



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 Lisa Movius

AUTHOR

Yung Lo, BA (Hons), University of Cambridge

BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Movius is an arts journalist based in Shanghai, China, and currently works as the China Bureau Chief and Asia Correspondent for the international edition of *The Art Newspaper*.



Having been in Shanghai since 1998, Movius previously covered Chinese music, theatre, film, literature and fashion as a regular contributor to the *Wall Street Journal*, *Women's Wear Daily* and *Art in America*. During her participation as a Luminary for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2019, where she moderated the session “Curating and Creating” at the National Art Gallery, Malaysia.

There is still more interest in sensationalism and stereotypes [of Asian art and culture] rather than nuance and accuracy. Especially now, when China has become so vilified in the United States, it is harder than ever to sell complex human and cultural narratives about it – but also even more important to.

- Lisa Movius

We interviewed Lisa Movius less than a year after her visit to Malaysia for GWKL 2019. She shares her insights as a seasoned arts journalist on the growing and changing contemporary art scene in China, the wider market in Asia, and how they fit into the global puzzle.

Q: Your participation in GWKL marked a revisit to Malaysia. How had KL changed from your last visit? What were your impressions of the cultural landscape having visited museums, collectors, galleries and meetings with artists?

Lisa Movius: While I had been to Malaysia and KL many times before, they were briefly as a tourist, so last year was my first experience plunging into the KL art scene. Things are still quite nascent, but it has the necessary raw materials of excellent artists and a few professional galleries and non-profits. Those have the possibility to be built into something truly impressive with more initiative and coordination.

Figure 1: GWKL 2019 Luminaries touring the Suma Orientalis fine art gallery in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia (Movius pictured in red). Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q. What are your main insights on the development of the Asian art (China and Southeast Asia) scenes vis-a-vis local development and global engagements, in the last 10 years (or during your time in China)?

LM: I have lived in Shanghai for over 20 years, but a decade allows a more manageable portrait. 2010 to 2020 has been a period of maturation and growth of art scenes around Asia, with many countries establishing distinct or even flourishing art scenes. It would take several books to itemise every city, country, region, but we have seen some rise, some stagnate, some remain stable. China has become more prominent around the world, but I think its efforts to internationalise have been more focused on the West than closer at home. A few institutions like Para-Site and the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art have been very proactive about building regional bridges, but there is still far too little attention to facilitating real dialogue.

Figure 2: At the session “Curating and Creating” moderated by Lisa Movius as part of the GWKL 2019 Luminary Programme, held at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Figure 3: Luminaries tour the gallery- guesthouse hybrid. Sekeping Tenggara, built by renowned Malaysian landscape architect Ng Sek San (pictured in blue) of Seksan Design, which houses his contemporary art collection. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Southeast Asia seems to be perennially up-and-coming, and both Singapore and Indonesia seem always on the cusp of gaining more traction. Art Jakarta last year impressed with its regional reach, while SEA Focus is small, strong and localised; but it is hard to say if their momentum will survive COVID-19. Southeast Asia has so many fantastic artists, but who do not get the broader exposure they deserve, perhaps due to the shortage of events and institutions. Also, as the region is so expansive and diverse, with so many different countries and cultures, it is harder for people from the rest of the world to get a real grasp on it, compared to apparent monoliths like China.

Q: Why have you opted to live in Shanghai above other cities in Asia? What cultural treats does the city offer and how strong is museum exhibition attendance?

LM: I first came on a whim, after studying in Beijing during college, but quickly put down roots in the local music and art scenes. Shanghai is one of the world's oldest modern metropolises and has a uniquely urban sensibility. When I came in 1998, it had a strong community of artists but only one gallery and one museum showing contemporary art. However, the energy was still there – with shows and events being organised in homes, malls, construction sites, all interesting art exploring China's modernities. The current explosion, with about a hundred professional contemporary spaces, and always more in the works, is rooted in that original community and can-do Shanghai spirit.

