



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.

[The Globalist Vs The Localist]

AUTHOR

Jennifer Pratt, Former Director of Strategy for Asia Pacific at Artsy

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Pratt leads strategy in the Asia Pacific region at Artsy, the leading global platform for discovering and collecting art. Merging global experience with regional expertise, she heads Artsy's efforts in their China market entry strategy in addition to establishing growth strategies specific to each of Artsy's businesses across the Asia-Pacific.



Prior to Artsy, Pratt worked in the luxury fashion sector in New York, which included working for Marc Jacobs, Louis Vuitton, and being Bookings Editor for Harper's Bazaar, after graduating from New York University. Pratt later relocated to Asia to join the team at ArtHK in building Hong Kong's first homegrown modern and contemporary art fair.

Shortly thereafter, the fair was acquired by MCH and re-launched as the Art Basel show in Hong Kong. Jennifer led the Marketing and Communications team in Hong Kong through the transition. Currently, Pratt is heading her own strategy consultant firm in San Francisco, Jenn Pratt Creates, which focuses on strategizing for fashion, art and tech industries.

In 2018, Pratt participated in Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL), selected as one of seven Luminaries for that year as part of the Luminary Programme. She moderated the panel “Emerging Practices and Platforms” at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

GWKL marks an important and necessary development in the cultural landscape of Kuala Lumpur. The bilateral exchange taking place in this dialogue is valuable to all in bringing regional specific concerns and circumstances to the forefront so that they can be considered and contextualised in the global conversation.

- Jennifer Pratt

Figure 1: Jennifer Pratt (far right) moderating the GWKL 2018 Luminary panel on “Emerging Practices and Platforms”, held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. Photo by Shalini Ganendra Advisory.



[The Globalist Vs The Localist]

Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, penned an article in January 2019 titled [*Globalisation 4.0 – what does it mean?*](#)

Here he defines the distinction between globalisation and globalism. “Globalisation is a phenomenon driven by technology and the movement of ideas, people, and goods. Globalism is an ideology that prioritises the neoliberal global order over national interests. Nobody can deny that we are living in a globalised world. But whether all of our policies should be “globalist” is highly debatable.” While he applies this to global economic policies, we can also apply it to the preservation of local culture and art ecologies in the face of the expanding art market.

The art market has proliferated to a global scale of that the world has never been seen before – economist Claire McAndrew states in the Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market report, that worldwide sales in 2018 reached \$67.4 billion. Of that, sales valued up to \$29.9 billion were transacted in America making the US the top market of 2018 followed by the UK and China. These three markets made up 84% of all sales that took place last year.

The increasing role of the international market and pricing indexed by this market shows a clear distinction between artists who have the financial support to show on a global level cherry-picked by the handful of blue-chip galleries by entering into multiple art fairs, biennales and gallery shows every year. And on the other hand, the galleries and artists who struggle to keep up in the global art trot.

As economies strengthen in the many fragmented markets in the Asia Pacific, and economic uncertainty builds in Europe and the United States, art dealers are placing bets on nurturing collectors from countries in Asia towards buying into the globalist cannon of predominantly Western art historically recognised as important artists and works. This leads to a downplaying of local art practices. The dealers able to operate at this level are bringing value to the communities they descend upon by investing in art education and client events, building both interest and demand for their artists. However, the level of investment dedicated to building a global audience for artists coming from the Asia Pacific is significantly less. And so, we see the proliferation of the international art fair model increasingly coming to dominate Asia’s emerging art markets. The success of these events is marked by the sales figures reported by a similar handful of galleries who have the resources to show their roster across multiple fairs each year.

Rarely is a domestic gallery quoted as having the biggest sales at an event – because the figures aren't certainly big enough to be seductive and also perhaps because their artists have yet to be deemed important in an increasingly globalist art dialogue.

At the Art Basel in Hong Kong press conference this year, it was acknowledged that the disparage and opportunity cost between leading and emerging galleries is vast and only growing. An international gallery can do well at a fair by selling just one or two works, each priced in the hundreds of thousands and millions. While a gallery selling emerging artists is lucky to break even.

In a world where collectors seek to align with a gallery or artists that are globalist brands, it is not difficult to foresee a globalist movement lurking in the future. In this future, which looks a lot like our now, blue-chip artists go from creators to managers to support the demand needed to keep up this eco-system, and artists whose works are born out of popular culture sell for millions at auction.

Art is a reflection of a place and a time in a culture and of the experiences of people that lived in it. Art is a screaming call to the world to recognise the human experience. Art tells the stories of the hands which have created it – be the statement personal or political, and frequently both. In which case, what are the implications when popular culture stemming from a globalist West begins to influence local cultural tastes?

What is often overlooked is that we need to explain and celebrate local cultures for audiences to understand the work coming out of any one of the many cultures and markets within Asia. Everything exists in its context, and without institutions working to educate viewers about that cultural and historical context, there is a danger of a white-washing of Asian cultural elements and representations. When patrons pay visits to these smaller art economies – the markets of Southeast Asia or India come to mind – it is crucial that the historical and cultural stage is set for them as they begin to survey the artists' presentations around them. With an outsider's eye, these works can be viewed as native, when they are in fact mainstream – it's just that a globalist audience may not always grasp the context of the stream.

In this new landscape, local institutions – museums, biennales, gallery weekends and gallery associations – must be called to action as the leaders in maintaining, growing and promoting local cultures, histories and practices. In Asia, where art education is not traditionally a part of education systems, these institutions have taken up the role of official educators to the public.

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL), led by cultural luminary Shalini Ganendra and launched as an annual feature in 2016, is a strong example of a private initiative with a public conscience, stepping in to connect, educate, discuss and inspire cross-cultural exchange. The market in KL has developed as many do in Southeast Asia - the gallery system is still coming into play as artists find ways to become successful practising artists. This difference in support systems for the artists make it challenging to integrate the work being done there with a broader dialogue. However, this is not for lack of culture and creativity, which resonates deeply in the community.

It will take initiatives such as GWKL to bring international experts to discuss and educate on the practices taking place around the world. The benefits here are twofold: local audiences benefit from the shared global experience of the delegates and visitors visiting Kuala Lumpur. All are immersed in KL's rich culture and are able to learn and take back with them the nuances artists and surrounding institutions deal with on a day-to-day basis.

Technology has stepped in to act as a great democratiser in all of this. Platforms such as Artsy or social media tools, such as Instagram level, the playing field by allowing every creator, whether backed by an organisation or not, to access the same audience as those who are fortunate enough to have financial backing.

Those of us working in the field must remember that art is not a commodity. As our nations continue their economic growth and development, and consumerism is embraced by some who may not have had the chance to experience consumerist culture before, we must remember that art is a reflection of a life, a history, a human experience.

Judgements should not solely be based on pricings and brand alignments. Know and value the culture – know and value the art.