

## The Apathy Lab Method

The Apathy Lab is a format to research the cause and spread of apathy. It has multiple variations and takes place in the form of separate projects under the umbrella of a metaphorical lab, that describes the intentions and methods of the format. The Apathy Lab reinforces other formats, primarily Emergency Room, as well as the Awareness Muscle. Though there is no physical testing facility nor a team of lab assistants, the Apathy Lab is the collection and measuring of a selection of Geoffroy's artwork's potential as a source for data. Operating without the use of an actual laboratory, data assembled through various projects of Geoffroy's are compiled and compared to generate an informed overview of the public's sense of responsibility towards emergencies and what does and doesn't trigger a reaction and why.

Through the different editions of the Emergency Room format, in operation since 2006 , Thierry Geoffroy felt the format could be strengthened by a more informed understanding of events, as there seemed to be an armour of sleepiness, apathy around some participants . Emergency Room is made effective and pertinent by sharpness in the artists, an attuned experience of the world that can inspire a change in handling emergencies. Artists should be able to make other people conscious of things they can't see.<sup>1</sup> Without this, indifference can spread on a larger scale. It is as though most people are asleep, removed from the abundant problems around them, seeing only what they want to see, as if they have been sprayed with a chemical<sup>2</sup> creating indifference, apathy, an inattention to the world around them. It has never been easier to access information. It is as though everyone is distracted, busy, focused on themselves and not the bigger picture. The media may report on events but they also have an agenda. By reporting on one aspect of a problem, they may be concealing something more urgent, that then is overlooked. To report on one point is to draw attention to it, and sometimes away from a bigger problem.

Eliminating the destructive force of apathy has long since been a theme in Geoffroy's art. The Apathy Lab is a build up of Geoffroy's projects that revolve around counteracting widespread apathy. Emergency Art cannot be created under a condition of atrophy. The Apathy Lab is a format for detection of apathy, and for researching an antidote to it. In his *Emergency Room Dictionary*<sup>3</sup>, Geoffroy explains in poetic terms the ways apathy impacts people and what effect this can have:

“Apathy is the effect of the chemical warfare. The dominating cynical generals have sent clouds of chemical gas. making artists (and all citizens) Sleep. Not feeling anything. Not being able to reflect anything at all. Any feeling at all. Any sense of responsibility at all. No more concerns. No more motivations. No more interest. No more energy. No more will. Death. A deadly gas making everyone an apathetic has been released. We have to look for the chemical formula to wake up again. The solution is daily training of the awareness

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, J., 1989. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. 1st ed. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, p.156.

<sup>2</sup> Thierry Geoffroy (2021), in person quote.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffroy, Thierry (2010). *Emergency Room Dictionary*. Denmark: Revolver Publishing by VVV & The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Visual Arts. pp. 25–26. ISBN 978-87-7945-002-8.

muscle. The convalescence must start to fight against the effects of the apathetic gas.”

It is these effects and the source of which that the apathy lab seeks to identify, target, reduce and eradicate.

There is the potentiality for creating an actual physical lab as a future development of the format. The closest realization of a legitimate lab space is in the form of a 5-year research project in the IKM museum in Oslo, Norway. This project, called “The Anatomy of Prejudice” is a collaborative installation that is part of a long-term exhibition on prejudice. Visitors are asked to participate in the project by scanning their phones for evidence of prejudice and xenophobia<sup>4</sup>, using museum-provided software to print out this evidence on paper and adding their own comments. These A4 papers are then hung up, shaping a sculptural installation,(architectural form) as each new participant contributes their individual example of prejudice and their thoughts on it. It is an extracteur project, and up until the covid-19 pandemic, involved over 200 participants being invited each week. After the 5 year period, the total summation of individual responses will be statistically analysed. (huge amount)

Geoffroy sometimes takes on the persona of a medical scientist, in keeping with the lab theme, as he sees himself in this role of a chemist, looking for a formula to disintoxicate people from apathy. Geoffroy has a background in medicine, as a 17 year old, he began studying medicine but did not continue these studies. There is a recurrent medical theme present in this format however. The artist conducted a public sociological experiment in Vejle in 2019. This took the form of a tent filled with selected artworks showing artworks on cardboards containing newspaper images from that day. Geoffroy asked passers by to choose which images they felt the most empathy for.

The lab was activated as an installation project at a Journalist convention in 2009, where many politicians, including the Danish prime minister at the time, and well-known journalists. Geoffroy installed a screen showing a graphically violent video that had played on television directly after a children’s show the day before . The installation included statements and questions hanging by the video, aimed at the journalists present, such as “How long can you look at it?” and “What my kids saw after dinner”. It was a social experiment, to measure the scale of reactions the journalists had to the content, and was conducted as a team effort with assistants and writers. To the shock of Geoffroy and the rest of the team, there was an extreme disinterest in participating with most journalists ignoring it entirely, or barely responding to the installation.

An artistic form of the Apathy Lab has taken place in the creation of artworks by Geoffroy himself, with questioning statements accompanied by emotive drawings, and sometimes including annotated newspaper clippings. These are an impactful way of addressing the key issues the Apathy Lab deals with. The artworks, which are on small pieces of cardboard, have a hasty, urgent feel to them and serve as a way for Geoffroy to express his sentiments in a direct manner, in most cases on the same day they were created . Statements include “Is Illusion of compassion creating apathy?”, “Apathy makes you accept everything” and

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<sup>4</sup> Miskovic, T., n.d. *anatomy\_of\_prejudice\_IKM\_museum*. [online] Emergencyrooms.org. Available at: <[http://www.emergencyrooms.org/anatomy\\_of\\_prejudice\\_IKM\\_museum.html](http://www.emergencyrooms.org/anatomy_of_prejudice_IKM_museum.html)>

“Does fear provoke apathy?”. In order to express these sentiments in a more accessible manner, he has written them on tents which he then places in public spaces. The reactions of people towards these tents is then recorded for the Apathy Lab.

The Apathy Lab is a format prime for partnership. With the right engagement, the lab has the potential to become a physical construction, with a team of researchers conducting effective interventions and investigations into the science of apathy and how to reverse its effects. This could take place in a multiscale framework, with testing facilities springing up around the world, eager to engage people on a global scale to acknowledge and bring down their own states of apathy. Within communities it could boost closeness and awareness of weaknesses and troublespots and improve people’s inclinations to work with each other. It could reveal ways to help people and activate group empathy, having a positive effect as the lab works to eliminate people’s indifference to one another’s suffering.

*Text by Elena Hansen .February 2021*

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*Links to art formats by Thierry Geoffroy / Colonel*  
<http://www.emergencyrooms.org/formats.html>

SO MANY  
OPINIONS



SO LITTLE  
INVESTIGATIONS