

# Hearing the pain of others: Engineering affect and empathy through the soundscapes of *This Song is For ...* (2019) and *Love Story* (2017)

> **Jenni Lauwrens**

School of the Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

[jenni.lauwrens@up.ac.za](mailto:jenni.lauwrens@up.ac.za) (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0336-7356>)

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## Abstract

While there is a solid and growing literature on audiences' affective and empathic responses to visual art, visual culture, and the mass media more generally, less attention has been given to how voice might play a central role in such experiences. In this article I explore two artworks that utilised voice to solicit particular responses from their audiences. The artworks, *This Song is For ...* (2019) by Gabrielle Goliath and *Love Story* (2017) by Candice Breitz, are analysed here through the lenses of affect and empathy, particularly as they intersect with voice studies. I begin by problematising these concepts and exploring the ways in which they have been theorised in art history, cultural and media studies, philosophy, and psychology. A careful negotiation between these theoretical perspectives allows me to construct a theoretical framework through which to analyse the intensely overwhelming responses the artworks elicited by paying particular attention to the effects of their soundscapes. I conclude that through the clever choreography of voice and image, both artworks constructed and manipulated their audiences in significant ways. By inviting their audiences on a critical journey, an encounter with these artworks may have led to a profoundly transformed understanding of the experiences of people who have suffered as a result of sexual abuse and various other traumas, such as oppression and displacement.

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# Introduction

Gabrielle Goliath's award-winning installation, *This Song is For ...* (2019), was exhibited at the Standard Bank Art Gallery in Johannesburg in 2019.<sup>1</sup> Even before entering the exhibition itself, the audience was immediately confronted with haunting music emanating from the room upstairs. However, a sonic disruption, recalling a scratched vinyl record that keeps repeating a segment of a song, jarringly interrupted the melodies, rendering the songs difficult to listen to. Simultaneously beautiful and irritating, as one moved through the installation, this semi-annoying music became inseparable from the horrific descriptions of sexual abuse and rape written in white vinyl lettering on the purple walls of the gallery. By the time I had read the seventh story out of a total of ten, I was overcome with emotion.

Candice Breitz's work, *Love Story*, was exhibited at the South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017.<sup>2</sup> While this seven channel video installation has also been exhibited at a number of other venues across the globe, I encountered it at the Biennale, an exhibition space that undoubtedly influenced how audiences experienced the work. Standing outside the constructed "rooms" where the installation had been set up in a huge warehouse-type building, I could hear familiar voices coming from inside even if I could not immediately identify (or see) who was speaking. Having walked around the extensive Biennale alone, surrounded by strangers, and overwhelmed by the sheer number of works on display, the familiarity of the two voices was reassuring and they evoked my curiosity. On the other side of a heavily draped black curtain wall, a video was playing that depicted Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin, each wearing black clothing and sitting on a "director's" chair in front of a green screen. The actors recounted chilling first-hand accounts of their abuse, captivity and escape at the hands of their oppressors. Along with many other people in the audience, I was deeply moved by their passionate and expressive descriptions of turmoil and strife, even though the stories were clearly not their own.

The two works I have briefly described above are similar in terms of their formal structure, their subject matter, and the way in which they elicited particular responses from their audiences. Firstly, both installations used a combination of image and sound, in dark spaces, to coerce the audience to move around their component parts. Secondly, neither artist expressed their own experiences of traumatic events, but employed other people's traumas as a means to achieve their conceptual aims. Thirdly, descriptions of traumatic experiences were used to elicit emotional and affective responses, albeit in different ways and with substantially different outcomes.

In this article, I examine the ways in which the artworks manipulated their respective audiences in order to solicit empathic and affective responses. More specifically, I propose

that both artworks generated these responses by utilising the medium of sound, and voice in particular, to do so. While there is already a solid and growing literature on people's emotional and empathic responses to visual art, visual culture, and the mass media more generally, less attention has been given to how sound and voice might play a central role in such experiences. For this reason, I explore the artworks' auditory dimensions and specifically their use of voice. The artworks are thus analysed through the lenses of affect, emotion and empathy particularly as these concepts are understood in sound and voice studies. This theoretical framework provides a way in which to analyse the operation of feeling, emotion, affect and empathy in the artworks as they are facilitated by the particular soundscapes the artists produced. I begin by problematising feeling, emotion, affect and empathy in image reception by exploring the ways in which these concepts have been theorised in cultural and media studies, philosophy, art history and psychology. This theoretical framework allows me to ask the following questions: how and to what effect did these artworks, through their particular use of sound, solicit affective and empathic responses from their audiences? What forms of empathy did the artists draw on in order to solicit these responses? And, finally, in what ways can artworks that either rely on (as in Goliath's work) or specifically expose (as in Breitz's work) the audience's emotional manipulation through sound and image, also engender profound, transformative and critical self-awareness? In other words, how might we understand the critical potential of these two artworks from the perspectives of affect and empathy?

