

PERFORMING EMPATHIES The Art of Saya Woolfalk

by Nicole R. Fleetwood

I'm always thinking about what are the potentials for the body. What can we be? Who could we be? Who could we become?

—*Saya Woolfalk*

For more than a decade, artist Saya Woolfalk has engaged with difference and relationality as modes of becoming in various artistic projects. Known for her immersive installations of imaginary and futuristic worlds, Woolfalk's practice is a labor intensive and meticulous process of cultivating characters, building and making material and cultural objects representative of these imagined worlds. These worlds are characterized by highly chromatic displays, skillful precision of matter and form, and the incorporation of media and live performance.

The artist's exploration incorporates utopian ideals, technocultural studies, racial discourse, animacy, and ethnography; and yet, these frameworks combined do not adequately describe her imaginary landscape in works like *No Placeans* and *The Empathics*. While her art incorporates a range of materials and technology, embodiment and performance (often as play) are also central tools for the artist as she considers the possibility of what "we" can become through a radical aesthetic investigation of relationality, difference, and belonging. Thus, "we" is an operative and charged term in her art as various forms of embodied characters experiment with difference, separation, hybridity, and togetherness. Through sustained artistic investigation, Woolfalk explores how "we" conceptualize our relationship to each other through and across difference in the twenty-first century, simultaneously taking into account histories of differentiation.

Woolfalk's ongoing series on the *Empathics*, a hybrid life form—part human, part plant—is an elaborate exploration of these concepts. *The Empathics* project has many versions and incorporates sculpture, dance, video, painting, fabric arts, mediated and live performance. It is a carefully orchestrated and finely detailed cosmology, that at the same time is open-ended and subject to change. In many versions of the installation, Woolfalk—as researcher, interlocutor, and subject of knowledge—explicates, performs, and ritualizes the origins of the interspecies beings in a live performance. As part of the installation, a short video *The Empathics*, invoking the genre of educational documentaries in school and museum settings, narrates the origins of the life form:

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On behalf of the Empathics, welcome. This video documents an exhibition about our biological transformation and the history of Empathic culture. The Institute of Empathy was founded to excavate a burial site in the woods of upstate New York. The bones we found appeared human but we came to realize that they had an unfamiliar genetic chimerism . . . Not only did the bones contain the genetic material of two distinct organisms but the organisms came from two different kingdoms of the natural world: human and plant. At first we merely studied this discovery but repeat contact with the fungus emanating from the bones stimulated our own physical transformation. These fungal spores circulated throughout our bodies, slowly mutating our DNA. (S. Woolfalk, *The Empathics*)

The video offers an entry point into the artist's concept of "interspecies hybridization" and provides legibility for the kaleidoscopic, interstellar, kinesthetic world that is constantly evolving.



Saya Woolfalk, *Empathic Morphology: Herniated Consciousness* (2012)
Installation view of *The Empathics* at the Montclair Art Museum, 2012

In querying about how we come together in this contemporary moment, the artist cultivates a mode of relationality akin to the Buddhist concept of “interbeing,” an open state (and an ethical praxis, for Buddhist practitioners) that acknowledges our connection to all living beings (Edelglass 421). A concept developed by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, interspecies is a state of awareness and engagement that he describes as, “To be in touch with the reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms.” Those who follow the Order of Interbeing commit “to change themselves in order to change society in the direction of compassion and understanding by living a joyful and mindful life” (Hanh 1, 9). Continual change is necessary to grow one’s awareness and practice of interbeing. Similarly, a mode of interdependent and relational change is one of the fundamental elements of the evolving world of the Empathics. Instead of abandoning difference and its multiple histories in the process of change, Woolfalk mobilizes difference as possibility and transformation through her notion of “interspecies hybridization,” an evolutionary process of cultivating new life form and consciousness through cross species fertilization. In this process, differentiation moves beyond intra-human relationality to consider human’s generative capacity with other organisms.

