



The changing landscape of Asian art in New York: Asia Contemporary Art Week 2014 – interview (part 1)

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Leeza Ahmady, Director of Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), and Associate Curator Xin Wang speak to Art Radar.

From 22 October to 2 November 2014, New York will host the 9th edition of ACAW, a week-long event on Asian contemporary art. In the first of a two-part interview, Leeza Ahmady and Xin Wang tell *Art Radar* what to expect and what to look out for.



MAP OFFICE, 'Disputed', 2014, wooden dart game, 2 booklets. Image courtesy the artist.

In addition to the enormous exposure available within the forum, **Asian Contemporary Art Week's** (ACAW) vibrant programmes – exhibitions, openings, social gatherings and other evening festivities co-organised with

ACAW consortium members and partners – are expected to provide ample opportunities for further dialogue.

Leeza Ahmady is an independent curator and educator noted for her foundational work on art practices in Central Asia. She is the director of educational platforms **AhmadyArts** and ACAW. Ahmady was a member of the Agents/Curatorial Team for **DOCUMENTA (13)** in Kassel, Germany and Kabul, Afghanistan (2010-2012). She has presented numerous artists at the **Venice Biennale**, **Istanbul Biennial**, **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum**, among others, and some of her past exhibitions include “No-Mad-Ness in No Man’s Land” at **Eslite Gallery**, Taipei (2013) and “Arahmaiani: Fertility of the Mind” at **Tyler Rollins Fine Art**, New York (2014).

Xin Wang is a curator and writer. She has worked as the research assistant at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** (MET) on the exhibition “**Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China**”, and co-organised a panel with Asia Art Archive titled “**Magiciens de la Terre and China: Looking Back 25 Years**”. She has written for several art publications, and is the curator of “Lu Yang: Arcade”, an upcoming exhibition in New York.

Ahmady and Xin speak to *Art Radar* about the history of ACAW, their curatorial perspective and the changing landscape of Asian contemporary art in New York and beyond. This is the first of a two-part interview.

Asian Contemporary Art Week: History and present vision

What were the circumstances that inspired the 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. By that, I mean – at the time – there were no journalists, writers or critics covering the small but definitely growing field.

Could you articulate a few key factors behind this initiative?

LA: At that point, it was also about trying to create a collective voice. What 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 organising contemporary exhibitions and programmes 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.

What are some of the key art institutions and professionals involved in the programme?

LA: **Asia Society**, **Japan Society** and **China Institute** were among the founding members, as well as **Bose Pacia**, an important gallery exhibiting Indian and South Asian contemporary artists that subsequently became the non-profit organisation **+91 Foundation**. Other long-standing Consortium members include **Art Projects International**, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, Guggenheim Museum, **MoMA**, **Queens Museum** and **Rubin Museum of Art**. I have always envisioned ACAW as an initiative where limited resources and expertise can be shared in a non-competitive way.

The first ACAW in 2002 brought in a lot of players, some of whom are now celebrated artists and curators, in a symposium dedicated to experiences of modernity in Asia. *The New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter praised it as “a turning point for the discussion of art from Asia in America.”



Jewyo Rhii, 'Typewriter', 2013, mixed media installation. ACAW 2014 Edition, "Jewyo Rhii: Out of Comfort", exhibition at Queens Museum. Image courtesy the artist and Queens Museum

Could you briefly talk about your mission behind ACAW?

LA: It has always been difficult for me to define the mission in one or two sentences. My personal mission as its director is to create visibility for significant art content that would be otherwise inaccessible. To accomplish this goal better this year, we invited a select group of galleries and institutions based in Asia to join ACAW as Consortium members and participants. Many are supporting the participation of individual artists and curators in the FIELD MEETING. I consider these organisations as an important layer of the content behind the scene. It is thus also essential to spotlight their work and to try to create links between them and American institutions.

The organisations that have joined us this year are:

- Australia Council for the Arts (Sydney)
- **Edge of Arabia** (Aseer and London)
- **LEAP Magazine** (Beijing)
- **Spencer Museum of Art** (Kansas)
- Korean Art Museum Association (Seoul)
- National Gallery of Indonesia (Jakarta)
- **Aike-Dellarco Gallery** (Shanghai)
- Alserkal Avenue (Dubai)
- **Chi-Wen Gallery** (Taipei)
- **Edouard Malingue Gallery** (Hong Kong)
- Galeri Zilberman (Istanbul)
- Ink Studio (Beijing)
- MABSOCIETY (Shanghai)
- **Vadehra Art Gallery** (New Delhi)



Wang Jianwei, 'Time Temple 3', 2014, wood, brass, and rubber. ACAW 2014 Edition, "Wang Jianwei: Time Temple", exhibition at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Image courtesy the artist and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Broadening the definition of Asian art

What was the reason behind creating this initiative in New York City? Is your audience mostly from New York or is it an international audience?

