



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

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Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory

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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.

True to Scale: Curating in Cycles

AUTHOR

Patrick Flores, Curator, Singapore Biennale 2019 and Taiwan Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022; Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines

BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Flores is Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines and curator of Vargas Museum in Manila and Director of the Philippine Contemporary Art Network. He was Artistic Director of Singapore Biennale 2019 and has been appointed curator of the Taiwan Pavilion for Venice Biennale in 2022.

He curated *South by Southeast* and the Philippine Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, co-curated *Under Construction: New Dimensions in Asian Art in 2000* and the Gwangju Biennale (Position Papers) in 2008. In 1999, Flores was Visiting Fellow at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and an Asian Public Intellectuals Fellow in 2004.



He was a grantee of the Asian Cultural Council, an Advisory Board member of the exhibition *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds after 1989* (2011), member of the Guggenheim Museum's Asian Art Council (2011 and 2014), and a Guest Scholar of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2014.

Flores has also written, convened and published extensively. He was the speaker for GWKL 2020's *Luminary Forum I: Balancing the Biennials*.

Like all art worlds seeking to enhance their ecologies, the Malaysian cultural scene needs a platform like GWKL to bring creative agents of various persuasions together to see art and to talk about it. This is no easy task as the field is dynamic and always in flux and that there are always tough questions to ask and tougher responses to keep. This situation is, however, needed to keep the community on its toes or at the edge, as it were, to find a stance or a tilt towards reaching out to more contexts of reception and practices. What I notice is that there is a desire and demand for discourse as there is a lively curiosity to crack the oftentimes arcane codes of the curatorial and the contemporary. This is a good sign, because it conquers cynicism and dichotomies, and encourages an ever-alert responsibility, as well as a vigorous generosity, of both public and practitioner.

- Patrick Flores, Curator, Singapore Biennale 2019 and Venice Biennale 2022

True to Scale: Curating in Cycles

Reading the brief of this event, I was drawn to the phrases “pioneering the creative” and “more value.” These formulations signify aspirations arising from the appreciation of risk as a necessity of originating something and the desire to further the achievement. I see these words forming the basis of origins and extensions, impulses to which biennales as platforms of deliberate selection and decisive inclusion speak. To take risks and to pioneer is to fulfil the potential of this platform and mark its limits; to be original or to be a point of origin, and to realize that it is not enough. This is the condition of the biennale, the source of its anxiety and the thrill of insisting on it time and again. This anxiety ultimately feeds into the curatorial intelligence.

Biennales are shaped by curatorial discourse. And curators do not just exemplify this discourse. They perform it as they curate the biennale through gestures that translate into the circulation of materials, the creation of situations, and the production of hopefully reciprocal discourse. The biennale iteration, therefore, is not empty. It is charged, and one must closely read the signs and not just easily recognize certain iconographies and signatures and pass them off as the basis of critique. A biennale speaks to this desire to be true to the condition of the current world. That truthfulness should surmount the literal geography or the restrictive geopolitics in which the biennale is located. Since a biennale is worldly, it should work with art that is equivalently so in terms of its materiality and the broad sympathies of its makers. Also, because the biennale is expected to be exciting and different, it gains a latitude to experiment with modalities that surface this robust materiality and sympathy beyond the exhibition, which on its own has a very dynamic potential.

With these thoughts in mind, I am reminded of Gayatri Spivak’s provocative remarks in Dhaka in 2018 for the Dhaka Art Summit where she said that an art event like the Summit, which is a broad exhibition of contemporary art taking place in Bangladesh, needs a “supplement.” And this supplement is to question the totality to which the event aspires. This notion of totality must be nuanced. Its appeal to the total has something to do with its ability and its power to gather art from different geographies, crossing national borders, assembling diverse aesthetic forms and technologies, and facilitating exchange between discourses of various registers. All this flows into a totality, although not seamlessly and without strain. But with this semblance of totality is also the mechanism of limits. For the curation of a biennale requires control and deliberate selection that, while provisionally in force, is not terminal because the biennale iterates. And every time it turns, it gathers other species and intelligences in the creative world.

