



# GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

*Pioneering culture-building networks*

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

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# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur  
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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 Herwig Kempinger

AUTHOR

**Yung Lo**, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

## BIOGRAPHY

**Herwig Kempinger** is currently the President of Vienna Secession, the Association of Visual Artists, having been elected in 2013.

He studied at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, where he went on to lecture in Media Art (1984-1994). Having worked mainly in photography, he has exhibited internationally since 1994.

His awards include the Fine Arts Prize of the City of Vienna (2010) and the Austrian Art Award (1992). Kempinger's range of international exhibitions include Neuen



Galerie, Graz (2008), Museum der Modern Salzburg (2006), and Biennale São Paulo (1994). Lentos Kunstmuseum dedicated a comprehensive retrospective to Kempinger's work in 2007. He was a Luminary for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2017, in the session 'Curatorial Conversations'.

*The KL Gallery Weekend was a fabulous possibility to become familiar with the art and culture of Malaysia that is not so well known in Europe. A few wonderful days of exchange, inspiration and discoveries that were so much more interesting than just visiting the same places again and again. Definitely a big step in the right direction.*

- Herwig Kempinger

**We interviewed Herwig Kempinger during an interesting moment in time, the height of the 2020 Pandemic (COVID-19), nearly three years after his first visit to Malaysia for GWKL 2017.**

“So, with this virus [...] For two months, no art. Just reading.”

2020 has certainly been a year riddled with uncertainties, anxieties and upheaval. For most industries, COVID-19 has left tremors and cracks in its rampaging path across the world. Amidst the deafening noise from the panic that has ensued, the protests that have taken to the streets, and the chaos inside the medical wards in desperate need of more staff, more ventilators and more funding, an unsettling silence equally materialised.

The art industry knew this better than most. A startling absence afflicted museums and galleries, which were forced to close due to government-mandated social distancing measures. No visitors to peer through the glass encasing exhibited pieces. No audience to absorb the emotions poured out onto canvases and into installations. Not to mention the overwhelming changes to be made to exhibition schedules. What has this all meant for museum spaces and the act of viewing art?

“I think that [the] encounter with the museum space is extremely important. Because I think you can only experience art in real life,” Herwig Kempinger asserts. The current President of the Association of Visual Artists Vienna Secession, the world’s oldest independent exhibition institution dedicated to contemporary art, emphasised the crucial element of being face-to-face when encountering art. Founded in 1897, the Secession became a distinct variant of Art Nouveau, established by a group of artists led by Gustav Klimt, one of the principal pioneers of the movement. Housed in the Secession Building, which has become one of Vienna’s architectural landmarks designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich in 1898, the Vienna Secession continues to this day to exhibit art that embodies the association’s dedication to cutting-edge modernist ideas.

In light of the wide digital accessibility of art and the new predicaments brought about by COVID-19, Kempinger goes onto elaborate:

“You have to stand in front of a painting or a sculpture and see [its] size... compared to [oneself]. What is the surface – is it matte, is it glossy?”



[The physical encounter with museum spaces and art] is a totally different thing [compared to] showing art digitally, [which] is close to meaningless... it cannot replace, in any meaningful way, the real-life experience of an artwork.”

Figure 1: John Akomfrah, Vertigo Sea, 2015 – exhibited at the Vienna Secession 2020. Photo by Iris Ranzinger.



Despite being a media artist himself, whom photography became an exclusive component of his craft, Kempinger maintains that in-person interactions with art are imperative. This is partly due to how they may reflect our changing sense of self and the world surrounding us. “...when you see the artwork for the 20th time in a museum, it’s always a different piece. Because you change, the lighting’s different, your mood is different... You never see [...] the same artwork twice.”

This profound remark must resonate with artists and consumers of art alike. Although he shows scepticism towards showing art digitally, Kempinger suggests that utilising digital platforms may be a useful way to introduce and illuminate work from globally unrecognised art regions. “For our regions that are not really in the international focus, I think the easiest and [simplest] way is to create an internet platform together.” He envisions a centralised digital platform that collates the most recent news about institutional shows and gallery exhibitions currently happening across different cities and which ones are worth visiting. “If you have this kind of one-click stop for people [who] are not that well informed about the region [...] you can pack all the relevant information [onto this centralised site].”

