



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

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MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

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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.

“I’m okay with no end in sight”: Process over Outcome

AUTHOR

Leeza Ahmady, Director, Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)
in New York

BIOGRAPHY

Leeza Ahmady - Born and raised in Afghanistan and based in New York, Leeza Ahmady is noted for curating large-scale multidisciplinary exhibitions, artistic collaborations, and experimental educational forums.

Since 2005, she has directed Asia Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF) (formerly Asia Contemporary Art Week) — a curatorial and educational platform through which she brings together leading US and Asia-based institutions and galleries to present cutting-edge exhibitions and dialogues with over 3000 presented artists.



In 2014, Ahmady launched FIELD MEETING art forum, critically acclaimed for staging newly commissioned performances, lecture-performances, and pop-up projects by over 250 artists, curators, and other creative minds in 6

iterations at notable New York venues.

Ahmady was a member of the Agents / Curatorial Team for the prestigious international exhibition DOCUMENTA (13) (2010-2012).

She has presented numerous exhibitions and public programs at other local and international institutions including Venice Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, MoMA, Art Basel, and many others. She has contributed texts to publications such as Flash Art, ArtAsiaPacific, Ocula, Ibraaz, Creative Time Reports, Manifesta Journal, and more. She was a panellist for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2020's *Luminary Forum II: Reconnecting – Museums, Creating & Events*.

As creative human beings, we are bestowed with imaginations that are like fertile fields that we can cultivate. It's up to us if we want to cultivate them with opportunities, compassion, joy, hope, capacity, and camaraderie, or envy, competition, and criticism. We need to collectively see the value of Asia contemporary art without having to look for validation outside of it. We won't get anywhere by believing that we have been disempowered, or that we are not represented.

- Leeza Ahmady, Director, Asia Contemporary Art Forum, New York

“I’m okay with no end in sight” Process over Outcome

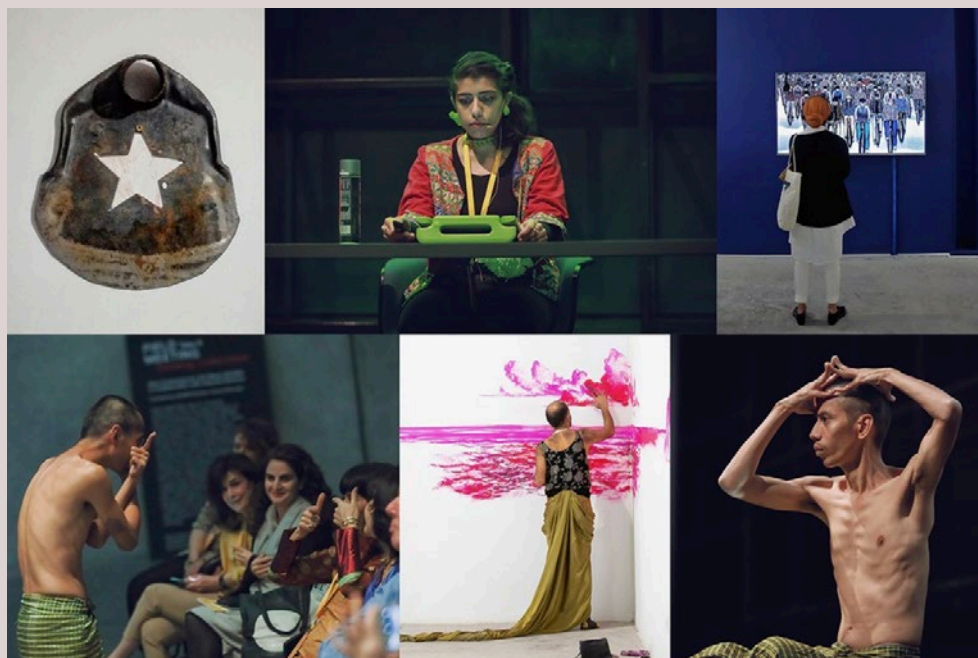
The pandemic, xenophobia and the art world: opportunities for wisdom

The impact of the pandemic is two-fold, in terms of specificity and the broader sense of the experience. We are all going through this extraordinary time as individuals and collectively as a human race — the individual human experience can help us understand more deeply the broad experience of humanity. I’m naturally upset by the xenophobic backlash against Asians, but not surprised by it. It’s unfortunate yet somewhat fortuitous that Asia was the first space for this pandemic, because it brought to the surface the kind of misconceptions about Asia, often perpetuated by the media, that many continue to buy into or fall prey to. It is this ignorance and lack of understanding of Asia as a region and a continent that continues to reinforce biases, misgivings, and an underestimation of Asia’s contribution to art. Sadly, this pandemic has shown us that prejudices against Asia and its art very much still exist today. There’s still a lot of work to be done in terms of education, increasing awareness and appreciation.

