

Intro Music (00:00)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (00:17)

Alright, we're back with another episode of the Ecologies in Practice podcast. Today, I'm in conversation with a dear colleague of mine and someone who I look up to immensely, Katie Lawson. Katie's a graduate of the Master of Visual Studies Curatorial Program at the University of Toronto, where she previously completed her Master of Arts in Art History. She's currently working towards a PhD in Art and Visual Culture at Western University with an interest in contemporary art and climate change. Thank you so much for joining us today, Katie. How are you?

Katie Lawson (00:47)

Thank you so much for having me. I'm doing great. It's a pleasure to share this space with you.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (00:53)

Likewise, and it's so great to have you here. Could you share a little bit about yourself, particularly your personal connection to water and your areas of interest as a curator and academic?

Katie Lawson (01:04)

Absolutely. So at present, I am a curator and a writer who is based in Toronto that has been my home base for the last 10 years and is the place that all of my work has kind of grown outwards from whether that is my academic pursuits, you were describing my background in schooling a little bit or also my work in museums and galleries of various sizes and my own independent practice as well. And water is something that has really been a part of my work for the last 10 years. And to psychoanalyze myself a little bit, I think initially that came into the fold because I am someone who went through many moves at a very young age. My family is Canadian, but I was born in the US and the early years of my life were spent in locations as drastically different as the west coast of Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, and southeastern Florida.

So I am trying to grapple with going through quite a lot of change. The one thing that I would kind of orient myself towards each time that I moved was water. That was one of the only consistent things. So whether that was, you know, the Pacific Ocean and all of that brings to the beautiful rugged west coast of our continent, or if it was early experiences for me as a child being taken to the Everglades and seeing like a really unique ecosystem that left, think, a very lasting impression on me. So by the time I, as a young adult, moved to Canada and was kind of coming to terms with understanding this place and my position in it, the Great Lakes were something that I just felt had to be a part of how I understood the place where I'm living and working. And so it kind of bled in from a very personal place, I would say, but became this amazing element to think alongside, not just in terms of literal subject, water as a subject to talk about things like the climate crisis or about social inequity. We think about the water crisis and who has access to clean drinking water, but it also started to be too a kind of conceptual and theoretical partner in a ways or started to be... water was an influence for how I started to think

about how I wanted to work and why I was doing the projects I was doing and what I hoped could be gained from them.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (04:18)

Wow, thank you for sharing that. And it's so intriguing to hear how that background informs your practice today, which brings me to my next question. Can you talk a little bit more about your process for curating exhibitions and how this upbringing informs your relationship with the more-than-human world?

Katie Lawson (04:40)

Absolutely. I do tend to struggle with summing up a bit of a curatorial approach. I would say that what I really love about curating is that every single project I feel like I'm able to show up to and out of necessity, I need to respond to the context. So who is hosting me? Who's calling me into their space to develop a project? Who are the other artists that I want to think alongside? What are the resources and the values of all of the stakeholders involved, not just those more operational ones, but also at the level of funders or governance or whatever else? So I, perhaps it seems like a cop out, but like I do really like to, with every project, come to it and be responsive to the situation at hand.

And that is not just in managing the relationships between the kind of human-to-human actors in that situation, but also thinking as deeply as I possibly can about the more than human or the material actants that are a part of the exhibition making scenario. And whether that is as kind of bone dry as the didactics and how they come to be in the world and what happens to them after the show, or if it's the material that the artists are working with themselves in developing new works and wanting there to be an alignment in terms of values of how we kind of understand working with resources in our world.

And it's the way I kind of work with exhibition design too, like my favorite part of curating an exhibition sometimes is like going into the storage room of a particular gallery and seeing all of the forgotten and dusty plinths they might have, what are the stories that they carry with them of these past exhibitions, which have kind of been forgotten. And is there any way that I can work with those materials, revive them towards a different need, let's say, of a particular show. So it's really about being responsive to the humans that are a part of this relational knot of the exhibition, but also very practically all of the matter that comes together in trying to produce an exhibition, if that makes sense.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (07:27)

Yeah, that's such a beautiful perspective. Thank you for sharing. I want to sit with some of the specifics. Let's talk. I mean, you've been part... you've curated, co-curated, collaborated on some really big projects. I want to talk about some specific ones, particularly the 2019 and 2022 Toronto Biennales. There you co-curated two shows *Shoreline Dilemma* and *What Water Knows, The Land Remembered*. Could you talk a little bit more about those projects in particular?