Among the scores of art museums here, the standouts include the state-backed Power Station of Art and private museums Rockbund and Yuz. Some private galleries have excellent shows and artist rosters, including ShanghART, Antenna, Aike, Don, Capsule, Bank, Vanguard, Eduoard Malingue. Museum attendance, at least pre-COVID, was strong – long queues for the blockbuster shows especially. Going to exhibitions is a trendy pastime and date activity for young, educated Shanghai residents. The social media era has turned it into a glorified photo op for many, but the hope is that, for some, that superficial encounter can perhaps lead into something more profound.

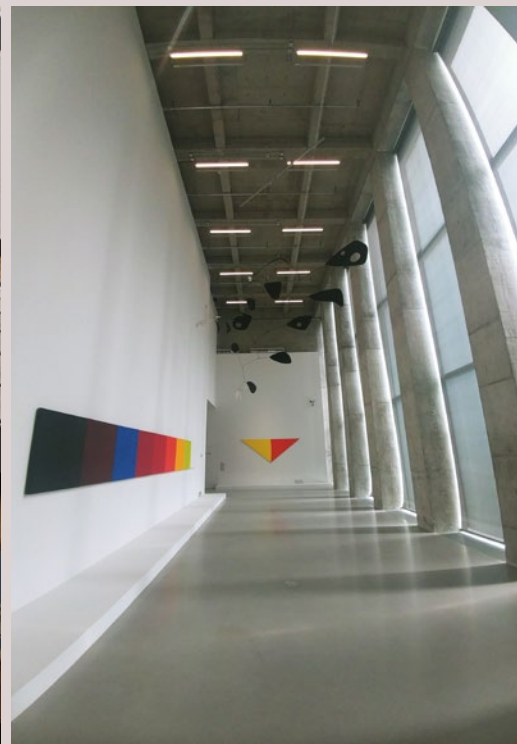
Figure 4: PHOTOFAIRS, an annual event dedicated to showcasing fine art photography, moving image and new media, at the Shanghai Exhibition Centre. Photo provided by Lisa Movius.



Figure 5: “The Book from the Sky” – the intriguing art installation by celebrated Chinese artist, Xu Bing, exhibited at Museum MACAN in Jakarta, Indonesia, 2019. Photo provided by Lisa Movius.



Figure 6 The Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum Project, which opened in Shanghai, November 2019. Photo provided by Lisa Movius.



Q: What main aspects of the Shanghai and Beijing cultural environments have brought them the greatest recognition?

LM: Inevitably city scenes get boiled down to a few trademark talking points, which can overlook the more interesting nuances. This is a big topic, but the main issues are that Beijing has long been the centre for artists, due to the Central Academy of Fine Arts and cheap studios in suburban-rural villages like Heiqiao. However, the artist villages are disappearing, and Beijing is no longer so hospitable to younger or less successful artists. Shanghai gets portrayed as the commercial centre, but actually it is a core of local artists plus a phalanx of curatorially strong local galleries that provide the foundation for the now splashy new museums and fairs. Ultimately, both cities are only as solid as their community cores, and the rest is window dressing.

Q: How have Chinese artists integrated so well, if they have, into the global conversations and established relevance?

LM: A few have; but most have not. The most successful ones have either tapped into global zeitgeists or portrayed an exotified Chinoiserie version of China for global consumption. Most artists just want to portray their own truths, their own specific slices of the world, and they struggle to find international reception if that does not align with overseas preconceptions about “China”.

Simple pronounceability for English speakers is an additional barrier or boon. However, the rising generation of Chinese artists, who grow up online and then study, live, travel abroad, are proving very adroit at codeswitching between China and the West. Multilingual and media savvy, they are simultaneously more adaptable while able to enter and steer global narratives.

Q: What do you see being the next ‘new’ Asian art market?

LM: The Western art world is always chasing the next “new” Asian market, but they are never actually new. Right now, Taiwan is getting that designation somewhat, but of course it is an old, established market, just not one that buys as much Western art as dealers would like. The trend du jour invariably lags behind the reality.

