

# Is art supposed to feel like something?

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# Is art supposed to feel like something?

**Tiina Rauhala, Chief Curator, The Finnish Museum of Photography in conversation with Artist Maija Tammi, Doctor of Arts, in Spring 2023. Translated from Finnish by Kataja Varisvaara.**

**T:** You know, I feel like feelings are very prominent in our time? We are living in a time that encourages reflecting on and acknowledging our own feelings. One has to be able to talk about how one feels and consider the feelings of others, sometimes even at the expense of facts.

**M:** Yes! It's present in everyday speech as well; nowadays we ask 'How do you feel about this?' where before we would have asked 'Would this be a good solution?' And how long have we been communicating with emojis? At least ten years? In a way it has to do with a shift in values, or what we consider a priority in public and private communication. I think curator Ariane Koek's essay *Out of Our Minds* hits the nail on the head: 'In the 21st century, feelings, not facts, are the new truth. . . . Feelings now have the primacy in our society and are taken seriously, whereas facts are readily dismissed or even disputed' <sup>1</sup>. Maybe we are now living in an age of so-called emotional intelligence.

**T:** Exactly! This is why it's paramount that we recognize and scrutinize our own feelings, both their cognitive and bodily aspects, because sometimes a negative feeling is just a symptom of a headache or tiredness.

**M:** Indeed. It's necessary to question our feelings, even though it can be challenging. Especially so with negative feelings like disgust or fear, and especially when they are directed towards a group of people or a species of animal. Sometimes reasoning is not enough to make a change, but exposure and repetition are needed. I mean, there's a long way to go from getting information on how important

pollinators are to the point where you're comfortable with being in close quarters with bugs. It took me a year and a half to be able to handle locusts with my bare hands and without screaming.

If I remember correctly, psychologist and neuroscientist Joshua Greene writes that feelings are great for driving cooperation in small communities. Feelings help us put "us" over the needs of an individual, but also over "others". Herein lies the problem, of course, that we no longer really live in small communities. And when we are faced with climate change and any other global problem, feelings can lead us astray. <sup>2</sup>

**T: Yes, despite that biological basis, the current consensus is that feelings are acquired. We have a biological instinct of nurturing and feeling love and fear, but still feelings don't just automatically happen in us. We learn the significance of feelings and different ways of feeling from the environment we live in, the structures and relationships we act in. Thus our environment railroads our process of learning the significance of feelings. How could we put our ability to learn feelings to better use, for example in tackling existential issues that require changes in attitudes, like climate change?**

**M:** Maybe it is simply about trying to recognize our feelings and the way they are formed and learned. From the perspective of learning, one great example is so-called moral disgust. I mean, it's easy to consider disgust a physical reaction that we can't affect in any way, but we feel "moral" disgust when we see, for example, someone stealing a purse from a blind person. We even make the same facial expression as when we smell something rotten, but in case of moral disgust, the purpose of the facial expression is more to communicate to others that 'Hey, this is not ok'.

**T: This is an excellent demonstration that feelings are largely based on values. Norms and values have a substantial effect on the way we interpret our feelings and think how we should be feeling. Affect is a related concept. Affects work with the general atmosphere to shape an individual's experience of themselves and others. To me the affect "worked up" is very interesting; it seems**

**to be highly valued in our time. An example of worked-upness is social media posting in the vein of #I love my job. Worked-upness is concerned with “finding your own thing”. It can also be a huge psychological burden for an individual.**

**M:** This also connects with the myth of the artist: the idea that an artist makes interesting and important art solely due to being an artist, which tends to mean a special, extraordinary character who has seen hardship. Personally I consider this a harmful myth capable of inflicting concrete damage to both the artist and the audience. Another example of the effect that values have on the significance of feelings could be parenthood, and especially motherhood, which is a very narrow box that allows one to feel almost solely positive feelings.

**T: That’s a good example. It really is important to be aware of the effects of the prevalent atmosphere of feelings and values.**

**M:** I consider art to be an excellent tool for challenging these narrow boxes. In my own work, I have sought to question the lines between the visually appealing and disgusting, which are naturally entangled with morality: is it possible to consider a cancer cell “cute”? How about a dissected tumor? Or the corpse of a rabbit infested with worms, which on the other hand can symbolize the circle of life? For a long time, the idea that negative feelings like disgust and anger cannot produce aesthetic pleasure prevailed in the study of aesthetics (although fear might have been present as a sort of existential fear at the face of a sublime artwork that makes the onlooker feel small). Over the past thirty years, this subject has been studied more. For example, academic Carolyn Korsmeyer writes about aesthetic disgust. In her theory, sometimes just the onlooker’s recognition of their own experience of disgust can make the artwork intellectually appealing.

