

Intro Music (00:00)

Ashar (he/him) (00:18)

All right, welcome back to another episode of the Ecologies in Practice podcast. Today, I'm thrilled to be joined by someone who defined the word cool way before it existed. Dr. Kirsty Robertson. She is a Canada Research Chair in Museums, Art and Sustainability. She's also a professor and director of Museum and Curatorial Studies at Western University, where she also directs the Center for Sustainable Curating.

Her pedagogy involves curating large-scale speculative and experimental exhibitions with students. And in her academic work, she's published widely on activism, visual culture, and museums. Thank you so much for joining us today, Kirsty. How are you?

Kirsty (00:59)

Thanks for having me. I'm not sure how cool I am. More like work, but thanks for the compliments.

Ashar (he/him) (01:10)

Well, I think you're definitely cool. Yeah, thank you so much for joining us today. So let's start off with the basics. Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your current roles?

Kirsty (01:20)

Sure, so I'm a professor at Western University where I teach in the visual arts department, but my teaching is primarily museum and curatorial studies. And from that, I also direct the Center for Sustainable Curating, which oversees curatorial and other projects, most of them clustered around environmental and social justice.

Ashar (he/him) (01:45)

Where did this journey begin? Can you tell us what inspired you to pursue this?

Kirsty (01:50)

So the center really grew out of this synthetic collective and then the synthetic collective really grew out of a kind of lifelong interest in environmental issues. But the synthetic collective is focused primarily on art science collaboration and on plastics pollution. And through that collaboration, it became clear that we just needed to do a little bit more research on how we could make the exhibitions that we were doing more sustainable. So it's like a core principle of synthetic collective that what we're doing should not in and of itself cause more environmental harm. And so the center was established to do just a little bit more research into how to make that happen. And then it sort of took on a life of its own and spawned its own series of projects.

So that's really how I ended up where I am.

Ashar (he/him) (02:50)

That's awesome. And how did it come to be? So the Synthetic Collective, I understand it's a group, but where did it all begin? Like who envisioned the project? Was it a couple of individuals that came together?

Kirsty (03:03)

Yeah, so around 2013, 2014, I think, Kelly Dazback, who's an artist, she attended a talk in the Earth Sciences Department at Western. And that talk was about plastics pollution. I can't remember if it was global or like in the Great Lakes, but the talk was about plastics pollution. So she reached out to the person who gave the talk, who was Patricia Corcoran, an earth scientist. And Patricia was sort of just like, "I'm going to Hawaii. Do you want to come?" And Kelly said yes. So they went to Hawaii and they were collecting plastic glomerate samples. So this is this like basalt rock, sand, and plastic agglomeration that is one substance. And then they described it.

So that means they figured out what it was and wrote a scientific article about how it was forming on these beaches in Hawaii. And that article went viral. And plastic glomerate is now very well known. And then I wrote this article in eFlex that was sort of the art side of plastic glomerate. So what does it mean to think about this substance that is not human made, but also not of the earth as art and how does that intersect with the art world? And we just decided that we wanted to do more work together. So in 2017, there were other people with us, other artists, other academics, other scientists. And we spent a weekend in Bayfield, Ontario, where somehow the name synthetic collective just came out of the ether. So in 2017, Synthetic Collective was formed and we started on this kind of long-term monitoring of pre-consumer plastics in the Great Lakes region.

So we did the first study where we tracked plastic nurdles, counting and characterizing them in 2017 and we're repeating the study as we're talking. It started on October 6th and will continue for another 10 days. So I can say more, but that's kind of the overview of what we do. So mostly plastic solution and then thinking about how to visualize the results.

Ashar (he/him) (05:46)

That's amazing. And then how did this workflow into the Center for Sustainable Curating? Can you perhaps elaborate more on that? How long the center was established and its mandate?

