

Agents of Concern: Images and Empathy (Hasselt, 16 Nov – 15 Dec 23)

PXL-MAD, School of Arts, Hasselt, Nov 16–Dec 15, 2023

Deadline: May 21, 2023

Toon Leën

An exhibition and conference at PXL-MAD, School of Arts, in collaboration with Hasselt University.

Conference: November 16–18, 2023;

Exhibition: November 16 – December 15, 2023

Agents of Concern explores the impact of images on our empathic engagement with the world around us. We seek artists and scholars across disciplines to contribute to an exhibition and conference program that brings together ways of speaking with, about, and to images. How do images affect our emotional and cognitive capacities to understand the experiences and mental states of others, and to feel our way into both human and non-human entities?

The project is a three-pronged investigation into what we term image-mediated empathy. First, focusing on visual strategies of projection, imitation, and imagination, we compare the different types of empathic engagement that these strategies enable. Second, addressing the conceptual origins of empathy in the notion of *Einfühlung*, developed in psychology and aesthetics in 19th century Germany, we discuss mechanisms of animation that allow viewers to approach images as if they were living entities. What happens when empathy for images replaces empathy through images? Third, we examine the role of empathy in practices of visual forensics. We ask how an engagement with the critical consolidation of evidence via images reshapes the empathic gaze of media consumers.

Approaching images as agents of concern, we explore the numerous ways in which they direct our empathic gaze. Images can be seen as passive vehicles, deployed to manipulate viewers' emotions in the service of aesthetic, political or commercial concerns. In addition, images at times appear to have an agenda of their own. They can themselves become "of concern" to us when we attribute agency to them.

Set up as an exhibition and conference, Agents of Concern will create a dialogue between academic and artistic ways of deploying and speaking about images. The exhibition will showcase video works that feature and question different manifestations of the empathic gaze. These works include Harun Farocki, *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969); Chloé Galibert-Laîné, *Watching the Pain of Others* (2018); Jill Godmilow, *What Farocki Taught* (1998); Florian Göttke, *Toppled* (2011); Jelena Jureša, *Aphasia (Act Three) – "A Kid From the Neighbourhood"* (2019); Rabih Mroué, *On Three Posters* (2004/2022); Goda Palekaitė, *I Write While Disappearing* (2021); and Frank Theys, *Mil-*

gram Rewoken (2017/2023).

We seek two forms of contributions: 25-minute lectures for the conference and short video works to be included in the exhibition.

☒ For the lectures, we seek contributions from researchers in the humanities and the sciences—including art history, history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, and neuroscience—as well as from open source investigators, artists, filmmakers and other image experts.

☒ We welcome video contributions from artists as well as researchers. These videos can take the form of video essays, interviews, video lectures, and experimental videos, and should feature a reflection on images.

Themes of the contributions may include:

1. The empathic gaze: projection, imitation, imagination

☒ The visual strategies shaping viewers' emotional responses and levels of empathic engagement

☒ Political uses of images and the role of empathy in the circulation of images

☒ Manifestations of the empathic gaze in devotional practices

☒ Remote spectatorship and the mechanisms of identification and embodiment

☒ Images and the fear of contagion

☒ Images and vicarious trauma

2. Animating the inanimate

☒ The Pygmalion effect and the construction of living images

☒ Idolatry and images as role models

☒ The impact of new media and AI on viewers' interactions with images

☒ Image operations and images beyond representation

☒ Empathy with visual abstractions

3. Practices of visual investigation

☒ Photography and human rights

☒ Visual testimony and the construction of visual evidence

☒ The use of images in open source investigations

☒ Visual literacy and strategies of countering disinformation

☒ Ways of empathizing with the archive

We encourage creative uses of presentation technologies. We will accommodate contributors' ideas and requests regarding visual experimentation in their presentations. For researchers who have no prior experience with video-making and are interested to contribute a video, assistance with filming and editing can be provided. The on-campus recording studio at PXL-Digital Learning Lab will be made available to contributors.

The keynote address will be on the evening of November 16. The conference will take place on November 17–18. The videos will be shown at the accompanying exhibition, from November 16 – December 15, 2023. The venue for the conference and exhibition is PXL-MAD Gallery, Elfde-Liniesstraat 25, 3500 Hasselt, Belgium.

To be considered for the conference and/or exhibition, please submit an abstract of ca. 250 words to agentsofconcern@pxl.be by May 21, 2023.

The abstract should sketch a topic pertaining to empathy and images, and should specify if you wish to contribute a video or a lecture. Lectures should be in English, while the video contributions can be in English, Dutch, French or German.

Please include:

- ☒ Your current institutional affiliation (where applicable) and a short biographical note indicating relevant research or publications
- ☒ The title of your contribution
- ☒ For video works: the estimated duration and language of your contribution
- ☒ If required: a statement requesting travel funding that includes estimated travel costs

There will be no registration fee for contributors. Funding for travel and accommodation can be provided based on need.

For more information, please visit <http://www.agentsofconcern.com>

This project is organised by the research group FRAME at PXL-MAD, School of Arts, in collaboration with Hasselt University, KRIEG?, and CCHA, with the kind support of the Flemish Government and Video Data Bank.

Reference:

CFP: Agents of Concern: Images and Empathy (Hasselt, 16 Nov - 15 Dec 23). In: Arthist.net, Mar 14, 2023 (accessed Jun 13, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/38783>>.