With *The Empathics*, Woolfalk destabilizes familiar notions of difference as a polarizing force to create new forms of being and relating through aestheticized hybrid modes of belonging and exploring the possibilities and limitations of utopian ideals of embodiment and transformation. This study analyzes the artist’s exploration of empathy, transformation, and collective visualization (as practices of utopian belonging) to consider Woolfalk’s imagining and practices of modes of togetherness that do not single out struggle over other forms of relationality and exchange. At the same time, as the study contends, Woolfalk’s art recognizes struggle and tension as necessary processes to forming human collectivities. Her invocation of empathy is a creative and productive embrace of such a challenge in which contact and vulnerability produce the continued growth of hybrid life. As I understand it, empathy is a mode of receptivity and an awakened presence to how we move and transform each other. Not only do we impact each other, we become *other* through a continuous state of interbeing. In this way, contact is not episodic, nor is it an event; it is a continuous state of transformation.

Recent scholarship in animacy—as “the profound associations between humans and non-human animals, and between the organic and the inorganic”—and interspecies advances theories of the production of difference as various modes of visible and invisible embodiment (Ferguson). Woolfalk’s notion of “interspecies hybridization” resonates with the scholarship of Mel Chen, Ed Cohen, Julie Livingston, and Jasbir Puar in troubling the discreet category of the human very much at play in her art. In a special issue of *Social Text* on interspecies, editors Jasbir Puar and Julie Livingston define interspecies as a category “to refer to relationships between different forms of biosocial life and their political effects. It is a capacious framing paradigm that names the articulation of human/nonhuman binaries and human/animal/plant taxonomies as interrelated even as these continue to operate in both congealed and differentiated modes” (3–4). The scholars also write that interspecies scholarship takes “the animal, the plant, and the microbial seriously as non-human actors and as racial and sexual proxies within actual, material, biological worlds” (4). The work of such thinkers coheres with the conceptualizing of interdependence and becoming posited in Woolfalk’s artwork. Moreover, this scholarship helps to undo some of the conventional frameworks for how human value and the human subject are conceived in ways that privilege certain bodies and life forms over others.

Contemporary Art and the Production of Difference?

Woolfalk's exploration is a rich and complex association that combines academic training and artistic study with her multiracial upbringing and matrilineal craft. Of Japanese, black, and white ancestry, the artist grew up in an educated, primarily white, middle and upper middle class community in Westchester, New York. During vacations, Woolfalk spent time in Japan where she learned to sew from her maternal grandmother. Trained as a sculptor with an MFA from the School of Art Institute of Chicago, she also holds a BA from Brown University and has studied philosophy, theories of race and ethnicity, and gender/sexuality studies. A highly accomplished artist, she has exhibited at PS1/MoMA, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Performa 9, and Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, and she has been the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship, an Art Matters grant, and a NYFA grant, amongst other awards.

Like the colorful and elaborately designed textile work that clothes the Empathics, Woolfalk weaves many layers of cultural, aesthetic, and sociological influences into her art. In her installations, performances, and media art, Woolfalk frames questions and uses bodies in ways that speak to a tradition of feminist performance and media art dating back to the 1960s, with such notable figures as Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Carrie Mae Weems, and Cindy Sherman. Woolfalk brings conceptual and art historical training together with aesthetic influences and skills that she acquired as a child to produce one of the most stunning aspects of her art: the laborious and exquisitely detailed textile sculptures of her installation. Woolfalk designs life-size sculptures that are Empathic mannequins and she creates (designs, sews, builds) all of the costumes and objects in the Empathic world. She reflects,

The early work that I made at Brown was about women's bodies and sexuality. And so, the first entry point into fabric was "How do we transform our ideas of the body? How do we create garments that can give us access to new ways of understanding our bodies and feeling and experiencing our bodies, as they are, not as they are confined or constructed?" And so, fashion, textiles, those kinds of things became part of what I was thinking about. And then, because I was working with my grandmother as a kid sewing—making things by hand, sewing things, toys—these small kind of plush objects just made sense. (S. Woolfalk, Interview)

In considering her influences, Woolfalk's art also resonates with several interventions made by black curators and black artists, many emerging out of art school training, of the late-twentieth century. In the 1990s and onward, artists such as Lorna Simpson, Fred Wilson, Coco Fusco, and Glenn Ligon pushed audiences and museums to look differently at the work of the museum and the exhibition of culture. Woolfalk acknowledges the importance of this legacy to her conceptual exploration and use of material. While identifying with her multiracial lineage and hybrid influences, Woolfalk acknowledges the importance of black art institutions to her success, noting that the broader public in the United States became exposed to her work when she exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2008 (S. Woolfalk, Interview).

