

Arts in Asia  
UNESCO Observatory  
Multi Disciplinary  
Journal in the  
Arts

2016

Volume 5 Issue 2

'Arts in Asia'  
UNESCO Observatory  
Multi Disciplinary  
Journal in the Arts  
Vol. 5 Issue 2 2016

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The 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 Ganendra**

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Director, SGFA

Guest Editor

## INTRODUCTION

The ‘Contemporary’ embraces the dynamic of the current. Thus, contemporary thought should also ideally encourage multidisciplinary curiosity, encounter and engagement. This multidisciplinary dynamic, fuelled by creativity, is the platform for the Vision Culture Lecture program (‘VC Lectures’), launched in 2010 by Shalini Ganendra Fine Art (‘SGFA’), in Malaysia, with the endorsement of the UNESCO Observatory. Over this short and enriching period, the VC Lectures have developed an informing presence in the region, fostering meaningful global discourse and cultural encounter, to inform the Contemporary.

SGFA is a pioneering cultural organization, embracing an eclectic and quality sensibility for collecting, consideration, capacity building and place making. We value new visuals - whether for materiality, concept or culture - and multidisciplinary processes in their creation. In addition to the VC Lectures and exhibition program, SGFA has: an artist residency program (the ‘Vision Culture Art Residency’); an arts management residency for university students (the ‘Exploring East Residency’); and the PavilionNOW project which celebrates local architects, contemporary design and materiality. Through these programs and a growing interest in emerging regions, we delight in the increasing international engagement with our represented areas of South East Asia and Sri Lanka.

Over twenty three speakers have participated in the VC Lectures since their inception, each invited because of eminent reputations and notable contributions within respective fields. The lecture module involves free public talks at the SGFA's award winning green space (designed by Ken Yeang), Gallery Residence, with external lectures often hosted by other local institutions and organized by SGFA. Participating curators generally conduct portfolio reviews with local artists, learning more about regional geopolitics and art practices. Strong press coverage enables outreach beyond the urban populace, as does active social and digital media. Speakers stay at the Gallery Residence and enjoy vernacular space that embraces natural ventilation and cooling systems, elegant aesthetic and greening philosophies. The VC Lecture program is as much about cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary encounters as it is about content – all defining platforms for SGFA's exhibition programming as well.

The eleven luminaries published in this peer-reviewed UNESCO Observatory journal were selected for a variety of reasons including expertise. They are: Sir Roy Calne (award winning surgeon and artist, UK); Christopher Phillips (Curator, International Center of Photography, NYC); Anoma Pieris (Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture, University of Melbourne); Susan Cochrane (curator and authority on Pacific Art); Volker Albus (Professor of Product Design at the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe, Germany); Michiko Kasahara (Chief Curator at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Japan); Matt Golden (Artist/Curator); Gregory Burgess (Architect, Order of Australia); Beth Citron (Curator, Rubin Museum NYC); Oscar Ho (curator and academic, HK); and Brian Robinson (Torres Island artist and curator, Australia).

Sir Roy Calne speaks of personal experiences using art to nurture empathy in his medical practice and his own passion for creating. Christopher Phillips, the pioneering curator credited with introducing Chinese contemporary photography to the United

States, writes about an important exhibition that he curated at the International Center of Photography. Anoma Pieris considers the impact of modernism on architecture in South Asia, and analyses supportive political and social ideologies, while Gregory Burgess tackles the place of architecture in creating a sense of individual and community belonging. Volker Albus, playfully but seriously asks us to consider the role of designers as technical and social mediators. Michiko Kasahara adeptly reviews challenges faced by successful contemporary Japanese photographers in addressing and reflecting Japanese culture, real and perceived. Susan Cochrane explores cultural ownership of Pacific Art through the use of terminology and context. Brian Robinson writes about his personal cultural narrative as a Torres Island artist. Beth Citron shares insights on Francesco Clemente's acclaimed '*Inspired by India*' exhibition which opened at the Rubin Museum in 2014. Oscar Ho speaks to the challenges of curatorship and requirements to sharpen its impact and discipline. Matt Golden shares the visual journey of his art alter-ego, Juan Carlos, with special focus on experiences in Malaysia. We bring to you a wonderful mix of multi-disciplinary and cultural discussions that show the exhilarating impact of this program.

