

## SFMOMA: Fionn Meade Responds to *Predictive Engineering*

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### Speaker

Fionn Meade, Artistic Director at the Walker Art Center

00:00:03:20 FIONN MEADE: Good morning. I'm Fionn Meade. I'm the artistic director of the Walker, and I'm going to— First of all, I want to thank Jill and I want to thank Robin and Rudolf, and in particular, Julia, for inviting me to kind of take part in the colloquium, and also, really an ongoing conversation around what this interdisciplinary emphasis can mean. And I say that because it is actually something that requires extra time for institutions to really take on, because the inter in interdisciplinary is a sort of— It's a space, if you will, rather than a medium. Not everything that we do, even if it's experimental, would fall into the interdisciplinary. The space of the interdisciplinary is one where you have a kind of alongside conversation, based in different registers of expertise, training. And the interdisciplinary happens collaboratively, by definition, because it actually requires, in some ways, expertise from different vantage points. So I think the Artist Initiative is one of these projects that's really allowing, in this case, SFMOMA to slow down and enter and occupy with more time, the interdisciplinary register.

00:01:20:20 And so I want to talk a little bit about that, because I think it really speaks to what Julia was mentioning last night, durational aesthetics, and why, in some ways, this project is exemplary, in terms of the need to go back in order to move forward. What does that mean? And why would that also potentially even have some implications for art history, which I'm glad that Gloria, and I'm sure Pip as well, are bringing into the discussion.

00:01:48:09 So I'm going to talk about some of the research that I'm engaged with right now. And I think it will, in an alongside way with Julia's work *Predictive Engineering*, I hope provides some provocations and questions. On that note, I think one of the anxieties that Gloria really brought us through quite brilliantly, I think, is that there is an anxiety of absorption and atomization. The diffusion of new art, new media. Or if we go back and we say, what was the absorption moment of Conceptual art? When did that happen and what role did the museum play in it? What was the absorption point for, in many ways, you could say participatory aesthetics? What was the absorption MEADE (Cont.): point for social sculpture? And today one could ask what's, in particular, the social— or the absorption point for performance, live art? And in this case, we could also say multi-channel, multi-screen work, that at some point in the nineties, really was predominant and is no longer. And in many ways, one could say, is difficulty even host or present for many a museum? And they're not necessarily doing the work together; we'll do that in the future. And I bring that up because these absorption points are all interrelated, because they actually— It's a sort of dormant question in the organism of the museum, is if you can trace certain absorption points around collecting and acquisition, you can, if you connect them, revive the question. You can create a recombinatory possibility for not just the presentation of the work, but also for the art historical imperative, one could say. Probably the trickiest of it. But certainly, you can bring a kind of new conservation expertise.

00:03:44:20 But that has to be something where you're not just speaking of new media art or post-internet art or performance or multi-channel cinematic space, or for that matter, black box versus white box versus gray gallery, which is the trend of the moment that most people are talking about. Every museum needs a gray gallery. [laughter] So what really matters is that you actually are able to intertwine the discourses of

absorption, so that you can in some ways, perhaps, create a kind of agent of reanimation and recombinatory aesthetics that I think is very important for what we're talking about today. Again, I'm not talking about all art, but perhaps more art than we think is related to this. So I'm going to jump through this. Uh-oh. This is my non-PC experience. Do I just— [inaudible voices] Okay. I don't think the projector [inaudible].

WOMAN: Someone's coming.

WOMAN: There we go.

00:04:49:20 MEADE: Ah, there we go. So I thought in order to go forward, maybe going back is helpful. So I'm going to talk a little bit about some of the research I'm working on, and start off with maybe the more— a bit of an optimistic, I would say, view from praxis. In this case, the praxis of Merce Cunningham and John Cage. This quote from John Cage, "Time is what we and sounds MEADE (Cont.): happen in. Whether early or late, it is not a question of counting." Merce Cunningham, "Common time is a shared history that reflects to me a change or enlargement of the underlying principle that music and dance and art could be separate entities, independent and interdependent, sharing a common time. There is a continuing flexibility in the arts. We are involved in a process of work and activity, not in a series of finished objects." And I think that last phrase, "not in a series of finished objects," is very key, because that's— Again, not all work. But that is the interdisciplinary challenge, in a sense, is to see it as an activity, and not working with a series of finished objects. This notion of an evolving art history that I think Gloria mentioned—or maybe Robin mentioned—that Pip ended on. What does it mean to have that, activity with not a series of finished objects, as one of the perhaps imperatives of the museum, the contemporary museum, the twenty-first century museum?

