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Talking Peers: Reading Salon

Curatorial Statement | Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)

Talking Peers

Reading Salon

Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF) with Image Journal

May 28, 2026

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Curatorial Statement

Rewilding the Kitchen
A Reading Salon

Inspired by *Rewilding the Kitchen*, an interview with *New York Times* bestselling author **Rachel Yoder** published in **Image Journal**'s *The Kitchen Issue*, the inaugural Talking Peers: Reading Salon convened artists, writers, curators, and thinkers on the rooftop of a historic church in Chinatown, on March 28, 2026.

Curated by **Leeza Ahmady** in collaboration with **Amie Hollmann** and developed in dialogue with Image Journal, the evening featured contributions by **Emilio Rojas**, **Dara Hartley**, **Roya Ghiasy**, and **Jed Kiang**, and approached the kitchen as both a physical and imaginative space where memory, hunger, care, intimacy, creativity, and survival converged. Through performance, sound, conversation, and shared culinary offerings, participants explored how acts of nourishment shape personal and collective histories, revealing food, the body, and the table as sites of cultural transmission, belonging, and transformation.

Together, these contributions expanded the notion of the kitchen beyond its walls. Across the evening, it emerged as a site of knowledge and cultural memory—present in the mother's body, the ritualized gesture, the speculative imagination, and acts of hospitality. Through these varied practices, nourishment emerged as a living force that shapes identity, preserves history, and creates connection across generations and geographies.

Merging the peer-to-peer ethos of Asia Contemporary Art Forum's Talking Peers program with the reflective spirit of **Image Journal**'s Reading Groups, Talking Peers: Reading Salon is conceived as an ongoing space for listening, conversation, and performative exchange. Through encounters with texts, artistic practices, and shared experiences, the salon invites artists, writers, curators, and thinkers into dialogue around questions of mystery, imagination, spirituality, care, and lived experience.

ACAF Talking Peers: Reading Salon program introductions. Photos, left by Zack Sherzad, top by Martin Bauer.

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EMILIO ROJAS
Ahaucatl

Emilio Rojas presented *Ahaucatl*, a performance that used the avocado as both material and metaphor. Drawing from the Nahuatl origins of the word ahuacatl—meaning "testicle"—the work traced the fruit's journey from Indigenous Mexican cultivation to its contemporary status as a globally commodified agricultural product. Through a durational action in which avocado was applied to the artist's body and gradually oxidized, darkening the skin over time, Rojas engaged the intertwined histories of colonialism, racialization, desire, and self-identification. Drawing upon his own mestizo heritage and experiences navigating inherited standards of whiteness, the performance transformed a familiar food into a vehicle for confronting the enduring legacies of colonial caste systems and reclaiming Indigenous ancestry through embodied gesture and ritual.

Emilio Rojas, *Ahaucatl* 2026. Performance. As part of ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*. Photos by Zak Sherzad.

Emilio Rojas is a multidisciplinary artist working primarily with the body in performance using video, photography, installation, public interventions, and sculpture. As a queer, Latinx immigrant with Indigenous heritage, it is essential to his practice to engage in the postcolonial ethical imperative to uncover, investigate, and make visible and audible undervalued or disparaged sites of knowledge, narratives, and individuals. He utilizes his body in a political and critical way, as an instrument to unearth removed traumas, embodied forms of decolonization, migration, and poetics of space. His research-based practice is heavily influenced by queer and feminist archives, border politics, botanical colonialism, and defaced monuments. Besides his artistic practice, he is also a translator, community activist, yoga teacher, and anti-oppression facilitator with queer, migrant, and refugee youth. He holds an M.F.A. in Performance from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a B.F.A. in Film from Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Canada.

Emilio Rojas, *Ahaucatl* 2026. Performance. As part of ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*. Photos by Zak Sherzad.

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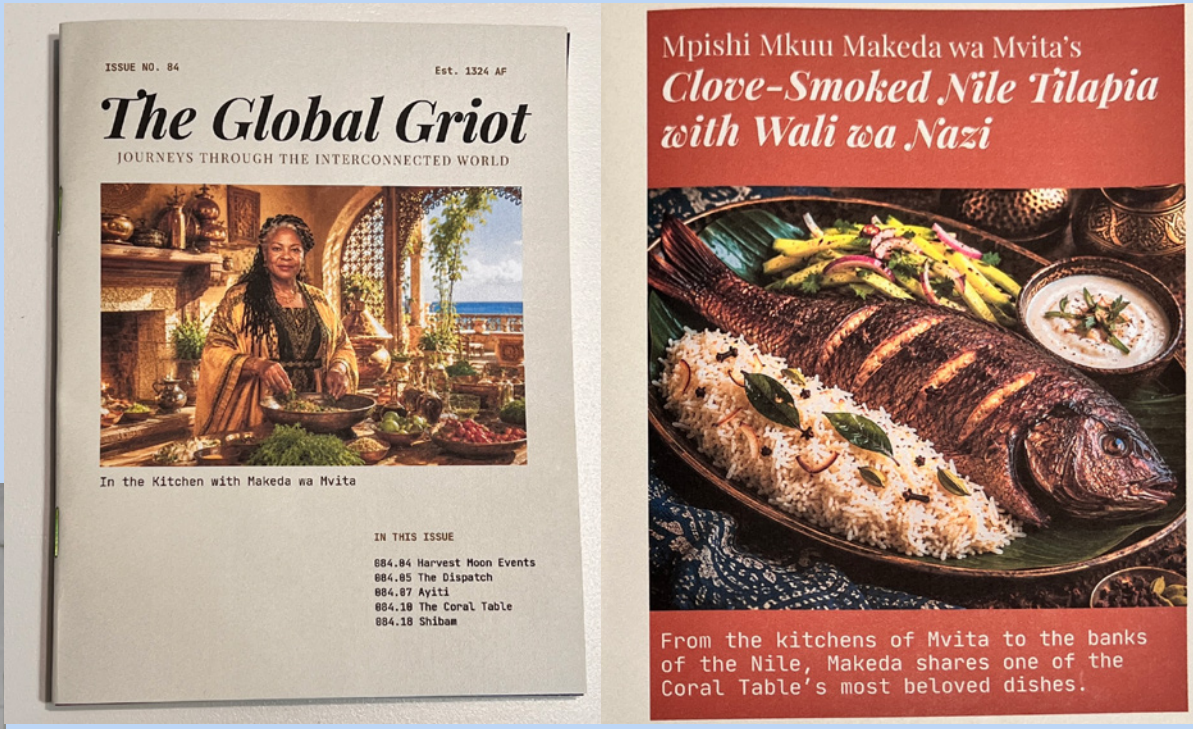
DARA HARTLEY
The Global Griot