This contentious concern of Spivak cannot be resolved easily, the more reason its trouble must be kept, though not indulged or belaboured. It is a question that speaks to a lack, according to her, and to exceed the aspiration. For Spivak the need for a supplement pressures the event to encompass the “incalculable dangerousness of the broadest base of human reality” and to look towards a “socially just world.” [1]

In this regard, in the context of this Gallery Weekend in Kuala Lumpur and my work as a curator of the biennale platform, let us revisit the persistent potential of the exhibition as a language and a vehicle to convey the sensible materials of the contemporary world. If contemporary art is more than just objects and engagement is more than just spectatorship, what do we make of the exhibition?

The next director of the Sydney Biennale, the Colombian Jose Roca, continues to express faith in the exhibition. And his words are instructive: “I am above all an exhibition maker. I believe in the exhibition as a device; I believe in the experience — not only visual or intellectual, but bodily experience — of the viewer.” [2] This being said, Roca would also look “beyond contemporary art” to include design, furniture, material culture and local voices “outside the realm of art.” [2] So again here, we take note of the effort to exceed not only the exhibition but contemporary art altogether.

Singapore Biennale 2019

These sentiments were also at play when I directed the Singapore Biennale in 2019. Let me begin with a tableau that may be expressed in the well-known phrase: ‘From a fishing village to a modern nation-state.’ This was the trope, which clarified the arc of time, that governed the dioramas of Singapore history commissioned by the National Museum of Singapore in the 1980s. Such a colonial imaginary would persist neoliberally in 2019, with the commemoration of the bicentenary of the arrival of the British in Singapore that is now the Potemkin city of late capital in the counter-polemic of Rem Koolhaas. In the same year, I directed the sixth iteration of the Singapore Biennale, heir to the nineteenth-century exposition and exemplary of the global contemporary. The co-incidences of the iterative Biennale and colonial time condensing in the spectral diorama, a veritable world-picture, gave me pause to think about how the interface between globalisation and miniaturisation could propose a different trajectory of worldliness via history and the contemporary within the exhibition. The dioramas, these maquettes which limn pivotal events as picturesque, were hewn painstakingly and delicately by craftpersons from Paete in Laguna, south of the capital of Manila in the Philippines.

With this subcontract of exceptional local labour, the Filipino artisans would thus carve out a space for the Philippine moment in signifying colonial history in a museum in Singapore. It is surely a history as well of craft, image, and art that migrates and circulates translocally. But inflecting this diffusion is the colonial tension that disturbs the passage of the contemporary through its modernity. The title of the Biennale addresses this frisson of restiveness through the words of Salud Algabre, a woman revolutionary who took part in a rebellion against the Americans in the thirties in the same province of the carvers. The insurrection fell apart quite quickly though Algabre remained undiminished. Years later, when a historian queried her where she had gone after the attack against the imperialist apparatus failed, she rectified him by saying: “No uprising fails. Each one is a step in the right direction.” [3] The intersection between the carvers and the insurgent opens up a latitude for more articulations of Philippine agency, honed in the crucible of three successive colonialisms from the sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, to dwell in and permeate the Biennale of the present.

VIVA ExCon

As one of the most sustained artist-initiated biennales in Southeast Asia, the VIVA ExCon (Visayas Islands Visual Arts Exhibition and Conference) organizes its 16th iteration in Bacolod City in Negros Occidental. It opened on November 8, 2020 and evolves patiently in phases until July 2021 for an exhibition program. Formed in 1990 by the collective Black Artists in Asia, the itinerant VIVA ExCon has striven to carve out a space and perspective for artists in the central islands of the Philippines called the Visayas. Through its efforts to foster an inter-island ecology distinct from, albeit not isolated from, the art world in the capital of Manila, VIVA Excon has achieved across thirty years a collaborative and participatory ethos of art making, mutual support, and solidarity unique in the Philippine archipelago.

VIVA ExCon 2020 promises to be responsive to the conditions shaped by the pandemic and offers an agenda that rethinks notions of the festival and the exhibition. Facing the prospects of the future, it holds up the name *Dasun*, a Hiligaynon word that means “next” and an idiosyncratic connective in everyday language to signify “and then.” It thus speculates on the things to come as it narrates stories of an ever-turning present.

