



**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

EDITORIAL TEAM

Guest Editor Shalini Ganendra

Editor in Chief Lindy Joubert

Associate Editor Naomi Berman

Designer Greta Costello

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



UNESCO OBSERVATORY
MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur
VOLUME 7: ISSUE 1: 2021

**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 Aaron Seeto; Director, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara (MACAN), Indonesia

AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

BIOGRAPHY

Director of Museum MACAN, **Aaron Seeto**, has a vast experience working to advance the goals of contemporary arts organisations and curating significant exhibitions of artists from the Asia and Pacific regions. Seeto was formerly Curatorial Manager of



Asian and Pacific Art, at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia where he led the curatorial team at the eighth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT8) in 2015. For eight years prior, he was the Director of Sydney's ground-breaking 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.

He was a panellist for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL)'s 2020 *Luminary Forum III: Collecting & Curating – Ways of Seeing*.

Thanks for having me Gallery Weekend KL!

What an interesting discussion about some of the immediate challenges we are facing. It is always great to connect with colleagues around the world and at this moment it is important for us to share experiences and viewpoints. Let us hope we can meet in person, again soon!

- Aaron Seeto, Director of Museum MACAN, Indonesia

Aaron Seeto's Views

Q: What extensive steps has the Museum taken to increase accessibility or reach during the pandemic?

Aaron Seeto: One of the things which the COVID-19 Pandemic has resulted in is a great shift of programming into the digital space. In this short time, there has been an extraordinary upheaval of the regular processes and practices of museums related to the delivery of their programmes – from exhibitions; the delivery of art education; the identification of audiences and constituencies - it is a landscape where physical engagement has rapidly been subsumed by ideas and experimentation with the digital. Museum MACAN is no different in this respect.

How institutions will experiment and adapt to these current conditions is modulated by a range of social and economic factors related to the accessibility of technology – such as how widespread and available technology is; the literacy and proficiency of the community to harness technologies as they become available, as well as the capacity of individuals and families to prioritise their data capacity, for cultural activity, over their other daily needs.

Concerning Museum MACAN's planning, and on reflection, our approach has elevated the public presence of our art education activities. In a normal situation, exhibitions are the primary nexus between audiences and institutions, but without the physical opportunities to visit spaces, our online delivery has pulled into view, the very important work of our education and public programmes teams.

Our #museumfromhome programme has several key principles. Like many museums around the world, in March and April, we very quickly began discussions about how we should respond to the pandemic. An internal team was assembled to review the issues and to plan. We were guided by several principles in our decision making:

- **Review existing projects** that had already been digitized: As the situation was constantly unfolding, we made the early decision to not produce new programmes, until we were able to review a broader institutional response. There was lots of uncertainty around programmes, the health situation in the city, how our staff would adapt to working remotely, etc. The shift to digital and online also meant a transition in human resources, and in the early stages of the pandemic, we prioritised these things.

- **Accessibility:** In April we created a central portal called ‘Museum from Home’, which would house all of the art educational assets of the museum, in a more streamlined way. Our Museum from Home program includes:
 - o Aspects of the museum collection database
 - o Collection audio guides
 - o MACAN A-Z podcasts – which are short discussions on pertinent topics by experts in the field
 - o Workshops and video tutorials for home
 - o Downloadable activities sheets for kids
 - o Education resource kits for art teachers

- **Data capacity:** This was an issue which we identified early. It was partly a result of all of the glitches and connection issues which we experienced in our own meetings – we understood that the quality and access to the internet was a significant variable, so our programmes were designed to be as light as possible. As part of our review of existing programmes, we looked to make sure that documents were of a manageable size, and where needed, to simplify the complexity of their design. In order for our materials to be used by parents at home, we realised that our materials should not be overly burdensome to download or print.

- **Social Media:** Since early in the life of the museum, we have embraced social media to help us carry the message of the museum. Social media is inexpensive, widely accessible, it can help to cut across social and economic class and engages with significant audience sizes, and as such can be a valuable platform to assist with art education. As an example – our Collection Highlight Guide of Arahmaiani’s Lingga Yoni was accessed over 37,000 times.

