Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts

"The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them."
> -- Mark Rothko

Empathy is the only human superpower—it can shrink distance, cut through social and power hierarchies, transcend differences, and provoke political and social change.
> -- Elizabeth Thomas

"To observe with empathy, one sees not only with the eyes but with the skin."
> -- Rachel Corbett

Introduction

In our increasingly divisive world, polarized by issues regarding politics, racial inequities, marriage equality, global warming, income disparities, and immigration policies, it becomes clear that our failures to understand other people's feelings are exacerbating prejudice, conflict, and inequality. If we wish to develop, not only a more equal society, but a happier and more creative one, we will need to look outside ourselves and attempt to identify with the experiences of others. This critical skill is called empathy, which "has the power to transform relationships, from the personal to the political, and create fundamental social change" (Kznaric, Roman, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It.)*

Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) posits that art museums can play a vital role in helping people understand each other in an increasingly connected yet fragmented world. Mia holds a belief in the power of art—and the responsibility of art museums—to spark curiosity and creativity, connect people across cultural differences, and engage our individual and shared values. Art museums, with their rich collections filled with stories of humanity from across the globe, are well poised to play a vital role in helping people understand each other.

Mia envisions the Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts (CEVA) taking a leading role in collaborating with fellow museum colleagues as well as researchers, scholars, content experts, and other influencers to research and explore best practices for fostering empathy and global awareness through the power of art and to share these finding with the field.

Background
Empathy is the ability to place oneself in another person's mind in order to imagine their experience as one's own. Roman Krznaric, founder of the Empathy Museum in the United Kingdom, defines empathy as "the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions." There are three primary modes of empathy: affective, cognitive, and somatic. Affective empathy, or emotional empathy, is feeling what another person is feeling, and feeling compassion and concern for them—a shared emotional response. Cognitive empathy, or perspective-taking, involves putting oneself in another's shoes in order to take into account their point of view; it is an intellectual awareness of their feelings, but the feelings are not necessarily shared. Somatic empathy involves a direct physical simulation of another person's feelings, based on mirror neuron responses, as in when someone else grimaces and you involuntarily grimace too.

Empathy is not passive, as one must move oneself from self-absorption and reflection to the experience of another human being. This movement from the self to another requires imagination, curiosity, and courage. By consciously focusing on the thoughts and feelings of others, we can continue to develop our empathic potential throughout our lives. Ironically, the ability to know another also draws on self-awareness, as we cannot possibly understand someone else's experiences without the ability to also be introspective.

We became empathic when we became human – and perhaps, as suggested by Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal (b. 1948), we became human *because* we became empathic. The use of the specific term "empathy", however, was not employed until the late 19th-century.

Our very understanding of empathy was born out of the visual arts. The German aesthetic philosopher Robert Vischer (1847-1933) coined the word *Einfühling* (literally "feeling into") in 1873 to describe the projection of human feeling into an inanimate object, such as a work of art.

The term was then adapted by Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) in order to explain how we understand the feelings and experiences of another person by putting ourselves in their place. He argued that *Einfühling* should be considered as central to both psychological as well as philosophical thinking when considering aesthetic experiences. Lipps postulated that the meaning of art did not arise from the work itself, but was made essential by the viewer projecting themselves (an "inner imitation") into the object. That is to say, we appreciate the object because we understand it as an analogy to another human being.

In 1909 the British psychologist Edward Titchener (1867-1927) translated the concept of *Einfühling* into a new word: empathy. It comes from the Greek *empatheia*, meaning "in pathos", i.e. in passion or suffering. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) later noted that empathy is an essential part of the rapport between patient and analyst, thereby making interpretation possible.

Déjà-Vu All Over Again: The Time for Empathy is Now

It is important that empathy was defined and coined within the field of aesthetics and that it emerged in *fin-de-siecle* Europe, as one era closed and another began. Although empathy is as old as humanity, we didn't feel the need to define it until the turn of the last century. What happened in society to drive the need for a word that we hadn't needed for 200,000 years?

Fin-de-siecle Europe was a time of political, philosophical, and societal angst, marked by urban alienation in a newly industrialized world. Across Europe, there was a wide-spread fear of losing familiar ways of life and a certain pessimism about the future. At the same time, there was an excitement about the new century and the future opportunities that came with the rapid rate of change that characterized the time.

One hundred years later, we continue to see new opportunities in the future and are experiencing optimism due to decreased global poverty, technological innovation, and vast advancements in science and in healthcare. Our current moment, however, is also marked by fear and pessimism brought about by declining civility, tyranny, extreme individualism, globalization, immigration and migration, urban alienation, excessive wealth disparities, and climate change - to name just a few contemporary anxieties.

Open-minded curiosity, a willingness to understand others, and the ability to empathize, are qualities of paramount importance as we face the future. What better place to start than where it all began: in the arts?

