

Curious about care

Script for Talk – Painting in Time Symposium

In the book “Art as a Thinking Process” (2013) Jeremiah Day introduces the work of Erik Smith and makes a case for digging.

In his short explanation of Smith’s work Day describesTest Dig Number 1. For this work Erik Smith simply started digging in one of the few remaining green zones in Berlin. After two days of persistently digging Smith unearthed the top of a curved wall. Over the coming days Smith methodically uncovered a wholly intact spiral staircase. When Day visited Smith on the site and asked about the history of the staircase, who had lived there and what had happened to them? Smith adamantly replied that although he had plans to go to the archive to find out that kind of information, he was keen to delay the visit. He preferred to sustain the period of digging, attending to the soil and ash, in which a different kind of information was possible. For Day, Smith’s open-ended exploration calls to mind Nietzsche’s writings on the principle of a limited horizon – a space of not knowing established in which one is not responsible to answer all questions or consider all perspectives. By holding facts at bay, one can learn something else. Here, there is another process of discovery, a physical persistence that knowing the facts might interrupt

I want to make a case for not knowing, staying curious and for digging around the word ‘care’. For this presentation I want to share some of things that are starting to be revealed through the process and some of the unanswered questions that are emerging.

So Why “care?”

For my doctoral project I am making an instruction manual for the production of three works. The work at the Tetley is one of them. With dogmatic determination I have held my nerve with the written component of the project wanting the writing to emerge directly through the work itself. Thinking with the material, thinking through making.

The instruction manual seems to be the solution. The instructions in the manual will be both written and diagrammatic. The instructions should, if followed precisely, enable someone to make the works. The instructions themselves will contain the indecisions of production, wrong turns or nuances of judgment. They are retrospectively written, using an instructional language and manual format.

The works themselves have generated the instructions. Attention is given to every detail of production.

Once the instructions have been written they are put through a topic modeling software. This software is used to identify themes prevalent in the text. The instructions generate the themes to be explored in depth.

I ran a set of instructions for the production of the work being shown here through the topic modeler. It picked up these 3 words. I was curious about the word care in relation to the machines I wanted to think about the word care

In a seminar I convened I asked the group to bring an object, image or text that was representative of their thoughts around this word. I will share some of them with you at points through out my talk as part of revealing what has emerged around the word as I have begun to dig

Before I turn to my work directly. I want to share something that I have brought in response to thinking about the word care and its relation to time.

I have brought everyone a sweet...

When I was young and we took long journeys in the car we would play a game. We would see who could make a sweet last for the longest in our mouth.

This game changes the way we experience the sweet in our mouth,

We would hold it in our cheek or stick it to the roof of our mouth.

We would pay it greater attention or desperately try to ignore it

We would do anything to protect it from melting.

While I continue to talk, I want everyone to suck their sweet, and see who can make it last the longest

So back to the work.

Where did my curiosity about care in relation to the work I make begin?

Where did an intrigue about the role of other people in the maintenance/upkeep or operation of the work start?

In order to articulate this I need to go back to the work I made before the one installed here at the Tetley. This is Inflate Automated in the Test Run Exhibition at Modern Art Oxford.

The test Run exhibition as the title reveals set out to allow artists the possibility to "Test Out" new works, processes, performances and ideas within the setting of the gallery/museum live and with an

audience. For the audienceIt was an opportunity to be “inside” production, or more simply it allowed them to have access to the creative process - as projects developed and evolved live within the gallery space. It was no coincidence that I was invited into an exhibition of this kind. At the centre of my own research both in the studio and through a pedagogic practice is an ambition to unlock the art object from a static encounter with its audience I am particularly interested in whether the machines I make resist resolution or closure and if so what does exposing this enable?

So at Modern art oxford I installed Inflate System (automated) and for 5 weeks it was in operation in the gallery

This painting system involved 7 paintings positioned around the space. The system operated using a peristaltic pump, an arterial system of copper pipes and 120 litres of white emulsion paint.

The peristaltic pump moved the paint from a tank through copper pipes into a plastic tube inserted into each paintings belly. The continual action of the pump filled the paintings from the inside out, the paint forced each canvas to expand until paint seeped out of holes cut in the linens surface.

Troughs sat directly underneath the paintings and collected the residual paint as it flowed off the surface of the painting. The troughs connected to a return pipe which fed the paint back to the tank to start the journey again.

The pump, set to a flow rate, fed paint to every painting in the system.

Valves on the supply pipes to each work could be opened or closed to different degrees to regulate the flow of paint to each one

The system would not stabilize.

Increasing the flow to one painting on the system decreased the flow to another. The work needed constantly tuning.

The performance of the works maintenance became integral

- it was tinkered with and taken care of... maintained....

There was no formal instruction given to the gallery attendant's just our dialogue and a growing mutual determination to sustain and regulate the system and keep every painting active.

On visits to the work, I would arrive to find the gallery attendants talking with a visitor whilst tinkering with one of the valves to the paintings.

Over time I became more intrigued by their tinkering, by their care for the work and by what this was doing.

