

# Interview with Paola Antonelli\* (PA)

Interviewers\*\*

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

\* Interview accomplished in november 2016, MoMA-New York. Paola Antonelli is an author, editor and curator. She currently serves as Senior Curator of the Department of Architecture & Design as well as the Director of R&D (Research & Development) at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

\*\* Amanda Saba Ruggiero is architect, postdoctoral researcher enrolled at Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism - University of São Paulo, Brazil; Luis Michal is architect, currently enrolled in the Masters Program at Technische Universität München, Germany.

**(L)** You are trained as an architect but later joined MoMA as a curator in 1994 and have been doing exhibitions with a focus on design ever since. Could you briefly elaborate on how you came into the field of curating? Was it something you always wanted to do or was there even a specific starting point?

**(PA)** I studied architecture at the Politecnico de Milano, and in 1994 I came to MoMA. I never even thought about it. A difference between the United States and certain places like Italy is that in the United States, you know you want to become a curator. At least let's say if you're a journalist, you go to journalism school and then you write and you specialize. When you study in Italy and go to a school, let's say of art or architecture, or medicine, you take on different platforms related to the same discipline. So journalists tend to not be journalists by profession, but they have studied something and then they write about it, which makes for maybe worse prose but more depth of knowledge. When you do architecture in a place like Milan, at least at my time, many people were not working as architects. Sometimes they wouldn't be in architecture and design at all, but, in some cases like mine, they could become curators of architecture and design, or writers of architecture and design. There were many more opportunities, because at my time there were so many architecture and design magazines, and places where you could curate. I worked as an architect for six months and realized that it really was not for me. I started working at Domus, Abitare, and then started coming to the United States because of the Aspen Design Conference in 1989. After that, I landed a teaching position at UCLA. I was going back and forth between Italy and Los Angeles, I was freelance curating, writing on staff at Domus and Abitare, and I was teaching at that time, all these different platforms. Then I found an ad for my position at MoMA in a magazine. So I applied, and I got hired.

**(L)** The term of 'curating' and the profession of the curator has become relatively popular in recent years, not only in a professional but also an every-day context. What

do you think are the reasons for the increasing popularity of the term and what does it mean to you?

**(PA)** The first R&D-Salon (A/N: Research and Development) that I ever did was on the topic of curating. In that discussion there were very different people: Ann Tempkin, a curator; Maria Popova from Brain-Pickings (A/N: online journal); Jeff Jarvis who is a journalism school professor and is the one that started using this word of curating sources, online sources for journalism; and a musician. We all came down to two principles, the first that curators are trusted, they exist because of the barrage of information, data and choices possible to give advice. And secondly, curators need an audience. Without an audience, they are not curating, which is quite interesting. If you start from these viewpoints, then I am not offended when people overuse the term curating. I understand that it is about trying to make sense out of a multiplicity of ideas and creating a path for others. Fine, if somebody wants to curate a Spotify playlist, that is what the person is doing. I don't have a problem with that at all. Actually, it pushes traditional curators to become a little less holy and to get their hands dirty with more reality, which I think helps.

**(A)** What are your main competencies as a curator? What are your tools and methods? Where and how did you learn those?

**(PA)** It depends on where you are a curator, and who you work for. I work for a museum, so my competencies are to uphold the museum's mission through exhibitions, acquisitions, public speaking, organizing programs, and talking with the press. I am part of the museum which is an organism, and I am part of the organism that is facing out towards the world, and my exhibitions represent the museum. So my first allegiance is to the museum, but my second and maybe sometimes my first allegiance is to the public. I feel that my mission is not really educating in the traditional sense of the term, but rather it is to stimulate people's already existing critical tools. I deal with design, and in many cases I do not need or I don't wish to impart notions to the audience. In some cases, yes, I want them to have more information. But more than anything, I want them to become curious about objects in a different way, about what is behind an object and also what's in front of an object. I want people to see the depth of field that comes from an object and I want them to appreciate the fact that objects should be made for them. I believe that the most interesting objects are the ones that are for everybody. I find objects that are available to everyone much more valuable and harder to produce than objects that are for a few.

