

# COLLISION

Vol. 3, No. 2 (2014)

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



---

Alexander Joy, "Toward an Aesthetic of Hijacking: Cathy Choi's B1206,"  
*Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 11-21.

## ABSTRACT

This Collision uses an encounter with Cathy Choi's B1206 (2012), coupled with theories of aesthetic empathy, to articulate how hijacking as an aesthetic concept might work. The aesthetic faculty of empathy conceives of the aesthetic experience as "feeling into" a given work. This concept furnishes a useful framework for thinking about aesthetic hijacking, as "feeling into" something implies the displacement of the work or its viewer. Hijacking, then, could foreground that displacement by emphasizing spatial uncertainty. Furthermore, hijacking could be an inversion of the process of "feeling into" a given work, indicating a process whereby the work forces its way into the viewer and the space s/he inhabits.

## KEYWORDS

Cathy Choi, hijacking, empathy, space, distance

# Toward an Aesthetic of Hijacking: Cathy Choi's B1206

Alexander Joy



In this Collision, I would like to begin the work of theorizing an aesthetics of hijacking and to examine a work of art – Cathy Choi's *B1206* – that might offer a few starting points for such an inquiry.<sup>1</sup> What could 'hijacking' mean as an aesthetic concept? How should we begin to think about it? What might an aesthetic of hijacking look like – or for that matter *feel/like*?

Considering the way we use the word 'hijacking' in English, I am disinclined to think that an aesthetic of hijacking is necessarily founded upon *looking* – a notion at once connoting both passivity and power. To look is to witness something without having to participate in it. In the vein of voyeurism, it is to act without being acted upon; yet the act must remain covert, must not be intrusive, lest it dispel the voyeur's unseen presence. Hijacking on the other hand is predicated on violent action. Our vernacular

senses of the word, conditioned in part by recent American history, all suggest acts of violence: to steal something while it is in transit; to hold up and commandeer a vehicle; to determine the destination and use of a seized vehicle or item by force. To hijack is to take command of something – or someone – without receiving consent. It may also involve an assertion of one's presence by virtue of the act of hijacking. We could begin to conceive of an aesthetic of hijacking as one where force, coercion, and seizure of control operate in the foreground.

At the same time, the force behind hijacking derives its power from an element of stealth or of the unexpected. A stowaway – or someone posing as a member of the crew – might be the one to hijack a ship or airplane; similarly, a hijacker could disguise himself/herself as a passenger and wait for the opportune moment to seize control of the vehicle. The hijacker relies on subterfuge, pretending to be part of an expected order of affairs – in this instance, the typical roles of and relations between those who inhabit a given space – before moving to shatter it. The concept of hijacking then also connotes disordering: disorder empowers the hijacker and allows him/her to carry out the hijacking action; the force a hijacking exerts is meant to induce further disorder.



I encounter *B1206* in my university's art gallery, stowed in a corner next to yet another Jackson Pollock wannabe. *B1206* strikes me as by far the more interesting work. The piece hangs at approximately eye level. Its undulating blues and pinks, liquid in shape and texture, stand in stark contrast to the crumbling white concrete of the wall behind it. From above, a small track light guides a soft beam to the piece's smooth, shiny surface. An information card beside the mounted work tells me that it is made from acrylic, glue, and resin on canvas. The canvas itself is a neat square, 36 inches by 36 inches – about a meter tall and wide.

Although *B1206* is a work of moderate size when compared to the other pieces in the gallery, it somehow gives me the impression of wanting – and striving – to be *bigger*. A sidelong view of the piece reveals that it is not quite flat as the initial frontal viewing suggests, but that it has depth, rising in slight ripples and bulges off the canvas. The piece's sense of

outward motion remains once I return to a frontal view. Its waves of color seem to batter against its perimeter as if trying to slosh over it and onto the walls, onto the floor. As if the space that *B1206* occupies is not enough for it. As if it seeks more room and will claim it any way it can.



If hijacking is a more active process than looking, then an aesthetic of hijacking should make use of a more active, more dominating faculty. As such, to articulate an aesthetic of hijacking, we might turn to previous aesthetic concepts that stress active involvement or outright possession. In this regard, empathy (as an aesthetic faculty) could prove useful. Contained in the term 'empathy' is the idea that one can know something by (forcibly) occupying its position or subject-position. The word's German origins suggest that one 'feels' one's way into that position, occupying it by emoting or by feeling what he/she/it would feel; experiencing those feelings enables better comprehension of the object. As such, an empathetic approach to aesthetics is a far cry from disinterested Kantian contemplation.

