

## Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

## Writing in China

### When words bow down to commerce



Much of the time, official censorship is less of a concern than self-censorship, by editors bowing to advertisers or writers to clients. Image credit: Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism: Coca-Cola* (1991-94). © 2015 Wang Guangyi

By  Lisa Movius

journalist

Published 29 August 2019 in [Other Insights](#)

Last year saw the closure of long-running Shanghai art magazine *Yishushijie (Art World)*, due to declining revenue and a restructuring of its parent company, led by the state-owned Shanghai Wenyi Publication House. Established in January 1979, the monthly magazine had been the first to publicize many Chinese artists—as well as writers, film-makers and musicians.

Though buoyed by its affiliation with the [Power Station of Art](#), Shanghai's state-run museum of contemporary art, the magazine's dominance had faded in the face of an incessant barrage of flashy, flash-in-the-pan websites, many selling advertorial clickbait on the mobile app WeChat.

New models chasing sustainability appear by the month—even *Art World* is being relaunched as a book series—while some double down on old models. In June, Chinese publisher Modern Media Holdings [bought a majority stake](#) in the British magazine *ArtReview*, which also publishes *ArtReview Asia*. It is also relaunching its struggling bilingual art title LEAP.

## Censorship for commercial reasons is killing the spirit of criticism

Other publications have dialed back their content or moved online. These business struggles coincide with intensifying censorship under Chinese president [Xi Jinping](#), as the People's Republic marks its 70th year, and as dissent in Hong Kong escalates. It is hard to be an art critic in a climate where criticism of all kinds is risky, and everything is for sale.

Much of the time, though, official censorship is less of a concern than self-censorship, by editors bowing to advertisers or writers to clients. "Most of the time the government doesn't care about contemporary art, so it doesn't happen often, unless your subject matter has influence beyond the tiny snow globe of the art world," says [Aimee Lin](#), the former editor of *ArtReview Asia* who recently departed the publication to direct Beijing gallery [Long March Space](#). "Censorship for commercial reasons is killing the spirit of criticism because many writers have to live their lives through gallery commissions."

"In terms of economic output, contemporary art is a tiny industry," adds Yang Zi, a Beijing-based critic who also is a curator at [UCCA](#), formerly the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. "The government doesn't regard it as a top priority. However, all publications and gatherings are limited to a certain extent."



Many art publishers also become event organizers while trying to survive, for example *ArtReview Asia*'s curation of the "Xiàn Chǎng" section of Shanghai's West Bund Art & Design fair. Image courtesy of West Bund Art & Design

China has few if any full-time, fully independent art critics. As in much of the world, criticism is a side-hustle for curators and academics and, less often, dealers, collectors and journalists. “Many of them have a day job: teaching in school or working as an editor for an art magazine or online journal,” says Lin. “Those who are really freelancing often work as curators. Galleries and artists will pay writers for an essay for a catalogue or, sometimes, even for a press release for an exhibition.”

Art criticism in mainland China has always been a fiscally thankless undertaking, with most publications paying only a few mao per word. “Art media that produce serious critiques in China lack financial support, so they can’t offer decent payment for their contributors,” says Yang.

The problem is not just in China, says Lin: “Throughout the world, many art publishers are trying to survive, so they also become event organizers, or make videos and publish them on social media, or make catalogues and content for artists or biennials. If being commercialized means they can survive, and possibly still partly function as a platform for criticism and more experimental practice, I wouldn’t say that is a sad story.” *ArtReview Asia*, for example, under Lin’s initiation, organized the curated section “*Xiàn Chǎng*” of Shanghai’s *West Bund Art & Design fair* from 2016 to 2018.

## Throughout the world, many art publishers are trying to survive

These factors, combined with a preponderance of paid content, whether as “red envelopes” of cash to writers or direct payment to publishers for coverage, further dilute publications’ reputations. “I think art criticism here at this moment is losing its power to engage a bigger audience,” says Yuan Fuca, who co-founded Beijing curatorial studio *Salt Projects* in 2016. “I can’t really tell if there are really any good outlets for Chinese language art criticism going on.”

Yuan and Lin cite *Artforum* as well as its online Chinese edition *Artforum.com.cn* as the leading outlets for criticism of Chinese art. “The decline of print surely has a negative effect on art criticism. In my opinion, the transformation period will continue for some time,” says Yang. “Any magazine or website will fold if they won’t consider a different approach for balancing commercial and artistic pursuits. On the other hand, some small workshop-style media productions like Dabinlou (or DBL) have consistently published high-quality articles.”



The male and straight old guard dominate the main academies, such as The Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, whose campus is pictured here. Image courtesy of The Central Academy of Fine Arts

Meanwhile, a younger generation of critics—including Yuan, Yang and Lin—who were mostly born after 1980 into a more modern and wired, if not open, China, are reinventing the wheel. Mostly overseas educated, they skew more diverse, particularly female and LGBTQ, than the male and straight old guard who dominate the main academies like the *Central*

#### Academy of Fine Arts and the China Academy of Art.

"I believe that for today's world (and for tomorrow's as well) we need to invent a really good art-writing platform, not just a new title," says Lin. "We need to invent a new structure, a new way, a funding system, and not be so lazy that we just stick with the current advertising system and structure."