



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.

Inside Out

AUTHOR

Karin G. Oen, Deputy Director for Curatorial Programmes,
NTA CCA Singapore

BIOGRAPHY

Karin G. Oen is the Deputy Director of Curatorial Programmes at the Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore. Her curatorial practice spans the art and architecture of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, where she deeply engages with the intersection of art, technology and culture.



Dr Oen was the Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, where she was involved with projects such as Liu Jianjua's 2016 installation *Collected Letters* and the 2018 exhibition, *Divine Bodies*.

Whilst at the Asian Art Museum she greatly expanded on the museum's collection of new media, feminist artists and works by the Asian diaspora. Her most current projects include a series of sculptural installations in conjunction with the Asian Art Museum as well as working with the Japanese ultra-technologist collective, teamLad, on their first major catalogue and museum exhibition in the United States.

She has previously taught on modern and contemporary Asian art at the University of North Texas and the University of Texas - Dallas. Dr Oen earned a PhD in history, theory and criticism of art and architecture from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an M.A in modern art history and art market history from Christie's Education and a B.A in urban studies from Stanford University. As a Luminary for Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2019, Dr Oen spoke at the session "Understanding Exhibition", held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

GWKL does what so many programmes around the arts aim to do — connect people at the local, regional, and international levels! In addition to getting to know the city and meeting people involved with the arts in many ways, the luminary programme is crafted around a dedication to meaningful conversations and forging alliances across disciplines and national boundaries. GWKL is an example of what the cultural world needs now more than ever: a cosmopolitan platform for art and a table around which people gather as strangers but depart as allies and friends. The ever-growing importance of Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur in the cultural sphere means that those who haven't been (or who haven't been recently) should take advantage of GWKL as a way to see this cultural capital from the inside out.

- Dr Karin G. Oen

Inside Out

The title for my presentation at Gallery Week Kuala Lumpur, was “Exhibitions as Research and Representation,” on the subject of understanding exhibitions. Had I crafted my thoughts after having arrived in KL, instead of before, I think I would have titled it “Inside Out,” since this theme ended up being a leitmotif for my time there as part of the Luminary Programme. The series of experiences thoughtfully crafted and scheduled for the group involved being hosted by warm individuals, each of whom cares deeply about art, culture, and the impact, great and small, visible and intangible, of bringing together diverse people around art. The focused attention on fostering conversations about culture, and the insider’s view of the growth of an arts ecosystem that is truly diverse and global, made me feel instantly at home. The opposite of tourism, GWKL was a means to engage with the arts in KL and Malaysia as an ally, friend, and an honoured guest. Each meeting with an artist, collector, gallerist, or museum professional was an invitation to participate in a larger conversation. Starting from the “inside,” literally, enjoying the warmth of our hosts’ homes and working our way “out” to the public-facing Programmes provided a human rhythm that global art world events often lack. Hearing an easy mix of conversations about art in multiple languages, and the eager questions from students who filled the audiences, I wondered if this was a model that I, an art historian and curator who has often bemoaned the lack of engagement and inclusive diversity in the art world, had been looking for – a model that could turn the art world inside out in a healthy, productive way. My understanding of exhibitions, presented at GWKL as a series of touchstones that addressed my diverse interests and multi-faceted practice as a curator, is offered here as a case study and proposition for expanding our mutual understanding of what exhibitions can and should do in the context of an art world that is undergoing dramatic change.

To locate my own practice as a curator and art historian, I must start with the historical research that I’ve done on the informal networks of artists and artist-initiated exhibitions. This research is mostly in the archives of the recent past – the memories of individuals, largely the artists themselves, the periodicals, ephemera, and other assorted documents that chronicled the work at the time. The subject of new media artistic experimentation in China, largely centred by groups of young artists who had been convened by China’s elite art academies, was the focus of my doctoral dissertation at MIT in 2012. At this point, I was particularly interested in the self-initiated practice of exhibition in an arts ecosystem with a distinct lack of diversity.

China in the 1980s certainly had museums and a few galleries or other formal exhibition spaces, but it also saw the development of many non-official venues. Most of them were temporary, informal, or fly-by-night. The questions that interested me in researching this period were not just about the art itself, but whether the nature of the limited channels to show and convene artworks in a critical formation might fundamentally change the relationship between the viewer and the art.

The work of The Pond Society in Hangzhou in 1986, a group that included the now-senior influential artists Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, including their pieces *Work No. 1—Yang Taiji Series* and *Work No. 2—Walkers in Green Space*, presents an interesting resistance to classification. These works were seen in public (on a stone wall outside the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art and in a forest, respectively) while not being conceived of as “public art.” They were also installations without having the holistic intention of creating an installation space, and they involved a performative gesture (each of them involved interventions and the clear actions of the artists) without being conceived of as “performance art.” In the case of *Work No. 1*, the figures, constructed from newspaper, were installed for just a few days before they were damaged and then disappeared. For *Work No. 2*, the piece involved suspended cardboard figures installed amongst the forest trees. It is known through documentary photographs and the written accounts of witnesses, of which there were fewer than ten – each of whom had been invited to see the project.