In the last 15 years, the art scene as well as the platform I direct, Asia Contemporary Art Forum, (also known as Asia Contemporary Art Week or ACAW) has changed a lot, but just because there has been more integration of Asian artists into the field does not mean the work is done. MoMA’s recent reinstallation of its galleries is much more embracing of many regions of the world, including Asia. This is encouraging and probably the most overt and long-overdue recognition by a leading institution in the art world. Indeed, there has been a rush by many institutions to be more inclusive over the last 10 years, but it has happened in a token manner of mostly surveys, books, and other little flares. As much as I appreciate the efforts, how do these initiatives actually empower artists? I don’t see how they create arenas for ongoing exchanges that could come close to representing the true extent and diversity of artistic activity across communities where it really matters, and beyond the art scene.

This pandemic has made me realize many things both professionally and personally. I noticed the tremendous outpouring of negative emotions, which comes from a primal layer and is understandable: everyone’s having a hard time, forced to be more isolated, myself included. This is contrary to what we like to do as a species, which is to roam together. Yet the intensity of the outpourings of anger, panic, and blaming “others” made me take a step back and consider everything from the perspective of the therapeutic psychological spiritual work that I have been doing.

Figure 1: FIELD MEETING
Take 6: Thinking
Collections, 2019
(various performances,
lecture-performances,
and artworks) hosted at
Alserkal Avenue Dubai,
curated by ACAF director,
Leeza Ahmady.



After all, we are not sheep or wolves — we are human beings with brains that have so much capacity, and intelligent emotional systems that, together, can help us avoid being reactionary. Those of us privileged enough to exercise self-care through yoga, meditation, and nutritional diets should be able to practice more empathy, especially at times like this. What I am perturbed by is that despite privileges, many smart, even well-meaning people have acted out of fear that blinded them to their own biases, becoming outright judgmental and even showing rage against groups they perceive to be the “other.” But, at the same time, I have also experienced a lot of compassion, empathy, silence, and sadness. That’s what the colleagues I have been in touch with are feeling — a mixture of panic and, paradoxically, perhaps relief. Interestingly, among the many things this pandemic has already changed is the way we work. I think many are discovering or rediscovering how wonderful it can be to work from home, to embrace our space and what might have been neglected within it.

Knowing that you have the power to choose to feel gratitude allows you to feel settled. It allows you to think more clearly, take care of others, and have foresight about what you can do and how you can be creative for the future. You can either be completely consumed by panic or you can approach the situation differently. Your imagination can take you to dark places, but you can also choose to think about it this way: What is the most difficult thing that’s on your plate today? If you can’t tackle it, why don’t you put it off, engage in another activity that requires creativity and freedom? This will allow you to come back to the dreadful task with more space for it because you’ve “released” something already. I created a necklace the other day because I was stepping away momentarily from a task.

It was a rhythmic activity that resulted in a beautiful item. While it had a flow, it took me a couple of hours to complete. On the following day, I was able to take care of that other task that was on my list, which was applying to a relief fund. I found out subsequently that ACAW did not qualify for it but, somehow, that discovery wasn't as debilitating to me as it would have been in the past. I'm bringing this up because in times like these, individuals, like collectives, need moments of silence. Different traditions call it different things. The Sufis called it the silence of the heart — if we don't have those moments of introspection, everything we do is going to be reactionary.

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Figure 2: FIELD MEETING
Take 5: Thinking
Projects, 2017 (various
performances, lecture-
performances, and
artworks) hosted at Asia
Society and SVA Theatre,
New York, curated by ACAF
director, Leeza Ahmady.



This will allow you to come back to the dreadful task with more space for it because you've "released" something already. I created a necklace the other day because I was stepping away momentarily from a task. It was a rhythmic activity that resulted in a beautiful item. While it had a flow, it took me a couple of hours to complete. On the following day, I was able to take care of that other task that was on my list, which was applying to a relief fund. I found out subsequently that ACAW did not qualify for it but, somehow, that discovery wasn't as debilitating to me as it would have been in the past.

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Art and curation as practice in consciousness versus production & consumption

I'm in the arts beyond the sole purpose of forwarding intellectual and aesthetic endeavours. I might have begun that way, but right now, everything is moving too fast. We need to catch our knee-jerk reactions, allow ourselves to slow down and think. I've been asking: "How am I as a human being transforming myself every day? And how can I do the same for the field that I care so much about?" If artists and cultural practitioners are able to connect with their hearts and other sources of intelligence, they could take things to a different level. We could elevate cultural pursuits to the level of humanity's evolution. That's what I've been able to bring more into my practice as a curator — paying more attention to how artists question reality, what they do that is significant to the spirit, and how they shift our perspectives and lift our souls. My curatorial work of late has been to identify such work, contextualize it, and help put it out into the world.