'Empathy' comes to us via translation from the German word *Empfindung*. According to Gustav Jahoda, *Empfindung* literally means "feeling oneself into", observing that one of the word's more daring usages was in the doctoral dissertation of philosopher Robert Vischer in the 1870s, where *Empfindung* was the central problem to be discussed.<sup>2</sup> Jahoda writes, "[*Empfindung*] was not altogether a new term, having occasionally been used previously in literary topics. But Robert Vischer pioneered its application to psychological aspects of the appreciation of art."<sup>3</sup> Vischer suggested that instead of encountering a work of art as some monolithic other at which viewers can only marvel, we reconceive the work in humanizing psychological terms. Moreover, because we begin to think of the work in terms of human sensations, we begin to register those sensations ourselves and perceive physical feelings as a consequence. Vischer explains how this process works in a later (1873) account of a generalized aesthetic experience:

I project my own life into the lifeless form, just as I quite justifiably do with another living person. Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct. I seem merely to adapt and attach myself to it as one hand clasps another, and yet I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this Other . . . When I observe a stationary object, I can without difficulty place myself within its inner structure, at its center of gravity. I can think my way into it, mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it.<sup>4</sup>

Vischer's description of an empathy-driven aesthetic encounter presents a seemingly paradoxical state: the individual identities of object and spectator remain in place, but the spectator feels as if s/he has become the thing observed. As a result, the spectator feels the same things as the object while retaining his/her own identity. Through his writings on empathy, Vischer helps to include the observer of the work of art as a vital player in the aesthetic transaction. Not only do his writings take into account the viewer's reaction to the work of art, helping to localize artistic experience in the spectator rather than in the artwork, but they also suggest that the fullest comprehension of the work comes from precisely this act of ego-projection. In order to know something fully, one must imagine oneself as that something. Crucially for Vischer, this rather invasive imagining process that the spectator undertakes is performed on a voluntary basis. One is not moved into thinking like the work of art but rather *moves* to think like it.

While Vischer's conception of *emföhlung* is noteworthy, the word owes most of its fame to the philosopher Theodor Lipps. In his 1903 essay, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense-Feelings," Lipps articulates a view of aesthetics that is predicated upon empathy, but instead of insisting that it is merely a physical sensation, Lipps attempts to go further. "Empathy means," he writes, "not a sensation in one's body, but feeling something, namely, oneself, into the esthetic object."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Lipps makes a different claim than Vischer: where Vischer suggests that we experience the work of art as a sensation without a sense of transposition, Lipps suggests that we mentally occupy the object's place – if not become one with the object. For Vischer, the work of art is a gateway to new sensations that ultimately manifest themselves in the spectator; the sensations of the artwork are harnessed and channeled toward providing the spectator with new feelings. Meanwhile, the art and its viewer remain

separate entities. For Lipps, the work of art is a destination. We place ourselves in it and merge with it, overtaking it. The goal is less to experience new feelings and more to fathom the being of the work of art – whatever that entails. It is a subtle difference but a crucial one, for Lipps's move lays the groundwork for articulating how one can feel one's way into another person's place whereas Vischer corrals us in our own minds by limiting the scope of our aesthetic experience to personal sensations. In sketching an empathy-driven aesthetic experience, Lipps writes, "Empathy is the fact here established, that the object is myself and by the very same token this self of mine is the object. Empathy is the fact that the antithesis between myself and the object disappears, or rather does not yet exist."<sup>6</sup> Lipps's portrait reveals that once the feeling-into process occurs, something above and beyond Vischer's ego-projection is happening. The spectator does not merely think like the examined object, maintaining all the while the knowledge that spectator and object are distinct. Instead, the spectator appropriates the object and *becomes* it. No 'antithesis' divides them, for they are one and the same.

Lipps's concept of empathy could provide one way to begin thinking about aesthetic hijacking: an aesthetic encounter wherein appropriation is the vehicle of the experience. Even so, the faculty of empathy alone does not address the forceful power dynamics inherent in hijacking as outlined above. Given that hijacking is concerned with disorder and disordering, the question in aesthetic hijacking is this: in which direction does the 'feeling-into' operate? A more conventional aesthetic order, such as that of Vischer or Lipps, places the work of art in a passive or submissive position, where its viewer may inspect or inhabit the work when s/he decides it is appropriate to do so. If this relationship were reversed, however – if the work of art felt its way into the viewer – it would result in quite the upset of the expected aesthetic experience...



Before long I start seeing myself in *B1206*. This is not to say I find in it a kindred spirit who also rails against limitations and restrictions but rather that I witness my own slightly blurred likeness in it once I stop investigating its color and texture. The piece's polished sheen is highly reflective, amplified all the more by the light fixture overhead. It shows me

slightly wavy versions of myself and the gallery room behind me, now awash in nacreous blues and pinks.