- **Some highlights:** The shift to the digital has affected a number of satisfying increases in engagement for our materials. And perhaps this is the silver-lining, that we can engage much larger audiences, across larger geographies for the important art education activities of the museum.
 - o In the first month after launching our ‘Museum From Home’ page, our website engagement increased by 100 times to over 10,000 views per month.

- o Since we launched MACAN as of September, we've been able to reach 1.4million users on Instagram and gained 110k+ views on our website.
- o Our most accessed document is the audio guide of Arahmaiani – Lingga Yoni, from the Museum collection, which has been accessed by 37,000 views on IGTV.
- o We've had over 6,500 downloads of our MACAN A to Z podcasts, a number which far exceeds our onsite attendance for these kinds of programmes.

Q: You have considerable curating experience in both Indonesia and Australia. Are there any significant differences, considering that they are countries with vastly different views on art and culture?

AS: On a practical level, there are differences in resource availability, which impacts how exhibitions are delivered, and how the artistic discourse for contemporary art has developed. Government support for the arts in Australia helps to drive lots of support for artists to sustain practices at critical stages of their careers. In particular, funding helps artists and organizations to sustain, in a systematic way. While in Indonesia, the role of the collective and sharing economies has shaped particular kinds of strong practices in Indonesia. I would also say that the role of the market in Indonesia (and likely across South East Asia), has seen artists be more aware of regional and global connectivity, and perhaps this is also assisted by the proximity of Indonesia to its South-East Asian neighbours.

But as a curator, I would say that the principles of research, which demands a curiosity, closeness with artists and the development of networks are the same in all kinds of territories.

Q: How do you think a platform like GWKL can help catapult our cultural awareness?

AS: The geographic proximity of South-East Asian nations means that artists and art lovers alike can easily participate in the opportunities for sharing and discussion that projects like GWKL provides. I find that those who have art in their lives, are curious travellers and this is an important step in building cultural awareness and even breaking down possible boundaries and borders.

Q: How and why did you decide to become a curator?

AS: That's a good question. At university, I was lucky enough to do a fine arts studio practice degree, as well as commencing a law degree. By about third year, I became very interested in how exhibition-making could also convey meaning, how one work next to another sets up a situation for a narrative or discussion. At the same time, I became involved in a non-profit contemporary art space dedicated to Asian art and met some people who became very influential in my subsequent career choices. I ditched law and dedicated myself to art!

Q: Is there a favourite exhibition you have curated, and why?

AS: That's a hard one. There are many exhibitions which I look back on and feel a great sense of accomplishment, especially when particular kinds of artist relationships blossom or you overcome particular kinds of challenges (usually funding) to make something happen. Working between artists and institutions, when there is also a demand to fundraise, write grants as well as install works, means that you often build robust and frank relationships with artists.

In 2007, I curated a major survey of Pacific and Asian art called *News from Islands* at Campbelltown Arts Centre. It was my first really large curatorial commission, I was supported by great artists, and a great director of that institution who saw something in me and championed this exhibition.

Similarly, the first project I did at Museum MACAN called *First Sight*, was a performance program spread over two days, with artists from Indonesia, Singapore, Australia and China, to help 'warm' the building. I have often found performance to be tricky to present, but I loved how the artists, the museum team and the public were buoyed by this project. The artists have left a mark on the imagination of the institution, and hopefully its audiences, about the possibility of the museum.

Q: What has Museum MACAN done as a cultural institution to combat issues such as climate change, racial injustice, etc.?

AS: I think that we all have a responsibility to tackle these really important issues. As much as we can, we implemented practical operations that are as sustainable as possible. In terms of content, artists are also giving voice to the great challenges that we are facing, and you will see lots of our programmes, especially in the areas of our children's education programmes offer these perspectives.

My opinion on social equity and access is that these are issues that every 21st-century institution needs to address in practical ways. Our institutions need to not only be aware of them but to actively dismantle the prejudices and inequities that have been systemically inbuilt. Whether that is as simple as readjusting the internal language used to remove normative gender bias, or actively interrogating, through research, ideas and perspectives that might be incorporated into future exhibitions, and thereby inserted into public discourse.