Why Empathy at Mia?

"The moment a viewer recognizes a painting as beautiful, it transforms from an object into a work of art. The act of looking, then, becomes a creative process, and the viewer becomes the artist"
         -- Rachel Corbett

We at Mia believe that fostering empathic skills is imperative in our world today and that the visual arts offer an extremely effective and efficient path to do so. Works of art were created by humans and they are expressions of the human lived experience, across time, media, and cultures. Mia's collection includes 91,000 works spanning 5,000 years of human history, made and used all across the globe. This expansive collection offers a rich and complex range of material that can be used to accrue a greater understanding of humanity and the self.

Museums are repositories of objects, all of which tell stories; it is the obligation and opportunity of museums to unwrap those stories and relate them in compelling ways. Art expands our perception and leads to emotional responses – and to empathy. What engages the heart and the mind captivates us and inspires us to dig deeper for a greater understanding.

The specific benefits of empathy listed below are simultaneously both professional (the ability to collaborate with others is a desired activity in most business environments) and personal (self-awareness).

- Greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence
- Development of altruistic behavior (moral and prosocial behavior)
- Curiosity about other people as individuals
- A greater understanding of global cultures, in a highly globalized world
- Ability to collaborate with others
- Understanding of what makes us human
- Growth of humility and compassion
- Workforce development (understanding the customer or the consumer's point of view)
- Enhanced creativity
- Increased understanding across generations
- Community bonding and empowerment
- Decrease in bullying and cyber trolling
- Reduction of prejudice and discrimination

Empathy and Wonder

Empathy and wonder are intimately linked. When we experience wonder – whether we are looking at the Grand Canyon, or the Mona Lisa, or listening to a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – we contemplate something that is bigger than our own experience and ourselves. This moment of realization provokes emotions as well as curiosity as we encounter something portentous and outside of our ordinary existence. While experiencing wonder, people become less narcissistic and feel more connected to humanity. They exhibit empathic and generous behavior when they are stirred by wonder; they are more inclined to help others and give of themselves. By comprehending another person's joys, sorrows, fears, and satisfactions, humans confirm their connection to other human beings.

The Dark Side of Empathy

Scholars have pointed out that empathy can have deleterious effects on people as it can be abused, manipulated, and misunderstood. Empathy is not in and of itself moral and this moral ambiguity can lead to abuse. Some of the concerns identified include:

- Potential for consumer manipulation (the "empathy economy")
- Creation of a false sense of understanding of others
- Potential manipulation through the development of empathy in Artificial Intelligence and robotics
- Increased vulnerability
- Reinforcement of current hierarchies of power
- A bias to cuteness and familiarity (children, puppies, peers, and people like us)

- A bias for the proximate and familiar

How can museums help people to harness the good while minimizing the potential negative effects of heightened empathy?

Mia is inspired by the growing movement around empathy research being conducted primarily at higher education institutions and by social science researchers, and academics. Myriad studies have demonstrated the importance of cultivating empathy in people as a way to create greater social good. However, research indicates that only a sampling of history and science museums are intentionally doing work around the topic of empathy as it relates to their collections. Among art museums, discussions on this topic—including those spearheaded by Mia—are still in their infancy. By establishing a Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts (CEVA), Mia will lead the charge to bring the art museum into the forefront of this important movement. "Museums serve society in numerous and important ways through their awe-inspiring objects, authentic stories, and by being safe and trusted places of learning, dialogue, healing, exploration, and contemplation—all essential prerequisites to the cultivation of empathy, and the very reason why museums can intentionally and strategically empower generations with their immense potential," argues Elif M. Gokcigdem (*Fostering Empathy in Museums)*.

Activities of the Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts

CEVA's initial activities are leading two major initiatives in partnership with key academic institutions to research, develop, and test interpretive strategies and gallery-based activities for cultivating empathy in an art museum setting. These innovative research projects will take place over three years and be co-led by expert researchers.

<u>Think Tank at UC Berkeley – October 2017</u>
To inform our thinking and jump start our research and experimentation, Mia, the Chipstone Foundation, and The Berkeley Social Interaction Lab (BSI) are inviting experts in the social sciences, empathy research, virtual reality, and neuroscience fields, along with museum curators and directors, artists, and educators to come together to discuss empathy and the art museum. This convening will be a catalyst for brainstorming ideas and opportunities for this initiative, and will expand our thinking by bringing together people from different disciplines and areas of expertise. We will explore the possibilities of how museums can engage audiences of all ages with art objects to foster empathy and global understanding. The ideas generated by the group will inform the project goals, research agenda, and offer insights into further areas for exploration and implementation.

