



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 4 (mid-June 2022)

KERRY GREENBERG - CURATOR

TATE 'S LIGHT AT ACMI

Tim Stackpool:

Kerryn, thanks for your time on the podcast.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Thank you, Tim. It's a pleasure to speak with you.

Tim Stackpool:

I actually want to talk about the exhibition shortly. But I just want to get your opinion on a couple of things first. I find of course, when you for instance, put together an exhibition for any particular gallery. And then you kind of consider, "Well, we might be able to tour this," or, "We might be able to share the expenses of this with other galleries around the world." And I kind of wonder whether that's always been the case, or whether we're seeing more and more of that perhaps this century?

Kerryn Greenberg:

Tim, I think touring exhibitions is not a new phenomenon, but there are several models which have been refined over the years and which are now in wide use. And there's a couple of different ways of touring. One is touring alone in exhibitions, and these tend to be exhibitions that are drawn from a very wide range of collections, typically, in as wide geographic locations. Those shows are most often monographic, blockbuster type of exhibitions that would be really too costly to organise on one's own.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So in those instances, one's usually sharing costs. And occasionally you'll find that the originating venue is charging a fee. There are also historic exhibitions that require significant research to realize where the extra resource of other organisations is extremely helpful. So in those instances, you might find a couple of different arts venues coming together to co-organise, sharing the kind of burden of both the logistics and the curatorial work. And while those kinds of exhibitions can attract a fee, they're typically realised as collaborations with that shared curatorial input.

Kerryn Greenberg:

What we are talking about today is a touring collection exhibition, which is an exhibition drawn from a single or a small number of collections. So V&A in London and the British Museum have been touring their collections internationally for quite a few years. Tate began touring collection exhibitions about 20 years ago. But this was initially on an ad hoc basis, so very much on instances of replying to inquiries that were made. And in fact, Australia was one of the first countries that Tate ever toured to. We organised a Pre-Raphaelite exhibition, which went to the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth in 2003.

Kerryn Greenberg:

But it's in the last sort of five to eight years really, that touring collection exhibitions has ramped up at Tate. And it's become much more strategic and professional. There are many advantages, I think, to touring exhibitions, as you indicated before. The sharing of collections and expertise more widely. But also critically of works that might otherwise be unavailable to the public. Either because a collection is so large and much of it is in storage at any one time, or sometimes because a museum is undergoing renovation or is closed.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So recent examples might be the Courtauld Gallery that toured highlights of its impressionist collection to Japan. Including really amazing masterpieces like Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* from 1882. And that was only possible because the Courtauld was closed and undergoing renovations. And it was a great opportunity to share those phenomenal works more widely. Because they're typically on permanent display in London. But also an opportunity to raise very much needed funds for their institution.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Touring offers opportunities to kind of forge new relationships and strategic partnerships in other parts of the world, and also to build profile for the lending organization and develop kind of new audiences, particularly in this era of kind of the internet and access being so much broader and wider. But it's something that's not really mentioned is the opportunity to develop curators experience, and to surface research that they might be doing that isn't possible to kind of surface at their own organisations.

Kerryn Greenberg:

And that's something that I really enjoyed about working on the *LIGHT* exhibition, is this opportunity to work in different parts of the world in completely different spaces, and with a much wider range of colleagues. And finally, as I alluded to earlier, the income generated from touring a collection exhibitions helps support the very significant costs involved in caring for collections of that kind of scale.

Tim Stackpool:

When it comes to those costs as well, just digressing a little bit more. The sharing of costs in terms of acquisitions as well, which goes across continents too. There's a bit more of that happening as well. Is this all tied up in the same sort of thing, or a completely different mindset?

Kerryn Greenberg:

I mean, I think it's slightly different. Although it's obviously being kind of prioritized because of the same factors. So I think the idea of jointly acquiring work is something that is relatively new. I mean, there were instances historically of works being transferred from one museum to another. So for example, probably the most well known is the relationship that MoMA had with the Metropolitan in New York. Where kind of MoMA was able to, well, the initial idea of Alfred Bar was to sell works that were older than 50 years to other museums. Reasoning that they would no longer be modern, and therefore they would be more appropriate to reside in historic kind of collections.

