

## SFMOMA: Gloria Sutton Responds to *Predictive Engineering* Friday, September 16, 2017

### Speaker

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00:00:03:12 GLORIA SUTTON: Good morning. I'm going to reiterate two things that Jill said. It is very bright up here. [she laughs] And also, it has been a tremendous luxury to be able to pull the ripcord of a parachute, basically, come down from Boston, and spend this tremendous amount of time focusing on an extraordinary work, but also, as Rudolf just mentioned, a practice. And so my comments today. First, I'd like to start by thanking Robin Clark and the Artist Initiative for organizing this. And this is clearly the result of a concerted effort by the entire team there.

00:00:32:14 As a scholar of experimental media art practices, my comments this morning will focus on both the process of production, as well as the models of reception within Scher's *Predictive Engineering*, and ask what methods for conservation and preservation are endemic to the work itself. That's the question I want to ask is, what does the work demand? What does the work need? Last night, Scher evoked the notion of a synthetic methodology, in terms of durational aesthetics, referencing not only the theory, but also the music of the late eighties, which I thought was fabulous. And this morning, I want to start with critic Susan Sontag's assertion from an even earlier moment in 1966. And you'll hear me use the word Scher, because prior to getting here yesterday, I had never met Julia Scher. So part of what I think is interesting about the setup today, too, is to really think about this as a kind of outside point of conversation.

00:01:21:12 Public discourse within a museum context has historically been vital to the institutionalization of emergent media. My first book, *The Experience Machine*, drew on primary research on new media, what was then called expanded cinema in the 1960s, generated from artist panels and forums, very much like the one we're watching today and taking part of. Moreover, the colloquium is a marked shift from a trend within art institutions that I have noticed—I mean, kind of in a negative manner—in which we've seen an economic and ethical shift, where artists are now SUTTON (Cont.): expected to donate work for auctions, serve on boards, ask their galleries to underwrite catalogs, and otherwise support the business of the museum. The fact that SFMOMA is doubling down, supporting the critical discourse and becoming a producer of *Predictive Engineering's* newest iteration is a radical step. And I think this is reflective of an earlier moment, specifically with West Coast organizations attempting to build new institutional models for the collecting, preservation, and circulation of media art, during the seventies and eighties. Here, I'm thinking about the Bay Area Video Coalition; I'm thinking about Long Beach Museum of Art, it's own collection now being archived at the Getty Research Institute. And this was a moment when not-for-profits were imagined as less as repository for cultural patrimony, and more as a site of cultural production, triangulating the dichotomous relationship that is constantly drawn between the market and the academy, as engaging in what at a previous moment, we would've called the public sphere or the civic arena.

00:02:51:17 My comments today stem from my current book project, *Pattern Recognition: The Durational Conditions of Contemporary Art*, which examines moments when the processes of standardization, modularization, and the clustering effects of digital culture, which have come to condition viewers'

expectations for media art, are treated not as neutral image technologies, but as powerful social markers of gender and race. And it offers a critique of the term post-internet art, which is, I think, problematically come to define media art produced since the 1990s. And this was a period when the descriptors participatory and interactive, which were initially associated with film, video installation, and performance proliferated. A watershed marker can be found in Rudolf Frieling's exhibition *The Art of Participation*, done here in SFMOMA. And this was a crucial marker for all of us in the field, and it's a constant resource that I teach from.

00:03:44:00 Almost a decade later, after this key exhibition, the inclusion of these terms have become a regulative norm, capaciously attributed to almost all forms of visual art, including painting and sculpture—so don't ask me how painting can be interactive, but that could be a longer discussion—but without providing a sustained and critical examination of such practices. Drawing on art historian Kobena Mercer's cogent arguments about the dehistoricized way we often see the current visibility or invisibility given to artists of color, my study outlines the stakes of such SUTTON (Cont.): practices, why they matter, as Mercer states, quote, "aesthetically, as well as politically," and how they alter our understanding of what art actively does, as it enters into the circulatory network of public life. Ultimately, I argue in the book that the internet is not a technology, but a cultural form. And again, this goes back to my wonderful Marxist ideas around Raymond Williams, so I was really happy to see that evoked last night. But a cultural form subject to the same types of racial, gender, and class disparities that undergrade all mechanisms that produce and circulate visual art. It offers an interpretive model, not only addressing the recent rise of so-called post-internet art, but also outlines a historical pattern by which ethnicity and gender are erased, in pursuit of a formalist universalism. It attempts to make visible patterns of repetition and difference in which the development of postwar internet art coincided historically with the turn toward dialogism during the 1990s. And we see this with Scher's *Predictive Engineering*, that uses the rhetorical strategies of authorial language, that she also performed for us last night, in text and voiceover that tells us, specifically in the piece on the seventh floor, quote, "Do not leave until the cameras have completely absorbed you."

