Let’s talk about affordances: some implications of the social-material affordances approach

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Abstract
In Erik Rietveld’s inaugural lecture “The Affordances of Art for Making Technologies,” art is presented as a valuable avenue to enrich the environment with material and social affordances that may enhance human meaning giving practices. In this contribution, I make a distinction between conventional and unconventional practices and argue for an account of sociomateriality that covers the whole spectrum and not just the evidently artistic and artful ones. In this context, I plea for a cognitive science program that adds to the rich resources art has to offer for understanding the whole spectrum of practices and deals with the complexity of social, material, and cultural practices.

Keywords
Cultural psychology, affordances, art, ecological perception

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My appreciation of Erik Rietveld’s inaugural address begins with a personal note.

I think I was one of the very few present at the birth of Erik’s interest in what eventually came to be known as the Skilled Intentionality Framework (SIF)—the program, in which intentional actions and stances of the embodied human being are investigated from the perspective of the life world’s dependence on the interaction of the organism’s capacities and the landscape of affordances. And I know for sure that the Gibsonian thread, particularly Gibson’s ideas about affordances, got woven into the fabric of, first, unreflective action and later the SIF. I am not sure who or what ignited exactly the fire of Erik’s ambition, but I certainly fanned the flames at a very early stage. I do by no means claim a share in the outcome. Far from it, because in his hands rather rough and unpolished suggestions become a gem of clarity and keen elaboration. The suggestion to turn to Gibson and his idea of affordances has through Erik’s diligent work on the landscape of affordances and its socio-material underpinnings become a hard-core element of the 4E-program.

Let’s now talk about the inaugural lecture, which you can find in this issue: The Affordances of Art for Making Technologies. Despite the Gibsonian claim that without a concise conceptualization of the environment, embodiment will remain a lame duck, many cognitive scientists did not explore this promising idea of affordance–organism interaction but turned instead to the inside machinery of the brain. It is tempting to do so, even though meaning making does not take place in the brain but rather between people in their own habitat. The brain is indispensable in the execution of the affordance–organism interaction, of course, as hormones are and the electrochemical operation of the body. The truth is that everything between people’s ears takes place in the head (where else?). But what thus goes on in the head by means of the neural processing of information has no bearing on the meaning of what goes on between those ears and between those of others. It is a pitfall to look inside the brain and its workings for what brains and bodies in the plural accomplish. Meaning is an interactive affair. Success in devising equipment for making calculations of oxygen in the blood, on positrons, or waves and even light in the
most recent attempt of optogenetics to chart the brain’s topology has turned much cognitive science research of the embodied mind into research of an “embrained” body. Fortunately, in the SIF program, this pitfall is avoided by taking the path of an elaboration of affordances. To quote,

The notion of affordances (Gibson, 1979) in the title of my lecture ties together socio-material practices and our embodied abilities. (...) The term “affordance” means a possibility for action that the socio-material environment offers to us. (...) Action includes walking and sitting, but also preserving monuments, and quite crucially, reflecting on artworks and, say, imagining what it was like to be inside the bunker in spring 1940 also actions people can do skillfully. There are close ties between affordances, practices and skills.

Let’s take the notion of socio-material affordances at face value and consider its implication for our understanding of the life world and human experience.

The above definition claims that for any action, there is a social-material counterpart, which affords something more or less specific. If affordances are used in combination with practices, they account for an important part of human action, social and otherwise. Such actions can be an important source of change and improvement. Let us call this new look at embodied cognition the Socio-Material Affordances Approach (S-MAA), in which practices of all kind are the main target.

