

# Markus Hansen & the failure of empathy

Matthew Rose



We all have trouble with other people, don't we? Especially their feelings. Some years ago a psychotherapist implored me to "feel my feelings" as if I couldn't, or as if I couldn't feel them enough. And by extension perhaps he meant I couldn't feel other people's feelings. So what was I groping for? Some unidentifiable cloud of sensations? Or words vaguely describing them? Most probably the latter. The vast amount of names cataloging our feelings is akin to an overflowing well, its deep and rising cylinder of stuff issuing from the core of some shifting interior cosmos we can only fathom with imprecision. "Shall I compare thee to a Summer's Day?" How deep is your love, or the depth of your disgust? Do you even know? I doubt it. It's impossible to feel other people's feelings because it's impossible to know our own. Our paltry proof is our eloquence, which often pales compared to the real thing. The technical gear for helping to feel feelings is called empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of another) or sympathy (both a feeling of sorrow for someone as well as a general understanding of another's feelings). But that's pretty vague: Mostly we try and fail, or fake empathy; our efforts to reach into the well of another and negotiate other people's feelings are often rewarded in a choice of color. Feeling blue? Sunny? Green with envy? Red with rage? Sickly yellow. Or another inadequate expression that approximates the truth. Yet we forge ahead, driven like mad men.

Markus Hansen, a German raised in England in the 70s by his German mother and English stepfather, carries his own large and unwieldy vocabulary and he's applied it to a massive project – *Other People's Feelings Are Also My Own* (2001 - 2014). The growing body of paired photographs shows a subject (male, female, black, white) in a straight-on portrait headshot alongside the artist himself in a similar pose.

Hansen's job appears to be to mirror the interior state of his subject through facial expressions (and the occasional gesture of dress up). These works – nearly 100 to date – lead us through the baffling thicket of consciousness, the tenuous grasp of feeling other people's feelings through feeling our own. When we exit, it is with a vaguely annoying and sticky substance gumming up our personal rigs – who we are, how we feel and how everyone else feels. The photographic performance Hansen brings about, and plays in, lays out the sneaky nature of subjectivity. He unearths its nature as truth, and in turning it over in his hand (and our minds) we realize (for better or worse) that this truth is self-deception. Self-deception being the naked and smooth fact of consciousness, the path that leads us to believe in ourselves and that our beliefs are special, individual or that our feelings are unique, and probably that we are good.

Born to a childhood fraught with the demanding job of belonging, or trying to belong, the artist who now lives in Paris is still at it. It's a powerful drug – belonging. It's futile, too, unless perhaps you're a McCoy or a Hatfield. Hansen didn't speak English at first and traces of the war, and Germans in the flesh, were uncomfortable for his English classmates, whose frame of reference was limited to the pervasive postwar media clichés. Hansen was the little boy version of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim, attempting mundanely to become "one of us." Hansen's current quest multiplies this by two, and his childhood desire to belong is his signature enterprise: the emotional palindrome.

### **Emotional Rescue**

The broad categories assigned to the realm of feeling are quite wide. The verb *to feel* bounces around from sensory experience (to feel pain, a feeling of nausea), to suspicion (had a feeling I'd lose)

to compassion (rush of feeling), to belief (he felt she was mad), to touch (she felt his skin), to testing (feel the temperature of the water). If you feel, you are sensitive. (And that's often judged as a good thing.) Shot-up cowboys (or their doctors) conclude that "pain is life," meaning if you can feel something at the very least you're alive, so quit complaining. But it's way more complicated than that. For the record there is also indifference, fear, anger, sadness, depression, confusion, love, interest, strength, happiness, openness, liveliness, and goodness among thousands of other words that attempt to run down seemingly countless subtleties of feelings. Drill down a bit more and we are sometimes amazed, attracted, blessed, elated, weary, offended, lonely, cold, tormented, fucked up, insane, dizzy and pissed off. We're also often a layered pastry of two or more emotions. How often have we been filled with love and disappointment? Or bitter *and* self-satisfied? But who could know? And how could I tell you? I might have to be Jane Eyre to lay it all out for you. And even then, would you really know what I was talking about? Take this test: How often have you asked a friend or lover, "What's the matter?" And how often have you been rebuffed (gently or harshly): "It's nothing!" Never has nothing had so much something! And yet we spend our lives negotiating not only our own feelings in words but also everyone else's.

