



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.

Reflections on GWKL

AUTHOR

Ivan Pun, founder of Pun + Projects, Cultural Entrepreneur, Collector

BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Pun is a Burmese entrepreneur and collector. He is a cosmopolitan soul who was raised between Hong Kong, Thailand, Myanmar and Britain. Pun was educated at Cranleigh School in the UK and went onto complete his higher education at Oxford University. In 2011, Pun moved to the former Burmese capital of Yangon, and proceeded to revitalise the city's downtown with TS1, a pop-up arts, retail, food, design and performance space, as well as a coterie of hip eateries under the aegis of his lifestyle agency, Pun + Projects, which he founded in 2013. Pun is currently based between Yangon and Hong Kong.



Pun was selected as a Luminary for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2018. During the marquee, Pun participated in the panel presentation and discussion entitled “Emerging Practices and Platforms” at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, and also moderated the session “Multi-View: Malaysian Vision” at the National Arts Gallery.

Gallery Weekend KL gave such an incredible insight into the city's art and cultural landscape. Expertly organised and executed, the informative programme was an unparalleled opportunity to understand Malaysia's burgeoning art scene better and to engage with local players from curators to collectors.

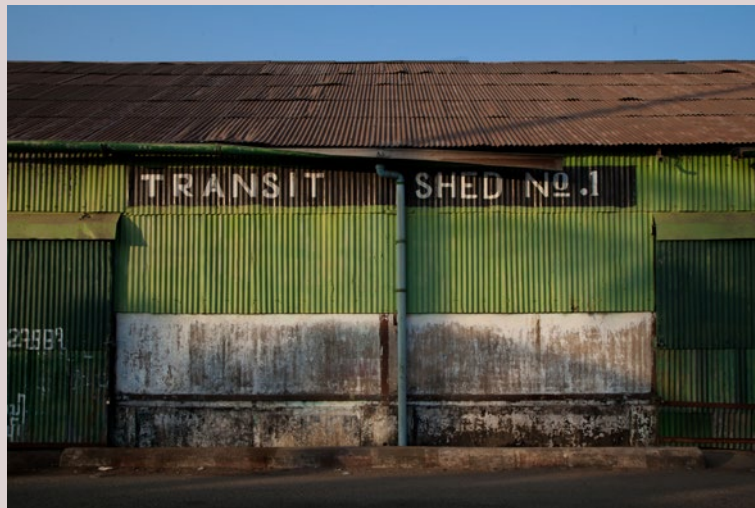
- Ivan Pun

Reflections on GWKL

I believe that the reason art is important is because it's a narrative of humanity. It's the broader picture; it plays a role in defining the world. I think artists can only produce work of value if they're constantly exposed to the world around them and subsequently evolving. Though all artists need to do this, it is especially so for those in an emerging or less developed ecosystem. The power of events like Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur is that they allow exactly this.

In Southeast Asia, art has always been seen as a luxury, but I don't believe this: it's needed to understand the world. With this belief, I founded TS1 in Yangon, Myanmar in 2014. We took over a warehouse on the river and we used it for exhibitions, featuring local artists like Aung Myint and Soe Naing.

Figure 1a & 1b: The exterior of TS1: a warehouse art space founded by Ivan Pun in Yangon, Myanmar.



Then, unfortunately, TS1 was closed down: we weren't able to renew the lease on the building due to complications with the government. As a result, we started to do pop-ups and recently we brought a show from the Dhaka Art Summit and brought it to The Secretariat called "*A God, A Beast and A Line.*" Now we're about to get a permanent space at The Secretariat that I'm very excited about.

Figure 2: The view of the jetty outside TS1 in Yangon, Burma.



Figure 3a: The former interior of TS1 in Yangon, Myanmar, founded by Ivan Pun.



Figure 3b: The former interior of TS1 in Yangon, Myanmar, founded by Ivan Pun.



I was interested to experience GWKL because I wasn't familiar with the art scene in Kuala Lumpur, but a parallel can be drawn to Myanmar in the sense that both are underdeveloped and need more accessibility. I wanted to understand the current state of contemporary art in Malaysia, both in terms of the evolution of its art and what the ecosystem is like; the galleries, the museums, the enablers.