**(A)** Are there any particular shows or persons that have influenced your work as a curator?

**(PA)** One that has influenced me a lot is Bernard Rudofsky, even with the exhibition that I am working on right now (A/N: Items: Is Fashion Modern?). I respect him, but the funny thing is that when I started at Domus, I remember the first day I had to write the obituary for Bernard Rudofsky. It was the first article I wrote, so I started looking into his work. In a way, I am almost happy that I never met him in person, because I am sure that he was a difficult person, but a genius. He was always very critical, and his stands were always to question and not just to take things as they were. I started looking at his work and I found out about Architecture Without Architects, of course amazing.

And I found out that it took him almost ten years to make it happen, because all the big architects were against that show. But he really stuck to his ideas and in the end made it happen. And then I looked and also saw his exhibition *Are Clothes Modern?*, questioning the way we live and the way we dress. All of these exhibitions were very important for me.

As for others curators, Okwui Enwezor to me is a guarantee of a show that will remain in my memory. Because he is able to open new doors, I have tremendous respect for curators that treat territories that had not been treated before, because there is so much laziness sometimes in the world of art! You have a feeling that curators are all picking the same artists. And instead, there are some trail blazers like Okwui, the ones that open new fields, ever since his Documenta in 2002 which was the first time that people started seeing contemporary art from Africa and other parts of the world. These are curators that I respect very much.

One of the places that has influenced me the most is the Foundation Cartier, every time I do a show, there is a little hint of a show that I saw there. Even right now I am doing a show that is about fashion, and I keep thinking of the first Issey Miyake exhibition that I saw at the Foundation Cartier. It must have been twenty years ago, and it was designed by Tokojimo Shioka. It was amazing because the clothes moved and balanced, and jumped, and one of the biggest problems doing shows on fashion are mannequins that are corps-like, and they kill every fashion show. I go back to exhibitions like that too.

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

**(PA)** I find it very interesting, architecture and design are more rooted in reality and therefore harder to present. There is a litmus test, a reality check that makes it much harder to stick to an original idea, however marvelous that idea was. When I look at an object and see that the designer really sweated it- that there are blood and tears there to make it the object that he or she was thinking of and still work in the world- I am always moved by that. Then of course there are artists who think that way, there are artists that have changed the world, but I think designers start from a different platform, and architects too. Even when design or architecture are speculative, they still are about pushing the world forward.

**(L)** And in terms of presenting architecture and design in a gallery?

**(PA)** Well, the eternal problem with architecture, number one: it's much less immediate and entertaining for people, unless it is Archigram or Frank Lloyd Wright, or beautiful drawings. But otherwise people are not very trained to understanding architectural drawings. For design there are not too many risks besides the fact that you have to create another space. People are used to having design around in different settings, which could be the home, could be the street, or it could be a store. You have to do something different, so you have to be more conscious to the *Mis en Scène*. It's never just big paintings on the wall, it's about relationships, and about making sure people see things from a different viewpoint, for instance. I was thinking about *Machine Art*, which is a show from 1934 by Philip Johnson, where he took ball bearings, propeller blades,

coils and put them on white pedestals against white walls as if they were Brancusi sculptures. That kind of offsetting of displacement is important. Then of course design also comes in so many different scales and applications. You have digital design, interface design, and what I love about curating design is that you can really work with themes, and the themes can cut across all these different types of design. Those are the exhibitions that we have been doing about the collection for quite a long time. In a way, there is more authorship in shows of architecture and design, than in most art shows. Not all of them, but in architecture and design we tend to really appreciate doing thematic shows. I personally do not like doing monographic shows, I have done very few in my career. Instead I like to do thematic shows, and many art shows are monographic. It seems to be the default art show if you think about it. Okwui always tends to do shows that are thematic, maybe that's also why I really like his work.

**(A)** How do you choose your topics? Is there something you want to achieve with your exhibitions or a specific audience you want to address?

**(PA)** I always say ideas are worth a dollar. I have so many of lists of ideas, but it's the ones that you choose to develop into projects, and also the ones that you are able to fight for, because you get a lot of rejections. I get a lot of rejections and still have great shows in mind, ones that I see are being developed elsewhere on the planet, like one about food. I presented it ten years ago, and now everybody is doing shows about food. Or Design and Violence, they said no, and I decided to do it anyway because I thought it was too good of an idea. In some cases you just abandon the idea completely, but you see it realized elsewhere. Ideas are never completely original, they are in the air. If you don't do it, somebody else will, and that is quite alright. Sometimes I am not even that sorry, I am happy that I saw it and that they did it. As for audiences I want to reach, I love to reach audiences that are not your typical higher education white person from the Upper East Side. I really love it when there are artefacts that you can tell are relevant to people coming from different parts of the world, different parts of the city, and stimulate their curiosity.

