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Thinking Performance at Asia Contemporary Art Week 2015, New York – Leeza Ahmady interview

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Asia Contemporary Art Week's Director and Curator Leeza Ahmady speaks to *Art Radar* about the third installment of FIELD MEETING.

Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) returns to New York with its 10th edition from 28 October to 8 November 2015. In an interview with *Art Radar*, Director Leeza Ahmady speaks about the artists and the programming for "FIELD MEETING Take 3: *Thinking Performance*".



"FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance" Presenter Bingyi working on Epoché (Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport project), 2014. Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio (Beijing).

Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) is a platform that brings together leading New York and Asia-based art institutions, museums and galleries. In collaboration with **The Metropolitan Museum of Art**, this year's ACAW will focus on performance with two signature programmes: **Lee Mingwei's** *Sonic Blossom* and **FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance**. The week also includes **a full schedule** of exhibitions and programmes opening and on view across New York City.

"FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance", is a two-day art forum curated by Leeza Ahmady and scheduled for Saturday 31 October at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Bonnie J. Sacerdote Lecture Hall and Sunday 1 November at Hunter Art Galleries on Hudson Street in New York.

Art Radar spoke with ACAW Director and Curator **Leeza Ahmady** about how this year's programme was born.



"FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance" Presenter Double Fly Art Center (collective). View of Double Fly's Klein Blue, 2015, performance, Space Station, Beijing. Image courtesy the artists and Space Station.

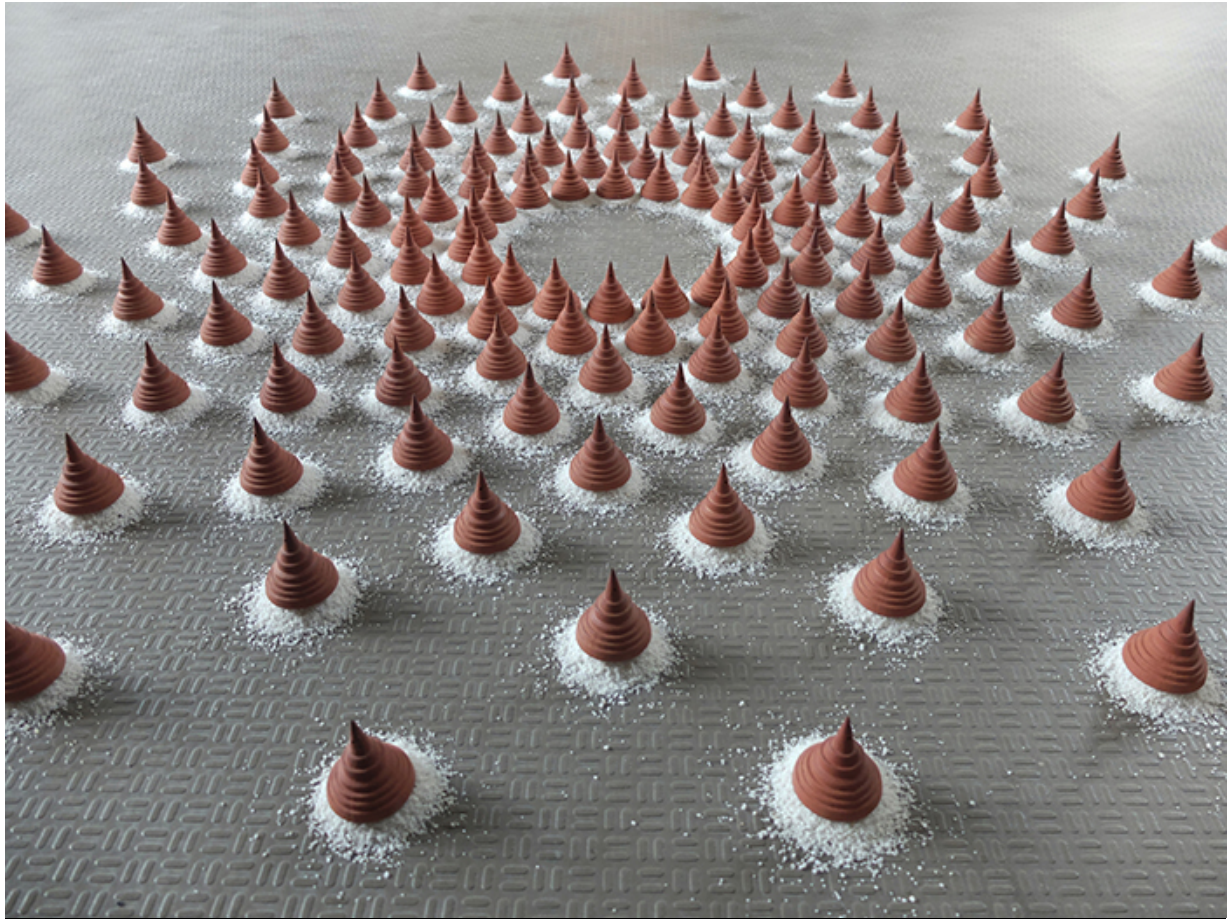
The inaugural forum FIELD MEETING 2014 was well received last year, followed by "FIELD MEETING Take 2: An Afterthought" during the Venice Biennale in May 2015. Could you talk about what this forum accomplished last year?

