

FIELD MEETING Take 6 : *Thinking Collections*

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Curatorial Narrative

Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), curatorial & educational platform, is pleased to collaborate with Alserkal Avenue on the 6th iteration of its annual art forum FIELD MEETING to stage 35+ performances, lecture-performances, talks, and a string of pop-ups by some of today's outstanding artists, curators, and creative minds.

Each year, FIELD MEETING sets out to re-evaluate one quintessential contemporary art world term, as a way for artists and arts professionals to think more consciously about their work and community. This year, Take 6 de-categorizes the word “collections” away from the ever-burgeoning global art market to claim the artist as the first collector.

Holding a multitude of connotations, the word “collections” in the art world is often surrounded by conversations of relevance, inclusion, cultural narrative, and monetary value. Within the communal mind of all societies, the building of a collection seems spartanly reserved for the wealthy and the privileged. However, for centuries, artists and other creative individuals have gathered everything—be they specific aspects of reality, fiction, or other diverse subject matter to create bodies or containers for the accumulation of their own ideas, insights, and mechanisms that, at some point in time, become identified as art objects in the world.

During our childhood, we all collected something, if not many things, as a natural part of growing up and understanding the world: Seashells gathered on a trip to the beach, stamps from around the world kept in a shoebox under one's bed, or Lego sets pouring out of closets. We memorized lyrics of every song by the infamous Iranian pop singer Gogoosh or the national anthems of countries in the world. These forms of collections become built into the membranes of our cells as extensions of who we are, where we have been and where we wish to go—a grouping of objects, events, feelings and thoughts mapping out our existence in different instances of time and space. Today, a period distinguished by the Information Age, the bounds of collections are vigorously challenged everywhere—social media and smart technology gather and store our preferences in ways that are at once comforting, and deeply disturbing. No longer are our photographs stored in physical albums, nor our favorite CDs stacked on our living room shelves. Instead, the boundless abyss of a digital cloud instantly gobbles up all logs of our activities. Interactions have become symbolic, in so far as we often cannot link any physical trace of many of our daily experiences. Meanwhile, internet companies record, archive, and manipulate our search history to customize the advertisements we receive; perpetuating mass consumption by keeping humanity numb and ever entangled by the roots of our own collection of personal, psychological, social, and emotional insecurities.

In these circumstances, a re-evaluation of the term “collections” is in order. What exactly do we mean by “collections” and “collecting”? Who are the dominant powers at play, and what are the values these collections perpetuate? Most urgently, the forum questions the ideas, apparatuses, and visions of countless collections and if they correlate with our true purpose as human beings. How are our minds being colonized by the “information age” to serve the insatiable desires of a capitalist market system? Indeed, our attachment to consumption and the accumulation of objects are increasingly endangering the planet, which contains a countless array of animal and plant species that together, with other great elements in the universe, make up a truly boundless collection of energy, otherwise known as the cosmos.

These questions take on a much more specified valence when considering Asia as a vast continent of regions and countries that have been fragmented through the categorization and recategorizations of academicians in fixed paradigms. Premiering for the first time in Dubai at the crossroads of a geographical location, which until recent decades was not generally, referred to as Asia, FIELD MEETING Take 6 addresses the lack of ongoing, robust, and artistic connectivity between Western and Eastern regions of Asia. The forum links MENASA (Middle East, North Africa & South Asia) institutions directly with a group of diverse practitioners, whose efforts complicate categorical notions about the continent.

Day 1, Morning Notes Inside Out: The Artist as Collector

Reflection is an act often used as a potent device through which artists launch inquiries about self, society, and matters at large. Observations of their internal world in relationship to exterior realities allow them to gather an inextricable accumulation of meaning. These savored acts of assembling, ordering and reorienting of significant experiences, ideas, feelings, intuition, memory, education, training, research, and history are churned into abstract, physical, and conceptual energies over time—which are then transmuted into understandings that make up the essence of any great art work. Thus, in the first session of FIELD MEETING Take 6, the unprecedented notion of seeing the artists as the first collector is introduced through an exploration of artists' processes and artistic activities.

