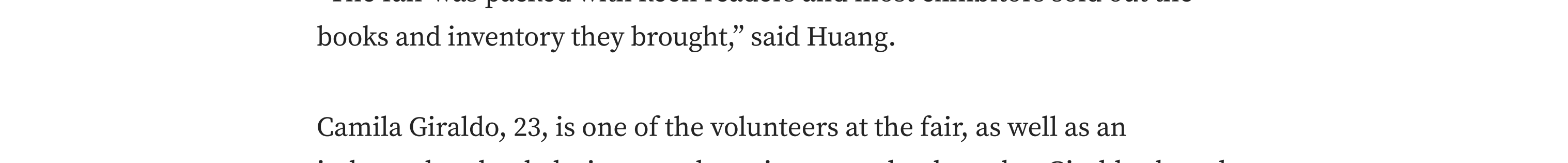
Huang explained that she had always wanted Bungee Space to be a place to spark curiosity and interest in a diverse group of people. The same intention can be found in Bungee Space’s frequent community events, which range from artist talks to [ping pong tournaments](#). The “chaos” and multiplicity of Bungee Space serve as catalysts for new interests, which is an intention that is not solely motivated by the financial side of things.

For Li and Pan, integrating an art gallery space into Accent Sisters is also a mission that they carried from the start. “We wanted to build a place where book lovers can actually meet in person and have conversations. And we also wanted to break the boundary between literary art and the more visual forms of art. They can exist in the same space,” said Li. Now, Accent Sisters curates monthly [exhibitions](#) in their gallery space, on view without admission fees.



"Parasites and Vessels" installation view in Accent Sisters gallery space. Photographed by Flaneurshan Studio.

This year, Huang and Li co-organized the first [Rehearsal Art Book Fair](#) in the Lower East Side, further emphasizing community bonding between readers and independent booksellers. On a sunny weekend in September, 49 independent publishers brought over 280 independently published art books to the [fair](#). Both Huang and Li said the successful turnout surprised them.



Big turnout at the Rehearsal Art Book Fair. Photographed by Ai Zhang (left) and Sofia Candiani (right).

“The fair was packed with keen readers and most exhibitors sold out the books and inventory they brought,” said Huang.

Camila Giraldo, 23, is one of the volunteers at the fair, as well as an independent book designer and passionate art book reader. Giraldo shared that at the fair, she was able to meet and talk to various independent book designers and publishers in person, which is a great opportunity for networking and inspiration for her as an artist.

As a keen bookstore visitor, Giraldo also realized that independent bookstores are more eager to present works from developing, young artists and writers, which is rare in mainstream bookstores. In a sense, independent art bookstores are like accessible art galleries, providing spaces for wide exploration and conversation.

“I feel like the art book industry is a small and generous community. Self-publishing and bookselling can be really expensive, so the people who have committed to the industry do it out of love,” said Giraldo, “That brings in so many people that are so genuine and passionate about what they do.”