I had envisioned a set of objectives, which I shared with the audience at my opening remarks in a kind of ceremonial invocation. I think we certainly paved the way and had many of those declarations accomplished during the inaugural **FIELD MEETING**. And I think those accomplishments are living forward as instigations that continue to unfold onwards manifesting in different ways even today, a year later, and will continue into the future as many significant things do.

The energy of the two-day FIELD MEETING gathering was palpable; everyone in attendance just felt it. They were touched and uplifted. The *studio-visit on a communal scale*, which I had intuitively imagined and wanted to create energetically, was suddenly on for real! There were incredible immediate bonds made, partnerships, collaborations and relationships forged so organically, especially between so many of the presenting artists and art professionals. Same with organisational leaders and professionals on the receiving end as the audiences.

I think we achieved a very broad and open representation of Asia, while focusing on artistic practice as an ongoing process rather than end results. We considered various unconventional modes of art making and exhibition, making practices and highlighting both artists and artistic initiatives in a timely and less mediated fashion. By bringing together an exclusive audience of arts professionals to connect directly with artists and their presence, we facilitated a kind of exchange that is far beyond established institutional representation and discourse with much greater nuance. We addressed the large gaps in the ratio of Asia-based artists represented in US museums, galleries and institutions by presenting many current and recent-historically relevant artists.

I think we certainly created access to unfamiliar yet existing art-historical scholarship and inspired new and rigorous research by the artists, and further analysis of new institutional models specific to local arenas.



Albert Yonathan Setyawan, 'Mandala Study #5', 2015, terracotta and white marble sand installation, approximately 118.1 x 118.1 x 3.9 in/300 x 300 x 10 cm. ACAW 2015 Edition, "REV | ACTION: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia", opening reception at Sundaram Tagore Gallery. Image courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Could you also tell us a bit about "Take 2: *An Afterthought*" in Venice? What are some of the insights and results from inaugural FIELD MEETING and Take 2 in Venice?

"FIELD MEETING Take 2: *An After Thought*" in Venice was much smaller in scale. It came together by sheer enthusiasm, immediate and positive response of many who either attended, were involved, or had heard about the first iteration and wanted to experience it for themselves. In the months after FIELD MEETING in New York, we received so many overwhelming responses from the artists who had presented, many emerging or not well known at least in the US, but also by some well-known figures who are not always represented here in the US, such as **Shilpa Gupta, Haig Aivazian, MAP Office, Reena** and **Jitish Kallat, Charwei Tsai** and **Lamia Joreige**; some who wrote beautiful tear-jerking thank you letters, which were so very gratifying to my team and I, all of us had expended so much effort in the organisation of FM 1.

