

DISTRIBUTION ASSEMBLY EAST for LA Art Book Fair 2020

Eating Bitter as Gratitude for Hard Work: In Anticipation of Independent Publication Practices on Slow Down



A conversation between 八家 *Bajia*, 展銷場 Display Distribute and soi འཕྲེལ on 2020 March 01/02, 7:00 pm UTC-8, 10:00 pm UTC-5, 11:00 am UTC+8, and 10:00 am UTC+7, via text messaging with added reflections in the weeks thereafter, amidst of a slew of cancellations and (pro)longings

Judha Su (JS): First question, is the book fair 100% confirmed that it will happen? I mean the virus affects many things, so I wonder.

Ming Lin (ML): I guess nothing is 100%, but at the moment, yes.

At any rate, I am realizing that most of our publication stock is in Hong Kong and wondering if there's any possibility to send things to me to print here in NYC for the occasion of the fair—the files, I mean. Of course, we can post things as well since I doubt many people are going to be traveling the route from Asia to US at the moment...

Elaine Wing-Ah Ho (EWH): I am not sure I would be willing to do that. Using post would go against the ethics of our whole [LIGHT LOGISTICS](#) project. Neither independent publishers, nor us as distribution facilitators, are making any money. If we ship everything then you will be paying for people to buy the books. I wouldn't want to conceal those costs as price hikes to the readers.

Instead, I would suggest something really radical, because I think we should face up to the fact that we are all affected by the virus. Like what about only having things that people can order at the fair, and find another way to present what is not there?

JS: My question here is how to offer a “radical” idea that doesn't linger comfortably in the art enclosure, or morally exclude it from other worlds either. In other words, how to bring the creative approaches realized here to rework for the wildest connectivity? The term “radical” should be relative, mutable, and never absolute, so it won't end up being celebrated like it's fulfilled in and of itself. So here, it's a restless dance between what we define as our mutual urgency, and what makes such an urgency deviate in particular contexts. I think we can move along this stream—yes, we are all affected by the same virus, but there is also a vast spectrum of suffering that manifests differently, so we must take a firm grasp of our realities and how serious revisions will be demanded of our practices.

Zandie Brockett (ZB): I'm curious to understand what can truly be a “radical” idea in America now, in Los Angeles. Watching the media depict the US-China Trade War, the Hong Kong protests, and now this little virus (with the impeachment in between), has left me wondering what kind of creative approach must we find and adopt to present ourselves, our project in a manner that reorients the way the East is perceived. While the virus originated in China, perhaps its spread is due to our global collective doing, and so its solution must, perhaps, be in a transnational partnership. Much like the global supply chains that work until they don't, and thus what brings us together today....

EWH: There is a line from my sister's recent exhibition text: “This fierce little bug has managed to do what politicians, activists, and workers of the world have failed to do since the beginning of the industrial revolution—slow the juggernaut of capitalism.”

ML: Nice. I find the idea of “fulfillment,” as Judha mentioned, relative to our current predicament intriguing, in regards to the possibilities of circulation amidst crisis. Fulfillment is the term that Amazon uses when referring to the successful sorting, dispatch and delivery of stock, and it carries with it certain expectations: the sense of

「後勤」借用人們在各自行程中剩餘的攜帶能力所搭建的P2P派貨網絡。我們提供的不是傳統的快遞服務——相反，它是一個免費可是沒有效率然而充滿人情味的「慢遞」服務，同時也推動一種移動和靈活的閱讀空間。如果你有興趣成為「後勤」人肉慢遞人員享受所有出版物的88折購書優惠，請到網頁底部報名。
 LIGHT LOGISTICS is a person-to-person distribution network enabled by the surplus carrying power of couriers. This is a free but not-in-time service; please allow for adequate lead time for your cargo to arrive. If you are interested in becoming a courier and receiving 12% discount on all publications, please scroll to the bottom of the page.

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LIGHT LOGISTICS, “a not-in-time couriering service”
<https://hql.displaydistribute.com>

satisfaction and contentedness anticipated with the arrival of goods. With our project LIGHT LOGISTICS we have been working on disturbing distribution as an alternative transport system that relies on volunteer couriers to hand-deliver published goods on borrowed time. This imperfect procedure places equal emphasis on the movement of goods—and its possible derailment—as the goods themselves, with special attention to the affective realms, systems of reciprocity and exchange, hierarchies of power, that are embedded within circulation. Within this framework, our service might be seen to upend expectations for fulfillment as it were, making space for something unexpected and possibly chaotic... Now, in this case of the virus we most certainly won't be able to fulfill orders as usual. So how might we seize this opportunity to further explore the limitations?