John Cage once wrote about a similar type of encounter with one of Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings, whose resplendent surfaces are capable of reflecting their surroundings, thereby changing what appears to be displayed on the canvas – or as Cage put it, “the reflective surfaces chang[e] what is seen by means of what is happening.”<sup>7</sup> Cage described the paintings as “airports for the lights, shadows, and particles,”<sup>8</sup> places where the viewer and his/her immediate vicinity could land and be seen for as long as they remained near the white canvas. Yet Rauschenberg's paintings – despite the fortuity of the airport analogy for a conversation about hijacking – seem less intrusive than the work I am viewing. One can always leave an airport after all; they are the sites of departures as well as arrivals. Seeing yourself reflected on a white background does little to alter the colors and appearance of your body and your world, leaving you with the sense that you are merely a visitor to the canvas. The outside world remains recognizably yours, and thus you remain recognizably outside the painting's reach.

With *B1206* however, I feel a sense of entrapment. Myself and my surroundings, rendered in warping blue and pink, bear little resemblance to the world I know. What I see then is not mine anymore; it is something that belongs to the work, that I am permitted to see only on its terms. Rather than allowing me to land on it for a while and take off as I please, *B1206* has ensnared me. I seem to belong to it more than it belongs to me. It occurs to me that it may well be impossible to view *B1206* without also glimpsing yourself and thereby letting the work of art take over. When encountering *B1206*, disinterested contemplation of the aesthetic object becomes impossible, for this piece erodes the subject/object distinction that enables such a process. *B1206* pulls you into itself and makes you a part of it. It occupies your space and surrounds you with blue and pink. It has felt its way into you and claimed you for itself.

Is this what it feels like to be a work of art, poked and prodded and felt into? When did I consent to such treatment? This piece has done something to me before I could realize – before I could intervene. I feel violated by it.



Hijacking as an aesthetic term could perhaps be thought of as a cousin to the empathetic process, differing primarily in where the power of projection lies. Empathy is a faculty that allows you to comprehend or apprehend a work of art. Hijacking is a faculty by which the work of art apprehends you, overpowers you, and uses you however it sees fit.

In this sense, hijacking is malign only in the way that all power disparities are malign.

If a given work of art appropriates you through hijacking, it also alters or dissolves outright distinctions in aesthetic space. We could divide aesthetic space between the world that the art object contains and our world outside it. If the work of art hijacks us and enfolds us in its world, then it brings our entire world with it. The earlier distinction fails; our world and its contents are held captive in a diegesis that has become extradiegetic; or else the artwork escapes its confines and asserts all space outside itself as being within its purview. No boundary remains between that which is art and that which is not.

In this sense, hijacking is malign only in the way that all denials of distinct, protected space are malign.

Perhaps it follows that an aesthetic of hijacking would not permit a comfortable partitioning of space. In such an aesthetic, irruption and interruption would be frequent and unpredictable. No territory could be declared and settled before some new intervention would upend it.

As an aesthetic concept, hijacking could indicate this kind of forcible disruption of diegetic space: one in which the work of art does the disrupting, erasing any pretense of the viewer's power to determine the boundaries of the diegesis.



*B1206* has requisitioned me. I am part of it. My one defense is to avert my eyes or to inspect the piece from a different angle, where I cannot see my own trapped reflection. In three-dimensional space, at least the balance of power still tips in my favor. I can move freely and evade my appropriated gaze; *B1206* remains anchored to its wall and can look into me only as long as I look into it.

But perhaps I err in thinking that the piece is confined solely to the wall.

Viewed from the side, *B1206* takes on an especially liquid consistency along the bottom of the canvas. The blue and pink seem to well up and pour from the frame but stop an inch or two beneath the canvas's edge – like a waterfall frozen in place. *B1206* melts out of its own frame to startling effect. For in so doing, it resists the finite space allotted to it. It demands space beyond the canvas.

And seizes it.

• Notes •

- 1 Cathy Choi, *B1206*. Acrylic, glue, and resin on canvas. Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York. [http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists\\_o2.cfm?fid=582](http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists_o2.cfm?fid=582).
- 2 Gustav Jahoda, "Theodor Lipps and the Shift from 'Sympathy' to 'Empathy'," *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 41.2 (Spring 2005): 153.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Robert Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics," in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica, California: Getty Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1994), 104.
- 5 Theodor Lipps, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense-Feelings," in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, ed. Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 381.
- 6 Ibid., 376.
- 7 John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1979), 102.
- 8 Ibid.

## • References •

Cage, John. "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work." In *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, 98–108, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1979.

Choi, Cathy. *B1206*. 2012. Acrylic, glue, and resin on canvas. Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York,  
[http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists\\_02.cfm?fid=582](http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists_02.cfm?fid=582).

Jahoda, Gustav. "Theodor Lipps and the Shift from 'Sympathy' to 'Empathy'." *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 41.2 (Spring 2005): 151–163.

Lipps, Theodor. "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense-Feelings." In *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, edited by Melvin Rader, 374–382. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.

Visher, Robert. "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics." In *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, Translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou, 89–123, Santa Monica, California: Getty Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1994.