



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

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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.

An interview with Christopher Phillips

AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Phillips is an independent curator and critic based in New York City.

From 2000 to 2016 he worked as a curator at the famed International Centre of Photography (ICP) in New York. He has organized many exhibitions that examine



modernist photography of the early 20th century, as well as contemporary Asian photography and media art.

These exhibitions include *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (2004, co-curated with Wu Hung); *Heavy Light: Recent Photography and Video from Japan* (with Noriko Fuku, 2008); *Wang Qingsong: When Worlds Collide* (2011); *Han Youngsoo: Photographs of Seoul 1956-63* (2016); *Life and Dreams: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Media Art* (2018); and *Zheng Guogu: Photoworks 1993-2016* (2019).

Phillips has also authored several books, including *The New Vision: Photographs from the Ford Motor Company Collection* (with Maria Morris Hambourg, 1989); *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (with Wu Hung, 2004); and *Life and Dreams: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Media Art* (with Wu Hung, 2018).

He is a board member of Asia Art Archive in America, and a member of the editorial board of the *Trans-Asia Photography Review*. He teaches courses on the history and theory of photography at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Being one of the two first Luminaries for the inaugural Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2016, Phillips lectured on "Unbounded Arts", which focused on international artists who transcended multiple artistic mediums, at the National Visual Arts Gallery.

The inaugural Gallery Weekend KL provided visitors like me with fast-track access to the city's rapidly growing art scene. Well-organized and including a wide range of events, it offered many opportunities for in-depth conversation with local artists, gallerists, collectors, curators, and museum directors. Gallery Weekend KL opened my eyes to the unexpected riches of KL's artistic culture.

- Christopher Phillips

We interviewed Christopher Phillips almost four years after his participation in the inaugural GWKL 2016. He elaborates on his journey with Chinese contemporary photography and visual art, imparts his knowledge as an experienced curator, and shares his encounters with the Malaysian cultural scene.

Q: Tell us a little about your initial encounter with and developed expertise with Chinese contemporary photography. What were the exhibitions you first organised in the US and what did you hope to achieve?

Christopher Phillips: I started to travel to China in 1999, at the urging of some of my Chinese students at the School of Visual Art in New York. “You’ve got to come to China,” they said, “What’s happening with the artists there is really crazy.” I had already met the eminent Chinese curator Li Xianting in New York, and he helped to arrange a schedule of studio visits when I made my first trip to Beijing. One of the first artists I met was Ai Weiwei, who was enormously generous and made introductions for me with a long list of artists in Beijing and Shanghai. It was thanks to his help that I met Song Dong & Yin Xiuzhen, Wang Qingsong, Yang Fudong, Ding Yi, and many others. I was astonished at the visual power and the imaginative freedom of the works that I saw in China.

In 2000, I started to work as a curator at the International Centre of Photography in New York, where I won approval to begin exploring the possibility of a major exhibition of contemporary Chinese photography and media art. It was Ai Weiwei who suggested in 2001 that I meet with Prof. Wu Hung of the University of Chicago; as it turned out, he was also starting to research a similar kind of exhibition. We met, talked and decided to work together on a collaborative show. That exhibition opened in 2004 under the title “*Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China*.” It proved remarkably successful and toured to museums in the US, Britain, and Germany for the next two years. That show established my credibility as a curator in China and made it possible for me to involve quite a few Chinese artists in exhibition projects in the following years.

Q: Have you been able to maintain your original enthusiasm for Chinese contemporary art, now some 20 years on?

CP: Looking back, it’s now clear to me that Chinese contemporary art had an extraordinary run from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, coinciding with the explosive growth of the country’s economy and urban culture.

I was lucky to arrive toward the end of that period, to meet dozens of original and highly productive Chinese artists who had been able to work steadily for many years without much distraction. All of that started to change when the international art market discovered contemporary Chinese art in the early 2000s, and the artists began increasingly to gear their artmaking to the market's needs.

At the same time, many of the more successful independent artists began to receive invitations to become faculty members at China's state-affiliated art academies. I think it's fair to say that for quite a few artists, the achievement of financial success and social esteem ultimately took the edge off of much of their art.

At present, I would say that it's among Chinese media artists that you can find the strongest evidence of sustained inventiveness and free-wheeling experimentation. Artists like Yang Fudong, Cao Fei, Lu Yang, and Hao Jingban continue to be pathbreaking figures on both the national and international art scene.

Q: What has been your curatorial compass? You are considered a curatorial pioneer in introducing Chinese Contemporary photography to America. You are an explorer. What are the questions you ask yourself when evaluating a country's cultural pulse and how to engage with it for your projects?

CP: I have to say that at any given moment there are only a handful of countries that exhibit a heightened cultural pulse. It's extremely rare to find a situation like that in China, where for two decades you had successive generations of artists working with peak energy and uninterrupted creativity. Historically, moments like that are the exception, not the rule.

Typically, I find myself keeping notes on 20 or 30 promising artists whose work I've encountered in different countries during my travels. It's impossible to know in advance which one or two of those talented young artists will find a way to sustain a productive career over time.

So much depends on accidents of luck and timing. Every artist's creative life is filled with obstacles and uncertainties, and the attrition rate is shockingly high. For the younger artists I'm interested in, I try to make repeated studio visits and follow the course of their development. If they are still working at a high level by the time they have been out of art school for five years or so, I start to think about ways to involve them in exhibition projects.

Figure 1: Christopher Phillips on his GWKL 2016 tour of Artemis Art, a Kuala Lumpur gallery which prioritises promoting young and emerging artists from Indonesia, Malaysia, as well as other Asian countries. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: What were your impressions of Malaysia in 2011 and then in 2016?