Ranbir Kaleka (New Delhi) discusses his childhood spent in an Indian village *haveli*, or mansion, considering how these years contributed to the development of his nuanced inner



Haiyang Wang, *The Birth of the Word, to the Demise of the Bird*, 2014-2018. Pastel on sandpaper.

life and sense of proportion. Through a container of occurrences, which he refers to as “visual events,” his work activates stories, images, and ideas from the drawers of his own mind, and that of the collective conscience, to offer repertoires of meaning and reading for viewers. On another spectrum of reflection, **Heman Chong** (Singapore) unpacks *Foreign Affairs*, an ongoing project representative of his quintessential practice documenting the unseen—photographs of embassy backdoors taken on his travels around cities of the world. As symbolizing barriers between the people and the government, Chong exposes these hermetically sealed entryways from the outside in to apprehend speculation often used by government officials in making policy. By extension, Chong then speculates on these same agents' place for carrying out covert actions. Expanding the Morning's accent on quiet and personal meditations, **Nikhil Chopra's** (Goa) 1-hour performance-action invites the audience to contemplate transformation through a large-scale landscape drawing, which he renders on-site with lipstick.

Day 1, Afternoon Notes Pendulum Swings & Spheres of Influence

The principle of polarity, also known as the forces of yin and yang, is foregrounded in the Afternoon Notes with a compilation of visionary “projects for empowerment” that in fact operate as ruthless mechanisms for depletion, destruction, and antagonism.

Through a lecture-performance iteration of her former multi-chapter animation project: *Atomi Daamaki Wali Mohabbat (The Atomically Explosive Love)*, **Umbur Majeed** (New York & Lahore) chronicles nuclear power in Pakistan within the frameworks of aesthetics, nationalism, state propaganda, community, and self. On a similar note, **Bassem Saad & Edwin Nasr** (Beirut) juxtapose Western military-entertainment mindsets with the use of virtual reality and video games in the Middle East to examine how historical, geopolitical, and identitarian narratives are simulated. In his obsessive studies of a region marked by climate change and recent geopolitical expansions, **Alexis Destoop** (Sydney & Brussels) reconfigures the history of the Russian-Norwegian borderland to re-imagine this space as a poetical re-appropriation, portraying a zone where past and future are confounded.

Khadim Ali's (Sydney & Kabul) talk entitled *Demonology* sheds light on the forces of destruction through the entanglements of the *Dew* and the *Pari* (demons and angels) in the mythologies of Central Asia and elsewhere. Dissecting its lore, Ali views demonology as an enabler for the “othering” of and persecution of minority groups such as the Hazara in Afghanistan. Also drawing from his native country, **Moe Satt** (Yangon) codifies the oppressive socio-political conditions of warfare experiences in Myanmar through a set of facial and body gestures in his performance *F n' F* (face and finger).



Heman Chong, *Foreign Affairs #62*, UV print on unprimed canvas, 51 x 78.7 x 1.5 inches (130 x 200 x 5 cm), Signed and dated verso, Unique, 2018.

Day 1, Evening Notes Modes of Being: Ideologies and Space as Malleable Entities

Reinterpreting the role of collections, the presenters in Day 1, Evening Notes act as the provocateurs of different modes of being by interacting with various social codes and ideologies to challenge their true meaning. What if our collections of knowledge such as psychoanalysis and transculturalism are to be given new realms of practice? It would require going back to the drawing board entirely, not only in our reading of social codes, but the meaning of what occupying a physical space signifies. What if the space in which you lived could literally enlighten you, raise the level of your consciousness, or, even better, allow you to live immortally?

Sam Samiee's (Tehran) talk delves into psychoanalysis, Manichaeism, and the Persian code of conduct, *Adab*, as interconnecting beliefs which can be used to reconstruct epistemic frames of mind. *Adab* has often been thought of as an immalleable set of rules or customs one must follow to achieve a good life. However, *Adab* is not so different from psychoanalysis and Manichaeism, as all three systems are working to achieve internal harmony through different means. Similarly, in her work *Hatayi*, **Burçak Bingöl** (Istanbul) recounts the trade of Chinese porcelain via the Silk Road, which influenced the evolution of the highly distinctive Ottoman Court style. Here, the fluidity of aesthetics across geographic borders as caused by transculturalism, recasting one's conception of spatiality to create a deeper meaning and history of artistic influence.