## Sound studies in context

The interdisciplinary field of sound studies emerged, at least in a formal sense, in the 1990s and has since gained increasing impetus. Taking sound 'as its analytical point of departure or arrival' (Sterne 2012:3), this field investigates the changing nature of our sonic world by analysing sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that both describe these practices and bring them into being. In a very basic sense, sound studies is interested in 'what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world' (Sterne 2012:3). As a form of artistic practice that emerged in the late 1960s, sound art has, however, received considerably less academic attention than the wider topics embraced by sound studies. At the risk of generalising the field of sound studies, it does appear, at least from two significant anthologies on the topic, that research tends to focus on the genesis, histories and consequences of sonic technologies, the production of electronic and digital music and their implications for the music industry, and the production of acoustic spaces in post-industrial societies, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> Christoph Cox (2011:146) argues that, despite the increase of sound art since the beginning of the twentieth century, the sonic elements of these artworks remain 'profoundly under-theorized'. One of the reasons for this neglect seems to be that when there is a visual

component to an artwork that also incorporates sound, the sonic dimension is disregarded whilst attention is mainly given to the visual qualities of these works.

Both the recent interest in sound studies and the rise of sound art (or the use of sound in art) is undeniably situated within or alongside the turn toward the senses, or the 'sensory turn', which emerged towards the end of the twentieth century as a challenge to the visualist paradigm that had previously dominated many academic disciplines (Howes 2019:20). It has now frequently been pointed out that even broader than the academic sphere, the sense of sight has occupied a central place in both western cultural practice and philosophical thought. The privileging of vision in cultural and social practice, as well as in academic discourse, has been related to the development of a scientific worldview that underpinned western thought, at least since the seventeenth century when emphasis was placed on reason and discovery (Kromm 2010). Even earlier than this, however, the preference for vision was deeply rooted in ancient Greek culture (see Idhe 1976). Don Idhe (1976:7) notes that Heraclitus claimed that 'eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears'. Contrary to Heraclites, Idhe's (1976:7) own argument in *Listening and voice: A phenomenology of sound* is that there is no evidence to prove that the eyes are more accurate or more objective than the ears. In fact, he notes, 'even the ordinary listener performs countless auditory tasks which call for great accuracy and discrimination' (Idhe 1976:7).

I would argue, however, that Idhe's contention should include awareness that the ears may be seduced or manipulated by sound and voice just as easily as the eyes are seduced by images, as countless studies of visual culture have pointed out (see Sturken & Cartwright 2001). For example, in *Regarding the pain of others*, Susan Sontag (2003) discusses a wide range of images, particularly pictures of suffering and trauma, and investigates how and why we look at these images. Drawing on Plato and Edmund Burke, she argues that people have an innate 'appetite for sights of pain and mutilation' (Sontag 2003:76). Images of atrocities can answer several human needs: '[t]o steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible' (Sontag 2003:77). Moreover, she explores ethical and moral questions at stake when we look at photographs of other people's pain (see Kesting 2017:9). I argue that our ambiguous and complex responses to pictures of suffering should also be applied to hearing the pain of others. In the same way that images manipulate our responses and potentially transform our understanding of war, genocide and other horrors, sound and voice can have similar effects. What is more, the ears may not be the instruments of 'accuracy and discrimination', which suggests objectivity, that Idhe (1976:7) purports them to be.

An investigation of a sound event – such as the two artworks I explore here – should take care not to isolate sound and hearing from other sensory experiences. The senses

do not operate in isolation; rather, following James Gibson's (1966) ecological approach to perception, human experience should be understood as influenced by the perceptions gained from different sensory modalities working in consort. Bearing in mind that all experience is multisensory and multimodal, and that listening is a socially and culturally constructed event, investigate how the artworks I introduced above produced particular soundscapes, albeit in combination with the visual and other sensorial properties of their exhibition environments, that evoked emotional and empathic engagement through careful sound design. In order to make these arguments clear, it is necessary to delve deeper into the multifaceted phenomena of emotion, affect and empathy as they relate to the artworks under discussion here and to media studies more generally, which recognises the mass media's potential to "play" with emotions and empathic responses.

## Unpacking feeling, emotion, affect

The (re)turn towards recognising feeling, emotion, affect and empathy in the reception of art and visual culture has occurred relatively recently and more or less simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> Marie-Luise Angerer (2011:219) sees this renewed interest as a symptom of a 'fundamental shift in modes of "theorising the human"'. This shift has led to increasing interest in the ways in which images in art and in the mass media can potentially "move" audiences and elicit deeply felt responses.

Aiming her critique particularly at art history – the discipline traditionally focused on analysing images, albeit of a certain kind – Susan Best (2011:1) argues that this field has always tended to contain a 'theoretical blindspot' in its disregard of 'art's affective dimension'. Instead, for much of the twentieth century, art historians have neglected feeling and emotion, while focusing their attention on social and historical contexts rather than personal affective engagements between viewers and art. Best (2011:12) notes that even though artists themselves might reject subjectivity in art, the expressive and affective qualities of their works have, apart from a few exceptions, been overlooked. In René Van de Vall's (2008:78-82) exploration of Mona Hatoum's *Corps Étranger* (1994), she shows that theorists writing from the perspective of Visual Culture Studies often do not see beyond its representational meanings, its relationship to medical visualisations, and its reflection on contemporary visual culture. What they overlook is a viewer's embodied perception of the work, which requires giving equal attention to its affective structure. Similarly, as Elly Konijn and Jelte Ten Holt (2011:37) point out, in critical analyses of the mass media, emotions were for long regarded as 'noise' in the transaction between sender and receiver, and not worthy of any serious academic attention.

