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## *Agents of Concern: Images and Empathy*

PXL-MAD, School of Arts, Hasselt, in collaboration with Hasselt University

Title: *Seeing Nothing – Empathy and Invisibility*

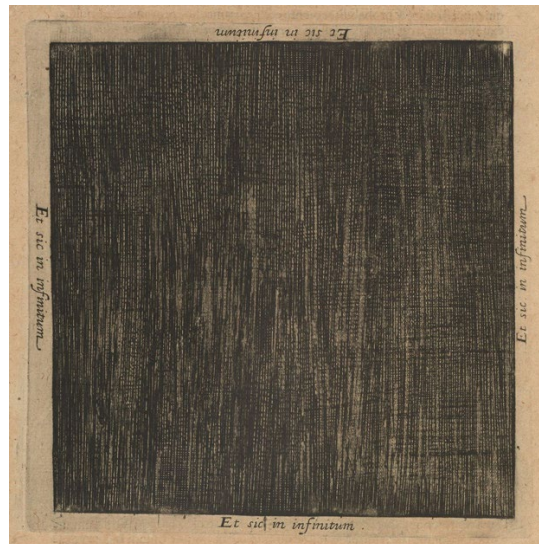
(Or “Blackness is the site where absolute nothingness and the world of things converge”).

Dr Andrew Warstat – A.Warstat@MMU.ac.uk

Manchester School of Art (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Keywords: Robert Fludd, politics of forgetting, empathy, ethics, Fred Moten, non-existence, non-identity, image, face, colonialism.

Empathy implies ontology (you have empathy for something), but is empathy more of a state, an emotional mood, a predisposition or even an ideology or politics, and can you empathise with something you can't see?



*Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia ... [Tractatus secundus de naturae simia seu technica macrocosmi historia], Robert Fludd, (Oppenheim : 'Aere J.T. de Bry, typ. H. Galleri', 1617-1618), p.26.*

With an image that represents nothing – for example Robert Fludd's black square in his *Utriusque Cosmi* from 1617 representing the nothingness prior to creation – our sense of how to relate to the picture is unclear: the history of aesthetics and art history suggests approaches such as discourses on the sublime, debates about abstraction etc., but there remains a necessary uncertainty about the disposition the individual viewer should take when faced with something that is literally about the 'un-see-ability' of something. In an era where a controlling and/or numbing 'faciality' is dominant (consider the role of facial recognition in technology, or the predominance of the face on the web/YouTube/TikTok/Zoom etc.), this presentation argues that, in the face of facelessness and absence, empathy might give us a process for edging towards and co-habiting with uncertainty and ignorance. When an image presents us with something that we cannot see or face, we imaginatively move towards or create a *rapport sans rapport* (following Blanchot, Nancy). The unstable ground of our relation to the image is a blurry zone where experience, aesthetics, ethics and our bodies and senses merge and intermix.

So, does empathy imply an ethical position? And, if it does, is it an ethics that implies or compels us to act (so is there agency in empathy)? The presentation will close with a consideration of what an act of deliberate defacement – iconoclasm as a form of ethical, empathetic action – might mean as an attempt to see something unseeable. The statue of the slave trader Edward Colson was dismantled in Bristol in 2020 as an attempt to ‘see’ a deliberately obscured history. The ‘unseeable’ experience of slavery was visible *within the statue*, and it was only by removing that statue – by defacing that image – that it became possible to work towards seeing the displaced face of the hidden experience of colonialism. In this instance, the image therefore becomes, in Fred Moten’s word (and alerting us to another way of seeing Fludd’s void), “a [...] relationship between thingliness and nothingness and blackness that plays itself out in unmapped, unmappable, undercommon consent and consensuality”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Harney, S., Moten, F. (2013). *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. United Kingdom: Minor Compositions, pps.95-96.

#### Biographical details:

Dr Andrew Warstat is a senior lecturer in art history and media theory at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. He is a writer, photographer and artist. Exhibitions include *After the Disaster* (Outpost, 2008) and *The Object of Photography* (The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, 2009). Recent publications include essays such as ‘S’attarder et regarder, ensemble et séparément - la photographie de Gavin Parry’ (2022) for Maison Louis-Jardin du Mesnil-sur-Oger, Médiathèques Simone-Veil et Daniel-Rondeau d’Epernay; writing on J.G. Ballard (‘Speeding to the Doldrums: Stalled Futures and the Disappearance of Tomorrow in “The Dead Astronaut”’, Brill and Rodopi 2016); work on the artist John Stezaker (*parallax*, 2010); texts on the role of ignorance and “self-reading” in contemporary art (*On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, Blackdog Publishing, 2013) and on the filmmaker Lewis Klahr (‘Adorno, Lewis Klahr and the Shuddering Image’ (Edinburgh University Press, 2018)).