Empathy Mimicry. On the Series "Other people's feelings are also my own" by
Markus Hansen

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Two photographic portraits, juxtaposed, show two different persons who both
look at the camera with a similar attitude, posture, and facial expression.
We see their face and shoulder in a classic full-face view, the rest of
their bodies is out of frame.

*To the left an almost bald man in his mid-fourties, smiling broad and
openly, straight at the camera, his teeth beaming white; he wears a red
shirt with lavish white leaf ornaments, the top button is open; his left
shoulder is turned towards the camera a little, so his right shoulder
catches the light that flows in from the left. To the right a woman of
around fourty with brown, dark eye-brows and shoulder-long hair that she
has tucked behind her ears, but, due to its volume, it flows forward; her
open and broad smile reveals her teeth, she beams at the camera; she is
wearing a red blouse with delicate white flower ornaments, the top two
buttons are open so the tips of the broad collar touch her shoulders; she
wears a short leather necklace with a silver letter "A" hanging in front of
her neck; her right shoulder is out of focus, turned back and towards the
light flowing in from the left, suggesting that her upper body is turned
slightly.*

Another two such portraits, again two persons, different from the first
set, yet their attitude and mimic again quite similar. At second sight we
notice that one of the two persons, the man in his fourties, was also in
the previous set of images.

*To the left an almost bald man in his mid-fourties, looking at the camera
with a calm and friendly look, barely a smile, his head slightly inclined
to the right; faint, blond eye-brows; he wears a striped shirt with
different shades of pink and violet, the top button is open; his left
shoulder is turned towards the camera a little, catching the mild light
that comes from the right. In the image on the right a man in his fifties,
with greying short hair, fading at the top of his head which is inclined
towards the right, where the light is also coming from; he smiles calmly at
the camera, his mouth a closed straight line, slightly pulled up towards
his right eye; he wears a yellowish striped shirt, the top button is open.*

With the third set we begin to understand the logic of the series: two
portraits juxtaposed, two persons with a similar attitude, of which one is
again the male person we have seen in the previous two sets.

Looking at the twin portraits from left to right and back, we search for similarities and differences between the two faces. The two persons shown are obviously different people, but not only are they dressed similarly, their facial expression, the pose, the lighting are also similar. How can two different people look so alike? How does one mimic the facial expression of another person? How are similarity, identity and difference coded, and how do we recognise them?

The fourth, fifth, sixth sets follow. In each the recurring male person assumes the attitude of the person in the other portrait, whether they are male or female, younger or older than he is; similar are the way the head is held, the gaze and the smile, even the attire of shirts or jumpers or scarfs simulates that of the other — never in an identical manner, never does he wear exactly the same shirt or scarf as the other person, but his portrait is made to look so similar that the two persons appear as though they were related, like siblings perhaps. Like kindered spirits.

This guy makes an effort to look like those other people, to emulate their expressions, to pose just like them. Does he just want to look like them, or does he want to be like them? Or is he trying to find out, through acting like them, what it might feel like to be in their position, to be them?

The idea that the recurrent male person is the artist, and that he is in control of the process, cannot be gleaned conclusively from the images themselves, though it is suggested by the title of the work, "Other people's feelings are also my own", — assuming that this is a statement of the author about the motivation for, or a narrative about, the twin portraits.

We can imagine how Markus Hansen has the portraits of the other people taken, or rather how he takes them himself, accepting whatever his sitters are wearing and however they might feel at that moment, choosing a white background to achieve a formal stringency throughout the series. After a particular image of the other person has been selected, the "artist as actor" meticulously studies the portrait and tries to find clothes and accessories that look similar to the other person's. Finally posing, making the face, looking at the portrait of the other person and comparing it to his own face in a mirror, looking back and forth between portrait and mirror until also the portrait of the other person appears as though he was looking into a mirror, his own image becomes an emotional mirror image of the portrait of the other person. Becomes *almost* an image of the other person. Then taking the photograph. Finally cropping and printing both images to compose the twin pair that he henceforth and consistently always presents together.

