



FIELD MEETING at Asia Contemporary Art Week 2014, New York – interview (part 2)

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Asian Contemporary Art Week's Director Leeza Ahmady and Associate Curator Xin Wang speak to *Art Radar* about their new forum.

Returning to New York from 22 October to 2 November 2014 is the 9th edition of a city-wide event on Asian contemporary art organised by Asian Contemporary Art Week's (ACAW) Consortium members. In the second part of *Art Radar's* interview, Leeza Ahmady and Xin Wang speak about their new signature program for ACAW, the FIELD MEETING.



Korakrit Arunanondchai, 'Letters to Chantri #1: The lady at the door/The gift that keeps on giving', 2014, installation view, video 2. Image courtesy ACAW and the artist.

[Click here to read part 1 of this interview.](#)

Communal studio visits

FIELD MEETING is a two-day forum hosted by the **Asia Society Museum** in New York on 26 and 27 October 2014. The forum was conceived and organised by Leeza Ahmady with contributions by Xin Wang. It aims to create the experience of a studio visit on a communal scale, where artists, curators and art professionals can present recent works and initiatives through lectures, performances and discussions.

Leeza Ahmady is the Director of **ACAW** and **AhmadyArts**. She is also a curator and an educator known for her work on art practices in Central Asia. Associate Curator Xin Wang is a curator and writer and has worked as a research assistant at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York.

Ahmady and Xin speak to *Art Radar* about their inspiration for FIELD MEETING, its structure, and some of the **artists participating in this programme**.



Manal Al Dowayan, research file for the Crash Project, 2014, mixed-media. Image courtesy ACAW and the artist.

You are introducing FIELD MEETING – a two-day forum bringing together artists, curators, scholars and institutional leaders active in Asian art – at ACAW this year. Could you tell us how it came about?

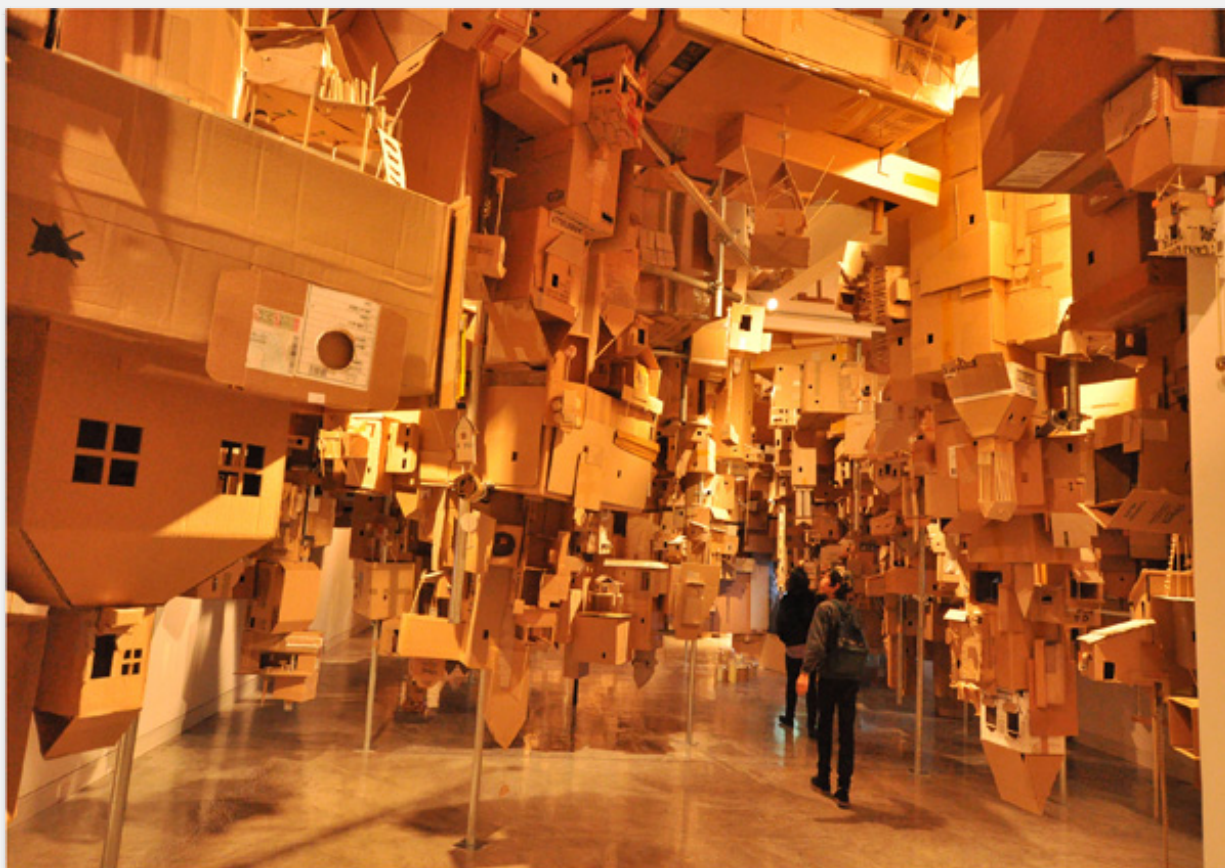
Leeza Ahmady (LA): Much of my curatorial work over the years has dealt with contemporary art and its history, and Xin has been trained as an art historian and has worked on museum exhibitions of contemporary Asian art. Essentially, what artists are working on now and what they've done in the last two to three years is a part of history.

