

*On Empathy,
and Related Concepts in Art Theory*

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The problematic:

It is said that contemporary art is returning to themes of beauty, sensuality, immersive experiences, emotions, affect, and visual pleasure—

And it is said that these tendencies are in reaction to the intellectual severities and constrictions of postmodern (poststructuralist) art theory.

The problematic:

The idea is that art can (again) provide a rich, engaging, captivating experience—possibly the exemplary such experience.

And yet there is no theory for such experience, and no agreement on terms. (The term *empathy* is a placeholder, not a guiding trope.)

The problematic:

Inward states, interiority, immersion, absorption, imaginative communion, phenomenological encounter, empathy, sympathy, etc., are taken as fundamental, sometimes transhistorical modes of experiencing artworks. But they are different concepts, with different histories.

The problematic:

The idea here is to make some provisional distinctions between different kinds of “empathetic” experiences.

Organization of this talk:

I. Inwardness, interiority

II. Intentions, intentionality

III. Immersion, absorption

IV. Empathy

V. Existentialism, phenomenology

I.

Inwardness, interiority

Innerlichkeit (inwardness) is a founding concept:

Roughly: an often nonverbal, felt or sense of the thinking, feeling self, the effect of introspection, reflexivity, self-reflexivity, thoughtfulness, pensiveness; a quality that is said to appear in writing, visual art, and (especially) romantic music



History

Interest in *Innerlichkeit* is an inheritance of German romanticism.

Innerlichkeit is specifically German; its role in national self-definition is well critiqued in Hans Belting's *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*.

Visual critiques of inwardness or interiority

The abandonment of inwardness (of the idea of trusting inwardness, or employing portraiture to convey it) can be seen in the history of psychological portraiture, from Rembrandt to the present.



Anders Zorn, in
the last generation
of psychological
portraiture





And much of
contemporary
photography
(here, Plensa's
Crown Fountain in
Chicago)



Matt Sparling,
Rob (2007)

In relation to Rembrandt:

Mieke Bal's *Reading "Rembrandt"* contains an extended critique of the idea that Rembrandt gives us mental states to ponder: it is more that he gives us our idea of what painted mental states can look like.

Svetlana Alpers's book *Rembrandt's Enterprise* advances the partly compatible argument that Rembrandt produced and attempted to profit from the projection of mental states.