EW: The virus, in the case of the conversation we are having now, puts theory into question because our own praxis is, as you say, also upended, and we are forced to reconsider how to deal with the pragmatics of movement. Going back to the curatorial theme we had talked about, this is exactly the “shadow” looming over all productions these days, and it reveals how movement is critical. It is also revealing to bring up Amazon at this juncture, because they are obviously failing on so many fronts. As [one recent report](#) describes, “Amazon’s relentless drive for efficiency in its fulfillment centers” is exactly the kind of inhumane stretching and conquering of human bodies and capacities which “has led to injury and even death.”

I think for us to simply “conquer” our situation would be a pity. *Let everything be slowed.*

JS: Alongside the fact that shipping from Asia to the US will cost a lot of money (hence being unreasonable to do so), I think we should temporarily halt the idea of “mobility” (this term is very contagious in the art community, including the more romantic “nomad”) and ponder upon “inhabitation,” ideas, and practices grounded in “being

in one place”—even though they are still precarious and unsettled. Can we still be in touch with the “international” network if we are not mobile? In fact, the given mobility already implies asymmetry of power.

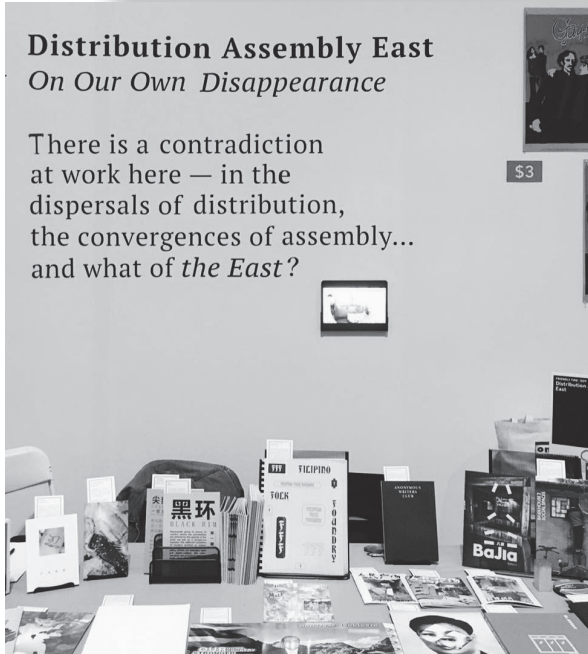
And now with the virus spilling over, the acceleration that has made a deep impact on human bodies is made manifest, also on every living organism we have brought into our activities in one way or another (exploitative, most of the time). Tourism also accelerates the pandemic, and it is, of course, one of the industries severely affected. While the reinforcement of borders becomes even more apparent, and the term “Southeast Asia” cannot be more fictional than here and now. We are controlled by the territories of country, city, and home, and transnational relationships are temporarily suspended. For example, the Singaporean government warns their citizens to avoid travelling to Thailand, and Chinese tourists are not welcome to eat in certain restaurants in Chiang Mai, the north of Thailand. Like other forms of public gathering, the national book festival was cancelled to avoid the risk of having people physically in touch (also, the term “in touch” becomes very physical, not metaphorical like it used to be). Now, the virus is a reminder of chronic problems that have never been resolved—say xenophobia, economic injustice, social segregation, and so on.



Mapping at the first DAE meeting at the Institute for Provocation in Beijing, 2018.
Photo courtesy *Baja*.

ZB: So much of the global art world and the successful flow of both financial and social capital is predicated on an artist/curator/critic/director/gallerist’s ability to participate in a smorgasbord of biennales, art fairs, and museum openings, around the world, and at any given point of the year. But it hardly leaves us time to create.

At least with Display Distribute’s LIGHT LOGISTICS project, we see that while so many independent publishers or artists cannot be “in-physical-touch” with the international network, they can appropriate the flight paths of those that do travel globally to distribute, even spark conversation while the human exchange of an ordered book is en route. How, as an expanded “international” network can we actually slow



DAE in the “Friendly Fires” section of Printer Matter’s LA Art Book Fair, 2019. Photo courtesy Sponge Gourd Collective.

down, stop moving, yet still find meaningful connections that contribute to sustainable modes of production, and fulfillment for our books, our practices, and ourselves.

ML: How do you guys feel about opening up the conversation to talk more specifically about Distribution Assembly East (DAE), and shadows, the theme we've decided upon for the presentation this year? Perhaps this can form the premise for what we decide to make and do, or how we choose to make-do?

Maybe we should start with explaining for Judha how DAE came to be, since soi is new to the assembly? Z and E, perhaps you can tell us about how it began for you in Beijing?

