15 INVITATIONS 15 YEARS
INGRID CHU
AUG OCT 15

ASIA ART ARCHIVE
INGRID CHU     A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ART BO OK BAG (AND THE THINGS THAT GO IN THEM)
AAA Public Programmes Curator Ingrid Chu explored the international phenomenon of the ‘art book bag’ in *a short history of the art book bag (and the things that go in them)*. Using the last 15 years as a guide, the exhibition featured ‘the things that go in them’—art publications, magazines, and related ephemera—alongside a vast array of these popular totes in the AAA Library.

Chu invited artists, curators, art book fair organisers, and print and online publishers to provide insight into the changing modes of knowledge production and circulation, and their influence on recent art of Asia. An associated public talk, ‘Dear Art, What Are Art Book Bags?’ took place on 22 October.

**Ingrid Chu**  
*a short history of the art book bag (and the things that go in them)*  
August–October 2015
A SHORT HISTORY OF THE

- TOTE BAG
- SHOULDER BAG
- SHOPPING BAG
- MOTION SICKNESS BAG
- MAN BAG
- HAND BAG
- GIFT BAG
- GARBAGE BAG
- EVENING BAG

ART BOOK BAG
(AND THE THINGS THAT GO IN THEM)

24 AUGUST–24 OCTOBER, 2015
MONDAY–SATURDAY, 10AM–8PM
ASIA ART ARCHIVE, HONG KONG

MADE IN HONG KONG
藝術書袋
(以及裡面的物件)

2015年8月24至9月24日
星期一至星期六：10AM-6PM
亞洲藝術文獻庫(香港)
Dear ART,
WHAT ARE ART BOOK BAGS?
—SITES FOR ART
—CARRIERS OF KNOWLEDGE
—MARKERS OF ACCESS
—BADGES OF DISSENT
—GOODS OF DESIRE
When is a bag a work of art? When it looks like a painting? When artwork is created for it? When it features a famous artist? When it is collected? When cultural organisations or businesses support its production? When it is included in an exhibition like this one?

AAA Public Programmes Curator **INGRID CHU** explores the international phenomenon of the 'art book bag' in **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ART BOOK BAG (AND THE THINGS THAT GO IN THEM)**. Using the last 15 years since Asia Art Archive's inception as a guide, the exhibition features 'the things that go in them'—AAA collection materials, as well as related publications, magazines, clothing, accessories, and ephemera—alongside a vast array of these popular totes in the AAA Library.

The exhibition also includes artists, curators, art book fair organisers, and print and online publishers. **SAVANNAH GORTON** Co-Founder & Curator, Forever & Today, Inc. and Friends with Books: Art Book Fair Berlin; **KIT HAMMONDS** Founder & Curator, Vernacular Institute for Art Publishing and Curating; **CHRISTINA LI** Director, Spring Workshop; and **CRISTINA SANCHEZ-KOZYREVA** Co-Founder & Editor-in-Chief, *Pipeline*, provide insight into the changing modes of knowledge production and circulation. This includes their influence on recent art of Asia through texts available via a complimentary print-on-demand dossier and AAA's e-journal-turned-blog, **FIELD NOTES**.

The exhibition is part of **15 INVITATIONS** Asia Art Archive's 15-year anniversary programme where invited guests, the AAA team, and others look within and beyond the organisation as an archive, a collection of material, a digital platform, and a node in a wider collective network. Taking various sizes, forms, and directions—literary, polemic, political, sonic, physical, and digital—the *15 Invitations* function as a series of 'drop pins' to alternatively navigate where AAA originated and where it may be going.
SITES FOR ART

The exhibition begins with a selection of material from the archive of Art Metropole, a Canadian artist-run centre in Toronto specialising in published works by artists in a variety of media.

On view in the first vitrine are a selection of 'Shopping Bags by Artists', an ongoing series of bags commissioned by the organisation for their participation in art and art book fairs. In addition are other bags, editions, and ephemera from their shop, along with further related exhibition and programme materials.