The Vision Culture Program enters its sixth year and we look forward to its continuing impact as a pivotal program to foster meaningful global discourse. We have forged strong friendships and benefitted from cross cultural discovery thereby building platforms for more informed understanding and appreciation of our world.

Many thanks to Lindy Joubert, Editor-in-Chief of the UNESCO Observatory journal, and her marvelous team, for supporting this project from its inception; to SGFA's Exploring East Residents who assisted with editing these texts and most importantly, the amazing Vision Culture Lecture participants who have fostered knowledge, encounter and consequently, the Contemporary.

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# Of Pizzas and Laptops

## AUTHOR

**Volker Albus**  
Curator and designer

## BIOGRAPHY

Volker Albus (b. 1949) studied architecture at Aachen University.

He has been working as a designer and exhibition architect since 1984, and has published numerous books, articles and exhibition catalogues. He is working as a Professor of Product Design at the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe since 1994.



Design is everywhere, but as a profession it may not be held in particularly high esteem. Yet designers are moderators: mediating between technical progress and society's changing needs, and translating them into material objects. Volker Albus believes it is time to take designers seriously.

By Volker Albus

You could hear the newsreader's disapproval in his voice. As he announced on Bavarian radio that Peer Steinbrück, a candidate for German Chancellor, had appointed "design researcher" Gesche Joost from the Berlin University of the Arts to his shadow cabinet, his normally practised delivery noticeably faltered. He didn't stumble over his words; in fact he enunciated the job title perfectly. But an almost imperceptible pause and his halting articulation of a term not often heard in the political news betrayed an unmistakable scepticism: A "designer"? In the shadow cabinet? Maybe even the cabinet itself, one day? Whatever next?

Like other members of the journalist's trade, the man from Bavarian radio is less than wholehearted in his appreciation of the design business. In the eyes of the political class, and the minds of the majority in society, the purpose of Gesche Joost's profession is to optimize the aesthetics and functionality of objects. It has very little to do with politics. Even adding that

the new appointee would be working to address the “needs of a networked society” did little to dispel the fundamental lack of belief in the relevance of design to society as a whole, let alone politics.

## **FORM AND FUNCTION**

This comes as no surprise. For many, be they traditionalists or enlightened amateurs, even “good” design is, for all its facets, at best defined as a quest for form dictated by rational considerations: whether a device comes with clear instructions and is easy to use, a chair is stable and comfortable, or a lamp is glare-free and simple to adjust. While our expectations – about these objects’ importance to us, what they say about us and how sustainable they are – have become much more complex, the classic utilitarian and aesthetic parameters still dictate the general perception of what design is for.

Conversely, any kind of design that, whether obviously or discreetly, seeks to undermine that rational approach is viewed as self-indulgent, frivolous or even – dare one say it – disreputable.

That is the invariable response when advertisers give essentially manual tasks a specious sophistication by tacking on the trendy word “design,” thereby branding them as superficial “lifestyle” products: “hair design,” “nail design” and “food design” are just some of the more fanciful examples. Such labels make it harder for design to gain acceptance, because they associate it with things that may well have their place in a pluralistic and market-oriented society, but whose meaning is unlikely to extend beyond localized image management, often with negative connotations. That is regrettable, not least because design has long since found its way into all areas of life: every time we go into a supermarket, we are faced with at least as much design as we would find in a designer furniture store. From the placement

of the shelves, the signage, the layout of the products and the choice of music, lighting and temperature to the packaging and standardization of “natural” agricultural produce, everything is geared to a single design philosophy: form follows function – even though the sole function of these goods is to be bought.

## **SELLING THE PRODUCT**

Naturally, this complex arrangement is not exclusively the work of designers. Success – as measured in sales figures – is just as much down to the marketing and advertising gurus, the management experts, the sales psychologists, the workers who built the shop and, of course, the staff, whose task is to present the product with a smile. But when it comes to how the product looks, especially when it is packaged (and is anything sold without packaging these days?), it is the product, packaging and communication designers who make the decisions. And now that even sectors as intangible as the financial industry have started thinking in terms of “product” categories, design has become a key element there too. In short, wherever customers are advised and served, wherever something is produced and sold, design is at the heart of the action.