00:05:30:09 Today in 2016, in its third iteration at SFMOMA, *Predictive Engineering* addresses us as what Scher calls us on the seventh floor, consciousness handler and technicians. The work before us then is to move beyond the novelty, right, of collecting, displaying, and preserving emerging media, and to advance the critical work of problematizing the technological determinism that have informed its initial reception, I would argue.

00:05:59:09 My response today is also informed by my previous life as a member of the board of directors at Rhizome, from 1998 to 2003. Rhizome established a toehold for network-based art practices and helped to foster what can now be thought of as the first wave of critical discourse on network culture. It is through Rhizome's first message boards and connections with *The Thing* and *Adaweb* that I first encountered Scher's work, and *Predictive Engineering*, in particular. And now again, for those in the audience, I have to remind you this is a moment before the ubiquity of Google, right?, when searching the web meant browsing top-down text directories and image search did not readily exist. Neither did the term social media. So again, that moment in the video that we SUTTON (Cont.): just saw that Martina showed us, about the historical specificity of what types of media and technology were, I think that context is crucial.

00:06:48:00 This is also a moment when community referred to a public broadcast audience model, which was not just a metaphor for Rhizome's membership, but offered a type of operational ethic, with the decided purpose of bridging new media and contemporary art. It is between these two fields that I argue *Predictive Engineering* continues to operate. As an art historian, my role is to point to the myriad ways that new media art reflected the contestation and pluralism of an earlier moment in video that drew upon its strategies of

anonymity, appropriation, and collective action. Of paramount importance then, as well as now, is art's insistence in making the distribution and circulation of ideology visible, an ethos imparted by Scher's work here at SFMOMA.

00:07:33:22      Also as a historian of new media and contemporary art, I'm often asked at places like this, what is the relevance of art history's methodologies to subjects that are inherently tethered to the new and to the now? I assert that contemporary art historians do not occupy a position of remove or privilege. And this is one of the things when we're in conferences with only art historians, that I'm put on the defense about. Part of it is that our subjects are still alive, breathing, making decisions, changing their minds, having dinner, influencing the way that we receive the work. Instead, we are absolutely complicit with the editors, critics, archivists, researchers, dealers, conservationists, curators, and especially the artists themselves, who generate the primary source material and the interpretive network that coalesce into the historical record.

00:08:20:00      So again, I want to just kind of flash back to an earlier moment when these debates were also happening. So in addition to Rudolf's exhibition, I think one of these kinds of volumes, this idea of *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, edited by Christiane Paul— So this is one of the issues that happens when we think about the glacial way that academics and glacial time— So if the curatorial and museum world works on a very fast turnover space, our space is very glacial. I'm thinking about how discourse catches up or works with this. So these are all debates that were happening pretty much online via email, but then get codified into publications that come out years and years later, right? So it's very interesting to see debates that happen online then come into print.

SUTTON (Cont.): And so thinking about the temporal delay of debate. So we have that book, and then also *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*, that comes out from MIT Press two years later.

00:09:11:09      So for me, the lesson gleaned is that while we've been focused on technologies of image projection and refinement, there's been less sustained analysis on technologies of audience reception. And this is a reference to the historical shift in audience structure. There's another example there. And it's how I sort of teach my sort of postwar survey course, right? So not just moving from painting to the internet or painting to internet art, but the shift away from the singular modernist viewing subject of abstract film and painting from the 1940s to the atomized, dispersed audience of broadcast television in the 1960s. And thinking about more specifically, the current condition of a mobilized collective audience who wants everything mediated in real time, where text trumps the speech act; or what Sherry Turkle has described as the lone together.

00:09:59:22      So what then to make of the currency given to the rise of post-internet art, exhibitions and anthologies? A few of which I'm going to show you here in this cover. And these all have come out in the past three years. The one called *Practicable Below*, on the left, comes out this month from MIT. And I'm currently— and again, full disclosure—I'm working on an exhibition with ICA Boston, called *Art After the Internet*, currently being organized by Ava Respini for a 2018, who's extraordinarily shrewd and interesting about this. So part of what I'm trying to map today is thinking about this as the kind of current condition, in terms of what I think *Predictive Engineering* is going to be received within.

00:10:38:23      So I think that it's unfolding very much like Scher predicted, developing in a manner that remains— That is, post-internet art is developing in a very synchronic, contradictory way that shifts laterally across media, rather than like other art forms, which have tended to develop gradually or creatively, even though her work and practice is iterative. Significantly, contemporary art's methods are self-reflexive, in that they require a critical recognition of the formal and social condition of a work's arts— of how it's produced,

how it's circulated. And it even refers to the kind of ephemeral projects that eschew object status. Occupying a space between the collapsing spheres SUTTON (Cont.): of the contemporary and new media, we can see contextualizing *Predictive Engineering* as a reminder that in much recent art, the question is not what is the work or what is media art, but when and where is it? These are temporal conditions.