Kerryn Greenberg:

They quickly realized that was playing a losing hand and abandon that approach. And now of course it's one of the most important collections in the world. But the idea that, I suppose in a city like London, historically, the museums have sought to kind of cooperate in pursuing separate collecting spheres so that they weren't overlapping. Specifically because they were all considered national kind of collecting institutions. That's become much more blurred as more institutions have started to collect contemporary art.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And we see that in Australia as well. Because there's shared acquisitions between, for instance, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and Tate in the UK as well. It's not foreign to us. But of course, being in Australia, it works to our advantage in two ways. One is that we get to see the most incredible touring exhibitions that so much of the population wouldn't necessarily be exposed to. And then secondly, of course we gain some ownership into some pieces that we couldn't possibly have the opportunity to own outright.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Yeah. I mean, I think you're right. The MCA relationship that Tate has, was born out of Tate engaging in Australia. Firstly, through collection exhibitions that toured there. Then through kind of an interest in collecting art from Australia. And slowly the kind of conversations develop and relationships deepen with colleagues in those countries. And then, can share the concerns and start to think about how we can collaborate and find opportunities. So that relationship which was supported by Qantas was very unique, I think, and very special. And enabled both MCA and Tate to acquire some extremely significant works. I wouldn't say it's typical. I think it is a fairly unique model. Particularly because of the huge geographical distance between the two collecting institutions. I think in the states, you'll see that happen more often, where actually transferring the works between the institutions is easier within one kind of country.

Kerryn Greenberg:

What I would say is more typical is jointly acquiring complex video installations. Where there's very little to store, very little to ship, and where the purchase price can be quite significant. So for example, I worked on a major acquisition of William Kentridge's work. *I Am Not Me, the Horse is Not Mine*, which was gifted jointly to the Israel Museum and Tate, back in 2011. And at that point we were very much kind of grappling with, well, what does the contract look like? Who gets to show the work when? These kinds of questions. Actually, who keeps the material, who's responsible for archiving it and transferring it as technology changes and so on.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So it opens up lots of complex questions, legal questions, as well as practical and curatorial questions. But it does make a lot of sense to share resources, particularly in the era of the climate emergency. And especially right now where resources are extremely stretched and all museums are kind of struggling with funding, and after a couple of years of not being able to generate much income. So I think we can expect to see much more collaborative working.

Tim Stackpool:

Which is great. And in terms of that as well, when you are thinking about perhaps sharing or touring an exhibition like *LIGHT* at ACMI, what do you have to consider as the originating curator, when you see other venues pitching or you pitch to other venues, other galleries. In order for them to actually take your exhibition?

Kerryn Greenberg:

It's a good question, Tim. And I think it's really important to do a site visit and to understand the space as well as its capacity. So questions around, are they able to care for the works? Is the climate conditions appropriate? Is there security? But more than that, I think it's understanding your partners commitment to building and serving audiences. So understanding, well, how do they function within the ecosystem? Are they the right partner for that particular show? Because there might be somebody more appropriate in that city, for example.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So it's not only kind of their ability to physically take the show. It's more about kind of the rapport in the sense that they can do something interesting with the materials and also the quality of the exhibition space. You know, how's this going to feel for an audience within that particular environment? So touring enables one to work in kind of a wide range of places that might otherwise not be possible. So I'm thinking about kind of India and South Africa, where there might not be the infrastructures that you would normally expect. And where loan requests from those institutions might not kind of galvanize or get approved, in a major institution like Tate.

Kerryn Greenberg:

But when it comes to touring a collection exhibition, you're able to offer a whole lot more support than you would otherwise with a single loan, for example. So Tate would organize creating the transportation arrangements, the insurance. We would send a courier or couriers if necessary. There would be the curatorial support. There would be support with interpretation materials. So enables you to work with perhaps smaller institutions that don't have that big compliment of staff.

