

**SFMOMA: Colloquium Roundtable: A Response to *Predictive Engineering***  
Friday, September 16, 2016

**Participants**

Audience Members asking questions

Robin Clark, Director of the Artist Initiative

Rudolf Frieling, Curator of Media Arts

Martina Haidvogel, Associate Media Conservator

Pip Laurenson, Head of Collection Care Research at the Tate

Fionn Meade, Senior Curator of Cross-Disciplinary Platforms at the Walker Art Center

Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, Co-Director and Associate Professor of Cinema and Digital Media at the University of California, Davis

Julia Scher, Artist

Gloria Sutton, Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Studies at Northeastern University's College of Arts, Media and Design and a research affiliate in the Art Culture Technology Program at MIT

Tanya Zimbaro, Assistant Curator of Media Arts

00:00:03:20 ROBIN CLARK: Welcome, Julia. [inaudible voices]

JULIA SCHER: Thank you, Robin.

CLARK: So for the next fifteen, twenty minutes, we wanted to have a discussion about your work. And I thought we'd ask you first if you wanted to respond to the responders, the first *Predictive Engineering to the Third Power* responders. Or would you rather there was something else?

00:00:42:12 SCHER: So thank you to the wonderful breadth of knowledge here. I've never heard such knowledge and ideas brought to any of my works at all, ever. So this is a first for me. So I'm stunned. So thank you to, first of all, the Artist Initiative. Durational aesthetics came up as a result of this combining of different voices, different mixtures of people with different expertise. So— As the installation itself is a mixture of teamworks over time. There's a hell of a lot of people. This additional, I don't have a better word for it than boost, is so significant. So thank you. And thank you for having me on the roster of this. And thank you for the selection of these voices. These are—guess what—predominantly, excuse me, women's voice, which I'm so almost in tears about. The wealth of information. You know, walking along in little orbs of— I would like to recognize the SCHER (Cont.): breadth of information and your own weaving your way to this project, which has not been an easy one. And so thank you very much. That's my first response is a lot of gratitude.

00:02:23:12 I think one of the questions that comes up is how you respond as— I hate to use a word that picks out one quality over the other. And I would like to resist that because of the authoritarian problematic with assigning something of value as labeling over the period of this artwork, which uses labeling very significantly and in dangerous ways. So to avoid that, I'd like to say the first question I might have is how you feel about mobilizing your particular intelligence and knowledge to somebody's artwork in this kind of context. Just to for a minute deconstruct the situation here, because it is an institution, there is money and travel involved. So just for a minute, to get any opinions to that point. What does it feel like to be in such a situation? I

guess that would be my opening remark, without being able to really look at anybody together in one glance [laughter] when looking. And cross modes of observation is kind of my thing. I find this intriguing, because my neck is really bad, so I know this was done on purpose by someone. [laughter]

00:03:02:20 GLORIA SUTTON: I'll say a quick comment. One is to say about choices. And you know, one of the interesting things I think that we all do is that as Fionn, as a curator, as an academic, you make choices. And these are tacit agreements, right? So they are tacitly endorsing something, right? Even with criticism or critical analysis, is a tacit agreement to take the time and to put something forward. So I do think that you're correct in saying we make choices. We makes choice on what to look at, just as curators make choices about what to install. It is a tacit kind of way of saying if you, not something else. Right? And so one of the questions I did have, you know, in terms of the Artist Initiative, was about how you made the difficult decision on choosing which projects to isolate as case studies. And one of the interesting things for me about Scher's work in particular, or Julia's work in particular, was to say most artists are not interested in the porosity of the work; they're interested in what Pip, I thought, really nicely put, thickly specific was the work, or thickly— [inaudible voice] Yes.

00:05:04:20 And that your project was quite porous, both in its reception, as you said, and discourse around it. Like, you invite that. And so that's one of the reasons why I think you could see SUTTON (Cont.): the diversity of knowledge production being brought here. Most artists don't. They insist on a very kind of specific through line in which the work is going to be analyzed, right? And so I think that's one of the different— or points that I would just comment on.

CLARK: Well, and that would be a good question for Rudolf, I think. Rudolf and Jill and Martina, I think, arrived at this as a good case study.

