

# Interview with Michelle Millar Fischer\* (MMF)

Interviewers\*\*

**Amanda Saba Ruggiero (A), Luis Michal (L)**

\* Interview accomplished in november 2016, MoMA-New York. Michelle Millar Fischer is a curator and an architecture and design historian. Starting from spring 2018 she serves as Assistant Curator for European Decorative Art and Design at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

\*\* Amanda Saba Ruggiero is architect, postdoctoral researcher enrolled at Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism - University of São Paulo, Brazil; Luis Michal is architect, currently enrolled in the Masters Program at Technische Universität München, Germany.

**A:** We want to talk with you about curating architecture. Could you talk about how you became a curator for architecture? Was there a starting point?

**MMF:** I did my undergraduate studies and first Masters degree in Glasgow. I chose to go to Glasgow because it had amazing music culture at the time around 2000. And it also had (and still has) this wonderful, vibrant, urban cultural variety. My mum, and her parents before her, and theirs before them all grew up there and so that's where my heart was (and still is). It is a place where the urban fabric really spoke the situation of its inhabitants, it was really dirty, a very post-industrial city at that point as it had the shipyards for the longest time. And yet it had been in 1999 the city of architecture and culture in Europe. So it had this kind of renaissance in terms of seeing itself again in this renewed way. It is the home of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Alexander Greek Thomson, so it has this wonderful late 19th century/early 20th century reputation for architecture and the Glasgow School of Art. I like architecture and design for reasons most of us do because there is something immediate about it, it touches peoples' everyday lives, people can immediately understand it in many ways, even if they are not going off into the theoretical. I really loved Juliet classes (A/N: Juliet Kinchin as MMFs professor in art history at the University of Glasgow), she was a great mentor, and then she told me that graduate school existed, and I applied for it. I got a scholarship, then came over here (A/N: NYC, USA) for a three month internship (A/N: at the Guggenheim) and then got a job. And so stayed and I also got a husband! (laughs)

Other than that I have done a lot of different things to move through an educational path. I was a nanny, I was a cook, I was a cleaner, I was a lot of other things alongside doing curatorial and museum work. I feel like that's maybe more indicative of our generation, its not the generation immediately before *us where you could go into a job and expect to be there for a quite a number of years. So, that's a long answer to your question.*

**L:** Was making exhibitions something which you wanted to do?

**MMF:** I am not sure actually. I like the idea of making exhibitions, I like having conversations with publics, but among everything I like teaching the best. Exhibition making is really wonderful; in terms the hierarchy of museum activities, for better or worse, it's pretty much near the top, but I am not sure is the most effective way to do things sometimes. The curatorial assistants here (A/N: at MoMA) are in a strange position, because you can only do your job before years, and you end up leaving and so I don't think you can imagine a career carrying on necessarily as a curator because where do you go after being at MoMA in the Architecture and Design Department? There are many amazing institutions out there, but very few departments dedicated to architecture and design in comparison to, say, contemporary art, so you paint yourself into a corner in some ways. There's no middle line in this department, there are curatorial assistants and there are senior curators. I think most people go often do something different; actually very few people who are here as curatorial assistants go on to do another curatorial job immediately. Some of them go back to curatorial work eventually, but very few immediately are going to do curatorial work post MoMA.

**L:** What's your next step?

**MMF:** I am applying now to do my dissertation completion year, so after *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* I will leave MoMA I go to do a year of dissertation completion, and then I will apply for professorial jobs, and then maybe my next step will be an assistant professor somewhere [A/N: Michelle ended up getting a job as The Louis C. Madeira IV Assistant Curator of European Decorative Arts and Design at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is very happy]. Whatever happens though I would like to be directing something eventually. It's nice to hope in my generation that we see more woman directing departments like this; if you look at the museum here, there is one head of department which is Ann Tempkin and she's amazing. There should be more. So my next step is probably the academic world but also I am taking part in a leadership programs where you can say "I have the kind of administration skills needed" which seems so unromantic but necessary. Most people our generation before would have said, "I will go to this collection next, I will take care of this exhibition next," but I don't think it's possible now.

**L:** What does the term of curating mean to you? What do you think are the reasons why the term has become increasingly popular in recent times?