Perhaps Kempinger speaks from experience. His first-ever visit to Kuala Lumpur was in 2017, to take part in Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL), where he was invited as a luminary.

“I still remember it fondly, because it was to a part of the world I don’t know very well,” he recounts. Even though his memories were “wonderful”, Kempinger’s visit was unfortunately very brief. Much of the vibrant metropolis and its flourishing art scene remains yet to be discovered. (The proposed GWKL 2020 digital platform amalgamating information on global art spaces and exhibitions may just be the ideal solution for travellers, such as Kempinger himself, to maximise their short stays.)

Figure 2: Kempinger (pictured far right) touring Kampung Baru, the traditional Malay enclave in Kuala Lumpur, with his fellow GWKL Luminaries (2017). Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



But did his participation in GWKL leave a mark on the Secession president?

“I’m definitely more interested in Asia as a result – as an artist [and] as a curator.” Moreover, upon his visit to Shalini Ganendra Advisory’s (SGA) Gallery Residence, designed by award-winning ecoarchitect Dr Ken Yeang, he was inspired by the gallery model which differed from his own.

Particularly, Kempinger highlighted how interesting he found SGA’s unique Artist Residency programme, which accommodates artists in the gallery space to develop their careers, research and draw from the rich Southeast Asian culture. “[I]t is something we don’t do [back in Austria].” His reflection encapsulates the interchanging essence at the heart of a multidisciplinary cultural event like GWKL – where collectors meet creators, and the global melds with the local.

Figure 3: Herwig Kempinger reviewing the portfolio of Kuala Lumpur-based visual artist, filmmaker and writer Mahen Bala during GWKL 2017. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



In spite of his newfound enthusiasm for Asian art, he laments that shipping art from the Asian region to Europe is “forbiddingly expensive”, even more so than shipping fees from the United States. This leads to the issue of financial support for art and culture. According to the Austrian native, “The most effective policies in government towards the arts is basically to just give us a little money!”

In Austria, purchases of artworks are still not tax-deductible. Kempinger and colleagues have recently petitioned for this to be changed. “Tax deductibility would be great [...] We’ve been asking [this] for 20-30 years”, he sighs. Furthermore, the grants programme that does exist is “not professionally maintained.” The government stipends give artists, curators and others in the industry the opportunity to travel wherever they want in the world.

But it only covers three months. “To use these three months in a really meaningful or effective way, you would really need some introductions that [are] not done.” Returning to the common obstacle of visitors’ unfamiliarity with host countries’ cultural institutions, and their initial lack of local connections who would initiate them to the art scene, Kempinger points out the gaps left unfilled by the government’s grant programme.

The amount of funding the arts receive usually plays a large part in determining how engaged the public are with the cultural scene in most places. For the Vienna Secession, their 2019 annual attendance amounted to 156,000 visitors (each paying a relatively modest €9.50 upon entry) spread over 15 annual shows.

Kempinger explained that they always have three different shows happening simultaneously and have five show cycles. In practice, this amounts to a new cycle (of three shows) opening every two and a half months.

With this quick turnaround that designates the search for innovation and modernity at its helm, how do Kempinger and his fellow board members of the Secession manage this iconic institution's programme?

“We don't accept projects that are just like, brought to us. We also don't take over shows or have our shows travel. It somehow never seems to work. Also, shows are specifically developed for us and the invitation to come up for a show is always one-way. We don't really look at projects that are sent to us.”

On top of this rigorous and highly selective process, Kempinger interestingly discloses that the Secession board and he do not exactly curate. Featured works are always decided upon democratically by the board of 12 artists, never single-handedly by an individual – not even the president himself. But through following these measures, Kempinger speculates that this brings both balance and an exciting element of surprise.

“We basically don't curate. We invite artists and they can basically do whatever they want. We hand them over the space and ask them, well, go wild, do whatever you want. As long as we can afford it financially. So surprises positive and negative are happening all the time... you really cannot tell in advance. Each one is a surprise.”

Figure 4: Ron Nagle,  
Nocturn Around –  
exhibited at the Vienna  
Secession 2020. Photo by  
Oliver Ottensschläger.