**T: Exactly, in your art you collide ideas of what is beautiful or disgusting, good or bad. The experience of surprise in art can ensue when one has to challenge one’s prejudices or patterns of feeling. In your work you explain to the audience what they’re looking at, and hereby you reveal the vast background**

**research that your art always includes. Long-running projects are characteristic of your artistic practice. You are both an artist and a researcher; how does this affect your practice?**

**M:** I guess it's a sort of compulsive urge to get to the bottom of things, which inevitably takes years; and researchers have the most up-to-date knowledge of their field, as well as access to imaging equipment that artists often don't have. It's rewarding to learn about things you didn't know even existed, or get a whole new perspective to something you were already familiar with. And even then you've only just scratched the surface. I have also noticed that in my core I excel at working in groups after all. I worked on *Hulda&Lilli* together with writer Juhani Karila, biologist Joni Ollonen, and composer Charles Quevillon, among others.

**T: I imagine that collaborating with researchers and artists also offers a sounding board for testing and reflecting on one's ideas together with others. I'm interested in the music; what kind of role does it play in your art?**

**M:** I'm somehow ashamed to say this out loud, but I think music is magic, because I can't fully wrap my head around how it works. I want art, my own or others', to have that same kind of "something" that can't be completely understood or put into words. Sometimes this is revealed in the very remark that the artwork "felt" like something.

**T: I can see why it's important to you that the experience has a residue of something just out of reach of our understanding. There is something very existential about it, the mystery of life. But let's come back to feelings. Hulda & Lilli is a toolkit for understanding how feelings are constructed, especially empathy. It's usually easier for us to feel empathy for something or someone similar. But why did you choose a lizard and a locust as the protagonists of this artwork? Or, why did you take it so far from humans?**

**M:** In this work I wanted to consciously take apart the way feelings are constructed, also for myself. Or the phenomenon how easy it is to get sucked into a story and empathize with the

protagonist. I wanted protagonists that were as far as possible from ourselves, so that we could take a look at ourselves from afar. Anthropomorphization, projecting human-like features onto animals, is very deliberate in this artwork, or, naturally the artwork is about us humans. At the same time I wanted to choose species that aren't commonly admired or empathized with, something completely different than charismatic megafauna, in order to demonstrate more obviously the power of narratives. This work is, of course, a fabricated story: Lilli is portrayed by at least twenty different locusts, all of whom aren't even female; Hulda is portrayed by five different chameleons; and I photographed some old samples at the Institute of Biotechnology for Hulda's baby pictures. The artwork might even trigger moral disgust over Hulda eating Lilli, about whether it was right or wrong. There is a risk of cynicism in the artwork, if one pays close attention to how simple the construction of feelings can be and how easy it is to manipulate us.

**T: At the same time it's important to understand that the ability to feel empathy doesn't automatically lead to the necessary changes being undertaken. Empathy is definitely an important feeling that can make people act to help someone, but whom and what for? That's why it's very important to scrutinize and question the process. Your artwork encourages the audience to become more aware of their own projections and the factors that influence us. I don't see cynicism there.**

**One could say that in this artwork, you aim to emphasize the significance of empathy, both positive and exclusionary; the fact that empathy means assuming the perspective of others and the possibility to understand others. If we are unable to assume the perspective of others, we won't be able to understand them. At the same time, however, we feel empathy selectively, which is why we should also question our feelings of empathy.**

**M:** One of the motives for this artwork is a Canadian study where one test group was given a piece of a scientific editorial that stressed the human-like qualities of animals, in a way bringing animals to the same level as humans. Another test group was given

an editorial that, on the contrary, stressed the animal-like qualities of humans. When the researchers compared the attitudes of the groups after reading their respective editorials, the first test group had also assumed more empathetic attitudes toward groups of people outside of their immediate circle, like refugees. The second test group showed no sign of changes in attitudes. The study concluded that feeling empathy toward other animals or living beings makes us also more open in our views on other groups of people. <sup>3</sup>

**T: So while you chose as your subjects two species that are very far removed from humans, you also aim to put to the test the principle of that study, or, how considering animals human-like can affect the feeling of empathy for groups of people that are less familiar to oneself?**

**M:** Yes, although this kind of study may only show short-term effects. But another important point might be that we need shared experiences of feeling and food for discussion, especially now that we might not even agree on facts or read the same news. I mean, what connects us nowadays? Could art be one element that connects people? At the same time I have in mind the emotional intelligence called for by journalist Minna Salami. We need it together with intellectual intelligence in order to rethink and question the problematic structures in our societies. So could it be that our new focus on feeling might be taking us in the right direction? Assuming that we remember to question our feelings when need be, that is. Where that need might be is, of course, a trickier question.

**T: The better we understand the construction of our feelings, the easier it will be for us to take apart negative ones and strengthen and nurture positive feelings, for example through art. Maybe museums could even be central sites for this nurturing. Places for shared experiences of feeling and food for discussion.**

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1 In Himmelsbach Sabine, Koek Ariane, Spaninks Angelique (eds.): *Real Feelings – Emotion and Technology*, Christoph Merian Verlag, Altenburg, 2020, p 32–43.

2 Greene Joshua: *Moral Tribes; Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*, Atlantic Books, 2015.

3 Hodson, Gordon, "The Human-Animal Divide and Prejudices Against Humans; Seeing others as "less-than-human" in *Psychology Today*, June 19, 2012.

# Maija Tammi

# Empathy Machine

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Photo Museum Ireland

8 November 2025 – 1 February 2026

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