00:11:34:17      So the idea that new media remains synchronic, contradictory, and lateral also serves to remind us that these media are implicated within technology and capital, and built-in obsolescence is the default mode. Rather than foregrounding the apparatus or means of image projection, experiencing the work on the seventh floor helps remind us that media art is first and foremost concerned with duration, what Scher has referred to as durational aesthetics and what I've come to regard as the shape of time, which can be characterized by the patterning or texture of its two base structural elements, the grain and the pixel. Grain or granularity is the optical texture found in processed film, photography, and cinematic film, in which an image develops gradually, though not necessarily evenly, through a sequence of alchemic processes that transform the behavior of minute particles. Subject to diffusion and distortion to the point of noise, granularity suggests a relatively fragile or unstable sense of time. Like its counterpoint the pixel, or picture element, it's also the smallest physical point that can be altered, varied, or controlled for intensity. And the relative stability of the pixel allows for a type of modularity that can appear to render digital time unified and seamless. To this end, though, its migration from analog to digital formats, *Predictive Engineering* can be thought as to investigate, I would argue, the rhetorical space between enactment and depiction. And in stark contrast to her prolific exhibition making, there's been little sustained historical consideration, given the ways that Scher's complex installations pressure the established genealogy of both analog and digital media, let alone the subject of surveillance in contemporary art. And we talked a little bit about this yesterday, in terms of why someone like Stanya Kahn or Trevor Paglen can have that as a subject and a medium.

00:13:19:17      The critical reception of Scher's extensive body of work is confined to a rhetoric of presence and the temporality of presentness. And I would argue this overemphasis on immediacy is conveyed on two fronts. The first can be thought of as a durational demand placed on the viewer to experience her installations as live events, encounters in real space, in real time, that have to be felt as well as heard, in order to be seen. And a second point is ramified through the metaphoric SUTTON (Cont.): comparisons frequently drawn between her spatially specific installations and the proliferation of newer forms of media saturation, both digital and social. More significantly, a close reading of Scher's historical antecedents suggest new affinities with what can be thought of as other perceptual systems and subjectivities. Doing so, I think, at this vital juncture, recalibrates our understanding of how by the mid-2000s, new media's material specificity becomes absorbed within the category of contemporary art.

00:14:19:12      So continuously working against established commercial conventions for image refinement, sound synchrony, and material stability, *Predictive Engineering* revels in its glitches, revealing the denigration of quality controls, and its iterative nature is foundational. In doing so, her work offers a contemporary feminist methodology. And here, it's important. It's not just the fact that she's replacing male protagonists with female ones, but to counter the modernist notion of authorial mastery that has become dominant within contemporary art. Scher makes ample use of image errors, including interference and dropouts, thus underscoring the fallacy of control. Even though we'd say that the work is all about controlling, in my opinion it's about the fallacy of that, using a complex algorithm that eradicates any aleatory elements. So what was interesting to see in Martina's documentation today is again, things that look chance or that are interested in kind of experimental, are highly scripted and keenly organized. We understand at four p.m., that that's when the cameras begin to record. The text message comes out at noon.

00:15:22:17 So challenging video's epistemological connections to its documentary function and positioning as an unbiased recording device whose content is admissible in a court of law, Scher's clearly manipulated footage underscores the important fact that video is not a neutral technology. Arguably, Scher's complex, labor-intensive video shoots, when we see the documentation about this and hearing from today, the editing of the footage and the postproduction it requires, it demonstrates how the circuits and networks of arts production echo economic changes writ large. And that's in a larger sort of— you know, we can look at with the context of where we are in San Francisco—the shift away from the industrial model of the exchange of goods to the current peer-to-peer economy that purports to eschew ownership for sharing, while never losing sight of the fact that visual art is an inherently social enterprise that traffics in experience.

SUTTON (Cont.): 00:16:13:18 So for the sake of time, I want to close my points today by just outlining a few provocations, what I'm thinking that *Predictive Engineering* presciently tells us about the rush to call new media art post-internet art. And sort of I'm just going to run through these as an anti-manifesto of sorts, what can be thought of as ten theses on the problem of post-internet art. One: Post-internet art is amorphous. It often refers to the ways that experiential, multisensory installations treat images as inherently variable and reproducible; and in the most benign cases, as mutable works equally at home in the gallery or on a web page. Though through walking through the museum, if you go on the seventh floor, and also hearing Scher speak last night, we see the problem of this, as the piece is conditioned by the specific social environment produced by the specificity of the architecture installation.