Even in areas that resist the metastatic expansion of commercialism, the tools of design are still put to work. Where would Greenpeace, the Occupy movement or trade unions be without an identifiable signature? Ofcourse, the protests in Egypt, Turkey and Greece got themselves noticed through their immediate power, despite the lack of logos and other signifying elements. But whenever protest is part of a mission, whenever the aim is to effectively publicize concerns or draw attention to an unacceptable state of affairs, every camp is eager to use signs, symbols, performances or costumes specifically designed for its campaign. They give the various forms of protest a distinctive profile. They not only render the opposition comprehensible

and identifiable, but also actively promote it: they help to “sell” it to the public.

So there can be no question that the scope of design has expanded. And yet, whereas right up to the 1980s and 1990s it reached out mainly towards the fine arts, the focus now is on the market, advertising, service and society. Here, design is viewed as a set of tools that can be used to fine-tune every conceivable strategy – and not as an opportunity for self-realization. Design’s core business – classic product and industrial design – is no exception. The difference is that here, a canon has developed over the decades that, for all its periodic upheavals, is always in principle guided by the same parameters of form and function. So it is not just reasonable but also thoroughly responsible to ask why such constant renewal is actually needed (given that there is nothing new under the sun anyway). After all, many of humanity’s problems are caused at least partly by its lack of restraint, the surfeit of goods produced by people and machines. And even designers themselves freely admit that design bears its full share of responsibility for the deluge of consumer goods.

## **A STATE OF FLUX**

The only problem is that almost every feature that governs the appearance of these consumer goods is being transformed: manufacturing techniques, materials and construction methods are influencing and altering stability, weight, sustainability, acceptability and robustness at exponentially increasing speed and on an almost daily basis. We designers must therefore constantly observe and analyse these developments and incorporate them into our work. We must match them against the entire spectrum of attributes of each and every product, and assess whether this or that novel material is really suited – in terms of price, sustainability and aesthetics – to making something that is new and better, or in other words cheaper, more stable and easier to recycle.

Such technical and physical turbulence, however, is just one reason – albeit a central one – for the refinement of existing products and the development of new ones. At least as important is the constantly changing socio-cultural make-up of society. It is in a state of permanent flux driven by migration and our own travel experiences, by the influence of the media and technical innovation, but also by the mobility imposed upon us by our work. It also has an immense influence on our behaviour.

We work and eat on the move, in the train, on our bike, in the car. We communicate using miniaturized devices at every hour of the day and night, wherever we are – in bed, at the dinner table or in meetings. We sleep almost anywhere: in the office, in airports, on demos or in front of the Apple store. Nowadays we take many of these combinations for granted, even though the two activities – eating and working, eating and communicating, travelling and eating, travelling and communicating – are still far from perfectly attuned, at least when it comes to the hardware we use. Devouring a pizza with greasy fingers while using a high-tech laptop, riding a bike in traffic while text messaging on a smartphone: not only do they not go together; they are mutually exclusive.

These are of course commonplace concerns; yet it is precisely these situations from the mundane reaches of everyday life that design needs to address. But what does that mean for today's designers? Must we become sociologists? Or users, constantly trying to keep pace with the latest technological innovations? I believe the answer is: neither in isolation, but both together.

Designers need to precisely diagnose socio-cultural change and be alert to developments in both people and production. Designers unquestionably have a vital role to play: as mediators or moderators. They must analyse developments, weigh up and reconcile the available options and the needs that are articulated consciously or unconsciously – by their customers, and translate them into products and services that make all our lives easier;

that fit seamlessly, are permanent and, ideally, self-evident and inconspicuous. In short, designers must transform possibilities and desires into real things.

If they succeed, then perhaps even the newsreader will rethink his attitude to their profession.

Wherever customers are advised and served, wherever something is produced and sold, design is at the heart of the action.”