We have no indication about the identity of the sitters, other than the faces and what we read from their physiognomy and the indication of their clothes. No names or dates are given, and we can only speculate about the personal relationship that may or may not exist between the artist and these "other people": are they members of his family, or friends and people he is well acquainted with, or accidental encounters? Given that the entire work by now consists of literally hundreds of portraits, arranged in several series, of people with extremely different physiognomies, we can assume that they must be taken from the artist's personal network, and possibly beyond.

The play of faces in this series of portrait pairs is a play of media. Firstly, the medium of this work is photographic portraiture. The work deals with the representation of individuals and the individuality of portraits, and with the destabilisation of that individuality and "likeness".

The gap that opens between the two persons is both spatial and temporal: they could both be either in exactly the same spot, or in two entirely different places; and the images could have been taken at exactly the same moment, or one after the other.

By repeating, re-assuming and re-portraying the pose of the first image, Hansen both duplicates and extends the lost moment of the other's presence and feeling. We are reminded of the temporality that Roland Barthes identified as the *noema* of photography, the indexical "having-been-there" of what is represented in the photograph, "*ça-a-été*". In Barthes' analysis, this characteristic of the photograph encapsulates its special affective dimension, the *punctum*, and the potential of longing for a return to the captured moment. In Barthes case, his reflexion about this quality of the photographic image in "La Chambre claire" was motivated by his browsing through the photographs of his beloved mother, soon after her death.

Imagine that Roland Barthes would have adopted Hansen's principle, taking the photograph of his mother as a child that inspired his mournful reflexion and *posing as his mother*, emulating her attitude in that photograph like Hansen emulates the portraits of those "other people"; imagine Barthes trying to mimic his mother's look, her facial expression, her attire; imagine him trying to revive the moment of that ultimate *punctum*. What difference would that imaginary emotional unison have made to Roland? What difference do the portraits make to Markus? And to his sitters?

Secondly, in Hansen's series of image pairs, the medium of the first face is the second face. Each of the second images is a portrait of the portrait

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to which it responds. The second face, as a medium, conveys and relays the emotional content of the first face. Before and after. Only then the medium of each face is the photograph — even though in the artwork that we experience, the photograph is always there first. Instead, we try to reach through the surface of the photograph and touch the moment when the sitters looked and felt *just like this*. *Between* the left image and the right image, between these emotional twins, that moment is radically disjointed. The gap between the two persons implies that they do not inhabit the same space/time, but two radically distinct sites; what we observe is not a social, but a radically individualised setting; radical difference in an identical, if generic space/time.

Finally, thirdly, the medium of the pair is the viewer's comparing eye. Wandering from the left face to the right face, we construct the similarities and differences, we construct relations and narratives. And possibly wonder about ourselves.

Imagine there was no temporal gap, but rather co-presence of the two sitters in the same place: the two images could have been taken at the same moment. Would both persons have been facing and looking at each other? If they were true mirror images, their faces would have to be inverted towards each other, one head tilted to the right, the other to the left — as though they were looking at each other through a mirror's reflection. A moment of unison and intimacy, unbearable for an onlooker to witness?

The myth of Narcissus resonates in this recursive structure, even though what we see is so clearly not a mirror image, but two similar, neither identical nor inverted images. More importantly, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum* comes to mind, a forceful deconstruction of the Freudian *mirror* that subsumes one (in Freud's case, female) subjectivity under another (male). Hansen's much earlier works from the 1980s asked similar questions about the status of male subjectivity through staged self-portraits. In "Other people's feelings are also my own", the possibility of identity is further dislodged by the maze of reflected and emulated emotions and identities, the shifting between ages, genders and races, juxtaposed into a fictitious encounter of two faces.

Imagine that instead of before-and-after, and instead of simultaneity, the image pairs were realised the other way around: imagine that the portraits of the recurrent male had been taken first, and the *other people* were then sought and prepared to assume his attitude. (The work "Other people's feelings are also my own" has been presented in several different series in which the portraits of the recurrent male are sometimes placed on the left, at other times on the right hand side — suggesting that the before-and-after sequence might at times have been reversed.) *My own feelings are also other people's.* Many people trying to act like him, or to be like him...

