



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

UNESCO OBSERVATORY
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1, 2021

UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur
VOLUME 7: ISSUE 1: 2021

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Cover Image: Ernesto Pujazon
Totem to "Wiracocha", Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2007–2008

ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal

an Openly Published Journal affiliated with

The UNESCO Observatory at

The University of Melbourne

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert

Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory

Email: lindyaj@unimelb.edu.au

Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education



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**ABOUT THE
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-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

Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

BIOGRAPHY



Shalini Ganendra's impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

FOREWORD

Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

Yes We Can: What Malaysia can learn from New York's ascent to the Centre of the Art World

AUTHOR

Madhavi Peters, founder of *The Tropicalist*, Journalist, Cultural Connector

BIOGRAPHY

Madhavi Peters is the founder of *The Tropicalist*, an online publication that is full of thought-provoking articles on culture. She founded *The Tropicalist* in 2015 in Singapore, and continues with the publication today, despite being now located in Toronto, Canada.

In terms of her education, she has a varied background, having a Bachelor's in



Philosophy and Southeast Asia Studies from Hobart and William Smith Colleges, a masters in Southeast Asian Studies and International Economics from John Hopkins, and a Doctorate in Law from the University of Toronto.

Peters was also a Docent and Researcher at the Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Arts and has an extensive background working in the media and communications industry. Peters is a self-described lifelong traveller and

storyteller, spinning compelling narratives out of the disorderly events of a world at an inflection point.

In 2018, Peters joined a dynamic panel of cultural visionaries in the Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) session “Emerging Practices & Platforms”, held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, as part of the GWKL Luminary Programme.

GWKL is an excellent showcase for Malaysia’s vibrant, multicultural society and strong democratic institutions, positioning Malaysia as a key player on the Asian art scene.

- Madhavi Peters

Yes, We Can: What Malaysia can learn from New York's ascent to the Centre of the Art World

Can Malaysia's small but vibrant local arts scene make its presence felt on the crowded global art stage? After three days of panel discussions gallery visits and scrumptious Malaysian cuisine at the 2018 Kuala Lumpur Gallery Weekend, this was the question on everyone's minds.

Participants at the Gallery Weekend came from around the globe and across disciplines, representing a variety of perspectives, which gave rise to lively debate on how to scale the Malaysian art ecosystem.

Of special interest to this writer was the panel discussion *Multi-View: Malaysian Vision*, where, on one hand, art practitioner Mahen Bala and critic Soon Heng Lim pondered whether education or an open society was the key to developing a deep art market. On the other hand, representing the marketplace itself were gallerist Raja Annuar and collector Bingley Sim, who pointed out the necessity of international exposure for Malaysian artists and standardisation of prices via the galleries.

Figure 1: Madhavi Peters (centre) featured on the GWKL 2018 interdisciplinary panel "Emerging Practices and Platforms" at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



One could imagine similarly lively debates taking place in New York, less than a hundred years ago. It's hard to believe now, but back then, New York was deemed a backwater by sophisticates in Paris, the cultural leader of the Western world at that time. Yet, within twenty short years, the centre of gravity of the modern art world had moved across the Atlantic to America.

To Bala and Lim's point about open societies being prerequisite to the development of art markets, the case of New York provides an opportunity for nuanced comparison. New York's ascent to the top took place against immense threat to the "free world," first from Nazism and later, communism. France's disastrous capitulation to the Germans in World War Two boosted New York's claim to cultural leadership of the West. And Paris was too exhausted from its war efforts to reclaim that leadership in the years following the war.

Yet, America was hardly a bastion of free expression and liberal social mores during these years. Society by and large remained conservative, and the notorious McCarthy trials, which had a dampening effect on artistic expression, had popular support. While New York had its bohemians, they existed at the margins.

In our own era, consider the growing tide of xenophobia and authoritarianism in the world these last two years. And then consider the Malaysian elections of 2018, which were, as the British High Commissioner pointed out to us at a lunch she hosted during the Gallery Weekend, the one bright spot in an otherwise dismal year for open societies. As the U.S. cedes its global leadership to deal with internal problems, could Malaysia hoist the flag for openness? Even if not globally, regional leadership is within the realm of possibility. But Malaysia is a conservative society, Bala and Lim might retort. To that, the response must be, yes but so was America, as we just saw.

Furthermore, while the definition of Asian values took a markedly conservative turn during the 1990s, it had less to do with any actual Asian traditions than with co-opting the region's rapidly expanding middle classes. A more thorough examination reveals a healthy tradition of openness within the many strands of Asian culture.