ZB: It was 2018, and I had just published the most recent issue of 八家 *Bajia*, a literary exhibition. Focusing on “Social Spaces,” the issue examined how the violent demolitions of public sites for work, play, and daily life in Beijing, but also across greater China, in cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou were challenging the economic, leisure, and social well-being of various communities. We spoke with artists, architects, and entrepreneurs working closely with marginalized communities—those who made their living and life in the city’s shadows—and many of who were influenced by the erasure of these “Social Spaces.” Elaine was a key respondent in the issue, so she and I were already in close dialogue about the politics of transforming community spaces, and the radical approaches she, amongst others took to re-imagine and build solutions, or more poetically suggest and gesture towards alternative systems of pause, learning, exchange, unity, and celebration.

At that time, I was also moving back to Los Angeles. I knew I’d be in the city for the fair, so I asked her and Fu Yuan (of Salt Projects and *Commonplace*) if they wanted to host a table together. Elaine—I’ll let you introduce how we were invited

into “Friendly Fires,” why we thought to work as a consortium under the name DAE, and, after many rounds of discussion, how we chose those three nouns... *Distribution. Assembly. East.*

EW: Personally speaking, I have been interested in finding more networked ways of mutual support and exchange among independent practitioners in the print and publishing arenas. The work that I do with Display Distribute is one manifestation, and in talking with any publisher, the difficulty of distribution is always one of the primary obstacles. So Zandie and I, having had one of those conversations, thought it may be a good idea to try to address some of these issues in a meeting and workshop format with other publishers. We hosted in the context of the ab/C art book fair in 2018, a closed door session at the Institute for Provocation in Beijing, with, in addition to Display Distribute, *Bajia*, and *Commonplace*, a few other local publishers like Sponge Gourd Collective and Fruity Press.

ZB: And Dooooogs, Die Bruder, Edge of Arabia, and Bon Gah came from Berlin, New York and Iran to share their international experiences.

EW: I wouldn't say we came up with concrete solutions out of that one afternoon, but it is the opening up for some of us to say, “Well, let's continue to try to address the problem together.”

ZB: We bought an enormous map of the world. Sitting around it, we drew our distribution routes, and as we ate dumplings, also marking central hubs, jotting ideas, and doodling key words as visual cues. One key goal in this convening and brainstorm was to suss out whether there was enough solidarity within the group



Photo courtesy @terreccccce.

to form an alternative network for the distribution of our independent publications, which, for those publishing in Mainland China, are technically illegal—or the circulation of their books is hindered by the fact that official ISBN numbers are extremely difficult to get.

ML: Display Distribute met Max Schumann at the Tai Kwun art book fair in Hong Kong in January 2019, and following this he invited us to have a table in the Friendly Fires section at LAABF.

EWH: This all led to our aligned participation in LAABF 2019, which became DAE's first attempt to manifest a curated congregation of books as an address of geopolitical identity and non-identity. By that I mean the regionalism which we have staked a claim upon as DAE (East and Southeast Asia), but without trying to play identity politics.

That was the irony of the first year's theme being “Disappearance.”

ML: The interests of DAE align with Display Distribute's ongoing inquiry, which concerns itself fundamentally with a question of circulation based on the belief that the meaning of content cannot be disentangled from the modes of distribution. Our forays into print have often existed alongside and sometimes been in response to the proliferation of printed wares notably deploying a D.I.Y. aesthetic originating elsewhere, while appearing quite emptied out of the original and more intimate connections that evinced them. Moreover, they often seem intended for the heightened purpose of immaterial circulation (*i.e.*, to “-gram”, flaunt, accrue cultural capital). Conversely, the publications that we are dealing with often come from a place where—inhibited by censorship, crushing and corrupt publishing systems, a lack of public space—the ebb and flow of movement as well as stillness is vital.

EWH: One very straightforward example is the fact that it is forbidden to use existing courier companies to send books or DVDs to mainland China from Hong Kong. So even without adhering to the LIGHT LOGISTICS model, there is an inherent need to hand carry knowledge across the border, so to speak, if you want to access the efficiency of mainland courier systems.

ML: Hyper-visibility and maximal circulation often gives the impression that everything is fluid and transparent, obscuring what's actually taking place. This year we decided upon “Shadows” as our collective theme for DAE's presentation. Though diaphanous, shadows could be considered as something akin to Edouard Glissant's “opacity,” as something unknowable and impenetrable, yet distinct and chaotically resonant. Shadows underscore the legitimate and the whole, and in doing so constitute it. With this theme we attempt to bring the less pronounced and less binary to the fore.

