

Interview with Sean Anderson* (SA)

Interviewers

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L: We want to talk with you about curating architecture. You have joined MoMA as an Associate Curator in 2015 and just finished your first exhibition “Insecurities” (MoMA 2016). Could you briefly explain how you ended up at MoMA? Was curating architecture something you’ve always wanted to do?

SA: I have had a long background in which I struggled between being a professor and being a practicing architect, I always felt the importance of both. I worked for a number of years in many different locations, in Rome, Morocco, Afghanistan, Dubai, India, Sri Lanka and Australia, in each of those places I would either teach and practice or just teach. I knew I wanted to come back to the US and saw in the midst of applying for another job the advertisement for this job and I thought I will apply but there is no way I will get it. To my surprise, I was asked for an interview, I had three in the process and was very excited then because I knew the museum fairly well as a student and I grew up partly in New York. So, I would come to the museum and knew that context and architecture exhibitions that I had been to, but I actually didn’t know what it meant to curate architecture. But in the process of my interviews for this job which required me to propose exhibitions, I realized that I had been curating architecture all along, because I had taught always from a curatorial perspective. I was never really interested in rigid chronology but actually thinking about art and thinking about architecture. My historical interest was implicitly curatorial, that is the very explanation how I got to this position.

L: You’ve talked about that you have been curating all along your way. So what does curating actually mean to you? We’re feeling that the term curating has been become increasingly popular during recent years and is used not just any more in a professional museum context.

* Interview accomplished in november 28, 2016, MoMA-New York. **Sean Anderson** is Associate Curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art. A Fellow of the American Academy in Rome and the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, he has degrees in architectural design and architectural history from Cornell University, an M.Arch from Princeton University and a Ph.D in art history from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has practiced as an architect and taught in Afghanistan, Australia, India, Italy, Morocco, Sri Lanka and the U.A.E.

SA: It is something that didn't necessarily cross my mind until I was applying for a job to be a curator what curating meant to me. Although, I had friends who were curators and I have a mentor who is a director of a museum, I never quite understood what they curated necessarily, they are art curators. I think this term gets used quite loosely, on the one hand it can be suggestive of a kind of organizing and thinking through. But in the context of this institution and how architecture has played a significant role in its history, curation means also being able to condense ideas and questions that continue from the 1930s onward and I feel like being both an architect designer as well as a historian allows me to fuse curation to sets of questions that I have myself and have always had myself for or in architecture. I think the key is to remove oneself from that, it is a set of ideas that are being looked at through the museum or through the work, I don't necessarily have my ego bound up in this although it certainly helps. I like the fact that I am in an institution, I said to someone recently I don't think I could ever be an independent curator, it'd be very difficult for me.

A: What do you think are your main competencies for a curator? Do you have tools or methods and if so where and how did you learn those?

SA: I think one needs a very strong critical sensibility and that's meant not to be negative. Critical thinking that allows you to cut through a lot of what it is that you see and hear and read, and if you imagine an exhibition as being a kind of architecture or a kind of visual and spatial essay, the clearer your intent the better and I would assume the better the exhibition. On the same token it also requires great deal of patience and trying to understand the perhaps sometimes hidden narratives that are found in either the works or what you are seeing, so as a curator you're not necessarily seeing the work, you're seeing through it. And then the work becomes a lens or a frame through which you can ask questions. I also knew from the beginning that part of the way I taught architecture history was through art, because I felt like you can't think about architecture without thinking about art. Quite often the concepts in art or more easy or at least have greater potential when you're discussing them with students than showing a building. I would generally teach through art and that's why there is so much art in the exhibition as well, because I think artists often ask questions that architects can't.

A: So that is also a good bridge to our next question. What sets curating architecture apart from curating other disciplines like art and what particular challenges do you face curating architecture?

SA: I think for me it comes down to what is the set questions that I want to ask and that the work will follow. I think the difference, the primary difference is that we in architecture are working with a spatial medium that is constantly being changed, it has temporality, it has function, it has occupancy on occasion, it has materiality. So architecture to me is a constantly evolving set of ideas that are responding to or not to the world. The hardest thing about the exhibition (Insecurities) was to find works that didn't aestheticise or freeze architecture or the meaning of architecture because this refugee crisis is happening now and will be happening for years to come. So how does architecture then become a vehicle for these questions? Granted I am also interested in historical exhibitions and organising them and thinking through them, but I think they require very different type of interpretation and process than I went

through with this. For architecture curation in particular, I think you need a very strong historical background and to some degree a very strong design background, otherwise you will see a flattening sometimes. Granted Barry (Bergdoll) I think is kind of an honorary architect although he never practiced, but he knows buildings extremely well. So you don't need to be a practicing architect in that sense, but some kind of strong affinity for building. I used to tell students this all the time, that architecture whether you become an architect or not, gives you one of the strongest foundations in critical thinking that there is, it is critical reflection on yourself and on decision-making. I mean that's it, curation is decision-making.