Kerryn Greenberg:

But also in context where perhaps there's the financial resources, but there are other factors at play. Yeah. So, I mean, I think it's quite exciting to be able to work in that way. Because it means that it's a much wider pool of partners. Whereas the loan entering exhibitions, you tend to kind of find MoMA, The Met, The Whitney, Tate, kind of Pompidou or partnering together, repeatedly. I mean, that's starting to change as well. But that's historically kind of been the way that it has worked. Where organizations of the same scale with similar types of resources behind them have kind of come together to work collaboratively. Whereas I think now we're starting to see that fragmented bit and much more diversified. So that a big institution like TATE, can work with a much smaller or even a private organization somewhere else in the world.

Tim Stackpool:

All right. Let's get back to this exhibition, we're talking about LIGHT. And given your experience, when it comes to curating a project such as this, where does it start for you? I mean, this subject is so broad. I mean, how does your approach kind of change when it comes to the content? Oh, I was thinking just today. I mean, do you have a Rolodex catalogue of what you have available to you when you're flipping through it and thinking how you can construct this? Is it that simple? Or is it far more complicated?

Kerryn Greenberg:

Yes and no. I mean, so Tate's collection comprises over 77,000 works. It is well catalogued, so it's relatively easy to search. So I was at Tate for 14 years. And during that period of time, you become very familiar with the collection and you begin to actually understand how it's history has kind of made it what it is. But also, you start to quickly realize that although it's a huge collection, there are very particular works that are increasingly kind of being requested or kind of in demand works. And those are the ones that are usually wanted for permanent or semi-permanent display at one of our own venues. And because of that exposure and they're well known and loved by local audiences. But also typically are well known in the international sphere. And those tend to be the works that are requested for loan out.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So you're kind of chasing after the same things oftentimes. Which means that one has to kind of come up with a curatorial idea that is very robust to convince colleagues that actually they should relinquish those works to you for tour. So it's an interesting balance really. On the one hand, it being kind of limited to the works that are in the collection. But on the other hand, there are a lots of them and you kind of got to navigate your way through quite a complex set of requirements.

Kerryn Greenberg:

For an exhibition like this. We set on the idea of Light, because of course Tate's collection is very, well JMW Turner is very extensively represented within Tate's collection. And he's perhaps the best loved English romantic artist, and is known as the painter of light. So on both counts, it made sense to begin with Turner for this particular show. And it's brought, conceived as a broadly chronological survey of how artists have used light as subject in the media since the 19th century. So it is very broad, but by starting with Turner, we kind of narrowed it down immediately.

Kerryn Greenberg:

I wanted to create a broadly chronological show that explored how artists have used light in so many different ways, that wasn't kind of pedestrian that moved through the different art kind of periods from

the Western perspective, it was slightly more complicated than that. So began to think about, well actually, how do we start punctuating that history in ways that can be productive and take us in different directions?

Kerryn Greenberg:

And so you start to kind of see unexpected juxtaposition. I tend to create curate intuitively and visually, and it's always informed by art history. But that's not kind of the starting point for me. So started to kind of look at well, what are all the works in Tate's collection that deal with the theme of light? And then, how do these relate to each other? Where are the synergies, where are the divergences?

Kerryn Greenberg:

And intuitively I felt for example, that there was a connection between Bridget Riley and Lis Rhodes. Bridget Riley, of course, known for distinctive paintings, which engage the viewer's sensations and perceptions through her simple vocabulary of color and abstract shapes. And Lis Rhodes being a feminist filmmaker whose iconic expanded cinema work, like music, creates more central and participatory role for the viewer within this very dynamic, immersive environment.

Kerryn Greenberg:

And then I stumbled across this lovely quote, which talks about the sound and vision of "Lis Rhodes' light music intimately connected to the op art patterns, readers audio. And the images zip and sizzle on the screen like cinematic Bridget Riley". And then you start think, okay, well this intuitive connection that I've made between these two artists, it's not just me who's seeing that. Somebody else has already kind of made these connections. And I think that's what's quite exciting about curating like that. Is you're able to surface things that perhaps aren't straight art history. But where there is something kind of visual or aesthetic. That links different practices.