Kirsty (06:01)

So I probably should have said like Synthetic Collective like the major output we did was this big exhibition and the exhibition was called *Plastic Heart Surface All the Way Through*. And it was about like the focus on it was plastics as they intersect with the art world. So it started from this study that we had done in the Great Lakes region, but then it also looked at like, how seductive a material plastics are for many artists, what happens to plastics in collections, like over time as they degrade. And part of it was thinking about how we could make this exhibition have a smaller environmental footprint. So we tried to do things like not use vinyl labeling. We tried to think about what would happen if we didn't repair the walls from the previous exhibition. What if

we didn't include huge data-heavy video and instead use very small iPad monitors in order to, or tablet monitors in order to show works.

And it was, I think what we did at that point, so that was during the pandemic. I think the first show was 2020. At that time, not a lot of people were looking into those things. And I think we definitely learned a lot and made some mistakes. And then by the time we packed up the exhibition to go to Paris, we were also thinking about what it would mean to ship an exhibition from Toronto to Paris as like, how do you do that environmentally or like in an environmentally aware manner?

So the center was established in 2021, May 2021, to really like dig into some of those questions. And also because I was really the museum's member of the Synthetic Collective. So it just grew into its own thing. So CSC still collaborates with the Synthetic Collective, but it also very much does its own projects now as well.

Ashar (he/him) (08:23)

So there's a couple of things you said there that stood out to me. And one of the things I really want to sit with right now is the interdisciplinary nature of the exhibition itself and the work that the synthetic collective is doing. How do you approach that collaboration with your peers?

Kirsty (08:42)

Yeah, so there's a lot of translation that goes on. So there's this example we use all the time that I think is really illustrative of how this works. So what we were sampling for these things called nurdles. And they're little plastic pellets that are sort of one to two millimeters across, and they're round.

But when we had collected them, so we found 12,595 pellets, I think, the next step in the project was what's called characterizing them. So trying to figure out how many of this kind we had and how many of this kind we had. And I can say like the artists just interpreted the shapes and colors and like the little details that separated each pellet completely differently from how the scientists did it. So what is an oblong shape? What is a dimple in the middle of an oblong shape? These things were what is spherical. We had very different ideas of what constituted each shape. And so then it was like this act of kind of collaborative agreement over how to define certain terms. So that's like a small kind of fun example, but it works at every step and at every stage. Our disciplines approach a similar problem of plastics pollution from very different angles.

And so finding, it's not even so much finding commonality as finding who's going to lead which part and then developing a project around that. So because we were working towards a common goal, that was possible. But it can be difficult. It can take a lot of time. And there were certainly parts where we would separate for a bit to work in our areas of expertise and then come back together. So that's sort of how the collaboration works, but it's always open-ended. The work of collaborating is never done.

Ashar (he/him) (11:11)

Yeah, thank you for sharing. I appreciate how honest that was. Which brings me to my next question. When you were talking about the exhibition, you mentioned the word mistakes and I think that stood out to me and how it was a learning process. Could you maybe elaborate a little bit more on that?

Kirsty (11:26)

I should have said research opportunities rather than mistakes, yeah, there were, I mean, we just learned a lot. Like at a certain point we thought we would have a bicycle powered video, for example. And we had to research. So we started up by researching how to do that. But as part of the research into how to do it, we figured out that like pedal power is great to get a human being from point A to point B, but it is very inefficient in terms of powering a video. You actually, the outputs are not worth what you are inputting into that. So that's just one example.

A second is we made these beautiful handwritten labels using beam inks. Like they were absolutely beautiful, but we decided at the end that they didn't fit with accessibility criteria because they couldn't be read by a reader, like a reader on a mobile phone, for example. But at that time we didn't have any alternatives for labeling. In the three years since then, the CSC and also FOFA Gallery which is at Concordia, have been working on many different alternatives to vinyl labeling. And I think now we have much better alternatives. So yeah, maybe not mistakes so much as like things we couldn't have known because solutions didn't exist yet and now there's lots of people working on different kinds of ways to work with these problems.

