

Recording Emotions Efficiently and Precisely

Mari Shishikura

Introduction

I aimed to develop methods to record emotions in a precise and efficient manner—precise so that details of an emotion are captured, and efficient so that this can be done with a low temporal and financial cost. The goal was to be able to re-feel the emotions felt in the past and to share those emotions with others.

Methods

The research has been done in three directions. One was to explore literature in psychology, art history, neuroscience, and philosophy. The other approach was to set myself as a subject and record everyday emotions in the forms of words, pictures, and colors. Finally, with regard to experimenting with sharing emotions, I have composed short stories which capture the emotions I felt in the past but explain them in a universally understandable manner.

Results

The literature has given me insights into our current understanding of emotion and theories concerning emotion and art. However, it did not provide hints for developing actual methods. The second personal experiment was helpful in creating a system to record emotions efficiently, but the preciseness is still to be tested. Finally, the short story has been a success, with positive comments at B21 showcase.

Discussion

The project has allowed me to learn about art and emotion and understand how I experience emotions. I will continue to explore the projects with an emphasis on the third direction, i.e., using short stories to depict complex emotions.



Why Record Emotions?

We go through many emotions everyday--no matter how busy we are, or how mature we have become. However, these emotions tend to be disregarded in our busy life and easily let go to ensure "professionalism" as an adult. I find it pity that we easily dismiss our emotions--a beautiful process that gives colours to our lives. My project stemmed from this notion, and aimed to build a stronger and intimate relation with our emotions.

The whole idea was to try to create a system where we can record and recall our emotion as easily as when we take a picture of a memorable moment and look back on it.



Emotion and Art

One thing to note is that my idea is not unique. A lot of the art works have been made with the same idea in mind; to materialize emotions and share them to others. The most prominent is the expressionism, where artists aimed to depict subjective experiences. While Picasso's painting "Guernica" is one of the most famous, expressionisms are found also in the music scene, such as opera.

Expressionism is often explored to capture negative emotions, such as sorrow, disgust, fear, and anger. Less is the case for positive emotions. I found this very interesting. Contemplation on this notion gave me an insight of how art has served as a means to process emotion. While I find this meaningful, my approach is slightly different. I want to keep art as a means to simply record the emotion--extra "processing" or "interpretation" step is not necessarily required. Hence, I wanted to discover a method where one's inclination in art did not matter and everyone could keep a snapshot of the artwork.



Pages from my picture book.

Short story approach

One part of my project focused on how we could share emotions with others. For this, I decided to explore short stories and picture books. This is because they are often used to nurture emotions in small children. Hence, I thought they have the characteristics to efficiently convey emotions. Another reason is that by simplifying my subjective experiences as a narrative in short stories may prompt a universal grasp of the situation and emotion, which is not too biased by personal thoughts and experiences.

The journey of my Project.

While this journey was incomparable to any other intellectual experiences, I would like to share two key aspects.

1. Tackling something without a definition.

What is emotion? This itself can be a project that takes months or years to answer. My first weeks at B21 consisted of asking this question. As a scientist, I thought you could not start a research without setting the definition for the subject you are investigating.

While I could have spent more time to find a perfect definition for "emotion," I decided to go on without having a definitive description of what emotion was. This was actually a big leap for me, which I would not have taken in a common scientific setting.

Investigating something without a definition was like describing an object through its shadow. It was very hard to get to its core and to be sure what I was doing was right. However, I still think it was a meaningful process. You can learn a lot about the object from its shadow, and with this knowledge one might gain an insight to get close to the truth.

2. Reaching the dead-end and going back.

Unfortunately, at one point of my journey, I have reached a dead-end. I had no clue how emotions could be captured, and my initial approach was failing.

Then, I decided to let go of my initial approach and to start a completely new one. This meant that I needed to go back to square one.

This was saddening and frustrating, but I had a clear understanding that every effort makes me closer to where I wanted to reach.



first approach

new approach



To be honest, my project was not very successful. I did not reach anywhere I thought I could be. I am still in the search of how to efficiently record and re-feel emotions.

However, the experience at B21 was very meaningful. I was able to meet passionate, creative, and intellect individuals. They had all the talents I do not have, but we were able to bond very closely to share from the most trivial thoughts to the philosophical views of the world. I believe this is the most precious thing I could ask for in this busy and overachieving world.

I hope the future B21 fellows can make the most of this opportunity, where they can limitlessly explore the possibility of the world, rather than to prove the significance of oneself.

The Story of the Story

"Can we record our emotions more precisely and efficiently? Like how we conveniently take a picture of a beautiful sunset?" This thought came to my mind a while ago, and frankly speaking, I was quite proud of myself for coming up with this intriguing question. I had been sitting on the question (proudly) until I joined Building 21 to finally begin the quest.

Little did I know that I would be entering a rabbit hole that connects to numerous rabbit holes.

There seemed to be no direction in the rabbit holes. I looked into psychology, philosophy, art history, neuroscience... whatever sounded relevant. However, at one point, I realized that my focus was oriented toward "How can we trigger people's (nuanced) emotions?" This made sense because my ultimate goal for recording emotions was to be able to re-feel them and share them with others.

The most straightforward way to record emotions is to verbally write about what happened with as much detail as possible.

I woke up at 7:00. Cloudy and humid morning. When I cracked an egg to make some scrambled eggs for breakfast, parts of shells went in. I got annoyed. After cooking, I realized I had forgotten to put in salt and pepper. What's worse, I didn't have any ketchup in my fridge. As I ate my tasteless scrambled eggs, I already knew today would be an awful day. Then I got a call from my mom...

Whatever the conversation with your mom may be, with the abundant information, it's easier for others to grasp what you felt talking to your mom.

However, I wanted to create something a bit simpler and less personalized. Rather than perfectly capturing the situation, I aimed to create something that is more abstract but universally relatable. I felt that the abstractness provides the space or flexibility to elicit relevant emotions in different people who have had different emotional experiences.

I have always liked pictures book, not because I am too lazy to read texts, but rather because I am fascinated by how simple stories could convey the valuable essence of life. Hence, I decided to create a picture book to share my emotions. I hope that the simpleness of the story makes it relatable to everyone and the abstractness leaves space to elicit nuanced emotions linked to an individual's experiences in the past.

The "Winter Dandelion" proceeds in the snowman's perspective. This is to facilitate the readers to be engaged and (hopefully) grasp what the snowman is feeling.

In the pictures of the book, I snuck in drawings of flowers. This was for the following two reasons. First is because I like flowers. The second is to have the readers on the same page. While I can leave the story interpretation to the readers (as in a normal book), because my purpose was to share emotions, I wanted to give "answers" to what the snowman was feeling in the scene and what I wanted to depict in the scene. Hence, in each scene, there is a small drawing of a flower whose "Language of Flowers" matches my intention.

The "Language of Flowers" is an idea where we consider a flower to be a symbol for a concept. The most common one is the rose, and its language of flower is love. The list of "answers" is attached at the end of my book.

Overall, I hope this book was successful in sharing my emotions: the excitement of your horizon broadening up through interacting with others. And the awe or the "sublime" feeling that, the fact that you have become a newer version of yourself with new perspectives means that the factors that caused the change, that is, the elements of people you interacted with, stay in you forever. Even if you forget their names.

This is a feeling or "emotion" that I got at Building 21.

Mari

The story behind my picture book, presented at the showcase.

