

# Interview with Juliet Kinchin\* (JK)

Interviewers

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

## **A: How did you become a curator and what was the starting point?**

**JK:** I suppose the starting point was at university in Cambridge, England, when I was seriously thinking about changing to the study of architecture (A/N: from art history). I did a thesis on an architect-furniture-designer and began to realize that I really enjoyed the intellectual debates and people involved in design history rather than architectural history. I was doing a lot of research in the Victoria and Albert Museum in the department of furniture and wood works. So I was becoming very aware of the kind of people coming in and out of the museum and these different approaches and very object-based kind of studies. It was also the time of the development of design history as a freestanding discipline, intellectually it was quite exciting. I just felt it was a really lively area to be involved in. I always loved the “stuff” and even when I moved from working in museums and I moved into teaching, first at Glasgow University in the art history department, and then at the Glasgow School of Art, I always kept curating small exhibitions and teaching very much from spaces and objects.

## **L: What does curating mean to you? Is it related to “the stuff” you love, is it about exhibitions, what does the activity of curating mean to you?**

**JK:** Well, in the sense of “curare” or “care for” or a kind of duty or responsibility I think that’s even if you are not responsible for a collection, you are responsible to a heritage or a culture and how you present it. The activity of curating is trying to communicate the kind of excitement, connections and stories that I understand to a wider public and to be doing that largely non-verbally, in the way you are making objects and parameters images talk to each other, creating narratives that are always leading the viewer or opening up questions. For me it’s like creating view points and arguments in a spatial and material form, of course part of that is having a deeper knowledge to be able to bring those connections or insights to the full.

\* Interview accomplished in november 10, 2016, MoMA-New York. **Juliet Kinchin** is a Curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA since 2008, has organized design retrospectives ranging from Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen (2010-11) to Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000 (2012) and held faculty positions at The Glasgow School of Art and at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in Design in New York. She has a interest in the social and political contexts of modern design, gender issues, and the culture of Central and Eastern Europe.

**L: And do you think this term is related to a specific medium such as the exhibition? Or would you also consider writing a book “curating”?**

**JK:** Oh sure, writing in different forms from the press release to the labels, the scripting of the narrative to publications are always addressing really different audience groups and thinking about the medium through which you are communicating and how all those elements fit together. So, how does the website relate to the exhibition, how does it enhance it? You have to respect the medium of communication.

**L: The term of “curating” has become increasingly popular in recent years, both in everyday culture as well as a profession for example with star-curators. What do you think are the reasons for this shift of importance?**

**JK:** Well, I think it’s like the transformation of how and where we listen to music. And so, in a sense, we are able to curate the music and the programs that we listen to and that is partly a function of digital and technological innovations, and soon with just the capacity to design your own in a sense we are all graphic designer, we are all curators. But I think that there is still room to do that more professionally, I think it is great that people are designing themselves on a daily based, are curating their experiences, and in a sense, although that’s bought down the actual term, I like the tendencies that it is reflecting which is about empowerment and accessibility of those means. I think there are so many cultures, stuff, art, there is room for everyone, there is room for the professionals, for the museums and galleries, and for people to do it sometimes very brilliantly on their own. That is something looking at womens experience in design, has very clearly taught me, it is not about the professionals, you have creativity, fabulous creativity.

**A: What do you consider the main competencies of a professional curator like you? What are your skills and tools?**

**JK:** Well, endless curiosity about the material. I am so inspired just by looking at the material, the presence of them, the scale, the relationship of word and images. But then, also, just being like a sponge towards the whole range of cultural preoccupations, history is never a dead, done, dusted thing, there is no one trajectory through all this stuff. You are constantly sifting, collecting and you have to have the feel for what is a really strong preoccupation. Its a bit like the whole fashion prediction agencies where its about feeding it into the colors, the textures, the political or economic field of a period. I think you need some of that skill to be able to predict. And you need an administrative skill to actually just keeping the machinery going, even if you are working in a really small venue where you are doing everything. You are always on an externally imposed deadline, you are always working with printers or outside agents. So that means sometimes, having to put them engaged and not follow up in as much depth as you would like.

**A: Do you have any idols? Are there particular shows or curators that have influenced your work?**

**JK:** Well, I mean the period I had at the V&A as a very junior curator was really key for me. I was in my early twenties and there was a very wonderful head of the department,

a man called Peter Thornton who had actually worked with textiles, with architecture and furniture, he was very open interdisciplinary. And he also encouraged me to take as much responsibility as I could, so I was allowed to just go for it. I learned so much. And for exhibitions, actually I have seen very different types of wonderful exhibitions. In Hungary, Budapest at the ethnographic Museum, in the 1980s, 1990s they were doing fabulous provocative, engaging exhibitions, with humor, with minimal budgets, but it felt very lively and engaging. Probably those are exhibitions, not necessarily art exhibitions, but which inspired me.

