

## Between Feeling and Knowing

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Although Teresa van Dongen's *Electric Life* (2019) may not seem to directly address themes of motherhood or parenting, my experience as a caregiver for the work resonated with my own concurrent experience of becoming a parent. Deeply affected by it, I share the following personal history to emphasize that this is the kind of story that you will not typically hear in any journal or museum exhibition with a focus on conservation: How do the conservators *feel* about the work in question? Professional boundaries aside, we bring ourselves to the table when we treat artworks under our care.

I had recently discovered that I was pregnant when we began installing a new exhibition, the Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial on the theme of nature, in spring 2019. The eight-month exhibition and installation process coincided nearly exactly with the duration of my pregnancy. The conservation needs included the care of living plants and cellular cultures, and extended beyond the more typical concerns of light levels, mounts, safe shipping, and installation. One of the most unusual responsibilities was the care of *Electric Life*, a work requiring the growth and maintenance of an electrochemically active bacterial colony that powers an off-grid lamp.

Attending to the living culture's needs is the heart of the designer's project, establishing an atypical relationship of care between the owner and object. After arranging transport for and receiving the bacterial culture from the artist's contacts in several universities, it took a week to set up the living "battery cell" of the lamp. I was delighted to be able to measure an electric current after several days. Despite relatively precise instructions and extensive experience with laboratory science, the moment nonetheless felt miraculous. All of a sudden, from water, minerals, and a few bacteria, there was light!

Meanwhile, sonogram by sonogram the creature in my body was becoming a fully realized human being. The first part of the pregnancy was exhausting. It was difficult to work amidst heightened concerns about exposure to the solvents routinely used in conservation combined with a supernaturally acute sense of smell and the New York City summer funk. The baby morphed from potential to actual, slowly becoming more knowable. As a conservator, I usually delight in observing what others cannot, but the pregnancy turned that on its head. The discomfort and anxiety of early pregnancy, while widely acknowledged, is truly not an experience you can share.

Being pregnant crossed between physical and emotional boundaries, upending my sense of self. While I was once just one person, the sole human inhabitant of my body, I was, for a time, more than one, and then later, abruptly and unimaginably, alone again. As the baby grew and developed according to schedule, many ineffable changes took place, at once miraculous and significant yet strangely indiscernible. So much of becoming a parent happens in this space of hidden uncertainty. Tracking the baby's growth on a pregnancy app, comparing his size from a pea to an apricot to an avocado, there remained a great difference between what can be measured and what is felt.

At the museum, I knew that we were attempting to keep Van Dongen's lamp alive for twice as long as previous iterations. Our conservation team monitored the lamp's brightness, diligently charting our comments into an excel spreadsheet and feeding it on the schedule that the artist had suggested. Although the light gradually dimmed between feedings, it would brighten again once the culture was fed. A few months in, we realized that none of us were sure that the lamp was brightening back to its original luminance. We had been documenting the bacterial culture's slow change and weakened state, monitoring it every other day throughout the duration of the exhibition. From this attention to minutiae grew an increasing anxiety that we weren't doing our best to care for the lamp and, a more troublesome realization, that we lacked the understanding of its operation to fix what had broken.

Coinciding as they did, the pregnancy and lamp made a tidy contrast of waxing and waning, but this is only half the story. That same spring, my mother was diagnosed with a progressive form of Parkinson's disease, upending her life and mine. The progression is relatively swift and the disease is rare and not very well understood. By the time a diagnosis is made it is often too late to do anything but try to accept it. Learning how to manage my complex emotions through all of this—becoming a mother and seeing mine dramatically changed—reinforced the idea that thinking and feeling cannot be neatly divorced.

What we know and how we know it is, formally speaking, a matter of philosophy (i.e. epistemology). Professionally, I am accustomed to privileging facts and observations, empirical processes based in materials science and chemistry. But we conservators still interact with objects intimately. Despite being in a field that has labored to define itself as scientific, our treasured hands-on work is nonetheless guided by instinct and intuition. Conservation work operates between *epistêmê* (knowledge/theory) and *technê* (practice), sometimes also phrased as the difference between knowing *that* versus knowing *how*, which makes it so satisfying.

The lamp, though it was not noticeable to most observers, was no longer thriving. Instead, it was languishing. But, I wondered, what if it's not what is visible that matters, but what is invisible, what is felt rather than known? Rather than collapsing the lamp's diminishing function into something as simple and sterile as an imbalance of pH and nutrients, the caregiving relationship morphed this concern into something much more emotionally significant. I can't pretend that the decision making had anything to do with logic, but I felt that it was important to keep the ritual of care and feeding going despite the worry that the lamp's waning culture couldn't be resuscitated in the exhibition's final weeks.

Perhaps we have been a bit negligent in acknowledging the emotional labor involved with caring for a work. We focus too much on what is seen, measured, tabulated, and analyzed while neglecting what is felt. Van Dongen's *Electric Light* forces the owner, exhibitor, or caretaker into a less stable, even precarious, relationship with the lamp. It is not enough to know *how* to feed the lamp, one must also devote care and attention to actually doing it. The imperative of developing a culture of care changes the relationship between people and mere things. By participating in the practices of care, specifically in the care of living creatures (albeit imperceptibly small bacteria), emotionally durable designs like *Electric Life* engage us in this more complex network of meanings.

As much as you may plan for it, you have no idea what the experience of birth is like without going through it. To put it simply, my child's birth did not go to plan. I learned an important and painful lesson that our ideas about control may be mere illusions. If there is any wisdom accrued in becoming a new parent that has translated to my professional life, then it is acknowledging and grudgingly accepting uncertainty. This lesson has become all the more valuable in the past year of pandemic upheavals. Back at work now, I juggle my professional role alongside the demands of a toddler and the challenges of managing my mother's care in an assisted living facility nearby. But between all the coordination, to-do lists, snacks, and diapers, there are glimpses of what's really important—my mother is laughing at my son, hearing him say “Nana” for the first time (and then again about one hundred times immediately thereafter in succession, so delighted is he at our response).

The unpredictable changes of pace of the last few years have thrown so much into play, revealing hidden and neglected facets. In the meditative work of conservation, I enjoy understanding invisible aspects of artworks (including the typical purview of how they are made and how they really work), but I fear this distracts from appreciating other dimensions of meaning. Accepting and even embracing change, instead of trying to resist, it is a hallmark of an evolving understanding of the role of conservators, a principle that I am trying to take to heart myself. Change is inevitable and both growth and loss are change, yet I am still struggling to understand how a lesson from my professional self might cross over to the personal. Having spent a lifetime thriving on predictability and control, being forced into precarious and vulnerable positions has been a strong, if not welcome, corrective.

*This essay is dedicated to my mother and my son. I would like to thank my husband (for everything) and my colleagues and classmates for their thoughts on earlier drafts.*