

Contemporary

A Rebellion Against Uncertainty, Rehearsal Art Book Fair

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand
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Rehearsal Art Book Fair. Image courtesy of Accent Sisters.

As a rebellion against censorship and, in their words, “highly capitalized contexts” — which arguably also limits access, the Manhattan-based photography, image study- and image criticism-focused art book store Bungee Space will together with Accent Sisters, a speakeasy literature bookstore and publishing studio, in New Jersey, organize Rehearsal Art Book Fair. Using the French word *rehercier*, as a point of departure, the organizers view bookmaking as “personal rehearsals and revolutions,” and are currently inviting independent presses, editions, collectives, and individuals by open call to join the fair which will take place at University Settlement in the Lower East Side on September 15-16, 2023.

“The book fair unfolds within the theater space and reimagined bathhouse classrooms of University Settlement—an historical community hub that has supported immigrant workers and low-income families since the 19th century. This setting mirrors our reality as low-income immigrants and grassroots revolutionaries,” co-organizer Shisi Huang of Bungee Space comments. “My context, being a Chinese queer woman, who still holds an O-1B Visa, not a Green Card, wholeheartedly dedicated to a fully self-funded, independent art bookstore, invariably invites discussions about identity politics,” she continues.

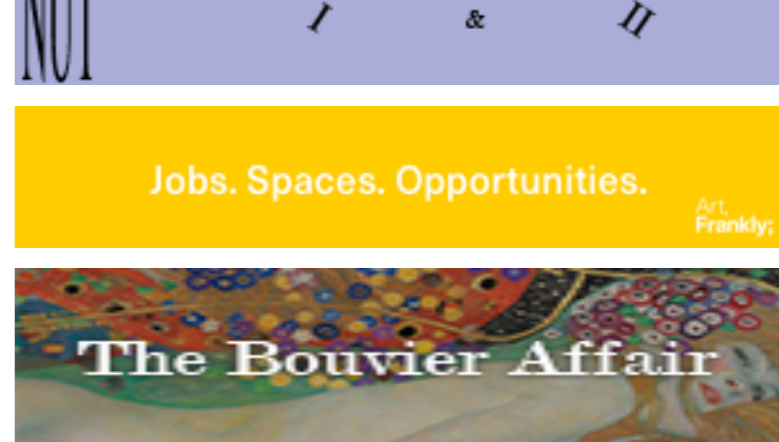
Many non-Green-Card holders enact self-censorship for fear of jeopardizing or interfering with their adjustment of status processes, living within uncertainties that cause stress and impair creativity.

For Accent Sister’s co-founder, Jiaoyang Li politics are also personal at her speakeasy bookstore, “Accent Sister’s mission is to connect creators who identify as Chinese and of Asian heritage through a variety of activities, including bilingual workshops, publishing, residencies, open calls, and art exhibitions. We endeavor to create a fluid, nomadic community that facilitates synergies across borders, languages, and media. Our community is nurtured in languages or non-languages, within the vast landscape of accents that facilitates synergies across borders, languages, and media.” Open for less than a year Accent Sisters has emerged as a sanctuary devoted to providing a home to diasporic Chinese writers and artists.

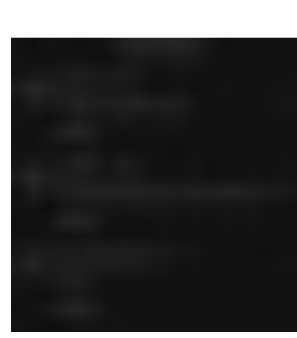
Currently, China hosts one of the strictest censorship apparatus in the world but censorship and book banning to silence and disempower people or enforce moral doctrine has long been a side-effect of printing and bookmaking. In 1759, with only seven volumes published, French King Louis XV banned the printing and circulation of Denis Diderot’s Encyclopédie for fear it would challenge his authority or that of the church. We might want to frown on censorship from the past, but it is still rampant, in 2022 PEN America [indexed 1,648 unique banned titles in United States schools](#), 41% with LGBTQ+ themes. Censorship does not only impact the public, but it brings with it uncertainty, insecurity, and sometimes danger for writers, artist, makers, and publishers.

Suppression of voices does not only happen through censorship in the form of removal but also through exclusion and marginalization—by market forces or various controlling bodies. The [news of the Smithsonian’s sudden cancellation](#) of the Asian American Literary Festival has shaken the industry. Li comments: “I am shocked by what is happening and it has deeply affected and hurt the Asian-American community. As an organizer of events, I believe The Smithsonian should have provided a detailed explanation for the cancellation to help people understand the reasons behind their decision. Events with international dimensions require careful consideration of cultural nuances and potential sensitivities to avoid misunderstandings or unintended negative impacts. I have writer friends whose events were canceled and they feel disrespected and cheated.” In addition, the academic and publishing industry also serves to curtail individual voices fostering academic echo chambers and tight criteria for mass-market publishing to appease the market.

