

SFMOMA: Pip Laurenson Responds to *Predictive Engineering*

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Speaker

Pip Laurenson, Head of Collection Care Research at the Tate

00:00:03:20 PIP LAURENSEN: So I would also like to start by thanking Robin Clark and Jill Sterrett and the team at SFMOMA for inviting me to participate in this colloquium. It's a great honor, and I'm delighted to be given the opportunity to join the thinking that's taking place around *Predictive Engineering* and the extraordinary work of the Artist Initiative.

00:00:27:17 So the first I'd seen *Predictive Engineering* was yesterday. And *Predictive Engineering* is a lively place to be. People hop in and out of the sensors. They laugh, they ask questions like, "Is it real?" "Oh, no." You hear comments like, "I brought my friend here and I couldn't get him to leave. He was mesmerized. I wanted to go and see other things in the museum." And, "Oh, this is hysterical." "Oh, this work is about surveillance." So those were some of the things that I heard.

00:01:07:12 In this presentation, I'd like to take Julia Scher's *Predictive Engineering* as a jumping off point to discuss its impact on contemporary art conservation, a practice that aims to not only cherish our collections, but also to see them flourish in our museums. Conservation practice is profoundly determined by the nature of the artworks we seek to attend to in our collections. In brief, ontology, or the nature and identity of things, matters. Time-based media and performances works of art punctured a temporal hole in the ontology of art, in a way that has implications for their conservation. If this sounds overly dramatic, this may be because I've been on a lot of airplanes lately. And unfortunately, that means an overexposure to Hollywood. So on my transatlantic crossing, I was completely distracted by the movie playing in the seat in front. I didn't actually watch the movie, I didn't hear the movie, but I was completely mesmerized by it. So the movie turned out to be Ridley Scott's film *The Martian*, with Matt Damon. Now, what I really love about this is the byline, which I only discovered this morning. "Help is only 140 million miles away." Now, I'm kind of tempted to try and play a little clip from this movie, from the trailer. Is everybody LAURENSEN (Cont.): up for that? [Woman: Yeah] Do you want a bit of crazy Hollywood? Okay, here we go. Let me try and do it. Okay.

00:03:00:07 [clip plays; Matt Damon]: I guarantee you that at some point, everything's going to go south on you. [inaudible voice] You're going to say, "This is it. This is how I end." [inaudible voices] Now, you can either accept that, or you can get to work. This will come as quite a shock to my crew.

00:03:36:20 Alright, I'm going to stop it there. [she laughs] But so any dramatic tendencies in this talk, I owe to this movie. [laughter] Let's get back to the talk. Okay. So to understand the impact of *Predictive Engineering* on my thinking on conservation practice, it might be useful to understand the frame in which it landed, which is heavily influenced by the art I was spending my time with in the nineties. In 1969, Nelson Goodman made the distinction between autographic and allographic works. In brief, autographic arts are things like paintings and sculpture, which may exhibit the hand of the artist and be considered finished by the artist, pardigna— paradigma—hang on; paradigmatically, I think—anyway, leaving their studios as an autographed, complete work; whereas allographic works are like musical works and performances, in that they involve a second moment of creation when they are installed or performed, in order to be experienced, and are often amenable to notation. So this distinction was useful to my conservation practice, and it offered a way of

bringing in a second moment of creation into the identity of an artwork. The philosopher of music Stephen Davies provides other useful conceptual tools, such as work defining properties and the wonderful notion of thickly or thinly specified works, to help characterize the forms of time-based media installation for which I was a conservator in the mid to late 1990s. So the opening of that second moment of creation in the realization of art was similar in its effects to puncturing a pressurized container. All sorts of possibilities rushed in, destabilizing the nature of art and conservation practice. Many artists responded by resisting the instability in their works that resulted from this.

00:06:01:20 My practice, and therefore my research, was deeply influenced by the experience of working with the creators of thickly specified installations par excellence, those multi-screened LAUREN SON (Cont.): works that Fionn referred to, works by artists such as Bill Viola, Gary Hill, James Coleman, and Stan Douglas, works where every detail of the installation was specified. So thickly specified works like these sit well within the practice of conservation, a practice that provides us with a belief that if we pay attention, we can understand, document, and capture those elements of the work which will enable us to define its important properties. Conservators operate out of a responsibility to cherish and honor the artwork and its history, by ensuring its important features are chaperoned through time intact, conserved for the future, as evidence of our past and present. So the vocabulary of work defining properties also feeds the pragmatic temperaments of conservators, in providing a roadmap. When we've defined what should be preserved, then we can get on with the task of keeping those important features of the work intact. Where these cannot be maintained, because of changing technological or changing cultural, social, or political circumstances, heroic efforts are made and great human ingenuity is brought to bear on finding solutions. If this fails, the language of loss may be evoked.