Also dealing with spatiality, **Chongbin Zheng** (San Francisco & Shanghai) presents a talk in which he applies an understanding of light as a function of garden building culture. Zheng challenges the idea that gardens were created as signifiers of wealth and status. He asserts that their true function was to enlighten their inhabitants in living a more consequential life in connection to nature. This reacquisition of space extends even further through the grand project of the artist / architect / scientist / revolutionary couple **Arakawa & Madeline Gins** as introduced by **ST Luk** (New York & Tokyo) through an excerpt film entitled *Children Who Won't Die*. The couple's legendary death-defying philosophy of transformative housing has challenged the bounds of space not simply as a source of enlightenment, but as an interaction with the physical body as a means for a longer life.

Rounding out Day 1, **Arahmaiani Feisal** (Yogyakarta & Tibet) urges us to adopt her “Manifesto of the Sceptic”, proclaiming artists as “alchemical vessels” for change as exemplified by her long-term collaboration with Tibetan monks (and local Chinese authorities), resulting in the planting of nearly one million trees across the country.

These Evening Notes on Day 1 lay bare for us how creative foresight can transcend rigid ideological dictums and hegemonic codes into malleable material for consciousness, nourishment, and longevity. The modes of being proposed in this section are not mere intellectual exercises, but encompass a sincere physical and energetic transformation of communities—past, present, and future. While modern societies are preoccupied with individual attainment, living a truly fulfilling life is in fact rooted in our connection with and nurturing of others and the planet as a whole—the largest, true collection.

Day 2, Morning Notes Community As Institution and Institution as Community

While institutional critique has long been a topic for introspection at art events, communities lacking such infrastructures are largely absent from these discourses. Residencies and art programs are abundant in the West, franchising their reach throughout cosmopolitan cities and key regional hubs. Yet, regardless of whether in an impoverished or flourishing institutional landscape, most trained artists today do not make their livelihood strictly through their art. Many allow this reality to lose their sense of purpose while also feeling entitled merely because they are granted a degree.

On the other end of the spectrum, artists within communities where institutional growth is hindered—autocratic governments, dictatorships, poverty, war, displacement and deterioration of natural environments—don't have room to discuss what is lacking. They instead mold their own forms of quasi-institutional behavior to both barely survive and, at times, greatly thrive in creating models that respond to their own local needs, history and



Arahmaiani Feisal, *Breaking Words*, 2006. Performance Documentation.

artistic trajectory. Presenters in Day 2, not only tackle well established or newly launched institutional endeavors for disseminating knowledge, but also engage with alternative forms of art making and collection building outside of institutional aid.

Afghanistan Untitled, a performative reading by **Francesca Recchia** (Kabul), tackles the vulnerabilities and complexities of living in Kabul as a foreigner, entangled with the small but struggling vibrant Afghan art scene. In opposition to operating within meager circumstances prevalent in conflict zones, large established museums across thriving world economies provoke questions on how infrastructure can be improved. For instance, in her curatorial talk **Lara Day** (Hong Kong) discusses the eminent M+ museum's collection in terms of relevance and accessibility in the digital age and the institution's need for "openness" to bold ideas.