Perhaps this oversight is related to the difficulty of expressing and analysing experiences that may seem to be incommunicable through language, because they operate at an

unconscious level. Equally, emotion, affect and empathy have been understood and theorised in different ways, and the differences between these categories are slippery and are often simply used interchangeably. In studies focussing on emotion and mass media, the term 'emotion' is often used to include 'a broad range of affective phenomena, including moods, feelings, affects, and related concepts' (Döveling, von Scheve & Konijn 2011:3), whilst in other academic spheres theorists have attempted to distinguish between these phenomena. For instance, media and cultural theorist, Eric Shouse (2005) defines feeling, emotion and affect separately. Feeling can be considered personal and biographical and is given meaning, identified and labelled in relation to previous experiences, whereas emotions are the display of feelings; they are performed within a cultural and social context (Shouse 2005). Emotions could therefore be described as feelings that are brought under conscious control. According to this formulation, affect is different from both feelings and emotions, as it occurs outside consciousness and 'before interpretation', and remains unformed by social or cultural convention (Kesting 2017:10). In this sense, it is abstract and cannot be fully explained or accounted for in conventional linguistic terms. Affect precedes will and consciousness, occurring too quickly to even be perceived. But, importantly, affect can influence consciousness by heightening our awareness of our biological state or our material being. In this sense, an affective image or work of art may potentially produce a self-awakening in the viewer through an appeal to the body that prompts critical reflection and 'a possibility for change' (Kesting 2017:11).

For Simon O'Sullivan (2001:126; emphasis in original), affects are 'moments of *intensity*, ... reaction[s] in/on the body'; they are 'immanent to experience' and take place at the level of 'matter'. Similarly, Brian Massumi (1996:87) argues that intensity and affect are the same, at least in that both involve the inexplicable and the inassimilable. By 'intensity' or affect, Massumi (1996:85) means the emotional state that is brought about or occurs when the expectations that arise from the 'event of image reception' are suspended or, at the very least, disrupted. Intensity increases when something occurs that breaks the narrative continuity of a particular event. These unanticipated reactions are the province of affect. In other words, it is through an affective encounter with an image (or in this case, multisensorial installations) that an unexpected and transformative experience may occur. Taking into account the various definitions given to feeling, emotion and affect, but also bearing in mind that the differences between these concepts blur, in the following section I delve more deeply into the ways in which *This Song is For ...* broke the continuity of the "image event" by moving audiences to deeply (and viscerally) respond to the nature and consequences of sexual abuse. But before I discuss this artwork, my concept of a "critical work of art" needs clarification.

My own thinking about the relationship between art and spectators – although, in the case of sound (in) art the term "audiences" might be more fruitful – is grounded in

phenomenological aesthetics. Van de Vall's (2008) and Jill Bennet's (2005:10) approaches to art's critical and transformative potential based in its ability to deeply "move" us in our direct (though never unmediated) experience of it, is especially elucidating. Van de Vall (2008:82) argues that while, and in part precisely because, the experience of art is always mediated – since the work is always structured in a particular way – art is capable of being 'critical by means of its experiential appeal'. Through the arrangement of the material, sensuous and affective structure of the work, the spectator-audience is 'engaged in a playful participation' with it (Van de Vall 2008:90). This is because, as visitors, '[w]e enter an installation with the expectation of experiencing something meaningful' (Van de Vall 2008:101). Similarly, Bennett (2005:10) analyses works of art that 'by virtue of [their] specific capacities, [are] able to exploit forms of embodied perception in order to promote forms of critical enquiry'. Both Van de Vall and Bennett contend that critical awareness is possible – even heightened – when affect drives the art encounter. If one is 'aware that something is happening with one's feelings and perceptions and that what happens is significant in one way of another', the experience of the work 'becomes critical' (Van de Vall 2008:100). In other words, if one notices and critically reflects on one's responses to an artwork, the work has the potential to be transformative.

### Engineering affect in *This Song is For ...*

*This Song is For ...* is an installation that combines huge screens (on which videos of musicians performing songs are played) and written reflections by ten survivors of sexual abuse. At the Standard Bank Art Gallery each written reflection was displayed in simple, white, vinyl lettering on the purple walls of the gallery. Some reflections comprised merely a few words while others provided a considerable amount of detail about the nature of the traumatic experience and the process of living with the memory of the event. For example, one survivor wrote: 'I tried to kill myself. I still want to kill myself. I have to fight to not want to kill myself. I don't want to just die. I'm a fighter and everyday I'm fighting for my life; fighting for it to matter. Here's to the good fight'. Another survivor wrote a detailed description of her experience in four parts, namely, Physical Rape, Institutional Rape, Judicial Rape, and The Aftermath. Each survivor chose a song that is especially meaningful for them and that transports them back to an earlier, happier time and place. The songs include *Everybody Hurts* by REM, *Unstoppable* by Sia, and *Fight Song* by Rachel Platten. These songs were re-interpreted and re-performed by a group of women and gender-queer led musical ensembles (ArtAfrica 2019). But owing to the disturbing sonic disruption – the stuck record effect – the songs were virtually unrecognisable and the lyrical harmony of the originals was destroyed.