Woolfalk's visual and tonal influences are far-reaching. Bright and soft textiles, life-size sculptures that resemble cartoon characters, gestures and movements that suggest comfort



Saya Woolfalk, *Empathic Morphology: Herniated Consciousness* (2012)

Handmade linen and abaca paper, wool, tree branches, cotton, linen, synthetic fabric, felt, plastic bones, mannequin, tree branches, acrylic paint, feathers, epoxy, and polystyrene foam heads (72" x 72" x 72")

Installation view of *The Empathics* at the Montclair Art Museum, 2012

and ease, and hypnotic and psychedelic renderings of alternative cosmologies characterize her art. Colorful, round, and soft shapes make up her imaginary world populated by a fabricated fleshiness with characters resembling those from the children's show *Teletubbies*. The artist notes of her use of color, "I've always made work with a lot of color, even when I was a kid. There's something about it. I love high amounts of chroma. I don't wear a lot of color. . . . But for some reason I've always made art with super high chroma . . . I think origami fabric and then going to Brazil. That increased the chroma" (S. Woolfalk, Interview).

As much as Woolfalk's work is an aesthetic and creative exploration of hybridity and belonging, her work is also an inquiry into the production of ethnography and cultural difference rooted in anthropology. She lived with her husband who is an anthropologist at his field site in Brazil from 2004 until 2006. Woolfalk also received a Fulbright to study performance and craft traditions in Brazil. She explains that during her time in Brazil, her thoughts on racial hybridity and blending crystallized:



Saya Woolfalk, *Empathic Morphology: Herniated Consciousness* (2012)

Handmade linen and abaca paper, wool, tree branches, cotton, linen, synthetic fabric, felt, plastic bones, mannequin, tree branches, acrylic paint, polystyrene foam heads, plastic beads, wooden hands, feathers, epoxy, plastic bowls, and wicker trivets (72" x 144" x 60")

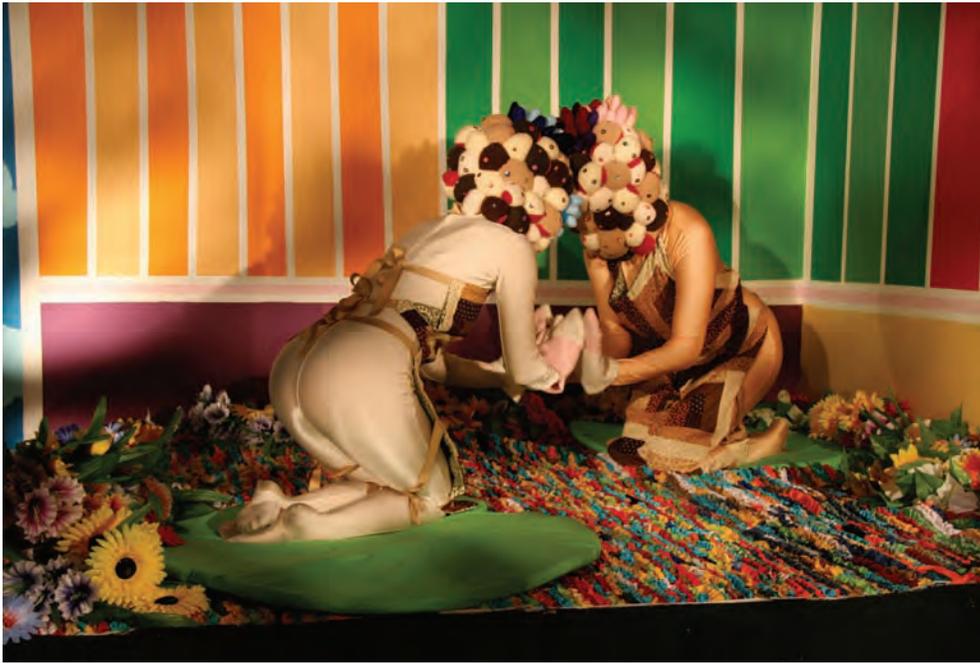
Installation view of *The Empathics* at the Montclair Art Museum, 2012

