DESIGNING THE EMPATHIC EXPERIENCE

Suggestions from Art Practices

Alice Devecchi

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Acknowledgements

The book is based on my doctoral dissertation and reports the research journey started in that context and then continued independently. Along the journey a huge number of scholars and colleagues encouraged me to start the work, persevere with it, and finally to publish it.

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Empathy between Art and Design

Luca Guerrini
Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano

In *Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto* (1967), Giulio Paolini brilliantly overturns the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. We are not observing the portrait, but rather is the young man who casts his mesmerizing stare on us. The sudden identification between the viewer and the artist at work – Lorenzo Lotto, who painted the original portrait in 1506 – slowly shifts into a silent dialogue between two human beings through time and history. Therefore, broadening the meaning of this silent dialogue, we may say that Art looks at us, with its participatory gaze: «The role of Art – says Neri Oxman (2016, p. 5) – is to question human behavior and create awareness of the world around us».

The notion of *Einfühlung* (empathy) designates the traits of this silent dialogue. As an aesthetic principal, it was widely discussed at the turn of the 20th century by Art historians such as Robert Vischer, Heinrich Wölfflin and Wilhelm Worringer (Curtis and Koch, 2009). In this context, empathy fundamentally dealt with the link between the subject (the viewer) and the object (the artwork), but, as Paolini demonstrates, it could trigger much deeper implications. The philosopher Theodore Lipps was the first scholar focusing on its psychological role in the understanding of other humans (Pinotti, 2011), paving the way to the wider interpretation of empathy by Edmund Husserl as the condition that makes intersubjectivity possible (Jardine, 2014).

Early in our century, design researchers and practitioners began to focus on empathy as a potential tool for enriching users' experience of products and services (Leonard and Rayport, 1997; Koskinen, Battarbee and Mattelmäki, 2003; Postma *et al.*, 2012). Human-Centered Design

experts pointed out the value of empathy for a better understanding of the final users' needs, hopes, and aspirations (Brown, 2009).

Moreover, the emergence of the participatory approach to design, which involved many actors, experts, and non-experts in achieving a common goal (Sanders, 2002; Meroni, 2007; Sanders and Stappers, 2008; Jégou and Manzini, 2008), could have also benefited from a more profound knowledge of empathy as a key to interpersonal relations.

Therefore, delving into the notion of empathy seemed a promising task in 2014, when, in the PhD program of design at Politecnico di Milano, a research line was launched aiming at "rethinking the role of the Arts in design culture" (Guerrini and Trocchianesi, 2019). This book by Alice Devecchi – finally published in an updated and revised version – summarizes the outcomes of her doctoral research on the topic, conducted between 2014 and 2018. The author faced tough challenges in carrying out her work, since it was the first attempt to discover new connections between Art and design. She was capable, however, of responding to them successfully.

The careful and in-depth scrutiny of design literature allowed the author to draw up a significant distinction between "empathy as a skill" – an ability the designer develops and shows in his leading role of the design process – and "empathy as a dialogic experience" that enhances the potential of human interactions in collaborative design processes. The latter became the key topic of her research.

The theoretical foundation of Devecchi's work rests on Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology, especially his pupil Edith Stein's dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917). In this regard, the author, relying on her humanistic background, wisely leaves neuroscience in the background, particularly the recent discovery of mirror neurons (Gallese, 2009), which would have forced the entire dissertation toward a science-based approach.

Building the research on the phenomenological approach, on the contrary, is a strategic choice to investigate interpersonal relationship established in co-design processes. In fact, «within the phenomenological tradition […] empathy is a basic, irreducible form of intentionality directed towards the experience of the Other». In this reading, however, «empathy is the condition of a connection rather than a fusion self-other. [It] entails by necessity a difference between the subject of empathic experience and the subject of the empathized experi-

ence» (Devecchi and Guerrini, 2017, p. S4361). Therefore, according to Devecchi, «empathy becomes a way of highlighting and giving value to otherness within interpersonal encounters». In this respect «understanding differences is far more enriching than acknowledging similarities, because otherness extends one's own horizon».