Tim Stackpool:

Now Light has been touring prior to arriving at ACMI. Do these shows evolve over time? Do you make changes depending on where they're going? Or are there practical needs that cause you to change an exhibition while it's touring?

Kerryn Greenberg:

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. So the exhibition was originally conceived for the Museum of Art Pudong in Shanghai as one of their Nogal exhibitions for their opening in July last year. And they had a huge space. And they had a very particular idea as to what kind of works they wanted to present. They wanted a lot of historical kind of paintings. And so that was kind of the brief. And at that point we didn't know when, where, or how the exhibition might tour beyond Shanghai. I was really focused on making an exhibition for them.

Kerryn Greenberg:

And so by necessity and design as well later on, absolutely the exhibition needed to change. So for starters, there were very few institutions that could have presented it on the scale that it was at in Shanghai. Which is, they also, they wanted, as I mentioned before, a large number of historic paintings, particularly works by the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Who you may well know, kind of have these really detailed, intensely colourful kind of complex compositions. Yeah. That recall that are 15th century Italian art.

Tim Stackpool:

Just beautiful, just beautiful. Yeah.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Absolutely stunning. But those works are in huge demand and usually on permanent display at Tate Britain. But for Shanghai, we were quite fortunate in that Tate Britain was planning a major collection rehang, which freed up those works temporarily. So they could be included in the presentation in Shanghai. And then because of ACMI's focus on the moving image, we really wanted to give more space to the contemporary works. And that's what we've done.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So I believe all touring exhibitions need to adjust to meet the needs of the host organisations and their audiences. And there's lots of different ways of doing that. It might be through the interpretation, it might be minimally altering the checklist. It might be changing the emphasis of the exhibition or altering the layout. And not all lending organizations approach touring in that way. I mean, some send absolutely everything with the exhibition, from a ready-made catalogue to the interpretation panels.

Kerryn Greenberg:

But, I think it's important to understand that you're working in a different context and to embrace that. And also, your colleagues who know the space, who know the audience, who know the program that this sits within. Are well advised to collaborate and find what's going to work for them. And I think as the lending organization, it's encumbered upon you to be responsive to those ideas. So, in the case of ACMI, the idea of the exhibition remains intact, but the space kind of did demand a number of changes. Kind of a key one is moving light music by Lis Rhodes, which I mentioned earlier, into its own space in gallery three. So it's given a lot of kind of prominence. They also commissioned a new work by Australian artist Mikala Dwyer, which will compliment the light exhibition. And that I'm very pleased about. With the historic exhibition drawn from a British collection, it is heavily male. So to be able to counterbalance that I think was important. And also to have a local artist is a nice addition.

Tim Stackpool:

It is good. Mikala's one of my faves as well, but you're right. And the other thing is too, on that note, is of course that the perspective of the audience is given consideration. Because there's nothing worse than stepping into a gallery and then thinking, well, sometimes it's tough enough to relate to contemporary art or art in general. But then sort of feeling completely alienated because there's no connection being able to made locally. It does leave you floundering.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Absolutely I think you're right. And when the ACMI team proposed supplementing the interpretation for the exhibition to make more connections to the history of the moving image. And they had some really interesting ways of doing that. Tate was absolutely amenable and very excited to support that in any way that we could. So I think it is important that exhibitions are relatable to local audiences. Even if the content is completely foreign, and in fact probably more so in those instances.

Tim Stackpool:

The other thing I wanted to ask you about. And you talked about how you received some reassurance going through and determining the content and how connections were to be made between the various aspects of the exhibition. But was anything uncovered to you that you thought was quite unexpected, which took you by surprise?

Kerryn Greenberg:

I mean, I think it's probably worth saying that I'm a modern and contemporary African arts specialist. But at Tate, all curators are expected to be generalists. So, for me personally, it was a wonderful opportunity to dive deep into the collection. Tate's collection of British arts spans 1500 to the present

and international art 1900 to the present. In my time at Tate, I've worked much more with the international collection, modern and contemporary collection than I ever did the British historic collection. So it was great fun looking at some of the really incredible historic works in the British collection. Which of course I knew about and had, had studied at school and at university, but hadn't ever had a chance to work closely with. So that was exciting to start to really look at Turner's paintings, for example. And start to think, well, okay, he's known as the painter of light, but which paintings of his exemplify that in the most interesting ways? And how do we then connect that with more contemporary practice?