As part of the off-site programme I particularly enjoyed visiting Shalini Ganendra's Advisory, a building designed by the architect Ken Yeang. I was struck by how low maintenance the space was, only using natural ventilation and a fan system to keep the interiors cool. The exterior walls were designed to need no upkeep, allowing the ravages of the seasons to take their natural effect. For me, this was particularly interesting to see as we are so often forced into a certain way of thinking when it comes to the presentation of art. Gleaming, slick white box spaces may be the current trend, but they do little to reflect the character of the culture and climate around them. Working in a country where the rains of monsoon take hold of the country for six months of the year, I loved seeing a space that was relevant to its environment.

Though it may sound very general, I think the importance of events like GWKL is that it creates a moment when the community comes together and when many people from the art scene can meet for the first time. To have those different industry professionals giving their insights on the world and their works was fascinating for both the local audience and for me as an outsider.

Figure 4: The exterior of the Shalini Ganendra Advisory Gallery Residence, designed by award-winning ecoarchitect Ken Yeang. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 5: The interior space of the Shalini Ganendra Advisory Gallery Residence. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



I took part in two talks, the first titled “Multi-View: Malaysian Vision” with Mahen Bala, a documentary photographer and filmmaker, Soon Heng Lim, an actor and the owner of a small theatre company called KL Shakespeare Players, Raja Khairul Annuar, the managing director of Pelita Hati Gallery, and Bingley Sim, a collector of Malaysian contemporary art.

During this discussion, we talked about how creative people often move abroad to pursue their artistic ambition and how this was creating a brain drain. One of the main issues for this is of course funding and support it’s clear that both Malaysia and Myanmar suffer from underfunding, both from the government as well as public institutions.

Also, within this topic, we discussed whether the current politics in Malaysia influenced art and whether artists should have a voice in these times. All panellists were in agreement that they do and should. As an outsider moderating this discussion, it was fascinating for me to hear the opinions of people from a different culture, of all interests, roles and ages, echoing my thoughts. Similar to Malaysia, in Myanmar too, the political strife has been a catalyst for people to wanting to convey political messages within their art.

Figure 6: Ivan Pun moderating the GWKL 2018 Luminary Programme panel entitled “Multi-View: Malaysian Vision”, held at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia.



The panel that I moderated were an eclectic mix from every aspect of the industry and they are all the enablers the Malaysian contemporary art scene. Mahen Bala’s work on the railroad of Malaysia is hauntingly nostalgic; hearing Soon Heng Lim’s insight into the development of performance art and culture was equally fascinating, as that’s another medium of expression that is only in its relative infancy.

The second talk I attended was titled “Emerging Practices & Platform” and also on the panel was Dr Deepanjana Klein of Christie’s, Lindy Joubert President of Lorne Sculpture Biennale, and Madhavi Peters the founder of *The Tropicalist*, moderated by Jennifer Pratt of Artsy.

Having come from a different emerging market in another Asian country, it was interesting for me to hear the answers to the questions of where do we go from here, how should we communicate with the wider audience, which I think is a very important topic to discuss at this juncture.

The question of the role social media plays in experiencing art was also discussed; I argued that though the visual experience is certainly different online and offline, anything that encourages engagement with art, or culture in general, is positive. In countries like Myanmar and Malaysia, which aren't on the circuit for touring art exhibitions, these technological platforms, despite their faults, are ultimately creating engagement and allowing development.

A question was put to us: "How can creators develop and collectors identify museum-quality artwork?"

As a collector, I think that there are so many different ways of judging quality and I'm broad in my appreciation. I don't think there is a set definition of what is considered high quality, for instance, some conceptual pieces can have a profound message but an unskilled execution. On the other hand, some art that is beautifully executed is purely decorative. This divide can also be seen geographically; in the East, the art is often philosophical and meditative, but in the West, many artists focus on creating incredible visual objects.

In parts of Southeast Asia, while there is often strength in the idea behind a work, the issue is material quality. There's a lack of resources, a lack of funding and a lack of training too. For both countries, the goal is to try to develop accessibility and generate more interest from the public. Crucially, the approach for both has to be top-down and bottom-up; there needs to be improved support from the government as well as public funding for education, museums, programming. As a necessity, there also needs to be grassroots enablers who get young people interested through shows, be it sculpture, performance or music. For my part, I will be taking back an arsenal of ideas to drive forward the art scene in Myanmar, and it was a privilege to listen to those doing the same in Malaysia.