Next, following a tour of the ACAW pop-up exhibitions housed in Warehouse 46, the artists and presenters in this section discuss their work in a lively joint conversation. An online selection of 17th to 21st century Japanese prints organized by Ronin Gallery director **David Libertson** (New York) exemplifies a private gallery's sustainable strategy for expanding community through a successful merger of traditional gallery charm with an innovative digital collecting experience. The individual's relationship with the institution as community continues as the common denominator in the work of the artists, such as in *Peace Coat* by **Zolaykha Sherzad** (Kabul & New York). Sherzad creates art and clothing not only in an effort to preserve traditional Afghan motifs and textile making techniques, but to also reinterpret modern design. She established, directs, and has maintained Zarif Design Center for over a decade, made up of a group of women and men working together to create within a safe environment, despite the unpredictable outer world of Kabul, Afghanistan. In her pop-up, **Amina Ahmed** (New York & Tehran) incorporates her mother Zulayka Mirashah's embroidery practice, which was nurtured by a sewing circle she founded during her girlhood. Placing her own drawings and newly conceived books adjacent to her mother's work, Ahmed honors companionship and shared experience as an essential method for creative process.

Umber Majeed, *Atomi Damaaki Wali Mohabbat (The Atomically Explosive Love)*, 2017-ongoing. Performance-lecture. Courtesy of Pirzada A. Waheed Archive (Rawalpindi, Pakistan), the CDA - Capital Development Authority (Islamabad, Pakistan), and Ashkal Alwan (Beirut, Lebanon).

The institution as a mighty entity, filled with resources established to meet the needs of all, is a phantom to be dismissed, much like the fantasy of meeting one's knight in shining armour. As a creative practitioner in much of the world, one is one's own institution—especially in the case of artists and curators who are often playing multiple roles from art and exhibition production to fundraising, marketing, discourse, and writing, to, at times, even acting as agents for works entering collections. The pop-up Limited *Liability Pavilion 4.0* exemplifies this type of community-making in Kazakhstan as presented by art managers **Vladislav Sludskiy & Olga Vesselova** (Almaty) in an installation of works from the private collections of artists formed through donations from their artists friends, colleagues, and art and cultural partners throughout the years.

Equally as ingrained in community as composites of one's past and present experiences whether personal, inherited, or institutional, **Nadira Husain** (Berlin), in her multimedia paintings, tapestries and sculptural objects, employs a variety of pictorial symbols and compositions from her various backgrounds to reflect on cultural phenomena. In his pop-up, Iranian artist **Ali Shayesteh** (Hamadan) treats societal dictums as critically as he does his attachment to personal memorabilia, such as photographs and writings. However, overtime some of his discarded compilations became assimilated into paintings & embroidered drawings, conveying nuanced sentiments often lacking within the linguistic folklore of culture.

Ending Day 2, Morning Notes, **Moe Satt** (Yangon) stages his second performance in the forum *Other Side of the Revolution / Fist on Me* reiterating the traumas of war and conflict by questioning the role each of us play as bystanders to the atrocities of the world. The institution of conflict implicates that such struggles affect everyone directly or indirectly.

Day 2, Afternoon Notes A Loose Canon: Who is Collecting and Why?

Extending beyond the climate-controlled containers of highly secured museums, galleries, libraries or private homes, a collection's purpose often delves into the depths of human nature itself, asking: "What are we collecting?", "Why are we collecting it?" and "Who is collecting?" In a collaborative curatorial talk, **Natasha Degen & Sandra Skurvida** (New York) consider collections through educational frameworks within the MENASA region and beyond. They scrutinize behaviors of various art departments, foreign university outposts, artists' organizations, and museums to ponder the balance between the location of a culture and its communication outside its immediate field of reference.

Pi Li's curatorial talk takes M+ museum's acquisition of Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping's monumental sculpture *Reptile* as a case-study to ask "What does it mean to build a museum collection in the 21st century and, more importantly, is it necessary for us to establish a canonical discourse for art in Asia?" Thus, while Degen and Skurvida focus on specificities of context and location, Pi Li is preoccupied with collection building in response to the predications of a particular era in time.

In her lecture-performance, artist **Wong Kit Yi**, aka **Ali Wong** (Hong Kong & New York), spins tales about DNA as a quintessential collection making up the very essence of every human being. In addition, she discusses projects for which she boldly courted collectors to purchase her would-be produced works as part of the making and conceptualization process of the projects. Leaping steps further, a year later, she offered collectors a 99-year lease for another series *Magic Wands, Batons and DNA Spiders*, as a critical nod to the historical precedent, the leasing of Hong Kong by the British from China.