Considering the complex interaction of collaborative design processes and based on Richard Sennett's interpretation, the author attributes a significant *dialogic* connotation to empathy as an experience. A dialogue is not just a conversation. As Sennett points out (2012, pp. 18-20), conversations may be *dialectic* or *dialogic*: the first seeks to resolve oppositions into a new, synthetic agreement; the latter seeks to form a relationship between the participants. According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), a dialogic discussion typically does not succeed by finding "common ground" regarding what is claimed but by allowing the participants to understand one another. Dialogue is not about winning an argument or establishing the truth (a temporary, fragile, and often deceptive one). It is about looking at different opinions, letting them interact and cross-fertilize. Dialogues have the extraordinary capacity to draw energy from people's differences and channel it towards something new. «Though – states Sennett (2012, p. 19) – no shared agreements may be reached, through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views» (Guerrini and Volonté, 2018).

Therefore, in Devecchi's view, empathy is an essential prerequisite of any fruitful human interaction. Moreover, as a dialogic experience, is a genuine and free human disposition that does not allow interest, calculation, or efficiency. In this respect, the author drifts away from market-oriented approaches that initially supported an empathetic attitude, such as experience design and user-centered design, and takes a stand for creative communities, collaborative practices, and socially committed design. This first research outcome certainly takes advantage of the lively debate Ezio Manzini and his PhD students sparked off in the Milan design community (Manzini, 2015).

Empathy is an interpersonal relation we cannot design. We can, however – and this is Alice Devecchi's task – «intervene on contextual elements that allow the empathic experience to take place». She defines these elements as *enablers*, paying tribute – again – to Ezio Manzini and his school (Meroni, 2008; Manzini, 2015).

To design these *enablers*, Alice Devecchi draws upon the Art. Certainly not the kind of Art still dealing with objects, such as paintings, sculptures, or bas-reliefs, that originated the notion of *Einfühlung* more than a century ago. Many contemporary Art practices shift from physical forms to processes, increasingly casting their critical gaze on social and political issues (Trione, 2022). They invade the public space, triggering collective actions in which the audience participates and performs (Perelli, 2006; 2017). Significantly, by investigating socially engaged Art (Kester, 2004; Bishop, 2006), the author identifies «signals of a common ground» with the design community committed to promoting social innovation (Mulgan, 2007), creative communities (Meroni, 2007), and collaborative design culture (Manzini, 2016a). The two sides «herald an ethical turn in producing the material culture we are merged into and an activist approach». Therefore, we may already envision «a shared area to find new ties across the disciplines», which is undoubtedly a remarkable outcome in the aims of our research line.

It is no coincidence that keywords and concepts such as participation, collaboration, dialogue, social change, community-based projects, and relational approaches resonate in all the Arts-based practices selected to identify the *enablers* of empathy as a dialogic experience. Empathizing with the other is a demanding task, for it involves our body – the *somatosensory* apparatus stresses the author – as a whole. Nevertheless, the author chooses the six case-studies with a light – somehow playful – touch, which facilitates our endeavor in reading, analyzing and potentially put her proposals into practice. The clumsy movements of the people forced to cooperate not to collapse upon the floating transparent membrane of *On Space Time Foam* by Tomás Saraceno (2012). The total obscurity of *Dialogue in the dark* by Dialogue Social Enterprise (from 1989), which turn everyone into an unsteady walker playing blindman's buff. The joyful interweaving of bodies with the rubber bands knotted together of *Rede de élasticos* by Lygia Clark (1973). The industrious collaboration of refugees and citizens carefully building their modular lamps in *Green Light* by Olafur Eliasson (2017). All of these Art practices communicate energy, commitment, and trust. Indeed, they go beyond the distinction between "antagonism" (rivalry, competitiveness) and "agonism" (team spirit) (Mouffe, 2005).