CP: In September 2011, I spent a week in Kuala Lumpur, thanks to a travel grant from the Asian Cultural Council. I presented two evening talks as part of the ongoing Vision Culture series organised by Shalini Ganendra Fine Arts; the gallery regularly organises lectures by international artists, curators, and art critics who are visiting in Kuala Lumpur.

The gallery also scheduled a full day of portfolio reviews. Attendees included artists and photographers from throughout Malaysia, as well as several a number who had travelled from Singapore. I spent approximately half an hour with each person, reviewing their work, offering feedback, and trying to answer their questions. Most attendees described their feeling of working in cultural isolation in Malaysia. They expressed eagerness to find ways to connect with regional and international arts organisations and to become part of an international dialogue about contemporary art.

During that trip, I met with the young curators at the National Museum of Modern Art, who discussed with great frankness the challenges that they face in a country that has a very limited tradition of modern art. They noted that the city's Museum of Islamic Arts is always crowded with visitors and school groups, while their museum is sparsely attended.

I spent one fascinating day with students and teachers in the design school at Taylor's University, one of the many private universities found in Kuala Lumpur. The students that I met were a very diverse group; they came from throughout Southeast Asia as well as India and also the Middle East.

They said that the key appeal of Malaysian private universities was the opportunity to follow a Western-style liberal-arts curriculum while living in a Muslim country. I found the students to be extremely sophisticated and well-informed about global culture. They were almost indistinguishable from their counterparts in the US and Europe as regards styles of clothing, taste in music, critical attitudes, and openness to new ideas. Most of them expected to return to their home countries after completing their education.

On the surface, Malaysian culture appeared to me to be still somewhat cut off from global currents. However, my experience with the artists and students I met in Kuala Lumpur suggested that there exists an extensive core group of young people who are actively seeking ways to create a cosmopolitan contemporary culture.

In November 2016, I paid a second visit to Kuala Lumpur to take part in the inaugural Gallery Weekend KL. That event provided international visitors like me with new insights into the city's rapidly evolving art scene. Well-organised and including a wide range of studio visits, gallery and museum visits, lectures, and panel discussions, GWKL offered many opportunities for in-depth conversations with local artists, gallerists, collectors, curators, and museum directors.

Figure 2: The GWKL 2016 tour to Artemis Art, a Kuala Lumpur gallery which prioritises promoting young and emerging artists, with a special focus on those from the Southeast Asian region. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 3: Shalini Ganendra (founder of GWKL) interviewing Christopher Phillips after his lecture titled “Unbounded Arts”, as part of the GWKL 2016 Luminary Pulse Series at the National Visual Arts Gallery. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



One of the most absorbing events was a tour of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, led by the museum’s visionary director Syed Mohamad Albukhary. The IAMM’s extraordinary facilities and collection confirmed Kuala Lumpur’s ability to produce art institutions that can attract global recognition.

In addition, I found it particularly valuable to hear about the experiences of Kuala Lumpur’s gallerists, and to learn of the many challenges they have had to face in the process of stirring up public awareness of Malaysia’s young but vital contemporary art scene.

Q: What is the importance of cultural marquee events for local arts appreciation and global introduction and awareness?

CP: During the past three decades, recurring events such as gallery weekends, arts festivals, art fairs, and art biennials have come to play an important role in stimulating international awareness of local cultural scenes. Such events are a necessary part of the infrastructure required to sustain local cultural production over the long term—one component of an ever-shifting mix of economic, cultural, and educational activities.

Q: Have you included artists introduced through such platforms in your projects?

CP: Not really. I’ve been much more likely to find artists through the personal recommendations of other artists, curators, and collectors.

Q: Do you find such platforms useful still, as an academic and advisor?

CP: I would have answered that question differently six months ago. Today it appears certain that the current COVID-19 crisis will have enormous and continuing repercussions throughout the field of the visual arts.

The global pandemic will sharply reduce the kind of large-scale air travel to cultural destinations seen in previous decades. Museums, art fairs, arts festivals, and art biennials will all struggle as they search for reliable ways to safeguard their visitors and eliminate crowding through social distancing. The economic damage inflicted by the pandemic will take a serious toll on art galleries, auction houses, and private foundations. The art world is going to change in unforeseeable ways, both large and small.

Under the circumstances, the trend toward online exhibitions and art events will doubtless accelerate. You can see it happening already. Being rather old-school, I still find it difficult to establish any degree of confidence in an artist or an artwork without some kind of direct personal encounter. Few of my younger colleagues share that attitude, however. They feel quite comfortable making judgements and decisions based entirely on information and impressions gathered online.

Q: Thoughts on the impact and hope for the evolution of GWKL, which celebrates its fifth edition this year, during these strange times. A moment for very creative outreach. What are your recommendations?

Figure 4: GWKL 2016 participants viewed the exhibition “SAGER: Ties of Tenggara”, co-organised by HOM Art Trans, an independent art space in Kuala Lumpur, and the National Visual Arts Gallery. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



CP: Creative outreach, as you put it, will definitely be needed for the immediate future. Until an effective vaccine for COVID-19 is widely available, it's hard to imagine that the restrictions on international travel will be lifted, or that potential cultural travellers will want to venture far from home. In that context, imaginatively expanding GWKL's online presence becomes all the more vital.

Figure 5: Christopher Phillips (right) being interviewed for BFM, Malaysia's independent radio station, with fellow GWKL 2016 Luminary, celebrated structural engineer and designer, Hanif Kara (left). Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.