Similarly, placed along a wall grid next to the vitrine, are other examples of bags that show how these now serve as 'sites for art' in their own right. The grouping also underscores the use of paper to produce earlier art bags and how this coincides with 'the things that go in them', namely books and other printed materials. This connection can also be seen through the exhibition itself taking place in the AAA Library.
IS YOUR BAG A WORK OF ART?
CARRIERS OF KNOWLEDGE

What do the art book bags of Asia Art Archive, along with their contents—those associated reference materials on view inside a second vitrine and scattered throughout the library—tell us?

For one, how a single bookshelf that launched AAA in 2000, continues to grow and expand the organisation's public, research, residency, and learning programmes. Through its ever burgeoning print and online collection AAA can be likened to an 'art book bag'. Built around the recent art of Asia, its motivation is to instigate critical thinking and open dialogue by circulating materials that serve as 'carriers of knowledge' for a wide range of users.
WHERE HAS YOUR BAG BEEN?

MARKERS OF ACCESS

A number of bags sourced from various locales hang on a second wall grid. Collectively, they represent 'markers of access' to the international production and circulation of contemporary art, pinpointing how the information that surrounds art travels, carried by those bearing these popular totes.

Often, what these bags contain filters through those who have access to them. They also prove useful as tools for promoting must-see exhibitions, established biennales, and triennials in Asia and elsewhere. Bags from educational and scholarly programmes also hang alongside those sourced from art magazines—periodicals functioning as vehicles that combine critical writing and commercial advertising.

What these bags and their accompanying materials expose is for whom, when, and how the complimentary and at times competing streams of art, are made available.
WHERE'D YOU GET THAT BAG?

Art always has something to say. To this end, what 'art book bags' provide is a version of the printed page—a blank space to be marked up and publicly seen, read, and heard, subtly at times and at others, extremely loud and clear. Case in point: books, bags, clothing, and ephemera by a number of exhibiting artists, artist groups, and cultural practitioners who transform these into 'badges of dissent'.

Setting them within a stylised domestic interior reinforces the personal resonance of these seemingly mundane objects. They are commercial products simultaneously being used as critical vehicles, and designed to provoke by those choosing to disseminate social and political messages through daily use and direct engagement.
WHAT DOES YOUR BAG SAY ABOUT YOU?

Bags have a particular resonance in Hong Kong, a city that is known for its support in the global production, sale, and circulation of commercial 'goods of desire'.

Since AAA's inception, there has been a heightened interaction between art and commerce through collaborations, commissions, and the rise of destination events such as international art fairs manifesting, at least in part, through the coveted 'accessories' produced for them. This shift can be traced through the art, bags, books, and magazines on view along the third wall grid and archival flat file turned retail display.

Ultimately, a short history of the art book bag (and the things that go in them) is an exhibition examining the structures that support the circulation of art and knowledge in order to widen these systems and make them available for a larger public. In this spirit, the exhibition is accompanied by both a zine and a gift bag, available free to all visitors, a sentiment Asia Art Archive shares through all the materials in its collection.
DO YOU HAVE THE 'IT' BAG?
DO YOU WANT TO USE YOUR OWN BAG?
WHAT’S INSIDE YOUR BAG?
WHAT DOES INDEPENDENT ART PUBLISHING IN ASIA MEAN TO YOU? WHAT POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES DOES IT HAVE?
Artists have long challenged the conventions of engaging with books, starting with reimagining everything—from their covers and contents, to reconfiguring their visual display—be it shelves, tables, pedestals, or vitrines, and all manner of structural supports in-between.

Given how books have expanded to such a degree that the information found within their pages can now be shared via hand-held digital devices as much as being felt solely in hand, renders the sites where published materials exist and circulate seemingly endless.

Currently in Asia, the number of cultural practitioners who incorporate books as a means of making and sharing their work is growing, bringing forth as many possibilities as restrictions for their concepts, production, and dissemination.

Artist books and ephemera already flow through the Asia Art Archive collection, alongside a regular programme of talks, residencies, and workshops. Lately, expanded views of how independent publishing restructures prevailing art historical narratives and discourses around recent art of Asia has taken hold through select programmes.

