



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 Sarah Ichioka

Urban Strategist, Curator, Writer and Director of Desire Lines, Singapore

AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Ichioka leads Desire Lines, a strategic consultancy for environmental, cultural and social-impact organisations and initiatives, based in Singapore.

Californian-born with educational roots in Yale University and LSE, her diverse and multidisciplinary portfolio ranges from leadership, planning and curatorial roles



for prominent institutions of culture, urban policy and research. These include the LSE Cities Programme, La Biennale di Venezia, Tate Modern, New York City's Department of Housing and Singapore's National Parks Board. Before relocating to Asia in 2014, Ichioka was Director (Chief Executive) of The Architecture Foundation, the UK's leading independent architecture centre, and concurrently a Co-Director of the London Festival of Architecture.

Ichioka has served as advisor or judge for a broad number of international initiatives, including the European Prize for Urban Public Space, the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, the Resilient by Design Bay Area Challenge and the XXII Triennale di Milano. Furthermore, she has been honoured as one of the Global Public Interest Design 100, by Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Institute of British Architects, the British Council / Clore Foundation's Cultural Leadership International Fellowship. Currently, she is a World Cities Summit Young Leader.

Ichioka has graced Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) twice with her participation in the Luminary Programme, speaking at the sessions “Creating and Collecting” (2017) and “Handmade for this Century” (2018).

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur 2017 provided expert insights into the city's burgeoning contemporary art scene and cultural infrastructure. The lively and informative programme introduced us to the wide range of galleries, museums and arts professionals active across KL's far-flung urban districts, helping to better appreciate contemporary Malaysian art in an international context.

- Sarah Ichioka

We interviewed Sarah Ichioka in June 2020 about her observations on the cultural scene in Asia and the shifting global dynamics between the East and the West, 3 years since her first visit to GWKL.

Q: What were your impressions of the two GWKL editions that you actively participated in? What are three words that come to mind?

Sarah Ichioka:

Convivial: The weekend was marked by many rich and enjoyable conversations, onstage and off. As with the best professional events, work didn't feel like work, it was a pleasure. Shalini is an authoritative guide and an impeccable host, complimented beautifully in the latter role by her husband Dennis and supported by GWKL's multi-tasking interns in the former.

Diverse: The venues, the content, and the participants—including here the other visiting “luminaries” as well as those hosting us in their cultural venues and asking great questions from the audiences—were full of delicious juxtapositions and surprises. This helped to forge connections well beyond my usual professional networks.

Well-organised: The Luminary Programme was very well structured, communicated and orchestrated; everything started on time, and everything unfolded with a sense of purpose.

Figure 1: Sarah Ichioka (right, in red) pictured with fellow 2018 GWKL Luminary, Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, speaking at the session “Handmade for this Century” at the Badan Warisan Heritage Society. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: How important are cultural platforms and events to bring focus to this Southeast Asian region and our creative practices? Do you see differences between for example, what Singapore should do and what Malaysia should do?

SI: With the prospect of increasing ASEAN integration in the economic realm, I think there's a very important role for programmes that support cultural exchange and collaboration, in a way that seeks to enrich, rather than homogenise practises and discourse across Southeast Asia. And with the long history of culture and knowledge flows between its constituent culture, this should be an obvious choice.

I always find myself drawn to individuals who are comfortable in their own skin; and could say the same about places or institutions that reflect their own place and people, rather than striving to fit some generic or "global" standard. Ideally, in my view, these programmes will take forms that are bespoke to their respective initiator countries or cities. Meaning that what would develop here in Singapore would differ in format and flavour from what would develop in KL, or for that matter what would develop in Penang.

Figure 2: Sarah Ichioka presenting to the audience at her GWKL 2018 session "Handmade for this Century" at the Badan Warisan Heritage Society. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 3: Sarah Ichioka (third from right) visiting Galeri TAKSU Kuala Lumpur's group exhibition Reflections with fellow GWKL 2017 Luminaries. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: How do you place Southeast Asia in the global view, considering also the responses of curators, collectors and audiences, both within the region and outside?