There has been a constant chatter in the field, which I call an East-West superiority-inferiority complex, due to the lack of more world focused scholarship. 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 FIELD MEETING is to shift how we read artworks and what we insert into art history. For example, one general criticism Asian countries (China, India

and Indonesia) are subject to is the commercial orientation of their art venues, particularly the proliferation of private museums and galleries. While this may be true, we cannot dismiss the specificities of such venues as possible grounds for the sprouting of new institutional models effective in their own right.

In terms of new models and institutional history, FIELD MEETING, in a way, is an acknowledgment of a successful model in the Middle East – in Sharjah, one of the Emirates States about 45 minutes away from another great new art hub, Dubai. I was invited to attend a programme called “The March Meeting” in 2011, which is instituted annually by the **Sharjah Biennial Foundation** as a quasi-public, government-founded private entity that has managed to launch a successful series of regional gatherings for art professionals.



In-Habit Project, 'Another Country', 2012, at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, Australia. Image courtesy ACAW and the artist.

How is FIELD MEETING structured?

Xin Wang (XW): FIELD MEETING will be hosted at Asia Society on 26 to 27 October 2014. We currently have 35 confirmed participants for the FIELD MEETING: roughly 45 individuals, as there are collectives and collaborative projects. We've invested a lot of efforts in communicating with the FIELD MEETING participants to encourage alternative ways of introducing their practices, not necessarily elaborating on specific projects but grounding the narrative in their creative processes, or issues and ideas they've been tackling.

During these two days, we will strive to have a diverse group of voices and formats, such as performances, performative-lectures, and group discussions. We are also involving New York-based art professionals to lead discussion in the Q&A sessions, so the entire experience will indeed have the dynamic structure of a studio visit.

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 United States, 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 energise and rethink their future programmes and collections.

Many institutions in the United States are beginning to show and 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, I think, which are just fine entry points where surface connections are made – but curators and museum directors generally build their collections through long-term exchanges, research and engagement with artists' overall practice. That's how careers are nurtured, and great art becomes part of the public realm.



Haig Aivazian, 'To Neither Confirm Nor Deny that the Matter Neither Reflected Nor Absorbed Light', 2013, lecture performance. Image courtesy the artist.

How did you select the artists for ACAW 2014? You mentioned that you've known many of these artists previously. Were there specific regions you were looking at or any specific criteria?

LA: For me, the selection has been through my research travels to various parts of Asia, or when I have launched an exhibition or participated in conferences and biennials, even art fairs. Colleagues and venues that I approached, knowing they are doing great work, have recommended some of the presenters.