Colleagues, people, members of the press, kept asking when would be the next one. So Venice was really a gift, a look back while also asking ourselves and of each other, "what is next?" How can we meaningfully move on with this format, because indeed to me FIELD MEETING is a curatorial format, even an exhibition in its own right. I am interested in curating what the artists are researching and thinking about, more than their paintings, drawings, video and other finished artworks. I am interested in curating their process. FIELD MEETING is a format that allows for such a showcasing, an exhibition that is alive and continues to be in the making.

We had capacity for 50, but received over 200 RSVPs from around the world to attend "FIELD MEETING Take 2" in Venice, which was shocking given the hectic atmosphere of the Biennale. And during our four-hour afternoon session, within the beautiful tranquil space of Venice's Navy Officers Club – which by the way had never been open to the public before this occasion – we still had about 100 people come through. I, however, recognised more clearly that large-scale biennial openings are not a proper setting for FIELD MEETING, which requires greater mental space than the frenzied and fatigued body-mind that most people possess during biennials.

Still, we managed to achieve a certain level of tranquility. Beyond the great performances and discussions, FM in Venice was also a celebration of just getting together. Many of the FM1 artists were either there because they were in the exhibition or just visiting the Biennale. Some actually came to reunite and check in. We were delighted to hear many were invited to participate in exhibitions and programmes as a result of their New York exposure through ACAW FIELD MEETING; while some talked about how they made so many other kinds of links and are considering various unforeseen angles to their research and practice through the FM experience.

Some who had not known each other prior were now collaborating through residencies and publications. Artists **Georgia Kotretsos** and Alexis Destoop, for example, had met dozens of hours via Skype to create their performance for Venice FM, in form of an interview, where each answered the other's question by asking a more convoluted and provocative question. The whole experience was exhausting but inspirational. Together with my FIELD MEETING curatorial colleague who is also ACAW's Managing Director Ambika Trasi, we came back ready to organise another iteration.



"FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance" Presenter Anthony Lee's lecture 'In Going the Distance: Fiction Writing as Performance'. 'Krishna in Cosmic Battle', unknown Mughal artist, ca. 1590, opaque watercolor on paper from Akbar's Harivamsa manuscript. Image courtesy the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

This year's "FIELD MEETING Take 3" focuses on performance art. Could you talk about the programme and how this emphasis on performance art came about?

Lecture-performance, a medium practiced by Lebanese artists **Rabih Mroué** and **Walid Raad** for over two decades, has slowly become prevalent in recent years by artists working across Asia. This medium, therefore, has inspired both the format and mission for FIELD MEETING from the beginning.

Even last year's inaugural programme featured performances and encouraged performative talks and discussions over purely academic presentation of information. Information alone is not art. An individual's energy, their processing of information and organisation of information in such a way that it becomes both insight and inquiry is art or artful. I am determined to make a distinction that FIELD MEETING is not a conference or symposium, which is why it must be performative.

Why have you chosen to present a forum on this medium now? What is the relevance of exploring performance art today in Asia and in a global setting?

The relevance is that performance – if you were to detach the word "art" from it – has been around since cavemen began singing and painting caves. Performance art is a term used by our contemporary art world of the past 30 years to categorise performance works made primarily by visual artists. It is really institutional semantics and surely there is a place for language. In a way, that is what contemporary art is, how we are defining and interpreting things.

However, while this year's FIELD MEETING will certainly consider the realm of performance art and its multiplicity of manifestations both inside and outside of Asia, we are aiming at a much wider scope of analysis to decategorise performance as much as possible, allowing for discovery of its true poetics, roots, history and meaning in different places, now and at different times beyond just the contemporary.



Nezaket Ekici, '99 Commandments', 2015, performance. Image courtesy the artist and Pi

The ACAW website states that “Thinking Performance invites broader, more nuanced interpretations of performance work and fresh understandings of performativity in artistic production at large”. Could you elaborate on this idea?

Performance is often an undeclared means to a process rather than an objective end. It is a method of delivery, a tactful language – the quintessence of all creative practitioners and their inner workings – painters, novelists, architects, comedians, poets and so on. Often performance is subliminal, a subconscious strand poised to seduce, communicate, enlighten and provoke.