Ashar (he/him) (13:20)

Yeah, I want to shift the conversation to your written work. So let's talk about your book, *Tear Gas Epiphanies*, which explores museums as these spaces of possibility and protest. How does that perspective shape your work on plastics and its intersection with museum and curatorial spaces?

Kirsty (13:40)

I mean, they are a little distinct. Like the work I do academically definitely informs all my collaborative projects, but they aren't, you know, sometimes you need a little bit of head space away from all of the things that are working in bigger groups. But having said that, part of *Tear Gas Epiphanies* is about unsettling museums. And it looks specifically at things like oil sponsorships in museums, how the extractive industries and museums are very tightly related in Canada and also elsewhere. And it looks at how pushback against museums from Indigenous communities, from many communities has fundamentally changed the way that museums operate in Canada, and that is still very much an ongoing process.

So I would say they impact and influence one another, but ultimately they are separate. So the academic work and the sort of more practical work... yeah, they have their own little rooms and sometimes I move between the rooms, but it's, you know, nice to sit at a desk by yourself every once in a while.

Ashar (he/him) (15:16)

In that vein, how do you see the future of museum practices evolving? You know, with your work with the Synthetic Collective, the Center for Sustainable Curating, you know, in terms of when we talk about sustainability and the environmental impact, how do you see that future of curatorial practices evolving?

Kirsty (15:37)

So I don't see one future, I see many, many futures. We know that museums have dark histories that they sometimes are dealing with, but also need to continue like to think with. At the same time, museums are deeply impacted by climate change. There have been many incidents of museums just like burning down and wildfires or flooding or, you know, the flooding of Chelsea and Hurricane Sandy, the very recent flooding of the Arts District in Asheville, North Carolina. So there's all these intersecting crises that are impacting what museums do. And I think in some ways they are responding to this, but the responses have to be like multiple and take place in many different ways.

With curatorial practice in general, again, like it's many things, not one, but the one example that I would point to is the Forge Project in upper state New York, where the idea is like you can radically reimagine. a space that could have been a museum to think about it as something more holistically. So that is the Forge Project, not the Forge Museum. It's dedicated to supporting Indigenous artists and it rethinks like what collections could be, how things like artist residencies could be used to support artists over the long term, to thinking differently about even how hanging things on the wall could be a part of a more radical vision of what the art world and museum practice should be.

So that's just one example. There are many others taking place, I think, but I see many futures. Some of them are the museum trying not to change in the face of massive change. And some of them are museums adapting along sort of mainstream lines and some of them are these really radical projects to reimagine what they could be altogether. It's the latter one that interests me the most.

Ashar (he/him) (18:13)

What role can the public play? I asked the question because I'm curious to know how visitors have responded to the exhibitions that you've curated. Were there things and points of interest that occurred or challenges and thoughts and comments that were made? If you could speak to that a little bit more, I'd be interested to hear that.

Kirsty (18:37)

Yeah, I'm sort of of two minds about that. Like on the one hand, some of the most effective changes that you can do curatorially to make a practice more sustainable, by definition have to be almost invisible.

So if you, for example, we've been using labels that are printed with vegetable-based ink and then adhere to the wall with potato starch paste, they look exactly like vinyl. And because of

that, they fit into an idea of what a professional museum space could and should look like. And it's the invisibility of the environmental aspect of them that is making them usable.

So it's not intersecting with the public. Like, the public doesn't notice. And it's important for museums to rethink what they do, but that's very small-scale. I personally find that members of the public who maybe don't have a really in-depth knowledge of art or museums, they actually really love learning about these things, like about the how of how an exhibition is built, how objects and artifacts and belongings are stored in museums and what it means to think about like the degradation of plastics and storage. These things are very kind of fascinating. So I actually think they... some of the things that might be resisted by an idea that artwork should be permanent or unchanging are actually things that are of great interest to members of the public. But it's also a complicated question because how do you track that and how do you know it's a little bit anecdotal. But I think that's also okay.

Ashar (he/him) (20:58)

Okay, I want to shift the conversation now to your history of research on textiles. I was wondering if you could share a little bit more about that journey and how it's brought back or how it's brought you back to synthetic textiles in your current work.

