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ABOUT THE E–JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

Editorial

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Guest Editor

INTRODUCTION

The 'Contemporary' embraces the dynamic of the current. Thus, contemporary thought should also ideally encourage multidisciplinary curiosity, encounter and engagement. This multidisciplinary dynamic, fuelled by creativity, is the platform for the Vision Culture Lecture program ('VC Lectures'), launched in 2010 by Shalini Ganendra Fine Art ('SGFA'), in Malaysia, with the endorsement of the UNESCO Observatory. Over this short and enriching period, the VC Lectures have developed an informing presence in the region, fostering meaningful global discourse and cultural encounter, to inform the Contemporary.

SGFA is a pioneering cultural organization, embracing an eclectic and quality sensibility for collecting, consideration, capacity building and place making. We value new visuals - whether for materiality, concept or culture - and multidisciplinary processes in their creation. In addition to the VC Lectures and exhibition program, SGFA has: an artist residency program (the 'Vision Culture Art Residency'); an arts management residency for university students (the 'Exploring East Residency'); and the PavilionNOW project which celebrates local architects, contemporary design and materiality. Through these programs and a growing interest in emerging regions, we delight in the increasing international engagement with our represented areas of South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

Over twenty three speakers have participated in the VC Lectures since their inception, each invited because of eminent reputations and notable contributions within respective fields. The lecture module involves free public talks at the SGFA's award winning green space (designed by Ken Yeang), Gallery Residence, with external lectures often hosted by other local institutions and organized by SGFA. Participating curators generally conduct portfolio reviews with local artists, learning more about regional geopolitics and art practices. Strong press coverage enables outreach beyond the urban populace, as does active social and digital media. Speakers stay at the Gallery Residence and enjoy vernacular space that embraces natural ventilation and cooling systems, elegant aesthetic and greening philosophies. The VC Lecture program is as much about cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary encounters as it is about content – all defining platforms for SGFA's exhibition progamming as well.

The eleven luminaries published in this peer-reviewed UNESCO Observatory journal were selected for a variety of reasons including expertise. They are: Sir Roy Calne (award winning surgeon and artist, UK); Christopher Phillips (Curator, International Center of Photography, NYC); Anoma Pieris (Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne); Susan Cochrane (curator and authority on Pacific Art); Volker Albus (Professor of Product Design at the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe, Germany); Michiko Kasahara (Chief Curator at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan); Matt Golden (Artist/Curator); Gregory Burgess (Architect, Order of Australia); Beth Citron (Curator, Rubin Museum NYC); Oscar Ho (curator and academic, HK); and Brian Robinson (Torres Island artist and curator, Australia).

Sir Roy Calne speaks of personal experiences using art to nurture empathy in his medical practice and his own passion for creating. Christopher Phillips, the pioneering curator credited with introducing Chinese contemporary photography to the United

States, writes about an important exhibition that he curated at the International Center of Photography. Anoma Pieris considers the impact of modernism on architecture in South Asia, and analyses supportive political and social ideologies, while Gregory Burgess tackles the place of architecture in creating a sense of individual and community belonging. Volker Albus, playfully but seriously asks us to consider the role of designers as technical and social mediators. Michiko Kasahara adeptly reviews challenges faced by successful contemporary Japanese photographers in addressing and reflecting Japanese culture, real and perceived. Susan Cochrane explores cultural ownership of Pacific Art through the use of terminology and context. Brian Robinson writes about his personal cultural narrative as a Torres Island artist. Beth Citron shares insights on Francesco Clemente's acclaimed '*Inspired by India*' exhibition which opened at the Rubin Museum in 2014. Oscar Ho speaks to the challenges of curatorship and requirements to sharpen its impact and discipline. Matt Golden shares the visual journey of his art alter-ego, Juan Carlos, with special focus on experiences in Malaysia. We bring to you a wonderful mix of multi-disciplinary and cultural discussions that show the exhilarating impact of this program.