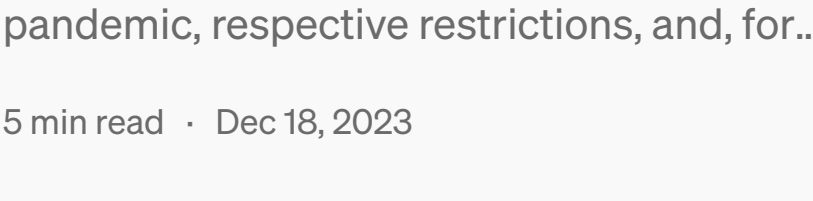
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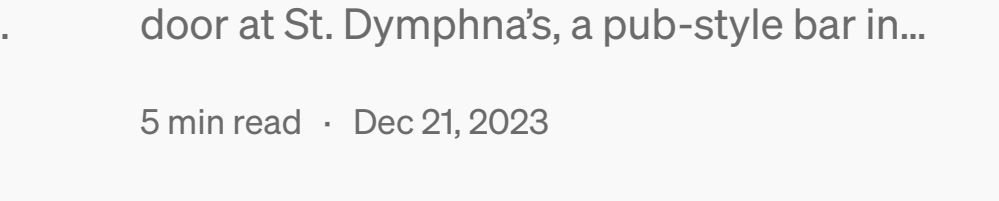
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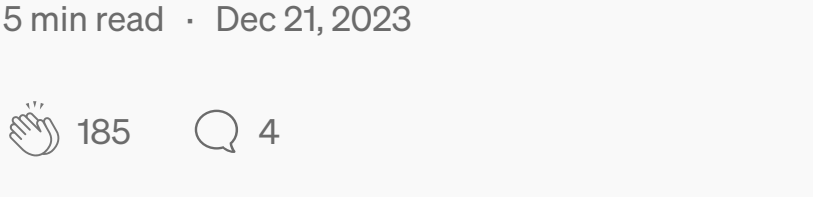
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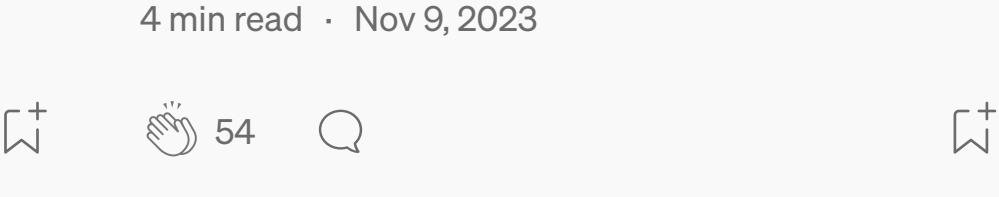
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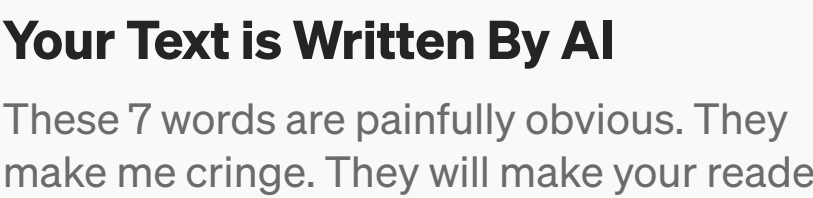
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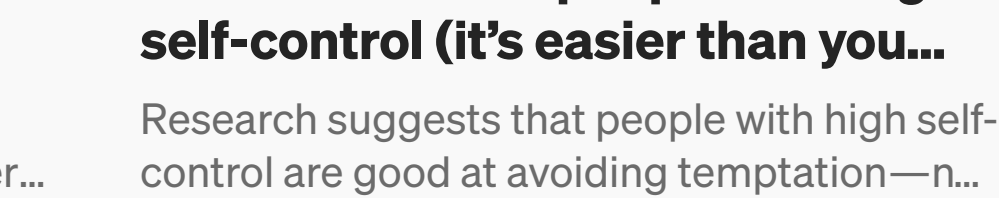
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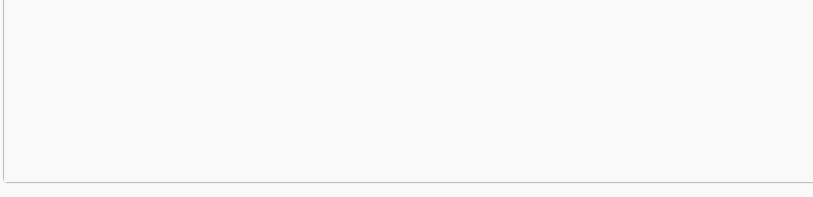
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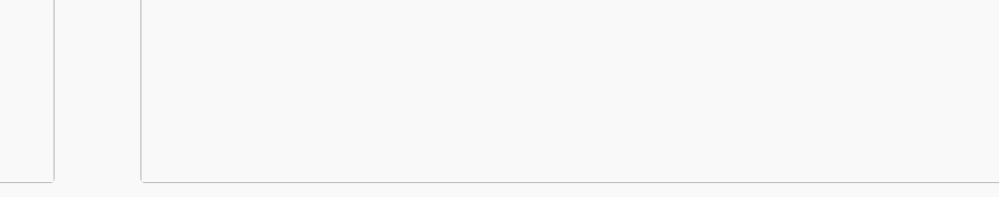
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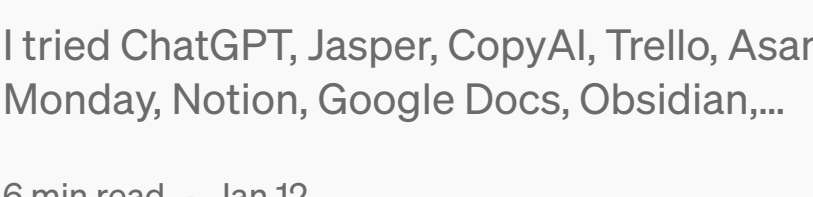
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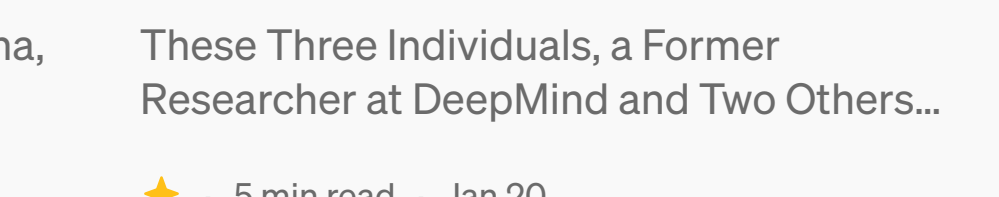
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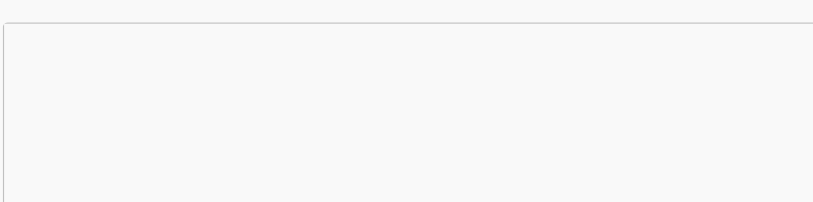
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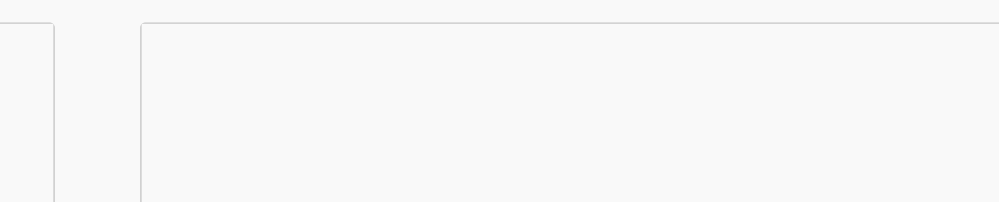
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