Hegemonic canons is explored deeper yet in artist **River Lin's** (Paris & Taipei) performance *20 Minutes for the 20th Century, but Asian*, a parody of a Tino Sehgal's original work outlining iconic choreographies from the 20th century. However, while Sehgal's piece highlighted such prominent Western choreographers as Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch, Lin reconsiders the history of dance through an Asian context containing its own form of distinct cultural memory.

Day 2, Evening Notes Breaking Bad & Good: Subaltern Narratives

As curators and arts professionals, we are programmed to take as our duty the upkeep of institutional memory. We are tasked to consider how we can conserve and create access to everything that artists make, as well as to what degree an artist's work fits into the art historical canon. Yet, more and more artists working in Asia do not concern themselves with the conservation of their work, nor their place within a canonical range, Western or otherwise. Instead, many are reimagining the world through a process-oriented approach, treating everything as material. Thus, in the closing section of FIELD MEETING Take 6, subaltern research and visions for inclusivity address the gaps and erasures in modern society through formation of new aesthetic strategies.



Beginning with a walkthrough of FIELD MEETING pop-ups at Warehouse 47, the first hour of the Evening Notes is dedicated to a moderated conversation among the artists featured so that they may elaborate on the contexts of their pop-ups and practice in general.

On view, artist **Rana Dehghan's** (Tehran) site-specific multimedia installation, urges us to confront and acknowledge the deplorable ways in which animals suffer and are killed for consumption daily as part of an anthology of celebratory holiday rituals worldwide. **Hasanul Isyraf Idris'** (Penang) unique and otherworldly style of illustration is drawn from the visual vocabulary of his native Pangkor Island in Malaysia, compiled through oral stories amplified by the spectacular imagery of his surrounding landscape, animals and plants. Similarly, **Haiyang Wang** (Beijing) is known for his distinctive animations created through semiotic connections between actions that produce visual wordplay, visible in his drawings series and videos on view: *The Birth of the Word, to the Demise of the Bird*.

Also staging alternative worlds of fantasy and intrigue, artist, cultural critic and activist **Bingyi** (Beijing) premieres a video-installation-edition of her newly launched project *Ruins*, an epic trilogy of films set in the inner-city *hutongs*, or historic alleyways of Beijing. After collecting

Bingyi, *Ruins*, 2018. Video still.



Hutong Love Letters, or personal stories written by people who lived in these areas, **Bingyi** memorializes a neighborhood now demolished and its ways of life displaced.

In his pop-up installation *Protozoan as Self*, **Bahman Mohammadi** (Tehran) speculates on evolutionary processes through his studies of paleoanthropology, tracing earlier stages of "homo/l species" all the way back to the protozoans to argue that "there is very little distance between evolutionary progress of humans and other living organisms."

Wrapping-up the two-day marathon of back-to-back presentations, **Stephanie Bailey** (Hong Kong) is tasked to deliver reflection on what transpired at FIELD MEETING. Through her position as a writer and editor she performs the role of a reviewer in real time by translating the accumulation of ideas and sentiments shared through a coherent and provocative summation.

In an ultimate send-off, attendees gather at Warehouse 58 for a final performance to encapsulate the spirit of FIELD MEETING as an experimental space for reevaluating our work, its significance, and its impact in our lives; helping to extract what is working and what we need to let go of, both as individuals and as a community of creative professionals. **Arahmaiani Feisal** (Yogyakarta & Tibet), Indonesia's most prominent feminist artist, re-enacts *Breaking Words*, first performed in 2006 in Japan. Now in Dubai, punctuating the end of FIELD MEETING, Arahmaiani's performance calls upon age-old Sufi wisdom to propose that one must be the regular smasher of one's own beliefs, breaking free from the hypnotic semantics of our definitions of reality and concepts of truth.

Wong Kit Yi & Ali Wong, *Unloading Consciousness to a Lotus Root*, 2018. Still shot of single channel HD video, edition 5.