This method of creating programmes has certainly brought with it, countless unconventional projects over the years. As an example, Kempinger illustrates the enthralling tableau of 70 dancers, both male and female, moving in unison, their nude bodies as bare as the scaffolding that shrouded the Vienna landmark, which disappeared under this temporary skin for its 6-month renovation. He was, of course, referring to renowned Austrian choreographer, Doris Uhlich's performance piece 'Seismic Session' in August 2017. "Well, that created quite some attention," he muses. "This was really direct engagement with the public, that we otherwise won't make a primary focus of our work. If it happens, fantastic. If not, well, then not."

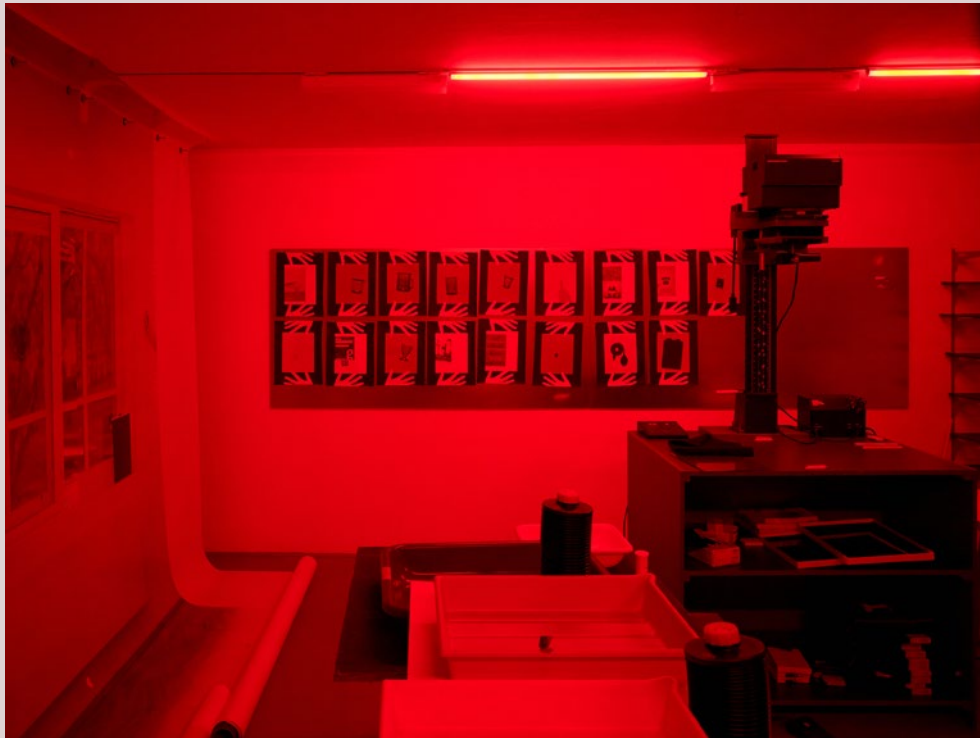
Developing projects for Secession in this specific way has been vital to achieving all-rounded versatility in the Association's programmes. For one, Kempinger and his colleagues ensure that the projects included in their annual programme always reach across the whole spectrum of media. Therefore, not only exhibiting painting, but also sculpture, drawing, photography, digital, performance and installation.

Likewise, as aforementioned, they strive to have a sense of balance. Diversity is key to constructing an inclusive programme of artists that are both male and female, young and old. Additionally, the principle of equal opportunity appears significant in creating a compelling experience for Secession visitors. Kempinger expounds:

"[...] all these things considered must create an interesting balance in a way [...] because only work by young artists who are unknown would be meaningless. And only showing very famous artists also doesn't make much sense. So, we kind of try to find a meaningful balance between all the genders, all the media, all age-groups. Our mission is in a way, to show mostly international art. We have very few Austrian shows because that was in our by-laws from the very beginning and still is after 122 years."

Since the Secessionist movement first physically manifested itself in the building's untarnished white walls and glinting gilt laurel leaves lining its dome, much tumultuous change has swept across the art scene and the world. Notwithstanding, it is uplifting to see how Herwig Kempinger and his fellow board members have stayed true to the pioneering energy and contemporary spirit characterising the original Vienna Secession more than a century ago. In the spirit of exploration, he did indeed make that inaugural visit to survey Malaysia during GWKL 2017.

Figure 5: Sophie Thun, Stolberggasse – exhibited at the Vienna Secession 2020. Photo by: Pascal Petignat.



“To every age its art, to every art its freedom” (German: Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit)

- *The Vienna Secession's motto, written above the Secession building's entrance.*