Q: Do you think that nascent art markets can grow and be sustained without government support, and if so, what would be the main drivers? Please give any examples of such markets or initiatives that have impressed you.

LM: Government support can be a double-edged sword, because support comes with controls, plus it can advantage political compliance over artistic quality. In China, there is an entire government-backed art scene mostly separate from and parallel to the critically recognised art scene; palatable themes and personal relationships determine what gets officially supported. In extreme cases, governments can actively support official art and suppress its more vibrant competitors.

Where government support does work is when there are supportive policies, but with light-handed implementation, like in Taiwan. State-backed institutions that are allowed to mostly operate independently, with professional art world directors and staff, such as Shanghai’s Power Station of Art, Taipei’s C-Lab and Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), can be great successes. In Shanghai, the West Bund fair is state-run, but with a respected artist at the helm; and private fair 021 also receives some government support. Ultimately, state support can help, but not always – individual initiative is what’s most important.

Q: How important are major art fairs and museum shows for developing a collector base for Asian art, and how so?

LM: Big commercial and curated events have been integral and symbiotic for developing collector bases, not just in Asia. Fairs are where the shopping gets done, yes, but also where new collectors are nurtured by seeing an eclectic array of what art and collection can be. Museum shows and biennales nurture the layers of appreciation and understanding by audiences, regardless of whether they can afford to buy, and of course are how artists mature their practices. In an environment where museum shows are curtailed and fairs are reduced to tepid digital facsimiles, new models are being envisaged though they have proven no replacement for physical exhibitions.

Q: What elements do you generally consider in your discourse of art market overviews? What barometers do you use for ‘success’ of a commercial exhibition and art fair beyond commercial sales?

LM: An art fair is a trade show, so sales remain the key factor: galleries have to survive. However, dealers will mark something as successful even with sluggish sales if the overall management was organised, the artistic quality high, and collector and overall art world engagement strong. For me, public attendance and education is also a consideration: are general visitors getting more out of it than just another selfie? I also look at regional diversity of galleries, and the freshness of the works they bring. Art fairs say as much about the galleries and the organisers as the actual local art market, and I take into consideration how or if all of these things sync up.

Figure 7: GWKL 2019 Luminaries touring TAKSU, one of Southeast Asia’s leading contemporary commercial galleries and art specialists, at their Kuala Lumpur gallery. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



Q: How has the curatorial expertise relating to Asian modern and contemporary art grown, improved or developed in the past 10 years, in Western and Asian institutions?

LM: Institutions are slow to catch up, but there are a lot of talented young curators from Asia studying at Western academies and using those credentials to do valuable research and texts. However, at the institutional level they quickly hit a double glass ceiling, since they are largely women of colour. In the West, curating Asia is still white and male dominated, and usually are people who have never lived in Asia or learned an Asian language, with no lived experience beyond the very managed visit. Individually, there are some people doing strong work despite that background. But as a group it causes Asia to still be presented as remote and exotic, while preventing a young generation with more diverse and relevant backgrounds from rising in the ranks.

Many Asian institutions are barely more hospitable, and many would rather import a famous Westerner than nurture the region's own emerging curators. They can be hierarchal, sexist, and pay younger staff poverty wages. There are exceptions though: Hong Kong's Para-Site and Guangzhou's Times Museum do a lot to support and cultivate young curators. Shanghai's Power Station of Art has a young curator's showcase as well, though it is limited to ethnic Han Chinese.

Q: How has journalistic coverage of Asian art and/or culture developed in the last 10 years? Are journalists with such expertise prized over the generalist now? What key features in this regard have driven your success as a writer?

LM: There is very little, and it has not really improved much. There are just a handful of Asia-based journalists who cover Asian art and culture in English for international papers, a number that has held steady or even decreased. There is still more interest in sensationalism and stereotypes rather than nuance and accuracy. Especially now, when China has become so vilified in the United States, it is harder than ever to sell complex human and cultural narratives about it – but also even more important to.