We should move away from output to focus on process. I'm not saying that products and outcomes are not important — they still are, but curatorial work is not just about the exhibition, it's also about the effort, one that can be transformational for the individual. I no longer feel compelled to put on exhibitions for the sake of having an audience. An audience is great but having one that doesn't connect or truly care about what is going on doesn't do much to advance my mission. Many artists and colleagues that I know have been disenchanted with putting out work and not receiving meaningful engagement from their audience, who doesn't seem to be benefiting from the exchange, the energy, or the effort. What I'm calling for is to not be fixated on end-products per se and be open to an organic evolution of what the field could be or look like post-pandemic. But this cannot happen at the speed everyone's still going at. How many more online exhibitions and viewing rooms can we stomach under current circumstances? Can we imagine something different? As much as I appreciate the efforts and respect the desires of those in the field to put out virtual content in this intense moment, I do wish that they could give themselves and their teams a bit of a break and not feel so compelled to jump on the bandwagon of moving everything online. This is all to say that we at ACAF didn't want to add to the global overload of information and pressure, with which we are all already coping in unimaginable ways.

Figure 3: FIELD MEETING
Take 4: Thinking
Practice, 2016 (various
performances, lecture-
performances, and
artworks) hosted at
Solomon R Guggenheim
Museum and Asia Society,
New York, curated by ACAF
director, Leeza Ahmady



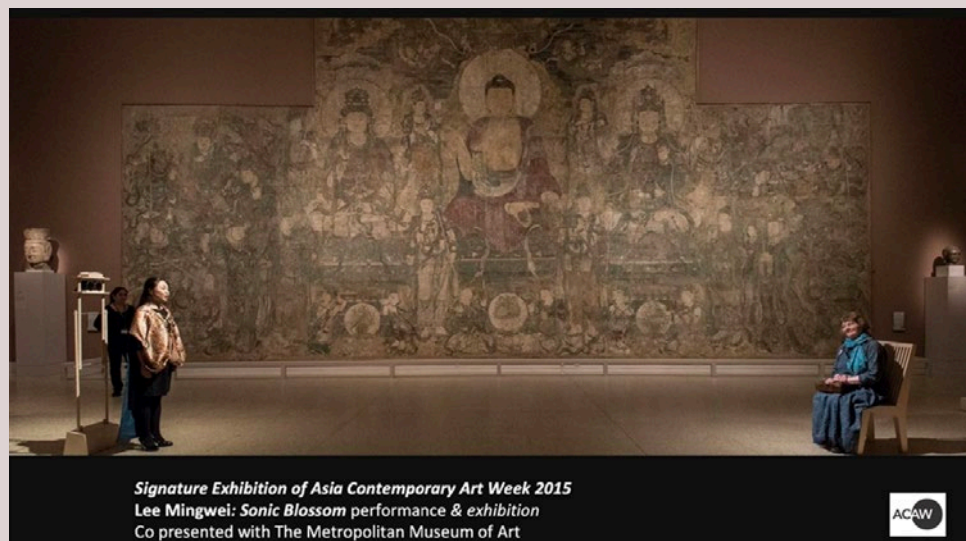
One of the positives that this pandemic has highlighted is the need in us for human connection. While digital programming is helpful during this period, I am looking forward to the day when we can go back to in-person engagement, because it is simply irreplaceable. For example, our signature forum, FIELD MEETING, is really about harnessing the energy of its participants, about 500 of them, on average. Aimed at emulating a “communal studio visit,” the forum presents artists who embody their own projects through lecture-performance, an under-recognized medium we are very keen to nurture. My goal is to make it possible for audiences to attend and be present in the actual space to experience and to receive that energetic presentation of an individual’s research. All six editions of FIELD MEETING took place in person — the process and interactions, if done virtually, simply won’t be the same as being on-site. Many of the artists who take part in our programming don’t normally get to travel. As a result, they’re not presented or as accessible to audiences here in the US. It has been a very special experience to facilitate that kind of connection for artists and the field. Many FIELD MEETING participants have gone on to collaborate and expand the global community that they find themselves a part of.

This experience of being at home has made me realize that the people I’ve been in touch with feel vulnerable, in a good way. I’ve seen my colleagues being more themselves. With some of their guards down, I feel I’ve been able to engage with a different layer of their and my own being. I also felt their candidness to show disappointment, and to talk about what was difficult. For example, one of our partners, an owner of a few galleries, was very frank with me about his views of problems in the art world and how something in the scale of the pandemic makes us realize that we don’t need too much.

My long-standing collaborators at a key museum also lamented the enormous amount of energy expended and expected from shell-shocked younger and older staff of museums and galleries; they are being demanded to produce content on a scale that doesn't allow them to take a breath.