Katie Lawson (07:56)

Absolutely, and maybe I can stay with this line of, you know, thinking about the material aspects of what we do in the contemporary art world, because I think that the four years I worked on these two editions of the biennial have been incredibly formative for me and informs every aspect of how I work with artists. And a big part of that is because my role there as a curator was largely supporting the commission of new work. So to distinguish that from coordinating loans of existing works as a curator, these being kind of two very particular ways of bringing a show to fruition.

And so I really was involved in the nitty-gritty behind the scenes, the sourcing, all of that right alongside with the artists, even the identification of sites or like, how to care for those things over the 10 week run of the biennial, what happens after that, because of course the Toronto Biennial, like many other festival oriented contemporary art events, they don't have storage, there's nowhere really for these things to live afterwards. And so it gave me a whole new appreciation of thinking about what the, let's call it like a life cycle is of an individual work of art or of an individual exhibition or any of these things. So it just illuminated different aspects of the artistic process for me in a way that I really couldn't have anticipated before taking that work on. And of course the biennial too really encouraged and wanted these, you know, like site specific works. We were often working in non-art spaces, whether it was a former car dealership that had been previously condemned and we brought, you know, just up to code to be able to be in that space.

So, yeah, I've lost my train of thought a little bit there, but maybe that is like a more concrete way to talk about how this kind of engagement with the more than human has shown up in particular projects like the biennial. Yeah.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (10:26)

Yeah, and there's two really interesting things that stood out to me while you were responding. One thing that you mentioned is gaining this new perspective on the life cycle of works, and the other thing was site specificity. Can you talk a little bit more about that new perspective and how it's evolved over the years, particularly regarding your most recent project, *Erratic Behavior*? And maybe you could, if possible, jump into sort of the connections between geology and water.

Katie Lawson (10:58)

Yeah, let me, I will take a step back to say that also with the biennial, there was a real focus on site specificity because it was the first time that an event of this kind was happening in the city. It was a brand new organization. So in 2019, that was the very first exhibition that this organization was putting forth into the world. And there had been questions for a long time in the city, in the air of kind of like, do we really need another biennial when there's so many globally? Like, what are we really adding to the conversation? And the idea was really that it was important and what it could bring that perhaps wasn't already happening in our arts ecosystem in Toronto was it gives you this flexibility when you're working in this kind of short festival format of being a lot more responsive to context and being a bit more fluid, a bit more flexible. And we were also able to really orient artists towards certain ways of engaging with place.

So before we had started commissioning any artists at all, we had commissioned an incredible Indigenous artist, activist, educator, Mohawk woman, and Ange Loft to write something that was called the *Indigenous Context Brief*. And so this was a document that we provided to all artists before they even started to think of what, you know, their new work for Toronto would be. So they were really coming into it with a sensitivity to all of the different layers of history that are in this place. The idea was always for the biennial to be along the waterfront as a place that really embodies a lot of the tensions and contradictions and especially like colonial shifts that have happened here, whether that's like the military presence along the water or the privatization of land or the extension of the shoreline out into the water. And so Lake Ontario and the relationship between Lake Ontario and Toronto and its many tributaries were really foundational to all aspects of our work on both editions.

And as I mentioned earlier on, water has been this kind of really generative elemental partner to think with on a literal and conceptual level for me as a curator. And by the time the second biennial had closed, I was starting to feel like that narrow focus wasn't serving me as much anymore, or I started to really... I was grappling with the edges of any given element, because anytime I would think about water, I would end up thinking about geology again. Like when I think about the problems faced in the Great Lakes, for example, and like the environmental damages that have taken place, a lot of those are directly tied to fossil fuel and plastics industries along the Great Lakes. And so when I was having this time to reflect after the biennial, I was really like kind of getting caught up in like, well, it's not just water.

Like, water always leads me back to any number of other things. And I had been on the back burner of my mind starting to think about a geology show slowly but surely. And I thought I would just try a different access point. Like I was like, "what if I started with rock, actually? What if I started with the earth?" And so that's how *Erratic Behavior* came to be, which was probably the most fun project I've ever worked on, but a really joyous and amazing group exhibition at Kitchener-Waterloo that has this kind of playful title that's, you know, drawing attention to the fact that our relationship with the geological is inherently quite broken. And that humans are the ones displaying so-called erratic behavior in terms of how we relate to and treat our one planet. But it was also a way to evoke, I think, that the geological entity that is an erratic... is a really fascinating thing to think alongside as well.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (16:16)

Wow, okay, so there's a lot to unpack there. One thing that really stood out was how you described grappling with edges. And you mentioned this sort of entry point, rock, geology. Now, geological time scales are so different than human time scales. How do you reconcile, you know, these two different variations of time?

