



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

UNESCO OBSERVATORY
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1, 2021

UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur
VOLUME 7: ISSUE 1: 2021

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Cover Image: Ernesto Pujazon
Totem to "Wiracocha", Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2007–2008

ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal

an Openly Published Journal affiliated with

The UNESCO Observatory at

The University of Melbourne

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert

Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory

Email: lindyaj@unimelb.edu.au

Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education



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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.

On Growth Markets

AUTHOR

Hugo Weihe, CEO of Saffronart, Former International Director of Asian Art, Christie's

BIOGRAPHY

Hugo Weihe is the former International Director of Asian Art at Christie's. Dr Weihe joined Christie's in 1998, after his post as a Specialist of Chinese Works of Art at Sotheby's New York. During his 16 years at Christie's, he founded the department of Indian and Southeast Asian Art.

He also helped to catapult Christie's Asian Art department—specifically the Indian department—to a strong market leadership position. Previously, Dr Weihe was a Specialist in Asian Art with Galerie Koller Auctioneers, Zurich.



Having been a longstanding advisor and friend to prominent private collectors worldwide, he has appeared as a panelist and moderator for numerous discussions on South Asian Modern and Contemporary Art, as well as conducting interviews with artists and collectors at various international venues and art fairs. Dr Weihe is currently the CEO of Saffronart, India's leading auction house founded in 2000.

He currently oversees Saffronart's presence in Mumbai, New Delhi, New York and London in building a market for Indian art and antiquities globally.

In 2017, Dr Weihe joined a selection of other international art world visionaries to participate in Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur's (GWKL) Luminary Pulse Programme. He presented on "Collecting, Creating and Curating" at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

[GWKL] is a brilliant initiative to showcase the rich heritage and new artistic impetuosity coming out of the region, a most memorable few days.

- Dr Hugo Weihe

On Growth Markets

I was honoured to participate at Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) 2017, not least to gain an understanding for the cultural environment surrounding KL as an important metropole and hub. The organisers are singularly dedicated to the growth of the local cultural scene and art market. I felicitate them on their ongoing efforts which I am delighted to support.

As someone who has been deeply engaged in the formation of the art market in South Asia over the last decade and beyond, this presents an interesting study case to analyse and identify the parameters that define the opportunity for growth in the arts:

1) Economy:

New wealth, in addition to established cultural patronage, is a key driver for growth. Art has always been connected to prestige, so “investing” in culture is not about short-term financial gains, but about identifying and supporting core values important to society and a specific people, which are of enduring value and at the core of an identity as a nation. However, there is no doubt that there are various driving forces at work, which can cause distortion in the short term. The boom experienced in the art market in the run-up to 2008 included a speculative element that was not founded on true connoisseurship or art appreciation, which subsequently dramatically affected the contemporary markets in Asia. New wealth first needs to develop a greater understanding of the values of culture beyond just monetary values.

2) Education:

Arguably the most important aspect is to facilitate aesthetic appreciation and intellectual curiosity in the arts and developing the knowledge and respect for heritage. This should preferably start at an early age. Therefore, schools and parental guidance play a vital part in introducing art into the curriculum at a formative stage and when there is both time and space to do so. This is probably the most important step, as the demands of modern-day life are increasingly distracting and challenge the opportunity to set aside enough time for contemplation and study.

3) Cultural Identity:

Art and culture identify people and are an enduring testimony to the achievements of a nation. Museums play an important role as repositories and as places to gather and celebrate culture in its context. All art was once contemporary and contains a sublimation of the time and place when it was created, from which we can continue to read and learn. I was particularly impressed by the collection and world-class standards of presentation at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. It demonstrates a deep understanding and respect for the heritage, which provides the best possible foundation for viewers to be stimulated visually and intellectually.

4) Legacy Building:

Public collections are often formed on the back of private initiative. The key is individual collectors, as is evidenced by the great private collections formed in the US in the late 1800s and early 1900s, such as Frick, Morgan, Huntington and many others. The motivation was a sense of gratitude to society after a successful career, to share with a larger community and to establish a personal legacy. The US system of allowing significant tax deductions for donations to public institutions has been a decisive driver in the continuous growth of collections in American museums. It has proven to be an excellent model for the greater public good. By contrast, many European institutions have been stagnating at best, seeing their government-provided acquisition and operating budgets being continuously curtailed.

5) Government:

Ultimately, the government plays a key role in supporting the arts, in facilitating the above steps, and by not placing onerous requirements and taxes in the movement and ownership of artworks. By not curtailing private enterprise, it stands to gain further down the road in terms of donations to institutions, developing initiatives and the creation of private institutions that have a positive knock-on effect. Enlightened cultural governance around the world has enabled institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, literally putting themselves on the map by creating a destination, with significant economic benefits resulting not least from tourism. For governments, art is a great business for history.

In consideration of the above factors, it appears that good groundwork is being provided in Kuala Lumpur. Developing quality programmes that highlight the contemporary art scene as well as artistic heritage and scholarship, are key to building awareness and appreciation. Charismatic personalities, including artists, curators, connoisseurs, gallerists and scholars alike, are helpful protagonists and “tastemakers”.

If we look at other models in Asia, China supported its burgeoning contemporary art scene after the opening in 1989, when it recognised the economic impact and cultural recognition it was receiving internationally. However, this also brought social criticism by artists such as Ai Weiwei. Spread by the power of social media, it inadvertently has the potential of making a cultural scene stronger and richer, with governments not necessarily having to worry about appearances in an increasingly complex political world. China also supported the return of cultural heritage, resulting in a strong market for antiquities. Additionally, there has been a strong drive in establishing world-class museum institutions along with high-quality publications and exhibitions.

Also at stake, is asserting a new pride of place in the world. India in turn, despite its enormously rich heritage and important masterpieces in public collections within the country, is still lagging on the museum front, in terms of modern infrastructure and presentation, which has arguably held back stronger development. While promoting “Made in India”, it has surprisingly omitted to leverage its soft powers of culture, philosophy, and historical wealth in asserting its position for the momentum emerging out of Asia as a whole. Culture is also about building bridges and roads across boundaries, in the way the ancient Silk Road helped connect not least through the trade of goods, but also of ideas, beliefs and achievements that garnered mutual respect. This concept is and still needs to be alive today.

Each of the five points outlined above plays a vital role in successfully nurturing the cultural scene and will pay off handsomely over time for society and humanity at large in priceless ways.