The Vision Culture Program enters its sixth year and we look forward to its continuing impact as a pivotal program to foster meaningful global discourse. We have forged strong friendships and benefitted from cross cultural discovery thereby building platforms for more informed understanding and appreciation of our world.

Many thanks to Lindy Joubert, Editor-in-Chief of the UNESCO Observatory journal, and her marvelous team, for supporting this project from its inception; to SGFA's Exploring East Residents who assisted with editing these texts and most importantly, the amazing Vision Culture Lecture participants who have fostered knowledge, encounter and consequently, the Contemporary.

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Critical Curatorship

AUTHOR **Oscar Ho**

BIOGRAPHY

Prof. Oscar Ho Hing-kay was formerly the Exhibition Director of the Hong Kong Arts Centre and is the Founding Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai. He is currently the director of the MA and BA Programs in Cultural Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has curated numerous exhibitions on the arts of Hong Kong, Mainland China and South East Asia. As a founding director of the Asia Art Archive, founder of the Asian Curatorial Network and the Hong Kong Chapter of the International Art Critics Association, he has written for international publications such as the *Art Journal, Art in Asia Pacific, Art Forum* and *Newsweek*.

The topic of 'Critical Curatorship' is about the critical contemplation of the format of exhibition presentation, the infrastructure of power and ideologies behind such an infrastructure. I will use examples of exhibitions I have curated to illustrate my self-reflection and creative curatorial responses to this issue.

QUESTIONING THE PRACTICE

Soon after I took up my job, I looked after a major exhibition showcasing photographs by the Hungarian photojournalist Robert Capa (1913-54). Among the exhibits, there was a set of three photos taken when Capa was in China during the civil war period. The three photos consisted of a photo of Chiang Kai-Shek, the leader of China at that time, Zhou En-Lai, one of the leaders of the rebellious Communist Party, and a picture of a woman crying in desperation (behind her was a destroyed home). The question was how should they be arranged?

In the end, I chose to arrange them as the crying woman first, Chiang Kai-Shek second and Zhou En-Lai last. I reasoned that since suffering in China existed long before Chiang and Zhou, the order should show historical facts. The incident gave me a message; the role of a curator is never objective, they strongly affect understandings of art, and in this case, history.

WALKING AROUND THE GUGGENHEIM

The Guggenheim in New York is famous for its beautiful spiral gallery, but the architecture of the building actually dictates our movements, our ways of looking, and our ways of understanding art. When walking around the Guggenheim we

must follow a route that makes us see art as progressing along a singular, linear path. This is a very modernist perception that is frequently challenged in the post-modern era.

When I was at MoMA in 2001, they were planning to build their new extension. One of the key debates surrounded whether there would be one single entry and one single exit, or multiple entries and exits. In short, the debate surrounded whether the exits should be modern or post-modern. In the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, there is no single entry or route, instead people can move freely and choose their paths by themselves. This sign of democracy was first used in the Pompidou Centre in Paris where visitors are free to choose how they experience the space. I am not trying to suggest that there is a correct way of looking at or experiencing art, instead I will try to show that one's perception of art is strongly preset.

THE WHITE CUBE

Why must the walls of today's museums be white? The modern exhibition display is mainly influenced by the format of display created by MoMA in New York. A white, empty space implies a specific aesthetic where a gallery is supposed to be a contemplative space, divorced from any disturbances. In theory, this makes art appreciation a pure act of formalistic appreciation where contextual linkage or association is taken away.

THE LABEL: CHALLENGING THE LANGUAGE OF DISPLAY

We are all accustomed to the practice of placing labels next to artworks. We must however, question why artworks need labelling and explaining in the first place. In the 18th Century works were never labelled as it was assumed that viewers already

knew about artists and their intentions. Today, some believe that you need to give adequate information so that an audience can fully appreciate what they are viewing. On the other hand there are people who think that you do not need to educate or instruct, just giving the basic information allows people to interpret artworks for themselves. In spite of these competing dialogues, the question still remains, do works of art even need explaining at all?