**L: What sets curating architecture apart from curating other disciplines? What particular challenges do you face curating architecture and design?**

**JK:** Well, the challenges of integrated exhibitions in the sense of integrating architecture and design with other art practices. The easiest option is a totally formalist approach to design, which is in effect saying, this looks like that! So, on those terms it might seem like a weak iteration of a fine art movement, whereas it totally ignores the social, political, technological, economic, the many contexts and intrinsically collaborative processes that feed into architecture and design. Context and process are very difficult to elucidate in a truly mixed-media show. I am on the other hand very interested in, and it's a great privilege here, to be able to bring in material, from other departments to an architecture or design show. But that looks and feels very different when you make someone like Jackson Pollock becomes a subset of a figure like Herbert Matter, the graphic designer for whom Pollock worked as a studio assistant. If you know that one can see very interesting parallels between their work, but if you are looking at a paradigm of graphic design and photography, and everything spinning out from that, it looks very different from a paradigm of painting and sculpture and fitting everything to that.

**A: Why does it matter to do exhibitions on architecture and design?**

**JK:** Well, when you enter a real piece of architecture, you just feel it through all your senses, you sense the difference. It just is really connecting the material to the spiritual, to the intellectual, to the sensory, in such a powerful way. And to really choreograph the power of practices like architecture and design to direct, to provoke, to give pleasure, to give psychological comfort as much as physical comfort, it's all those things working together that is generally only partial with other media or with other practices. And the boundaries are often not clear-cut.

**A: How do you select your topics? When making an exhibition is there a specific public you want to reach?**

**JK:** With enough budget and enough time, my aim is always to reach multiple audiences, to do a project that will work through it's related programming or publications, or simply through the labelling and scripting that people can take different things from it, but that does take money and time. And it's also about thinking how it fits into the wider program of the institution you are working in. When you look at the programming of a season or even a year, thinking about the relative accessibility of certain types of topic or material. It would be pointless having some very abstruse, very experimental piece that people found difficult to relate to, but which are raising very important

issues. If you have a year of that, you would be doing a disservice to many audiences, its always about balancing the program, and that's not something that individuals control. But it is going back to that idea of the sponge. Like the exhibition I did on kitchens: New York is such a kind of foody place, as a theme, there is so much design, so much architecture, and so many huge agenda about power sources, utilities, food where it comes from, how long we keep it in, debates which everyone can relate to and which have a particular intensity at that moment. So for me the ideal topic is a really big, accessible area, and then complicating the history. Some people won't get it, they'll just get the shiny objects. But I am looking for topics which really respond to people, from kids to much older audiences, very diverse audiences which are able to take different things from it.

**A: Could you elaborate on both projects which you would consider as great successes as well failures of yours?**

**JK:** I mean there's always topics or exhibitions that I felt deserved a larger, comprehensive treatment that I could give or didn't work so well in the confines of the space. I don't think I have done anything I really wanted to tear down (laughs). But for example, I think a successful project of mine was "Century of the Child – architecture and design for children". It is such a huge and fundamental area of design, and yet one which is constantly trivialized or marginalized, and actually looking at those questions about how we want the next generation to experience the world, it forces you to think very future oriented. No one wants bad design and architecture for children, and so often it's some of the best, most thoughtful kind of work.

**L: Working as a professional curator at the Museum of Modern Art, one of the leading institutions in the world, what do you like about working within such an institution? And what would you like to rather do in a different way?**

**JK:** I would like more control over my budget, because when you are working in this large machine, there are certain things I could get done more cheaply, or I could concentrate the funding in a certain area. In earlier jobs, I had that kind of freedom. But nevertheless, greater freedom in how you spend it. On the other hand, I am not directly involved anything like as much in having to raise the funds to make grand applications which is very time consuming. It's great working in an organization with a separated development department. And everyone is very professional and engaged, which is great. The funding models are different, there is so much more more private funding here. Which has its own pressures compared to a European tradition where it is far more about government funding, but then that's politically inflected generally as well.

**L: Do you have any unrealized project? What is your dream/utopian project?**

**JK:** Oh, there are exhibitions I would love to do. I really wanted to do this exhibition on how we design our home relationship with the animal world. So from Zoos, to slaughter houses, to pets, to again it is one of these incredibly rich areas and I know the time is right, in fact it might even getting too late. You know there are all these animal studies and programs, and it's now becoming an intellectual discipline. Again, it has a bearing on just thinking about what makes us human, and this continuum of living creatures from cockroaches to us and where do we fit in that.

**A: So do you think it is a topic that one day you will do?**

**JK:** Yeah, in some form, because I can actually see it, I think that is also the thing that, when you get a good topic, I can almost see, it is not just a verbal idea, or a book, it's stuff, and the branding of all kinds of goods, services, objects, around animals is so rich, the film potential, cartoons.

**L: Also incorporating real animals?**

**JK:** Well, yeah, there are some artists who have worked with real animals in the gallery from Joseph Beuys and then all the idea of artificial animals and growing, meet and hybridity of species. This brings us back to animals and our imaginative and cultural life and these wider philosophical, ethical dimensions of the relationship all of which are kind of expressed, I would argue through design and architecture.

**A: An advice to the young people: How to become a great curator?**

**JK:** Passion, curiosity, being interested in the small projects, I mean much of my career I was just plugging away, studying and thinking about and presenting stuff I really cared about, I never would have thought, say twenty years ago, that I would be sitting here, in MoMA as curator (laughs). But if you have integrity about what you do, I mean it's terrible there is no easy route, it is really tough, but it makes the difference.