The main exhibition of VIVA ExCon is *Kalibutan: The World in Mind*. I am the head curator, and I will be collaborating with six curators from the Visayas. The project will unfold incrementally in modular form from November 2020 to July 2021.

The exhibition takes inspiration from the Visayan word *kalibutan*, which refers to both the world and consciousness, universe and speculation. It is a dense and intricate term because it brings together world-making and worldview. The world is embodied, on the one hand, and the body is enworlded, on the other. It is rare for a word to register simultaneously cosmos and cognition. This is the prompt for the curatorial work on the Visayas: to create conditions for expressive material that responds to the range of stimuli of an active ecology. Mindfulness of the world acknowledges complicity in its production as well as the indeterminacy of its vastness. From November 2020 to July 2021, the scheme of *A Seminar on a Possible Exhibition*, a supplement to *Kalibutan*, will play out virtually around the following nodes: Curators Converse; Artists Explore; Works Disclose; and Exhibitions/Not Exhibitions. This seminar sensitively attends to the reconstitutions of the chastened world in pandemic time in the context of the viral and the vernacular.

The curatorial contribution to this discussion is the philosophy of *kalibutan*, a conceptualization of the world and of consciousness, of ecology and intuition. It is simultaneously time and place as well as the mediation of them by the senses and the ethos. Without doubt, our *kalibutan* can only touch on the everyday and emergency, delicately and urgently.

Taiwan Pavilion/Venice Biennale

The work of Sakuliu Pavavalijung comes from a distinct place in the vast creative world of Taiwan. As it is rooted and reared in the indigenous lifeworld of the Paiwan people, so is it, in the same breath, in dynamic interaction with the quickly changing social context around it. Sakuliu stands at this intersection and endeavours to transform spaces across and within it. Shaping his practice is the impulse of a knowledge generator who pursues visual research of persistent mythology, collective strategy, and an encompassing cosmology through drawing, photography, and animation. On the other hand, he reveals a lively intelligence for artistic intervention through sculpted form, built environment, installation, and the cultural labour of revitalizing heritage. I am honoured to be curating Sakuliu for the Taiwan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2022. I am interested in his complex artistic language and his deep engagement with his community in Sandimen in Pingtung County, which is in the south of Taiwan. Coming from the Philippines and Southeast Asia, I am keen to plot out coordinates between these two points of the south in the larger context of Austronesian culture and reflect on the current discussion on what it means to be either contemporary or local.

Sakuliu seems to say that this is a false binary as he animates an ecology inspired by the spirit of ancestors and reinvented by the vision of the citizen-artists we meet every day. Curating the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice is very much of interest as it complicates the idea of a nation-state in a worldly, international, cosmopolitan biennale. Taiwan is within Chinese discourse, but it is not China and is not a nation-state in the geopolitical agenda of China; in fact, it contradicts the hegemony of China. The artist Sakuliu, for his part, is not of Chinese lineage, but Austronesian and may well be more proximate to Southeast Asia.

Coda

Reflecting on the three projects I briefly discussed, I think there should be greater dissipation of the artistic and curatorial material into multiple and equivalent, though uneven, scales. And every curatorial initiation should be true to the scale within which it finds its measure as well as its experiments. Curatorial efforts come in a series, and so there is no need to consolidate so much in a singular venture. In the examples I presented, I cite a biennale in Singapore; a biennale in the islands in the Philippines; and a pavilion in Venice. I see them as relays in my practice, attempts to navigate the constellation of contemporary art that is marked not by continents, but by archipelagos and mangroves, with all the tides and thickets. I am wary of efforts that rely on the signature of artists or art forms that can easily be captured, simplified for convenience and possible commodification, and drained of their complexity or difficulty. For me they tend to become franchises of the global inventory. I am more interested in dispersed, even tricky, materialities that propose plural trajectories instead of a monolithic image or a fully formed accomplishment. I think what the pandemic has made us realize is the need for the biennale modality to signify precarity and vulnerability in the context of a persistent resistance and patience. That's what the line "every step in the right direction," which may be prayer or manifesto or both, had sought to evoke in the first place.

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