Kirsty (21:16)

Yeah, so it's going way back. I wrote my dissertation in the early 2000s. It was also on protests in museums and then eventually became my book, *Tear Gas Epiphanies*. But part of it was on activists who were using various crop practices. It was called craftivism. I mean, I think that term has been sort of... the term is resisted now, but we're talking like 2004. So it was writing about people who were drawing on like Greenham Common and anti-nuclear protests and using textiles within a kind of feminist framework to unsettle capitalism to think about different kinds of communities.

And then weirdly that ended up.. well, it's not weird, but it's segued into all of a sudden we were noticing there was just so much more clothing. So now we have the term fast fashion. I think everybody knows what that is. But in the early 2000s, it was just kind of noticeable. Like these stores started emerging that were selling very cheap clothing that had these like extremely quick fashion cycles going on and it was unclear what was happening. So I ended up quite randomly doing a lot of research into international, like legal agreements around the quotas on textile exports because this was what happened: until 1997, there were very strict regulations and quota systems in place on the circulation of textiles and clothing. And in 1997, pretty sure it was 1997, those were eliminated. And the elimination of those quotas resulted in a flooding of global systems with clothing and textiles. And not just, I mean, we say fast fashion, but it's also things like carpets and textiles that are used in furnishings and so on and so forth. And that flooding has kind of gone on growing. And at the same time, now there's like a search for cheaper forms of textile manufacturer and synthetics are just cheaper to make than things like wool or cotton or leather.

So that was the path into synthetic textiles and then synthetic textiles because they are essentially plastic. I mean, it's a simplification, but it's a useful simplification to say that synthetic textiles are plastic textiles because of how they degrade and so on. So the research on synthetic textiles was my entry point into the Synthetic Collective.

So when did I write this? I actually can't remember. It was around the time of the advent of the Synthetic Collective. But this new form of fashion that was - I'm not making this up - it was called frackware, was introduced into like workwear and leisure wear companies. And it was because oil workers, they just, hadn't had to wear safety equipment in North America. So they're like, if you look back at photos of oil workers from like the 60s and 70s, sometimes they're wearing these like cotton denim like jumpsuits, but often they're just wearing like jeans and t-shirts.

But after the Gulf of Mexico BP disaster, safety regulations were introduced and part of that was that workers had to wear fireproof clothing. And as a part of that, some companies responded with quote-unquote frackware. And frackware was this clothing treated with fire retardants and other chemicals also designed to keep workers safe. But the short-term impacts are probably, yes, those kinds of safety gear definitely keep workers safe. But the long-term impacts of things like fire retardants or shedding plastic textiles are largely unknown: we actually don't know what kind of harm those kinds of textiles do.

So I spent a lot of time looking into that and to how companies like DuPont and InVista, who are also plastics, well, DuPont is like also a plastics company, were sort of benefiting at both ends by creating this market for synthetic textiles and then those textiles were needed for extractive industries and it just created this kind of circular world under the umbrella of this vastly growing circulation of synthetic textiles around the globe.

And it was later than that where Mark Brown and other scientific researchers started finding synthetic microfibers on beaches. So these are polyesters and other synthetic textiles. They're known to shed thousands of plastic microfibers. And when you hear stories about plastics have been found in Antarctica, plastics have been found in outer space, plastics have been found at the bottom of the ocean, that's typically plastic microfibers.

So these come off synthetic textiles, often in washing cycles, and they proliferate and they move very easily around the world, and they are extremely difficult to clean up. We actually don't know how to clean them up, and we don't know what kind of harm they do. So these are big questions, and I was addressing it from a humanities perspective rather than a scientific one, but some of the work with Synthetic Collective has filled in some of the gaps.

Ashar (he/him) (28:16)

Wow, that is so interesting. Thank you so much for the history. Would you say that doing this work has also made you a little bit more conscious in terms of your fashion choices, maybe looking out for brands that you know that are a little bit more ecologically conscious or being more transparent about their procedures? I'm just curious.

