

MA graduation Show

# *rachel* Hernández Pumarejo

MA Visual Arts: Transnational Arts

Camberwell College of Arts | University of the Arts London



## The other, i am that other, i am you...

Rachel Hernández Pumarejo's work proposes a collaborative-collective contribution to the MA Transnational Arts exhibition. Over the last three years, Pumarejo has been working in the role of both artist/designer and part of the audience to approach creation from a different perspective. Pumarejo understands the artist/designer's creative process as an **empathic operation** where identification with the Other's feelings, thoughts, or attitudes takes place. This empathic relationship is shown in Pumarejo's artworks which make the audience an active participant in her practice.

Like the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark and the Cuban/Puerto Rican artist Rosina Santana, Pumarejo's oeuvre shows the presence of the Other through collaborative experiences. Pumarejo's **'interactive' installations** are two-way systems, 'dialogues' between the artist and the public, where most of the 'discourse' is a combination of real life problems and socially sensitive situations that help to interweave a visual dialogue, not only with the art world itself, but, above all, with society.

The presence of the notion of empathy is clearly shown in Pumarejo's designs and visual art projects from different perspectives. In two of her recent video works, the empathic concept is seen metaphorically as a specific narrative, depicted in **Lee Thomas Carpenter** (2008), and within a specific environment, such as **Plural** (2008). In **Lee Thomas Carpenter** the female protagonist shows her tragic story through the



Plural, 2008 (video art project)

logically capable of explaining every single step of that process. Simultaneously, on the other hand, graphic designers are encouraged to look for new methods of composition through chance, those that enable them to have less control over the results. Intuition is therefore seen as the most valuable part of creative action. However, neither of these perspectives take into account the agency of the viewer. Could Pumarejo's work be thought of as a new method of creation, called the empathic method, where the Other becomes the 'main character'?

Pumarejo's artwork emphasizes the empathic *modus operandi* of the creative process, no matter what discipline. Perhaps the difference between her approach and the other operations, described above, is the active presence of a second subject in the act of creating. Of course the audience has a privileged 'seat' in an artistic project, and even more in design practice. However, the ones that have a 'seat' are often seen as passive subjects. This inactive position is left aside in Pumarejo's work. All participants become involved. They are key components of her pieces and, fundamentally, of her creative process.

### An empathic route

Pumarejo's contribution to the MA exhibition, **'i am you'** (2009), is divided into two complementary levels —theory and practice— distributed respectively between Wilson Road and House Gallery. **i am you** is an open-action-based project that tries to elicit a feeling of empathy from members of the public, no matter who they are (they could be you or me).

The installation begins with two 'maintenance' chalkboards on the ground floor at **Camberwell College of Arts**. They act as a conceptual framework that introduces and promotes the

