

Intro Music (00:00)

Ashar (he/him) (00:18)

Hello, hello, it's your host Ashar and I'm back with another episode of the Ecologies in Practice Podcast. Today I'm in conversation with Julie Rae Tucker, who is the head of programs and projects at Art Windsor Essex. She started out the gallery in 2020 and has held this new position since March 2023. She's also a collaborator on the Munsee-Delaware History and Language Project, a member of Three Collective and sometimes a maker of things and a language learner.

Hi Julie, thank you so much for joining us today. How are you doing?

Julie Rae Tucker (00:50)

(greeting) Very well. I just like to introduce myself if that's okay in the language because I always like to practice.

(Julie introduces self in huluniixsuwaakan, the language of the Lunaapeewi (Lunaape/Lenape people)

Yeah, so I just said there, my name is Julie. I live in Windsor, also in Anishinaabemowin, is known as Waawiiatanong. I am a turtle clan and I am from the Munsee Delaware First Nation and I'm also of settler descent. So I just want to just start with that and say *(greeting)* to all my relations

Ashar (he/him) (01:43)

Thank you so much for sharing that. Can you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and your current role?

Julie Rae Tucker (01:51)

Yeah, so currently I am the head of programs and projects at Art Windsor Essex. I had started at the gallery during the pandemic in 2020 and was hired by Jennifer Matotek, our executive director. And it was a really exciting time because we, you know, she really led the charge in basically changing how we do everything at the gallery, including how we design exhibitions.

So I've been responsible for all of the education and programming and then I'm also have the opportunity to curate shows as well. So that is the very... kind of the best part of my job, but only makes up maybe like 1% of what I get to do here.

Ashar (he/him) (02:39)

Wow, that's awesome! How do you approach curating art exhibitions that sort of engage with the complex and often challenging relationships between humans and the more than human world?

Julie Rae Tucker (02:50)

Yeah, you know, what I really like to do is to work with collaborators. So I do that in my own practice, my art practice that I kind of, I don't have very opportunities to work on. But also within my curating, you know, I really love finding partners who have a different skill set, perhaps in history or science. And one of my favorite exhibitions I got to work on was with Dr. Laurie Buchanan and we looked at the ways in which, like how, like my research question was like, "how is your brain affected by art?" So it was really great to work with a collaborator from

a different background to be able to explore actually research within the collection. So it also involved a student and as part of the exhibition, there was an ongoing research project that was happening that was in collaboration with both of them at the University of Windsor.

I've also worked with my cousin, Dr. Mary Jane McCallum, and she has a history background. So really how I'd be able to parse out these very complicated questions is to work alongside other people. I don't think you, I think it's just, it makes it a more... less daunting process to work with other people. So that's what I like to do.

Ashar (he/him) (04:24)

Yeah, I couldn't agree more and we'll definitely dive more into that later. But I do want to shift the conversation just a little bit because I'm really intrigued by one of the recurring themes in your work, which is water.

Can you share your personal connection to water and how it's become such an important focus in your curatorial practice?

Julie Rae Tucker (04:44)

Yeah, well, if you visit us here at Art Windsor Essex, we are situated along the Detroit River. And it is something that I can see from my office every day. And it becomes, you know, I think the site of where the gallery is, like in its relation to water, really impacts me in sort of the decisions I make.

And so one of those was to, you know, one of my first shows was to create the exhibition, *Water Protectors*. And in that exhibition, I was inspired by the Indigenous community here in Windsor. And when I'm curating shows or like choosing particular works of art, I think of the people that live, work here who come visit the gallery regularly and people that I'm in relationships with. So sometimes I either pick a theme of the show or even particular works based on a particular person. So I'm secretly picking works because I know that say, someone that attends the gallery will really appreciate it. It's something that I think I started doing subconsciously, but now I'm starting to recognize that is like a common thing that I do.

It was just the work of one person in particular, her name is Lacey George, and she is an Anishinaabe woman who does a lot of community work and who does a lot of advocacy. And I was thinking about her when I chose the idea. One of my first experiences in Windsor was volunteering for the Indigenous community. They were hosting Grandmother Josephine Mandamin Biidaasige-ba. She was a water protector and that is where the idea of the show came from. And I wanted to create a show that would resonate with the Indigenous community here.

Ashar (he/him) (07:07)

That's so interesting. I would love to hear more about the show. Maybe if you could talk a little bit more about key works that were part of it, outcomes, possible challenges that you might have faced along the way. We'd love to hear more about that.