We welcome the sustained discussions amongst artist communities and institutions around the world, about their role in reorganizing culture and society to adapt to future scenarios – this should not only encompass the practical issues inherent within physical limitations imposed upon us by COVID-19 – but also the underlying structural issues of the art world – in short, perhaps the reorganization of the delivery of programmes can help to address the social and economic inequities and biases which this pandemic has made us more aware.

As institutions adapt to the challenges to transform programmes to cater to new physical requirements, new programmes and processes should strive for wider social participation in the arts. The challenge ahead of us requires our institutions to be responsive and to be reflective of the communities of artists and the audiences which surround us. There needs to be an idealism in our embrace of new formats and processes, to ultimately elevate access and broad social engagement with art and culture. Let's hope that this moment of pause has allowed for a rethinking of the role of artists and the museum to create critical and inclusive spaces.

Q: The arts and humanities are subjects that are generally not seen to be important or equal to STEM in the Asian education system. What are your thoughts about this? And how do you think museums can change this?

AS: I think this is partly true, but I also think that there is a recognition that for industries of the future, and also in times of immense disruption (and especially for young populations, like Indonesia) creativity and emotional capacity will be prerequisites. Additionally, to support young minds to develop faculties for critical thinking – creativity, and the ability to see multiple perspectives is an underlying requirement.

The role of art in education, in the service of broad social participation, is one of the underlying visions of the museum and its founder. We believe that we can help to make a difference.

Q: How does public consumption of the arts differ in Indonesia to Australia and, if any, how have you approached this?

AS: I've thought quite a bit about this over the last few years, there are some distinct differences between how Australians and Indonesians embrace art. Part of my thinking also revolves around very broad social and cultural differences – Indonesia is extremely young, curious about and engaged with media, and as a developing nation hasn't had the institutional resources and maybe therefore entrenched ideas about museum-going culture. While Australia, where museum-going is well established, it already has some quite rigid ideas of culture and who it is for.

I have found Indonesia's emerging engagement with museum culture to be exciting, it has allowed us to insert some of these broader ideas about social access, as you've asked above, but also to be creative and playful about how we identify our audiences and how we engage with them. I think that we have made an incredible impact in a short period. In 2017, Google informed us that 'Museum MACAN' as a search term, was one of the top 10 search terms in Indonesia in the areas of culture for that year. I think this is an instructive result. To me, it tells me that there is a curiosity within the general public about what we do and that to attain a result like this, we were 'competing' with all kinds of search terms in Indonesian popular culture – from movie stars and popular music – not just the smaller frame of contemporary art.

Q: Within the Covid-19 climate, what are the most innovative adaptations that Museum MACAN has adopted?

AS: I think that we have been able to do a lot, and our youth (only established in 2017), has allowed us the agility to pivot. But there is still a lot more to work through. In all of the things which we have delivered this year, we have tried to ensure that we are very clear about who we are talking to – in most cases, this is the Indonesian public, artists, teachers and students. I hope, therefore, that there is a simplicity in how our programme has been designed. I am very proud of how many people have accessed our materials and also how well the Museum team has worked under this immense strain. Furthermore, I am hoping that our planning for 'hybrid project', a real-life engagement with objects tethered to virtual programming, will be embraced by our audiences.

Q: Is the emphasis on accessibility via the virtual something that will continue to be emphasized within the curating practice moving forward?

AS: Yes, it will. I have written elsewhere, that in places like Indonesia, Jakarta in particular, where you have infrastructural constraints that makes crossing the city a potential issue due to traffic, along with such pronounced economic barriers, media (which is relatively inexpensive) helps to cut across these social and cultural barriers. There is still lots to do and to develop.

Q: If you were to give three key tips/points of advice to young aspiring curators and artists what would they be?

AS:

- Hang out with artists and see as many exhibitions as you can.
- Volunteer with organizations that you respect – as this is a valuable way to learn.
- Be entrepreneurial and open-minded, the curator of the future, won't look like the traditional curator of the past.