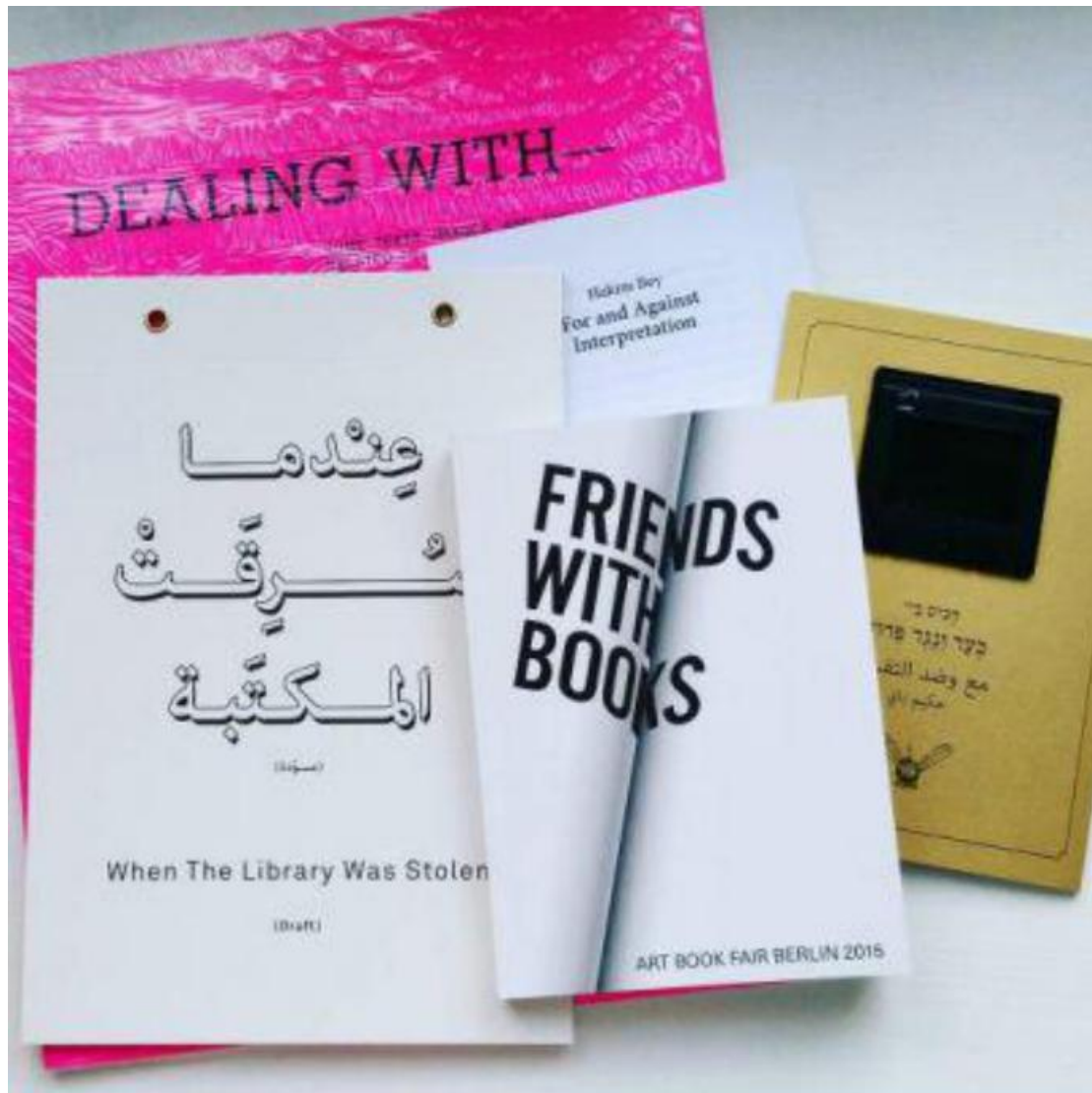


Asia Independent Art Publishing Exhibition – Free Anchors: Ambition and  
Action Live Exhibition

Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong 09.01.17 – 04.05.17

Jiaqiang LIU



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### **The Phantom of an Exhibition – On Publication**

(Translated by Sophia G. Kidd, Yedan HUANG)

## The Phantom of an Exhibition: Sub-text

Every exhibition has potential text, and not just one. An art exhibition's mode and mechanisms include material forms, and these constitute the 'sub-text, like a phantom.