**(L)** Could you elaborate on both projects which you think were very successful in that sense as well on projects that you even might consider as failed?

**(PA)** The times that I feel that I failed hard, those might not have seemed like failures on the outside, but they were failures for me because I didn't follow my instincts. I am thinking of an exhibition, a monographic show that you will not even find in my curriculum. It was a great show, it was beautiful, people loved it, but I hated it because it was not the kind of design that I believe in. I thought it was a wasted year of my life, but sometimes you have to do things that you don't like because they work well for the institution. And in terms of the successes, it's the opposite. It's where I took risks and they paid off because people also appreciated my risk taking. My favourite show was Design and the Elastic Mind from 2008. It was an exhibition that was about designers and scientists, and design and science coming together without the membrane of engineering and technology. It showed designers giving scientists the degree of freedom that scientific scrutinies usually denies them, and scientists giving especially speculative designers that are trying to imagine possible futures a little more of scientific grounding. It was really a great show, but I was afraid it would be a failure until two days before the opening, because it was so odd and

it was so unusual that I felt it could be completely rejected. But what is interesting is that that I did not shy away from making myself vulnerable as a curator in that instance. I basically told people this is a hypothesis that designers and scientists can work really well together without anybody in between, it might be totally wrong, it might be right, let's see. When you do that, sometimes people are very receptive and generous. „Let's see how it goes“, and they respond „Yeah, let's see how it goes together.“ It's fascinating.

**(L)** The context of your work as a curator is the Museum of Modern Art, an institution which was very influential in the development of the format of the architecture exhibition. In recent years the range of format of architecture and design exhibitions has been increasingly diversified into local Biennales, Triennales, architecture museums and galleries which often are very flexible and experimental in terms of format and methods. How do you think large institutions like the MoMA can keep relevant in such an environment?

**(PA)** It's a very good question, is MoMA still relevant? That's what I ask myself every day and that's also why I started the department of R&D, (A/N: Research and Development) which is not only about architecture and design, but is about the whole museum. I find that MoMA has such a big name that when you do a show here, you still have a better chance of people finding out about this show than in many other institutions. There are institutions that do a better job than we do, that have more interesting exhibitions and more interesting biennales, and I get humbled sometimes by exhibitions that I see or biennials that I see, and we all have a different role in the picture. MoMA is an institution with a capital eye, for good and for bad. When you do something here, it has an impact, and we better not waste our opportunities. That's why I am always so vehement when I feel that there's a good idea, that's why I didn't want to throw away Design and Violence for instance.

**(A)** Staying with MoMA what do you like about working within such an institution and what would you like to rather do in a different way?

**(PA)** Well, I like the power, I say it very openly and honestly. I feel that I have used it well so that's why I feel comfortable saying that. You can really help designers and artists here, you can really give them a lot of visibility- not only designers and artists, but also issues. I love what I was telling you about before, the fact that if you do something here, it has a big resonance. I also love many of my colleagues, not all, but most of the people that build exhibitions here are fantastic. What would I do differently? That's complicated because I wish we could have less bureaucracy and more transparency, but you know institutions are institutions, and they are always complicated.

**(L)** Talking about limitations and possibilities do you have any dream project you would like to realize one day?

**(PA)** Not really, they are all dream projects. I like limitations, because without limitations you cannot do a good job. Frankly, I am still a designer at heart. There are always so many ideas, and there is not one in particular, but there was an exhibition that I had proposed years ago called "Natural." It was about what organic design is today, and maybe one day I will be able to do it, and it's continuously evolving. When I proposed

it, there was not that much talk about artificial intelligence, which is now almost reality. I think organic design never changed, it has existed forever and it mutates in continuation, and I have been good at observing it evolving. So I would love to do that exhibition, at some point, but there is no rush.

**(A)** Is there any advice you would like to give to young people or professionals trying to become curators?

**(PA)** You're already doing the right thing. You always have to gain experience, even if that means to work for little money. And you always have to grab the opportunities when they come your way. So my only bit of advice is try not to have regrets, because they are completely useless and they only put you down. No regrets.