Katie Lawson (16:38)

I don't think I do. But it's interesting for me to try and hold them both like in my mind and in my body. And I think that those attempts to connect with the scale of geological time, which is this kind of impossibility, often provides me with a really important like perspectival shift, or it really

like, allows me to understand my entanglement with human and more-than-human forces in the world in a different way. And is quite grounding and is so different, too, from the kind of the speed that we expect things to happen at in the art world, but also just like in a capitalist system at large. So it yeah, it felt really worthwhile to... and even like water had already kind of nudged me in that direction of thinking about deep time. Because a lot of the writing that I was doing, particularly when I was at the biennial was about the fact that, you know, all water on our planet is always already there. We're not getting more, we're not getting less. It's just constantly transforming and circulating through human and more-than-human bodies. Our reserves of freshwater and groundwater are finite, they are not renewable resources.

And there's this amazing quote from a theorist named Astrida Neimanis. And I won't remember the quote exactly, but it's something to the effect of like, maybe we would look at the world a bit differently if we realized that like, you know, a tear I cry might be the same like molecule of water that was part of a tsunami centuries ago on the other side of the planet. Just as a thought experiment and just to be like... it's a deeper scale of time than we can even conceive of and that focusing on the elements is one way to really tap into that. So I, yeah, the geologic and the hydrologic do similar things for me, I guess, in my work is what I'm trying to say. And they both allow me to connect to a different scale of time.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (19:07)

Now, you've talked quite a bit about your personal perspective and I appreciate the honesty with which you're coming with, but I want to shift gears a little bit and hone-in on the collaborations that you've been part of and how those collaborations have informed your career the last few years or so and how working with different people approaches your own curatorial practice.

Katie Lawson (19:32)

Yeah, absolutely. I don't know if I've ever worked in isolation in this field. And so it always feels kind of funny too to come in to talk about my practice because my practice is responsive and is defined through the folks that I choose to work with. And I will say a lot of projects I've been involved in have been working with other co-curators. So the Toronto Biennial, of course, working with Candice Hopkins and Tyrone Bastion. And it wasn't like a Nuit Blanche approach, people get zones. It was very much a deeply embedded and integrated and collaborative endeavor.

And there's been other shows that I've taken on since then one of which was called *All Flourishing is Mutual* and was myself and one other co-curator Jacqueline Kresma. But that aspect of relations has just always been such a big part of my work.

And I think there's really an instance where I'm curating works into a show. It's more like I'm curating people into a project and inviting them in. And then we're working together to find a way forward that feels good and honors both of our work as individuals, but also contributes to something larger.

Nothing that I do would be possible without others and kind of just like a funny, I'm sliding back into a personal anecdote now, but I initially went to school to be an artist: I did a studio degree.

And I very quickly decided that I did not want to do that. But the thing that I loved more than anything else was just spending time in the studios with my peers, my artist friends. And those conversations were everything to me. Just curating came to me as a way to spend a lot of time luxuriating in those moments of like conversation, of developing relationship, and of working together. And I'm also not someone who works in this way where I'm like imposing a thesis as an exhibition onto other people's work. So yeah, I don't know if that answers your question, but.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (22:11)

No, it does. I completely agree. I mean, having worked with you and shared classrooms with you, you're, yeah, you're awesome at those things. And I know you're also very passionate about public engagement and you're involved in community and volunteer activities like the Great Lakes Water Walk. How do these experiences and how have they informed your thinking and your practice and work as a curator?

Katie Lawson (22:36)

I always, when I'm thinking about exhibitions, imagine public programming right alongside it. And that comes perhaps to also down to the fact that all of my first jobs in the art world were in education and in public programming. And I saw how often it would kind of be an afterthought let's say, or like the public program comes to illustrate the work of the curator who has come in, done their work and left. But for me, it was always integral. It should be thought of as a greater whole. And in terms of my volunteer work kind of outside of the art world as well, that for me has always just been really nourishing because I do - as much as I love the conversations that I have with my colleagues in the arts - I do find sometimes that it feels a bit like being in an echo-chamber. You know, the folks who are most often showing up to openings for shows I've curated or events that I'm putting on, they're already on the same wavelength as me. Like they are thinking alongside me, we agree about the state of the world and you know, what could stand to be improved, this, that and the other.