L: So talking about your first exhibition. Is it something you are happy with and would consider a success of yours or would you do things rather differently if you could start again?

SA: Well, I would be very curious to read the few reviews of it. What's fascinating to me is that artists that I have talked to think it's fantastic, architects I speak to don't think it's fantastic and I don't know what that means or if it means anything. But I would say that the success of the exhibition rests in that there are only very few works, there are only 42 or 43 works in the entire show, it was done at a very low budget.

A: Are there any particular show or persons that have influenced your work as an architect, educator or curator?

SA: There are both artists and architects whose work I've always admired for different reasons. I have always been drawn to artists and architects and places that don't necessarily get looked at all the time and so my own research and thinking in the past, has been something that perhaps is taken for granted and then turn it over and then think about it in a different way. My second book was about Italian fascist architecture in East Africa. You know, I think there are narratives that are present in architecture and art throughout history, that become quite fascinating if you have the luxury of spending time with them. But I used to read quite a bit and now not so much unfortunately but a lot of South Asian writing, novelists as well always have been traveling.

L: Earlier you talked about a mentor of yours?

SA: Yes, her name is Suhanya Raffel, she is from Sri Lanka. I have met her in Australia through friends, she is now the overall director of the M+ Museum in Hong Kong and when I sat with her many times and I realized that her perspective on the world and on art in particular, but also architecture was so sensitive and so sophisticated, that I wanted to be like her. And because she has been working in Asia in particular for so long, she has amazing stories to tell. But also I was impressed by her knowledge of why things happen, and I think a lot of what curators are trying to do is to use art and architecture and design to ask why things happen.

L: A question leading into your future as a curator, how do you choose your topics? Is there something you want to achieve with your exhibitions? Which audience do you want to address?

SA: I don't think that I have a specific audience in mind, if you can have an audience from all slices of life, enter an exhibition and immediately be absorbed, even if for a moment, that's pretty good. I think too often people come to this museum just because they have to come to this museum, so if they can pause longer than the 30 seconds it is on average that someone spends time looking at something, you have done a good job. As for the topics I do have a lot of questions about contemporary architecture but also historic architecture that is grounded in situations in which there were changes that affected the reception of architecture or even the building of architecture historically. I think it would be fantastic to do an exhibition on fascist architecture and just see what that looks like. Quite often I feel like I have in mind what the exhibition will look like before what it is. Similarly with essays when I was writing a lot, I know what the ending of an essay is, I just have to figure out how to get there. And then what I hope to achieve is to expand how and what we see when we see architecture in the museum. That it's not just plans and sections and elevations and models, but that there is a realm of ideas through and by which architecture can be seen and understood in radically different ways.

L: MoMA was very important for the development of the architecture exhibition, however in recent years there have been a lot of new architecture events all over the world such as biennals, triennals or small architecture galleries. What do you think makes MoMA still relevant in that context and what is its position?

SA: That's a very good question, I think we will be trying to answer that question for years to come. I just wrote an essay about that exact same idea, because there are so many biennals and triennals of which architecture is part of and my question is more along the lines of for whom are they being made? Who is going to these events? Is it just other architects and designers, is it for scholars, is it for a public? So no, I don't think the museum will ever fall out of favour in that regard, but it does require the institution to make provocations.

L: Talking about institutions, what do you think are the advantages and also the struggles working within such an institution?

SA: I think the beauty but also the danger is that you reach, a huge audience of working in an institution like this. The beauty being that you can communicate a set of ideas that many people will see. The danger being, they are the first to question critique and ask why this? We have a very big mouth-piece in a way, we have a very big presence in the world and so the value is that we can also, hopefully, not change opinions but shift the discourse on ideas which we have been doing throughout the museums history. And the minute though you would shift the discourse there is also a danger, because you can slip into the feeling taking up your ego, and that's where you get involved individually. Also, there a great responsibility in creating history and this is always in the back of my head is and I have to remind myself that I work at MoMA. But you can't live through that, it's a burden not in a negative way, it is something that you know, but the minute that you kind of step out of there is just unlimited potential.

A: Do you have a dream project that you would like to realize one day?

SA: Yes and no. I don't know what it would look like, but it would involve thinking about modernism around North Africa into the Near East, so from Morocco to Baghdad. Something not necessarily based on geography, but on the communication of ideas across the Mediterranean area in modernism. Something that's never been done here.

A: To conclude our conversation, is there any advice you want to give to young people trying to become curators?

SA: Don't take anything for granted. Ask questions, I always would tell student to ask questions, because there are too many people on the world who don't or who fear that asking questions will not either resolve in the answer they want to hear or in something else. I think the beauty of being able to think through projects as a curator is not knowing necessarily what comes, what the questions will be. You can't control what people see or think, you can just try. And so I don't see the museum and exhibitions as a form of propaganda, but I do think it is important for curators or even non-curators to have as many experiences in the world as possible. That's my advice.

A+L: Great, thank you very much for your time.