LA: The goal is to have the broadest audience possible. It starts with this idea of New York, its public and its art professionals, but it's also always about the United States. How can we share this knowledge with the rest of the United States? It seems that more and more organisations, students, scholars, curators and the general public in other cities are connecting with ACAW through social media, our website which archives every past edition, and interviews and audio recordings shared in a variety of formats. This year, we are partnering with **Artsy** to reach an even larger audience through their interactive platform.

How do you fairly represent each country or region in Asia given your mission to broaden the definition of Asian art and awareness to different regions that make up the Asian continent?

LA: It's not about being fair. It's not a political campaign. We are just two individuals making this effort within the effort of a larger group of people and doing so with very limited resources. I don't know if it's fair; all the choices made by gallery directors, curators and institutional directors are subjective ones, based on a connection they felt with a certain artist or temporality. I think about the fact that it's better than doing nothing.

Xin Wang (XW): I would say that 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. I was trained as an art historian, but also a mathematician and an avid video-game player obsessed with the horror and sci-fi genres. While these fascinations and inclinations are personal, they also echo what's going on in broader spheres of cultural production that traditional art history or even curatorial studies are hesitant to accommodate. At the FIELD MEETING we are also venturing into these areas and calling attention to all of these not-so-hidden layers.



Seokmin Ko, *White Square*, 2013, limited-edition archival pigment print. ACAW 2014 Edition, "Seokmin Ko: Stripshow", exhibition at Art Projects International. Image courtesy of the artist and Art Projects International, New York.

The changing landscape of Asian contemporary art

Could you describe the landscape of Asian contemporary art for artists, art professionals and the audience when you first joined ACAW? How has it changed over the years?

LA: I came on board ACAW in 2005, asking this question: what do we mean by the term "Asia", exactly? In the United States, due to past scholarship and ways in which educational institutions have characterised 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 a very large geographical space.

Let us also consider Asia philosophically. Chinese medicine does not just treat symptoms, it tries to identify the part of your body that may not be in harmony with the rest. And in Sufism, which is the Islamic philosophy founded in Central Asia, there are similar concepts: there is a beginning that is also an ending, circling outward and inward; it is the way the universe works. I suppose that my continued interest in ACAW is this linking of many concepts and aspects that seem unlinkable. There has been a lot of resistance, but simultaneously, many institutions are open to broadening their programmatic offerings. While they may not be able to accommodate full-scale exhibitions, some are willing to collaborate on smaller projects.

Since 2006, for example, I have presented a number of artists in ACAW editions, from Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and Lebanon through collaborations with curator **Barbara London** at MoMA, as part of MoMA's Modern Mondays film and video programme. As a result, participation of artists from all regions of Asia has dramatically increased, while the ACAW consortium has expanded to include non-Asia specific museums and galleries. Yet among the 500 to 600 galleries in Chelsea, only a few dozen represent artists from Asia. How we decipher shifts and progress really depends on how one considers ratios and measuring tools. The intensity of artistic activity and the rapid changes taking place inside Asia are not all captured here.

By the time an artist is presented here in New York, everything has been filtered through 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.



FIELD MEETING Presenter Aki Sasamoto, 'Sunny in the Furnace', 2014, mixed media performance.
Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

Bypassing filters and lenses

Are you trying to show what is currently happening in the local vernacular and bringing it to the United States without the filtering lenses?

XW: In a way, or 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. For example, there's an increasing number of blue chip galleries working with Asian artists, typically one or two on the roster, and given the nature of the business, these artists become focuses that are often detached from a broader cultural context and social dynamics within artistic communities.

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 are so valuable, because it responds to these creative urgencies a lot more spontaneously. Although we've been working for months – Leeza started planning last year and I was brought on to contribute late this spring – it's still more flexible and agile than bigger institutions that demand a lengthier process to produce scholarly catalogues, make loan arrangements, etc.



Tarek Al-Ghoussein, 'K Files 781', 2013, edition of 3, archival digital print. ACAW 2014 Edition, "Tarek Al-Ghoussein: K Files", exhibition at Taymour Grahne Gallery. Image courtesy the artist and Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York.

LA: Another reason why this is important is that there are different kinds of filters. The filter that I'm also trying to remove is my own filter as a curator. Within the time frame 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 an artist in their studio, which is why I decided that this year's signature programme, the FIELD MEETING, will be modelled after a studio visit, though on a communal scale.

*The second part of the interview will focus on ACAW's signature programme, FIELD MEETING, scheduled for 26-27 October 2014 at the **Asia Society** in New York. [Click here to read part 2 of this interview.](#)*

Christine Lee

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