In 1994, I was invited to run an installation at an exhibition at the Hong Kong University Museum, entitled, *Engaging Tradition: Violation*. As an artist and curator, I was asked to rethink their display of Chinese antiquities. I proceeded to challenge the language of museum display by playing around with the labels.

The need to include artist's names on labels is based on a belief in artists as the central core of artistic creation. Art then, becomes not mixtures of many different social elements, but heroic, creative acts of individuals. After dropping the name of an artist, including the title of an artwork in a label provides a topic, or sometimes a story to reveal an artwork's underlying meaning. Thereafter a year of creation is normally mentioned to locate a work within a linear, developmental framework defined by time. Artworks are then normally assigned a category based on a medium or type of object.

Therefore the language employed by exhibitions strongly affects our ways of looking. At the exhibition under discussion, I succeeded in changing the content of labels. For example, I changed one label to 'This is the most expensive artwork at the entire museum', and another to 'This is the favourite artwork of the museum director's wife'. For me, these are all legitimate reasons for why certain artworks can come to be displayed.

Art display is never objective; the language employed is loaded with ideologies that dictate our perceptions of art that people, including curators, are not even aware of. It is not only

the presentation of exhibitions that can influence; posters, education programs and press releases all continue to impact our understandings of art. A curator then, becomes the art world's gatekeeper by defining, selecting and interpreting what art is.

CRITICAL CURATORSHIP

Critical curatorship recognizes that curatorial practice strongly affects how the public perceives art. It determines what kind of art is selected to show to an audience. A curator plays a highly influential role since even when they try to be objective, interferences are inevitable. Serving as a bridge between communities and producers of art, curators thus play important roles in shaping the definitions and understandings of culture. They also have moral obligations as gatekeepers to be continuously critical and self-reflective of their own curatorial practices.

Critical curatorship involves a critical review of the nature of curatorial practices, the traditions of exhibiting (including the language and techniques employed), as well as the definitions and infrastructures of art that shape people's understandings.

MY CURATORIAL EXPERIMENT

I was trained as an artist in North America for 9 years and after returning to Hong Kong in 1984, I worked as an artist before later becoming a curator. I was employed as the Exhibition Director of the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1988. At that time I had no experience in curating, and most people did not even know what a curator was. This gave me an open field, free from any restrictions or traditions.

Soon after I became a curator, I realized that I wanted to help ordinary people get closer to art. In 1989, I curated the *Mobile Art Show*, an exhibition that brought contemporary art to some of the poorest members of the neighborhood I was working in. After the painful process of licensing, I finally brought a group of artists to install artworks in a run-down neighborhood's playground.

On the day we were to begin installing works, there was a group of young people playing basketball in the playground. We were about to show them our permit and ask them to clear the venue when a question arose. A passerby asked, "What makes you think that your art is more important than these young people's basketball game?". I immediately retreated and installed the exhibition on the other side of the playground, allowing the children to continue their game. This made me realize that some things, such as basketball, are just as meaningful to people as art is to curators. Sometimes artists and curators can be too self centered and arrogant to realize that.

WHO HAS THE RIGHT TO DEFINE ART?

The very first exhibition I worked on in 1988 was entitled *Living with Art* and was organized by my predecessor. It was an open exhibition imitating the *Summer Art Show* organized annually by the Royal Academy in London. The exhibition was open for everyone to participate in and there was a panel of judges to select works.

The question raised during the exhibition was, who had the authority to say what was art and what was not? Our society has built a structure of authority that tells you what art is and I decided to challenge this by looking at art from an anthropological/sociological perspective. I decided to remove the adjudication system that selects artworks for exhibitions,

opening entry up to everyone. The criterion was that as long as someone was willing to submit, we would show their works.

