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explore diasporic discourses

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Poster for the 8th Singularity Plan Festival, 2021, a collaboration between Nini Sum (IdleBeats), XiaoLonghua (instagram: @xiaolonghuaer), and Gregor Koerting. Courtesy of IdleBeats, Xiaolonghua, and Singularity Plan Festival.

Outsider Art Fairs Have Become the New “Insiders”

GU LING

Following the emergence of contemporary art fairs including SH Contemporary, West Bund Art & Design and Art021, the decade has witnessed the growing popularity of the art book fair and its derivatives in China. Compared to conventional museum and commercial gallery exhibitions or art fairs in which professional artists are the protagonists, and the topics are seemingly distant and serious, these fairs often feature open calls, and the art tends to be entertaining and not too intellectually taxing.

The creators come from the country's growing ranks of freelance illustrators, accessory-creators, stuffed toy makers, puppet artists, graphic designers, tattoo artists, milliners, fashion designers, florists, carpenters, metalsmiths, graffiti artists, skate-board designers, street artists, zine makers, self-publishing studios and many other young and independent creative minds who refuse to be defined as contemporary artists.

Creators draw upon a variety of inspirations from classical Asian and western art, to modern and contemporary art forms, but tend to lean towards popular culture borrowing from local street art, manga, animation, comics, super-hero films and science fiction. The art on display often features vibrant and highly saturated colors and exaggerated caricatured figures. Artists collaborate across mediums with an “anything goes” attitude—applying various inspirations and materials to produce their own artistic languages.

For instance, in the 2021 Shanghai edition of Singularity Plan Festival, Nini Sum (IdleBeats) and XiaoLonghua (instagram: @xiaolonghuaer) jammed with cardboard and paper cuts. Using a set of game-like rules, they improvised, deconstructed and collaged these materials by hand to create the signature poster of Singularity Plan Festival Shanghai, 2021. In addition, they created a 12-piece “album” of 12 pieces which became their first official work as the new artist-duo Nilon. Co-founded by Nini Sum and Gregor Koerting in 2009, IdleBeats is the first independent screen-printing studio in Shanghai. Koerting was invited to design the typeface for the poster—a typeface which drew inspiration from Asian avant-garde art-deco fonts of 1920s through 1930s.

The trend for these kinds of platforms began with Almost Art Project (AAP)—the first art festival in China that showcased self-taught artists (those who received no professional visual arts training). Since its inaugural exhibition in 2015, AAP has been held annually and is now officially managed by Tabula Rasa Gallery in Beijing.



China has also seen a flourishing of fairs dedicated to book art such as abC (art book in China) which was first launched in 2016 to organize book art exhibitions and self-publishing fairs, with exhibitors including A4 Art Museum, Chengdu; Arrow Factory, Beijing; Juanzong (*Wallpaper China*) Bookstore, Beijing; and The Type (an independent platform which shares research on typeface through its podcast, publications and events). *Wallpaper China* described abC as “a temporary street, a program, and also an invitation. abC is about youth community.”¹

Hot on the heels of abC, UNFOLD art book fair launched in 2018 in Shanghai, with a focus on the printed materials, including art books, zines, postcards, posters and other paper-based works. Meanwhile, Singularity Plan Festival which started from an underground garage in downtown Guangzhou, focused more on graffiti and street art-style artwork. Yet most of these fairs share many of the same artists and exhibitors. Comparatively, younger fairs seem to tour to a greater number of cities and have a greater awareness of branding business-operations. For example, BonJour Art Book Fair from Nanjing has toured seven cities with 12 editions since its founding in 2019.

Arts for Generation Z

As the first generation to have grown up with access to the Internet and portable digital technology from a young age, members of Generation Z in China, (those born between the mid-1990s to 2010) have been dubbed “digital natives,” although they are not necessarily digitally literate.

As the illustrator and founder of Singularity Plan Festival, ETH remarked, “Being trendy and being oneself is the statement of Generation Z.”² Generation Z also has a very strong attachment to printed matter due to their nostalgia for a childhood where video games and comic books became inseparable “close friends,” accompanying them through their school years and becoming an important part of their cultural lives as adults.

In August this year, under the shadow of the newly discovered COVID-19 cases in Shenzhen, the third edition of Witches' Feast—opened in the Sea World Culture and Arts Center. Witches' Feast is a themed open-call art fair founded by fashionable illustrator MAYI, known for her depictions of Asian women with magical powers. The fair focused

Opposite page, top: “#enter into the artist's brain” slogan at Singularity Plan Festival Shanghai, 2021. Courtesy of Singularity Plan Festival.