How many times have I been berated by some irate girlfriend because I can't understand her, or better – I can't feel her feelings? And this despite the fact that I've negotiated with her – and she with me – since the moment our paths first crossed. Each interaction has been an attempt of the other to "save" face. Not just mine but each other's. Saving face, a notion borrowed from the Japanese, is a very real concept that is employed almost every minute of every day of our lives. Each encounter is a risk

of some intensity and our social job is to keep the other in the game. Or, at its most extreme, to destroy the face of the other. So a simple "Hey there, how are you?" carries the self into a kind of social void; it's a risk to ask, and sometimes a greater risk to receive and respond. Facial expressions sometimes do the business of words and all of a sudden we're in the thick underbrush of human communication and human manipulation. Markus Hansen is pointing us toward this phenomenon.

Indeed, the artist's process here is deceptively simple. He photographs friends, acquaintances, family members and sometimes strangers and then sets himself up to perform for the camera in order to capture a reflection of his subject's feelings. How he studies his subjects is mysterious; he could mimic them perhaps very easily if he were an accomplished mime. It's all in the eyes or the mouth or the eyebrows or one of 43 facial muscles (although 5 are essential is communicating the "universal" emotions – happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise). The artist plays Shakespeare the poet, mirroring a moment in a character's life. And mirrors, in Hansen's world, are key to understanding the artist's process and his audience's participation.

In early 2012, Hansen completed the walk-in sculpture *Each Man Kills The Thing He Loves (Chambre Miroir)*. Located in the artist's Paris studio, the "chambre" (room) is housed in its own modest white labyrinth. Constructed of plywood, a single doorless entrance leaves you with the choice of turning left or right, although neither direction seems to portend any advantage or disadvantage. It is an architectural palindrome with rippling internal palindromes: *Eve damned Eden, mad Eve*. Playing softly but consistently is the cloyingly irritating song sung by Ingrid Caven from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (after Oscar Wilde).



One follows a short corridor cushioned throughout with a common, office-style grey carpet, and we are suddenly in a room with a view: A hi-fi with a pair of speakers, and a spinning turntable sits on a knee-high table; several wires flare out of the back of the turntable, and a mirror behind the unit reflects the back of the turntable and hi-fi with its inputs and wires. Or does it? You stand in front and examine the machine and then, of course, your reflection (my reflection). The mirror is the sort you see in dressing rooms: long and inexpensive, edged with metal and often fastened to a wall with clear plastic clamps or hooks. The reflection has a slightly greyish tint to it. One problem: When I stand in front it, I'm nowhere to be found. That, in effect, is what the piece is about – the anticipation of seeing yourself and the shock of not seeing yourself.

What Markus Hansen seems to be reaching for is an after the flood type experience: What would it be like to be in your shoes? Not to know his own sadness or blissfulness but to know another's. There is something noble in that quest, I believe: He wants to say (with feeling) "I am in your shoes." And in that mind/body shift, he's asking us and himself, "I've been in my own shoes, but have I really known what it's like to be in my shoes?" *Each Man Kills...* forces me to confront my duality, my doubleness and all those notions surrounding my knowing anything about myself (or anyone else): twins, mirrors, copies, match, reflections, replica, parallel, reproduce, imitate, simulate, mimic, parallel, correspond, echo... and notions of things identical, and even faintly fraternal. Metaphor, in the end, is essentially based upon the impression – or better, conviction – that one thing resembles another. Juliette is like the sun; Romeo is like the wind. Eve is Earth; Adam is Sky. Poetic intervention permits us to approximate this literary copse with a view toward approaching the emotional depths of our own

image or being or soul or penetrating that of the other. Tricky stuff. Empathy is asymptotic.

But why does the artist even bother trying to feel other people's feelings if there is no reciprocity? If there is no reward for his failed emphatic gesture? Even if he could feel the way a skinhead feels after a nap, or a teenager feels who just smoked a joint for the first time, would we be intrigued or frightened or grateful? For how long? Is this the basis for friendship? Love? Religious faith? If the artist turned his empathic skills towards a middle-aged drunken businessman who had just endured a head-on car crash and was still alive, what good would it do? Get him a job in advertising?

Well, maybe part of the good comes from what he fails at – targeting the slippery notion of empathy itself. The artist sets up a model of humanity in which theoretically anyone can participate – a black hip-hop rapper, an Indian street beggar, a cheap used car salesman, an elegant paranoid schizophrenic, a little girl blowing out the candles on her fifth birthday, an old man watching the last of his days from a park bench. Race, class and brand are flattened. These markers (culture, race, ethnicity) are turned into mere details in the greater goal of reaching for human emotion on its own. Identity politics, so much the rage in a world that is increasingly globalized, are also partially the subject of this series, even as they are essentially ignored. No, he doesn't have to photograph everyone on the planet in every possible mood to complete the project – it's not possible, and if it were it wouldn't be more compelling than simply standing on the corner of 44th and 5th in Midtown Manhattan staring at people's faces and trying to imagine – and feel – what they might be feeling. There is something noble in it, if it's real. And yes, it's safe for you to do this at home. Hansen's catalog of other people's emotions as viewed