Kerryn Greenberg:

So I had lots of fun looking at Turner's lecture diagrams from the early 1800s, which he made to illustrate how to represent the reflection and refraction of light, for example. And he made those lecture diagrams to illustrate that to his students at the Royal Academy. Those are not so well-known, but actually look really contemporary. And then when you put works like that into dialogue with something like Lilian Elaine's *Liquid Reflections* from 1968, you see that actually two artists approaching the same ideas from very different kind of historic moments in completely different media.

Kerryn Greenberg:

So playing with the idea of, how does light and art and science all kind of intersect to create something new. Those kinds of connections for me were exciting to kind of draw out. Because it was a history that I was much more familiar with, with one that I was less familiar with. And I hope that audiences will have that same kind of revelation, I suppose.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And a tremendous amount of detail there. Are we talking about your preparation from start through to delivery? Are we talking 18 months here? Are we talking two years here?

Kerryn Greenberg:

So I worked with a curatorial assistant Matthew Watts, he was actually from Australia, but based in London. And the two of us worked really intensively for the best part of 18 months. So yeah, I mean, obviously we were doing other things as well. A huge amount of research went into the show and then of course there's the catalogue. And we were also supporting the museum of Art Pudong in getting ready to receive and deliver a show, which was obviously their first show. So I mean, these things don't come together quickly. Even, when they are all drawn from one collection.

Tim Stackpool:

I always just think the intensity of the work that curators such as you, especially when dealing with international collections, there's an intensity there. I mean, there's a preoccupation almost. You're constantly distracted. People say, what time do you start work in the morning? And it's as soon as you open your eyes pretty much.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Yeah. I mean, I always said curating, isn't a profession, it's a lifestyle. It isn't something that switches off at 5:00 PM and you walk out the door. I do wake up in the middle of the night and I think, oh, that amazing work that I hadn't thought about, that could work extremely well in this space. So what about this venue for that exhibition? So definitely is a life choice. But such a rewarding profession to be involved in. And such an honour to work with artists and be able to kind of share what one learns along the way with a wide range of people.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I love how you can walk into an exhibition and then there's the surface layer, which is what you presented. And then there's a deeper layer of trying to understand and trying to relate to how the curator has put this together, how it has been presented this way. And especially in terms of an exhibition like Light, there's the foundation that you put in place. And then the local curatorial team at ACMI, then making it work in their space as well, in collaboration with you. Sometimes I think the artistic process is not just what's on the walls, but how you have actually come to this point. How you as curators have come to this point. And I think that's a work of art in a way in itself.

Kerryn Greenberg:

I mean, I think curating is definitely a creative endeavour. I mean, there are some curators out there who will draft a checklist and not think at all about a visitor's journey through the space. And they'll hand over the checklist to an exhibition designer who will then do the creative work of thinking about, how does our visitor move through the space? What do they see? What are the works that are hanging next to each other? Or which work proceeds or follows the next. I'm not one of those curators. And there's not that many that I know who takes such a distance from the finished product. And who approach it from a much more art historical kind of theoretical position.

Kerryn Greenberg:

For me, that's like writing a book. I am really interested in what does it mean to be in space with art? What does it mean to be physically present, looking at something closely? That's why I'll always advocate for physical exhibitions rather than for virtual experiences. Even though those two have a place, they're supplementary rather than kind of taking the place of the physical experience of viewing art and space, which I think you're right, is a creative practice.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, Kerryn, look, it's tremendous from what I've seen light coming together, you've done a terrific job. We're so privileged, I think, to actually have it come to Australia. And we thank the folks at ACMI as well for making it available to us in Melbourne. I really appreciate your time on the podcast. I know you have so much else that's going on, and thank you again.

Kerryn Greenberg:

Thank you, Tim.