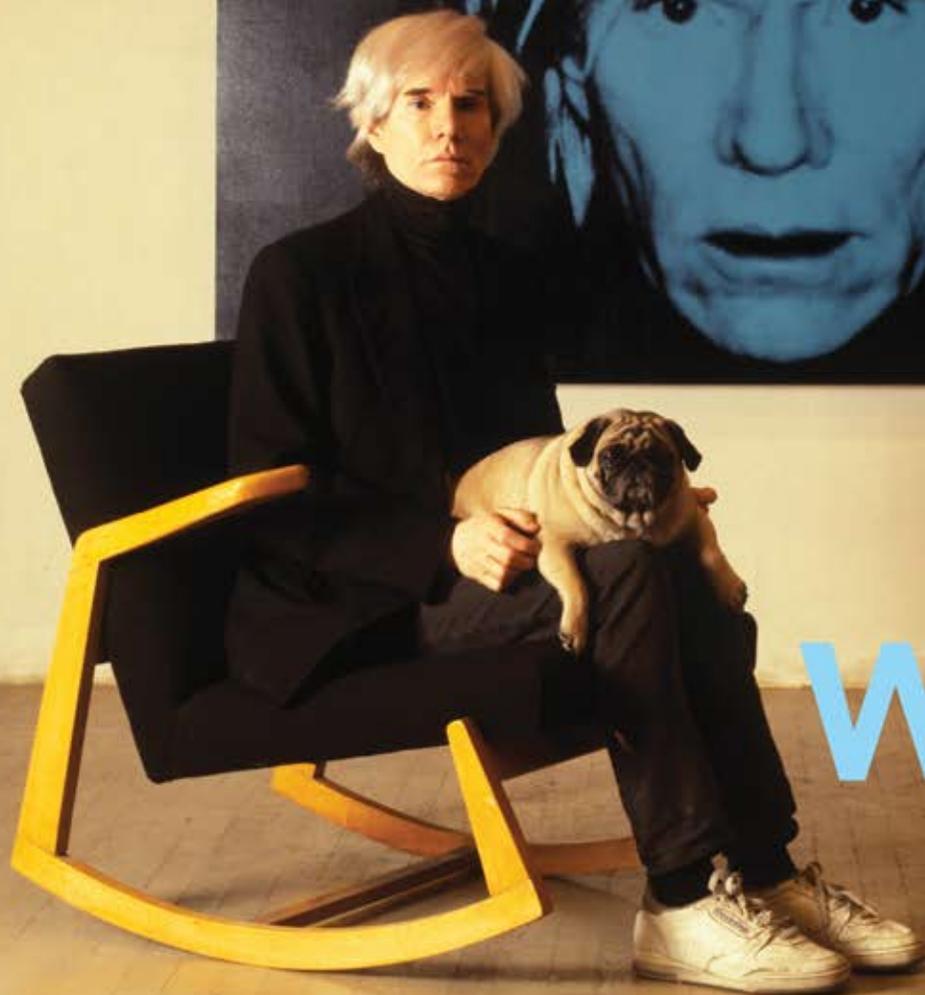


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ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



## WHAT WOULD ANDY DO?

**ON ANDY, FAME AND THE VIRTUAL AFTERLIFE**

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Opposite: Arahmaiani. *Breaking Words*. Performance, FIELD MEETING Take 6: *Thinking Collections*, 2019. In collaboration with Alserkal Avenue, Dubai.

Right: Moe Satt. *F n' F (Face & Fingers)*. Performance, FIELD MEETING Take 6: *Thinking Collections*, 2019. In collaboration with Alserkal Avenue, Dubai. Photography by Tara Atkinson. Images courtesy of Alserkal Avenue and Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAWeek)



## LIVING ARCHIVE

Embodiment and disembodiment, oppression and protest, colonialism and choreography, overt war and deep truths – these were motifs manifested by the performances at Asia Contemporary Art Week’s (ACAWeek) annual forum FIELD MEETING (25-26 January), held offsite in Dubai from New York and headed by curator Leeza Ahmady.

Words by Alexandra Chaves

The body is a vessel – containing memories or personal histories, bearing tools for transformation and defiance. The performing artists at ACAWeek’s annual FIELD MEETING investigated the art forum’s theme *Thinking Collections* – which was taking an artist-focused approach rather than a market approach – by reflecting on the body as both inventory and archive.