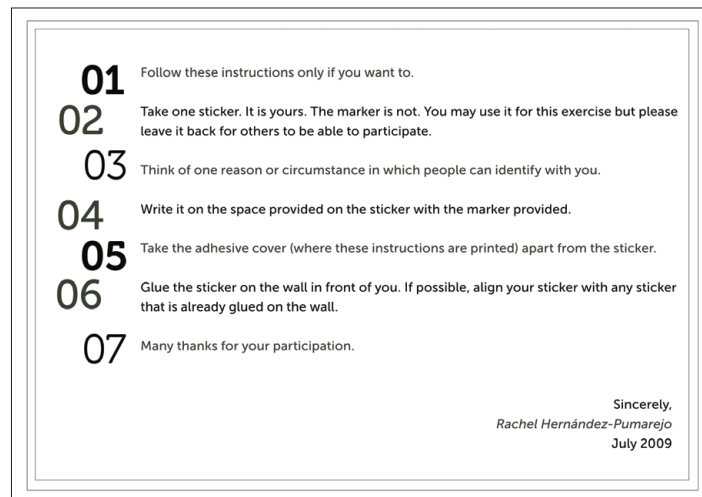
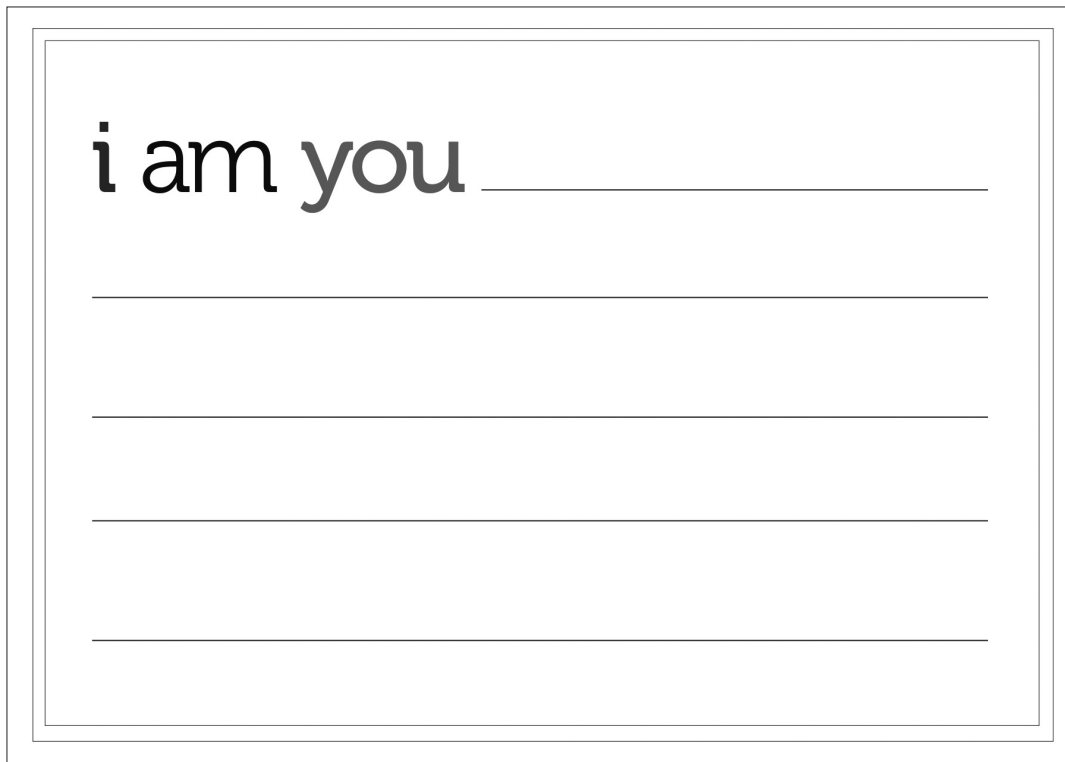


'empathic gaze' of the camera, used as a tool to acknowledge the empathy felt for the woman. The atmosphere created by the objects, music and colour reinforce the woman's feelings. The saturated colours, the red tights and the green grass give the video attitude and character, as if it were an Almodovar film, distinguishing it from a mass market endeavour. **Plural** reflects another kind of empathic attitude from several daily non-staged London events to a semi-autobiographical narrative. As in **Lee Thomas Carpenter**, in **Plural** there is a female protagonist who demonstrates her empathy with her body language through the phrase 'I'm with you'.

### The third approach

Art, design, poetry, theatre, music, all are defined as creative disciplines. There are many authors that have studied their own creative process trying to understand how it works. On the one hand, graphic designers have been taught to create with aesthetic rules, technical parameters and fixed steps that are opposed to a random thought process. These are rational methods where artists/designers are seen as human-computers,





main piece located at House Gallery. The phrase ‘i am you’ is written with chalk, integrated repeatedly within a poem/manifesto inviting the audience to start the empathic route. The second level of this installation, the ‘practice’ element at the **House Gallery**, encourages collective collaboration, where the audience expresses empathy with the feelings of others—their fears, joys, thoughts. Through each empathic experience expressed by the audience, the final art piece will be constructed. How can the audience participate? How can the audience be the artist? Stickers and markers are the tools, and the wall is the frame. To break the empty space of this piece, there is already one sticker on the wall: Pumajero’s contribution to her own project. Pumajero’s sticker is both the element that breaks the whiteness and the starting point of her collective-installation. On her sticker Pumajero explains her feelings and the reasons why she requests empathic feedback from the audience.