Like the fans of a pop star or other popular hero, trying to emulate their idol's attire, style and habits. Attempting to inhabit the idol's image, donning the facial expression like a mask, symbolically stalking his body, creeping into his image as though into an empty skin, in vain trying to take the idol's pose and place. Testing their look-alike potential.

The mimicry that we observe in the *performance* of the portraits is not the physiognomic resemblance described by Johann Kaspar Lavater, who attempted to identify certain morphological facial features with character traits. Instead, Hansen's work relates to the psychological mimicry that Charles Darwin first described systematically in *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872). Two interesting trajectories follow from this: one is that of *camouflage*: mimicry's attempt at resemblance seeks to reduce difference. In the case of animals and their skin colours, this is a way for them to blend in with their environment in order to hide from predators. In the case of human relations, facial mimicry can also act as a way of blending in, and reducing the difference from other people: Hansen's mimicry could then be interpreted as a form of *hiding in the mask of the other*.

Such *external* mimicry has its *internal*, psychological equivalent in the sense of empathy, compassion, or "feeling with", the emulation of the feelings sensed in another person that then create, more or less deliberately, a particular, similar facial expression.

The reciprocity of facial expressions between photographer and sitter is an old topos in photographic portraiture. The 19th-century photographer and entrepreneur, André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri, suggested that when taking portraits, the photographer has to carefully observe the sitter during their introductory conversation and must then quickly identify a typical pose and facial expression that will most accurately portray him or her. How then can the photographer influence the sentiment of the sitter in such a way that the chosen expression appears on his or her face when the portrait is actually taken? "The faculty of imitation is innate with man: sadness transmits itself, smiling is contagious; observe the spectator in a theatre auditorium: you will see that the physiognomy, that his features are in unison with the actor who interests or moves him. You will see the various nuances of the scene passing over his features; well! the artist-photographer has no other means of reviving on the face of his model the vanished expression than to take on that expression himself: it is necessary that he identifies with the moral situation which he wants to arouse in the person who is to be represented, and which alone can give to his physiognomy the expression necessary for the perfect execution of the portrait." (Disdéri 1862, p. 284)

The mechanism that triggers this play of the facial muscles described by Disdéri is psychological, not electrical as in the 19th-century scientific work of Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne who caused muscular contractions of faces by local electrocution, taking his subjects through an electro-morphological and codified series of expressions of emotions. This automation of facial expressions is today continued in the performances of Dutch artist Arthur Elsenaar who offers his face as an expressive *interface* for a fictitious artificial entity that uses the "hollow", depersonalised matrix of Elsenaar's face in order to better, i.e. more empathetically communicate with humans. While Elsenaar offers up control over his facial muscles to a machine, Hansen's deliberate performance is one of empathy with other people.

Further examples of artistic portraiture and self-portraiture come to mind and help to pinpoint the specificity of Hansen's approach. Cindy Sherman's images show the artist in any number of social and historical roles, most often refering to artistic and cultural contexts, both historical and contemporary. The images show her masquerading "as an other", inventing possible personae — but not, like Hansen, gauging the difference between herself and another person. In contrast, the photographic self-portraits of artists like Helga Paris or Roman Opalka show and partly stage the artist's self, they are images of introspection and, arranged in long-term series, documents of the aging body. This aspect was pushed further by Jo Spence who documented and enacted her own body before, during and after surgery that she received because of a breast cancer. Instead, Hansen's critical self-portraiture performs a questioning and dispersion, if not an erasure of the self.