00:06:16:20 And to sort of flip that—this would be the positive vantage point—maybe it takes praxis and takes an understanding of collaborative practice, and expertise and technique. I would say— This is a quote from Hito Steyerl that probably some of you are familiar with. And this gets to the audience question, which is the other side of the museum experience. "Now to look is to labor. In circulating through the museum space, spectators are actively montaging, zapping, combining fragments, effectively co-curating the show." So accelerated, distracted, their own editors. And in many ways, certainly not, in a sense, often, receiving the full work. This is certainly a big issue with moving image and/or multi-channel media-based work. This actually, this kind of distracted acceleration of the viewer in the museum space, is creating a kind of a point of— A breakdown point, if you could call it, where the black box doesn't really work anymore, because people aren't going to spend forty minutes in the black box watching the work. But then again, the flat screen is really kind of a footnoted version of showing historical work, which actually, we all do very often. And in this case, you have a kind of— More so, you have a viewer that is actually often taking their own edited version of the show as they go through. Perhaps as they're— that they may enjoy most about museum space. Maybe that's the most public aspect for audiences at the moment.

00:07:59:13 And I say that because here's an example of a piece that probably saw, or at least talked about, Maria Hassabi's *PLASTIC*, in the atrium at the Museum of Modern Art. Maria's MEADE (Cont.): practice is based in duration. It's a ten-hour performance over the museum's hours. And it's a very, very slow, still choreography, done with a group of performers. And in many ways, it actually, I found, in a very interesting way, surfaced this exact issue. Because what actually happened—not so much at the Stedelijk, by the way, at the entry where she did the work; not in the stairwell at the Hammer, where she did the work; but in the atrium, the kind of panopticon sort of space of the atrium at MoMA—what really happened, in a fascinating way, was perhaps relative to our time. Which is to say, the viewers became, in many ways— perhaps usurped the piece itself, to a degree. And that literally, it became watching the viewer watch the work, or watching watching watching. So

this notion of to look is to labor that Hito Steyerl talks about, well, there's a refracted kind of reality of how looking and spectatorship, whereas Duchamp calls it the onlooker, is shifting at this moment in time. And it has to do with, I really think, this absorption point with, in many ways, one could say, a desire for real time, duration, live art, and performance. These things are interconnected. They're not separate in this discussion. That there's a kind of— Because what Maria's doing is bringing real time to a almost standstill, really close to it. And what surfaces is the accelerated editing, montaging viewer. So the public space problem that we're all in, in a way, or the public space itch, if you will, is brought to the fore by an embodied slowness of presence, real time. Or in Julia's case, I mean, we're talking about an incredible concatenation of time over three versions of the work in *Predictive Engineering*, beautifully titled, in many ways, too, in terms of what I'm talking about.

00:10:25:22 And lastly—I'm going to make sure I don't go too long—is I want to talk about what this means; why you have to go back in order to ask these questions now. Some really simple examples that I've been thinking about: Robert Rauschenberg makes his first Combine, right? Combine. One of the biggest terms of postwar art; certainly, postwar American art. Not painting, not sculpture, but something in between, something inter, a Combine. Well, the Combine, the first one is made for the premier of this piece *Minutiae*, by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, three weeks before his first solo show in New York, at the [Charles] Egan Gallery, where he shows *Charlene* and a number of other Combines. And when Cunningham and Cage invited him, Cunningham said, "I want you to make something that we can pass through, maybe huddle behind, and that's all. That's all you need to know." So he makes his first Combine, in a way, because of the MEADE (Cont.): theatrical space. The stage space was the invitation. So when you see the first Combine, you're seeing a displaced theatricality, that then goes on to impact his work quite remarkably. And he becomes the art director that same year, of the company. And this is the quote that Cunningham used. He says, "So there were now three elements: the movement, the sound, and a visual action." And I think that visual action is really interesting. As with Cunningham, always very, very precise and very clear.

