

Feeling In and Feeling Off

To correspond with her solo exhibition, *While the Light Eats Away at the Colours*, Apichaya (Piya) Wanthiang converses with Johnny Herbert about ideas central to her work, including how we might think empathy in a consumer society, and how a concept of affordance has helped her fine-tune the exhibition at Stiftelsen 3,14.

JH: You once wrote to me: “I very much like the expression that my hands are far smarter than my head ever will be; they might also be more empathic.” Could you expand on this a little more?

AW: A place to start could be: how does the knowledge acquired by our hands (or other parts of our body) differ from formal education we get at schools? One simple answer is that this kind of knowledge is often passed on less consciously, and is possibly therefore much more ingrained or literally embodied. We could also claim that this kind of knowledge is often less occluding of other things, maybe that’s why it could be more empathic? It’s as if our mind polices us, dividing people and cultures into categories.

From observation it seems to me that bodies interact less strenuously with other bodies than minds engage with other minds. Cultural or other differences are just as present in bodies as in our thinking, yet it seems to me that those differences are more accepted, even empathized with – why? Is it because there’s an acceptance that we are less in control of how our bodies move and engage than how we think and converse? In regular school curricula, gymnastics or dance are only a small part of basic education. We are strongly conditioned either way, but do we think that one is more conscious and therefore we ought to be more responsible for it? In this regard I see a big difference between Asian and Western formal education. In Asia there’s much more emphasis on formal bodies and order.

This remark in particular has bearing in relation to painting – that’s where I feel the comment to be truthful. Advancing in painting means looking at many things and actively painting. I can read and talk about it all I want but it will not make me any better at it. My hands are explicitly implicated in the ability to tap into my own senses and call on the viewer’s senses to relate to an image or work.

JH: The translation of the German word *Empfindung* into English is one littered with parentheses, footnotes, and frustration. If not left in the German, ‘empathy’ is the most common rendering. To initiate her talk on the concept of *Empfindung* in connection with the work of the late Harun Farocki, Robin Curtis presents a quote by Harun:

This is a word that belonged to the enemy. I had learned from Brecht to not gaze so starry-eyed/to not perpetuate Romanticism. Empfindung is too good a word to leave it to any enemy. And Empfindung is a much better word than identification, since it has the flavour of transgression, or a vaguely violent form of compassion or alignment. It must be possible to partake in Empfindung in such a way that the effect is one of estrangement.

Adopting Bertolt Brecht’s assertion of ‘estrangement’¹ as the key socio-political function of theatre – the quickened intellectual reflection hijacking affective identification, that feeling *with* a character is overridden by contemplation *of* that invitation to feel with – Robin notes that Harun is not so willing to give up empathy as was Bertolt.

Now, whenever we speak, you bring up empathy. Would you agree with Harun’s assertion that empathy can be a process for estrangement or do you see it working towards other ends?

¹ In German *Verfremdung*: another contested term, having also been translated as ‘alienation’ and, perhaps less appropriately, as ‘distancing’.

AW: It's a bit funny that from that talk you took out a part I had annotated with a question mark. I had wanted to discuss this further: where does this association (of *empathy* or empathy) with the starry-eyed and the romantic come from? Just as the word 'romantic' is currently often used as 'over-romantic', the negative connotation making it something to be avoided.

I was reading *Inventing Peace, a Dialogue on Perception* by Wim Wenders and Mary Zournazi, where she as a teacher asked her students what they understood by the term 'peace'. Her students answered that it is the opposite of war. However, Wenders remarked that reading it this way makes it devoid of conflicts. Instead, he proposes that it should contain conflicts. I wonder if empathy has the same difficulty? That the general understanding is one of uncomplicated projection into another subject? The trouble with positive terms, I think, is that people don't believe in them. They seem too far removed from day to day life. If we are formed by everything around us: architecture, city fabrics, relationships, and not least the media then it becomes clear that negative words and images are far more present, and as such, do they instruct us more?

I certainly agree that empathy is much more complex and could work towards effects such as estrangement, unsettlement or a distancing; however, it's not the main focus of my practice. Yet, it would be fair to say that I often aim to make use of estranging elements in order to stimulate decenterings. I think genuine empathy has to be equally inclusive of estrangement and other negatives such as sadness, anger, violence, grief... etc.

