



Deep Cuts, Episode 21: "Take art outside of the white box and into open spaces and communities"

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Each installment features a writer, artist, or curator discussing an underrated artist, artwork, movement, or museum.



ACAW Field Meeting Day 2, Double Fly Art Center's Performance Hundouluo at Hunter College Art Galleries. FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance, 2015

Today we're with Leeza Ahmady, an independent curator, and the Director of Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), in discussion of "Field Meeting: Thinking Practice", which is a "two-day art forum dedicated to the exhibition of newly conceived performances, lecture-performances, and lively discussions by 30 compelling figures, hosted at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum & Asia Society Museum, New York on November 11 & 12." How long has Field Meeting been going on, and why was it initially launched?

I introduced FIELD MEETING as the signature program of Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) in 2014, with the intention of questioning what I call an East-West superiority-inferiority complex. Mostly due to the lack of more world-focused scholarship, individual artists are often represented through a particular place, artistic style or a mass movement.

I am interested, however, in a new model for exhibition-making, one that presents artists and creative urgencies in a less mediated fashion, to broadly present Asia as a complex and conceptual space beyond geography, while also addressing the large gaps in the ratio of Asia-based artists represented in the US.

FIELD MEETING is thus a programmatic approach that appropriates the format of an art forum to put creative minds on display as opposed to art objects; a showcasing of people, their ideas, research, and their endeavors in relationship to the field of art. By inviting an exclusive audience of arts professionals to attend and receive this content, my aim is to facilitate indispensable exchanges between like-minded artists, art professionals and organizations in the United States and Asia so they can build long-lasting relationships, collaborations and support systems to shape the future of artistic discourse as a whole.

Lecture-performance, a fascinating hybrid of research, lecture, visual art and performative techniques, also greatly inspired the format and curatorial objectives of FIELD MEETING. It is an unconventional form of art-making with capacity for disseminating information in a highly provocative, creative manner, without all of the logistical expenses entailed in organizing an object-based exhibition. Of course, inviting artists to conceive lecture-performances or to present their process in a performative manner has its own curatorial challenges. It requires a great deal of time, organization, communication, and conceptualization, not to mention resourcefulness, given that flying artist in and hosting them in New York from various parts of Asia and the world is also costly. Yet creating that face-to-face connection between people is a priceless experience. Not all galleries and organizations we invite to support artists to present in FIELD MEETING can justify doing so, given their primarily sales focus. Some, however, do recognize the long-term advantage of promoting and nurturing their artists in this way.



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, And Yet My Mask Is Powerful, 2016 (still). Single-channel HD video, 2-channel sound. Courtesy of the artists. FIELD MEETING Take 4: Thinking Practice, November 11 & 12, 2016

What has changed since the inaugural event? How does this year differentiate itself?

Generally if you are in tuned with what you are doing and committed in your mission, change happens naturally and usually for the better. The first edition was very broad in content. We have slowly narrowed to a particular focus for each edition, while still keeping the inquiry, methodology, and process as wide open as possible. A consistent emphasis has been to include as many artists but to also open it to as many kinds of creative minds (meaning from all kinds of disciplines) from as many countries of Asia as possible, including the Middle East, Central and South Asia, which until very recently have had very sparse visibility.

The energy of the inaugural FIELD MEETING was palpable. Incredible connections were made and the seeds for new collaborations were planted. Riding with such overwhelming enthusiasm from the participating artists, organizations and audience, FIELD MEETING Take 2 hosted as a collateral event during the 2015 Venice Biennale was a gift to look back and reflect on how this forum could move forward. I recognized clearly, that large-scale biennial openings are not the ideal setting for FIELD MEETING, as it requires much greater mental space than the hectic frenzy of a Biennale. This is why FIELD MEETING has emphasized on modeling after a **studio visit on a communal scale**. The intimacy derives from a communal activity that requires an exchange of energy between all. For professionals in the field, the studio visit means engaging with the artist's own presence and voice giving insight into his or her process and intent - a kind of a one-on-one connection that becomes a catalyst in pushing the artist and the curator forward in their practices.

The 3rd iteration of FIELD MEETING hosted at the Metropolitan Museum and Hunter College Art Galleries in 2015, focused on deconstructing performance. The history of performance has been diverse, vast, and integral in Asia—street performances, theatre, dance, spiritual rituals, and even healing practices. So we attempted to foreground the diversity and critical role of performance work in the context of Asia by spotlighting a wide range of practices beyond the visual arts in an effort to liberate performance from contemporary art world-institutionalized prescriptions. *Thinking Performance* invited much broader interpretations and fresh understandings of performativity as an inherent part of all forms of artistic expression and production. ACAW's signature performance exhibition *Sonic Blossom* by artist Lee Mingwei co-presented with Metropolitan Museum was hailed by renowned New York Times art critic Holland Cotter as one of the top ten art events of the year.