For example, my 15 Invitations ‘art book bag’ exhibition (and this dossier) unfolded as a way to examine these innocuous art world accessories and ‘the things that go in them.’ The bags, some AAA’s own, became a metaphor for what Asia came to represent over the same 15-year period since the organisation began. Free Parking provided a way to bring ‘art libraries from elsewhere’—be it through highlighting other AAA programmes like Mobile Library, or surveying 2015–16 residents, the artist collective Slavs and Tatars’ decade of book works—in conversation with the library collection in Hong Kong. New thinking and critical dialogue on artist publishing in Asia was further generated through informal ‘meetings without walls’ at AAA’s Art Basel in Hong Kong Open Platform (2015, 2016) programme booth.

The Editorial (10–11 December), organised as part of the Taipei
Biennial 2016, was the culmination of this process. Initiated with Kit Hammonds of Vernacular Institute, and held in partnership with the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the research-led inquiry further investigated the role and network of independent contemporary art publishers in Asia and their international impact through curated public events, material displays, and discussions. It was followed by a *Free Parking* (9 January–4 March 2017) exhibition including resulting research documentation in the AAA Library in Hong Kong.

What the texts on the following pages represent are views from a cross section of curators, art book fair organisers, writers, and editors, who among others invested in all manner of art and publishing, were invited to answer the same set of questions for *The Editorial: What does independent publishing in Asia mean to you? What potential and challenges does it have?*

Respondent: Ingrid Chu, Public Programmes Curator
Publisher/Organisation: Asia Art Archive
Website: www.aaa.org.hk
Independent art publishing inspires a particular style of ‘do-it-yourself’ spirit and often scrappy determination in the face of little to no sanctioned support. Artists’ books and publications are a vital outlet for expression, and have undoubtedly had an impact on how we imagine another kind of artistic space to exist—one where, though seemingly intimate when housed inside a book, then dauntlessly goes out into the world to proclaim itself, through multiple ‘conversations’ with its viewers and readers, one book at a time.

As an immense landscape encompassing diverse peoples, cultures, and histories, Asia is perhaps too vast to grasp as an entity in and of itself—impossible to distill into a single perspective. Once peripheral communities (and in some cases suppressed) are becoming more visible and interactive on the global stage, and former boundaries to artistic freedom are frequently challenged and ruptured. Furthermore, many Asian artists’ desire to steer away from received narratives in modern and contemporary art (particularly via the lens of the Western art canon and the aftermath of colonialisation) has enabled new and distinctive intellectual and experimental positions to gain momentum and flourish.

This motivation toward increased self-definition, autonomy, and reclaimed territories of personal and artistic authorship is reflected in the myriad ways that artists and art publishers in Asia are working today, including their current level of productivity. Trans-cultural and -regional initiatives and partnerships continue to increase the level of activity and dialogue, thus strengthening the sphere of influence. As awareness of artistic practice in publishing continues to expand on an international scale, and what was once ‘faraway’ can now be ‘so close,’ there are ever more opportunities for collaboration.

Years ago, artists’ books and publications were often distributed through unofficial channels, including underground networks of the like-minded, word of mouth, mail, and trade, due to less widespread availability or knowledge of their existence, since mainly only specialty bookstores had them on offer. In more
recent times, online distribution channels have increased, archives and libraries have made an appreciable effort to add to and improve research and scholarship through their collections, and independent art publishers participate in regional and international art book fairs that draw publicity and progressively greater numbers of visitors.

An uncertainty both now and in the future is that books and publications may eventually become antiquated as an artistic medium—observed as precious fetish objects and/or relics of the past rather than as functional vehicles for artists’ voices and visions. Yet the present enthusiasm among younger generations of art publishers in Asia, as in other parts of the world, would appear to contradict this outcome. As such, the potential for the production of artists’ books and art publications remains high, as the tools for independent publishing have become readily available to the layperson using the Internet’s digital platforms, cloud, and print-on-demand services, among others. Additionally, hybrid formats and platforms for art publishing will likely continue to proliferate, further allowing artists to develop and reach audiences. It seems that despite the present perceived crisis in the corporate publishing industry at large, the rise of artist self-publishing has declared itself even more determined to stay relevant in the future, both in Asia and beyond.