Li points out that as a diasporic Chinese international writer she seldom feels adequately represented in any Asian American Literary Festivals. “How could I comment on a canceled festival that we never imagine to be able to participate in? I believe the festival can be more inclusive and better embrace the diverse voices within the Asian American community,” she says. “We recognize that there are limitations and challenges in both China and the US, but here in Jersey City, we have built Accent Sisters as an enclave, a special colony, and a safe space for our community,” Li continues.



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University Settlement on the Lower East Side. Image courtesy of University Settlement.

“All of this leads to why we decided to co-organize Rehearsal Art Book Fair,” Huang explains. “Key questions discussed with Jiaoyang in the early stages included: Does New York need another book fair? With numerous book fairs, how can independent publishers find time to create new, high-quality works, and bring them for each book fair? If publishers rely on book fair sales but can’t create quality work in time, how can those in the industry avoid being swallowed by extreme capitalized environment? How can we engage book fair visitors beyond books with only eye-catching cover designs and fairly plain content (this kind of sales feedback from audiences influences independent publishing trends as our long-term observations)? As owners of an independent bookstores, how can we respond to this highly capitalized reality? As two Asian women co-organizers, how should we address our identity-related issues at Rehearsal Art Book Fair? Born in China, one of the few countries without free speech, how can we discuss “freedom of publishing” through the book fair?”

Suitably, at the fair a collection of contemporary curated Samizdat—underground material—from mainland China will be exhibited for the very first time. Samizdat, a Russian term for self-published, first described illicit material critical of the Soviet Union and its regime.

Coinciding with the opening and to create a balance between joy and serious reflection, the fair will host an open-mic night titled “Publishing Punchlines: Poos from the Press” on September 15 at 7 PM. Creating a platform for knowledge-sharing and support, publishers, editors, and industry professionals are invited to tell their funniest anecdotes, mishaps, and encounters from the realms of books, editing, and publishing.

Like Accent Sisters, Huang from Bungee Space is also community-oriented, and if her mission stands corrected “we involve, form, and transform community, intervene social, political, and cultural lives, creating chaos” the bookfair will certainly be a safe haven for rehearsing, making rebellions, and being seen—I am certainly expecting many positive surprises.

Visit Rehearsal Book Art Fair September 15-16, 2023 at University Settlement, 184 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side. Tickets are available after August 20 on [their website](#) (we love the design by Sixuan Tong and Shuyu Peng!) To participate submit to the Open Call [here](#), by August 15.

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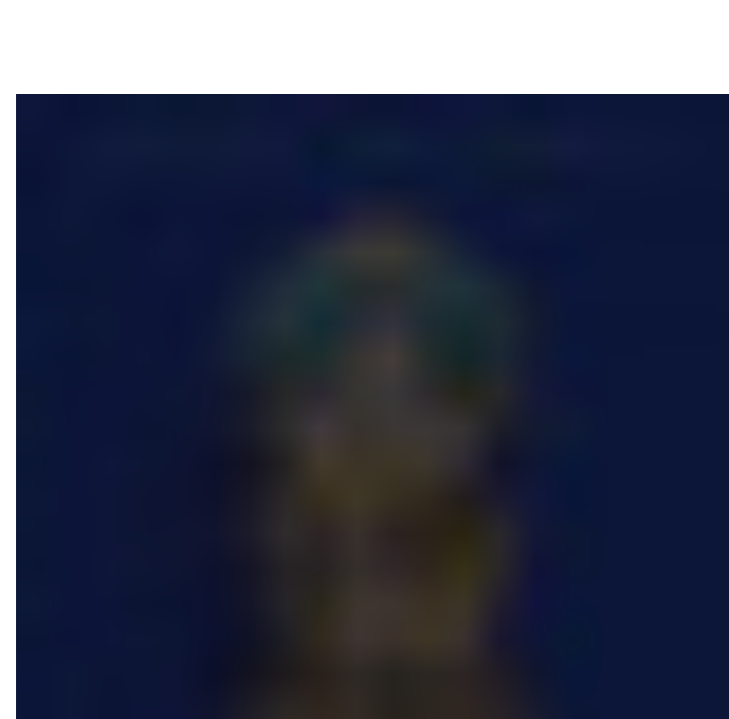
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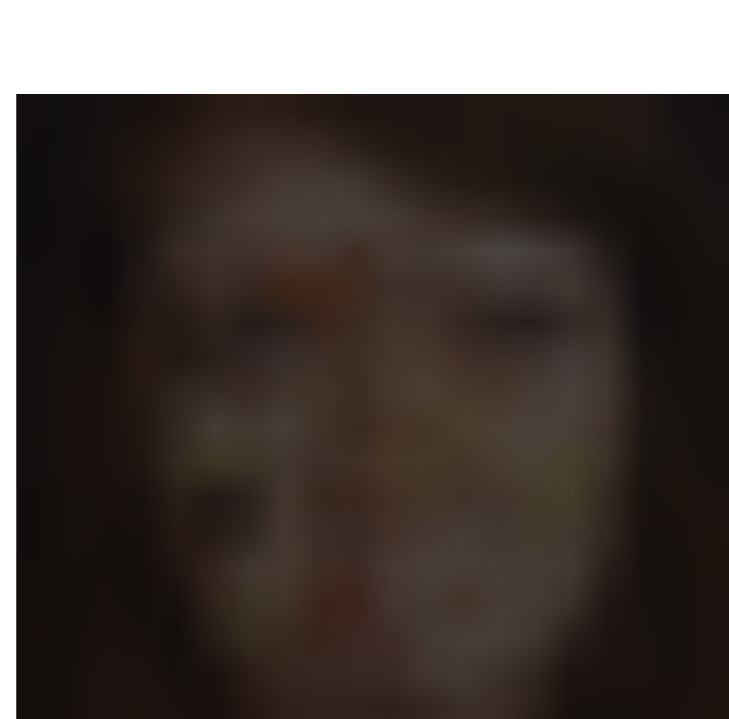
Anna Mikaela Ekstrand is editor-in-chief and founder of Cultbytes. She mediates art through writing, curating, and lecturing. Her latest books are *Assuming Asymmetries: Conversations on Curating Public Art Projects of the 1980s and 1990s* and *Curating Beyond the Mainstream*. Send your inquiries, tips, and pitches to info@cultbytes.com.