At some point in her talk Curtis makes this historical distinction between *empathy* and empathy, which I believe is very important. She notes that *empathy* stems more from aesthetic history, whereas empathy initially belonged more to the field of psychology. This distinction has blurred somewhat over time but the main implication is that *empathy*, which could be translated as 'to feel into...', applies to both subjects and objects. This is probably why it had such appeal in aesthetic fields: you could feel into art, objects, or landscapes... It's a very applicable and relies on thinking imaginatively.

JH: We can return to starry-eyedness/the stars. I agree with you that criticism and criticality seem to have become entangled with a pessimist analytic now prevalent in much public language. Proclamations of a 'critical' nature (*negatively* critical, fault-finding) also now seem to be conjoined with being clever, hence the shorthand denigration 'romantic' as denoting a perspective accused of finding solace in the past and in some way blind to a specific present state of affairs – perhaps by love, or the stars?! When we think we require variously dogmatic assertions or inheritances, covert or not, which operate like a mason's tools as the ratio of an excavation – each dig might require different, if not new, tools. Yet, as you mention with the concept of violence, binaries can only be a hindered beginning, so perhaps we need to enrich the term 'empathy' rather than cordon it off as the 'enemy': how might we think of it amongst the force-field of seduction within which we are targeted everyday as consumers?

AW: This is a question that I have been mulling over for quite a bit. Empathy is necessarily implicated in the web of seduction, consumerism, and profit. In *The Century of the Self*, a documentary by Adam Curtis, we are shown how companies make profit through trying to sell us products that fulfill our deepest desires through tools such as PR (public relations), product placement, focus groups, and diversifying products in order to allow for the feeling of self-expression... etc. All of these tools make use of our inner desires, as well as our ability to empathize. So much so, that we can hardly think of empathy loose from profit. This dynamic becomes more puzzling in relation to humanitarian work: imagery of war and suffering is used in the hope to secure donations. Right or wrong seem to be entirely obsolete categories here. I don't have an answer to your question, but I think it is the right question to ask. Can we imagine empathy towards ends other than those of profit making?

I would like those other ends to be in consideration of humanity-at-large: to think beyond and yet with generations past and future, beyond and with gender, beyond and with cultures and legacies, beyond and with borders and nationalities, beyond and with disciplines... I don't know if we can possibly stretch our imagination that far, yet there seems to be a need for this way of thinking which allows us both to breach and yet be in consideration of things, not through a dismissal but with care. I could be misread here and be considered moralizing. However, the more I think about it, the more I see the necessity to verbalize and visualize this thinking. We need other things to circulate in order to instruct us differently...

JH: What about if we totally overhaul a conception of humanity rather than merely reform it? Paraphrasing a whole community of thinkers (the ones I'm thinking of most are Fred Moten and Denise Ferreira da Silva), it seems to me that the subject – the focal actor of humanity, the self-determined individual living freely and born of the self-assertion of existence announced by an interior thinking process ('I think therefore I am') – is a product of the repression of other thinking beings excluded from the a given 'freedom'. So, *giving up* that freedom offered and *giving up* the subject outright, seems an initial step: two huge foundations of what we might think of as 'humanity', right? Giving up all that, suddenly the stress is on the imagination: re-reading pasts that gesture towards those not written into any histories, interfacing with the world and realising that we're constantly possessed by other things and people.

Walter Benjamin claims that the flâneur is the figure engaging sensuously with things that have been nurtured within the violent grid of price and quantity, in so doing over-determining the relationship invited by conditions of consumption. In *The Arcades Project* (convolut M17a), he cites this from Gustave Flaubert:

I see myself at different moments of history, very clearly. . . . I was boatman on the Nile, leno [procurer] in Rome at the time of the Punic wars, then Greek rhetorician in Suburra, where I was devoured by bedbugs. I died, during the Crusades, from eating too many grapes on the beach in Syria. I was pirate and monk, mountebank and coachman – perhaps Emperor of the East, who knows?