Goliath uses sound deliberately in an effort to work in media that expands the traditional conception of art as primarily visual (ArtAfrica 2019). In this way, her use of sound can be related to the sensory turn in art, which considers art in terms other than representation. According to Goliath, '[w]hen language fails us, when conventional therapy fails us, art allows for a different kind of encounter, a more human encounter perhaps. One in which the differences that mark our experiences of the world become the grounds for our mutual acknowledgment and care' (cited by ArtAfrica 2019). In other words, Goliath attempts to bring about a transformation in people's thinking about a social issue – sexual abuse – through the affective capabilities of art. It is also evident that Goliath purposefully set out to solicit empathic responses in audiences as a means to reach her goal. She explains that, '... I am seeking to resist the violence through which black, brown, feminine, queer and vulnerable bodies are routinely objectified, in the ways they are imaged, written about, spoken about ... what I have in mind is a more empathic interaction' (cited by ArtAfrica 2019). Goliath is acutely aware of the phenomenological encounter of the listener with the particular character or grain of singers' voices. Roland Barthes (cited by Young 2015:2) describes the elusive sensual encounter with the 'grain' of a voice – whether spoken or singing – as 'the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening or singing'. Idhe further expands on Barthes' attention to our experiential encounter with sound and voice. He argues that listening is a bodily experience: 'I do not only listen with my ears, I hear with my whole body' (Idhe 1976:45). Listening to certain music, such as loud rock music, produces a feeling in his stomach, 'and even [his] feet "hear" the sound of the auditory orgy' (Idhe 1976:45). Listening to singing voices thus produces bodily and affective experiences that "move" audiences in their whole bodies.

Norie Neumark (2017:5) argues that voice magnifies affect by activating, shaping and producing emotions for both the speaker and listener. Furthermore, Neumark (2017:6) finds a link between mimesis and 'the transmission of affect' by drawing on Anna Gibbs' notions of 'corporeal copying' and 'affective spectatorship'. Gibbs (cited by Neumark 2017:6) draws attention to the ways in which all the senses are attuned in the 'affect contagion of mimesis'. Owing to the intensity of affective encounters and their ability to "move" audiences, as I will show in the next section, there is a close – though not uncomplicated – connection between affect and empathy. Both concepts describe an appeal to the experiencing body of the spectator-listener. For this reason, the following section deals with some of the ways in which empathy has been theorised in psychology and the philosophy of art, without losing sight of the manipulative effects of affective rhetoric (especially in the media), which often elicit empathic responses.

## Empathy theories in context

From the perspective of psychology, empathy operates at both emotional and cognitive levels; it is a form of embodied perception that entails both being able to share the emotional experience of others and also being able to understand another person's feelings (Lang, Yu, Markl, Müller & Kotchoubey 2011:386). The concept of empathy also has a long history in art-related debates about the perception and appreciation of art. In the late nineteenth century, the fields of philosophical aesthetics, perceptual psychology, art history, and architecture tried to understand the ways in which spectators feel themselves *into* art and architecture.<sup>5</sup> In an attempt to understand why people feel moved by these art forms, art psychologist, Robert Vischer, theorised empathy – or *Einfühlung* – as the bodily, or imaginative, fusing of subject (viewer) and object (what is being viewed). According to Vischer, viewers project aspects of their emotional and psychological selves onto a work of art (Koss 2006:139).

In the twentieth century, empathy theory was rejected by many art historians and critics, owing to its presumed subjectivity, idiosyncrasy, and 'Romantic orientation' (Esrock 2010:219). For instance, interest in the bodily engagement with an artwork was eradicated from modernist art theory, which dubiously claimed that abstraction elicited a purely optical and cognitive response (Esrock 2010:219). Since the 1970s, the emphasis on 'historical, cultural and social factors in responses to art' eliminated virtually all interest in the 'emotional, the empathic and the realm of non-cognitive corporeal' effects of art (Freedberg & Gallese 2007:199). One of the characteristics of this approach is the application of hermeneutics, structuralism and poststructuralism, among others, to understand the social function of art (and images more generally), to interpret the meanings embedded in them, and to expose their ideological functions. Clearly, the rejection of empathic experiences of art occurred for the same reasons that feelings, emotions and affects were side-lined, as I demonstrated above.

More recently, however, some art historians have applied insights gained from scientific research to understand the perception of artworks. Following the discovery of the mirror-neuron system at the end of the twentieth century, combined with advances in Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology, it became possible to determine which parts of the brain are activated by certain stimuli (see Preston & De Waal 2002). When looking at pictures of other people in pain, the same neural networks are activated in our brain as would be in a first-hand experience of that pain (Bucchioni, Lelard, Ahmadi, Godefroy, Krystkowiak & Mouras 2015). These discoveries have shone a light on how (and why) people sometimes respond to art in ways that can be viscerally felt. David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese (2007) argue that, depending on a person's ability to empathise with what they see – for this may differ from person to person – they may

respond empathically to pain, trauma and suffering that they see in images. Freedberg and Gallese use Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St Thomas* (1601-1602) to demonstrate this phenomenon. Their studies show that when we look at St Thomas touching the open wound on Christ's abdomen, the same cortical networks are aroused in our brain as would normally be involved if we were actually experiencing such a painful form of touch (Freedberg & Gallese 2007). Owing to the activation of the mirror-neuron system, some people feel a pre-rational, bodily resonance with images of people being physically harmed or mutilated.