This year, set on the heels of one of the most alarming United States presidential elections, **FIELD MEETING: Thinking Practice** further considers artists as active agents in civic life. While dismantling the term “practice” to its core quintessence, it also addresses strategies that allow practitioners to maintain sovereignty over their own voices as world citizens and commentators amidst the pervasively hostile political climate of conservatism, nationalism. Capturing the heightened urgency to take art outside of the white box and into open spaces and communities, artists and practitioners directly question institutional boundaries and traditional modes of infrastructure. With over 30 compelling presentations, we shall witness and give credence to the daring choices individuals make in their creative endeavors - the spiritual, kinetic, ever evolving processes that become inseparable from their daily lives.



Shezad Dawood, Nature Interpretation Center, Kalimpong Hill Station. Image source: www.tourmyindia.com, as part of the artist's research for his lecture-performance, "A Virtual Tour of Kalimpong" for FIELD MEETING Take 4: Thinking Practice, November 11 & 12, 2016

The artists involved in the event come from all over—from New York to Tokyo, Lahore to Beirut, Berlin, London, Cairo, Slovenia, the list goes on. How crucial is the global aspect to the event?

I prefer to use worldly over the term global. We have a tendency to believe we are inventors today when there is precedence for everything in history, although not in the same speed and manner as in the past. Folklore for example, was a form of artistic globalization for centuries. If you wanted to impress an emperor of a region, the head of another region would send over a gift of art- a beautiful scroll, or a crafted swords etc. Philosophers, scientists, poets, artists, and astronomers have always flocked from one side of the empire to another in search for meaning, connection, collaboration and patronage.

Most invited FIELD MEETING participants happen to only live in Asia part-time and are based in multiple continents. We began listing only the cities next to their names on our program to convey a telling story on its own - the nomadic practices, transnational networks, globalized economies and shifting lifestyles that affect not only the art world but all of us today.

It's time for us to ask what is specific about a local culture and why is it relevant. How is it framed within the world practice and world art history, modern, contemporary or within other timelines altogether.

This perspective extends to the audiences of ACAW & FIELD MEETING. Initially, we started with New York and this dynamic hub of artists, art professionals and general audiences. But now we are reaching more and more organizations, students, scholars, curators and the general public in other cities in the United States, Asia, and beyond through social media, our website, archives and our vast network of partners shared in a variety of formats.



ACAW Field Meeting Day 2, Discussion with Leeza Ahmady, Arash Fayezi, Zeynep Kayan, Vibha Galhotra, Christopher Ho and Nora Taylor at Hunter College Art Galleries. FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance, 2015

Although this is an equally loaded and broad question, do you think Asian-inspired and Asian-originated art is underrepresented in this United States, and do you think it's underrepresented globally?

We attempt to read art and artists outside of mere nationalistic and regional categorizations. I make a point of not using the word “Asian” because it implies something specific when that specificity is very complex in actuality. This is why we decided to drop the letter “n” from our platform’s name in 2015, because Asia predicates a more open space -- a state of mind rather than an orientation.

Due to Western colonial dominations of many parts of Asia, people in Asia have had the tendency to look far outside of their own continent for inspiration, scholarship, and perhaps also market validation. But that is no longer the case. The time has come for this part of the world - with the largest population on the planet and containing some of the most rapidly growing economies - to connect on an inner-intercontinental level like never before. Europe had a powerful global position because European nations have built strong cultural/ institutional collaborative infrastructures with one another now for over 6 decades, if not hundreds of years. So my curatorial aim first and foremost is to support how Asia concentrates and connects with itself rather than to worry about Asia’s representation globally.

ACAW platform is based in New York, and was founded as an initiative to promote contemporary art discourse from Asia in the United States so we continue to expand and nurture artistic interconnectivity between these two sites. There have been tremendous positive shifts over the past decade. New York may or may not still be one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities, yet among the 600 or more galleries in Chelsea, only a dozen represent artists working or living in Asia. And while many institutions in the US and elsewhere are beginning to collect art from various regions of Asia, who are they collecting? And how are they accessing such works? Mostly accessed through art fairs, these artists are filtered through the lenses of institutions, art advisory services, and media based-ideological interpretations, and many are usually already very established locally and internationally.

As a result, institutions do not capture the most current creative energies within Asia because they continue to play this catch-up role to update the audience here about what has happened years or decades ago. Meanwhile, many small institutions organizing contemporary exhibitions and programs from Asia end up doing this work in isolation without a sense of community and support system.

Can you give a brief background on ACAW for the uninitiated?

In 2001, a small group of curators, museum directors and gallery owners came together to address their disenchantment with the still very Euro-Centric New York art scene at that time. In a collective effort to change that reality, they established Asia Contemporary Art Consortium (ACAC) to bring more synergy and critical attention to contemporary art from Asia in the United States.

Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) has since grown as a platform that brings together the world’s leading New York and Asia-based art institutions, museums and galleries to promote cutting edge

exhibitions, innovative projects, provocative dialogues on current topics, and networking opportunities. My personal mission as its director is to create visibility for significant art content that would be otherwise inaccessible, and to spotlight the work of our Consortium members and participating organizations as important contributors to the field.

This year we have expanded into a three-month season to present a more extensive overview of the current artistic endeavors in Asia. Other than hosting our annual signature event FIELD MEETING in November, we are also launching a semi-annual online journal FIELD REVIEW to offer discursive opportunities for writers, curators, and art-historians as an extension of the art forum.