One of our keynote presenters, Haig Aivazian, is based in Lebanon. I first met him when he was one of the curators of the Sharjah Biennial in 2011. Then I saw his works in different settings and realised that he was an artist too. When I researched his work further, I discovered that he often presents performance-lectures incorporating very elaborate research and speculations about a particular event at a specific time. We are very excited that he will present a one-hour iteration of his piece *To Neither Confirm Nor Deny that the Matter Neither Reflected Nor Absorbed Light* for the first time in New York, as a commission for the FIELD MEETING.



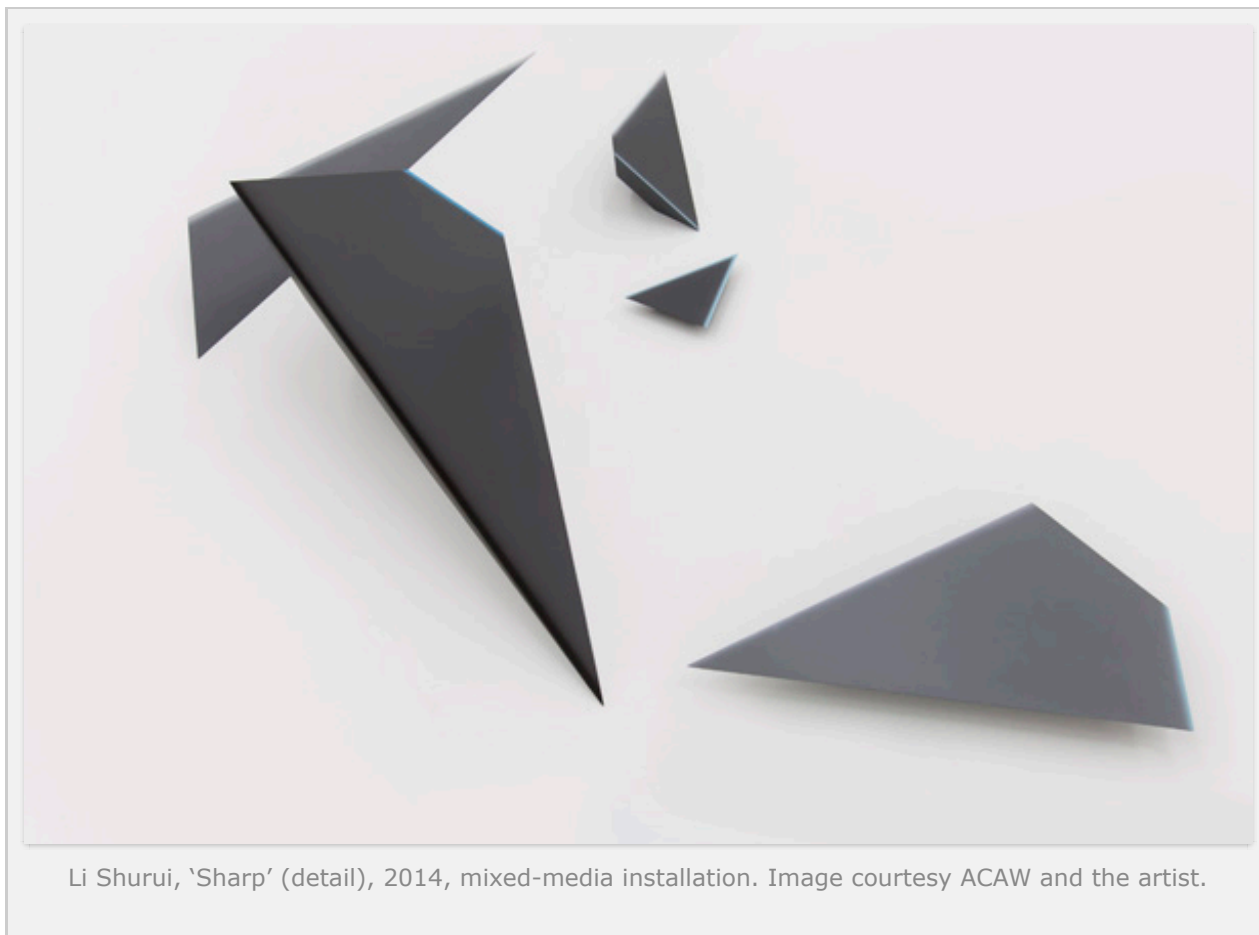
Sun Xun, *A Footnote to Time*, 2012, Installation: wall painting, ink and color on paper, mixed media. Supported by Edouard Malingue Gallery. Courtesy the artist.