Volker Albus  
**Weaner Blut**  
Chandelier

Steel, Steelrope,  
Electronic  
equipment

1987

34 x 75ø

Edition of 20

Foto: Bernhard

Schaub



Volker Albus  
**downlight**  
Floor light

Glass, Steel  
2002  
112 x 29ø

next home  
collection  
Foto: Uwe Wagner

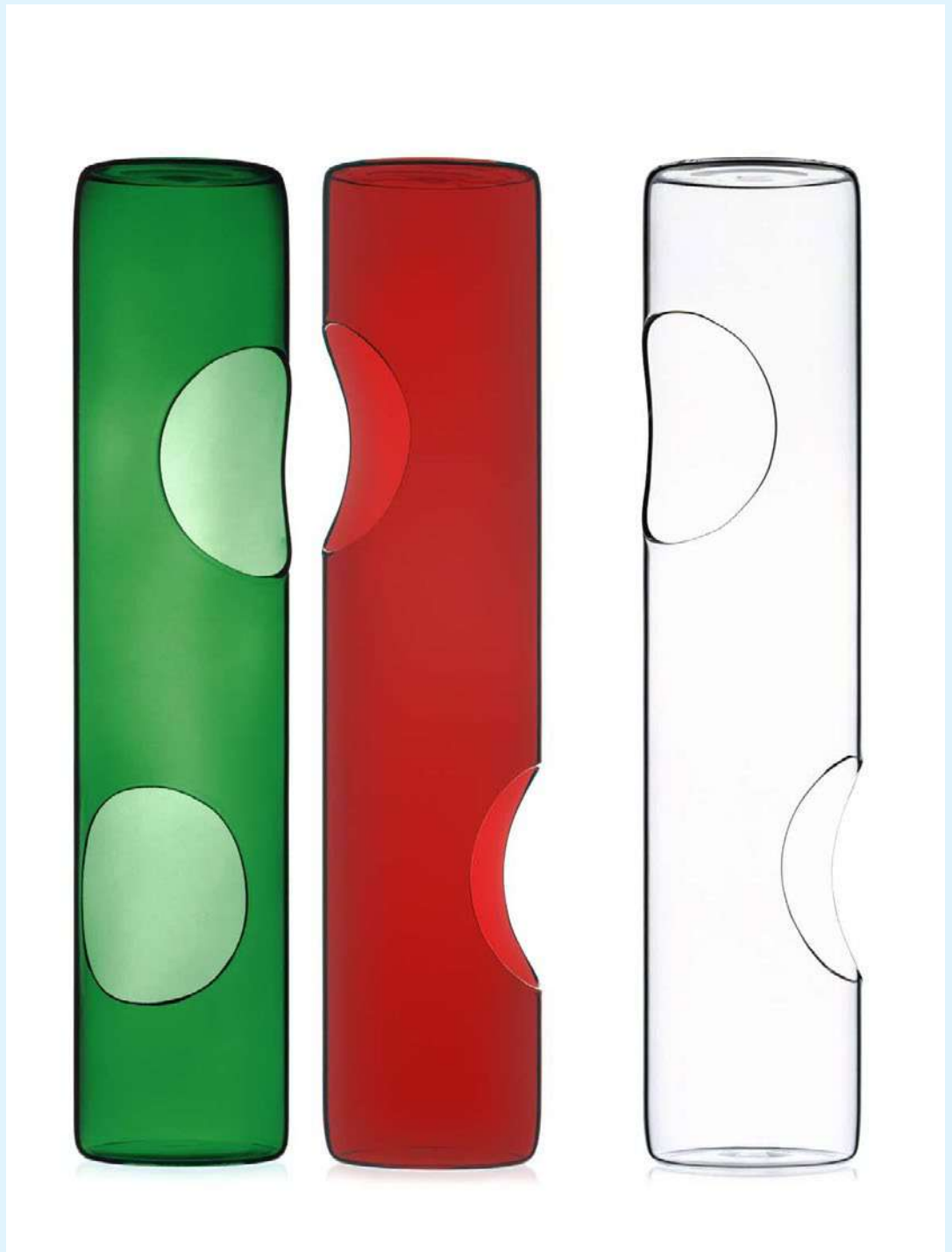


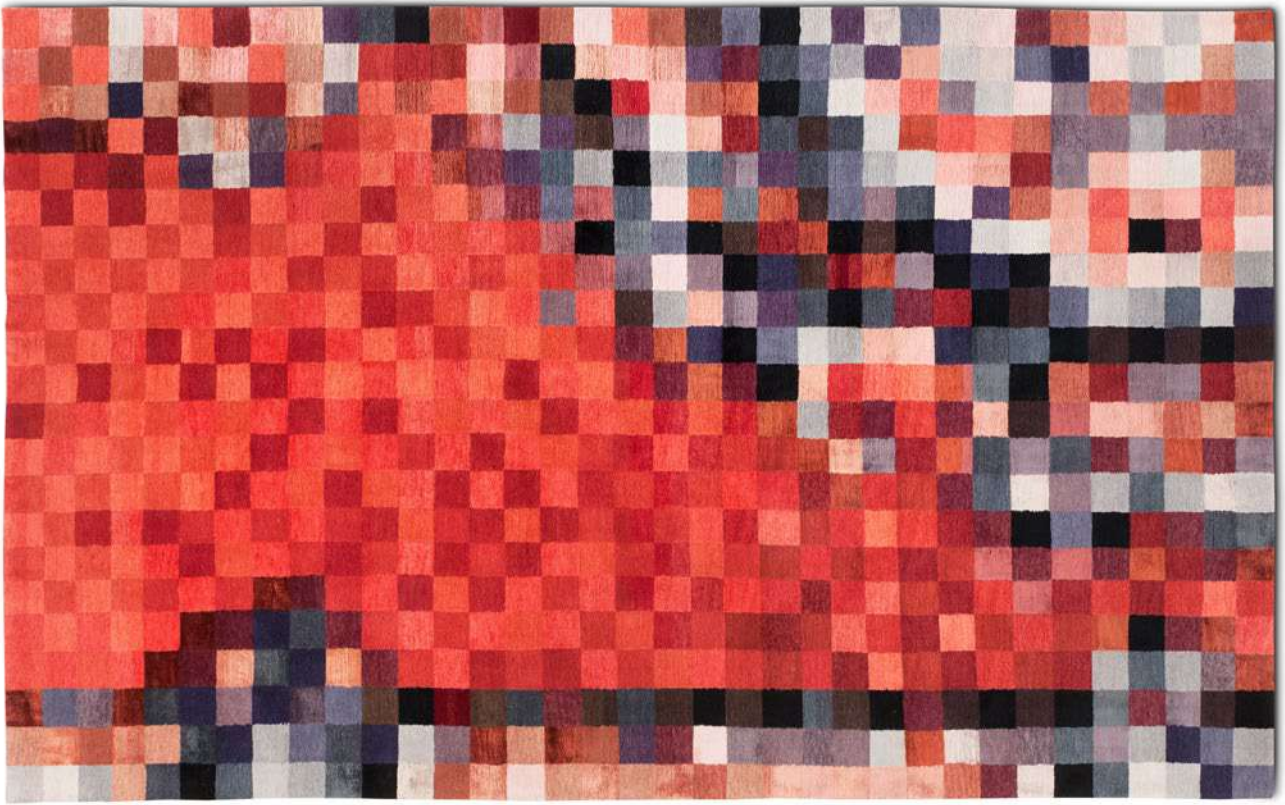


Volker Albus  
**Vitrine**  
Vase pour Orchids

Glass  
2004  
44,5 x 10,5 ø

Gandy gallery,  
Praha  
Foto: Gandy  
gallery, Praha





Volker Albus  
**Pixelperser**  
Carpet

Highlandwool, Silk  
280 x 176  
One off

Foto: Elmar  
Schwarze

Volker Albus  
**Perrier-Light**  
Chandelier

LEDs, Perrier  
bottles  
2013

84 x 96 ø  
Prototype  
Foto: Philip  
Radowitz