Julie Rae Tucker (07:21)

Yeah, so actually, I did have a co-curator, of course, on the show. And her name is Danielle Printup. She's an amazing curator that works at QAG. And she's also a good friend, but we talk a lot about our shows. And with this show, particularly, we were like, we had the exact same idea for the same show. It was very, it was just a very, yeah, just a very surreal moment.

We often... I don't know, like our collaborations are, you know, throughout the many years is, you know, we're always like, sending memes back and forth. But, you know, when we do get a chance to talk, yeah, so she had a very similar idea for the show, so we decided to combine them. A lot of the work for the show came from the Indigenous Art Centre that's owned by the Canadian government. And that's a place that Danielle had worked previously, so she's very familiar with that collection. And most of the work, except for one piece, had come from, like one work was from our collection and the rest was from the Indigenous art collection. And, you know, it was really through the advocacy of the Indigenous women that had worked at the Indigenous Art Centre where they made that work available to all Canadians. So we're very lucky to be able to have borrowed all of the work from the Indigenous Art Collection.

And so two works that were really significant to me was... the work is called *Contaminated Supper* by Glenna Matoush. And Glenna is the sister of Arthur Schilling. And the Schilling family are just an amazing group of artists. And it was so great to make that connection. We also have an Arthur Schilling in the collection. So I always, I like love like, sibling and family, families of artists, and include them in the show.

And then the other work, was by Ruth Cuthand. It was called *Boil Water Advisory no.5*. And, it was, a collection of, glasses as a sculpture work and inside our pathogens that are found in water, many of which are in First Nations communities because you can't drink the water there. This work we're really happy to get to borrow from the Indigenous Art Collection because it really resonated with both Water Protectors.

We also had Ruth curated in another show that we had at the same time as Water Protectors, which was *Bio Curious*. So we also had her beaded pathogens in that exhibition as well. So I'm just a really big fan of Ruth's work and those, you know, those two works are just a selection, but of all the amazing work in the show, but those specifically had to do with water.

Ashar (he/him) (10:39)

Yeah, thank you so much for sharing. That was a beautiful backstory. Another very interesting project that you curated was titled *The Water Library*, which upon first glance blends elements of art, activism, curation. Would you say that that's an accurate description?

Julie Rae Tucker (10:56)

Yeah, I think so. I also like to call it truth-telling. It gives an opportunity for our educators to share what the realities are. You know, it was a really great collaboration with myself and also Steve Nielsen, our tech. I was like, "okay, could you build me a shelf that lights from the bottom?" The image of like, the bottles on the lit shelf is really beautiful. It kind of looks like an Ian Baxter piece a little bit. So it's, you know, it's almost like something that I would... I think that's why I might be a better curator than artist because it's almost something that I would make in my other practices.

But I'm always looking for opportunities to sort of have moments bringing the outside world into the gallery so that audiences, especially young people, can make those connections and be able to also participate, become an active participant in the exhibition, and be able to bring their own background and knowledges into the gallery. So making that connection to the real world through this display of a water library.

There's also a water library, like an artist, Roni Horn in Iceland that I think was also an inspiration for this work, but the *Water Library* was an opportunity for people to participate and bring their own samples of water. I wanted it to be a little bit more scientific than it was, I just couldn't find the right partner to work with me, but it does look aesthetically beautiful and it was used throughout the exhibition.

Ashar (he/him) (13:02)

Yeah, I love what you said there. And my next question ties back into what you said earlier about your love for collaboration, finding partners. Now, because the *Water Library* was a participatory project, maybe talk a little bit more about how audience engagement played a role in shaping and evolving the project and then its sort of overall impact as well on the community.

Julie Rae Tucker (13:27)

Yeah, it's, you know, it's sometimes hard to measure impact, but what I would say is that the, yeah, so we had a selection of water from like, from the Arctic, from the local First Nations, places with places that are like Munsee, for instance, where you can't drink the water. And so people... like visitors to the gallery, so we had some students come from Walpole specifically to see the *Water Protector* show. They had brought some samples from their community. And then it was an opportunity during the tours to stop and talk about the water issues on First Nations communities.

But also we used the water. So we would take samples and we used it to make a collaborative watercolor project using Beam watercolors to make a mural using the water samples that were provided. So we did that a number of times with different groups of kids and visitors as well.