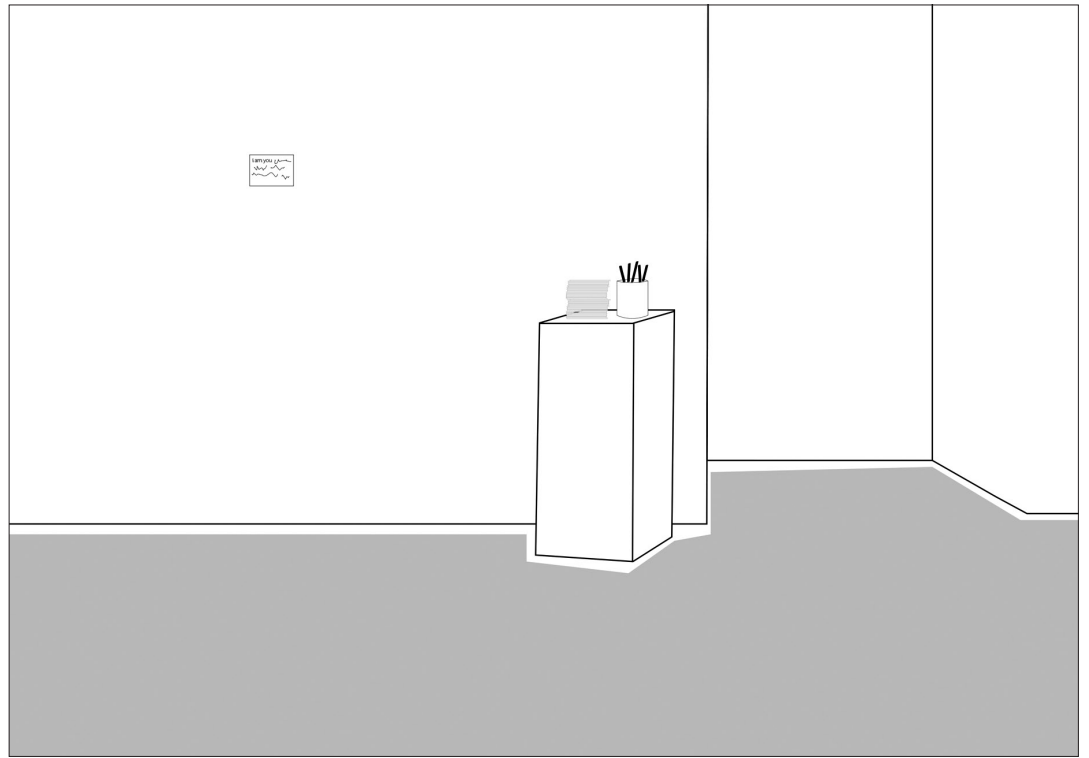
The artist/audience’s workspace is a pedestal near a wall which contains many stickers. Each sticker has on the front the phrase ‘i am you’ and on the back a set of detailed instructions,

as ‘rules’, explaining how this second moment works. The audience is invited to become the artist writing down and drawing their empathic thoughts towards the author, and then sticking them on the wall. The piece will be finished when the wall is full of stickers; the final form is unpredictable, giving this project an open-ended character. In addition, the installation will be documented day-by-day.

We cannot help but view the world from our own subjective experiences. Pumajero’s projects propose a new way of seeing our daily environment. Her work is a reflection of the artist’s practice and at the same time, a reflection of the place of the viewer, of the Other, in that process. Her work is a bridge that joins artists and audience, and beyond this, known and unknown people. Both as an artist and as a designer, Pumajero has developed a practice-theory where ethic and empathic concepts can be tested.

**Sheila Pontis**  
*PhD Student*  
*University of Barcelona | TrAIN Associate Student*

i am you (2009)  
(participatory-based piece)



**Rachel Hernández Pumarejo** was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She completed her studies in Image and Design at Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Puerto Rico, 2008. Rachel was chosen to participate in the International Exchange Program held by the Graphic Design department at Rhode Island School of Design. Her practice as a professional designer has influenced her work as an artist, where she has expressed strong ethical standpoints that are visible throughout her recent work, which lately has centred on the social experience of the obese population. As a designer, her work has evolved around the philosophy of Milton Glaser, 'do no harm', which she has applied to design in the condition of it being universal and accessible to all, especially to impaired individuals, such as blind and deaf people.

Her current work deals with the notion of empathy and how it can be implemented in creative production, especially its methodology. This study on ethics and aesthetics builds on her experience as an artist and designer. She is currently working as part of a design group, *Rubberband*, to design a typeface to be presented in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in December 2009. | [hernandezpumarejo@gmail.com](mailto:hernandezpumarejo@gmail.com)



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