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Multi Disciplinary  
Journal in the  
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'Arts in Asia'  
UNESCO Observatory  
Multi Disciplinary  
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# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The 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 Ganendra**

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Director, SGFA

Guest Editor

## INTRODUCTION

The ‘Contemporary’ embraces the dynamic of the current. Thus, contemporary thought should also ideally encourage multidisciplinary curiosity, encounter and engagement. This multidisciplinary dynamic, fuelled by creativity, is the platform for the Vision Culture Lecture program (‘VC Lectures’), launched in 2010 by Shalini Ganendra Fine Art (‘SGFA’), in Malaysia, with the endorsement of the UNESCO Observatory. Over this short and enriching period, the VC Lectures have developed an informing presence in the region, fostering meaningful global discourse and cultural encounter, to inform the Contemporary.

SGFA is a pioneering cultural organization, embracing an eclectic and quality sensibility for collecting, consideration, capacity building and place making. We value new visuals - whether for materiality, concept or culture - and multidisciplinary processes in their creation. In addition to the VC Lectures and exhibition program, SGFA has: an artist residency program (the ‘Vision Culture Art Residency’); an arts management residency for university students (the ‘Exploring East Residency’); and the PavilionNOW project which celebrates local architects, contemporary design and materiality. Through these programs and a growing interest in emerging regions, we delight in the increasing international engagement with our represented areas of South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

Over twenty three speakers have participated in the VC Lectures since their inception, each invited because of eminent reputations and notable contributions within respective fields. The lecture module involves free public talks at the SGFA's award winning green space (designed by Ken Yeang), Gallery Residence, with external lectures often hosted by other local institutions and organized by SGFA. Participating curators generally conduct portfolio reviews with local artists, learning more about regional geopolitics and art practices. Strong press coverage enables outreach beyond the urban populace, as does active social and digital media. Speakers stay at the Gallery Residence and enjoy vernacular space that embraces natural ventilation and cooling systems, elegant aesthetic and greening philosophies. The VC Lecture program is as much about cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary encounters as it is about content – all defining platforms for SGFA's exhibition programming as well.

The eleven luminaries published in this peer-reviewed UNESCO Observatory journal were selected for a variety of reasons including expertise. They are: Sir Roy Calne (award winning surgeon and artist, UK); Christopher Phillips (Curator, International Center of Photography, NYC); Anoma Pieris (Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne); Susan Cochrane (curator and authority on Pacific Art); Volker Albus (Professor of Product Design at the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe, Germany); Michiko Kasahara (Chief Curator at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan); Matt Golden (Artist/Curator); Gregory Burgess (Architect, Order of Australia); Beth Citron (Curator, Rubin Museum NYC); Oscar Ho (curator and academic, HK); and Brian Robinson (Torres Island artist and curator, Australia).

Sir Roy Calne speaks of personal experiences using art to nurture empathy in his medical practice and his own passion for creating. Christopher Phillips, the pioneering curator credited with introducing Chinese contemporary photography to the United

States, writes about an important exhibition that he curated at the International Center of Photography. Anoma Pieris considers the impact of modernism on architecture in South Asia, and analyses supportive political and social ideologies, while Gregory Burgess tackles the place of architecture in creating a sense of individual and community belonging. Volker Albus, playfully but seriously asks us to consider the role of designers as technical and social mediators. Michiko Kasahara adeptly reviews challenges faced by successful contemporary Japanese photographers in addressing and reflecting Japanese culture, real and perceived. Susan Cochrane explores cultural ownership of Pacific Art through the use of terminology and context. Brian Robinson writes about his personal cultural narrative as a Torres Island artist. Beth Citron shares insights on Francesco Clemente's acclaimed *'Inspired by India'* exhibition which opened at the Rubin Museum in 2014. Oscar Ho speaks to the challenges of curatorship and requirements to sharpen its impact and discipline. Matt Golden shares the visual journey of his art alter-ego, Juan Carlos, with special focus on experiences in Malaysia. We bring to you a wonderful mix of multi-disciplinary and cultural discussions that show the exhilarating impact of this program.

The Vision Culture Program enters its sixth year and we look forward to its continuing impact as a pivotal program to foster meaningful global discourse. We have forged strong friendships and benefitted from cross cultural discovery thereby building platforms for more informed understanding and appreciation of our world.

Many thanks to Lindy Joubert, Editor-in-Chief of the UNESCO Observatory journal, and her marvelous team, for supporting this project from its inception; to SGFA's Exploring East Residents who assisted with editing these texts and most importantly, the amazing Vision Culture Lecture participants who have fostered knowledge, encounter and consequently, the Contemporary.

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# Wang Qingsong: When Worlds Collide

## AUTHOR

**Christopher Phillips**

Curator

International Center for Photography

## BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Phillips is curator at the International Center for Photography in New York City. Previously he had edited such publications as *October and Art in America*. He has organized exhibitions like *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* and *The Metropolis and the Art of the Twenties*. Publications include *Photography in the Modern Era* (1989), *The New Vision* (with Maria Morris Hambourg) (1990), and *Steichen at War* (1981).