Kirsty (28:38)

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, yes, absolutely. But it's also, it's less that we can do without plastics and more that we need to be treating plastics as precious rather than disposable. That's really my perspective. I think plastics have contributed to medical care, to food safety. Synthetic textiles are definitely a part of that. So while yes, I make choices that have to do with wearing fewer synthetic textiles and washing them differently or having like a, I forget the name, like a filter on a dryer or a washing machine, I also don't think individuals can be tasked with solving this problem. Like this is much bigger than being able to sort of make consumer decisions. It has to be like a multi-scalar, massive rethinking of how we live in the world as humans and of how we sort of treat something that is so accessible as plastics, definitely has positive impacts, but then also has these unfolding futures that we're not even sure about. So I think it's like a bigger perspective. But I will say I just find natural fibers to be more comfortable, less stinky and easier to wear.

Ashar (he/him) (30:30)

Yeah, well, yeah, that was very well said. Thank you. Just a couple more questions. What is next on the horizon for you? What exciting projects are you currently working on or that are coming up? We'd love to know if you want to share.

Kirsty (30:45)

Sure, so I'm finishing up a short book that is about these kinds of museum projects that imagine the museum outside of the museum, so something like Forge Project, but there are quite a few other examples. So that's coming along and should be done relatively soon. And then the center also is involved in a big project with the Synthetic Collective and some other people to think about the long-term lives of artworks. So what does it mean to think about artwork not as permanent but as something that will inevitably degrade and how can we think about that degradation as a part of the artwork?

So we are doing that in collaboration with something called the Sustainable Institution, which is in Europe. And we were all in residence at Le Mans-Arle in France. So that is probably hopefully gonna be done quite soon, but it'll have its own afterlives. It's like a project about art afterlives that will unfold over time. So those are the two big things that are going on.

Ashar (he/him) (32:03)

That sounds wonderful. Good luck with that. And my final question to you, and you know, it's something that really stuck with me while you were talking about these little changes in terms of curatorial practices, what you said about sort of invisible changes, I think that really stood out because, you know, if I know anything from being around you is that you are a silent leader in a lot of ways and definitely have inspired me to try to be more conscious of the research that I'm doing and how it impacts the world in general.

So in that vein, I wanted to ask you, do you have any advice or resources for young up and coming curators or museum professionals who want to work in a more sustainable and responsible way?

Kirsty (32:44)

Well, thank you, Ashar, and I admire the work that you are doing too. But I think, yeah, I'm just going to point to the center's resource guide because it is open and freely circulating. It's downloadable from the website, which is sustainablecurating.ca. There's a French version and an English version and it just has a brand new design that we released yesterday by Anahí González, is a student, PhD student in the visual arts department at Western, and it looks so nice. But the guide is meant to be for people who are just starting out. It's aimed at smaller scale museums and galleries. It has step-by-step instructions on how to do things. And if you're in Southwestern Ontario, it also has a list of resources where items can be sourced. So it's aimed at students at Western, but it also has this ability to work pretty much anywhere. So that's just an easy one and a nice plug for the center as well.

Ashar (he/him) (34:02)

Yeah, I completely agree. And I can vouch for that. It's a tremendous, very thorough resource. yeah, yeah. Yeah, I mean, that concludes the interview, all the questions that we wanted to ask you, Kirsty. This was absolutely wonderful. Thank you so much for taking the time. I mean, I know we only scratched the surface of what you're doing, but I think it'll be a really nice listen for all the viewers. And yeah, again, I just want to say I really, really appreciate all the work that you do. And yeah, I really look up to you and one day if I can be half the academic that you are, I think I will have lived a great life. So I just want to say that. And yeah, thank you so much for being here with us.

Kirsty (34:38)

Well, thank you Ashar and Amanda and Elysia for organizing this podcast.

Music (34:42)

Ashar Mobeen (he/him) (34:48)

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 (35:25)