Again, I am proposing that we scrutinise performance much more openly, which is why the subtitle of this year’s FIELD MEETING is “Thinking Performance”. It is an attempt to think and allow a diverse set of thought about the subject at hand. It is a much more interesting way than continuing on the path of East West dichotomies. I think that alongside myself, many of the select presenters practice or experience performance perhaps not in the way it is readily defined.



“FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance” Presenter Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker. Jason Conger, ‘The Four Hoarse Men, Interrupture, Kjell Hansen’, 2012. [MW] Moment Magnitude sound poetry performance at Frye Art Museum. Photo: Malcolm Smith. Image courtesy Frye Art Museum.

There are over 30 artists and professionals presenting at the two-day forum. Could you highlight some of the artists and their works?

Every artist and professional presenting at FIELD MEETING is a highlight, that is why they were selected. They have a distinguished point of view, individual approach, they may be shifting and reforming something or the importance of what they are researching at the moment. To be conscious, I will borrow from our FIELD MEETING curatorial narrative / statement to respond to this question:

“Known for his scrutiny of the still inadequate institutional representation of contemporary art from Asia in the United States, *The New York Times* critic Holland Cotter delivers the first keynote lecture at this year’s FIELD MEETING. **Witte de With** Director **Defne Ayas** further expands on Cotter’s inquiries, evaluating the extent to which performance has been a vital trigger for the current cultural ecology across Asia, and how this has allowed for liberation from examining art in Asia solely through the lens of European Modernism.

Novelist and professor Anthony Lee (New York) will dissect the mysterious and meaningful exchange that occurs between author and reader in American literature and how the roots of this exchange may derive from a 2000-year-old Indian poem, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Keynote artist **Ming Wong** (Berlin and Singapore) imagines the plot for a Chinese science fiction opera – a fantastic voyage to uncover diverse expressions of China’s past and future, underscored by the nation’s radical approach to both tradition and to redesigning the future. Painter **Jeff Cylkowski** (New York) reflects on his artistic beginnings in graffiti art and break dancing and how it has informed his practice, in terms of both the technical process and philosophical investigations.



FIELD MEETING: Thinking Performance Presenter Ming Wong, *Ascent to the Heavenly Palace (I-IV)*, 2015. Photograph courtesy the artist.

Arash Fayez's (San Francisco, Tehran) lecture-performance interlaces official documents, news reports and personal materials to explore the displacement of a bicameral mind in-between various locations. **Yan Xing** (Los Angeles, Beijing) deliberates on the performativity that pervades his overall practice, and his use of high camp, melodrama and sincerity in his multi-layered, autobiographical projects. Using delicate sensory prompts, Dubai-based artist **Lantian Xie** guides us through airport terminals, the high seas, hotel resorts and heritage sites, to question preconceived notions of the types of voices and bodies that get attached to a certain place and expectations of how they ought to perform.

Beijing-based artist **Bingyi** perceives living as performing with unseen forces and discusses this in the context of her large land-art performance project *Epoché* (2014). Through her performance *99 Commandments*, **Nezaket Ekici** invokes her own cathartic ritual to break from the ever-gripping shackles of all the world's religious commandments. Renowned New Delhi-based artist Shuddha Sengupta of **Raqs Media Collective** reflects on the imperatives of storytelling and speculative procedure that binds much of Raqs's practice in the realm of performance – the process of bonding and building narratives with one another, a tradition embedded in India's vernacular atmosphere. Depicting his own body through a vocabulary of simulation, **Qasim Riza Shaheen** explores notions of gender, particularly and atypically through the poetics of Sufism and how cultural texts and narratives from Sufi tales and folklore incarnate into contemporary popular culture [...]."

We are very thankful to the many galleries and arts organisations in the US, Asia and other parts of the world that have joined ACAW this year by sponsoring some of the FIELD MEETING invited artists' trips to New York.



"FIELD MEETING Take 3: Thinking Performance" Presenter Jeff Cylkowski. Image courtesy the artist

What do you think are some of the emerging trends in performance art in Asia and around the world?