And sometimes it feels a bit futile. And so I just, I really like to reach outside of the art community when I can to be involved and whether that is like grassroots work or it's work that is coming from a completely different discipline than my own. Any kind of way of trying to cross that barrier or have it not feel like as much of a barrier.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (24:31)

Can you recall a moment or moments where one of your exhibitions or projects made an impact on a community member or an individual that was in attendance? And have you also faced any challenges while being part of these spaces?

Katie Lawson (24:49)

Yes to both. I mean, I've had such... I feel very fortunate. I've had really meaningful conversations with complete strangers in the context of work that I have done in public space.

And it's hard to really... I mean, talking about impact is difficult with the work that we do because a conversation feels meaningful, but is there any direct correlative action that comes out of that?

There's not much I can do in terms of following up on that to know if that's the case. But in the moment, it feels amazing. And it feels like being seen and heard and finding connection, which I think is like a big part of how we move forward. In terms of other ways of thinking about impact, I have in the past, actually around the time that I was involved with the Great Lakes Water Walk, I had a show called *Learning from the Lake* that was on and we went and did a shoreline cleanup at the Humber as one of the public programs. Like it was completely separate from the gallery and it was just me stewarding this cleanup.

That was really amazing and like for that to be able to, after a few hours with a great group of people, look at heaps of garbage that we had pulled out of the water, it felt like, even if I can't be totally assured of the impact of the exhibition, we can say we did this. And so I am always keen to find those moments of how it can be grounded in something that is really tangible in terms of its lasting effect, but I think it's just it's a constant searching for those moments and the ones that make sense in the context of a given project by trying to do it as much as I can.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (27:00)

Yeah, we're curious to know what projects you're currently working on and any upcoming projects that you're comfortable enough to share with us that you're also excited about.

Katie Lawson (27:10)

Sure. I am in the thick of working on an exhibition for the City of Barrie. It's a project that I've been working on for the last year. They have only recently gotten a staff member who is charged with being the public art coordinator, and they're in the moment where they are trying to build a public art program for the future and they came to me because they were interested in a kind of pilot project, let's say, of commissioning temporary public art projects for the shoreline and the downtown. And so that is going to be opening in September, on September 27th (2024), and there's six incredible Canadian artists who have conceived of site responsive projects that take many forms and they will all be accessible to the public for a period of six weeks. So until November 8th (2024) is the closing date.

And there's also going to be, I'm curating as well, an exhibition at the McLaren Art Center that's in Barrie that will be kind of a gallery compliment to the outdoor public art exhibition. So that is the thing that is coming up next. The exhibition's title is *Seeds to Sow*. And that was coming from a bit of an allegorical place in thinking about the value of temporary public art really being that it is planting a seed within a community and it's only there for a short period. It's a very finite growing season. But seeing the value in that and it also being about more environmentally responsible gestures than, let's say like, a ton of bronze permanent public art messes. Yeah, so that's what's coming up next.

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (29:32)

Wow, that's awesome. Sounds fantastic, I'll definitely have to check it out when I can and I'm wishing you all the best with that. So yeah, with this, we conclude the interview. It's perfect timing, 30 minutes, you know, so yeah. No, it was awesome to learn a little bit more about things that you've been up to and also how sort of these personal perspectives have informed, you know, the works and projects that you've been involved in. So I just want to say thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule for being here and for being so honest and open. I appreciated it. And yeah, like I said, I feel like I'm left with wanting to know more, but you know, I can definitely connect with you some other time for sure.

Music (30:16)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (30:22)

Ecologies in Practice is hosted by Ashar Mobeen and produced by editors Elysia French and Amanda White, with music and audio editing by Adam Wiebe. This season was made possible through the generous support of the Sustainability Impact Fund at Western University, in collaboration with Brock University and the Centre for Sustainable Curating. We'd love to hear from you. Visit our website at ecologiesinpractice.ca to get in touch. There, you'll find details about each episode, transcripts, and further information about our guests and links to relevant projects and organizations. The book *Ecologies and Practice in Environmentally Engaged Arts in Canada* is now available through Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Outro Music (31:00)