Ashar (he/him) (14:38)

Now, the issue of lack of clean drinking water in First Nations communities has been brought up a few times today. I suppose in your opinion, how can art and exhibitions serve as a tool for environmental advocacy, particularly in fostering awareness and action around water conservation?

Julie Rae Tucker (15:00)

Well, I think it's education because I don't think people really know what the problems are or they have never met anyone possibly from a community where you aren't able to drink the water and how that affects you. So I really think it's education and making it personal as well.

Ashar (he/him) (15:30)

That's a great response and I do agree. I was wondering if you could maybe elaborate a little bit more on how you might envision that. Would you say that it's more of a curriculum thing within

the education system or just a lack of public awareness and working towards creating that awareness?

Julie Rae Tucker (15:48)

Well, I do think it's a curriculum thing. You know, from our experiences, you know, working with topics such as water on First Nations communities or residential schools is that people have absolutely no idea at all. They know absolutely nothing. So I think that's our role. You know, the reason that I think it's really valuable for me and why I'm in this position is to be able to share what I know with other people. Not because I'm an expert or I know more than other people, it's just because I think this is the responsibility I have that comes from my community to do this work and to make those connections, you know, it's not just about, like, it's about creating space and for people to be able, you know, to be able to see themselves in the gallery as well. So people that do come from those communities to be able to feel welcomed and acknowledged and that people do care or know about that culture specifically. Their cultures specifically*.

Ashar (he/him) (17:25)

Right. And so would you say that's how you envision the role of the curator evolving maybe in the context of these environmental issues and sort of the urgent need for sustainable practices within curatorial spaces?

Julie Rae Tucker (17:41)

Yeah, I think education is a big part. I think it's also... we like, as institutions, we need to make changes as well. One of the things that we have is we have a sustainability community or committee, sorry, sustainability committee that is looking at these issues specifically. I'm not sure like, I'm not sure if other galleries have that or not.

We also have an indigenous circle that's made up of local indigenous people. And that's really where a lot of the ideas that I work on as the curator come from. So they directly come from community. So we are, you know, we like our... like my role as a curator is just to listen, and be able to bring together people and resources to bring these concerns or things that people want to celebrate forward.

Ashar (he/him) (18:46)

Yeah, and so my next question, I'm interested because you work within this regional framework and you mentioned the Indigenous Circle, the community, the role of the curator, other staff that are present within the institution as well.

Who would you say the responsibility falls on the most? Would you say that it's sort of a shared responsibility? Would you say that there are individuals that have to take on more of the burden within that regional framework? If you could maybe talk a little bit more about that. It's just, it's an intriguing sort of community, right?

Julie Rae Tucker (19:21)

Do you mean within the institution itself or?

Ashar (he/him) (19:25)

Yeah, yeah. So that's sort of regional framework, right? Because you are working in a regional art institution in some ways, right? And so, yeah, I suppose within the institution itself.

Julie Rae Tucker (19:34)

Yeah, you know, it has to be like, we're a small team, and because of that, it has to be like every single one of us participates in whatever our areas of operation are to address.

To you know, address these like different issues, or, so I think it's like, it, it has to be shared. I think, you know, I'm often as like, as a program, as the person that makes the programs and education like, it can't always fall on, on, on us to be able to do all of the work. If you know what I mean.

And so it has to be a shared value throughout... the shared values, right? about the environment and taking care of people and being community centered. It's... the responsibility of that falls with everyone that works here. And, you know, like in terms of what we can do as an institution that's specific to our role as a regional public gallery is to look at ways where we can make changes that affect how we operate and maybe contribute to best practices.

So for instance, our sustainability team is looking at the way like our energy use, which is very high - works of art require temperature and humidity control - so one of the avenues that they're looking at is reducing energy consumption by reducing, making it warmer in the summer, which would greatly impact how much energy we're using.

So that's like, that's an example of that. Of what? Of making it acceptable for the art, but also it's, you know, better for the people here. It being warmer. I don't know if you're- when you spend time at galleries, it's like you're in an icebox 100 % of the time. So it's something that I'm looking forward to reducing our energy outputs and then also making it more hospitable to the people that work here and visit.

Ashar (he/him) (22:27)

Yeah, thanks so much for sharing.