Thinking about power, I wanted to think about race and I wanted to think about sexuality. Before I went to Brazil, it was much harder for me to think about it, because we don't live in a culture that thinks about a blended idea of raciality, even though we exist in one . . . Maybe now more so, because we have a president who is black, but he is also biracial. I mean it's really starting to emerge as a conversation . . . It exists and it existed but it wasn't a topic of conversation that was going to be easily broached. So, going to Brazil opened that, just opened the door, like completely for me. I was able to start thinking about what a raced body looks like; what blending looks like; what blackness looks like; what whiteness looks like; what a combination of those things looks like; what Asian-ness means in relation to all of that, because it was not my context. So I could kind of abstract from it. . . .

I was in Brazil and I was like, "Oh okay. I can think about race now because these categories, these blended categories, these categories where people are touching and mixing and mingling, are much more consistent with how I know my world to be. This is how I live my life. And it's not Utopian. It's actually just as fraught, and just as dystopian, and just as complicated as having clear lines and categorizations. And I liked the idea that this place was posited by many people." (S. Woolfalk, Interview)

It was in Brazil where Woolfalk began to conceive of the No Placeans, "a future utopian world where people are part plant and human and change gender and color" (S. Woolfalk, Message). During that time, she collaborated with an anthropologist Rachel Lears on the video *Ethnography of No Place*. In this earlier experiment with interspecies hybridization, the point of view, as Woolfalk notes, is from that of an anthropologist, "from the perspective of someone who is outside looking into a culture" (S. Woolfalk). In the video, chapter titles are used that mirror conventional themes of anthropological studies. For example, there is a chapter entitled "Death and Kin" invoking ethnographic traditions of studying kinship, rites of passage, and death rituals. In this chapter, the disembodied ethnographer states: "The body perishes with each gesture" to rather absurd images of a faceless puppet holding a painted egg crate that functions as a cultural object of the No Placeans. Following that and without clear connection, the ethnographer states, "Sorry and thanks are insufficient to express gratitude for love." Such heavily laden voice-over narration to images of performers in costumes that are reminiscent of children's puppet theater humorously highlight the disjuncture between anthropological discourse on the interpretation of culture and cultural practices. In another chapter of the video labeled "Empathy," two No Placeans mirror each other's movements. Their faces are bulbous textiles with no discernible eyes. They are in perfect harmony; at the end, their hands meet.

Both the No Placeans and the Empathics gesture towards world making that is not post-race, although the artist entertains what "post-race" might mean and look like from our present moment, steeped in our racial histories and racial present. More specifically, she interrogates and cultivates idealized notions of hybridity as practices by severing the ideal from the human as pure form. She does this, in particular in the world of the Empathics, while providing an alternative framework to consider the history and present of racial amalgamation as the production of culture, nation and subjects.¹ In the world of the Empathics, this awareness plays out through the construction of the Institute of Empathy, which serves as a repository of Empathic culture and a lab where the life form and culture continue to evolve. Moreover, the researcher and the researched are one and the same.



Saya Woolfalk in collaboration with Rachel Lears, Video still from *Ethnography of No Place* (2008)
Video (30min)

Aestheticizing Difference as Belonging

The Empathics is an evolving aesthetic, technological, and cultural experiment with many components. First, there is the hybrid species, self-identified as the Empathics. They generally appear as blue colored organisms and are about the average size of a human female. Many have two heads that are decorated with stripes or spots and some have grown petals on parts of their bodies. In addition to the embodied subject, Empathic also refers to their many cultural objects, hieroglyphs, and rituals that Woolfalk incorporates into installations.

