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ACAW FIELD MEETING: "TAKE 3—THINKING PERFORMANCE"

BY HG MASTERS



Day 1 of Asian Contemporary Art Week Field Meeting, held on October 31, 2015. Left to right: Istvan Ist Huzjan, Defne Ayas, Holland Cotter and Ming Wong. Photo by HG Masters for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

If you had spent even five minutes on the street in any part of downtown Manhattan during the last week of October, you would have witnessed the current vogue for performing: publicly, queerly and exuberantly. The Halloween season and its succession of balls, street parades and parties stretched more than a week, with people donning costumes at all hours. A whisker here, a scar there—fishnet stockings and dinosaur jumpsuits anytime. Amid these public festivities—and, this being New York, countless others, like the city marathon—was Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), a confederation of gallery openings, museum projects, performances, lectures and the ACAW Field Meeting. The latter, whose third edition, “Take 3: Thinking Performance,” spanned two days and a third night, brought together practitioners from around the world for TED-talk-like “keynotes” and collegial discussions around this irresolvable term.

Day one of the Field Meeting took place uptown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Lee Mingwei’s performative installation *Sonic Blossom* is having a two week run in the museum galleries (get close enough to the Arthur M. Sackler gallery for Asian art or the mezzanine of the Modern and Contemporary wing, depending on the day, and you won’t miss it). Curator Leeza Ahmady, the self-declared force behind the now 13-year-old ACAW and the Field Meeting, began her Saturday morning introduction with a “scary proposition” that, for her, the weekend symposium was like an exhibition, in a performative sense, as contributions and connections unfolded over time rather than space. (I’ll admit that this did make me nervous, as conferences can take on fun-house levels of rhetorical tedium, horror and bloodshed.) She spoke not only of the organization’s achievements, but also reminded attendees of the ongoing struggles in New York to put artists from Asia on equal footing with their Euro-American peers—hardly a new theme, but one that still gives ACAW its urgency.

Ahmady’s comments were amplified and enlarged by the morning’s second speaker, *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter, whose engagement with art from Asia and Africa, as well as contemporary New York, makes him a favorite in the ACAW crowd. Cotter described his upbringing with the globe-spanning collection at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (his parents would leave him at the museum alone for the whole day while they ran errands in the city), his time in the 1970s living among New York’s downtown, avant-garde denizens, before he became fascinated by the temples of Japan and the Buddhist and Islamic art of South and Southeast Asia. He spoke eloquently about his many frustrations that Manhattan museums—the Museum of Modern Art was singled out in particular—still project their sense of superiority and paternalism over the art scene in the city, and internationally. His whole 20-minute talk—touching on his strategic approach to art criticism, his lifetime of learning on the job, his mistakes even—will be well worth watching when ACAW posts his and all of the Field Meeting talks online. As a follow-up, Cotter’s experiences were echoed in an anecdote from Witte de With director Defne Ayas, from a recent edition of *Performa* when, after a lecture-performance by Rabih Mroué, a New York art critic, whom Ayas said “we all know very well,” had remarked: “I don’t get why do we need to see Rabih Mroué: we already have Walid Raad.”

Grumbling about New York’s chronic provincialism aside, performance within Asian contexts was the wide-open theme of the Field Meeting, and participants offered a range of approaches, from their own actions to performative lectures to straightforward artist talks. Getting Saturday morning on track, Ming Wong walked the audience through his recent projects about female Chinese cosmonauts and his

current mission to Hong Kong to create a sci-fi Cantonese opera. Shortly after, Brussels-based Slovenian artist Ištvan Išt Huzjan shared his research and performance works that had resulted from his unexpected residency program in Seoul, where he collected unusually similar images of artworks by Mono-ha artists and those produced in the same years by the Slovenian OHO group—despite the absolute lack of communication or personal connections between the two. Berlin-based Nezaket Ekici gave a straight-up and full-on rendition of her work *99 Commandments* (2013), swinging a large prayer bead around her head and enunciating the sexist pieties of world religions, before Shuddha Sengupta gave a startlingly pithy (but no less poetic than usual) summary of the “three-headed hydra” that is the 25-year-old Raqs Media Collective, of which he is one. “Whatever is between us, is the artist,” Sengupta intoned about the group’s networked approach to diverse creative enterprises.



Day 2 of Asian Contemporary Art Week Field Meeting, held on November 1, 2015. Left to right: Leeza Ahmady, Arash Fayeaz, Zeynep Kayan, Vibha Galhotra, Christopher K. Ho and Nora Taylor. Photo by HG Masters for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

The second day of Field Meeting had a more informal, downtown setting, taking place at the Hunter College Art Galleries on the west end of Canal Street. To begin, Lee Mingwei shared four of his projects, representing the diversity of his practice. As part of his talk, I had the chance to ask him about his backgrounds in music and textile, and how he arrived at his uniquely generous approach to art-making. Following us on stage came Art Institute of Chicago academic Nora Taylor, with a look at the history of archiving Southeast Asian performance art, and then Ankara-based Zeynep Kayan offered a slideshow accompanied by a mantra-like reading of Jean Tinguely’s 1958 manifesto *Für Statik*—15,000 copies of which the Swiss artist had sprinkled over the city of Dusseldorf from an airplane. Vibha Galhotra shared videos of a live performance she had created on the polluted Yamuna River in India (she opened an exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery earlier in the week on the same subject), followed by Christopher K. Ho’s lecture that provocatively attempted to make “orientalism” a productive artistic strategy.

After a Chinese-intensive session in the mid-afternoon—with Liu Ding, Double Fly Art Center and Tang Dixin, among others—and a low-intensity final talk with *Leap* editor Robin Peckham, Hong Kong artist Nadim Abbas and a very rambling Korakrit Arunanonchai, Cornell art historian and artist Iftikhar Dadi was asked to give the final thoughts of the event. Dadi wrapped up the weekend concisely, weaving together the many diverse contributions, and offered his own synthesis: a way to see the idea of performance as an “imperfect placeholder” for situations in which the self or subject is still in the process of becoming. He suggested that this idea allows those who use it an opportunity to re-inscribe tradition, or even problematic conceptions such as that of “Asia” itself. Finally, before people could disperse, Ahmady asked the crowd to say just one word that summarized their feelings about the Field Meeting, and the crowd was appreciative, offering up sentiments like “collegial,” “community,” “connection,” “engagement.” No one said “scary.” I said thanks, three times.

HG Masters is editor at large at ArtAsiaPacific.

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ArtAsiaPacific

GPO Box 10084

Hong Kong

info@aapmag.com