**MMF:** Curating in a very simple meaning is to care for, to look after collections; you have a relationship with a particular institutional collection, or it used to mean this—and I think that goes to the second question, in term of why it has changed. Collections have kind of atomized over the last fifteen years; you now have biennials, a complete globalization of the art world, and that goes for architecture and design biennales too. I think as curators have been ripped from their institutions there has become a more unstable relationship between curator, works, and institution. Also I think the rise of mass media and then social media, with which you can sort of create for yourself as a person that might live outside of the museum, has changed things profoundly and given some voices agency around the activity of making exhibitions and discussions extra-institutionally. There is an hierarchy to the term curator, and in the museum the most important person (still) is usually the curator. Sometimes the artist is the most important

person, but there's often a very strong agency of the curator in terms of having the last word. And for most people that's a position that's very difficult to give up. That's another reason why I am not very fond of the idea of making exhibitions but of like creating spaces in which people can have experiences, although that sounds like a spectacular type of exhibition, or learn something, or meet or have their expectations changed. I admire the work of curators (like the ones I work with) who do this.

**A:** What do you consider the main competencies of a curator. What are your tools and methods? And where and how did you learn those methods?

**MMF:** I used to say research, now I definitely marry that strongly with an understanding of what creates a visual delight for the better or worse. And those two things together have really become concrete in my mind from watching Paola and Juliet (A/N: Paola Antonelli and Juliet Kinchin). For me Juliet is a model curator in that regard, she really incorporates total research, and really knows her subject inside out. Before I came here, I felt like research was paramount because why would you ever present an idea if you hadn't become the authority on it and really carefully sort it out. But then Paola said, no, research is always key but but you also have to think about what it is going to look like; no one is going to stop and read pages of text about your reasoning for this, make them stop first and take a look and then draw them into that reasoning. So I am aiming for research plus visual delight and my benchmark for that would be the way that Juliet and Paola do it.

**A:** Is there any particular show that has influenced your work as a curator?

**MMF:** I am thinking about it ... you know what, the best exhibition that I ever saw, there was one in 2006 at El Museo del Barrio and it is still the best show I have ever seen in New York, and it was called *Los Desaparecidos*, and it was on the "disappeared" and the dirty wars in Latin America and the different artists who responded to that. I remember the show almost perfectly room by room. The other show that I would say was the Louise Bourgeois show at the Guggenheim in 2008. The Guggenheim rotunda was really a fantastic place to be in, but it is a space where the architecture is always the main event before you can get into any of the exhibitions. Louise Bourgeois was perhaps the only artist who dominated that space, whose sheer force of personality, even though she had just passed away at that point in time. So those two shows, *Los Desaparecidos* and Louise Bourgeois.

**L:** What sets curating architecture and design apart from curating other disciplines?

**MMF:** I think probably everyone has said this before, but it is hard to put a building in a room and so it's very difficult in many ways because you are always going after a ghost. With design I think it's sometimes that you have something so familiar in a room that people don't really see it apart from their daily life. You have to, in some way, create enough of a distance between the object and the audience that they can reconsider it without making it into an artwork which is what it's not and make sure it does not lose the certain integrity and context of its making. People, even if they are very new to museums, know how to behave in front of a painting: you don't touch it, you stop. There's something kind of church-like about that interaction, whereas with architecture and design, the reason why we love it is that people feel often (but not always) an immediate affinity.

**L:** How do you choose topics? Is there something specific you want to achieve or a certain audience you want to reach?

**MMF:** That's a really good question. Curators and audiences take great confidence in some of the wonderfully canonical conversations around architecture and design, for example there is something really beautiful about looking at the Mies archive that we have here, those amazing drawings, looking at those kinds of iconic works. But then you want to have a museum space where you are not always showing dead white architects and histories that we already know pretty well. So I think at that point there is always a balance; if you are asking about institutionally how do these decisions happen then as a director or chief curator you hire people who have incredibly strong research focuses, which have been developed over years, or you hire people who have good ideas and you trust them to pitch ideas that offer a whole picture of human achievement within a specific field rather than mandate a specific vision. And if you have a collection, you focus on strategic goals in terms of both protecting it and developing it in ways that reflect a greater diversity than it probably already has.

**A:** Could elaborate on any projects of yours that were very successful as well projects that were very difficult or even failed?