My interest in these works is not just to understand and situate them in their particular time and place of creation, or to historicise them as crucial to the artistic lineage that they are arguably central to, but to see the power and interest in relatively simple acts, gestures, and modes of convening people. At my best, as a curator, I hope to create the circumstances for exhibitions that nod to the expansive practice of works like these Pond Society pieces. I look for modes of interaction that invite participation without being overt performances; I collaborate with artists and designers on installation strategies that are creative and lend context, without being installation works in and of themselves; and I sincerely hope that attendance (always a daunting KPI for an institutional curator) need not be high for a project to be important and memorable. For me, the mode of creative practice that is the contemporary art exhibition is one that is dependent upon continual reconsideration and re-calibrating.

I hope that my own practice, as a curator of modern and contemporary art who has worked in several historical museums, and conversely as a historian who works in the

realm of contemporary art, is informed by the perplexing and fascinating practices of artists who approach projects or works or collaborations as a means to provoke questions and craft open-ended experiences.

To present the diversity within my own practice and in my particular corner of the art world, I offer some wildly contrasting examples of employing these Pond-Society-inspired techniques in the organisation of exhibitions. At the Asian Art Museum, where I worked as a curator of contemporary art from 2015-2019, the context of a broad historical museum collection provided many unusual opportunities for connecting contemporary art to broader dialogues around art and culture. Particularly inspired by the conceptual and expansive thinking of my colleagues, curators of historical material organised by culture and geography, I joined in on the exhibition and catalogue project *Divine Bodies* in 2017. This was a project that was originally a partnership between Jeffrey Durham (a curator of Himalayan art) and Qamar Adamjee (a curator of South Asian and Islamic art). Intrigued by universal humanistic questions around the intertwined natures of the sacred and profane, as well as basic inquiries into life and death, Adamjee and Durham had explored the museum's collection, both in their areas of oversight and other collection categories, for several years with the idea of bridging the typical museum divisions based on time and place. Rather than thinking about the particularity of the way a certain deity in a certain tradition had been represented at a certain time, they wondered, why is it that these divine representations are so human in their appearance or perceived temperaments? Conversely, they wondered why the acknowledgement of divine characteristics is present and celebrated in humanity (or humans, to be more specific) so universally, despite the many other differences in religious and sacred texts and practices.

Also intrigued by these larger questions that could allow our research to manifest in an unusual exhibition project based on engaging both individual artworks and the juxtaposition of unlikely groupings of objects, I joined the curatorial team to bring contemporary work from far outside of the realm of overtly sacred art into the conversation. The installation of Dayanita Singh's long-duration project documenting the Delhi-based transgender individual Mona Ahmed in photographs and a book project entitled *Myself, Mona Ahmed*, as well as a video installation entitled *Mona and Myself* (2013) alongside historical sculptures of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, was one of the highlights of the project for me. The practice of Vivian Sundaram as visible in his *Khajuraho* series involve his drawing and creative interventions to modernise the deities portrayed in photographic reproductions found in a guidebook to that temple complex.

These diminutive works on paper were installed near sculptures of Hindu deities that bore some relationship to the *Khajuraho* works, an opportunity to re-contextualise the guidebook's photos in terms of the modern context in which they are viewed but also to re-invigorate Sundaram's work that utilised printed reproductions with close proximity to the historical sculptural objects. Gauri Gill's *Traces* (a series of photographs capturing humble mounded gravesites in the desert in West Rajasthan) appeared in the same gallery as stupas and mandala paintings in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition – each of these works touching on the cyclical nature of life and death in its way. Pamela Singh's *Tantric Self-Portrait* series of embellished photographs involve the artist and her presence (sometimes indicated by only a shadow or small corner of her face) in the urban, historical, and mysterious landscape of Jaipur. The work of this artist-flaneur, embedded within a section of the exhibition exploring the multiplicity of divinity, offered a reminder that photo documentation of the experiences of our environment every day can be as elusive and indescribable as overtly sacred sculpture in the Buddhist and Hindu tradition, and that the sublime can be equally at work in an urban street scene as in a serene house of worship or meditation.

In my current, still new, position as Deputy Director for Curatorial Programmes at the NTU CCA Singapore, I'm working on curatorial projects that are overtly different from many museum exhibitions. Underpinned by a mission as a research centre, we address the larger issues of the contemporary spaces of the curatorial, both outside of traditional exhibition venues and inside these spaces but defined by a different intellectual territory. We actively examine what it means to “curate the city” and examine critical spatial practices alongside the transdisciplinary purview of artists working on issues connected to our overall research umbrella of “Climates. Habitats. Environments” – a broad look at the issues of urgency surrounding our ecosystem and our future. We offer exhibition projects alongside discursive programmes, curated film programmes, and research-based artists' residencies that combine specific inquiries with investigations into broader methodologies of research, as well as what presentations or exhibitions mean in the context of this expanded field of art practice.

I realise that my background as an art historian, my experience in historical museums, and my work as a curator in the broad field of contemporary art might seem like somewhat incongruous modes of addressing the impossibly indefinable space of the contemporary art world. But I hope that the ties that bind my practice together are clear in their intention: to create the circumstances for bringing together people with works of art and conditions of viewing that might provoke and invite conversations, investigations, and creative responses.

Figure 1: Karin Oen and other GWKL 2019 Luminaries on their tour of Rumah Lukis Gallery. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



As someone who finds the histories of display and exhibition fundamentally interesting, I hope that my own exhibitions and contributions to the changing landscape of the world of art and culture can help continue these conversations while sparking new ones. And not just the in the realm of the arts, but the world that we are all navigating, and co-creating, together.