



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.

Tranches of Time in Asian Art Immersion: Reminiscences of GWKL

AUTHOR

Dr. Puteri Shireen Jahn Kassim, Associate Professor, International Islamic Museum, Malaysia

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Puteri Shireen Jahn Kassim is an Associate Professor based at the Faculty of Architecture and Environmental Design (KAED), International Islamic University Malaysia, and currently based at the Applied Arts and Design programme.

She is the main author of two recent books, *'The Resilience of Tradition'* and *'Modernity, Nation and Urban Architectural Form'*. In recent years, she headed



the architecture and arts research cluster under the transdisciplinary grant (TRGS) by MoHE, aimed at connecting Malay Nusantara heritage resources with urbanism practitioners and policy and acted as lead advisor on sustainable standards (MyCrest) for Malaysian buildings to the Construction Industry Board Malaysia (CIDB) and Jabatan Kerjaraya (JKR).

She currently acts as Chief Editor for the Journal *'Cultural Syndrome'*, focusing on regional Asian-based heritage and the visual arts. She is editorial member of multiple academic journals and led a series of research-based exhibitions on Malay artisanal traditions.

Dr. Kassim coordinated participation by numerous university students in the Luminary Forums and included new knowledge from the sessions in teaching modules.

Whether it is a process of creating art that suddenly dawns on the viewer, or the perspective of the art connoisseur, or the journey of the novice collector, or of the discerning curator, or of a student struggling with absorbing history in a general course on the arts or any design programme, GWKL has a story to tell and part of its story has something for all in the journey and evolution of humanity.

- Dr. Shireen Jahn Kassim, Associate Professor, International Islamic University Malaysia

Tranches of Time in Asian Art Immersion: Reminiscences of GWKL

The learning of art history can be an onerous journey. Yet it is a journey that must be traversed every year by both instructor and learner. In academia, limited by classroom space and resources, compacted into a fourteen-week semester, the journey became doubly arduous. It is usually compounded by expectations; art history sounds so exciting yet how do you grapple with the essence of conveying and experiencing time and talent on a global scale, in such a short time?

It is the multifaceted story of GWKL that seems to be one part of the answer. The journey of art and aesthetic tendencies of humanity can transcend the classroom and time merely as a series of numbers, more than a plodding of dates and points in a timeline.

In Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL), Art becomes a story of humanity, some which exceed their conditions and events, to create beauty and perfection. History is experience beyond what is boxed into timeframes. Galleries and talks replace the usual serialisation of milestones and markers. To learn art history, artistic achievements are no longer reduced to a calendar of time. History - a journey backwards in time - is no longer learnt by the heavy plodding of circas and centuries, numbers, dates, locations and years.

The experience of GWKL wonderfully lightens the burden of teaching. The usual cultural marquee's editions have immersed the learner or participant - whether audience or speaker - in a multiformat yet light programme. In some ways, GWKL brings one's consciousness backwards and forwards within a spatial-temporal sense in art's evolution. The event resonates as a priceless series of immersive 'tranches' - giving flashes of art eras, and dimensions. One travels through it like one revel in travelling the world in different locations. The history of arts in the region becomes one that immerses the mind and inscribes the memory. This sense of temporal tranches contains art inflexions with universal appeal yet inflected with geographically and culturally defined nuances, due to its unique intersections and quagmire of cultures, which defines Malaysia. This nation and region have been the intersection of so many events and stories in history and cultures of the world, that a gallery week experience in KL feels like taking a route on a time - a crossing of cultures between east and west.

Learning is aided and thus, becomes spiced with discussion, listening, viewing and thinking. This process is invigorated for those few days of GWKL within a bubbly multicultural cauldron of Malaysia's art community.

Tranche is defined as a 'portion of something'. Typically, the term is used in the world of finance and banking. It designates the movement of something as part of a bigger thing. History is the unfolding of the bigger continuum of achievements in society. In GWKL, these momentary insights merge as a confluence of artistic tranches in creativity, not necessarily in chronological order. Within the events that unfold over several days, art becomes a celebration of cultural specifics and its ancient role as a unifying agent. As conversations take place over dinner, through gallery visits and luminary talks, art becomes a means within which the ethics of co-existence is collectively facilitated. Through visits, and subsequently, talks and conversations over the offerings in KL, young (and old) minds and outlooks become enmeshed onto the local arts scene. KL, a multicultural city, with its sentinel-like backdrop of KLCC - the twin-towers, gives an ever-present reminder of a culture of co-existence. The culture of 'sharing', hospitality and generosity strikes at the root of Malaysia's local culture, yet it teases on the constant problematic in humanity, that of sharing, and how sharing can be beneficial to all. One is reminded how the act of 'sharing' marks the beginnings of Malaysia as a nation, and GWKL places a homage to this cultural way of life as an artistic immersion into time and ending with anticipation of the future.

Reminiscing the past years of the GWKL programme and the experience of it, its (insistence) space to space, interspersed with stopovers of visual absorption of creative sources across KL, luminary enlightenment and review of exhibitions, recall such an experience of 'tranches'. The programme itself represents flashes of the temporal and the spatial.

The inclusion of craft as a persistent discourse and module provides a marker and milestone into arts, from an ancient and rooted perspective and vantage. Without delving too deep into time and history, it recalls the ingenuity of the local populace and folk arts before experiencing the width and breadth of the local arts. By incorporating crafts into its programme, a discourse and an anchor to a moment and an initiation in time, that of, the ancient beginnings of the arts, are created.