00:07:49:12 So underpinning my approach to these thickly specified allographic works was a pervasive notion of completeness. The experience of installing these works to the artist's specifications meant that one experienced them as aspirationally fixed, at least in that second moment of creation in the gallery, each time they were installed, aspiring to a fixity that was materially undermined by their technological dependency. So going back to *The Martian*, in this film there are two classic moments: the scene where the pressure is lost and he's sucked out into outer space; and the scene where he punctures his space suit, and somehow this acts a bit like putting a hole in a balloon, and he's propelled forward through space. I'd like to suggest that the temporal puncturing of the ontology of art in this second moment of creation destabilized the ontology of art, and has also propelled us into new ways of thinking about conservation. Looking back, perhaps part of the response of artists in so thickly specifying their works is to attempt to restabilize their works' ontologies. Okay. Enough about space movies.

00:09:16:22 So putting pressure on this conceptual frame are works that have within, to use Julia's term, their DNA, a desire to unfold episodically, over time. The words used to express this idea are a testimony to the influence of Julia Scher and her work on my thinking, and also the LAUREN SON (Cont.): extraordinary work of the Artist Initiative. This is a photograph from this time last year. And you can see Julia and Robin, and also the media arts conservator from MoMA, Kate Lewis. And we're gathered here in California, in preparation for the conference Media in Transition, to think about some of the issues we're discussing today. Now, do you see the Post-it note? I'll tell you what it says. It's a bit grainy, but "conservators discover the meaning of life." So *Predictive Engineering* offers conservation a very different proposition from the aspirationally ontologically stable works that I spent my time with in the nineties, while Julia was spending her time quite differently, I think. [she laughs]

00:10:38:20 Julia has described *Predictive Engineering* as epistolic, self-documenting, self-consuming, a work which gobbles up previous iterations of itself. *Predictive Engineering* has within it more adaptive DNA. It holds within it the blueprint for its growth and development. So how, as conservators, might we respond to this, and how might we characterize the different roles which are part of this engagement? Firstly, the SFMOMA team have led the way. We see the sort of care and attention to the actual work of art, which characterizes the practice of conservation at its very best, uncovering a deep knowledge of the work. There are different ways in which works of art might unfold. They might unfold as we seek to know them better, within the variety of epistemic cultures we approach a work from—art history, conservation, curatorial, and artistic practice. Okay, and they're all different epistemic cultures. They might unfold over time whilst on display, as with time-based media and performance works. Or for some contemporary artworks, they might unfold as the objects of artistic practice, through the ongoing engagement of the artist. I'd also argue that this unfolding is as a result of continuing activity which is uniquely driven by the artist. I would hold that there are logical imperatives within *Predictive Engineering* that require the work either to be periodically updated or to enter a different future form, which is perhaps an end-of-life document or record of itself. And it's the question of the centrality of the authorship and whether we think the unfolding can happen without the unique relationship of the artist to the art unfolding over time of this artwork, that will inform decisions about the future form of this work. And it's going to be tough.

00:12:52:17 LAUREN SON (Cont.): So recently, in his essay, "In Praise of Actuality," Hal Foster wrote, "Any artwork holds together various times of production and reception. Not only as we confront it in the present of our own experience, but also as other moments are in the work as it passes through history." The anxiety for conservation in embracing the adaptive DNA of the self-repairing *Predictive Engineering* is the risk to obliterating the history of the work. Surveillance footage, after all, captures the passing of time within a particular place; but surveillance footage also has the tendency to get wiped over when needed. When you kind of want to use it as evidence you often find it's been wiped out. But here is where *Predictive Engineering* is so intriguing for conservation. Because although it only claims to be self-repairing, a reference to technological time dogged by obsolescence and technical failure, it actually offers a rather profound notion of conservation. Taking a lead from the curator Maria Lind, it's called[?] to learn from art and artists, *PE3*, which is its nickname [inaudible], offers much we can learn from about harnessing the plurality of time as a mode of conservation. Like a selective version of the ship of Theseus, it provides partial ontological stability across time, by selecting what it takes forward from previous iterations. However, of course, this is not something the artwork does itself; it is something the artist delivers, as part of their ongoing engagement with the work and its unfolding.

00:14:50:20 The most important book about these issues is Nagel and Wood's *Anachronic Renaissance*. And in this they write, "An artwork is a strange kind of event, whose relation to time is plural. It points forward to all its future recipients, who will activate and reactive it as a meaningful event." *PE3* dramatizes art's relationship to time. It dramatizes actuality, offering a way to reconcile the relationship of the past and present that is able to unfold over time within the museum. In *PE3*, the earlier footage is drawn through to the present moment. The past is dragged into the present, in a work which claims to predict the future. Conservation and museum collections are about the safe transportation of the past and the present artwork through time, to the future. It is therefore no surprise that this work is so central to the Artist Initiative, a profoundly significant collections research project for our time. Thank you. [applause]

00:16:13:06 [END]