What I wanted to show was that in our society, there are many artists making many kinds of art, and they are all personally and socially meaningful. The Hong Kong Arts Centre at that time was a prestigious place and being able to show one's work there was an honor. The open system consequently attracted a lot of submissions.

The only group that did not participate was the 'professional' artists, for the open selection criteria took away their prestige as 'special creative persons'. The opening night was a joyous community event and a lot of people who did not normally come to the Arts Centre showed up. Moms and pas, grandpas and grandmas all happily took pictures in front of artworks created by family members. It was a communal celebration of creativity with no boundaries.

I had successfully challenged the authority of cultural institutions in their exclusive rights to define and select art, but my problem was then what my next exhibition would be. If I gave up curatorial selection again, my next show would be exactly the same kind of show, and so would the next one. The exhibition did not even need a curator. The problem was solved when I talked with my boss, who told me they had hired me because they wanted my perspective, and he felt that my perspective would be meaningful to the community.

There is nothing wrong with having a single perspective; there is a problem, however, when society only has one perspective. Instead, what Hong Kong needs are many Arts Centers and many Oscar Hos with different perspectives.

One should not apologize for having a distinctive perspective, as long as there are other options for people to choose from. However, considering the impacts a curator could have on

understandings of art, it is important for a curator to be self-critical and to constantly review their own approach.

WHAT IS ART?

My job is to deal with art. A fundamental question that comes out frequently is, 'what is art and what does it mean to ordinary people'? I co-curated a project called 'In Search of Art' in 1990. The project invited people to send in objects that no longer served any function, but were still on display in people's living rooms and homes. I was interested to find out what objects people found meaningful to look at; whether they called it art or not was not important. Along with the objects, entrants also wrote a short statement explaining why they still kept these objects to look at.

Figure 1
In Search of Art, Exhibition, 1989

In order to avoid the event being participated only by regular exhibition lovers, normally educated middle or upper middle class individuals, special efforts were needed to promote the project among the working class community.

There were a lot of personal objects in the exhibition; one child sent in a candle that looked like a clown, an object he had cherished since winning it in a Christmas draw; a girl submitted an ordinary comb, given to her by her grandma before she passed away; another lady entered pictures of herself as a young, beautiful woman but when she came to the opening, she was old and had gained a lot of weight; and there was also a Rolex watch submitted by a man who although now blind, could still remember how beautiful the watch was. A taxi driver sent in a pineapple made out of one-cent notes from China. Obviously a work of love and labor, it was a gift made for his girlfriend who later on became his wife.

What became obvious during the course of this exhibition was that what makes art meaningful is not the style or the artistic significance of a work within history, nor even the artistic quality of an object. It is the personal linkage of stories and memories that make a work meaningful. Often when curators or critics approach these objects, their inability to understanding the stories behind them can make them fall back into the employment of habitual vocabularies of form, style, history, social and ideological context. The intimate, personal parts that provide essential meaning to many people are missing because of the inadequacy of the curator and critic to look deeper into the stories behind objects.

I have curated many exhibitions, many of them straightforward, only in some have I been experimental. I want to end this talk with an exhibition entitled *Hong Kong Incarnated: History, Community and Individual*, which I curated in 1997 during the same month that Hong Kong was returned to China.

It was a complicated show and I want to talk about one particular section of the exhibition, the history of Hong Kong. Before I talk about the exhibition, I need to briefly give some background information.

As the destiny of Hong Kong was confirmed when it was declared that it would be returned to China in 1997, there was a strong movement of recovering and reclaiming history and cultural identity. At the same time, the Chinese government had commissioned many scholars to re-write the history of Hong Kong as if the history taught during the colonial days was wrong.

Meanwhile, within local communities there were people constructing their own histories of Hong Kong by collecting personal memories and infusing them with nostalgia. For a while I was researching Hong Kong's mythologies with limited success, until one day I came across a creature called Lo Ting.

