

FIELD MEETING Curatorial Statement: A Conversation **Leeza Ahmady and Xin Wang**

Inspired by and born of the intense field work carried out by all practitioners of art, FIELD MEETING foregrounds the immediacy of these dynamic exchanges by bringing together over 40 artists, curators, scholars, and institutional leaders whose works variously relate to and problematize the cultural, political, and geographical parameters of contemporary Asia. As a curated platform, FIELD MEETING capitalizes on this fall's citywide museum and gallery exhibitions shedding light on various aspects of contemporary Asian art through highlighting individual and regional practices; simultaneously, the intensive two-day forum facilitates another kind of exchange beyond established institutional representation and discourse to expose the field's creative practices in a more timely and less mediated fashion. Through lectures, performances, discussions, and most crucially, the presence of the art practitioners both on stage and in the audience, FIELD MEETING presents contemporary art from Asia in its present tense and as a working process that dynamically interacts with creative energies worldwide while challenging its own boundaries.

FIELD MEETING recognizes that a critical inquiry into the conditions of making and thinking about art in Asia has profound implications in rethinking global contemporaneity. The application of the term "postmodernism" presumes a homogenous modernity, a narrative that still perpetuates in the power structure of today's art world, for instance, in the relentless generational thinking that ignores local genealogies and modes of pedagogy; mirroring the well-worn yet unresolved East-West dichotomy are still finer hierarchies, misunderstandings, and post-colonialism within the Asian continent. These pressing problems have inspired artists to respond in ever more thought-provoking ways, which have become more nimble and effective than entrenched academic debates.

The FIELD MEETING thrives on the possibilities of unexpected undercurrents, connections, and reflections on a variety of relevant subjects. Over the past few years more artists in and from Asia have established presence on the rosters of blue-chip galleries and international biennials, while research and academic inquiries within Asia have also expanded considerably. FIELD MEETING acknowledges the field's achievements and challenges; it advocates nuanced approaches to unearth our recent past and, more urgently, to critically and radically envision the future.

Context: Asian Contemporary Art Week

Leeza Ahmady (LA): ACAW was established by the coming together of Asian Contemporary Art Consortium (ACAC) in 2001, a small group of curators, museum directors, and gallery owners who were disenchanted by the lack of real critical attention for Asian contemporary artists and exhibitions in New York and decided to try to change that reality. At the time there was an absence of journalists, writers, or critics covering the small but definitely growing field.

ACAW was also about trying to create a collective voice. What at the time was considered a large international art arena in New York was still I think a very Eurocentric scene. Of course, Eastern European and South American artists were being integrated quite strongly; it has been so in the last decade for Asian artists as well. However, many small institutions organizing contemporary exhibitions and programs from Asia end up doing this work in isolation without a sense of a community. The coming together of this Consortium has meant making a larger impact on the perceptions of a larger public here in the United States and beyond.

I came on board in ACAW in 2005, asking this question: what do we mean by the term Asia exactly? In the US, due to past scholarships and ways in which educational institutions have characterized the

region, Asia mainly refers to China, Japan, and Korea. India has entered the discussion more recently. In a sense, Asia in the United States has meant areas where the Rockefellers have been collecting. If we were to visit universities, there are mainly two categories, Near Eastern studies and East Asian studies, but there has never been a kind of panoramic perspective of this space called Asia, which after all is very large geographical space.

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LA: By the time an artist is presented here in New York, his/her practice would have undergone a whole series of lenses--institutions, people, and ideological interpretations. There is a stamping process that artists go through before they are presented in a museum and even galleries. So the majority of artists we see here are already very established locally and internationally.

More work is necessary in this area, but the fact is that there are other types of history-making that we must make room for. Art history has typically been written from the perspective of a collective of artists in a particular place engaged in one style in a mass movement. What about individual artists and their work in different parts of the world made in isolation from other artists? How do such artists enter history? One of our objectives with the FIELD MEETING is to shift how we read art works and what we insert into art history.

Xin Wang (XW): Key institutional exhibitions have provided seminal scholarship that broke the ground for further research, yet most of the time they seem to be playing—rightfully so—this catch-up role to update the audience here about what has happened years or decades ago. These historical retrospectives are enormously important, but there is also the recognizable void of making visible the happenings—not just individual practices—that are constantly evolving and often quite actively in dialogue already with global contemporary art.

LA: Many institutions in the US are also beginning to collect art from various regions of Asia. The question is who are they collecting? And how are they accessing such works? Mostly through biennials and art fairs, which are just fine entry points where surface connections are made, but curators and museum directors generally built their collections through long-term exchanges, research, and engagement with artists' overall practice. That's how careers are nurtured and great art enter the public realm.

XW: FIELD MEETING, in a way, is trying to bypass filters and lenses already in place. Because of the way art institutions function, there are initiatives and timelines that make it difficult to consider the region more holistically. Gallery representations tend to single out an artist—or even select pieces of art objects—more or less detached from a boarder context of cultural and social dynamics. Museum exhibitions, on the other hand, take about five to ten years in planning—including two to three years of intensive curatorial work, which is why curated platforms like the FIELD MEETING is so valuable because it responds to these creative urgencies a lot more spontaneously.

LA: In a sense we are also curating the audience. The idea is to fill the room with art-professionals not only from New York but also from other cities in the US, which is very ambitious. We are very conscious of who will be attending, who is going to be in the room, do they want to be there? How can

they benefit from this? Instead of passively inviting an audience, we have been busy looking at our contacts to consider all the people we know and those we don't, drafting individual invitations to have them join the FIELD MEETING. A great percentage of the audience will be art professionals, scholars, and art practitioners because our vision has been to create opportunities for these individuals to energize and rethink their future programs and collections.

The filter that I'm also trying to remove is my own filter as a curator. Within the timeframe of thinking about someone else's practice, you have your own projections. There is nothing wrong with that, that's curatorial work, which is about discriminating, choosing, and selecting. However, it is equally important to consider ways in which we present artists by creating a more direct access to their own thoughts, objectives, and processes a little more removed from curatorial and institutional readings; I think this is what one encounters when one visits with an artist in their studio, which is why I decided that this year's signature program, the FIELD MEETING, will be modeled after a studio visit, though on a communal scale.

XW: There is this tendency, when it comes to interpreting works of art from unfamiliar areas, to contextualize them in related political and cultural contexts, a very constructive method that can also reduce artists to mere footnotes. In fact artists can and do challenge how those political and cultural situations are understood in the first place.

Many artists are consciously evading dichotomies, such as Asia vs. the rest of the world—particularly the West, yet clichéd frameworks like that are still being imposed on them as interpretive devices, as if Asian art has to be compartmentalized in a politically-correct, well-defined manner so that people won't worry about saying the wrong things or not picking up on certain references.

Related to this we also have artists working with a variety of subcultural currents and phenomena. Subculture is simply too elusive and volatile for "serious" scholarly investigations, yet artists are increasingly free to respond to specific strands in the cultural fabric, which should be differentiated from "pop" in the abstract and already historicized sense.

LA: The criteria are very open and representational of what is actually going on in the scene. Many of the FIELD MEETING participants only live in Asia part-time, some live in multiple continents and many are based in New York or elsewhere in the world. This is why we are listing the cities where each participant is living next to their names; it is a telling story all on its own.

XW: I would say it's a very thoughtful but undeniably subjective process. It is informed by our own interests, backgrounds, and limitations; it has also allowed us to indulge in our own fantasies that don't show up on curatorial resumes. At the FIELD MEETING we are also venturing into these areas and calling attention to all of these no-so-hidden layers.

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