Opposite page, second from the top: Singularity Plan Festival Shanghai group photo, Singularity Plan Festival Shanghai, 2021. Courtesy of Singularity Plan Festival.

Opposite page, second from the bottom: Singularity Plan Festival Guangzhou, 2020. Courtesy of Singularity Plan Festival.

Opposite page, bottom: Singularity Plan Festival Shenzhen, 2019. Courtesy of Singularity Plan Festival.

Below: Illustration by MAYI. Courtesy of MY-illustration.



around environmentalism and asked visitors to dress in green and black accordingly. Visitors paid 80 RMB to enter and viewed the visit as a shopping, artistic and performative experience. Cosplayers and “hanfu” groups—a subculture whose followers wear Ming dynasty attire as everyday fashion in support of an “authentic” Chinese identity—used the fair’s dress code as an opportunity to come in costume.

In some ways, it was an immersive exhibition where visitors perform alongside participating artists, from live comic book style portrait sketching, to hand-crafted music boxes that integrate magnetic kinetics creating an effect similar to stop-motion animation.

Liberation of Artistic Creation Facilitated by Taobao and Social Media

Without the help of brick-and-mortar stores, artists have developed sophisticated marketing and communication strategies using popular social media platforms such as Weibo, Tiktok and Bilibili, selling their wares through Taobao and Wechat stores. In creating their own fan bases, these independent artists can manage the market for their creations in a speedy and nimble



fashion and seek out angel investors who can help them transform their practices into more commercialized vehicles for their IPs (intellectual property), while harnessing the power of the media and art critics to add meaning and value to their work.

Beyond distributing their work, Taobao, the industrial supply chain monolith, has also been crucial in both facilitating their work and taking it in different directions. Taobao's "everything under the sun" marketplace provides easy access to raw materials such as specific types of resin and customized thermal transfer printing for garments.

These above-mentioned fairs have become welcome programs for (mostly private) art museums and shopping malls to help attract young audiences and thus support the sustainable operation of the institutions. Their core values are very much in line with those of many high-end retail centers and contemporary cultural spaces which aim to strengthen the connection between art and everyday life. The strong festival-like atmosphere provides a draw that cannot be matched by a Taobao store, and in the age of the attention economy (an approach to the management of information that treats human attention as a scarce commodity) host venues are attracted to the potential of converting online fans into mall consumers and museumgoers. The visitor numbers are impressive: Witches Feast featured 80 booths and attracted 4,000 visitors in three days; Bonjour Art Book Fair (Nanjing) featured 150 booths and attracted over 10,000 visitors per fair; and Singularity Plan Festival attracted on average 100 booths and 5,000 visitors per fair. All successfully toured in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing.

Art and Art and Art

To some, the entry and increasing popularity of these art fairs might signify a threat to the comparatively small contemporary art scene. However, these fairs have the benefit of attracting the uninitiated into the realm of art and creating a more open and accessible market for the arts, without galleries acting as gate-keepers.

In a testament to the recognition of this blending of art, design, craft and life, one of the most famous outsider artists, Guo Fengyi (郭鳳怡), is now represented by Long March Space, Beijing. Meanwhile some fairs are taking up more institutional roles, such as abC initiating the ABCA (Art Book in China Archive) in 2018—a not-for-profit project for collecting and archiving independent art publications. From Witches' Feasts' color-themed parties to the more academic approach of abC or happenings at the West Bund's Dome Art Space, which featured musical performances and F&B booths, there's an expanding spectrum of curatorial planning underlying these carnivalesque fair-exhibitions. One can anticipate further evolution of these new "insider" platforms under the ethos of "everything can be art; and everyone can be an artist."

Opposite page: *Special Project: An Apple a Day*, 5th Edition of *abC art book Fair*, Beijing Times Art Museum, 2020. Exhibition Design by A Day Studio. Courtesy of *abC art book Fair*.

- 1 "A Temporary Street," *Yi Tiao Xianshi Cunzai De Jiedao*, 《一條限時存在的街道》 *Juanzong* (Wallpaper China) Official Wechat Account, October 7, 2021, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/BaAFw-AYRj24_btMKF8a6A.
- 2 "HiTalk—collaboration with Singularity Plan Festival," *HOUHAI HARBOUR*, Official Wechat Account, August 31, 2021, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/zuvrjvQPhx-dkd_VXvN8Xw.