



Catholic
Universities
Art
Triennale

26

Exercises in Empathy ART CUT'26 Catholic Universities Art Triennale 2026

An exhibition, 104 artists, 14 curators, 8 cities, 3 continents, that sets in motion ideas of art, empathy, education, knowledge, the university and, of course, the future. A project nourished by the conviction that artistic languages are a privileged means of establishing relationships, dialogues and affinities beyond cultural, linguistic or political barriers.

An exhibition unfolding across the world, bringing together artists who speak different languages, possess different poetics, and have very distinct artistic, cultural, social and political practices. Between them and us, who receive and experience their works, an extensive conversation takes place, a conversation envisioned by His Eminence Cardinal Tolentino de Mendonça and materialised in a vast exhibition to which he calls “a school of empathy.”

But why art to build this “school of empathy”?

Because ever since art was invented, we discovered that we are capable not only of representing reality, but also, through those representations, of communicating and expressing the world, the human and the spirit. An unprecedented mode of communication which, according to Bataille, began in the cave of Lascaux and continues to this day: unfinished, active, powerful.

A way of expressing, loving and seeking the human and the world that had (and has) as its condition the recognition of the other and the possibility of saying him in their irreducible singularity. The possibility of articulating the other grounded in our capacity to establish a sentimental, rational and collective connection between the self and the other (any other and all others).

If recognising the other and their humanity must lie at the foundation of any ethical, social and also technological project (as Pope Leo XIV identifies in his fundamental encyclical «Magnifica Humanitas»), that recognition is also the condition of art. As Walter Benjamin puts it, art always presupposes the whole of humanity as its recipient; in other words, there can be no art without relation, without alterity, without one person speaking and another listening, one showing and another seeing. That is, there is no art without empathy (as Worringer so aptly described).

Of course, when we speak of art, we are not referring simply to a set of more or less well-made objects that we may or may not like, but to things that mysteriously condense feelings and provoke emotional and spiritual experiences within us. Art, with all the mystery that surrounds it, is an emotional experience through which we say things to one another that transcend times, cultures and geographies. An essential form of speaking in times of intense and radical dissent, of impossible conversations and seemingly incompatible ways of life.

Drawing on a series of philosophical meditations on art, literature and music, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum shows how emotions provoke *upheavals of thought*. These *upheavals* not only expand the human capacity to feel ourselves, but also to feel the other.

The imaginative exercise we undertake when reading a poem, looking at a painting, watching a film or listening to a piece of music involves not only the activation of our imagination, but also the establishment of relationships between different characters, elements, perspectives, ways of seeing and ways of being. Through these different experiences, the reader, the viewer and the listener learn to appreciate the emotional lives of others.

Through art we can thus live more than one life. Not only because of the movements of sensitive imagination that carry us to distant times, unknown places and realities we could never have anticipated, but also, to again invoke Nussbaum, because through art we can inhabit the intimacy of other beings, feeling their steps, their fears, their desires, as if they were our own. Or, as the poet Rilke says, the movement through which poetry guides us allows us, for a moment, to leap into the centre of a being and see the world as if we were that being. It is not seeing through beings as mere windows onto the outside, the poet says, but seeing from within.

For both the poet and the philosopher, when we are able to live these borrowed lives that art makes available to us, it becomes more difficult to see the other as strange, repulsive or hostile, even when political forces and organisations or certain media portray particular groups and communities as threatening.



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The possibility of living another life through our imagination not only broadens human emotionality but, as Martha Nussbaum reminds us in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), art teaches us to think critically, to analyse arguments and to imagine life from the point of view of someone other than ourselves.

As a *School of Empathy*, this Triennale presents itself as a moral laboratory in which a series of exercises are proposed, where each work, each exhibition and each artist leads us towards collective practices of empathy that are aesthetic, ethical, human, political and social. And they teach us, as the Brazilian artist Leonilson embroiders on one of his textile works/paintings, “the thoughts of the heart” (“os pensamentos do coração”).

The enormous ambition of our *School of Empathy* is proportional to the scale of the upheavals that human societies and cultures have undergone, to the point where they have often made the unthinkable real. It is a project that finds in works of art empathic devices that need to be activated and to which we need to pay greater attention, because within them lies the possibility of deinstalling the growing dehumanisation we see coming towards us. A dehumanisation driven by the growing dominance of digital mechanisms and by a kind of deafness that renders us incapable of dialogue: we all speak as if we had toothless mouths, to use Wittgenstein’s brutal metaphor. Art, as a school in which this greater knowledge of the other can be exercised, allows our speech acts to be heard and enables us, in response to Pope Leo XIV’s appeal, to remain human.

Nuno Crespo

Chief Curator

Art Cut '26

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