This pre-rational response seems to operate at the same level as affect, which could potentially at least lead to a profoundly transformative experience when encountering artworks. Likewise, Ellen Esrock (2010:239) grounds her study of embodied responses to art in a combination of scientific theory and empathy theory to show that spectators are able to experience an empathic exchange with an artwork. What is significant about Esrock's approach to these empathic exchanges is her resistance to a universalising concept of "the viewer", a position that I have also tried to take in my analysis. Instead of assuming that there is one "correct" way to experience an artwork, I agree with Esrock that our analysis of how art might move spectator-audiences should strive to differentiate them 'in terms of bodily awareness' (Esrock 2010:239).

## From empathic viewing to empathic listening

The research I have referred to thus far used visual stimuli to understand the affective and cognitive systems for empathy, while the two artworks discussed here combined images with sound to solicit empathic responses. How does this research then translate to sound and voice (including the singing voice) in particular? According to Michael Krauss (2017:646), empathic responses to voice are still remarkably undertheorised. The dearth of research dealing specifically with this topic is interesting, considering that in real life 'the human voice is one of the principal conveyors of social and affective communication' (Lang *et al.* 2011:387). In fact, as Mladen Dolar (2006:13) points out, 'we use our voices, and we listen to voices, at every moment; all our social life is mediated by the voice'; and since 'we constantly inhabit the universe of voices', we develop skills to navigate our way through the cacophony of different voices that surround us even before birth (Dolar 2006:13).<sup>6</sup>

Jody Kreiman and Diane Sidtis (2011) argue that hearing emotional exclamations relating to pain and suffering elicited the same (and in some cases even more) responses relating to the 'pain matrix' than the neuroimaging studies of empathic responses to images have revealed. Their focus is not so much on what is being said, but rather on non-linguistic

vocalisations, such as intonations, tone, stress and rhythm. Krauss (2017:644) contends that ‘the voice, including both speech content and the linguistic and paralinguistic vocal cues (e.g., pitch, cadence, speed, and volume) that accompany it, is a particularly powerful channel for perceiving the emotions of others’.

Similarly, Krauss’s (2017:644) research found that voice-only communication rendered empathic accuracy higher (if only marginally) than when compared to empathic accuracy measured against communication across the other senses. This research compared people’s ability to read their partner’s emotions whilst having a conversation, first in a well-lit room and then in a darkened room (Krauss 2017:648). Krauss found that voice-only communication led to an enhanced empathic accuracy, in other words, participants were able to more accurately recognise emotions in the darkened than in the well-lit room, an interesting finding, considering that darkness played a key role in the display of both artworks under discussion here. The darkened spaces allowed not only the images in Goliath’s work to be sharpened, but also heightened the intense responses to the pitch, cadence, and rhythm of the singers’ voices.

The affective and empathic encounter with *This Song is For ...* may, for some, be so deeply moving that they are compelled to step back and reflect on sexual abuse and violence in its complexity and ambiguity. It was undeniably not so much the written narratives or the images in the videos, but the stirring voices of singers that engulfed the audience moving through the gallery. As a deeply affective encounter, the powerful effect of the continuous repetition of a section of the song is difficult to describe in words. The music caused tension and anxiety, thereby mediating and increasing the effect of the survivor’s narrative about their personal sexual abuse in visitors who chose to read all or some of the texts. As Cox (2011:148) argues, ‘sound is immersive and proximal, surrounding and passing through the body’. Image, text and music ‘interpenetrated’ (Cox 2011:148) each other, while the affective texture of the work penetrated the audience. In this moment of intensity, the repeated segment of the song registered as a break with the narrative continuity of the sonic event, leading to an empathic affinity with the traumas that were expressed. Although not all visitors would necessarily have read the texts on the walls, no-one could escape the overwhelming soundscape constructed in the Standard Bank Gallery, which, in a similar way to Breitz’s work, could be heard even before entering the installation. In the next section, I explore more closely what forms of empathic responses are produced and manipulated by Breitz’s *Love Story*. I aim to show that, unlike Goliath’s work, Breitz’s installation uses voice to expose the ambivalence of our affective and empathic responses to art and images in the mass media.

## Engineering empathic responses in *Love Story*

*Love Story* was exhibited in two interconnecting spaces at the Venice Biennale; the first was very dark and contained a massive screen on which a montage of Julianne Moore and Alex Baldwin relating horrific stories as if they had experienced them first-hand, was playing. There were a few places to sit in this room and watch the video, much like in a movie theatre. It quickly became evident, however, that there was a discord between what one saw and what one heard. It did not take long to realise that these were not Moore's and Baldwin's personal stories – they were not speaking as themselves. Instead, they were channelling the edited stories of others. Nevertheless, their passionate and expressive descriptions of turmoil and strife, combined with the almost tactile close-ups of their faces, quickly drew the audience into the tales, and we easily felt for the characters in the “movie”. I noticed that the audience was overall quite captivated by these stories and spent a considerable amount of time listening to the actors, who we knew were narrating the hardships and plights of others. The seats in this room remained almost fully occupied for the entire time I was there. In other words, even though one realised the stories were not the actors' own experiences, visitors were nevertheless intensely moved by them.