Much of Erik’s inaugural lecture is devoted to the role of art as a skillful practice and craft. Art as a source of affordances for making technologies. Skills and crafts, and eventually all art belong to the world of play. Play is in the experience of people all over the world the prime source of Culture with a capital C: the higher human accomplishments of art, science, technology, and sophisticated material objects that make up the environment we live in. This was Huizinga’s idea, expressed in his book Homo Ludens. Culture—and therewith the arts—are produced by playful humans whenever and wherever they live and under whatever circumstances. But Huizinga goes further than just culture with a capital C. Human interaction tends to sediment into rather persistent patterns of conduct, often very mundane patterns that are characteristic of human groups. The way men, women, and children get attuned to each other is in most cases scripted and dictated by the agreements, conventions, and arrangements (ACAs) of their living quarters and their social group. That is to say, explicit rules, unwritten conventions, and lived settings, in which the physical and social environment is organized, work together with the human body in the production of the smooth and automatic flow of social conduct. Huizinga was one of the first and very few to argue for the importance of the paramount playful element in this production. So not only Art with a capital A but also that vast array of human practices that makes up the world we live in is indebted to the artful nature of humankind.

On the basis of Huizinga’s idea about art and other human practices, I would suggest a dimension along which practices can be classified within the S-MAA to embodied cognition: at one extreme, those practices or actions that are socially quite conventional, routine-like, and rather poor in innovation, and at the other extreme, practices that are socially less rule-abiding, unconventional, and focusing on arranging the environment afresh; artfully, one could say. In this manner, a taxonomy of practices is created that runs from the mundane and unobtrusive to the sophisticated, remarkable, and artistic.

The S-MAA has resulted in a rich variety of art works, in which “working with layers of meaning” has for instance brought to the surface the deeper layers of war violence by laying bare the soft intestines of a bunker. Or take the installation in Het HEM: the brass of bullets is turned into a protective shield, which in a rather self-evident interpretation is meant to ward off war outrage. In still another artful project, RAAAF has made visible the insides of the hard work of technicians in making the Dutch coast safer: the enormous concrete water work, through which the power of the waves has been investigated, has been beautifully cut up and outlined in a reflective pool. And finally, the plans to turn the overpowering towers of war in Vienna into soft, transparent, and harmless structures as tokens of how to solve future severe conflicts: be open on all fronts.

These are the artful projects of RAAAF. Yet, if we fantasize about the other side of the dimension, the more mundane and rather down to earth part of practices that are conventional, routine-like, and are not as innovative, what layers of meaning are there to be explored? One of RAAAF’s projects looks quite promising in that regard: The End of Sitting. We all sit, we all work in quite unhealthy postures. The End of Sitting explores new layers of meaning in the rather insignificant world of everyday practices. One more example in RAAAF’s repertoire is of comparable nature and again concerns the mundane side of the dimension. It could be inspired by the age-old practice of “the commons.” Already in Medieval times one was convinced that cattle can be pastured and herded best on open, unfenced land under cooperative, communal control. So why don’t human communities use their gardens in an unfenced way, so RAAAF thought? It will afford all kinds of communal practices on this common ground. Precisely these kinds of affordances at the mundane end of dimensions of practices requires further development and implementation in the S-MAA model.

Although art provides promising avenues to apply cognitive science, it is still the day-to-day scientific
hard work that has to do the trick of developing the S-MAA, together with SIF into a model that could be applied more broadly. A model that tackles human meaning-making practice on a large scale. It could begin by including the sociomateriality of for example, courtship, boardroom meetings, political debate, sex, diversity, ethnicity, age, and status into the art work and extend S-MAA model to the complexity of social practices at the level of everyday life. All kinds of practices that make up ordinary living and are fenced in by morals and manners which somehow derail the performance could benefit from support from the world of art and design. Rituals have their own socio-material elements; these are a gold mine of affordances as well. For example, channeling feelings of respect for an opponent in a parliamentary debate by providing a specially designed place (and gangway toward it), from which to voice the interruption, would probably help to restore the mores in parliament. So much still needs to be done in areas of the same level and the same importance as sitting or communal living. In the Dutch university scene, there exist separate niches of cognitive science shattered around that should and could be united under the banner of a solid program. S-MAA/SIF would be a good candidate.

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