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The Fine Art of Conversation

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Abstract

This workshop is aimed at giving human interaction researchers the conceptual and practical apparatus to balance their representations of data (mixes of drawings and photographs in the most part), so as to “maximally incite, but also constrain” their representations, just as artists sometimes succeed in doing (Streeck, Grothues, & Villanueva, 2009, p.28). Why—as Streeck points out—are the drawings and visualisations of interaction researchers so halting and timid, compared to the ways artists have responded to the same kinds of representational problems? Are these heavily segmented and sparsely constructed representations of interaction the result of a prevailing positivistic outlook with regard to representing shared space, where interaction is presented as staggered and discrete physical events with apparently little to connect them. The workshop seeks to redress this situation by examining the solutions that artists have arrived at when representing human interaction, and asking participants to engage in a series of activities and discussions which will re-frame their approaches to this issue.

Keywords: cognitive science; arts; interaction; drawing; embodiment; creativity; representation; comics; art; film; photography

Depicting Human Interaction

Detailed representations focusing on social interaction in fine art are surprisingly rare. Where they do occur, they reveal something about the artist’s conception of communication and their (possibly implicit) theories about how these representations are perceived and processed. Similar issues attend the representation of interaction in the Cognitive Sciences (C. P. R. Heath, 2014). Researchers have developed a diverse range of specialized methods for describing interaction; from graphic transcripts including photographs mixed with line drawings showing joint action and embodiment (Laurier, 2014), to coupled representations of the patterns of neural activation during social interaction in the brains of participants (Dumas, Nadel, Soussignan, Martinerie, & Garner, 2010). For thousands of years drawing, mapping, diagramming, and other forms of visual notation have been key methods for transmitting human knowledge and culture, and line drawing has been a particularly salient and widespread form of visual communication (Craig-Martin & Martin, 1995).

None of these representations are innocent. Drawing itself is a kind of transcription, encoding our own analytical assumptions about what we see as relevant to a reader or

viewer (Ochs, 1979). A wide range of commonalities between drawing systems have evolved, such as the practice of perspective drawing, and each system has developed its own rationale, method, and objects of enquiry (Dubery & Willats, 1972). Importantly, these approaches to representation are *rarely scrutinised as empirical methods*.

It is not surprising, then, that artists have become living repositories of expertise in the practice of drawing systems of all kinds, and as such have become a valued resource (Kozbelt, 2001). Visual reasoning can be examined in the ways that drawings are commonly constructed, (Van Sommers, 1984), and the ways in which novel drawing situations are spoken of and acted upon (C. P. Heath, Cameron, & Cain, 2008). Added to this, drawing and diagramming have become standard tools in the repertoire of participatory action research (Chambers et al., 1997) applied in diversely situated engagements, (Theron, Mitchell, & Smith, 2011). The process of interpreting visual depictions in itself is an intersubjective phenomenon, where particular methods and practices of reading determines the consequential social meanings and practical uses of the inscription (Goodwin, 2000).

This workshop will bring together a range of perspectives from the cognitive sciences and the arts, asking whether our long legacies of drawing systems in artistic and scientific representations is telling us something about our varied approaches to mind, intersubjectivity and social interaction. Researchers explore very different phenomena of interest, often using highly specialized research methods particular to their subdomain within the cognitive sciences. Many of these are represented in the list of prospective participants in the workshop which we are submitting with this outline. The proposed workshop aims to encourage new opportunities for dissemination and collaboration within and beyond the cognitive sciences, scrutinising the received and conventional methods of depicting human interaction as a starting point for conversation and exchange.

Goals and workshop plan

Background The organizers have participated in and run workshops, specialist conferences and presentations bridging cognitive science, human interaction and the arts, including

at the 2014 meeting of the Society¹. This workshop aims to:

- build upon and extend the networks of researchers established at prior meetings, and to use the clear focus on methods of depicting human interaction as a binding theme to draw together and engage the widest possible range of fields and approaches;
- to provide an entry point into the themes and discussions for a broader audience within Cognitive Science;
- to encourage cross-disciplinary researchers and especially those just starting out in their research to collaborate with others, seeking out connection points, looking at how human interaction and communication is depicted in their fields.

Format In order to create and sustain a broadened interest in the workshop, a blog page will be set up in advance so that invitees, workshop participants and others may browse examples of artworks that have already stimulated discussion amongst the organisers and can contribute their own. The blog will also provide a centralised focus for the workshop and is intended to test and support be the impetus for an illustrated publication. The central function of the blog will be gather and examine cases in which fine art has succeeded (or failed in interesting ways) to create credible depictions of interaction. Discussions on the blog both before and after the workshop will enable participants to contribute to threaded discussions alongside each artwork (link to follow on notification of acceptance of proposal).

Practical workshop activities will centre on previously worked-up examples of interactional depictions, and will use questions and criteria suggested in the workshop presentations. Activities will involve drawing out points and patterns of interest from artworks using projections onto whiteboards and screens, the results of which can later be digitally overlaid onto source artworks and can be documented on the blog. A 3-step line drawing protocol for drawing out shared interactional spaces using field inscriptions will also be used and adapted to the available ‘data’—in this case the artworks under discussion.

An overview at the end of the day will compare the outputs of different groups, and will conclude with a group visit to a London gallery to look at and discuss prime examples of the kinds of artworks and drawn phenomena encountered during the day.

Planning committee

The planning committee consists of researchers who have been working together on related projects in human interaction research, cognitive science, psychology and the arts. Each will give a short overview presentation in order to frame the subsequent activities and discussions.

- Claude Heath, "Drawing out interaction"
- Patrick Healey, "What's so difficult about drawing interaction?"
- Saul Albert, "Representing unformulated action"

The following list of participants (partial here, since numbers who have expressed interest are growing) comprises cognitive science researchers who have dealt with depictions of human interaction in their research. It also includes scientists from other fields, and artists who can bring to their highly relevant interests and methodological approaches to the cross-disciplinary objectives of the workshop.

Toby Harris (QMUL), Daniel G. Jay (Tufts), Sophie Skach (QMUL), Rosella Paulina Galindo Esparza (QMUL), Shauna Concannon (QMUL), Lida Theodorou (QMUL), Leshao Zhang (QMUL), Melissa Bliss (QMUL), Nicola Jane Plant (QMUL), Soomi Park (QMUL), Saul Albert (Tufts), Christian Heath (KCL), Yal Kreplak (EHSS), Dirk vom Lehn (King's), Jrgen Streeck (U. Texas), Eric Laurier (Edinburgh), J.P. De Ruiter (Tufts), Michael Sean Smith (UCLA), Elizabeth Stokoe & A Dozen Eggs (Loughborough),

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¹See <http://bit.ly/2kPpZtF>, checked 1/30/2017