I am not a big believer in trends. I think that there is much more institutional interest in performance today than ever before. There are more artists whose practices are finally being exhibited in museums and also

commercial galleries. I also think that the multi-disciplinary approach is more embraced and prevalent although it is nothing new.

I mean more collaborations between visual artists and other professionals in the performing arts, theatre, dance, music are being presented. In fact contributing to the conversation of the need to break away from traditional institutional approaches, another FIELD MEETING speaker Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Director of the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, redefines “the exhibition” as a living organism in constant transformation, turning the museum into both a platform and project to embrace all disciplines.

What are some of the challenges that performance artists face today?

Same challenges that performance artists have faced at all other times. Lack or limited ongoing institutional support, true infrastructure, funding, appropriate spaces, etc. Although few museums have begun to install performance art departments, which in itself is a baffling idea. I would say that the very consistent lack or void of infrastructure and support around the world for this medium is perhaps what continues the drive for artists to explore it further.

Most of the elemental aspects such as rebellion, the unknown, the unaccepted, risk and intervention, and finally the challenges of production itself make most performance works so very compelling. Otherwise it would be a Hollywood or Bollywood production, which is a whole other realm of performance.



Lee Mingwei, 'Sonic Blossom', 2015. Performance view from The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. ACAW 2015 Edition, "Sonic Blossom", performance-exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Image courtesy the artist.

Finally, Taiwan-born, New York-based artist, Lee Mingwei's participatory installation *Sonic Blossom* was performed at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2014, and is being featured at this year's ACAW 2015. Could you talk a bit about his work and its significance?

Actually, the "Sonic Blossom" exhibition is co-presented by ACAW and The Metropolitan Museum of Art jointly. The focus of this year's FIELD MEETING and ACAW on performance came about partially out of a studio visit I had with artist Lee Mingwei in the fall of 2013. I had been thinking about Mingwei's performance practice for a while, indeed in connection to his growing up in between Taiwan, Asia and California, United States.

During his *Mending Project* in 2010, I interviewed him for an hour, during which he mended one of my favorite embroidered shirts from Central Asia talking about his childhood experiences and observations that subtly enter so many of his works. I recognised a mark, a particular gesture, which I believe is embedded in Asian continental spiritual thought, such as Taoism and Sufism. The way in which Mingwei incorporates giving, the concept of a gift in performance – which is essentially an exchange with one individual at a time – is very non invasive but still intimate and alluring. [It has] an eastern-Fluxes-sensibility for initiating and letting go at the same time, like an acupuncture needle gently allowing a flow of energy. A manner so different than the quintessential provocative in-your-face performance practices of artists generally elsewhere in the past 30 years.

At the time of my studio visit, Mingwei was preparing for his major **Mori Art Museum** exhibition in Japan. I was impressed that a major museum in Asia was organising a retrospective of more than 20 years of performance works by the artist. I mean, this after all happens only once a decade or so here in the US and only recently. Mingwei was generously going over a PowerPoint with his works with me in his beautiful apartment, when we came across his piece *Sonic Blossom*, which had actually first premiered in a museum in Korea. A singer dressed in a beautiful custom designed gown would walk over and choose a viewer in the museum and ask: "May I give you a gift of Song" and then walk that person over, if they accepted of course, to a chair to sit down –also designed specially for the performance installation – and then break into a Schubert Lieder.

I was really touched by the work, felt its significance immediately and thinking out loud, I said, "This is a perfect piece for The Met. A place full of beautiful classic objects that transports one to the past, walking at The Met among all those shimmering precious stones and objects, I yearn for something more alive, or in the flesh!" Mingwei replied: "That is what I have been thinking exactly."

What a remarkable intervention, but also a great juxtaposition of the classic and contemporary. I promised Mingwei right there and then: "Let's make it happen as the signature exhibition of the next Asia Contemporary Art Week!" Of course, it took about a year and half of meetings and connecting with colleagues at the Met and fundraising for the show to be scheduled. We are grateful for the Taipei Cultural Center for their support of the exhibition, which opens on Friday 30 October on the third day of ACAW to the public and ends on its last day on Sunday 8 November.

Christine Lee

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