00:05:41:20 RUDOLF FRIELING: Well, I mentioned earlier today, it may have been an insane proposal to think that one could simply show the work. It was maybe an insane proposition to propose that for the Artist Initiative, because I literally had no idea how much work this would be. But it's been extremely rewarding. And I think Jill talked about this as an opportunity for really deep research, which we rarely do in this museum—or in many museums. We do research, but deep research and taking the time, the deep time for thinking and talking to each other is a luxury. And in some ways, I think it was the perfect timing for us. The fact that we were closed for our expansion allowed us to really rethink who we are. And clearly, that was related to our expansion project. But also to rethink what it means to collect, and how to show that. So I would say for the— You know, again, also making reference to Pip's beautiful juxtaposition of thickly and thinly defined, Julia's work is extremely thinly defined, but with a thick apparatus now around it. And I'm wondering what effect that will have on our thinking of this work.

00:07:20:22 SCHER: That's a good point. Well, you know, it can have a death. Anything with DNA has a death and can end. And that's interesting. It flows with the museum. So I'm very happy about that. On the many points that Gloria made, I think something that floats into that is this idea of what perceptual systems are or might be in the future, and how a work like this, and others, like the two spinning— the Naumans— There's so many works that have issues that are relevant maybe into the future, under different names, different identities. And how— I'm wondering if you could say more on that. The other point that I'm really curious about is my reaction to when you said [inaudible] was together. I was very, very, very struck for many reasons because of that. So I just want to confirm with everyone that the words that you chose and the

language that you used as SCHER (Cont.): individuals was very meaningful to me, in a world where dehumanization and depersonalization has become so ordinary, and how struck I have been by that.

00:08:52:20 CLARK: Well, I'm thinking we've been talking for a while and it would be great if anybody in the audience had any questions, if you would like to chime in. And our wonderful colleague Nora has a microphone, so if anybody would like to ask questions of anyone here. I think Beth would like to say something. Nora, could you bring the mic over to Beth?

BETH: Thank you. I wanted to ask, because I subscribe to the text messages, so I've been getting text messages since— Well, let's see when it started. Well, when the museum opened, so whenever— I guess it looks like May 6<sup>th</sup>. And so it's funny because every day at noon, I get a text message. And two things happen. One is that I'm like, oh, I have a text. Oh. Oh, that's that one. Oh, it's new. You know, so there's sort of this like, clock thing that happens. And then I was actually in Vermont for a— well, during the summer, and not where there was phone service. And then I'd like, go into town maybe once a week, and so then I'd be like ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding, and I'd get like a week's worth all at once. And I have this— Every time the new ones come in, they're quite clever. I quite like them and think, you know, who comes up with all these clever text messages?

00:10:15:00 And have a picture of you, which I know is not a correct picture, but I have this moment where I picture you thinking in the morning, what am I going to text today, and like, creating the text. Which I know— [laughter] Conceptually, I know that isn't really happening. But that's just sort of this moment, like this fantasy that I know is a fantasy that I'd like to have. And then I was like, well, is it her assistant who writes the texts and then sends the out? And I, again, know that there's no assistant sending a text every day. And so then last night, I think there was a moment where you said there was a certain number, like 300, that were provided or something. And I'm wondering, is there a finite number? Like, what is the real process behind the texts? Like, is there a finite number of them? Have you written them all yourself? Will there be a time when I start getting repeats? Because right now, they're all different. But there will be a time when I start getting BETH (Cont.): the same ones again? You know, what's the algorithm for which one goes when? Is it randomized? These kinds of things.

00:11:16:00 FRIELING: Why should we tell you? [laughter]

BETH: I know, exactly. No, you have no reason to tell me, but I would love it if you would tell me.

00:11:25:13 SCHER: Well, that's a very interesting question. I'm loyal to your device, to your telephone, [laughter] which during the course of today, I unwrapped mine from its protective sheath, I just have to say here, inspired by the talk. I like to be in touch with many issues, relative to language and intimacy and— It's a longer conversation. But no, they were written over time, but prior to their deployment. They were set up to be deployed over the telephone system, to recirculate back into the city, however prematurely. That is, they might have another life at some other time. So the circulation of images and voice over time, a longer discussion about connecting with people and warning and— But there are more. A long time ago, I saw Vito Acconci talk, and he said he was an artist. Next time I saw Vito talk, he was a designer. The next time I heard him talk, he was an architect. So his iterative possibilities with language, I think inspired me, as have many other artists who use poetry and use words of warning.