According to the production of the history and mythology of the Empathic (as documented in Woolfalk's "educational" videos and public lectures), Empathic culture has been catalogued, archived, and exhibited by the Institute of Empathy, a research center in northern New York. Appropriating anthropological tropes of difference and various tribal and cultural iconographic systems, Woolfalk develops a world and representational system that incorporates familiar signs in a disorienting and self-consciously contemporary context. For example, her installations on the Empathics are often set up to harken back to ethnographic displays of tribal groups at world fairs in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, while incorporating technological discourse of transmission and virality. Curator Lowery Sims writes, "The dynamics of display are at work here, but Woolfalk moves beyond a contemporary version of the *cabinet des curiosities*. This is meant to be a collection of objects that will be conjured and assembled over time. . . . It is

a *cabinet d'anticipation*." So for instance, in *The Empathics*, a wall display in a museum setting features decorated bones of the hybrid; beads, colorful and textured fabric, and shiny ornaments turn the functionality of bone into aesthetic objects of difference on display.

It is the relationship between the material culture of the Empathics, the deeply intimate relationship with technology that facilitates transformation, and the incorporation of performance that make *The Empathics* such a layered, visually striking, and meditative project. Woolfalk is not only the producer and scholar of Empathic culture but is also a subject—a hybrid informant, who performs as an Empathic in many of her videos and in live performances. As an Empathic, she speaks as both researcher and research subject. She is evidence of the transformative character of scholarly inquiry, thus flipping anthropological ways of knowing.

Dance and movement are integral to Empathic transformation. The Empathics are characterized by their fluid, harmonious movement in unison with each other. When creating videos for the Empathic project, Woolfalk works with professional dancers and students. In earlier works, dance serves as an important medium for the artist to explore belonging and conflict. Many of her short videos feature dyads—a pairing—moving together and simultaneously struggling with notions of individuation and togetherness. Her 2005 video *Winter Garden: Hybrid Love Objects* centers around two fabricated subjects whose costumes and dance are influenced by Northeastern Brazilian carnival and folklore performance. To percussive music, the figures move rhythmically sometime in unison, sometime in combat. They break their dyadic impasse by throwing a puppet between them, thus forming a solidarity based on this exchange. Woolfalk describes *Winter Garden: Hybrid Objects* as "my first attempt at trying to deal with hybridity but it was still dealing with these categories of blackness and whiteness. And so there's this topsy-turvy doll that is half black and half white and it's stuck together and they are basically like tearing it apart, and holding it and tearing it apart. It's like this central component of their social interaction" (S. Woolfalk, Interview).

Belonging is a central preoccupation of contemporary performance and immersive art work in the late-modern era where community formations and national, racial, gender, linguistic, religious, and sexual affiliations are largely shaped by complex exchanges between the global and the local, the technological and the corporeal, the virtual and the material. "What brings us together?" is a question posed in much of the scholarship on gender and sexuality studies, community studies, theories of the public, and political theory. Querying the entrenchment of gender categories, feminist psychoanalytic theorist Kaja Silverman argues that largely what brings us together is our shared vulnerability, morbidity, and limitation—our finitude. According to Silverman, it is through our limits and vulnerability that we face our inter-connectedness, our interdependence, and that we act in ways that have consequences to the self, the other, and the whole.

Political theorist Danielle Allen, arguing for "the whole" as a metaphor of governance that replaces the dominant metaphor of "the one," also emphasizes the importance of vulnerability to relationality, governance, and belonging. She argues that the dominant metaphor of the nation as "one" has exacerbated division, suspicion, and exclusion; instead Allen puts forth a notion of citizenry that emphasizes wholeness over oneness, writing, "On the same page or in the same city, alongside each other without touching, citizens of different classes, backgrounds, and experiences are inevitably related to each other in networks of mutual benefaction, despite customary barriers between them, and despite

our nearly complete lack of awareness, or even disavowal, of these networks" (45). Similar to Silverman's theory, Allen's proposal of belonging pivots on vulnerability, writing, "We teach our children, 'Don't talk to strangers!' in order to protect them from dangers. But democracy requires vulnerability before one's citizens" (49). The vision of wholeness is an incomplete striving toward something that we cannot achieve, or ever quite reach. Woolfalk's "interspecies hybridization" is an exploration of becoming as belonging; and, similar to Allen's theory of governance, Woolfalk's world system is one that is not premised on suspicion and exclusion.