Architects, artists, researchers and designers continuously struggle with a reconstruction of origins. The origin is the ever-present and prescient need to have a referral point in the ancient. It is a datum, even though some may overtly advocate a position of departure from tradition. Jahn Kassim and Nawawi (2016) recall how architects are perennially known for looking forwards yet they can't invent without delving and moving backwards. They grapple with the palette of history and synthesise ancient tendencies with the present. They must restructure the simplicity of the indigenous into the complexity of modern life. Anthropologists are constantly occupied with arranging traits of different cultures to map culture in an evolutionary sequence.

In GWKL's programming of curators and auctioneers, the value of the past becomes reinstated. Aesthetic awareness and concerns become intertwined with learning as art and its evolution within history becomes alive, fluid and multifocal. There is a sense of permanence in the presence and position of the vernacular, yet these are accompanied later by the shifting nature of the modern. This allows the freedom of being brought back to the beginning of time, to one's simple roots without the stigma of being labelled as 'backward' or out of touch. This gives a crucial balance and equipoise, between past and future, and thus opens a debate of the relevance of traditional techniques and methods.

Discussion of the indigenous becomes a search for the unknown, taking the mind 'back to where it all started'. In this process, the mind is open to possibilities of creativity and creates an armature for the discourse of the modern. From a historical viewpoint, one journeys through the contrasts the classical formalities into the free flow of modern forms. The craftsman makes art through the limitations of simple conditions, not for themselves but the patron, while the artist interprets, endows, bestows and recreates. Artistry is seen in both ways, as a reflection of the moment and the modern, but also as something fundamental to humanity and ancient.

In 2019, GWKL's Sarawak Craftsmen and these talks were supplemented by an appreciation into the works of weaving and craft, epitomising the indigenous techniques of Sarawak. At the same time, the sessions become the 'classroom' of craft. Students continue with classroom learning in investigating art historical events using such a contextual approach learnt from. GWKL works of crafted art provide a visual context for the learning of history.

1. Conversations of the Classical

Definition of the Classical is certainly debatable yet it is an era of formality. Arts included the classical which was an early and late flowing of the colonial era, and surprising this is touched upon during conversation in my discussion with participants at the dinner table. Some hover at the intersection of the culture and the conservation movement. One dinner companion relates how the fictional character of *The Tropicalist*, an explorer and natural historian, is one who exhorts its loyalists to learn about the natural environment and how it has shaped our culture.

Just as I thought that there will not be any conservation of this era, a tranche of it is experienced in the visiting established museums such as the IAMM. The classical and cosmopolitan is fused in ‘memories of the weaving of the local and the colonial. Outside the boundaries of large empires, discourses and writings in art and architectural history tends to overstep this era. There is constant anxiety to overlook these; seen as a reminder of subjugation. There is a misleading notion of history and tends towards seeing Malaysia and South East Asia as a place of transience: of cultural mixing but within neither a firm civilisation nor culture. Historical evidence and events, and perhaps now in GWKL, reveal a different story. This is a region that merges the dynamic and crucial, constantly negotiating cultures and differences. Even in the colonial era, there is a contribution made and interpretation of the local and whether these are translated by those who lived in the region or by outsiders, their views are increasingly framed into the local discourses.

2. In the modern

Luminaries are selected to represent the modern. These come only from the range of artists and curators but from practising architects and design professionals. GWKL 2018 arranged the sharing of a Hong Kong-based architect-curator-collector (William Lim), whose session gave an amazing ‘tranche’ into the era of the Modern. An era with Fragmented forms, new technology, blazing colours, strong lines and minimalist structures and spatial articulation, one is transported into a time which epitomised the other end of the spectrum or pole, a time when tradition is vigorously shaken off by the artistic. These recall a need to unburden a kind of yoke, to bring in the shock of the new.

3. Post-modernism

The tranche and struggles of the postmodern is a constant element in the continuum of luminaries and gallery hopping sessions, and debates with local artists. The famed Ahmad Fuad Othman led to varied discourses amongst the young of the intertwining of art and current issues. Art becomes no longer elitist. One feels no longer hesitant to wade and tiptoe onto the era of Surrealism and Expressionism, and one suddenly dawns upon the ever-crucial role of Balai Seni Lukis galleries of prodding the mind and life. A curtain is opened, and a stage in history, or the present, is experienced. This stage presents art as the product of modern questions, concerns and confluences. The Postmodern has no quick or easy answers to life which becomes more complex, and the sense that all designers must somewhere, somehow, face difficult conundrums in balancing different tensions and stakeholders. The very role of art is to create questions. The mind is pricked into challenging the status quo, capturing the essence of a period and pushing society out of their comfort zones.

Learning, insights and debates are continuous in the backwards-forward intensities through the evolution of time. A glance, tranche or glean of an artistic era is gained at every level from the program and activities offered - from a casual tranche, a conversation at dinnertime. Like its location in Malaysia and South East Asia, GWKL, as its city host, sits at that route or intersection that reflects these struggles within the constant quagmire of global and local influences.

GWKL folds the seemingly opposing poles of making - the handmade crafts and the cosmopolitan modernity of design, giving all value. The value of the handmade in an age of mass-production is seen as an experience of the galleries.

There is an extension of lecture or classroom-based, broadening the scope of learning and comprehending. In a kind of time warp, one learns to appreciate the formality of pattern in craft men's work, of which beauty is achieved within a set of boundaries in terms of material and time; they see craft as a form of art that must be preserved yet popularised for its survival.

Whether it is a process of creating art that suddenly dawns on the viewer, or the perspective of the art connoisseur, or the journey of the novice collector, or of the discerning curator, or of a student struggling with absorbing history in a general course on the arts or any design programme, GWKL has a story to tell and part of its story has something for all in the journey and evolution of humanity.