



# 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.

# Curating Art in the 21st Century

## AUTHOR

**Wanda Nanibush**, Curator of Indigenous Art, Art Gallery of Ontario

## BIOGRAPHY

**Wanda Nanibush** is Curator of Indigenous Art at Art Gallery of Ontario. She holds a Master's in Visual Arts from the University of Toronto, where she has taught graduate courses.

Along with her curatorial work, she was an Aboriginal Arts Officer at the Ontario Arts Council, Executive Director of ANDPVA and strategic planning for CCA. Hailed by



New York Times as 'one of the most powerful voices for Indigenous culture in the North American art world', she has curated *Karoo Ashevak* (2019), *Rebecca Belmore Facing the Monumental* (2018), *Js McLean for Indigenous & Canadian Art* (2018), *Rita Letendre, Fire & Light* (2017), and *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971—1989* (2016).

As the author of '*Violence No More: The Rise of Indigenous Women*', Nanibush has published widely in various other magazines, books and journals. Nanibush is an Anishinaabe-kwe image and word warrior, curator and community organizer from Beausoleil First Nation.

She was a panellist in the Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2020 *Luminary Forum II: Reconnecting – Museums, Creating & Events*.

*It was enlightening and inspiring to be a part of GWKL. The new connections to Indigenous artists working in the region is exciting for future programming possibilities. Bringing First Nations art to GWKL was important to create more knowledge on art practices globally and encourage local artists in their vision.*

- Wanda Nanibush



## **Curating Art in the 21st Century**

“For colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.”

**- Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth***

“The time has come. Water is something we cannot negotiate, something we cannot compromise. It is seemingly abundant, but in reality, it is in grave danger and my duty as a woman is to defend our water and to protect life...water is life.”

**- Nina Was'te, Lakota/Dakota/Cree, founder of the  
'Idle No More' movement**

We find ourselves working or struggling to survive in the midst of a pandemic and finding our mooring within anti-racist and anti-colonial work. As an Indigenous curator, I have a different route and root through these times. I have a strong sense that it's our relationship to the earth that has led to the pandemic. It also feels like the world is finally listening to Black and Indigenous folks on how dangerous this world has always been for us. It is not an accident that a major movement against racism and colonialism has risen when everyone is locked inside their homes from a virus caused by our treatment of animals. We cannot ignore the way human and our non-human kin struggle to survive under a system that has placed resource development, wealth, and consumerism above life itself. We seek alternatives within the realm of creativity and Indigenous knowledge. I work at this intersection.

There is a lot we can learn from artists and I wanted to do a thought experiment with three works of art to see what they could teach us about the time we are in and the future to come.

As anti-black racism became an everyday topic of conversation in museums, thanks to the daily activism of thousands in major city centres across North America, I began to look back at my own work in the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario). I had made some inroads in purchasing art by Black Canadians and had a few small exhibitions of their work. I was also beginning to integrate the art into the permanent collection galleries. I realized I did not speak or write about it as Black art partly because I had listened to the artists and felt the need to change the art history based on their inclusion was much more fruitful in the long run.

I had learned from one artist, Sandra Brewster, who I had recently done a small solo exhibition with and had commissioned a large photographic work to be the centre of one of our permanent collection galleries. Sandra Brewster's *Wall Transfer Blur 4* is monumental in scale and evocative in materiality.

Sandra Brewster is a Canadian visual artist based in Toronto. Brewster centres her experience as the daughter of Guyanese-born parents who moved to Toronto in the 1970s and the experiences of people of Caribbean heritage and their ongoing relationships with back home. In particular, her photography practice gives a new way to move beyond representation within equity action within the museum. I think what is so innovative about her work is that the meaning of the works is derived both from the content of the photo but also the photographic materials as well. She uses the materiality and history of photography itself in her process, adding meaning by the form the photo takes. This also sometimes leads her photography to approach sculpture and have an embodied presence in the gallery.

In *Wall Transfer Blur 4*, Sandra Brewster depicts Tuku Matthews, a Toronto singer, performance artist, and former member of the blues-rock band Blaxām. For Brewster, Tuku's music represents the texture of Toronto and has left a lasting impression on the artist and her community. The idea of legacy is central to Brewster's work. "In my transfers the texture of the paper I work on becomes similar to that of old photographs. I like that relationship. I work on the walls of spaces because I am drawn to the idea of the work being everlasting. Even when the work is being removed, after it has been sanded down then painted over, it's still there. We may not see it, but there is lasting legacy." The work creates a visible Black presence and history without reduces what it means to a representation of Blackness. The wall transfer is created by pasting the printed image to the wall and washing away the paper until only the ink remains. The transfer shows a transformation one image to another by its movement from one place to another, much like the migration experience. The subject of the photograph is caught in motion and as such cannot be fully seen or objectified. The notion of blackness is kept unfixed and transforming.