In the video *The Empathics*, an Empathic guide appears in white clothing with white petals surrounding her painted face. She looks directly into the camera, motionless. Her lips do not move, but she is positioned as the one who narrates the story of becoming. The stillness of her mouth suggests an evolved form of communicating with her audience, as if her thoughts are transmitted to her intended receivers without speech. The story begins as a conventional ethnographic inquiry into discovery and difference, but unlike the normative practice of ethnographic narration, the female narrator uses the first person plural to educate her audience about the institute and the evolution of the Empathics:

We decided to name our new species Empathics because our transformation has rendered us extremely receptive to the introduction of foreign genetic material. [Pause] We subsequently refined this biological process into four steps so that any ordinary human may elect to undergo the experience of interspecies hybridization, thus choosing to become an Empathic. (S. Woolfalk, *The Empathics*)

Two featureless, but clearly hybrid, beings move together in interstellar space. Their colors are muted and facial features are not distinguished. They are in the early stages of becoming Empathic. The video then cuts to a wall display of a life size, colorful Empathic mannequin with elaborate petals, suggesting the future stages of transformation of the two featureless bodies. With the narration, Woolfalk offers her audience an origin story of a type of hybridity, that of interspecies mutation.

The Empathics demonstrate a notion of what theorist Brian Massumi describes as "In becoming is belonging" (76). It is in becoming-as-belonging that the artist stretches our configurations of the past, present, and more importantly future possibilities. Performance serves as an important method to explore modes of interspecies becoming and to interrogate categories of subjectivity and embodiment. About her exploration, Woolfalk explains that "a lot of it comes out of thinking in the body that you live in and what it feels like, what it means, how it interfaces with the world, what the world sees, how you blend in, how you don't blend in" (S. Woolfalk, Interview). It is through the possibilities and limitations of embodiment that she expands notions of being and collectivity—interbeing—into the reaches of the not-yet-actualized, but perhaps knowable, moment yet to arrive.

On Becoming Empathic

Crucial to the process of interspecies hybridization is the workings of empathy as a necessary component of transformation. How does one articulate and perform empathy?

As a mode of performance and relationality empathy is a fraught concept in light of cultural critique of the ethics of representing and speaking for “the other.” In thinking about empathy in the context of Woolfalk’s art, I would distinguish it from a representational praxis of “speaking for,” in which the researcher, artist, inquisitor delves into the other, presumably with less power and capital, to emerge as a translator of difference. In this paradigm, the researcher is left relatively stable and benefits by becoming more secure and powerful through studying “the other.” In Woolfalk’s conceptual projects, the empathic process emerges out of collective exploration of modes of relating that involves different bodies and subjects. She explains how she works with dancers to build these imaginary worlds:

The characters are formed out of the people who participate. That’s like another element of chance that comes into it. I don’t say, “This is who I want.” I say, “These are the kinds of people I might like and let’s see who will come and participate in this project, because it’s about collectivity I give them criteria. For example, you’re an Empathic and this is what we’re thinking about. Then, they create the culture. And so the idea is that as they are creating this culture, I then pull out parts of it. (S. Woolfalk, Interview)

To become Empathic is quite easy. It is a voluntary state of receptivity; the body, both vulnerable and vital, opens to states of transmission and transformation. In this way, choosing the world of Empathy is an ethical love project that allows a subject to undergo an identification of hybrid belonging that constantly evolves. Inquiring leads first to a subtle and then ultimately revolutionary process of becoming as being. The contact zone that produces Empathic being is not a site of territorial invasion or violent conquest. Instead, contact is tensionless. The deeper one’s transformation, the more receptive one becomes to further hybridization.

Being Empathic is not the same as, although related to, being compassionate or empathetic. While empathic and empathetic share similar meaning, they are used differently in everyday language. Empathetic is often in reference to one who is moved by and moved to act based on another’s feelings and experiences; empathic has a mystical connotation to reference one who channels the feelings or experiences of another. Both references come into play in the cultivation of Empathic beings and culture for Woolfalk. Sims writes, “For Woolfalk empathy is the means by which to effect a mutation of the two biologies, effectively ‘dislodging’ the barriers between worlds, societies, individuals.”