Respondent: Savannah Gorton, Co-Founder & Curator
Website: www.foreverandtoday.org; www.friendswithbooks.org
What does an art publication look like? An artist book? A magazine? A catalogue? Does it include images, text, or both? Clearly, many possibilities exist as publishing is a common part of how contemporary art circulates, even in the digital age. In fact, the growth of art book fairs and art bookshops in Europe, the Americas, and more recently elsewhere globally, demonstrates an unprecedented interest in art books, both in producing and collecting them, and in their surrounding social events.

Instead of addressing what is or is not an art book, my focus here is on what makes them independent as it resonates particularly in Asia. ‘Independence’ has become something of the ‘new black,’ a stylistic term replacing ‘freedom’ as an aspirational concept. The latter, as foundational of modern social democratic sensibilities, pervades the arts. The free market, free press, free movement, and free individual might all be seen as part of the space in which culture and contemporary art finds its footing.

So why has ‘freedom’ come under such strain in all aspects of culture, society, and politics? How has being independent emerged as an alternative concept? Perhaps it cannot be described as being entirely under the sway of economics, cultural tradition, and populist forces, but in accepting that one is never fully outside of their sphere of influence. In this sense, an independent press is not the same as a free one.

In its English form, ‘publication’ literally means to ‘make public’ and not merely to present something in the public sphere as Habermas defined it. By and large, mainstream publishing not only puts out content, but constitutes its public readership. The changes this has enacted are now all too familiar, with readers being transformed into subjective readers and simultaneous authors—the result being a publishing industry still struggling to find its economic base.

Although the editorial power to convene a public has been usurped by digital media to some extent, older conventions remain in Asia, and despite its longer history of embracing social media as a space for self-expression. In many parts of Asia, media remains under national control, an aspect of nation building itself. In
Euro-American situations this has made publishing a kind of independent space through its obsolescence, but in Asia, the book retains something of its old vitality being harder to control than the digital space. Printed books circulate more independently, and persist—sometimes only finding their reader or audience in a distant time and place. Once in circulation, they move outside the usual vectors of social media’s algorithmic direction, their fugitive character less distributed than dispersed.

So what does an independent art publication look like? Maybe it’s easier to define what it is not: exhibition catalogues; listings; or all of the tools marketing the prevalent system of art as it is. To identify the independent spirit we have to look at how art publications move and speak in order to judge their independence or complicity. In short, the art book’s independence is fleeting and tactical in evading institutional strategies. In this sense the political conditions in Asia have much to gain from this area of activity.

Respondent: Kit Hammonds, Founder & Curator
Publisher/Organisation: Vernacular Institute for Art Publishing and Curating
Website: www.vernacular.institute
The precariousness of publishing, not just art publishing, cannot be underestimated or understated in times like these. I write this as Page One, Hong Kong’s oldest art and design bookstore, announced its closure last week.

While it’s an exciting moment for art publishing in Asia, the landscape is still evolving with new publishers, titles, approaches, and designs. Another important factor to recognise is how each context and its conditions necessitate new strategies and tactics to create a robust ecology for this burgeoning field. I also see technology as important for this emergent sector, both in reimagining how modes of distribution and circulation may be established beyond the conventions currently in place in other more developed locales, and in fostering discussion and exchange to build a dedicated community, both of readers and publishers, often disconnected due to geography, language, and resources.

As with our organisational mission, Spring Workshop’s publishing activities are grounded on an open, experimental approach where we explore possible outcomes which are often determined by testing the boundaries of content, structure, and support. For example, together with Singapore-based artist Heman Chong, we started Stationary, an ongoing publication project, initially forged in recess from the regulatory cycles of professional practice. We invited artists, curators, and writers to take stock of, elaborate on, and chart their obsessions, fascinations, and influences within a suspended moment afforded by the publication’s pages.

In devising the design approach, conceptualisation, and dissemination, we particularly wished to preserve the integrity of a printed object, and considered the potential of employing the Internet as a circulation tool (readers can log on to stationarystories.com to request and then receive a gift copy in the mail) in creating a community of readers through word of mouth. For the upcoming issue co-edited with Malak Helmy, we have opted for a different format within the same philosophy, where a set of four stories will arrive bi-weekly in mailboxes once requested.
A different outcome emerged after a year-long residency Spring did with Hong Kong Farm—a group of local farmers, artists, and designers—in the form of a limited set of individual zines, first made with other local farming collectives, then housed in a planter box complete with a pack of seeds, a growing calendar, and farming sleeves. We gave these copies-cum-growing kits to libraries and other urban farming initiatives far and wide with the philosophy that sharing the knowledge of tools will not only enable communities of like-minded people to grow but also to generate meaningful encounters with each other.