In all the work I make the viewer is never positioned at the end of the work – they are positioned inside it.

Was the performance of the works maintenance, regulation or care enabling a more heightened sense of this?

The visibility of this maintenance brings to mind Chris Burden's *When Robots Rule: The Two Minute Airplane Factory*. This monumental art machine was intended to robotically assemble small rubber band airplanes that, once mechanically built, would be jettisoned into the gallery space beyond the machine. Human intervention was avoided with only the replenishment of materials a necessity for human contact. By early May (three months into the exhibition) the machine had failed to make a single airplane and the only example of a completed plane for the audience to view was a hand made one by the artist himself.

Human intervention, in fact, became crucial to the static “broken” object.

What kept the work alive was the endless flow of engineers and software experts that scurried around in an attempt to make the work....work.

The attendants at Modern art weren't “fixing” my work but they were caring for it, keeping it stable, active and each painting alive. When the work was taken down and the paintings it had made detached from the system there was a heightened sense of shared - authorship, the machine and its attendants and me had made this work work.

In Latin literature the term *Cura* or care has two conflicting meanings:

In one - it means to be worried, troubled or anxious - a person is burdened with cares

And in the other it means or to be attentive and conscientious or devoted

Here we see the tensions that emerge around the word care and these cannot be ignored. Are the attendants in the gallery burdened with their duty to the work or attentive out of care for its requirements?

For the work in the Tetley this tension has become even more pertinent and exaggerated. For the 1st time the paintings being made by the system have completely relied on the attentiveness and action of the attendant in order to be kept alive.

Unlike other works that have gone before this work has been completely stripped back.

There is a plastic pipe, on a continuous loop, feeding paint into the open tops of 4 x 50 cm square paintings

Literally holding the paintings full to the brim.

Each work is made from a double thickness skin of canvas

Carefully sealed and primed so that it will hold the paint that fills its belly

The work relies on a peristaltic pump, moving paint on a circular route from the tank through the supply pipe and back to the tank.

At interim moments, the gallery attendants open the valves in the network, discharging small amounts of paint into each painting, allowing them to overflow.

Any residual paint drips onto the gallery floor.

These are the instructions that were given to the attendants.

Attending to the paintings (Instructions for Leeds)

Instructions for the attendant....

The paintings require activating when the surface of the painting appears dry and when there is no evidence of dripping off the bottom surface.

1. Attend to one painting at a time, when each one calls out for attention.
2. Turn the valve on a painting slowly towards the vertical position using a flat head screwdriver.
3. Notice the painting fill.
4. Fill the painting to the brim allowing only a drip of paint to run over the lip onto the surface of the painting.
5. Pay no attention to the dripping on the floor.
6. Close the valve back to the horizontal position to stop the paint flowing as soon as the paint has dripped over the top lip of the painting.
7. Attempt to send only a single drip over the lip.

8. Send a drip over the brim of each painting when the paint on the surface of the painting is dry.
9. Notice the surface of the paintings and over fill them only when the surface appears dry and there is no evidence of dripping off the bottom edge.
10. Keep the paintings active in this way.

Over the course of the exhibition the works has required the care of the attendants to keep them alive.

In *Take Care* by Anthony Huberman

https://www.theshowroom.org/system/files/062015/55842f3817f49e6da50001b8/original/Take_Care.pdf?1506568407

He proposes that “things” don’t simply sit still under someone else’s terms. Instead he suggests what makes objects compelling is “what they want and how they behave when they are set loose in the world” p 11.

Overfill was filled and set loose.

It required *Taking Care of*. It needed attending to in order to keep it active.

In this article Huberman is articulating his concerns about exhibitions ‘reigning in objects’ in an attempt to make a point.

The curator and the exhibition perform a position of knowing, according to Huberman, in order to inform the audience.

What does this mean for the objects?

Do they too become “expert performers of the “I know”

Huberman goes onto argue not for “not knowing” but for a more vulnerable relationship with knowledge. He calls for a curatorial approach that wanders and learns with rather than acting like an explanation machine. What Huberman is calling out for is an attachment to the objects to be established rather than simply a consumption of them. He cites Verwoert here and suggests that sitting between the “I know” and “I don’t know” is “I care” and if, according to Verwoert, we care then we are curious.

For Huberman the I know coexists equally with the I Don't know in the form of the I Care

What is the difference between caring about and caring for?

The new work produced for *Painting in Time* requires "caring for". Without attention they stop. The attendant is required to notice the painting and overfill it (to send a drip over the front surface) but only when the surface appears dry from the previous action. The material of paint and the act of leaving a residue establishes the logic for the "call" the paintings make.

Do the attendants care more for this work than another that requires no attention beyond invigilation?

Is being forced to attend to something different than caring for it?

Does caring grow out of this forced attention?

The request is more than simply to maintain or watch over the work, it is a request to keep them alive.

In the recent review of *Painting in Time* for "This is Tomorrow" Mathew Hearn talks about the paintings as a record of their own performance.