00:13:01:20 There's also the power of three. Do you know this iterative of three? The three like, [changes inflection] availability, reliability, and performance. You know, that people sell you things in threes. Many of these sentences were constructed in clusters of three, because of its sales manageability form, and then were dispersed in different ways. And so they're just poetic— I'm sorry, I didn't even expect this question. Just there's a lot to say about the curator's vision relative to the potential of the words, and the kind of onsite limitations in this particular artwork, and what might connect to earlier and other artworks that I've done where they're exclusively language-based. So thank you, Rudolf.

CLARK: Anybody else? Over here.

00:14:14:12 MAN: This is to anyone, because I think Julia's work and work like hers creates a very amazing problem. And that is, last night you mentioned that what you sold to the museum is really an algorithm, because the technology's always changing. But what is solid, or the object, is this mathematical phrase that can then be moved forward. So I'm curious, to anyone who wants to take this, so how does that work of art move forward? And you know, think of, in talking about *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*— But we know we're, like, there, where in digital reproduction, things can happen, shift, change. Yet Julia's work, with the three versions we've seen over the last couple of days, has very specific iterations. So all we're really seeing in it are the traces of what the work was. Or a kind of imaging of what it was through a way of interface, versus the actual work itself. So I'm curious, like how you as scholars, collectors, and archivists think of preserving all that work going forward. And Julia's work or other artists, as well.

00:15:36:09 MARTINA HAIDVOGL: That is, for me, *the* question, right, I think, of this colloquium. And I don't have an answer, and I don't think the museum has an answer. But through this Artist Initiative, we're exploring what we can do about that and we're exploring if we can conserve an artist's practice. But yeah, that's the core question of this Artist Initiative project, I would say.

FRIELING: Let me add to that. Clearly, this was way before my time, when it was acquired in '98. And I would argue that probably no one had a clue what it meant to bring this work actually into the collection. The team, the museum, the institution knew what it took to stage these two iterations. But it is actually an act of attributing symbolic value to a practice. In this case, saying we want to make it clear that we value what Julia as an artist can bring to a museum; and that's why we bring this work into a collection. But let—I didn't know I was coming—let Rudolf think about this later, what it means to actually do this again. We don't have to worry about that now, but we want to make it clear that this is something that belongs to the area that we should cover. This is a practice that is key and essential to our understanding of contemporary and media art. So that's why we should collection it, as well.

00:17:17:22 HAIDVOGL: And maybe just to add, this algorithm, it's not like a very clear set of rules that you just follow, like a Sol LeWitt drawing, for example. I would say, like, it's very vague. It's like, you take ten— I don't know what it was. Take 10% of the first iteration and then 20% of the second, something like that. But you know, as Rudolf was explaining, I think yesterday, that there were so many questions that then the museum actually had to answer, how we're going to implement that. And that completely changes the role of the museum, because we're not used to being the creators, the producers. And as conservators, we're the ones documenting. We're the ones that actually have no opinion, even. Like, we're completely objective. And that sort of these practices also [inaudible].

PIP LAURENSEN: I just wanted to add something, just— I think this is a comment about the Artist Initiative, actually, and my latest favorite term, which is epistemic resistance. [she chuckles] And so basically, it's a sort of ethical responsibility to call out what is actually happening. And I think one of the things that has actually been happening for a number of years in the museum is not only a paying attention to the specifics of an artwork and actually working with artists in dialogue over a number of years, and actually realizing their work and creating knowledge through that process. But it's this project that is actually surfacing all of that activity, I think in a really extraordinary way.

00:19:14:22      And so when I was training, there was this sort of myth that you talked to the artist once when a work came in, you gather everything; that's it, that's fine now, we've got it, and then we can work in this sort of fabulous isolation and sort it out. And you know, that never really happened, [she chuckles] you know, but we had this myth that went on. So I think there is a really important dimension to this project, of actually calling out the sorts of deep collaborations that have been happening at the museum, and how that museum has acted as a tool. I do think that they are different knowledge-producing practices, and I think they have different ethical responsibilities and different distinct roles to play. I don't feel like I'm a producer in the artwork. I think I'm still the conservator, working and developing knowledge from my particular practice perspective. But that's something, I think, that's really interesting to talk about, in how we use language to demarcate those roles.