Eye Contact Experiment by Liberators International (2017) and *Portals* by Shared Studios (from 2014) imply a more intimate, one-to-

one relationship triggered by eye contact. Once again, the gaze between two humans draws a subtle line connecting the old *Einfühlung* to the contemporary empathic experience.

In the *Eye Contact Experiment*, the colorful invasion of the public space by seated couples facing each other, sometimes silently staring at each other or chatting or even hugging each other, may also recall a joyful event. The gold-painted shipping container of *Portals,* however, discloses a much more challenging task. Its gray interior shows on a screen the encounter with the stranger with all his unsolved questions. Empathy as an embodied experience seems to reject any online conversation. Therefore, after the pandemic, we may think the whole value of this research has been de-potentized. On the contrary, *Portals* demonstrates that, under carefully designed circumstances, online empathic experience may be not only possible but valuable.

A careful analysis of the six case studies helped the author draft a tentative list of nine potential *enablers* of the empathic experience, subdivided into "contextual" (Art box, Tricky space, Bracketing place, Suspended time) and "relational" ones (Body to body, In your shoes, Common goal, Foreign face, In the same boat). They show many conditions related to space, place, time, and action, which may trigger empathy as a dialogic experience in its multifaceted complexity.

These *enablers* were tested with a survey among participants of the artistic interventions and a workshop involving researchers and PhD students working in different design areas, such as collaborative practices, social innovation, and experience design. Communication issues and the need for a substantial critical mass of respondents in some case studies weakened the survey outcomes. The workshop itself produced results below expectations fundamentally for an incorrect phase-timing. Therefore, the author is doubtful about attributing scientific value to these tests. They contributed, however, to share the first results achieved and to corroborate the effectiveness of the research approach.

Alice Devecchi, identifies seven basic principles for the empathic experience to happen after further review of the enablers. Some of them are simply renamed, and some others are adjusted or merged. The final research outcome comprises seven guidelines translating these principles into careful instructions. They are: Safe zone, Never mind the clock, Somatic engagement, Multi-subjectivity, Diversity as value, Interdependence, and Role change.

We always see a self-ironic game in the author's choice of names, almost as if to exorcise the complexity of the topic, the weight of the research, and the value of the outcomes. Alice Devecchi undoubtedly builds her research work better on the theoretical-analytical approach, which she fully masters. However, her effort to face the challenges of design processes and practices is commendable.

She focuses on guidelines instead of tools or a method because she acknowledges the elusive complexity of empathy. Guidelines are not prescriptive by definition; therefore, we can always adjust them to specific contexts, teams or goals. Similarly, we can improve them or increase their number according to further applications. The final set, however, covers all facets of the empathic experience, clearly tackling the fundamental issues of collaborative design practices. «The guidelines – states the author with a theatrical metaphor – address the setting up of the scene and managing a possible choreography of the actors on stage».

The outcomes of Alice Devecchi's research are offered as such to the design community for implementation and development. No time for further testing was devoted before the final discussion. Substantial corroboration for the validity of the guidelines, however, was provided by *Design in the Middle* (MAXXI Museum, Rome, 2017), a workshop in which 30 designers invited from the Middle East/Euro-Med region co-designed possible responses to critical issues arising from their territory (Perez and Tarazi, 2017). A careful scrutiny of the design process demonstrated the efficacy of some of the principles underpinning the guidelines (Devecchi and Guerrini, 2019).

During the thesis development, we co-authored two essays that are still highly ranked on Academia and Research Gate (Devecchi and Guerrini, 2017; 2019). With this book, Alice Devecchi finally shares with the design community her comprehensive work. Beyond comments and evaluations that will follow, the author's effort to shed light on the role of empathy as a dialogic experience in social and collaborative design practices – and we may say in society at large – deserves full consideration. Especially in a dark hour in which humans seem to neglect both dialogue and empathy dramatically.

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