He says "As paint dries on the surface of these monochrome paintings the transitional time signature of paint is marked and amplified".

What is equally amplified and revealed by each drip as it has dried on the surface of the painting is the attention it has received.

Each layer is a record of the valve being opened and the painting being overfilled by one of the attendants (as requested). The painting becomes a document of its own care

Here I am reminded of the Text that Nina Wakeford wrote in response to my call out for responses to the word care.

Nina wrote about Skin Care

Just a few weeks after her accident, while at Stoke Mandeville, Wendy developed bedsores. Sasha and I were distraught. It implied that she hadn't been turned frequently enough by nurses, either in St George's, the local hospital into which she had been admitted straight after her fall, and/or at the Stoke Mandeville specialist unit for spinal injuries. We googled. The recommended turning interval was 2-4 hours for those unable to move themselves. We guessed she had been turned every 6 or so –

which was the schedule the nurses had been given by the hospital, probably due to staffing (or lack of it). It took months and months for the wounds to heal. Eventually, after more googling, we persuaded the ward sister to try Manuka honey applied directly into the sore. This seemed to have more effect than anything conventional medicine had to offer.

Pressure ulcers are open wounds that form whenever prolonged pressure is applied to skin covering bony outcrops of the body. Patients who are bedridden are at risk of developing pressure ulcers. Pressure ulcers are commonly known as bedsores.

Preventing pressure ulcers has been a nursing concern for many years. In fact Florence Nightingale in 1859 wrote "If he has bed sores, it is generally not the fault of the disease but of the nursing. Others view pressure ulcers as a visible mark of caregiver sin

A visible mark of caregiver skin

The paintings do the opposite to this. They bare the marks of the attention they have received. Each stalactite growth the evidence of ongoing and regular activation.

These paintings have become a document of their own care

The marks on the surface also reveal something else.

These paintings can heal themselves

When I installed the work here (at the Tetley) over two month ago painting four leaked.

The canvas must have had flaws.

It had been treated identically to the other 3 paintings; it had been through the same process of care – as I sealed it and primed it attentively.

During install as the painting filled up for the first-time paint leaked from the underside.

I stopped the process of filling. With a sense of anxiety that painting 4 would fail to fill.

Only half filled, the paint leaked quickly from the bottom edge, dripped onto the floor. (or into a bucket)

Over time, however, the pace slowed and after 2 hours the leak stopped.

The painting had healed itself.

The thickening paint in the pores of the canvas formed a scab, a seal.

Once these healing process had taken place the painting could be filled and activated like the others on the system.

The paintings often misbehave.

No matter how rigorously designed the systems or machines are they can never be fully anticipated. They provoke a dialogue around stress, pleasure and anxiety as the paint drips, pours or spills out of or into a space - literally filling the site with the sound, smell and substance of paint (purposefully or not).

For a minute I want to return to the paintings taking care of them selves and to the rigorous design of the systems because this allows me briefly to introduce the new machines, I am currently working on

In this new work “Taking care of themselves” is becoming more and more relevant and the intention is to remove human intervention completely and build a machine that is “thinking for itself”

This is the prototype for a new work

These are sensors

Each painting has its own pump

The sensors on this new work detect a drip

Using simple programming and an Arduino this work is sensing when a drip has occurred and is attempting to regulate its own flow/or overflow by learning from its previous behavior.

If this new work functions it will sustain its own flow rate, regulate its drip time and attend to itself.

If it doesn't work, it might, like burdens machine attract the attention of people who think they can make it work and rely once on the attention of someone else's hand.

I am running out of time ...

I am still curios about care.....

I just want to take a minute to think about the letter a friend brought to my seminar that had this ripped edge.

The letter was sent to him by the wonderful artist, teacher and colleague Roger Ackling. (it seems fitting to mention such a man in a talk about care)

At first glance the edge of the letter seemed ripped carelessly and yet upon closer inspection the rip had been carefully and purposefully torn to render the skyline of Geneva.

I want to think about carelessness in relation to the painting.

The spill of paint on the floor might look careless, yet it is utterly purposeful and a decision made with absolute attention and certainty.

I want to think more about what the instruction to attend to the painting is doing to..... looking.

In his book *The Object Stares Back* James Elkins (1999) maintains that objects look at us. A knife says pick me up. A cookie says eat me. An unused box reminds us of things we haven't done.

The object invites us to notice it.

In this work the invitation to notice is explicit, it's a duty, a direct instruction

I want to finish with this

This graph was rendered by designer Dexter Sinister for Anthony Huberman who I mentioned earlier, (he was the curator of the last Liverpool Biennale and is the Director of The Artist's Institute in New York)

In his 2007 essay "I not love information" Anthony Huberman presents this curiosity curve.

With curiosity up the vertical axis and information along the bottom Huberman plots a curiosity curve and suggests that we need to stay at the top of it...

He says ...'in a place of speculation...the best art must make us not understand,

For HubermanIf we know too much our curiosity falls

If we want to know more

and we care... our curiosity is sustained

Who is still sucking their sweet?