

**SCREEN X ACAW**

A dialogue on “Thinking Performance” with Leeza Ahmady

By Jiayin Chen

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Jiayin Chen: This year marks the 10th edition of Asia Contemporary Art Week. In addition to citywide opening receptions, performances and screenings, ACAW also presents FIELD MEETING Take 3, an invitation-based two-day forum for arts professionals focusing on conceptual exchange and experimentation. And that's not to mention the additional programs in collaboration with [Performa](#). Can you speak to us more about this year's thematic, “Thinking Performance”?

Leeza Ahmady: It was challenging to narrow down this year's FIELD MEETING. I'm not big on themes that instruct people how they should frame something, but focus is important, at least as an experiment. It helps all of us unfold the particular. The history of performance, to me, has been diverse, vast, and integral to the artistic genres in Asia—street performances, theatre, dance, spiritual rituals, and even healing practices. Performance art in the last 25 years has been institutionalized and compartmentalized by museums and galleries. I've always wondered, as we categorize, how can we also allow for openness and continuous re- invention? Let's rethink performance. Performance as a creative act is also an act of seduction. One seduces oneself by a set of creative insight; and then undergoes questioning, doubts and ultimately finds the courage to act. Magnetism, chemistry, the risky exchange with someone outside of oneself without knowing how it's going to land on the other side, is performance. It's all there.



ACAW Field Meeting Day 1, Nezaket Ekici's Performance 99 Commandments The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo by Carol Haggerty



ACAW Field Meeting Day 2, Christopher Ho's Performance Lecture St. Joseph As Model at Hunter College Art Galleries

JC: Within this expansive definition of performance, can you talk more about how you curate the program of an event like FIELD MEETING Take 3?

LA: Similar to curating an exhibition, everyone invited have created entirely new works or have appropriated something particular for FIELD MEETING. I have tried to include as broad a range of practitioners as possible. I asked them how they think about their own practices, which they may not even have thought of as performance. For example, Anthony Lee, a novelist, and professor of literature, isn't Asian but Irish-American, but he connected to my notion that all creative acts are

performative: "You're describing my whole process!" he declared when I shared my thoughts on performance with him during a discussion. Artist Jeff Cylkowski, who grew up graffiti painting and break-dancing in the '80s' and '90s, studied at Pratt later on, and now runs Jeff Koons' studio. His paintings now synthesize all of those vocabularies. We also have veteran performance artists like Tang Dixin of China who is scheduled for both FIELD MEETING days with site-specific interactive pieces and Yan Xing, who's California-based and will present a convincing lecture-performance about a non existing artist. For Daddy in Beijing, for two hours Xing talked about this raw, personal, emotional connection with his father in front of a normally very distant audience.

Another purpose of FIELD MEETING is to spotlight individuals who might have a lot to do with how this whole landscape is changing, but haven't always been honored. For example, Defne Ayas, who's one of the chief curators for Performa for many years, and still the curator-at-large, was invited to be one of the keynote speakers alongside Holland Cotter. And Holland, in turn, I invited to talk about his view of the coverage of contemporary art from Asia in the United States in relationship to what is considered mainstream. He has always

had a global perspective—so his insights on the challenges of writing about performance in the course of his career as an art critic are also invaluable.

Robin Peckham of LEAP magazine will discuss art objects and their "liveliness" in a panel with Korakrit Arunanondchai and Nadim Abbas, two artists who also wouldn't necessarily be identified as performance artists. While another more readily considered performance artist Nezaket Ekici, who has a wealth of experience with durational performances involving her body, presents a piece entitled: 99 Commandments. Qasim Riza Shaheen, who is from Pakistan and based in

Manchester cannot be physically present because his father is ill, but will participate through a video-letter entitled Undeliverable Mail to reflect on how Sufi philosophy and age-old narratives enter popular culture today.

I always try to be as open and comprehensive as possible to consider Asia as a wide arena for thinking beyond mere geography. Chinese participation is strong this year: Lantian Xie, for example, who will deliver a lecture-performance void of any visuals, was born and is based in Dubai but his family is originally from China. Fu Xiaodong, curator and founder of Space Station will introduce a performance by Double Fly Art Center involving 8 stand-in-actors, as the artist-collective could not all travel to New York themselves. Beijing artist and curator Liu Ding, presents a newly conceived performance Message spanning from a work commissioned by Istanbul Biennial early this fall.



ACAW Field Meeting Day 2 Leeza Ahmady Opening Remarks at Hunter College Art Galleries.



ACAW Field Meeting Day 2, Double Fly Art Center's Performance Hundouluo at Hunter College Art Galleries.

JC: And how was the format developed? I know you've been invested in experimenting in the format of the formal presentation.

LA: The format is similar to last year's, with really concise, fast-paced 15 minute or 20 minute segments, which ranged from performative talks and lecture-performances to actual performances. It's a way to capture the journey of each individual, and how they've been seduced or engaged by their own practices, what inspires their process, and why it should matter to anyone. Though FIELD MEETING is open to the public, invitations primarily go to curators, museum directors and writers. That's because we want all this amazing content to land somewhere, leave a trace, and spark off different collaborations.

JC: Let's return to that particular phrase, a very ambitious one: "a studio visit on a communal scale." Can you talk to us about the challenges of cultivating a sense of intimacy amid such a large and diverse group?

LA: It's a big challenge indeed. Not only is the work of selecting invitees difficult, but the task of communicating the significance of the event. It's a period you should stay through, rather than just drop in for. The intimacy derives from all of us sitting together without a predetermined end. We do not want the artist just to come in, present, and leave, or the audiences to dip in and out. This is not a conference or a symposium, and most importantly, this is not about each individual person doing his or her own thing. It truly is a communal activity requiring an exchange of energy between all. This element is what was felt most presently last year during the inaugural FIELD MEETING and is bringing so many colleagues back for this round, from far and near cities in the US and Asia.

We are a small institution with very, very limited funding, and the entire platform comes together through not only our consortium members' efforts and desires to create this

campaign but also through the contribution of many individuals working in the field. The biggest challenge has been at the level of resources: human resources, staff, funding. All of this happens because of perseverance and, in the end, sheer magic.

Asia Contemporary Art Week as an institution is also in the process of shifting to a new stage. That's so that we'll be able to handle the intensity of communication from our consortium members to ensure great programs. Someone or some group, like your team, SCREEN, comes along with great ideas. We want to link you up. I'm

interested in the next generation, and who's doing what. We should be surrounded by different groups of thinkers. I have mentioned many times, that I curate art because I am interested in people. Although it's been challenging, it's important for me to create this dialogue. Now it's happening and this year, it's going to be phenomenal. I'm very excited and have a lot of faith in my work, and the significant work of others.



ACAW Field Meeting Day 2, Discussion with Leeza Ahmady, Arash Fayez, Zeynep Kayan, Vibha Galhotra, Christopher Ho and Nora Taylora at Hunter College Art Galleries.