

Closing Remarks – ACAW 2015 FIELD MEETING: *Thinking Performance*

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Thanks to Leeza and the organizers ACAW and for inviting me to this very stimulating two days of presentations, insights and friendships.

We have a set of terms at play here: Performance, performativity, performance studies. We had a discussion of these yesterday, and I revisit it to offer further remarks via a brief academic background.

During the last two or three decades, theorizations of performance, identity, have been very important to thinking about the self and society. For example, Judith Butler and many theorists of NYU's Performance Studies program have emphasized that previously unexamined notions of the individual and collective self are not stable across time, space, and in a society, but emerge constantly in a process of being and becoming, a process that unfolds in the now.

I suggest that we think of the term "performance" here as a kind of catachresis, an imperfect placeholder for expressiveness and iterations of the self and society, which is not captured by other terms or other mediums. Perhaps the only requirement here is that audience are co-present with the unfolding of the work. This sense of performance is at play whether it is enacted as a formal practice with a frame and platform, and whether it is a lecture performance that is a structured lecture performance, a more formal way of storytelling or something closer to a casual conversation one might have with a friend or stranger over a meal. We saw a number of moving and powerful interventions with instruction, narrative, and persuasion, in the presentations by Yan Xing, Aman Mojaddadi, Lantain Xie and others.

Definitional terms are important for all sorts of institutional reasons, under which museums might engage with various practices, or how an archive might document this work. Having stated this, one acknowledges that there is something liberating about performance, which can have a very wide ambit. But if the self is traversing a process of becoming, how does it make sense to suggest that there is something "Asian" about this journey? We saw a very wide range of practices here, some more obviously "Asian" than others. But the sense of what being Asian is and how global identities and forces are at work interjecting and traversing any claimed closures is precisely what is at stake here. If I may go out on a limb and posit a set of working terms, one can think about the relation between the three terms "Asian" "performance" and "Contemporary" in at least these ways.

1. We all know that the term Asian is problematic, characterizing the majority of the world population today and supposedly grouping societies that are as radically different from each other as any in the world. Nevertheless, I think this term Asian can do some work for us, provided we remain open to its reinscribability, which is precisely what performance with reference to Asia does. To put it clumsily, Asia can characterize societies with long and deep traditions of ritual, performance, and culture. For example, the Kamasutra begins by describing numerous arts of living, many of which would not be captured under the terms of object-based art, but could be perhaps under "performative" arts of living. These traditions can be hierarchical, patriarchal, and oppressive. But they can also be quite radical, and can illuminate

paths for us to future possibilities. These inspirations to performativity could be spiritual or everyday; they can be much more open towards the closures of gender than other art forms; and they can be radically queer in the sense of nonnormativity and strangeness. We see this in the work of Bingyi's relation to nature and to ink painting, Nezaket Ekici's complex critique of religious edicts, Lee Mingwei meditative projects with the Bodhi tree and sand painting, and Qasim Riza Shaheen's exploration of Sufism in which narcissism and the ego is reformulated in the age of celebrity. Korakrit Arunanondchai's investigation of technological states of possession today, and Ming Wong's forthcoming Cantonese Sci-Fi opera, of thinking the future via the past are also suggestive, and this leads me to my next observation.

2. Which is that Asia and Asians hardly exist in the world today in hermetic isolation, of course, as Nadeem Abbas's projects demonstrate through their "psychodrama of performance." Quite the reverse: Asia and Asians are immersed in processes of globalization in uneven ways from the earliest eras of history, but which are now in acceleration. Furthermore, with the speed of urbanization, the rise of modern institutions and new social structures, traditions are in various states of crisis and transformation. Jeff Cylowski's work, which nicely brought youth culture into abstract painting is a great example. And we see this in the various projects of Raqs Media Collective that stress the need to seriously evaluate the modality of our relationality with our present. Christopher Ho's lecture on the demented liminality of Asianness in the world today is thus provocative and apt. Liu Ding and Tang Dixin's readings and performances demonstrate how the word and the body in China today have a particular charge in coming to terms with the profound transformations unfolding there. And Vibha Galhotra compels all of us to confront the ecological disaster in much of Asia, which should temper any triumphalism we might be tempted to claim in "Asianness."
3. I close my remarks by making a final observation on the question of the archive. Diane Lewis enlightened us to the genealogy of the term "performance" as it emerged in architectural terms during the European enlightenment era. The results of Istvan Huzjan's residency in Seoul made us all aware of how interconnected conceptual and earth art was globally during the late sixties. And Nora Taylor demonstrated how a living archive can be immensely productive and liberatory for performance even in a society like Singapore that arguably had better established art institutions than many other parts of Asia. As an artist and art historian, for me these offer profound lessons for us both on the need for some humility in seeing our own work with some acknowledgement of what has preceded us, and the continued need for research and scholarship in documenting ephemeral, site and time based character of performance.

Asia as a concept in a productive crisis with globalization is one that we need to continue to think through via the terms "contemporary." But here again, the very modality of performance opens it up nicely to the question of the present. Since performance has to be enacted, enactment carries all the potentialities of responding creatively right now to the dilemmas one faces today. At its best, the "Asian" part of the formula "contemporary performance in relation to Asia" can recover and remold tradition and the questions we face today, for the present and the future. Not just for Asia but for everyone whose lives intersect with our life and work, today and tomorrow. In this sense, the term "contemporary performance in relation to Asia" could not be more apt.