Southeast Asia has always been open to the world—Arab, Chinese, Portuguese and Tamil traders have flocked to its ports since the beginning of history. When the Dutch and Portuguese were jostling for trade monopolies in the waters of the East Indies in the seventeenth century, local potentates came out forcefully for the *Asian* traditions of free trade. [1]

Traders from around the world brought to Southeast Asian shores foreign goods, but more importantly, foreign ideas. These were all freely considered and adopted on local terms—not forced upon a population as a result of foreign invasion.

It might even be argued that this long-standing tradition of openness puts Kuala Lumpur ahead of New York at the same point in its trajectory. Therefore, it would seem that popular commitment to an open society is nice, but not necessary for a deep art market.

Government-led education, however, is indispensable. To wit, New York’s cultural leadership was not organic but rather a carefully orchestrated, top-down initiative to infuse the general population with the belief that they were the rightful heirs to the leadership of the free West.

Such nationalism was necessary to rally the troops for American involvement in World War Two and the Cold War. Government-sponsored art shows and other educational/cultural activities promoting *American* art and artists were one of the many “ways in which a public once cut off from the products of culture was shown an image of itself, an image of fighting America, and thereby persuaded ideologically and intellectually that the defence of culture, of its culture, had become crucial to the survival of civilisation in general.” [2]

Nonetheless, cultural critics and policymakers of the era understood that this nationalism had to be balanced by an internationalism too. For American artists, long ignored by their own preeminent institutions in favour of their Parisian counterparts, the temptations of xenophobia were hard to resist now that they were finally being given their due. And yet, they were repeatedly cautioned against giving in and exhorted instead to learn from the Parisian refugees who were pouring into New York. The hope was that by doing so, they could make something new and of their own.

Back to the Malaysian case, Annuar and Sim are right to call for greater international exposure for Malaysian artists. However, it needs to be a two-way street. As tempting as it is, not only in Kuala Lumpur but also in other Asian capitals that are only now casting off the long shadow of colonialism and coming into their own culturally, to insist upon a narrow and exclusionary definition of “Malaysian” art, the rewards of resisting that temptation promise to be great.

Already, there are movements afoot in the art world to expand this definition. On a visit to the Shalini Ganendra Advisory gallery space, this writer noticed the prominent placement of indigenous artworks, typically relegated elsewhere to the status of craft.

The move to bestow art world recognition upon long-marginalised modes of creation was in line with the views expressed by Lindsey Joubert, the Vice President of the World Craft Council, in a panel earlier in the day. It was a quietly revolutionary call to rethink the meaning of the modern within the Malaysian context. Similar visits were organised during the Gallery Weekend to the National Arts Gallery and the Museum of Islamic Art, where viewers could witness a Malaysia in constant conversation with the larger world.

Another advantage contemporary Malaysia has over mid-century America is its long-standing membership in the regional bloc ASEAN, which provides a pre-existing framework for regional art world co-operation. Via ASEAN, Kuala Lumpur's galleries and museums could become fora for regional artistic exchange. (An additional benefit of promoting regionalism over globalism is that the consumers of the artworks all have access to the same cultural language as the creators of the art.) Now, having put forth an educational strategy, do we then leave it to the Malaysian government to execute?

Far from it. As Annuar and Sim reminded us, the gallerist and buyer have a crucial role in the creation of the market. Yet, to return to the New York experience once more, the artist still has to take the initiative.

The art historian Melissa Rachleff has written of how post-war avant-garde artists in New York who were frustrated at being ignored by the galleries in favour of known names opened up their own galleries to showcase their work. These artist-run showrooms did not replace, but were a stepping-stone to, the all-important commercial gallery system, which seemed to require that additional nudge from the creators. [3] Arts communities in other Asian regions such as South Asia have followed the example of New York's artist-led initiatives with similarly promising results. [4]

The experience of New York shows the importance of collaborating across disciplines in order to build a visual arts platform. Having been given the opportunity to interact with all aspects of the arts ecosystem in Kuala Lumpur during the Gallery Weekend, it seems that a similar cross-disciplinary collaboration is afoot in Malaysia. The future looks bright.

Figure 2: The two-winged (Greek: dipteros) fruit (Greek: karpos) of the “Dipterocarps”, the trees dominating the southeast Asian rainforests, which changed the course of Malaysia’s history, and which Madhavi Peters’ GWKL 2018 workshop was about. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 3: The timeline of a dipterocarp tree on a bento box, at the “Dipto Bento” workshop devised by Madhavi Peters during GWKL 2018. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 4: GWKL 2018 Luminaries attending Madhavi Peters’ workshop “Dipto Bento”, an exploration of botanicals at the Me.reka Makerspace by Biji-biji Initiative at Publika Shopping Gallery. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



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