What we have learnt through our various publishing projects is to be cognisant of the specific communities the publication is engaging with, and to develop projects whilst keeping our potential readers in mind. Independent art publishing in these precarious times will need to reconsider not only content, but many other facets such as distribution channels, formats, and design as they are inherently connected and jointly responsible for producing their final published outcome.

Respondent: Christina Li, Director
Publisher/Organisation: Spring Workshop
Website: www.springworkshop.org
Sometime in 2011, I decided to create an art magazine based in Hong Kong alongside my then business partner who was running a gallery guide. We numbered issues in continuation with the guide, upgraded its contents, and chose a name: *Pipeline*.

We wanted to talk about art, and let the scene talk about itself through its makers. It was a ‘yeah, let’s do it!’ moment between two friends and not really based on a business impulse. We commissioned writers and interviewed artists, curators, and many other people involved in the art world. At times we reproduced views as they were, focusing more on underlying relationships and interests between different players rather than editing them to fit a particular editorial voice.

It was rather basic in the beginning. Non-English speakers were given a chance to express their work through English words—like Socrates’s metaphor of giving birth to the soul, I often felt like a midwife in relation to artist statements. Some issues were experimental, following a path of discovery, sometimes lucky, sometimes less so. All issues played around a theme as an excuse to learn about hoarding, colour, death, and sex. Even Bruce Lee was a theme! We had fun choosing the paper and the layout, but not as much hassling distributors and shops, and getting advertising—which was my business partner’s role as we strictly divided our tasks to prevent conflict of interest. To this end, we also separated advertising and income from coverage, and chose writers with no vested interest in the topics they were writing about.

Editorially, the idea was to be open to international content but operate from a Hong Kong vantage point. The magazine was serious about art, but not academic. In my case, independent publishing meant *all in the name of art*: the people creating it or making its creation possible; the people buying it; and the people interested in seeing more of it.

I learned all about art in the region with the magazine. I also experienced how being independent was something paramount as an ideal of integrity, and the necessity of applying this consistently to the best of our knowledge and abilities. But my ideal also included
the responsibility for Pipeline to cover and give voice to underrated, if committed art practices in the region. We approached scenes that were seldom given a platform outside of their locales. We tried to maintain a balanced view between the commercial and the institutional sectors, keeping an open mind in considering them equally important.

Like many entrepreneurial publishers, one of our biggest challenges was getting enough income to continue being sustainable. At the end we exhausted ourselves, so much so that we went from eagerly working seven days a week to burning out (and burning each other out). It was the most beautiful and rewarding professional experience, but I’m glad it’s done. Our last issue was published in March 2016 but who knows? A new Pipeline magazine might emerge. For now, I am still processing the lessons from the ashes of the old one.

Respondent: Cristina Sanchez-Kozyreva, Co-Founder & Editor-in-Chief Publisher/Organisation: Pipeline Website: www.pipelinemag.com
Asia Art Archive marks its 15th year by extending *15 Invitations* to creative practitioners to look within and beyond the organisation as an archive, a collection of material, a digital platform, and a node in a wider collective network. *15 Invitations* take various sizes, forms, and creative directions—literary, polemic, political, sonic, physical, and digital—and function as a series of ‘drop pins’ to alternatively navigate where AAA originated and where it may be going. AAA’s e-journal *Field Notes* traces the 15 participants as they contribute notes and entries to document the process.

*15 Invitations* for 15 Years is supported by the S. H. Ho Foundation Limited, the C. K. & Kay Ho Foundation, and The Hong Kong Arts Development Council. The programme is part of the ADC 20th Anniversary Celebration Series. Special thanks to Spring Workshop.

Asia Art Archive is an independent non-profit organisation initiated in 2000 in response to the urgent need to document and make accessible the multiple recent histories of art in the region. With one of the most valuable collections of material on art freely available from its website and on-site library, AAA builds tools and communities to collectively expand knowledge through research, residency, and educational programmes.