00:20:32:18      CLARK: Oh. Do we have a couple questions in the midsection of the theater? [inaudible voices]

WOMAN: Okay. He has one, too. I'm sort of come dropped in from Mars here, because I haven't seen this iteration yet. But I did see the first and the second. And at that time, I was writing about this kind of work. And you know, actually, I was giving a lot of thought to Julia's work, too. And so I didn't have too many guides. You know, things to guide me. I had to actually involve my own experience very much in what I was going to say about it, you know, when I was writing about it. So one thing that I sort of found that was really profound and very important for me, that—I could've missed it; by the way, I loved your talk [inaudible] very useful and very interesting—but was that although this is about some way captured by all sorts of other powers that can, you know, predict then what you're going to do in the future. It also had a moment for me in which that made us have a capacity of either eluding that or sort of losing our identity and having another capacity to have another identity. And because it was— when it had— You know, if you could see yourself actually— It was almost— I don't know if was really possible to see yourself, you know, performing for the— you know, on the camera, and see— You know, actually put yourself together, the body of— You know, the mirror experience and all of that.

00:22:24:17      It was very hard to actually put together a self in this context. And so it was a way of scrambling it. And to me, it was oppressive and liberating. And it struck that this was more of a— you know, it had potential for a kind of maybe not revolutionary, but something really free, as well as one of warnings and discoveries of being surveyed.

CLARK: It sounds like you have another article in you about this work. [laughter]

WOMAN: Oh, really?

CLARK: Yeah.

WOMAN: I wanted to hear— I asked Rudolf if I could listen to talks again, because they went by pretty fast for me. I have not been reading for a long time on this kind of thing. And so I wonder if there is another chance for us to— Will it be on YouTube or something like that?

00:23:15:18 CLARK: We are recording this, so we will share it in the future.

WOMAN: Okay, please do.

CLARK: Okay, thank you.

WOMAN: Because I can't write without actually trying to digest what you say.

CLARK: Alright then. Great. So I think Ben had a question.

00:23:25:20 BEN: I had a question sort of related to the video, which is how to sort of take what you're doing here and organize it and come up with maybe some kind of plans for the future. And also to disseminate it to other institutions, organizations that might be able to look at this process and use it. Do you have any ideas about that?

CLARK: Well, our dissemination—

WOMAN: We're making it. [she laughs] We're still producing it [inaudible].

CLARK: Yeah, it's still happening. I mean, we've made, as you may have seen, several videos with Julia and put them on our website, and some articles about the piece and put them on our website. We've amassed a tremendous amount of contextual information, which we are still figuring out ways of sharing out. And certainly this colloquium is one of them, but—

00:24:15:18 FRIELING: I would just add, we are now accepting loan requests for *Predictive Engineering 3*. [laughter]

CLARK: There were a couple in the audience who have performed in this work or been directed by Julia in this work. I wonder if any of those would be interested in speaking for a second to that experience or asking a question about what's happening now in the gallery. No actors want to step forward? Oh, I think Tanya. Alright. Tanya Zimbardo.

00:24:51:22 TANYA ZIMBARDO: Well, this is less about my acting in the piece than being part of some of the conversations early on. And I was curious. Initially when we were talking about sort of the gap between '98 and 2016, and looking at sort of the landscape of surveillance technology, there was a question, I think to my mind, but also that had come up in certain conversations among the team, of whether this piece should account, or would be interested in considering data mining. And there was a decision, it seems to really keep it focused on sort of lens-based technologies. And so when thinking about adapting this sort of work to the future, sort of what type of surveillance is *Predictive Engineering* sort of really focused on, in thinking about several of the shifts that one could've assumed might happen, and then didn't?

00:25:55:09 SCHER: The Surveillant Architectures group, the seminar I teach, has students in it which are gung-ho data mining. They're encrypting and they're hacking. And so as a teacher, somehow I've not crossed into this fertile area in one form, but have taken it on in many, many others. The reaction to data mining, to deeper panoptic practices inside the body and out into the landscape, the further use of these terminologies come up in the texts. So that physically, because I don't—you know, I haven't programmed in a long, long time—it takes on the work of younger people. And so my position is not that it isn't really cool stuff, but that it's diverted to younger folks.