This is happening across many art institutions and my colleagues have been looking at organizations that have chosen to do things differently. Not surprisingly, my fellow curators and artists are concerned about the development side of things. Foundations have shown and shared great and noble intentions about helping and supporting. Many have created relief for the field but, at the same time, they are demanding some seriously unreasonable requests for content building that responds to the current situation. Why can't providing relief and allowing people to just recover not be an option? Why does relief have to be attached to a condition?

Figure 4: Lee Mingwei, Sonic Blossom, the signature performance exhibition of Asia Contemporary Art Week 2015 co-presented with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Bouncebacks in Asia & the world through pause, poise and cosmic introspection

The word is that Asia will bounce back a lot faster than the rest of the world and that we will most likely see programming and events as early as fall, in China, Korea, and other spaces. I'm trying to manage expectations and be positive at the same time. As creative human beings, we are bestowed with imaginations that are like fertile fields that we can cultivate. It's up to us if we want to cultivate them with opportunities, compassion, joy, hope, capacity, and camaraderie, or envy, competition, and criticism. We need to collectively see the value of Asia contemporary art without having to look for validation outside of it. We won't get anywhere by believing that we have been disempowered, or that we are not represented.

If we continue to do that, we will cultivate that negativity. The opposite of that is to understand that we belong, that we are already included because we include ourselves. We have our own art history and yes, it wasn't part of the global Western canon-driven art history for a long time, but now it is. We made it happen and we're never going to let go of it, xenophobia or not. We're going to continue to make sure that Asia's art history is recognised in its own right, and that we acknowledge Asia and its vast regions' artistic specificities.

I've been using this precious time to reimagine ACAW, which we have incorporated as a non-profit with a slight name change to Asia Contemporary Art Forum or ACAF. A bit of background about the evolution of ACAW is important for context. ACAW was established in 2001 under the auspices of Asia Society. I took over as Director and Curator in 2005 aiming to promote, empower, and cultivate the field. I have been producing large annual editions of the Week ever since. In 2014, I added FIELD MEETING to each edition because the Week was no longer capable of holding the amount of content that was coming through, as well as the collaboration that the community craved. The Week turned into seasons and it became quite incredible. I was in awe of our growth and how much we were able to accomplish. But being able to create impactful programming addressing the needs of the entire ecology of artists, arts professionals, museums, galleries, and other arts organizations we served each year became increasingly challenging at times. I was constantly brainstorming ways to make our programs more accessible and digestible.

FIELD MEETING was initiated as a space for the ideas and efforts of artists and arts professionals, as well as individuals invested in a variety of fields that relate to and inform the arts, such as architects, novelists, poets, philosophers, scientists, environmentalists, anthropologists, comedians, and so on. The more FIELD MEETING editions we organized, the clearer and more challenging it became to also put on a very large-scale edition of the Week involving numerous museums and galleries. After years of non-stop programming for ACAW, I felt compelled to take a pause last year, to take stock of our achievements and think strategically about the platform's long-term sustainability. We were making good progress before the pandemic struck, which really forced a rethink on our part. My team and I have been taking time - the space for silence - to consider our resources and re-evaluate our mission and programs. We asked ourselves how we could possibly continue doing projects that are meaningful and serve artists and art communities. Our mission remains unchanged.

My advice for everyone is to slow down, create the space to cope and adapt to a shifting reality that may continue to be unpredictable in ways we are unable to control regardless of how much we want to. Let us not rush or be swept along by others. No one is going to forget us just because we pause programming for a bit. Let's be gentle on ourselves and the people around us. Let us also be vigilant to contemplate and question everything that's being put in front of us by all sources. Approach this time as an opportunity to deeply nourish our individual internal beings so that we can make decisions that manifest abundance and wellness for the communities we serve, instead of reacting to dooms-day messages and notions of scarcity that could render us overwhelmed and feeling powerless.

This is the moment to test our will and imagination in loving and positive ways to allow us to tap into the goodness of humanity, nature, and the cosmos. I invite all of us to consider this crisis from the perspective of an unfolding process that we can each take responsibility for as individuals and as a collective, one conscious step at a time. We all have the capacity to be game-changers in our own lives and in those of whom we love. This is not a special skill or privilege that is given to a few. We are all bestowed with the ability to be creative in the face of challenging, painful losses and situations. We can create a better, juster, and more eco-respectful world.

We need to heed the advice of many great philosophers - if you want change, start with yourself.

Figure 5: Kyzyl Tractor Art Collective, Purification, performance documentation as part of Focus Kazakhstan—Thinking Collections: Telling Tales Signature exhibition of Asia Contemporary Art Week 2018. In collaboration with The National Museum of Kazakhstan, curated by ACAF director Leeza Ahmady.