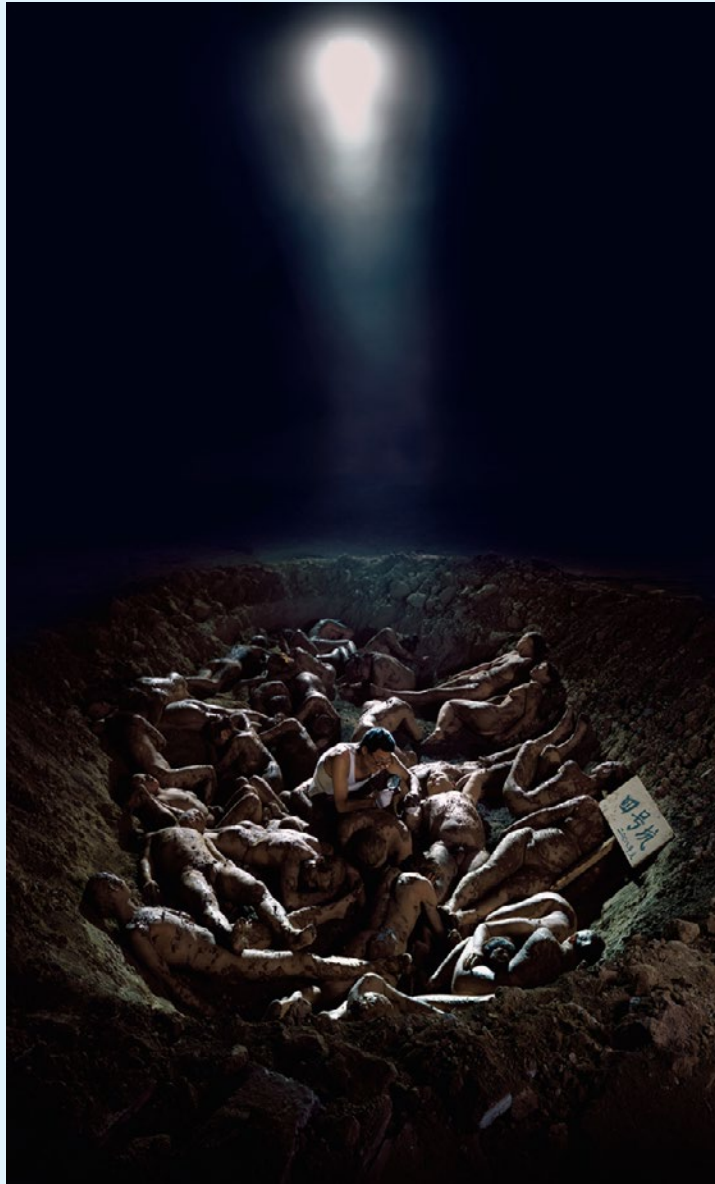
Since turning from painting to photography in the late 1990s, Beijing-based artist Wang Qingsong has produced a stream of ambitious works that explore China's on-going relationship with global consumer culture. Working in the manner of a motion-picture director, he conceives elaborate scenarios involving dozens of models that he stages on film sets. The resulting color photographs often contain ironic references to classic Chinese artworks which are reinterpreted with intentional awkwardness. These photographs throw a fresh light on present-day China, emphasizing its new material wealth, its uninhibited embrace of commercial values and the social tensions arising from the massive influx of migrant workers to its cities.

Because he employs elaborate studio settings and stylized arrangements of models to make enormous color photographs, Wang Qingsong is sometimes likened to Western contemporary artists like Gregory Crewdson or Jeff Wall. A more apt comparison, however, might be to an earlier artist like George Grosz, whose drawings and paintings from Weimar-era Germany are filled with needling social observation, sardonic humor, and sometimes grotesque exaggeration. In Wang Qingsong's works, the artist's deep-seated attachment to his country exists alongside his dismay at its boom-era excesses. He recoils from what he calls the 'superficial splendor' of today's Chinese nouveau-riche. Yet he also insists, 'I like Chinese civilization. It offers an enormous space for imagination.'

Things take one form today, and then change to another form tomorrow.'



Wang Qingsong's life brings to mind a saying often heard in China: 'Nothing is easy; everything is possible.' He was born in 1964 in northeastern China, in the Daqing oilfields where his parents worked. It is still hard for him to explain how as a boy growing up in a series of oilfield towns around China he made the decision to become an artist. Yet his pursuit of this improbable goal was single-minded, undeterred by the obstacles he encountered. His father's death in an oilfield accident in 1981 left the family without financial resources. The 17-year-old Wang Qingsong took his father's place on the drilling platform and worked there for the next eight years. During this time he continued to take art classes part-time, studied art magazines for news of the independent art movements then springing up in China and learned about the unconventional artworks being made by artists like Xu Bing and Cai Guo Qiang. He regularly sent off applications to China's top art academies, and was just as regularly rejected. When he was ultimately accepted by the prestigious Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, he was already in his mid-twenties, older than most of his fellow students and a number of his teachers. He studied oil painting and graduated in 1992.