When you're tackling such complex issues, you know, it's a lot of work. It's daunting on the body, the spirit. How do you take care of yourself in those moments? How do you make sure your sense of self, your mental health, wellbeing is preserved and conserved during those moments that might feel like, you know, because you are coming up against these big issues. And yeah, so if you could talk a little bit more about that, I'd be interested to hear.

Julie Rae Tucker (23:00)

Wow, that's a really important question.

Yeah, I might be stumped a little bit because I don't think I'm very good at taking care of myself, but I think

Julie Rae Tucker (24:07.316)

Yeah, I didn't think about that question. Sorry, ahead of time. Yeah, I like, I don't... Yeah.

Ashar (he/him) (23:17)

That's okay, I'm sorry, it kind of came out of the blue. It's not on the script, we don't have to. I was just curious, was all, because it's such an important question and I'm always interested in how individuals are balancing... and yeah.

Julie Rae Tucker (23:37)

Yeah, it's just like the question speaks to emotional labor much which falls heavily on my shoulders a lot of the time so I'm... you know, I guess like my best answer to that question is that I don't work for the institution, I'm like a person inside the institution. So I can't take responsibility for everything the institution does. I can only control what I do. And what I try to do is like, it's okay to, I just have to be okay with difficult conversations and also, you know, saying no to people and that like being able to say no to people, to stand your ground and also accept criticism, which is, you know, a form of care in itself. From, you know, from people to like they're criticizing you because they want you to be better is something that I am learning and working on. And I think I'm much better at it than I was four years ago when I started.

Ashar (he/him) (25:05)

Yeah, that's really well said. Thank you so much for sharing, for being so open and honest about that. I know it's not easy, but I do appreciate you sharing that with us. Which brings me to my last question of the interview. Could you tell us about any current or upcoming projects that you're working on, excited about, if you're willing to share? We'd love to hear about it.

Julie Rae Tucker (25:27)

Yeah, I love sharing about my projects because even if they're not quite happening yet, I think staying it out loud is a way for them to happen. And one of them does have water involved. I'm working on a solo show with Vanessa Dion Fletcher. She is an Lunaape and Potawatomi artist. We have been learning language together.

since during the pandemic, when a lot of things went online and Vanessa was learning with my community actually, so that's how we connected. And yeah, so we're gonna be working on a show together. And Vanessa does work with language and quill work and the body. And she's been making these floating earrings. So we're looking at a place to perhaps float these giant floaty earrings. So either in a pool or outside somewhere. So that's a project that I am working on that's going to be in October. So I'm very much looking forward to partnering with Vanessa and I also connected her with Farber Fusion Love in Hamilton. David Bobier has been a really great partner and artist that I've collaborated with, so I'm really happy to collaborate with David again. And so there could be, there's going to be some sound and vibration involved in Vanessa's work.

And then I'm looking to secure a grant to do a show on baskets, so baskets that come from the border region. I'm working with Dr. Talena Atfield as well as Melissa Phillips, two amazing Haudenosaunee women on a basket show. So we're looking at finding funding to support that. And I think, again, it's one of those shows that was inspired by community members here, specifically Elaine Ilex who is a really just a strong, beautiful, Oneida woman and she really wanted us to do a show about baskets so I am trying to make that happen.

Ashar (he/him) (28:08)

Yeah, that's awesome. Thanks for sharing. I love hearing about what folks are working on. I'm wishing you all the best with that and really excited to see how it all comes along. And that being said, that sort of concludes our interview.

It was really wonderful to talk to you today, Julie, to hear more about where you come from, how you think about your shows, your love of collaboration, working with people, how important the participatory nature of the work is as well. Yeah, I really, really appreciated all of that. And I think you're doing really phenomenal work and I genuinely do wish you all the best. And yeah, you did also touch upon some really important topics as well. And I do apologize about the curveball that I threw in there. It just came up in my head.

Julie Rae Tucker (28:56)

No, it's okay.

Ashar (he/him) (28:58)

But yeah, I know it's not an easy task. Yeah, no, it's not an easy task. And that's something that I recognize. But I think that your handling, was just it's yeah, it's definitely been an inspiration for me to hear about the work that you do, obviously, as someone that also wants to make a difference in their own community. And so, yeah, it's also been a learning experience in a lot of ways. So yeah, just thank you so much for being here and for sharing your knowledge with us. Yeah, I really, really did have a really nice chat with you. So I just wanted to say that.

Music (29:23)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (29:31)

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 (30:07)