00:17:05:23 Number two: In the 1990s, post-internet art was called net art. And in the 2000, it was called net art 2.0. And that's the title of the book featuring Julia's work. Number three: The internet is not a utility. It remains a luxury service. *Predictive Engineering* reminds us that although people may read network art through purely visual terms— And it was very poignant last night, to hear her talk about the specificity of one of her viewers who was seeing impaired, and having to think about the voiceover and conditioning another sensory point of reception for that. I think that was really important. So even though it may be kind of conditioned for visual terms, the point of reception is clearly demarcated by bodies. The enticing promise of instant communication dominates and continues to drown out the inherent questions of control; access, for me; and disparities, social, economic, and racial, which are all also native to the net.

00:18:02:22 Number four: The internet is not neutral. Scher shows us how both subjectivity and agency are wrapped up in technological networks. Politics, perception—and her wonderful Bernie Sanders impersonation last night—and experience have all been challenged and transformed by the dominant computing economy. The internet as we know it evolved through years of complex corporate, government, and military initiatives. And this has profound implications for the a priori theorization of the internet as a mode of cultural production. Number five: If we are not post-internet, I'm going to argue we are certainly not post feminist.

SUTTON (Cont.): 00:18:38:12 Number six: Museums and MFA programs are the progenitors of post-internet art. Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of prominent art museums in the US and Western Europe added new media art specifically as a collection category, and art schools offered degrees and specializations. While the very notion of a durational aesthetic is ontologically bound to earlier models of experimental media art practices such as film and video, and even photography, none of these prior medias have been institutionally embraced as quickly as new media art by the mainstream culture industry, as a distinct category for collection, exhibition, scholarship, and funding. Number seven: The internet is contingent

on interfaces. What is compelling about the recent institutionalization of these various practices that constitute new media art is that conditions specific to network practices have begun to have a resounding effect on reading other modes of art practice. *Predictive Engineering* offers us a schema to examine a range of contemporary projects that can be seen to exhibit durational aesthetics off line. In particular, it pushes the relevancy of the term interface over medium. And fundamentally, an interface is an apparatus, right, designed to connect two different or distinct systems, so they can be operated jointly. And while the term has been used since the nineteenth century, the very concept of an interface became more popularized with the advent and dissemination of the digital computer in the late fifties. And by '62, Marshall McLuhan introduced the notion that interfaces meant interaction.

00:20:07:23      Number nine: The internet amplifies social habits. Habit is central to the inversion of privacy and publicity that drives neoliberalism and networks. Why do we view our network devices as personal, when they run on proprietary software with pre-programmed defaults that are rarely questioned? *Predictive Engineering* compels us to ask what would happen if rather than pushing for privacy that is not really private, we demanded public rights. As theorist Wendy Chun has recently articulated in her new book, as the right to be exposed, to take risks, and to be in public and not be attacked. And then on top of that, I would add Scher's very salient point made last night, or not to be bullied.

00:20:48:09      And number ten: The internet did not kill video art. Engagement with the web and Web 2.0 was distinct from the broadcast and televisional experiments of the early seventies, and the SUTTON (Cont.): subsequent emergence of video art. Like Scher herself, I would argue artists such as Douglas Davis, Frank Gillette, Walt [inaudible], Shigeko Kubota, just to name only a few individuals, were less occupied by the rhetoric of revolution that video artists promoted a full decade later. And this is the ones that I was mentioning with Bay Area Video Coalition. These artists engaged a slightly earlier social sphere, in which art and technology intersected with a growing social movement, and the scientific discourse developing around behavioral theories of liberation, control, and feedback associated with cybernetics. The context for Scher's work is not only just video art and performance, but down in the design galleries, I thought it was very interesting to see there's a copy of *Radical Software*, co-edited by artist Beryl Korot, who's also in the exhibition that Rudolf has curated, whose multi-channel videos often explore the affinities between weaving and computer programming. *Radical Software* functioned as a manifesto and a how-to manual, featuring descriptive essays on newly available recording and editing equipment, with the idea that artists could not only outfit themselves with necessary technical skills to become savvy activists—and again, Julia's explaining last night, too, how she was one of the only—in fact, the only woman to be a certified engineer for her first company—but also to shape the emerging public discourse on media, television, and communications.

00:22:18:20      And finally, I'm going to conclude. I just want to suggest that *Predictive Engineering* points to the ways that new media do not radically break with the past, but I would argue, redistributes the weight between the categories that bind art and culture, often foregrounding what was once in the background, and vice versa. Or in other words, new media art doesn't discard or destroy anything, but continually realigns and reinstalls itself. As the novelty of real time interaction wanes, the lingering and residual effects of *Predictive Engineering* will be the fact that access to media technology is rendered meaningless if we have nothing radical to say to one another. Thank you. [applause]

00:23:09:20      [END]