So the selection is more organic?

LA: Oh absolutely. 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 telling a story all on its own.

XW: There are multiple elements at play that inform our selection. Some we already talked about, such as this discontentment with the clichés and skewed representation. There is also this tendency, when it comes to interpreting works of art from unfamiliar areas, to contextualise 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.

A good example would be **Sun Xun**, an artist still relatively young but extremely prolific and already a fixture in important international exhibitions, who makes use of animation videos, mural paintings and installations to create his own narratives of China's recent history and, more abstractly, the fabrication of history. In a recent conversation, he came up with this provocative proposition: how does an artist make use of the Cultural Revolution as material without being political, or without the typical associative connotations? I won't give away more than this, but what he will share at the FIELD MEETING will surely inspire alternative ways in thinking not only about his practice, but also about the contemporary situation in China with all kinds of ideological residuals and anachronistic properties.



Li Shurui, 'Sharp' (detail), 2014, mixed-media installation. Image courtesy ACAW and the artist.

Could you tell us more about the artists in FIELD MEETING, and why you find them interesting or relevant?

LA: We've invited **Umer Butt**, a gallery owner whom I met a few years ago in New York for a show he was curating at **Thomas Erben Gallery**. At the same time, there was a high profile exhibition on modern and contemporary Pakistani art at Asia Society. He shared his views and criticism of that exhibition openly. His cause is to look at other kinds of work that are not necessarily political or culturally relevant by artists in Pakistan: artists who are essentially formalists.

I am interested in why and from what aspect of the local culture this is embedded in. It's time for all of us to ask what is specific about this – why is it relevant? How is it framed within the global practice of art history, modern and contemporary?

FIELD MEETING is also an opportunity for institutions and professionals to delve beyond the business-as-usual and to encounter artists whose works involve ongoing processes that challenge typical modules of exhibition making. Complex, research-based art projects may require new forms of representation and engagement beyond institutional settings. For example, one of the FIELD MEETING artists, **Tintin Wulia**, investigates the concept of borders in her practice, creating a series of installations, performances, and residencies involving the passport: passport making, collecting, distribution and restrictions. In her latest iteration, the passport is distributed in the form of an arcade game to be installed in a mall.

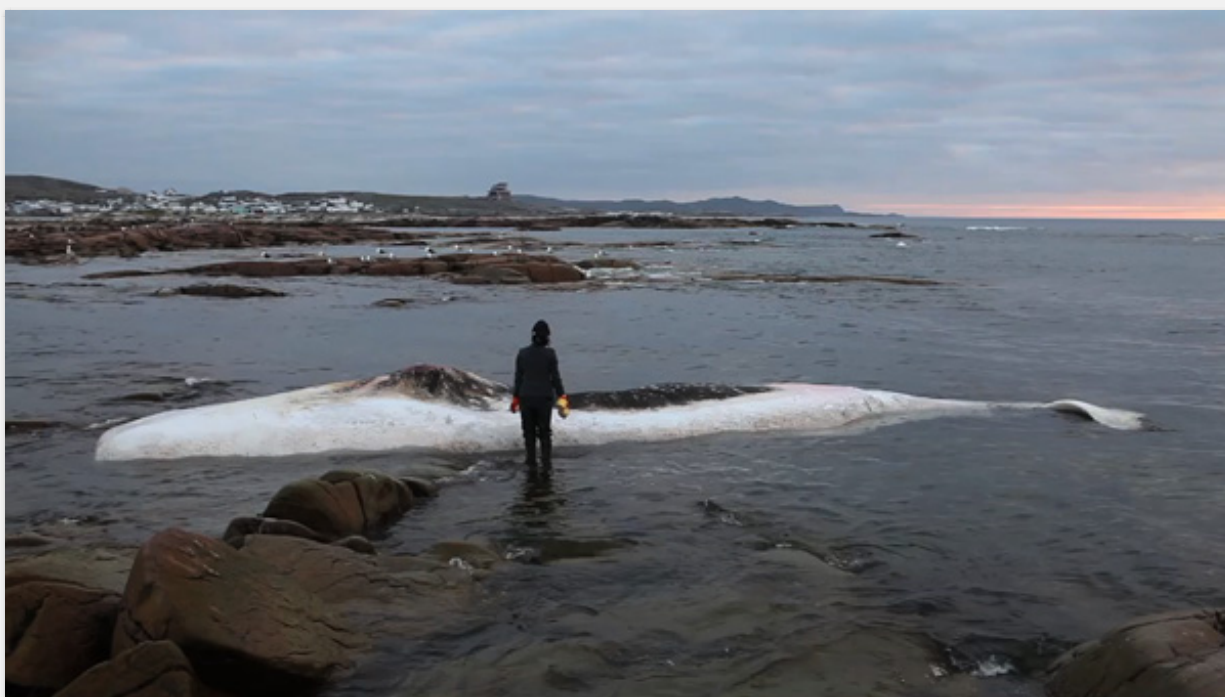
XW: Through the physical and symbolic constructs of the passport, she contemplates related concepts such as border control and nation-building policies.