First to perform was Nikhil Chopra, whose hour-long live art performance entitled *Rogue* saw the Indian artist dress up as a woman, replete with a wig and flowing silk green dress. He proceeded to paint an ethereal landscape – a stormy sea between two shores – that stretched on warehouse walls, utilising red and pink lipsticks. Taking his time, Chopra removed items of clothing as the image took shape. The seascape he

created was linked to his surroundings, having lived in port cities like Dubai and Goa. Process and product unfolded at once as the image emerged.

Known for his elaborate costumes, Chopra’s work is also about tapping into aspects of the self that are unacknowledged. “I use the body to extend my creative self,” he said after the performance. “It’s not about exploring otherness, but about being comfortable in chipping away at my own masculinity.”

In a different expression of masculinity, the standout choreography by River Lin, *20 Minutes for the 20th Century, but Asian* was performed by Wen-chung Lin, as a parody of Tino Seghal’s 1999 piece, in which the British-German artist nakedly performed 20 well-known styles



Nikhil Chopra. *Rogue*. Performance, FIELD MEETING Take 6: *Thinking Collections*, 2019. In Collaboration with Alserkal Avenue, Dubai

of dance. This reinvention comprised an eclectic mix of martial arts, yoga, ballet and even disco. Despite its title, the moves were borrowed from East and West, a commentary on colonization, imperialism and cultural memory of the Asian continent. Using YouTube as a source, Lin developed a choreography that seeks to question the hierarchy of value systems in dance, though not without a hint of satire. Some moves could not be considered dance at all, let alone identified, but that was the point.

In the first half (30 minutes), Lin wore a suit, a Western symbol; in

the second half, he stripped down to his briefs – though performances outside the Middle East are performed fully naked – and then went through the whole routine again. This disrobing signals a shift, after which the whole thing becomes a different performance altogether. With the physical, corporeal body on display, every movement becomes magnified. “I wanted to address the collection of body – what does it look like, what does it represent?” River Lin posed. “The suit symbolizes a layer of skin, and after he sheds it, he becomes a body of himself,” he continued. In Chopra’s case, the casting off of clothing signalled an



unmasking, while Lin’s is more like a liberation.

The rest of the performances were decidedly political, like Moe Satt’s *Other Side of the Revolution*. Recognized in Myanmar as a pioneer in performance art, Satt has used the medium as a way to elude government censorship. In their quiet subversion, his works were at risk of being overlooked by audiences unfamiliar with the country’s politics, but their interactive element drove the message home. Asking audiences to stamp blue and red ink on his body, Satt manifested



River Lin. *20 Minutes for the 20th Century, but Asian*. Performance, FIELD MEETING Take 6: *Thinking Collections*, 2019. In collaboration with Alserkal Avenue, Dubai. Photos by Tara Atkinson. All images courtesy of Alserkal Avenue and Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW)

Myanmar’s turbulent history, specifically with the military junta, where red became the symbolic colour for the democratic revolution. In this process, it wasn’t only his body that became stained with ink, but the participants’ too. In times of conflict, both the inflictor and inflicted are ‘marked’ by their actions.

Arahmaiani Feisal, often referred to by her first name, closed out the event with her defiant *Breaking Words* performance. It began with the artist writing down “Religion” and “Capitalism” on two white plates, then asking the audience to come forward and write their own “keywords”. It took almost half an hour before all the plates had been marked, but once they had, time accelerated. Without pause, Arahmaiani flung them against the wall. Each seemed to shatter louder than the one before. After the last plate was thrown, she clasped her hands together, in a gesture of gratitude and calm. This, too, was part of her performance, which dealt with duality. “We often see reality in binary opposition systems – right and wrong, good and bad – but we have to remember that these two are connected. It’s impossible to eliminate one or the other,” she said.

By breaking these ‘important’ words, the Indonesian artist seeks to strip them of their power. Her performance, which was created in 2006 and has been performed in different cultural contexts, questions sociopolitical systems of conditioning and control. *Breaking Words* was a fitting choice to end the performance programme, which progressed from the body being the main site for political overtures to being an agent for action in the world.