In that sense his practice is also radically opposed to the tradition of portraiture and self-portraiture as represented by artists throughout the last centuries, from Hans Holbein to Thomas Ruff. In Hansen's self-portraits, the attitude and self-presentation of the artist is distinctly modern. It is unthinkable that self-affirming artists like Dürer or Rembrandt would have presented themselves in such a playful and volatile manner; instead, we can think of the posed and *eccentric* self-portraits of Maurice Quentin de La Tour, or of Egon Schiele, as precursors. And of Andy Warhol's polaroids which show him in changing attire, sometimes in drag, and — formally similar to Hansen's images — mostly in front of a neutral white wall, concentrating the viewer on the appearance of the face and upper body. Warhol's self-portraits are similarly anecdotal and incidental, though here the *incident* appears to be germane to Warhol's own, however fragmented life, whereas Hansen's appearance, in this series of "self-portraits", is always predicated on the appearance and emotional states of *other people*.

In her reading of James Coleman's slide projection works with audio narration, art critic Rosalind Krauss describes the artist's strategy of placing the actors in a manner so that, despite being in dialogue, they do not look at each other but both face the camera, and thus the viewer. In a conscious break with the cinematic convention of a shot reverse shot arrangement, Coleman uses the arrangement of "double face-out" (Krauss) which also characterises the diegetic forms of comic strips, or advertising. Krauss identifies a phrase that Coleman adopts from Yeats, "Why do you gaze, one on the other ... and then turn away?", as the key to his rule of the "double face-out".

Unlike Coleman's settings, Hansen's "double face-out" is not based on a shared space or time of the pair of sitters. No narrative, no dialogue, no encounter binds the two together. The empathic reflection from one image to the other affirms the radical separation between the two — an impossible attempt at either identification, or intimacy.

The genre that Hansen proposes with "Other people's feelings are also my own", is one that is both portraiture and self-portraiture at the same time.

A comparable dialogical — or rather triangular structure, involving the viewer, is offered by Thomas Struth in his photographic *Selbstportrait Alte Pinakothek München* (2000) which shows, supposedly, Struth looking at the original painting of Dürer's self-portrait of 1500, the panel being prominently visible in the centre of the photograph. To the right, we see the left half of Struth's torso in a blue jacket from behind, the rest of his body including the head, lower body and legs cut off by the image frame. We are directly confronted with the gaze from Dürer's self-image, while Struth looks sideways at the painting, his left hand casually tucked into the trouser pocket. We can only speculate: does Struth's facial expression resemble, or even mimic Dürer's, or is he taking a critical distance to this *auto-icon*? Is Dürer's portrait the mirror in which we see Struth's inverted face? And what about our own face? While Struth constructs an oblique, riddled dialogue between himself, Dürer's *icon*, and the viewer, Hansen's juxtaposed images suggest an oscillation between difference and fusion of his own face with those of others.

If the mimetic function that Disdéri describes in the passage quoted earlier actually exists, and if Hansen takes the photographs of his sitters himself, then the portrayed emotions might be even more *reflexive* than we thought until now; because the look of the *other people* would then be their response to seeing Hansen as he takes their picture, reflecting their feelings towards him — feelings which are captured in their portraits and consequently copied by Hansen himself, who now makes a face that shows an expression of how the *other people* feel about him.

Hansen's extended series of twin portraits is thus a dispersed self portrait, and at the same time an image of the multiplicity of human relations, of how we mirror ourselves in others, and how our perception of others, fuelled by empathy, creates possible selves, possible feelings that leave traces in us and inscribe what we are, and who we might be.

Literature

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Disdéri 1862, p.284, French original: "*La faculté d'imiter est innée chez l'homme: la tristesse se communique, le rire est contagieux; observez le spectateur dans une salle de théâtre: vous verrez la physionomie, ses traits se mettre à l'unisson de l'acteur qui l'intéresse ou qui l'émeut. Vous verrez passer sur ses traits les nuances variées de la scène; eh bien! l'artiste photographe n'a pas d'autre moyen pour faire revivre sur le visage de son modèle l'expression évanouie, que de prendre lui-même cette expression: il faudra qu'il s'identifie avec la situation morale qu'il veut faire naître chez la personne à représenter et qui seule peut donner à sa physionomie l'expression nécessaire à la parfaite exécution du portrait.*"