Empathy produces a transformative experience that is distinct from compassion, although the words are sometimes used interchangeably. Compassion has been theorized as “*an emotion in operation*” that implies privilege; empathy, although often conflated with compassion, is more difficult to isolate. Compassion is conceived as a power dynamic where one who has more social and economic capital gets pleasure and achieves more power by helping subjects understood as needing (Woodward 71). Empathy suggests a relationship to the experience and suffering of another, that one does not simply express concern (sympathy), nor is the result of one’s experience of the other’s suffering a do-gooder action (compassion). Instead empathy connotes a receptivity to the experience and emotion of another that leads to the possibility of transformative connection. Legal theorist Lynne Henderson defines empathy as “the foundational phenomenon for intersubjectivity, which is *not* absorption by the other, but rather simply the relationship of self to other, individual

to community" (1584). As I invoke the concept of empathy, I push Henderson's definition further. While empathy does not necessarily suggest the "absorption by the other," it does call for a transformative experience so that one is not left the same, nor is one the other.

The Path to Interspecies Existence

It is through contact, transmission, and reception that Empathics emerge as interspecies beings. The contact begins through fungal spores that stick to human researchers. Repeated contact with fungus turns researchers into their research subject. The narrator of *The Empathics* maps out the four phases of becoming an Empathic: "The first physical manifestation to becoming an empathic is to develop multiple heads with multiple brains. For example, one brain may contain information on being a plant while the second brain may contain information on being a human. This in-between state allows us to tolerate our experience of crossing species and also enables us to move effortlessly between human cultures." The growth of multiple heads allows for the Empathic to integrate data and matter from both kingdoms.

Two headed-ness emerges as a tenet in Woolfalk's cosmology: that plant life has consciousness. Empathics have two heads as an evolutionary process of integrating information and consciousness from two distinct kingdoms. As theorists of interspecies have argued, we are not bound human subjects; we are, in fact, interspecies and that hybridization is not a choice that we can completely govern. In analyzing virality and containment in bioscience and theories of the human, Ed Cohen writes, "What the parasite reveals is that the 'life of the body' also belongs to life in general, which is why the parasite can eat both with us (as guest, as commensal) and from us (the literal meaning of parasite). In so doing, the parasite confronts us with the fact that life does not properly 'take place' within a proper body" (23). Both Cohen and Woolfalk suggest interspecies existence as a mode of survival. Cohen later argues, "Unbeknownst to us, our futures may depend on the ways we learn to live with the viruses that take place within and among us—though of course the referent of this 'us' would then be up for grabs. Yet this coincidence, literally a co-incidence, troubles us both physiologically and conceptually" (27).

Beyond the physical transformation that Empathics undergo, another crucial phase of interspecies hybridization takes place through dreaming and visualization. As audiences of *The Empathics* learn:

The second important aspect of our biological mutation process is called Utopian Conjuring Therapy, or UCT. In this therapy, a senior Empathic guides a junior Empathic through a kaleidoscopic, lucid dream. These guided dreams organize the heterogeneous mental content of the junior Empathic synthesizing her competing sets of genetic information. We then objectify these dreams by making visionary paintings. In the third stage of mutation after many sessions of Utopian Conjuring Therapy, we synthesize our heterogeneous experiences into a unified state. As a result, some of us develop petal-covered wings that allow us to participate in aerial displays. This unification also allows us to shed our second heads and mold our skins. We collect and embellish these sheds and then sell them to support our research into interspecies hybridization. Upon

completion of Utopian Conjuring Therapy, the Empathics physically activate the knowledge we have attained through our lucid dreams. This fourth and final stage culminates in our joining together to create one of several physical configurations or formations. The star compulsion formation is a way for us to activate the things we see in our visions. Through our continued research into Empathics genetics and culture, we hope to offer insight into our hybridizing world. (S. Woolfalk, *The Empathics*)

Woolfalk explores the function of dreams in the video *Utopian Conjuring Therapy*; here, the audience is given access to the process of vision transmission. Utopian Conjuring Therapy is the process by which interspecies beings visualize together. These dreams often result in totems and artifacts of Empathic culture. They also allow for further stages of hybridization. In the short video that demonstrates the therapeutic process, a senior Empathic stands at the head of the table operating a computer tablet. On the table are decorated bones; the bones move around and take form without being physically handled by the Empathic. Instead she uses the computer screen to mobilize them. As she moves her hand along the screen, the bones come together as a puzzle and layers of embodiment emerge. While the video is in conversation with traditions of folklore and myth, it is also very much about the possibility of technology for cultivating a sense of belonging, for promoting creative processes, and for building new ways of identifying.