The preface to the exhibition is not the only operative text, but one variant of the sub-text, among many. The 'sub-text' and exhibition or artwork are separated by a kind of transformation: from perception to thought. Even if the text is a straightforward written interpretation of the piece, it is still not an extension of the artwork itself. The writing weaves its way in and out of the artwork, yet independently of it and going far beyond it, as if to suggest an ecological dimension. Or perhaps it is the very liminality of the artwork that first enables the text to be written. Some words or sentences and images evoke the possibility of a subtext, and this facilitates disposing of the outer garb the exhibition is forced to assume. The text is composed, when the body and the brain are able to serve as the page or screen for the script. Unstable rhythms and indistinct language are interwoven, to produce moments of immanence and potential. The 'sub-text' is always on the way to becoming, and arises from a standpoint where it cannot declare itself, on account of the uncertainty of its transitory status. What emerges here is text for the exhibition text (i.e. verb, process and concept, etc.) rather than the exhibition text itself (i.e. noun, result and physical form, etc.).

As it once again edits an artwork's 'sub-text', an exhibition text does not directly act upon the artwork itself. 'Subtext' does not form the background to a work, or its meaning; nor is it the concealed or unspoken words that are left to the viewer's understanding. Its nature, like the nature of the artwork, is to suggest the invisibility of visible objects—and so the text itself does not really seek out meaning. Neither is the 'sub-text' an artist's interpretation or explanation of the piece, nor an additional gift or supplement. It is constituted at the same time as

the piece, and carries an equal significance. The 'subtext' is annihilated immediately all forms of the artwork are removed, and the artwork simply reverts to matter, if it is completely disbanded (turning into a state of emptiness), and the context of the exhibition will also become an indifferent space. However, 'sub-text' contains political potential, the emergence and submergence of which generate an impact on people's intrinsic ideology and cultural psychology.

### A Reversed Form of Writing: The Participants

Today, exhibitions exist (and are promoted) to a large extent in textual form. The usual method is as follows: The exhibition's promoter puts together a media package, comprising a press release and artist's CV, together with information about the exhibition space. This is then sent out to the various media. The editorial staff in the media then re-edit, re-organise and reformat the material, with the help of a web editor where necessary, and forward it to their target audiences via the internet or mobile networks. Each media platform re-distributes the material to a so-called 'general public'. Members of the 'general public' then share it with their circles of friends via a variety of social media platforms, so that the text is spread ever wider and gathers ever more 'likes' along the way. This process moves along with incredible rhythmic efficiency, and constitutes a loop on the internet even before the exhibition itself has taken place. However, this online circulation of texts never really leads to a direct confrontation with real audiences. In their re-edited form in the media, these texts now address an abstract, capitalised 'OTHER' (i.e. fans), determined by the social positioning and cultural class attributes of the media's target audience(s). The constant re-editing and formatting – the attention economy - plunders the reader's leisure time, which is a variable quantity. The reader is in a vulnerable situation, and the ideological control and calculation of the text are hidden. Watching and listening thus becomes a kind of internalised act of inscription, whereby the audience is unconsciously written into the text.



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In this case, neither the exhibition text nor the 'subtext' succeeds in approaching the viewer, as both exclude the audience, treating it simply as the undifferentiated 'OTHER'. Contemporary art encourages the audience to participate in exhibitions. Only by becoming a participant can one at the same time become a unique viewer. But in reality this often leads merely to a kind of nominal presence in a participatory landscape. Exhibitions become the background for a selfie, a photo on a mobile phone, a posture, or a flowchart widely disseminated on the mobile terminals controlled by capital, floating along cyberspace networks with Wi-Fi coverage and captured by the computer algorithms of application programmes.