Lo Ting is a half-fish, half-human creature that lives on Lantau Island in Hong Kong. There is very little information about them, but some tales that suggest they were followers of a rebel leader who was defeated in a battle against the emperor of the Sung dynasty. For fear of being persecuted, the surviving Lo Ting escaped to Hong Kong where they went on to lead sub-human lives on Lantau Island. I found the story fascinating, as it is a great metaphor for Hong Kong. I always feel that Hong Kong is an 'in-between' place, not quite East or West, not quite here or there. Hong Kong is exactly like Lo Ting, who live between land and water, between human and fish, the children of rebels who ran away from persecution to a barren piece of land in order to survive.

At a time when everybody was trying to tell me what Hong Kong's history was, I decided to curate an exhibition about it's ancient history that was based on the story of Lo Ting. There was very little information on Lo Ting, but it did not matter, we

could fabricate it.

What is history anyway? Is it about dates, dynasties or important people? Is it about facts? What are facts anyway? Can history be a metaphor? Most ancient histories started off with mythology and stories of great metaphorical significance. And who has the right to write history, the historian? The academic? Why do these people have such exclusive rights? Can ordinary people write history too?

I got a group of friends together, some artists, writers, and academics and collectively, we fabricated the ancient history of Lo Ting. It was, however, not a fooling around with fantasies, it was a serious attempt to metaphorically tell the truth about Hong Kong's people through fabricated stories. For example, by showing that people can come from the sea instead of from the land, we could in turn, highlight the in-between-ness of Hong-Kongers.

Our story-making group only constructed a basic story line that we then passed on to artists, who used fake archaeological finds to further fabricate it. Sometimes the artist's stories contradicted each other, but that was okay as we saw that history is always full of contradictions. We went on to display these fake archeological finds as important discoveries found at Lantou Island.

The exhibition not only challenged the making and content of history, it also challenged the institutional authority of museums. Some of the faked archeological finds were extremely unconvincing but once displayed in a museum environment, with the formal display boxes, they gained a convincing authority that made them seem real.

In the exhibition, we linked Lo Ting with the Hakka, boat people living along the coast of Guangdong who have been long suppressed. By linking them together, we gave the exhibition a contemporary meaning. During our research we also discovered

a history that had never been told before. In 1197, exactly 800 years before 1997, there was a massacre of Hakka people at Lantau Island that practically wiped out the entire population. We wanted to tell that part of 'real' history convincingly.

Lo Ting, 1979

The greatest challenge came after the exhibition was opened. I wanted the exhibition to make a metaphorical statement about the Hong Kong people and I knew that if the audience did not believe in it, I would have failed. However, I also knew that if the audience did believe in it, I would feel terrible. During the show, I overhead a father, misled by the faked authority of the museum display, telling his daughter with all seriousness, 'this is how our ancestors used to live'.

I asked myself, what did I want from the audience? I did not want them to fully believe in it but I also did not want them not to believe in it. I wanted them to come out confused since confusion is the beginning of questioning. I wanted them to be aware of the state of ambiguity, for history is ambiguous. With the exception of a small group of art people from the cultural field, there were not many responses to the exhibition, and even fewer people understood what I tried to do.

After the exhibition, I wanted to continue to organize exhibitions on Lo Ting every year for 5 years to see if repeating a lie could make it true. Unfortunately a lack of funding made this impossible. However, a funny thing happened not long after; two years later the History Teachers Association recommended the study of Lo Ting as supplementary learning material for students studying the history of Hong Kong.

Overseas there was a scholar from UCLA discussing the exhibition in her book on 'Asian Visuality', and a student from the UK wrote her MA thesis on the exhibition. Over the last few years, local scholars began writing about Lo Ting, books began mentioning Lo Ting and people started talking about Lo Ting as our ancestor on websites. Last year there was even a television program on a popular channel talking about them. I think we have all begun to believe in Lo Ting.

If you ever come to Hong Kong, do go to Lantau Island, especially near the Tai O area. On a good sunny day, if you get lucky, you may find a green creature swimming in the sea.