



## EMPATHY ROOM

a multi-media installation based on the “READING THE MIND IN THE EYES” empathy test revised by Simon Baron-Cohen, Sally Wheelwright, Jacqueline Hill, Yogini Raste, and Ian Plumb / University of Cambridge, UK/ 1997.

Calvin Burgamy & Karen Tauches Collaboration

kt: Empathy is the ability to identify with others, to walk in another’s shoes, to project into the feelings of strangers. I am empathetic to a fault. But I believe my experience is not the norm.

On the contrary, in the business of contemporary life it is efficient for decisions to be based on percentages, facts, boundaries, and other practicalities worked out on paper. This tendency is only exacerbated by an increasingly virtual existence, where physical closeness with land, animals, and people is limited or devalued. We seem to abide by a “detached” mode of existence.

Thus I became interested in empathy tests. First to determine where I fell on the spectrum, and then to see how my businessman boyfriend and other friends scored. I found several compelling tests online. The test I liked the best was quite visually compelling (and also had a killer title): “READING THE MIND IN THE EYES.” I decided this test should be the inspiration for an interactive artwork about our ability to connect with the feelings of others. . .

The “READING THE MIND IN THE EYES” test is designed to determine social sensitivity (empathy) in adults. Test subjects were asked to identify the correct emotion--from a list of



four--felt when looking at 36 black-and-white photographs of people's eyes. To create these photographs, actors were hired to express specific emotions. People with Aspergers Syndrome, Autism, or deficits in social cognition struggle with this test. But perhaps many people in the general population will also be challenged/surprised by the task of "reading" the emotions of strangers. (Can a person "read" into the image of a person's eyes (their soul)? -- What a beautiful question to ask. . . ) Is this a practice that could help a globalizing culture connect with others? How compassionate are we?

I found that as I administered the "READING THE MIND IN THE EYES" test to friends, the fact that it was a test seemed to put people on edge--there was judgment involved. So as I began to collaborate with Calvin on the artwork for Agnes Scott College's Dalton Gallery, we agreed not to "test" the audience. Instead, we wanted to abstract the piece--first we would collect the gazes of strangers, and then juxtapose that footage with the words used in the original test. We both agreed that video would be more effective than stills: it conveyed a more visceral connection. And, we liked the term "Empathy Room," which would provide an environment or experience that an audience can choose to walk into, instead of conjuring the authoritarian and clinical baggage of a test.

It turns out we did not need to prompt video subjects to create emotions. Interestingly, we found that if they simply paused from their routine to look into the camera (for 30-60 seconds), their eyes expressed authentic emotional content unconsciously.

Going into public places with my camera was an interesting exercise as well--I focused on grocery stores. In many cases I would stand next to people soliciting voter registration. I felt some tension due to recent violence in public spaces that was in the news. I was confronted by security and ignored by those who did not wish to interact. But I quickly I learned the rules of play. . . People who wanted to participate, curiously engaged me with eye contact.



\*\*The Dalai Lama recently commissioned a website to help secular audiences practice compassion: He calls it an “Atlas of Emotions,” and hopes it will foster emotional awareness and sensitivity in contemporary human beings.

([http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/07/world/dalai-lama-website-atlas-of-emotions.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FDalai%20Lama&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/07/world/dalai-lama-website-atlas-of-emotions.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FDalai%20Lama&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection&_r=0))

We invite you to feel something. . .