EMPATHY TREE

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Figure 1. Empathy Tree: a memory box (left) and a bio-sensing jewellery box (right). Photo by Bart van Overbeeke

Empathy Tree is a family heirloom that consists of two boxes, which are passed between generations, one containing jewellery and the other memories. It invites people to plant and care for a tree as well as collect and share 'tree stories' about its growth over time and across distances. *Empathy Tree* is a bio-sensing device that enables one to feel the world through a tree and thus become aware of the entanglement of society and nature, humans and nonhumans. It can be placed anywhere on the body, where it produces haptic and sonic effects based on the electronic signals it receives from sensors attached to a tree (Fig. 1).

Our artefact emerged through a shared interest in the potential role of everyday objects in cultivating empathic sensibilities. We wanted to move beyond conventional notions of empathy and prevailing accounts of the relative ease whereby people access the feelings of others, which often lead either to an 'over-identification', where persons experience the feelings of someone else as their own,[1] or to an 'over-projection', where people mistake their own feelings for those of others.[2] We were therefore wondering if an object could serve as a 'mediator' that brings together bodies and facilitates an empathic process, while retaining their differences to avoid the perils of over-identification and over-projection.

We began to ask ourselves how far we could stretch the notion of empathy beyond the interpersonal realm, ending up with human-plant relations. The idea of trees stemmed from

[1] LaCapra, D. (2001). Writing History, Writing Trauma. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

[2] Nickerson, R. S., Butler, S. F., & Carlin, M. (2011). Empathy and knowledge projection. In J. Decety, & W. Ickes (Eds.), The Social Neuroscience of Empathy (pp. 43-56). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

descriptions of cultural practices, where communities plant a tree to mark the birth of a child and to highlight the entwined character of human and nonhuman life.[3] We investigated this idea through our first research artefact, a detachable electronic tattoo (Fig. 2) that functions as a decorative piece and as a device for receiving data on chemical processes, moisture levels and other environmental phenomena pertaining to tree growth. Although the artefact allowed for limited experimentation with materials and their properties, it enabled us to outline key dimensions of a system that combines wearable technology with cultural practices and natural processes in order to foster new kinds of empathy with the world.

Figure 2. Making a prototype of an electronic tattoo. Photo by Kim Kullman

Given the time constraints, we knew that we would not be able to solve all the technical issues of the system, but the expanding field of plant sensing[4] suggested that our ideas could be turned into a workable prototype further down the line. Operating in a speculative mode, we were also more concerned with the affective and sensory entanglements that the system might enable and sustain among humans and nonhumans, which directed our attention to its material qualities and their diverse embodied effects on wearers. For this reason, we decided to abandon the electronic tattoo and collected twigs, bark, leaves and other organic matter from nearby trees, deploying these as a starting point for a new artefact (Fig. 3).

We concentrated on interactions between organic and synthetic materials, exploring how

[3] For a more recent example of this practice, see: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-16548881

[4] Chamovitz, D. (2013). What a Plant Knows. London: Oneworld.

these could be conjoined in pieces of jewellery (Fig. 4). We also produced plywood boxes as display cases for the jewellery and as framing devices for narratives about the potential futures of our artefact. We soon realised that the boxes might facilitate intergenerational memory work by encouraging users to collect and curate objects that illuminate human-tree relations, such as obsolete sensors attached to exfoliated bark. As *Empathy Tree* does not enable data recording and storage, the boxes provide a platform for users to experiment with alternative ways of documenting and conveying their own unique 'tree stories'.

Figure 3. Creating objects for the memory box and imagining possible futures for them. Photos by Kim Kullman

Over time, the users of *Empathy Tree* will have developed receptivity to the continuous flow of haptic and sonic signals from sensors. Some of these lend themselves to interpretation, while others remain indecipherable, reminding the wearer about the inescapable limits of empathy as well as suggesting that the world, in its ever-evolving complexity, will never become entirely knowable to humans. Instead, we can learn to sense *with* a tree and, much like its roots, slowly burrow our way through the earth, picking up echoes of events and

processes both near and afar, from construction work to conflicts and earthquakes.

Collaborating on *Empathy Tree*, we became increasingly conscious of the distinctiveness of making as a speculative mode of research. Rather than having an idea and translating it into an artefact along a linear path, making is an invitation to release the moorings of conventional research. One has to place oneself amidst unruly materials and allow ideas to emerge during embodied interactions with them and their shifting individual and combined properties. Making confuses the phases and temporalities of academic research, because the method of finding out about a thing, the thing itself and the concepts employed to make sense of the thing are created simultaneously. This introduces a strong sense of fragility and uncertainty into the process, but also genuine moments of surprise and wonder.

Figure 4. Final prototypes of bio-sensing jewellery. Photo by Bart van Overbeeke