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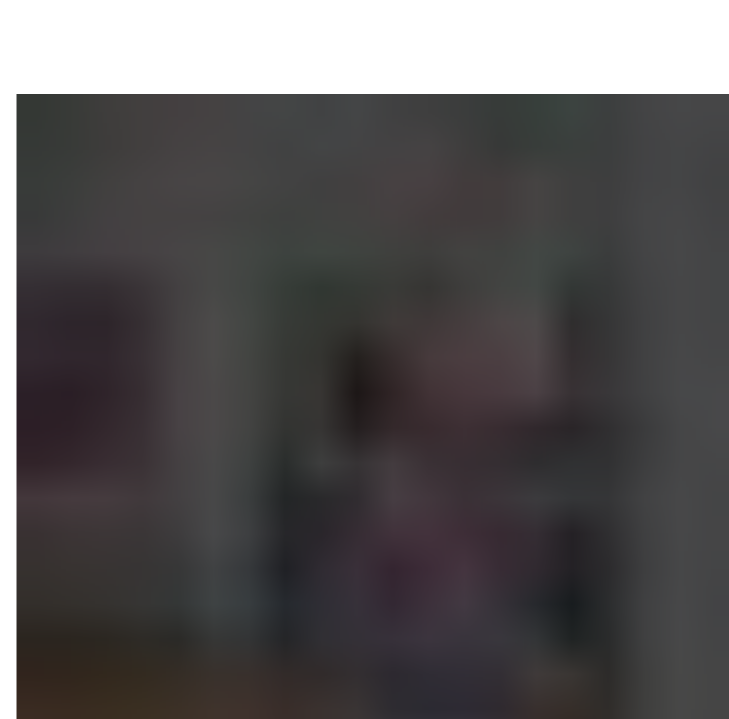
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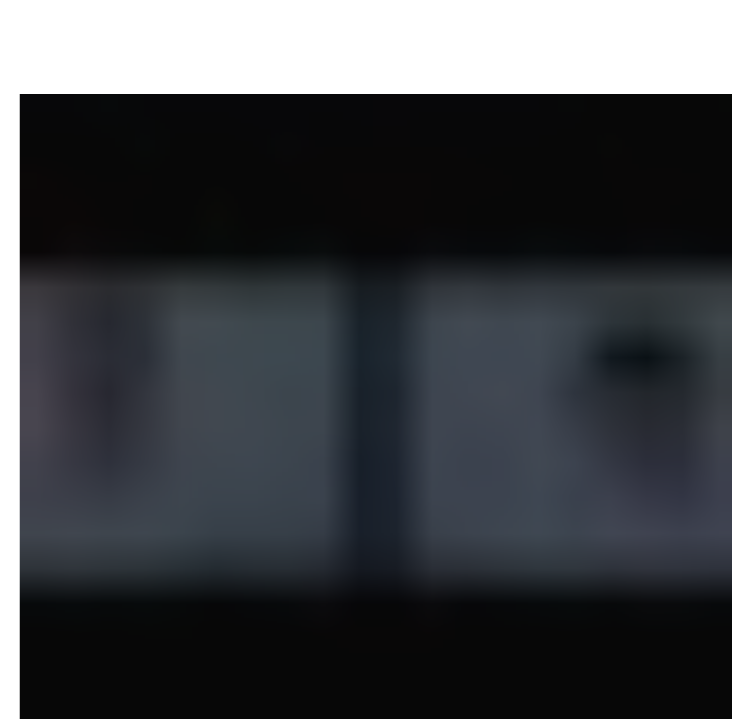
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