It seems like the practices of the flâneur, as a kind of hyper-empathiser, prohibitively and painfully crippled by an uncontrollable, dilated capacity to be affected, could be thought of as a way of breaching a consideration of empathy that needs some kind of oppositional stance, when localizing and distancing ignores the fact that we're implicated in all that 'otherness'. Perhaps the 'feeling into' of *emföhlung* is pre-empted by the pregnant atmosphere of 'being felt', that being in the audience in the theatre means you're part of what's happening, that you're in the show?

AW: You make a really good point. I'm not sure if we need and if we can give up the subject and (our) freedom. To include non-human things in the equation seems like a fundamental condition to imagine. Humans are core actors, yet it seems that acting humane can only be in consideration of non-human things. The Flaubert example only cites examples of imaginary others who are all human.

Can the flâneur only exist through the condition of consumption? In the same way that the Angelus Novus in Klee's painting can only progress through the violent storm? One of the anchors of my practice is to try to create dwellings. A dwelling is a place where we all get to be flâneurs, and where we empathize with other means towards other ends. What becomes painfully visible here is that it is just a pocket within a much larger and violent infrastructure. Within its pocket, it's escapism. Yet can it have larger effects on its surrounding infrastructure? What if we can train/ingrain our bodies and minds to dwell in the midst of violence and chaos? What if dwelling bodies would insist on a daily space that is not overtaken by profit and violence?

JH: How might this happen?

AW: As touched upon above: To shift emphasis from humans to objects, things, environments, stories, anecdotes...To focus on the things and our surroundings that we're automatically implicated in, just by existing. I'm not sure if that's really the answer, but it's what I try to play with: to decenter, not once, but continuously.

JH: ...and that the 'center' is a construction of the surround anyway. Back to the idea of dwelling: how have you been particularly working with this idea in *While the Light Eats Away at the Colors*, your solo exhibition at Stiftelsen 3,14?

AW: I tried to make paintings that take in consideration landscapes that do not necessarily belong to me, yet I try to inhabit them through the activity of, and spending time looking at, painting. Inspired by

imagery like Hiroshige's *Cherry Blossoms in Full Bloom in the Third Month along the Five Streets of the New Yoshiwara* from the series "Famous Views of Edo" (1830s), I explored an alternating focus between foreground and background, open to the thought that what appears logical in reality is not necessary so pictorially. The latter requires a more active use of our imagination. This pictorial logic is one that comes very natural to painters. It designates our fluctuating positions in relation to the rest of the world, and as such entangles us within it. I often get comments from visitors that something 'feels' off in my paintings. Sometimes this can be a positive sign of a decentering of elements that audiences expect to be a certain way.

Most of the paintings in the exhibition are based on source imagery made during a visit to Nice in France. I was there to visit the Matisse chapel – this place and its imagery have been part of my subjective archive for many years. The act of returning to imagery or text, or to people who inspire you, is a way of corresponding through time. It can be a resonating with, as well as a breaching. I suppose there are also some elements within the painting, some technical aspects, I try to work through with specific artists as my companions.

JH: What are these problems on which Henri Matisse has been working with you?

AW: I wouldn't term them 'problems'. Maybe it's like the recognition of effects/affects, and needing to understand those affections requires me to work through them. With Matisse, there's a purity to his forms and spaces, and maximum impact in relation to colour combinations. I often have the instinct to think and work in a maximalist way, adding many elements, or over-painting. It seems to me that he has opposing instincts: stripping down and cutting out, even though most of his works are hardly minimal.

I often wonder about the qualities of spiritual effects in places such as the Matisse Chapel in Vence, the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Michelangelo's Medici Chapel... the list goes on. If there's a scale of spiritual effects and qualities then how do these different places enact it and how do they differ? Maybe there's such a thing as a search for a logical aesthetic unity that is person- and time-specific. They have always struck me with awe, these culminations of life long practices. What was it they were searching for? These places mentioned are really that: places like no other, which have been entirely constructed from motives, topics, and formal play, and yet there's still something that they share: a presence that is testament to a life long practice within a certain time.

JH: I'm with you here. Returning to the exhibition: the design of the space has been important too hasn't it?