Hidden in the darkness, two doorways led from the larger space into the next. In this smaller and more cramped dark space, six monitors were displayed side by side and on each, an interview with a stranger was playing. As in the video of Moore and Baldwin, each person was filmed sitting in front of a green screen, with no props or other backgrounds. In this setup, however, the voices remained silent unless the visitor put on the headphones to hear the stories of violence, abuse and torture described by each person. In the artist's statement that accompanied the work (which is also available on her website), Breitz (2017) explains that she conducted interviews with six individuals who had fled from oppressive conditions in their home countries. Sarah Mardini escaped war-torn Syria; José Mario João is a former child soldier in Angola; Mamy Maloba Langa is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Shabeena Saveri is an Indian transgender activist; Luis Nava is a political revolutionist from Venezuela; and Farah Abdi Mohamed is an atheist from Somalia. The interviews were held in the cities where each refugee is either still seeking, or has already been granted, asylum, namely, Cape Town, New York and Berlin (Breitz 2017).

Unlike the first room, which had remained full and busy, not many people listened to the videos playing in the second room, where an intimate connection between the actual survivor and the audience was invited. And those who did listen to and watch the videos, did not do so for very long. I did not see anyone listening to all the interviews. It was only after I had left the installation, that I realised how cleverly I had been manipulated by the

artist, who knew only too well what type of audience would view this work at a global art biennale. Breitz's cunning choreography of the "ideal" audience's movement through the installation controlled our affective spectatorship and ultimately engineered our empathic reactions to it. The second room, where people did not linger, showed the full-length original interviews with the refugees – people who usually remain nameless and faceless in the media. This room was only accessible by passing through the first, where Moore and Baldwin – 'the very embodiment of visibility' (Breitz 2017) – channelled excerpts from the original interviews. To complicate viewing the work in its entirety even further, the total length of time one would have had to spend in order to listen to all the interviews would have exceeded 22 hours (Koch [Sa]).

Breitz (2017) maintains that *Love Story* reflects on our current media-saturated culture where people more easily identify with fictional characters and celebrity figures than with real people who are facing adversity in the real world. Furthermore, she claims that the piece interrogates the circumstances under which empathy is produced by asking: '[w]hat kind of stories are we willing to hear?' and 'what kind of stories move us?' (Breitz 2017). News broadcasting corporations and the film industry – the particular media whose manipulative operations *Love Story* exposes – disseminate news about events occurring across the globe. As Niklas Luhmann (2000:1) puts it: '[w]hat we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media'. More importantly, these media do not only provide information about these incidents, but also package them in ways that elicit fear, sadness, anxiety, anger or happiness (Döveling *et al.* 2011:2). *Love Story* is a shrewd demonstration of how mass media (including film and the culture industry in general) engineer our affective and empathic responses, thereby manipulating how we feel about the world. However, I want to add a related, although slightly different question: what role might different voices play in how empathy is engineered?

## Contextualising voice

Although the terms 'voice' and 'voice quality' are often used interchangeably, according to Kreiman and Sidtis (2011:5), they ought to be distinguished and understood as two sides of the same coin. Voice refers to the acoustic signal that is generated by the voice production system; it therefore has a physical and physiological base. Voice quality refers to the way in which the voice is perceived by a listener and has to do with the listener's response to the sound of speech. For these authors, it is important that in voice studies, both the signals and the listeners, or the production and the perception of voice, are considered to be inextricably linked. As they explain: '[a] human voice is a concrete, perceivable event' that is attached to an individual body, which is located in a specific

sociocultural context (Kreiman & Sidtis 2011:10). This body produces the particular sound of the voice, and gives expression to the speaker's physical, psychological and social self. Furthermore, the speaker '... exists in a communicative context that necessarily includes a listener ... and the voice that is produced cannot be separated from the act of listening that provides the context for production' (Kreiman & Sidtis 2011:10).

Listeners make judgements based on voice quality, including pitch, loudness and accent (Kreiman & Sidtis 2011:8). Moreover, each listener's context, attention, background and biases influence how they perceive, understand and are affected by voice. Although 'responses to fundamental frequency and intensity are reasonably consistent', Kreiman and Sidtis (2011:9) insist that voice quality is multidimensional and listener differences will always be present. This means that, while empathy is the ability to feel with someone else, empathic responses to sounds and voices in artworks will also differ based on the listener's context, attention and background, as well as the context within which the voice is encountered.