Brewster's work reminds me not to assume a representation stance when thinking of diversifying collections and exhibitions. Instead, she punts to the work of writer Eduard Glissant from Martinique who coined the phrase "the right to opacity." The opaque is the opposite of the transparent and bears within it the notion of resisting comprehension.

In cross-cultural communication, Glissant argues, opacity is ethical and a mode of resistance: to refuse to be known and concomitantly to realize you don't really know another. The "right to opacity" means that a person's difference cannot be reduced to an equivalence within mainstream culture. There is no single Blackness or Black experience, only multiple; a person can be reduced to being Black because they are a full, complex and ever-changing subject. Our work needs to keep this respect for difference *as* difference front and centre.

Brewster's practice also points to new histories of photography where the materiality of photography could speak to the experience of migration. By learning from the work itself, the mode of inclusion turns into a real ethic of difference where the ground you thought was stable is unmoored and the whole story needed to change. That is the truth-realization of justice work in museums: to not force people to fit already predetermined oppressive categories but change the entire edifice from the position that has been excluded.

To understand these ideas, connection to the earth and her histories, I turn to a work by Anishinaabe (Indigenous) artist Michael Belmore called *Èdifice*. Anishinaabe artist Michael Belmore works primarily in sculpture. He employs a variety of materials, including wood, stone, and metals, and draws inspiration from his surroundings, exploring notions of geological time. *Èdifice* (2019) was created from boulders Belmore hauled out of a river near Smith Falls, Canada. Belmore is making a subtle reference through material to the Parliament Buildings which are three edifices arranged around three sides of Parliament Hill's central lawn. Parliaments edifices are made from the same stone as his sculpture, Nepean sandstone. He is also conceptually nodding to the second meaning of Edifice which is a complex of beliefs; in this case, the religious, capitalist, and Euro-Canadian concepts that give rise to Capital-colonialism. Belmore hand-carves each stone, carefully creating a beautiful topography and inlays copper leaf on a few stones to create a fault line that glows in the light. In Anishinaabe philosophy, copper is considered to be the life force of the thunderbirds, who travel between the spirit world and ours, and as such, it is a healer. The edifice of his creation speaks to the enduring beauty and strength of the earth against all that threatens it.

The last artwork I feel I have learned from in relation to where we stand to today is *Tower* and *Tarpaulin* (2018) – two sculptures by Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore. Belmore is a multimedia artist with an international profile. *Tower* and *Tarpaulin* are both made from clay and are affective touchstones from the artist's observations of the global problem of homelessness.

*Tower* is made of steel shopping carts and raw clay that is applied each time it is installed. The shopping carts take on the form of a tower and the clay looks like it could be the result of a landslide or an eruption from the earth filling the tower with early material. *Tarpaulin* is fired clay to create the impression of a human body lying under a blanket or tarp for warmth. shopping carts, tapes and blankets are the trappings of home for the homeless. Together the works speak to the contradiction of capitalist accumulation whereby we build more and more towers and still more and more people are homeless. Home becomes an out of reach commodity for most of the world's population.

Museums trade in wealth and largely exist based on the wealthiest whims. Since their inception, they were meant a source of class discipline where class meant cultured. Both COVID and Black Lives Matter made people aware of the role poverty plays in making certain citizens more vulnerable and when it intersects with race which it almost always does you have the perfect conditions for disease and oppression. Museums' upper-class culture keeps alive the idea that upward mobility is the way to secure equality for all. It also keeps many audiences from feeling safe or comfortable in them.

We need museums the poor want to be in and can afford. The cultures of the poverty class, working class and the underemployed need to be taken into account when deciding what is 'proper' behaviour in a museum.

As an Anishinaabe-kwe, it is my responsibility to take care that the earth and her lifeblood, the water, are here to nourish many generations to come. Without the return of land bases and resources, we will not be able to get out of poverty. Our poverty is a direct policy of colonialism and led to the wealth of today's 'West.' These are lines of thought three works of art take this curator in the age of pandemics and anti-racist action.