Seeing the Loop: Examining Empathy through Art Practice

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Abstract
In this chapter I will be using my own artwork, a specific project titled Backstory, to explore empathy by reflecting on empathy and art from a phenomenological perspective. This chapter is written from the perspective of the artist/maker and so foregrounds the qualities of specific artworks as a means to consider where empathy and contemporary art might be seen to cross paths. As philosopher Theodore Lipps defined it, empathy is a kind of imaginative projection or inner imitation of our own feelings into/onto an object or artwork. In short, Lipps’ theory states that the work of art enhances our capacity for empathy as he maintains our sense of beauty results from an ability to identify with the object before us. Empathy as derived from the German *Einfühlung* literally translates as ‘feeling into’. In this account, I am not only concerned with exploring our ability to feel empathy, that is, compassion for people directly (though perhaps it is possible with figurative art), but with empathy as a method for activating what Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft refer to as a shift in perspective, particularly with regard to artwork. For both William Worringer and Theodore Lipps, the form of the artwork or object before us is made by the viewers’ engagement and their personal insights or inner world. Here, I will be considering my own artwork as a means of exploring orientations, ways of looking, looking as an active process, and how this activity uses imaginative projection to explore empathetic engagement. I highlight four key areas within the practice and consider if and whether empathy and empathic processes are manifest in the artwork. The discussion is presented under the following subheadings: Empathy and Recapture, Empathy and the Substitute, Empathy and Doubt, and Empathy and the Loop.

Key Words: Empathy, art, perspective, orientation, proxy, doubt, loop, translation, phenomenology, Samuel Todes, Edith Stein.

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1. Empathy and Recapture
In this section, I am addressing the ideas of ‘recapture’ and artwork as photographic document. I propose that in artwork, ‘recapture’ is achieved through a process of engagement on behalf of the viewer. It is the moment the image is experienced and internalised by the viewer. By internalised, I mean made personal through association or reflection. In the work I discuss below, this internalisation is made manifest and becomes a process of expanded collage. We know collage to mean a form of joining one image to the next. Collage suggests a conflation, a contrasting or complimentary connection of one material with another and as such
is an ideal medium in which to reflect upon empathy’s power to connect. I use the term *expanded collage* to mean a layering process that may happen beyond the image itself, for example in the use of layered media as in photos layered with video. Collage also occurs in the method, in that, I often engage others, involving them in the work and therefore develop a dialectical, layered approach.

As part of my art practice, I take snapshot images (which I refer to as *foundational images*) of strangers in the street and then submit these images to a process of opening up or expansion, often through engaging others to respond in some way to the images. These responses, whether written, filmed or drawn, constitute a form of layering, as they add to and expand the original photograph or *foundational image*. In the video and photography project *Yellow De Ne Pouvoir Etre Seul* (Image 1), the chance sighting of a girl in a gallery with an unusual yellow mark on her clothing provided that foundational image, from which began a process of collecting images of everyday yellow things. This activity was carried out as a means of getting closer to or recapturing lost information about the girl in order to explain her yellow mark. However, after a long time collecting images, it becomes clear that these images and this process only serves to delineate a portrait of my everyday life and not that of the stranger with the yellow mark. The video also makes use of a stratified perspective to offer the viewer a more dynamic role. The camera angle places the viewer in my place; my hands become your (viewer’s) hands. While this act of orientation may seem subtle, it is not incidental. Certainly the notion of empathy as orientation is relevant and has been explored by many. Amy Coplan discusses the importance of recognizing the difference between ‘self-orientated’ and ‘other-orientated’1 perspective taking, arguing that the qualities inherent in ‘other-orientated’ perspective taking make it more faithful to the empathic condition. Steve Larocco sites empathy as a kind of orientation rather than simply a feeling or a state of mind saying; ‘it is an orientation of feeling and cognition toward and through the other’.2 This notion chimes with the process I undertook, where the act of taking the yellow photographs was addressed towards another.

In developing this particular artwork, orientation is also used as a device to engage the viewer, to harness the potential for perspective taking. In the resulting video artwork, the ‘other’ is considered to be both the viewer of the eventual work and the stranger in the original photograph from whom the artwork is derived. Therefore it is my intention in making the work, that the position of the stranger, both the figure in the image and the ‘stranger'/viewer of the work, are considered. This requires a certain refocusing of attention and imagination, one that feels like a kind of ‘leaning out’. This process of orientating the artwork towards the viewer reflects an attempt to adopt empathic strategies in the working processes.

After completing the work, I realised I had no measure of the viewer’s reactions, and wanted to know if my viewer/strangers shared my curiosity and imaginings about the girl with the yellow mark.