The act of listening and the communicative context of experiencing *Love Story* at the Venice Biennale should therefore not be underestimated. The listeners in that context – that I am referring to as the “ideal” audience – were predominantly White and western, with some experience of viewing western art at global exhibitions. It is not surprising then that this audience would give more attention to the actors speaking fluent American English than to the personal narratives of the actual refugees, whose imperfect grammar and accented English required a great deal more effort to listen to. As I have already argued above, sound and listening are embedded in our social relations and our cultural practices. Jennifer Stoever argues that sound and listening both reflect and produce the racial politics of our time. Listening practices shape and are shaped by race, and owing to culturally embedded racialised practices of listening, people make assumptions about other people's speech (including their accents, tone, vocal timbre), their music, verbal expressions, and so forth. In other words, as Stoever (2016:8) suggests, we hear race in relation to cultural assumptions about what constitutes natural, normal, and desirable sounds. The sonic colour line is the 'audible contour' (Stoever 2016:6) of race; it is the site where assumptions about racialised identities are produced, maintained and also resisted. Stoever (2016:5) argues that it is at the site of the sonic colour line that race is sonified and listening is racialised.

The audience's willingness to listen to and be drawn into Moore's and Baldwin's fictional stories and their unwillingness to listen to the actual refugees is, therefore, related to whether we are familiar or unfamiliar with their voices (Kreiman & Sidtis 2011:9). Our level of empathy increases when we are familiar with someone or when we identify with them, whether on the grounds of race, gender or class (Avenanti, Sirigu & Aglioti 2010;

Bucchioni *et al.* 2015). The audience's 'affective proximity' to the subjects in both artworks therefore influences how they respond to the works (Bucchioni *et al.* 2015:9). Even though one has not met them in person, the voices of Moore and Baldwin are familiar if one has seen them in movies. We have probably been moved by the fictional characters they have played which have, in turn, played with our emotions.<sup>7</sup> Hollywood blockbusters are often released on a global scale, from the United States, to Germany, Australia, Japan and South Africa. It is therefore highly likely that audiences at the Venice Biennale were acquainted with these familiar-famous voices.

On the other hand, the reason the audience is more interested in Moore and Baldwin's retelling of the horrors of war, may be because it is easier to hear the dramatised version of suffering than to hear the real story. Visitors hear the recollections of the actual refugees on separate television channels. One might be prepared to look briefly and respond with, 'this is horrible', and then want to change the channel, but the next channel (in this case the next monitor) merely shows another refugee and another cruel story. So visitors move from one channel to the next, hoping for some relief from the stories of suffering. Relief only comes when re-entering the room with Moore and Baldwin, whose voices are reassuringly familiar and provide the necessary distance from the realities one would rather not engage with intensely.

My own response to *This Song is For ...*, and particularly, the emotions that erupted uncontrollably in response to the combination of music and written text, is entirely related to my position as a woman and mother living in South Africa where 'sexual violence is a common feature in the lives of many adult women and children' (Abrahams, Mathews, Lombard, Martin & Jewkes 2017:1). In September 2019, the BBC reported that 'sexual offences and murder rates have risen significantly in South Africa over the past year ...' (South Africa Crime 2019). Statistics from the South African Police Services (SAPS) show that, since 2018, sexual assault increased by 9.6% and rape by 3.9%. Although all women and children are potentially vulnerable, many living in South Africa fear that they might be the next victim. The recent global media coverage of a number of high-profile rape and murder cases in South Africa – and in particular that of a young Cape Town student in August 2019, at the same time that *This Song is For ...* was exhibited at the Standard Bank Art Gallery – sparked public outrage and led to the emergence of the #AMINEXT movement on social media. The work was exhibited during a time marked by anxiety over sexual violence against women and children in South Africa, heightening the artwork's intensity and my own responses to it.

## The dark side of empathy

The link between empathy and its role in producing social justice has been an important topic within feminist and antiracist social theory. Diane Teitjens Meyers (1994:9), for

example, argues that empathy opens up ‘channels of communication and understanding’ that can help to ‘mediate relations between so-called different individuals and members of dominant social groups’ (Meyers 1994:37). Because empathy carries an emotional charge, it is ‘seen to involve more than simply a process of imaginative reconstruction’ (Pedwell 2012:282). Understood in this way, empathic engagement at the affective level can ‘make “us” actually “feel”, realise, and act on’ (Pedwell 2012:283) political responsibilities and obligations as we begin to recognise ourselves ‘as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the others must confront’ (Bolar cited by Pedwell 2012:283). In this sense, engendering empathy is positive and necessary and an important skill in developing respectful, nonviolent and civil societies. As Pedwell (2012:280) argues, ‘within the contemporary Western sociopolitical sphere, empathy is framed as “solution” to a wide range of social ills and as a central component of building cross-cultural and transnational social justice’.

But there are limits and risks to figuring empathy as only a progressive political resource. On the one hand, claiming to know and understand the experiences of others can give rise to forms of projection and appropriation of the experiences of marginal subjects, thereby simply reproducing social hierarchies and inequalities. On the other, inculcating empathy is frequently used in political rhetoric and neoliberal capitalism. Pedwell (2012) shows how Barack Obama’s affective rhetoric – which highlights the importance of empathy for those both within and beyond the borders of the United States of America – is closely knitted to the dominant discourses of neoliberalism in the American economy. In this rhetorical tapestry, ‘empathy is understood as a technology for “creating the many” as a means to maximise economic competitiveness and growth within transnational circuits of capital’ (Pedwell 2012:287). In this sense, empathy has a dark side; it can be used as a tool that masks the hidden goal of entrenching social divisions for economic or political gain. Can empathy then – as it is figured in these two artworks – engender profound and transformative thinking about the social injustices that surround us?

