

The Artist Initiative

Friday, May 10, 2019

Speaker

Robin Clark, Director of the Artist Initiative, SFMOMA

00:03: ROBIN CLARK: Good morning. Thank you for coming. We're excited to have you here at this event, which has been long in the making. We are going to drill down into a very weedy and specific topic. But first, I wanted to step back and give you a little bit of context for Artist Initiative as a whole. We started five years ago, with a very generous grant from the Mellon Foundation, nearly \$2 million, to research our collection with a specific methodology, which is fundamentally cross-disciplinary, with a conservation and curatorial co-lead for each project and many other colleagues assisting, as well as direct engagement whenever possible with the artists, to really learn their viewpoints about the best methods for storing, displaying, documenting, and preserving their practice and their works in our collection. There are a number of kind of other important aspects of the Artist Initiative, which has been a big sandbox for experimenting with lots of different ways of achieving these goals. And an important one is activating SFMOMA's new Collections Center in South San Francisco as a site for generous collections access, research, and teaching, as well as the storage of the bulk of our collection.

01:30: So the Artist Initiative comprises five research engagements, each with a curatorial and conservation lead, as I mentioned. Three of these projects are monographic and supported major installations or exhibitions at the museum, including our work with Ellsworth Kelly and his studio, the results of which you can see on the fourth floor of the Snøhetta building, in the Fisher Galleries; a long-term collaboration with media artist Julia Scher; and foundational research for the Vija Celmins retrospective exhibition, co-organized by SFMOMA and the Metropolitan Museum of

Art. If you missed it at SFMOMA, it's currently in Canada and will soon be at the Met Breuer in New York. The two other engagements are thematic. One considers the challenges of displaying digitally-driven design objects in an art museum context. And the other is a project we're here to speak about today.

02:27: The Ellsworth Kelly engagement was the first to launch. We convened scholars and members of Kelly's studio for the two-day colloquium to document and explore Kelly's painting techniques and his installation practices. The first day happened at the Gap Galleries, where the Fisher Collection Kelly works were, at that time, on view; and the second day was one of the first programs that we convened at our Collections Center, in the mockup gallery at the Collections Center, where we installed SFMOMA works by Ellsworth Kelly and thought about the problematics and opportunities and challenges of displaying this work so that his ideas about integrating the work with its architectural surrounds could be completely honored and represented, but we could also consider some aspects of safety of the works in crowded galleries, a difficult question.

03:23: The imagining of Julia Scher's media work called Predictive Engineering, which deals with subjectivity and surveillance in relation to specific architectural, cultural, and technical conditions, required a large team. Initially conceived in 1993 for SFMOMA's space in the War Memorial Building in the city's Civic Center, many adjustments needed to be made into order to migrate the work to a 2016 context in SFMOMA's new Snøhetta-designed galleries. We began with a team of ten colleagues, shown here, which nearly doubled in size by the time the work was realized.

04:01: Artist interviews are a key component of our work. We've interviewed Ellsworth Kelly, Vija Celmins, Julia Scher, and the multiple designers and photographers who've been involved with the project. Here you see some our art handlers installing a big

painting by Julia Scher in the Collections Center mockup gallery, and then Julia being interviewed about how her early painting practice segued into her work with media arts. And you can see this video and others on our website. Hospitality is part of what we do. And the Collections Center is also a place for convening artists and colleagues for more casual conversation.

04:45: One of the great benefits of the Artist Initiative funding has been the ability to convent study days at the museum’s Collections Center, which provides opportunities for our curatorial and exhibition design teams to prototype strategies for displaying complex or delicate works long before the actual installation happens at the museum. Interviewing photographers about their priorities and intentions regarding their works in our care has been an essential part of this process. You’ll hear from some of them this afternoon, in a panel moderated by Erin O’Toole.

05:20: To speak a little bit more about our Celmins engagement, the team was able to travel to New York to study Celmins’ works at the Museum of Modern Art in the paper conservation studio, in storage in Queens, on display at Matthew Marks Gallery. And then the team came to the Bay Area, where we visited works in public and private collections and had study days, both at the museum and at the Collections Center. The Vija Celmins engagement also gave us the opportunity to pilot a new series of workshops that provide special access to the Celmins exhibition, both through engagement in the galleries during the time when the museum was closed to the public, and in the conservation workroom. We prototyped programs for three different groups that we are especially keen to engage. These include local artists, higher education groups, and multisensory researchers.

06:14: Another outgrowth of the Artist Initiative project has been a team-teaching program that we started at the Collections Center, and which now happens both at the

Collections Center and here at the museum. Since the spring of 2016, we've been collaborating between departments. The Artist Initiative, following the same methodology of including colleagues from conservation and curatorial in conversations about works in the collection, has also worked with the education department and collaborated with professors who want to bring their students to the Collections Center or to the museum for a very kind of high-touch tailored program that maps to the specific goals of their syllabus. We've been doing this since 2016. We've hosted over 1,000 students from twenty Bay Area colleges and universities, split fairly equitably between public and private institutions.

07:10: Just a few examples. A course called Constructed Fictions, taught at San Francisco Art Institute, came to the Collections Center and we installed works from the collection that mapped to their syllabus. And they got to meet with curators, conservators, and art handlers on our team, and also with Gay Outlaw, who's one of the collection artists who was featured in the installation. An especially exciting project has been collaborating with California State University East Bay to create classes for their medical humanities students, who are studying to become medical professionals. And they're thinking about social constructions of health and illness, developing communication and empathy skills through engagement with visual art. In the case of their sessions with us at the Collections Center, we installed works by artists in the collection who were addressing the AIDS crisis and think through the questions in that way.

08:07: Sharing our research is really important. Dissemination of our research is something that has been going sort of parallel to the research itself. And we'll do a big push over the course of the summer to share the bulk of what hasn't already been made public. We share our research through participation in conferences; by hosting public programs like this one, which is being recorded. So if you participate in the Q&A,

understand that you will be recorded and it will be published on our website. We are also commissioning articles and interviews for the website, and our class offerings for higher education are another mode of dissemination.

08:47: In closing, I'd like to thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the invaluable support they've given us, both intellectual and financial; and to especially thank the Artist Initiative team at the Collections Center, shown here, for their good work, which has made this aspirational project a reality. Thanks. [applause]