Because of the introduction of market economy principles in the Chinese art world, no guaranteed job awaited new art-school graduates; Wang Qingsong knew that he would have to make his way as an independent artist. He came to Beijing in 1993, at a moment when Chinese contemporary art was beginning to attract international attention. His first years in Beijing were marked by extreme privation and frequent changes of living quarters. For nearly two years he lived in the Yuanmingyuan artists' village near the old Imperial Summer Palace on the outskirts of the city. Although many of the artists there lived in near-poverty, some of them, like the painters Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, were already supporting themselves comfortably by the sale of their art. Wang Qingsong's paintings (which

during this period were introspective, expressionist canvases that portrayed suffocating figures struggling to break free of encumbering plastic sheets) also found buyers. But he first won real recognition thanks to his through his involvement with the Gaudy Art group, a short-lived, Pop-style movement of the mid-1990s that was championed by China's most influential contemporary art critic, Li Xianting.

Conceived in the wake of Chinese premier Deng Xiaopeng's 1992 pronouncement 'To Get Rich Is Glorious,' Gaudy Art was the first Chinese art movement to reflect the country's new social dynamic, one shaped less by political ideology than by commerce, consumer fantasies, and a get-rich-quick ethos. As many artists saw it at the time, the problem was not the arrival of consumer culture in itself, but the fact that an aggressively vulgar commercial spirit seemed suddenly to have occupied the entire cultural field in China. In fact, a void had been created during the years of Mao's rule that had witnessed the conscious demolition of China's traditional values and cultural standards; moreover, the lofty 'revolutionary romanticism' that marked the Maoist period had by the 1990s also been discredited and abandoned. As critic Li Xianting observed, all that was left to fill the resulting cultural chasm were the tawdry cultural aspirations of the nation's unsophisticated but suddenly prosperous peasants-turned-businessmen. 'Damaged by Affluence' was the revealing title of one early Gaudy Art exhibition and the artists in the group (including as Qi Xilong, Xu Yihui, Yang Wei, Feng Zhengjie, the Luo Brothers and Wang Qingsong) created works meant to call attention to the exuberantly garish and pretentious taste of the time. Distantly aware of the kitsch aesthetic of Jeff Koons, they used techniques that were unorthodox by fine-art standards, borrowed from distinctly low visual sources: street advertising, folk embroidery, kitsch ceramics, New Year calendar prints and popular paintings on velvet. Although it lasted for only a brief period before artistic rivalries led to its dissolution, Gaudy Art effectively caught the momentous turn



in post-Mao China from ‘politics in command’ to ‘business in command.’



In addition to providing a new starting point for Wang Qingsong’s art, Gaudy Art prompted his gradual shift from painting to photography. His newly awakened curiosity about the tumultuous society around him fed his growing interest in photography, a medium he felt might enable him to quickly register and comment upon the economic and social changes that were sweeping China. Initially he tried using an inkjet printer to transfer photo-derived images onto acrylic velvet or sheets of reflective metal. Next came a group of digital photomontages *Requesting Buddha* that in their unbridled, derisive humor recalled the Dada-era works of John Heartfield or George Grosz. Although these works awakened considerable interest in the Chinese art scene, by 2000 Wang Qingsong had come to feel that unconventional supports and compositional approaches were less artistically promising than relatively straight-forward renderings of the complex, many-figured scenes he had begun to

imagine. Since that time, most of his works have been essentially unaltered photographs of the extravagant sets and arrangements of costumed models that he and his team of assistants create in various studio spaces in Beijing.

This exhibition presents a selection of photographs and videos meant to introduce three of the most important themes that run through Wang Qingsong's substantial body of work. The first is the artist's continuing development of ideas that emerged in the Gaudy Art movement, evident here in *Pick Up the Pen and Fight to the End* (1997), *Requesting Buddha Series, No. 1* (1999), *Night Revels of Lao Li* (2000), *Bath House* (2000), *Red Peony, White Peony, and Frozen Peony* (2003) and *Yaochi Fiesta* (2005). Next is the impact of China's post-Mao economic opening to the West and the arrival of global consumer culture, as seen in *Follow Me* (2003) and *Competition* (2004). Finally, a series of Wang Qingsong's works have dramatized the acute social tensions associated with the influx of millions of migrant laborers to China's cities; among the most powerful are *Sentry Post* (2002), *Dream of Migrants* (2005) and *Dormitory* (2005).

A tumultuous era like the present, Wang Qingsong says, throws into doubt all the ideals and putative heroes of the Chinese past. What kind of future, he asks, is going to emerge from the shared past and collective experience of the Chinese people? What kind of unimagined hybrid culture is going to result from the current collision of China and the West? While the artist himself does not make predictions about what may lie ahead, his works provide us with an extraordinary vantage point from which to gauge the possibilities.



A chronological presentation of the works of Wang Qingsong, as well as his commentaries on the works, a complete bibliography, and a complete exhibition history, can be found on the artist's website, [www.wangqingsong.com](http://www.wangqingsong.com).