ZB: It also reminds me of Anna Greenspan's writings on Shanghai. In “The Power of the Spectacle,” she describes how it is precisely those that live in the shadows—the vendors operating only quasi-legally in the streets, or domestic migrants living

in the cities despite not having a permissible hukou, or housing permit—quite literally, but also figuratively fuel, feed, and sustain the glossy metropolis whose skyline is an emblem of wealth, futurity, and well, lightness. But as Classic Chinese thought acknowledges, dark needs light, just as light requires shadow, with infinite revolutions occurring between the two.

JS: I like how you described shadow, Ming. Not seeing it in definitive opposition to light or in any kind of binary, I think we can use the shadow as a focal point to re-imagine publishing enterprise and logistics. In the context of the book fair, I propose the shadow as a method to move two directions. First, to look around the domain of hyper-visibility and circulation, and to work in silhouette, which may constantly alter the stage as well as be altered by it. While our bodies won't be burnt by the ultralight, we also carry some luminosity and re-distribute into other realms of artistic endeavor which, by the convention of art, may not be regarded as such. Second, to inhabit shadows and work through them as an ontology, we need to unravel the normative relationships imposed by the publishing industry and rebuild a networked relationship between suppliers based upon the presence of shadow. I'm not sure how far we could go with the second move, nor do I know exactly what it would look like. But I think it's worth exploring.

EW: Honestly, I think this is very much how we are working already! But as you've talked about elsewhere, it's not so much an attempt to "re-distribute into other realms of artistic endeavor," but flatten the curves of accessibility so that this agency of the shadow may be employed to greater ends, whether it can be considered art or not.

JS: Let's think about the book fair as operating in the realm of the shadow instead of that of visibility. The convention of the book fair usually brings productions and products to light in a manner that creates a certain relationship between producers and readers: an object-based relationship, like "look at me, here is my work." What if we challenge such a criteria itself, what if we invite participants of the book fair to transgress the definite border between producers and readers (buyers), offering them a complex web of anonymous suppliers, failed experiments, and unnamed laborers, so they (readers/buyers) can also decide if they want to re-situate themselves into this line of production, or remain distant observers. Such a proposition is never singular, never alone and never lasting.

In this sense, an infrastructure is not only built for access products, but it is imagined for all struggles to be recognized and thus be taken into a zone of critique—hopefully to find an effective solution. Being in the art world, we are privileged to play with new ideas, suggest new propositions, but such artistic endeavors will be transformative only when the artists simultaneously challenge and transform the conditions around them. By saying this, if we are willing to take the very idea of "art book fair" seriously, the revision of publishing and distribution must be brought into conversation. I haven't arrived with any concrete answer for myself, but I'm very keen to discuss.

ML: This is something we've been trying to transgress with the LIGHT LOGISTICS project, whereby as artists we build up our own infrastructures and arbiters of content

via our bodies and movements.

JS: In the case of self-publishing practices and alternative modes of distribution, it could be powerful if they unleash the practice into a less systematically regulated form, so I want to suggest us to think more about how to work in response to the ongoing conditions which we partly share as well as to particularities of each of our contexts.

I see my participation in DAE as imagining a space that allows me to think more attentively and collectively on publishing practice and its relevance.

EW: Completely agree. But despite the critique of the spectacle-making trend of international fairs and biennales, I have found the very basic and direct kind of interaction and exchange that can happen in an art book fair (these are the ones that rarely get documented) to be exactly relevant for us as publishing practitioners to get back to the work of what, why, and how to get to print. Group Material collaborator Doug Ashford recently spoke of moments of intimacy as points of entry for subversion, and I think this can speak multitudes towards a praxis of the shadow. *Sun foo sai*, everyone, and Ming, let us know what Printed Matter responds.

ML: Ya, will do.

ZB: “*Sun foo sai*”—*shen me yisi* (what does that mean)?

EW: 辛苦妳—I don't know how to translate that.

ZB: 啊, yes! 辛苦啦! “Eat bitter,” LOL...

ML: I'll eat bitter for us all. Okay, thank you, everyone...TBC.

EW: Cheers, and good night, USA, good day, BKK.

ML: Day/night!

ZB: Ha, nice—back to the ying yang. Night/morning, everyone!

Distribution Assembly East (DAE) is an occasional convergence in matters of print, thinking through borders, identities—and the content between covers—by taking up the mantle of “circulation as form.” This year’s conversation and selection of publications from East and Southeast Asia centers around the theme of “Shadows,” as movements that underscore the visible, are often elicit, mostly marginal and always essential. [@distribution_assembly_east](#)