Saya Woolfalk, *Star Compulsion* (2010)
Fabric, felt, papier-mâché, plastic beads, mannequins, and latex paint (180" diameter)
Installation view of *The Empathics* at the Montclair Art Museum, 2012



Saya Woolfalk, *Utopia Conjuring Chamber*, Institute of Empathy, Greene County, NY, circa 2012 (2012)

Mixed media video installation

Handmade linen and abaca paper, cotton fabric, mannequins, felt, fabric paint, wood, latex paint, polystyrene foam, plastic bones, synthetic felt, plastic sequins, converse sneakers (170" x 180" x 336")

Installation view of *The Empathics* at the Montclair Art Museum, 2012

Woolfalk's Empathic project leaves some audience members asking whether one must give up individuation to belong. Is history sacrificed for idealization or utopian visions? There is a deliberate dream-like, seductive quality to her world making that invokes utopian idealization. This dream-like state, in fact, might better be understood as an awakening for audiences to think more critically about notions of hybridity and utopia. About this, Woolfalk states: "When I am in the United States people are always thinking about multiraciality as an Utopian position—and it's just not. It's very complicated and very fraught. It's not that it's just hard for me. The confluence of cultures causes conflict. There are some wonderful things, there are some great things, but there are also problems that happen" (S. Woolfalk, Interview). Her invocation of chimera, as that which is hoped for but not quite achievable, highlights how she imagines the complex relationship between hybridity, blending, and belonging.

In *Chimera*, there is an absence of speech. Instead, the focus is on the process of empathic transmission and transformation. One Empathic takes a cord attached to another who sits in the middle with her eyes closed. She plugs the cord into her chest and we can see a visualization forming in her second (colorful) head. The one who attaches herself to the Empathic who is visualizing then appears on the other side of the dreaming Empathic. The dreamer has her eyes closed, the transmitter has her eyes open. She then attaches another cord and the visualization becomes more elaborate. They combine bodily as they dream together into a three headed, six-armed form. Their merged body is covered in feathers. This hybrid/whole being glides backward harmoniously through a circular, colorful space. The Empathic whose eyes are open disappears; the dreamer is left in the same position with eyes closed and hands to her second head. Sims states, "Hers is an identity that questions whether or not we have the capacity for change, for empathy, for happiness. It is one that is aspirational as opposed to existential, potential as opposed to certain. We are forced to consider what the fusion of races and cultures would actually look like; what would comprise cultural hybridity?"

Woolfalk's intentionally idealized worlds encourage audiences to grapple with our complex and bloodied history of exclusion and intolerance, of sacrifice and suffering. The tensionless ease of Empathic becoming brings into sharp realization how the connective tissues and sinewy mess of togetherness are more challenging to actualize in the present moment. The Empathics provide a cautionary tale about societal embrace of utopian notions of hybridity, and simultaneously offer a vibrant, dynamic, and fluid landscape for moving through our inter-relatedness.



Saya Woolfalk, Video stills from *Chimera* (2013)
Digital video (2 min. 49sec.)
Filmmaker Rachel Lears
Technologist for 3D animation James Tunick, IMC Lab + Gallery
Commissioned by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, California

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This article benefited from the thoughtful feedback of audience and organizers of the “Mobilizing Performance: Identity and Self-Making in Black Women’s Aesthetic Practices” Colloquium at Brown University in March 2013. A special thanks to Brandeise Monk-Payton, Ralph Rodriguez, and Rebecca Schneider for wonderful suggestions. I am also appreciative of Yona Backer and the crew at Third Streaming Gallery for exposing me to Woolfalk’s art. Thank you to research assistant Mark Ray for transcribed interviews and research support. And finally, a very special thanks to Saya Woolfalk for her generosity, kindness and brilliance.

NOTE

1. For more on theories of amalgamation, see Nyong’o; Sexton.

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