Mellon Foundation Research Project: Empathy + Wonder

Mia will partner with Berkeley Social Interaction Lab (BSI), under the direction of Dr. Dacher Keltner, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley and the founding director of the Greater Good Science Center, as the lead investigator on a research initiative that will explore the impacts of the museum in fostering awe, wonder, and empathy among a general museum audience as well as school-aged visitors. How does experiencing wonder through an art museum experience impact one's social behavior? How does an artistic experience, which connects us to something bigger than ourselves, influence how people interact with and treat others? This proposed research project will explore these questions and build upon previous research findings that indicate how wonder can result in a "diminishment of the individual self and its concerns, and increase prosocial behavior."

- **General Visitor Study**

This study will collect data on a mass level that measures visitors' levels of empathy before and after their museum experiences. Building off of tools utilized by the Greater Good Science Center and BSI Lab, Mia and our partner researchers plan to develop several interactive evaluation tools—delivered via iPads or online—that can assess visitors' level of empathy pre- and post-visit. Imagine an interactive test where people respond to facial expressions or emoji that show different emotions they must identify. Or perhaps visitors will be asked to identify emotions depicted in works of art from Mia's collection. While the exact designs of these evaluation tools are to be determined, the museum-specific tools would be based on 25 years of research from the Greater Good Science Center and BSI Lab to ensure their effectiveness in measuring a change in one's ability to empathize.

- **In-Depth Youth Study**

The second study will take a deep-dive look at the impact of facilitated object-based museum experiences on children ages 6-13. This second study will be conducted in partnership with the University of Minnesota's CAREI, who will serve as the local researcher and who brings expertise in evaluating educational experiences. Dr. Keltner and BSI Labs will advise on this study.

The proposed study will measure students' level of empathy following a school tour. The study will utilize a treatment group, which will take a museum tour, and a control group, which will go on a different field trip. Following their experiences, the students will complete an empathy measurement tool developed for this study (likely based on research from BSI Lab as well as the Basic Empathy Scale). In addition to this assessment, teachers, and parents of students in the study would also participate by providing their perspectives on the students' empathy and social behaviors before and after the experiences. This study will be equitably designed as a randomized control trial.

Staff Training on Empathy and Global Awareness

In the first year of the grant, Mia staff from the Learning Innovation, Curatorial, Visitor Experiences, and other departments will participate in empathy training classes provided by experts from UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center and World Savvy. Mia educators will then develop and implement a training module for the museum's volunteer docents who will be involved in the research activities. Additionally, Mia plans to replicate this training module to offer it to other museums, leveraging our knowledge to benefit the field.

Development of methodologies and protocols for research and evaluation.

Prototyping, evaluation, and data collection will take place at each museum. Ongoing iterative development and adaptation will also be part of the protocol, with full documentation of prototypes.

Development, Design, and Production of Tool Kit

An outcome of the project will be a "toolkit" of enrichment materials and new research-based best-practice guidelines in museum learning that will be shared across the field. The toolkit will include a complete description of the study designs, assessment tools, case studies, and a curriculum for fostering empathy among youth through object-based learning experiences.

Culminating Convening

In the third year of the project, Mia will host a convening for educators, curators, and researchers from across the field to highlight our investigation, its findings, and the resulting tools. The convening will include workshops on how to foster empathy, wonder, and global awareness in their own practices.

Dissemination

Mia staff and research partners will present the findings at national and international conferences and publish articles highlighting the results of these studies.

Future Exhibition and Installation Strategies to Enhance Empathy and Ongoing Implementation

Building off of the progress from the think tank and collaborative research projects around empathy, Mia looks to determine ways to implement the key learnings into the museum's programs and practices, and to continue our research. Mia will develop strategies to put research on empathy into practice within the museum's programs and activities. Based on successful experiments and prototypes, Mia will develop interventions within our permanent collections, exhibitions, and programs, which may include innovative installations, interactive experiences, digital and virtual reality, and new training modules for gallery teaching. Mia will also support ongoing research into empathy and art, and plans to host talks and convene symposia on the topic. Mia will conduct ongoing research and evaluation on these initiatives and continue to these share findings with the field.

Outcomes: What Might We Learn?

- How might museum staff and volunteers work more empathically?
- How can we learn more about ourselves as individuals and as an institution?
- What is the relationship between wonder and empathy?
- Does one necessitate the other?
- Is curiosity critical to empathy?
- What is the role of living artists?
- How might engaging with objects help children, youth, and adults develop greater empathic skills?
- What curriculum and teaching strategy should be used for these age groups?
- How does the experience of wonder in museum galleries make us more empathic? How can objects or the interpretation of objects tell empathic stories without educators to mediate?
- How can we motivate people to action (a mechanism to motivation)?
- How might the skills and dispositions participants develop in the art museum context transfer to their daily lives and interactions?

"We need empathy to inspire a next generation of global citizens who are mindful of our shared humanity. Empathy is essential for creative thinking, collaboration across disciplines, and wise decision making."
	-- Dr. Konrath

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