For Bennett, it is important to distinguish between empathy understood as affinity, and empathy understood as feeling for someone else with the recognition that the other’s experience is irreducible and different from one’s own and, therefore, often inaccessible. In *Empathic Vision*, she distinguishes between these two forms of empathy in her analysis of artworks that deal with traumatic experiences. The first is based on Bertolt Brecht’s (cited by Bennet 2005:10) formulation of ‘crude empathy’, which can be described as ‘the assimilation of the other’s experience to the self’ (Bennett 2005:10). In this form of empathy, the viewer, as in Freedberg and Gallese’s example above, feels *for* the other by imagining themselves being the other. But another way in which to figure empathy is to understand it as a process of feeling for another while at the same time realising that the other’s experience is different from one’s own and that the nuances of their experiences

may even be inaccessible to another person. According to Bennet (2005:10), when this kind of empathy is solicited by an artwork, the experience may become transformative; it changes your perception as you realise you may want to, but cannot fully experience, the other's irreducible pain or trauma. She draws on Nikos Papastergiades (cited by Bennett 2005:10; emphasis in original), who explains that perception is only transformed when the empathic experience allows the viewer to experience 'a constant tension of going to and fro ... of going close to be able to see but also never forgetting where you are coming from ... empathy is about that process of surrender ... but also the *catch* that transforms your perception'. In this process, an empathic encounter with an artwork is characterised by 'a distinctive combination of affective and intellectual operations' (Bennett 2005:10). The transformative capacity of the art encounter is realised when, following Van de Vall (2008:100), the spectator-listener acknowledges and critically reflects on the situation in a process of self-critical awakening.

Goliath hints at precisely this kind of empathy when she states that it is in acknowledging the differences in our experiences that a 'mutual' and caring perspective might be achieved (ArtAfrica 2019). As a sonic event, *This Song is For ...* would have led some people – those who were open to the 'affective capabilities' (Bennett 2005:10) of the installation – to undergo a profound transformation in their awareness and understanding of sexual abuse if they were also able to recognise their distance from the experiences of others through a critical engagement with their own embodied – affective and empathic – responses to the work. Empathy, in this sense then, can be imagined as a form of embodied perception that can also lead to critical thinking. Similarly, but taking a different route, *Love Story* shrewdly exploits crude empathy in order to expose our spontaneous responses to the suffering of those who are different from us. People who were sufficiently aware and critical of their own behaviour, and the way in which they had been manipulated by the artist, may have reached a point where they could reflect on their responses to stories of the migrant crisis in the mass media.

## Conclusion

Empathy is a form of embodied perception that allows us to negotiate the world and understand the people that share it with us. In different spheres, however, empathy is used as a tool to engineer and manipulate people to feel for others in ways that are suspect. Different forms of empathy are at work – or exploited – in *This Song is For ...* and *Love Story*. Through the clever choreography of voice and image, the soundscapes in both artworks produced responses in their audiences in specific ways and to particular ends. *This Song is For ...* stirs the audience viscerally with the aim that people will empathise with victims of rape, while *Love Story* manipulates audiences' empathic

attention in such a way that one is shocked at one's own gullibility. Both artworks, whilst engineering empathy in different ways, ultimately provide audiences the opportunity to experience something deeply transformative. There is no guarantee that everyone will accept the invitation offered, nor that this transformation will be the same for everyone; the artworks merely offer a possibility that people might think differently about the topics they deal with. Intentionality is required from audiences; a commitment to a different kind of behaviour that is based on kindness, generosity, unselfishness and love; a transformed notion of civic responsibility toward those who either look or sound different from us, or who have suffered sexual violence. This is precisely the critical potential of art, and suggests extensive transformative potential for sound (in) art.

## Notes

1. The video and images of the work can be viewed here: <https://www.gabriellegoliath.com/this-song-is-for>.
2. The video and images of this work can be viewed here: <https://www.candicebreitz.net>.
3. The two anthologies I am referring to are Jonathan Sterne's *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012) and Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld's *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (2012).
4. Although what I offer here is not meant to reflect a comprehensive list of all the literature that deals with affect and empathy in art and visual culture, it is worthwhile to draw attention to the dates of some of the texts I have used in this article. For affect see Angerer (2011), Best (2011), Döveling *et al* (2011), Kesting (2011), Konijn *et al* (2011), Massumi (1996), O'Sullivan (2001), Shouse (2005), and Van de Vall (2008). For empathy see Bennett (2005), Esrock (2010), Freedberg and Gallese (2007), Koss (2006), and Pedwell (2012). As the dates of these texts show, it is hardly plausible to suggest that the interest in affect and empathy in image reception occurred within different historical contexts.
5. The history of the various conceptions of empathy in psychology and art is far more complex than the brief sketch I am able to provide here. See Koss (2006) for a more detailed discussion.
6. Voices can be heard by the foetus *in utero*, resulting in the development of a highly voice-sensitive neural system (Kreiman & Sidtis 2011:202).
7. For instance, Moore and Baldwin both starred in the movie *Still Alice* (Richard Glatzer & Walsh Westmoreland 2014), which evocatively depicts the ordeals of a linguistics professor who, at the age of 50, is diagnosed with the early onset of familial Alzheimer's disease.

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