When the audience is present in the exhibition space, the text of the exhibition alone cannot serve as a guarantee of the work on display, even if it comes from the artist's hand. In the process of exhibiting the work, the artist not only loses control of the audience, but loses

possession of the work itself. The artwork isn't an object in reality, but something that arises through a certain process – a process without end. Members of the audience must modify their existing relationships, submit to a kind of internal reprogramming, and then accept to be active participants. Their acceptance of this role legitimises and promotes the work, and the 'subtext' adds to the idea of an external intervention (Blanchot's 'passion for the outside', as Foucault put it). The outside is the exterior of the whole. It is an internally generated outside, where everything is possible, brought about from the points of fracture as well as the interstitial spaces, and is in constant evolution. It is the outside that triggers the internal workings of the exhibition text.



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Textual Variation: Publication

A variety of forms of artistic discourse are generated through this process of rewriting and internalising the original. But this is not really duplication. To be more precise the rewrite occurs simultaneously with the exhibition. The audience have only to see, hear, touch, or participate in the artwork, to become instantly engrossed in a process of evaluation of what may be light or dark, strong or weak, crude or smooth; and the differential threshold of perception becomes displaced, something is inscribed in their body. This happens in that moment, not when pen is put to paper. What is inscribed on their body is converted back into a form of publication; it can no longer be treated simply as an echo of the inner world of the individual body, but becomes a kind of externalised reduplication of the script, instead.

This reduplication of an exhibition text is not a simple duplication, but a variation of it: the text is multiplied, but not replicated. Reduplication is something close to reflection, which is diverted from its original course by a process of contradiction or dialectics. However, variation (or a rewrite) requires distancing, if it is to produce its own position and space; a duplicated text is just like the shadow of the exhibition or artwork. However, only when a new textual interpretation is generated, through a process of fracture and dislocation, can it move away from its shadowy existence, to take its stand between the exhibition and the audience. In spite of this, variant texts are by no means free-standing – they always tangle with the chaotic world. They must avoid being engulfed in the chasm of capitalism; they may not listen to the myth of neo-liberalism; and they must also reject being bogged down in the communist narrative of Utopia. Art is always impure, but its impure space provides scope for the reinsertion of writing.

However, writing is not just a matter of filling the gaps, or stitching them up: it cannot be just fitted in, but always produces new wounds resulting from the dislocation and friction. It is the wounds that create opportunities for whatever may be latent or repressed to rise to the surface. Perhaps, viewers are also searching for a wound they partly identify with, and that is partly their own. The wound, along with the gap

in the artwork, is left for the audience to deal with, along with all the variations of text. The audience come across the exhibition text without resistance; they then need to go beyond that, to create a new version of text as well as a temporary new subject. Contemporary art can help to rebuild the politics of daily life; its constituents and method of production cannot be replicated; therefore, it is unique and irreplaceable. Writing a text is certainly not merely a job for professional critics; the audience should never allow inexplicable authority and discourse to threaten the artwork, or transform knowledge production into a tool of ideology; instead, they should get into closer touch with both themselves and the world outside, in order to understand both better. In this case, getting in touch with 'sub-text' also means releasing more moments of potential, and creating a much more fertile and vivid world.

The 'sub-text' haunts various kinds of publication like the phantom, or shadow, of an exhibition. It settles freely in the open areas and book stacks of a small public library. 'Sub-text' cannot be traced back to a single source; it is a kind of publication that is always being rewritten, not only for the author, but also for the reader, or participant. It does not flow only in one direction; it is linked to a form of celebration, moving towards the endlessly changing outer world, and undergoing a form of ancient rite of passage. Does this mean that it is possible for every 'amateur hobbyist' (Stigler) to claim that 'everyone is an artist' ?