I also would like to contextualise the selection a little bit in conjunction with the limitations of showing contemporary art from Asia in New York, or more broadly in the United States and "the West" in general. New York is already an incredibly cosmopolitan place, yet we continue to have quite skewed representations and entrenched ways of interpreting creative energies from this vast and often problematically-defined

region. Many exhibitions 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 recognisable 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.

In addition to this problem, we have uninspired commercial art filtered through the market that continues to cause real damage. I have had friends and mentors from the academia, intellectuals who don't specialise in contemporary Asian art or follow the scene as closely but are nevertheless informed and curious enough, gradually losing interest, because too often they run into terrible, derivative "contemporary Asian art" in New York. These people aren't the globe-trotting types that jet-set from private collections to biennials to major art fairs, nor can they afford to do the "field work" such as visiting artists' studios on a regular basis, but their critical voice and response are undeniably valuable for the discourse.

Many artists are consciously evading dichotomies, such as Asia versus 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 compartmentalised 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. This, unfortunately, limits the way we think about not only contemporary art and culture from Asia but also global contemporaneity.



Patty Chang, 'Invocation of a Wandering Lake', 2014, video still. Image courtesy ACAW and the artist.

Could you give us an example of how interpretive devices placed on contemporary Asian art and culture affect what and how the works are being shown in United States and in Europe?

XW: Throughout this year, there have been panels after panels organised by influential platforms—such as **Frieze**—that discuss the quarter-centennial of the internet and its lasting impact on art-making. Of course there's the **Net Art** to post-internet art narrative largely confined to what took place in Europe and the United States.

In all these discussions, what's routinely ignored is that the "world wide web" hasn't been world-wide at all for all those 25 years, and it's equally naïve to consider the platform as perfectly free, democratic and flat. Different regions in Asia came on board at different times, and when the internet interacts with the local

vernacular, politics, or interesting issues such as censorship, there are very different implications and coping strategies, and these factors play certain roles in the way artists engage with new media and this sense of connectedness. Are late comers necessarily at a disadvantage? The IT adventurers will show you it's quite the contrary, and the art world should take notes from that.

Related to this, we also have artists working with a variety of subcultural currents and phenomena. The practice of **Lu Yang**, a Shanghai-based artist born in the 1980s, has been heavily informed by anime, video games, and other Japanese cultural imports that left indelible marks on the collective memory of my generation, the so-called millennials, if you will. She's not just appropriating elements but her entire practice is immersed in these fascinating virtual realms full of quirky specificities. So some of her pieces are actual video games from larger installation series that have the same polish as industry products, but at the same time feature highly provocative content and social critique. Works like these easily fall into the cracks between established narratives and categorisations.

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 historicised sense. We have also invited **Cao Fei**, an already established artist working with moving images, who took intriguing turns in recent works that are born of a fascination with the thriving genre of zombie apocalypse in films and TV series. Existing as or among the walking dead seems eerily relevant to certain aspects of reality in today's China, which can easily be dramatised into a post-apocalyptic land as a result of pollution and apathy.

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Christine Lee

516

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