**MMF:** You mean exhibitions only? (Laughs) I fail all the time, most people do. How many things you apply for and don't get, fellowships, jobs etc. Design and Violence as an exhibition was a great learning curve, I enjoyed that as a show a lot, but I also feel like it failed quite a lot too, in a productive way. We felt like the online version of it would be a way to engage people in a different manner than you usually can in a gallery but many conversations "below the line" came from people who liked design already. And then for other conversations, there was much less engagement than we'd have hoped—for example, we put up a post about Ricky Jackson, wrongfully convicted of murder and almost killed three times by the lethal injection. Just two people commented on it, as opposed to the hundreds who commented on a post about Temple Grandin and animals suffering violence. I realized our Design and Violence project contained radical research but it made me realize the limits of what we do when we make exhibitions. In many ways I prefer teaching because at least you can have a conversation in the classroom, face to face, and you learn too.

**L:** Before you already talked about new exhibitions formats such as biennals and triennals. What do you think is the role of an very well established institution like MoMA in this increasingly "atomized", global art world?

**MMF:** I think that is a really great conversation to have, with more than one question and one answer. I think there is definitely a place for museum like this, because we collect and that's the whole reason I love being at this museum. You can have all the panels and triennals you want, but you need to preserve culture too. I think public programs are actually some of the best curatorial work at this museum. Often they come out of the education department, or the Research and Development dept, so they are not labeled curatorial, but they're super amazing in terms of their content, and their approach, and their effect. But I also think "how often is it a truly diverse audience who has seen this kind of stuff here at MoMA?" It's a \$25 entrance fee. So I think there is definitely still a place for MoMA, we preserve culture, but we need to think about openness more sustainably too.

**A:** What do you like working within MoMA and what would you like to do rather differently?

**MMF:** I love the people, you get to work with lots of different types, like yourselves, like Juliet and Paola, people who are way smarter than me. My mom always said play with people who are a lot better than you, because that's how you get good at something. So here you get this ecosystem with incredibly smart and wonderful people. On the other side, and this goes back to what I said before, this position of the curator in the hierarchy of the museum is sort of untouchable and I do not think that it is correct. I think you should always be subject to critique and if you have that kind of hierarchy it's not so good for your own process. You need someone to go to tell you your ideas are shit sometimes and that doesn't happen unless you have a good relationship with your colleagues. However I would say in this department (A/N: Architecture and Design-Department) most of the senior curators have a very frank relationship with one another and their junior curators. So I like MoMA because of the people, but I do think sometimes, as with any museum, not just MoMA, the hierarchy can be counterproductive.

**A:** Do you have any unrealized projects or dream projects?

**MMF:** I would really love to find ways to show the Laretta Vinciarelli archive that we have here, I love it and it is one of my proudest acquisitions. I've also wanted to put together an exhibition around my list of my objects that are designed specifically for women's bodies, so to think more generally about the frameworks that are designed around them [A/N: update, Michelle did this show in 2017-18 at UNAM in Mexico City]. I guess other unrealized projects would just be collection shows, being able to go back through the collection and figure out what we have and why we have it. What are possible connecting threads and how can we make a thesis around them?

**L:** Do you have any advice for young people interested in curating, exhibition making etc.?

**MMF:** There's a part of this job that is much more about collegiality and kindness and I think sometimes that is never talked about when someone is giving career advice. You can do all of the things that you are meant to do, you can go to all of the schools that you think are correct, you can do all of the networking that you think is correct, you can do all the internships that you think are correct, but you also have to be someone who is just collegial and good to work with. Especially in MoMA, everybody has an amazing resume, everyone has done ten million things. So it is important just to be kind and be happy, maybe not all the time, that's impossible, but if you are generally collegial and also if you're generally happy, if you are grateful for the things that you do get to do, it's a good attitude to have here. No career is totally perfect, even if you have a ton of time and a ton of money and not very many obligations, it's still never going to be a completely linear path, I don't think those ways exist anymore. I think that would be my advice, because anyone who has gotten to this point has enough smarts to do whatever they want to do, I think you have to be somewhat comfortable and pass on that confidence to others because when you feel pretty secure in what you do, you can afford to be pretty nice to people. And so you always should be.