AW: Yes, it has. In collaboration with Trond Lossius and Cristian Stefanescu, I tried to work towards a slow narrational unfolding. Trond has been a great conversation partner and has been thinking along with me on topics such as slow time and setting ambience. With Cristian I designed open-frame structures and benches that connect and create a modular grid. I wanted the supporting structures to have a lightness because some of the paintings have ended up quite filled. Each frame and bench is different from others and is determined by the size and scale of the largest painting which served as the main grid, the other paintings were placed in relation to it. One painting can be seen from different angles and as such are conversing with each other depending on where the viewer sits or stands, there are several sweet spots, which organises the space but is not authoritarian. These are all very basic decisions in relation to composition and play, but it's all in the fine-tuning. Variation through repetition creates rhythms evocative of dwellings.

JH: Design and atmosphere is something I've been thinking about quite a bit too. I see where your interest in the term 'affordance' comes from here (it also brings to mind Keller Easterling's concept of 'disposition' – something I still don't feel I have a hold of). I'm a little cautious of these terms, can you expand upon how you think of the term 'affordance', how it's been useful for you and, particularly, how it works with a thinking of atmosphere and ambience?

AW: I haven't read Easterling's take on this. Do you want to expand on that? To me affordances are simply material and compositional decisions that lend themselves to something specific (both in acting

and reading). For example: a chair affords us to sit; a glaze on a painting affords us to see through. It is extremely helpful to have it in mind while working on installations or exhibition designs. It is less helpful while painting, or writing. Before and after that process kicks in I think it's crucial to consider the audience, to think about affordances is to consider how the viewer could experience or enact the work.

Studio work starts with a gut instinct, an image or a sentence. The clearest and most stable things during the process is the kind of ambience I want to set, which is usually a transference of place specific qualities, in this exhibition that would be Nice and it's surroundings. I also try to include topics/motives that occupy me such as thinking about when might a body be a landscape, and when does it become a subject. However, the reason I was so attracted to Nice was that the colours in the landscape and the way the city and it's surrounding was built seemed to resonate with a certain pace – similar to places I grew up in. Then I attempt to activate some of that through studio work, to recreate rhythms through formal decisions that call for that space. The notion of affordance within a painting would require expanding on many more and varied examples, but I think you can really think and discuss a painting in terms of affordances as well. I'm curious: what are the reasons to be cautious about the term?

JH: I want to voice 'affordance' as a reconfiguration that is first social. My previous caution has been somewhat alleviated having just read Trond (Lossius)'s blurb for what he'll talk about at the one-day seminar adjoining the exhibition, particularly the part mentioning an approach to the term through a consideration of ambience; however, it is still a little vague to me, as is Keller's 'disposition', I can't understand right now how they help us think prior to the oppositions we perceive as presented to us, 'before and before' as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney might say. I hear 'relationship' in the term 'affordance' too so want to know how this relationship is initiated and what the conditions of its hosting are because I think of objects as social but not like Karl Marx. I want to think the 'fetish' of Karl's conception of 'commodity fetishism' with those for whom such 'powerful figures' *avowedly* function with great power in a community (groups within the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example); possessions possess us, objects are vessels of powerful social desires, not possessions articulating a self-possessed individual's free will. So, I'm hearing 'relationship' and am thinking 'sociality'. I suppose a flâneur speaks here. We seem to be nearing Fred and Stefano's thinking of 'the hold' in *The Undercommons*, where this alludes to the holds in which slaves were transported in ships and a 'hapticality' of being held and holding one another (like being in the show by being in the audience?)

AW: Right! I was thinking of this part in their book:

The hold's terrible gift was to gather dispossessed feelings in common, to create a new feel in the undercommons. Previously, this kind of feel was only an exception, an aberration, a shaman, a witch, a seer, a poet amongst others, who felt through others, through other things. Previously, except in these instances, feeling was mine or it was ours. But in the hold, in the undercommons of a new feel, another kind of feeling became common. This form of feeling was not collective, not given to decision, not adhering or reattaching to settlement, nation, state, territory or historical story; nor was it repossessed by the group, which could not now feel as one, reunified in time and space.

So, I think of a dwelling as never experienced the same. For every visitor that engages with it, it does not have one unified time and space. Still, a visitor might feel in and feel off it, a meandering that could be experienced alone, together.