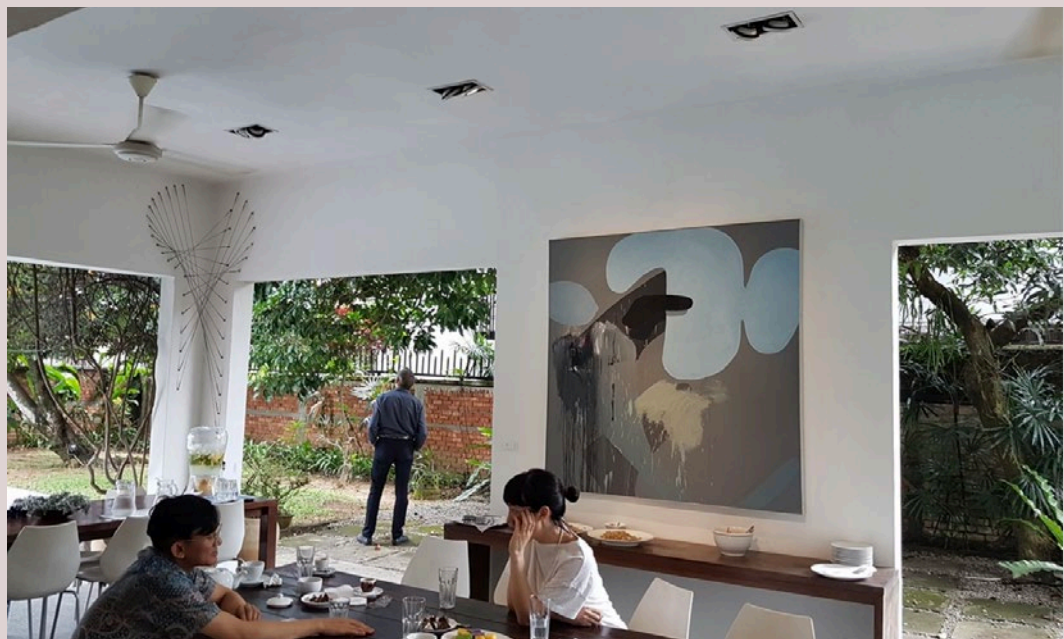
SI: I won't attempt to speak authoritatively to what other curators, collectors, audiences may think. But speaking only personally, from my current vantage point in Singapore, I'd say the contemporary cultures of Southeast Asia are of tremendous interest. I'm more interested in opportunities to learn about what is happening in the cultural realms of, say, Indonesia or Thailand or Vietnam than of, say, New York or London. (But I'm speaking from a position where I assume that I can reconnect with friends and colleagues New York or London whenever I want to; I shouldn't take that for granted).

Q: Do you see Western institutions and/or museums still being necessary participants in the recognition of art from Southeast Asia as a global phenomenon (for example, through exhibitions or writing)? As a related point, how has the dynamic of East-West exchanges changed in recent years, if at all? If so, how and why?

SI: I will always cherish my experiences of working for the Venice Biennale and Tate, both examples of Western cultural institutions that retain strong convening power. So, I won't discount the importance of such institutions. And I can see how other players around me still treat them as necessary, buying into the franchise model of Western cultural assets, be they regional branch museums or the more commercial realm of art and design fairs, for example. But these days I find myself interested in more distributed or organic models, as well as intra-regional conversations, as aforementioned.

Perhaps instead of content export or brand validation, I see the potential for and importance of West-to-East (as well as East-to-East and East-to-South if these terms are still meaningful) knowledge exchanges around things like audience engagement, cultural education, the design of physical and digital cultural spaces, and so on. As long as this is actively framed as exchange and debate rather than "best practice" and "knowledge transfer". More workshops, fewer lectures!

Figure 4: Conversations during the GWKL 2017 tour of Galeri TAKSU's group exhibition Reflections. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: What has it been like as an entrepreneur in the cultural field? What elements of your consultancy, Desire Lines, have developed to define its name?

SI: It's still early days for Desire Lines, but so far, I'm grateful that we've had such a diverse range of clients, partners and projects. We aim to play a bridging and interpretive role between different disciplines, sectors, cultures; with a strong environmental and social compass. In my previous role leading The Architecture Foundation (UK), my team and I enjoyed tremendous freedom to experiment, explore, forge collaborations. Upon relocation to Singapore, I wanted to maintain or expand that capacity. Establishing Desire Lines was a way to do this. I hope the future will bring more ambitious partnerships that allow us to increase the breadth and depth of our impact.