Dara Hartley presented excerpts from *The Global Griot*, a speculative Afrofuturist food and travel zine set in an alternate contemporary world where a prolonged Black Plague led to the collapse of Europe and the flourishing of interconnected African, Indigenous, Islamic, and Asian civilizations. Combining storytelling, illustration, editorial design, AI-generated imagery, and worldbuilding, the project imagined a richly developed culinary culture shaped by different centers of global exchange. Through live readings and a hand-stitched publication featuring travel writing, recipes, and cultural artifacts, Hartley used food as a lens through which to reimagine history, hospitality, identity, and alternative futures.

Dara Hartley, *The Global Griot* 2026. Zine Reading. As part of ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*. Photo by Zazk Sherzad.



Dara Hartley, *The Global Griot* 2026. Speculative zine. As part of ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*. Zine photos courtesy of the artist.

Dara Hartley is a New York City–based multidisciplinary artist and designer whose work blends technology, craft, and storytelling rooted in Afrofuturism. Combining digital tools and traditional craft techniques, she creates travel posters, textiles, and mixed-media works that envision new futures while drawing inspiration from history, literature, and the African diaspora. Her practice centers joy, self-expression, and radical imagination, celebrating Black joy, beauty, and presence across time and imagination. Outside the studio, she can often be found exploring museums, tending her garden, experimenting with microgreens, or geeking out over Star Trek.

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ROYA GHIASY
Lullllaby

Roya Ghiasy contributed *Lullllaby*, a sound work composed from recordings of breastmilk pumping. Emerging from reflections on motherhood, caregiving, and artistic practice, the piece considered the mother's body as a primary site of nourishment—the first kitchen. By transforming the intimate rhythms of pumping milk into a hidden studio soundtrack, the work blurred distinctions between labor and artmaking, care and creation, drawing attention to the often-unseen forms of work that sustain both life and creativity.

Roya Ghiasy is a multidisciplinary visual artist based between Delft and New York, with a foundation in cultural anthropology. In 2001, she entered the 49th Venice Biennale through a side door, not as a visitor, but as a country, creating the first Afghan Pavilion, "Welcome the Minister of Culture of Afghanistan", without an official invitation. This act became both artwork and inquiry, questioning systems of visibility, legitimacy, and cultural power. Moving across mediums, histories, and social environments, Ghiasy weaves personal memory with collective history, examining the subtle ways power settles into behavior, ritual, memory, and perception, and shapes how we understand the world before we recognize it.

Roya Ghiasy, *Lullllaby* 2026. Sound Sculpture. 4 minute recording. As part of ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*. Photos, left by Martin Bauer. Above by Zak Sherzad.

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14.

JED KIANG
Broth for the Road

Jed Kiang shared *Broth for the Road*, a culinary offering inspired by the overlapping land and maritime Silk Roads that have shaped centuries of cultural exchange across Asia and beyond. Combining elements of the Afghan dish Chainaki and the Taiwanese dish Yunba Teng, the slow-simmered lamb broth served as a sensory bridge between distinct culinary traditions. Shared among participants, the offering functioned as a living archive of interconnected histories, revealing food as both nourishment and a vessel of cultural memory.

Jed Kiang speaking about the broth he prepared for ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*. Photo by Zak Sherzad.

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Jed Kiang is a chef, educator, and storyteller from Taiwan whose life mission is to connect "different" minority communities through food, culture, and the struggles that people in our communities share - whether political, economic, or human. His areas of research include Taiwanese cuisine, Kurdish society, and the shared history of food and spice across the world.

Jed Kiang, *Broth for the Road*, culinary offering for ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen*.
Stills by Jonas Bauer.

ACAF Talking Peers Reading Salon: *Rewilding the Kitchen* program discussion session. Photos, top by Martin Bauer, bottom by David Pae.

ACAF Asia Contemporary Art Forum

Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF), formerly Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), connects Asia-based and Asian diaspora artists, curators, and cultural practitioners across the United States and worldwide. Through curatorial and educational initiatives, ACAF brings Asia's artistic practices, histories, and knowledge traditions into dialogue across cultures, disciplines, and geographies.

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