00:11:57:09 And what I bring up is then '64, ten years later, Rauschenberg makes his final Combine, right? And he makes it for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, onstage in London. And we can see it on the right, this piece *Story*. And that was actually during a world tour of the company, where they went to eighteen countries, thirty-four cities, and presented *Story* in each one. And *Story* was a piece that was three years old, at that point; was where Rauschenberg would make a new Combine every night, based on flea market, junk shops, backstage material, whatever he could find in different cities. And he would make it and then he would just leave it. And then he would make the next one in the next city. So the last Combine is made in '64, and kept, in London, because it's the end of the tour, if you will. And that story, which I just briefly rehearsed, '54 to '64, the displaced theatricality of the stage making the Combine possible, is not even a written story in our art history today. It's not even talked about. So if we have issues like that, if we can't go back and talk about these kinds of moments, in the sense of the inter, how can we do a good job of inviting people to do interdisciplinary work today?

00:13:14:22 So when does the praxis orientation of the museum—not for every project, but by degree, by percentage; and that's, I think, what the Artist Initiative is doing beautifully—how does the praxis become actually the responsibility of the artist, the conservator, the art historian, the museum, and the curator? And this is, I think, very important, to be able to go back in order to invite, to have the right invitational register. And I think Cunningham and Cage's notion of a common time, this is like autonomy within collaboration. It's a radical concept that I think actually still informs a lot of the debates even that Gloria was running through, which are very much of our moment. And I think I'm— Am I kind of at my time, or ish?

WOMAN: Getting there, yeah.

00:14:05:20 MEADE: So what I wanted to talk just briefly about was, in this regard, what creates that attitude, that interspace, that along-sided aesthetic? And this is an example from the same tour of David Tudor and John Cage performing at the Moderna Museet, in what was called Five New York Evenings. Probably, maybe art historians are aware of this more so than audiences or artists. But what this was is Cage and Cunningham, when they created this notion of an event structure, they did so in 1964. And it was a recombinatory collage principle, based on their own work. So knowing that they were working on evening-length work—or, you know, sometimes thirty- to forty-five minute work—that had real demands—technological demands, demands from all the collaborative artists that needed the right kind of production and hosting presentation; knowing that they were making work that was very precise like that, they also made up a different assemblage-collage principle, so that they could perform in the museum space, they could perform in public space, they could perform in a basketball gymnasium, or in the street, or the Piazza San Marco in Venice. And that is this event structure, which actually, when you go through this, Five New York Evenings, is directly the precursor to Experiments in Art and Technology and the space that opened up, in many ways, in the four- to five-year period afterwards. This is also very, very influential on Judson, because Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, they all danced in the company around this period, and were looking at this notion of a refracted space that wasn't the work itself, but allowed for this inter kind of, if you will, symptomatic relationship.

00:15:59:17 And lastly, maybe I'll just talk about this, is another kind of embedded, in this case much more directly related to Julia's work, embedded kind of story that is also very fascinating, and we're working on within this exhibition, is Stan VanDerBeek, along with Nam June Paik, in 1965, worked with all of this different material that included early computer animations, slides, film, broadcast—all the kinds of things that we think of when we think of VanDerBeek— He brought them all to bear on a piece called *Variations V*, done at Lincoln Center, where the dancers had sensors in the company for the piece. And when they would cross different—in a way, the map of the stage, it would trigger either the sound or the visual, and also thereby, the movement itself; it would recombine. And the footage that VanDerBeek used, along with Nam June Paik, became in MEADE (Cont.): many ways— It actually, literally, was the footage that then became his *Movie Mural* and his *Panels for the Walls of the World* work. In other words, again, a sort of relationship that readily shows you the interspace and the intentionality of interdisciplinarity is not in the history books. It's not in the discussion that actually allows us to work differently with living artists today. And I think that's really key for these projects that want to take on the interdisciplinary, is being able to go backward, in order to go forward is key. You can't simply move forward. Experimentation is not simply moving forward. Experimentation is actually creating recombinant aesthetics, whether that's art history or artistic practice, or even conservation. So I'll end on that. [applause]

00:18:03:08 [END]