through his portraits, however, is not exhaustive nor does it even attempt to tap into the vast well of human feeling. There is no portrait of a pretty girl or handsome man feeling the pain of a loss of a parent, or lover or limb. There's little blood to speak of, in fact, and the range of emotions is quite narrow. One can imagine that Hansen told the sitter to feel relaxed or think of something, maybe nothing, or maybe just the idea of being photographed for this project served as the emotional hors d'oeuvre. So what are they feeling and what is the artist trying to imitate – a look? It brings us to the question of aesthetics – does beauty translate into truth? Subjectivity is truth, yes, but so what? He looks like her; does he feel her feelings too? Can the artist or anyone ever get to the bottom of the dizzying “I know that you know that I know that you know that I know that you know...?”

### **I, Witness**

Narcissus, we are told, rejected the romantic advances of the goddess Echo and was condemned to fall in love with his own reflection; unable to consummate his love, he knelt by a pool, captivated by his own image, and finally turned into a flower – the Narcissus. Our inability to perceive ourselves in our entirety is nothing less than mythological in scope and power; the ability of the other to see “most” of us, or even our true intentions when we cannot, is embodied metaphorically by a soul mate, better half, best friend, and of course, our shrink. We yearn to see ourselves in other people's eyes (for better or worse) but mostly better, because we allow others to sit in judgment of our nature. We are nearly always partners with someone somewhere, even our magic and imaginary friends from childhood; as we grow up we acquire cell mates, bunk mates, and lacking a love mate, spend an inordinate amount of time

masturbating. We are, in our minds, the psychedelic Alice through the looking glass, searching for ourselves.

Can Hansen find what he's looking for through photography, that convex mirror of the world? I'm persuaded to think about contemporary photographers who have plunged into portraiture in many ways to stake out not just mood and the elusive postures of the self, but to map out the human arc of possibility – from desperation to dissertation, from irrational to the ironic. Nan Goldin has long mined these human potholes for dusty handfuls of coals and the occasional diamond. Cindy Sherman has turned to an array of devices – prosthetic, cosmetic, lighting and filmic – to frame a particular set of female experiences. Both women have scratched away at their skin to reveal a kind of innocence wrought with emotion – whether performed or real. And by and large we believe these two women, that is, we embrace their art because at their cores, their projects are sincere, both intellectually and emotionally. One can say the same of Hansen's effort to plow into the emotional ganglia of his subjects, memorize those five essential facial muscles and put on a close facsimile of what he sees, and we can probably believe what he feels. He pouts with skepticism along with his daughter Naomi <sup>[Naomi]</sup>, and offers a subtle and wry sense of amusement very close to his other daughter Iris. In other double portraits you can see, or better, feel (!) the subject reacting to the camera, putting his or her best or least pained face forward. (Which is why I suggested this series was disturbing). True, photography offers us a smallish window (as do the eyes) into the pained or pleased soul (or consciousness) that confronts the lens. And our belief in photography as a tool of accuracy, as well as a witness to history, is an unparalleled gift of human consciousness. It takes a certain spirit to make good works from these tools.

Yet we are dogged, are we not, by the shades of our hell? Would we be more certain about these emotional palindromes if these photos were black and white? Sepia? Larger? Smaller? In fact they are exhibited as a color slide show – as if they were simply leftovers from the photo booth. And so, on purpose, there is little pretense in their presentation, and from that one can fairly ascertain the artist's sincere appreciation of the complexity of the project. I'm also curious whether painting or sculpture or literature and their equally challenging skill sets permit us to penetrate this proposition: How many layers of subjectivity does a portrait contain? And does time put the entire enterprise into permanent flux? Layers of self-consciousness in picture making and picture viewing, not to mention posing for pictures, give us that unique and slightly tortured *mise en abyme* sense of nausea, of not really knowing anything for certain but settling for a set of parameters (or better, words) that is often adequate. One of my favorite films is Antonioni's *Blow Up*, a jazzy 60s detective story that examines the motifs of musical phrases, brush strokes and the increasingly detailed moment of a scene in a London park via photographic enlargement that leads to a supreme knowledge of an event – actually a murder. It is an unparalleled exploration of aesthetics and succeeds in cutting through the fat of looking.

Markus Hansen is asking us to peel back these instants of portraiture, and to look from one to the other, and assess first the sentiment, then the sentiments, and then, exhausted, to participate in a pristine reflection of the twin moments. If we can step out of our own stewing pots of emotion, knowing it is impossible to know our depths but that it is only human to test them, we can re-imagine that enterprise as some kind of Shakespearean axiom: All the world's a stage I'm going through.