ZIMBARDO: I ask, in part, also because we're at a moment where museums not only have, of course, closed-circuit technology, but some of the larger institutions, the ability to just gather data, whether you call it surveillance or just sort of marketing on sort of visitor behavior, movements—

00:27:14:17 SCHER: It's marketing.

ZIMBARDO: Yeah. [laughter]

SCHER: I mean, I'm sorry. I mean, there's a piece I did about data mining, before it was called data mining, called *Information America*, which was a program— Which is a company called Lotus, in Cambridge, in the nineties, you could buy for \$300, before there were internet connections. \$300. You'd get a disc in the mail, and you could put it in your computer and you would get a database of companies and their addresses. So one of these first pieces I did was *Information America*. We provide information free for all directories. For information cultivation and extraction, we use the brightest, newest, and fastest master-and-slave voice readers. Blah-blah-blah. Which were very new at the time. So at the very beginning, it was not camera based specifically. The huge potential of data was not passed by these earlier pieces.

00:28:26:22 CLARK: Okay, I think we have time for maybe one or two more questions. Does anyone have a burning comment or question? And that includes our illustrious panel.

MAN: I don't know if burning is how I would [inaudible; laughter]. I just wanted to ask sort of a practical question, because it seems like Julia's piece is the perfect piece to explore these questions. For the next— You know, if and when the piece is put up again, will it have to be *PE4*? Or is it possible to do it as *PE1* or *PE2*? And just one other thing, that when I initially read the piece, I read it *Predictive Engineering Cubed*, which had this sort of nice spatial dimension to it, as well. And does the putting up of the piece again necessitate the destruction of the old space, so that it can no longer exist on the seventh floor, where it is now? Once that space is gone, is it a new building that it needs? That's my question.

00:29:38:22 SCHER: It probably needs a new building. [laughter] So maybe thirty, forty years from now, do it again. And there are many misnomers. I apologize; it's my fault. That it is cubed and it is to the third, the dritta[?]. It's not three, it's really— But it's so hard to type that on a cell phone. But it really is to the power of three. So I imagine maybe we'll all be dead or maybe I'll never do it again. But I think the cause and effect of my technophilia with engineering is to such a degree that I think it would be cool if it were titled so again. In the future, you won't have predictive SCHER (Cont.): engineering, however; it will be replaced by newer terminologies. So in fact, the term is already quite dated. So I cannot imagine these futures; but in this conference in 2008, which you wisely spoke at, there are new iterative responses by a number of scholars and mathematicians to these dimensions that may be unseen at the moment. But I think in terms of museum policy, that's a good question maybe for another time.

00:31:04:13 FRIELING: You just mentioned the term dated. I am wondering if that is the right approach to work in the collection that has a very specific beginning in 1993, but sort of also goes back to your previous practice. So one could argue this is a work that is deeply embedded in the concerns and the visual approaches of the eighties and nineties to surveillance as a topic. And I think we as a museum have a responsibility to not forget those beginnings, and rather say let's see in what way this might be dated today or not. And I think that was my hope, that doing this iteration in 2016 does provide, for the first time within the confines of this piece, a real historic trajectory. Also, by the way, in terms of lived lives. There are colleagues still on our staff who were part of '93 and '98. So it has a real historic dimension in that. But I would say while the term might feel dated today or sometime in the future, it might also resurface as an interesting term in 2028. Who knows?

00:32:34:22 SCHER: I got the title from Gary T. Marx. So, you know, I didn't make it up. I make a lot of words, but that one, I didn't make that up. I didn't make information America up. That was real. That was a real, well, surveillance for the mouth of the flow of what we see today. So when you're fired up about your own humanity disappearing, I think it's cool. When you forget about that and it disappears into a void matrix of pleasure, seduction, sexual gratification, food, and fashion, I still see a lot of danger, and that might still exist in the future, if we're still around to enjoy the pleasures of this very strange world we live in.

00:33:28:12 CLARK: I think that might be a good place to end, unless did you have something [inaudible]? Okay, so thank you everyone for coming. [applause] And thank you, Julia.

00:33:48:06 [END]