Disability & Skilled Intentionality
Special Guests Symposium 1/6/2015 at Van Abbe Museum

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It may actually seem quite strange to be specialized in skilled action and then talk at a conference on disabil­ity. But I believe that in the end the things that we have learned about skilled action over the years may apply equally well to all human beings including people with disabilities, like blind people, deaf people, people in wheelchairs. The reason for this is that if one lacks certain abilities, like sight, one will just rely on the other abilities one has to deal with the world. So you are still skilled at interacting with the environment and that is what the Skilled Intentionality Framework that my research group has developed is about. The Skilled Intentionality Framework (Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014, figure 1, see description in pp. 1-4) is basically aimed at understanding of the way people engage with their environment in everyday life (and in situations of expertise) using the skills they possess. The central notion here is affordances: the possibilities for action offered to us by the environment. Using our skills we can pick up affordances that are relevant to our concerns; engage with them. Skilled Intentionality is having a grip on multiple affordances simultaneously.

By simply responding to relevant affordances skilled people can move towards an optimal grip on their environment. One can see this as establishing a relative equilibrium or fit between the individual –with certain abilities- and the particular situation.

The posture of Juan Muñoz’ ‘Listening Figure’ shows manifests this tendency towards an optimal grip: to listen well the figure bends sideways towards the wall.

Even though they are responsive to a different set of affordances because they rely on different skills, disabled people move towards an optimal grip in structurally the same way as people without disabilities: namely by being responsive to relevant affordances in their particular situation. In the image below we see both a blind person trying to get a grip on the work of art and a group of people trying to get a grip on the situation in which the two tour guides explain different ways in which they are allowed to access the famous sculpture. The half circle in which they are seated is similar to the half circle non-blind people would make.
One of the things that is interesting about thinking in terms of affordances is that affordances, more precisely defined, are relations between aspects of the material environment and abilities available in a form of life, which includes socio-cultural practices in our human case. Interestingly, people who have disabilities, say a deaf person, may have skills that other people can learn from. Deaf people describe their way of engaging with the environment as being able to have a ‘broad view’ of things or a ‘wide view’. So they may have a skill – having a ‘wide view’ - that also hearing persons might want to learn. Perhaps they could, for example, teach me how I could experience an artwork differently if I would adopt the ‘wide view’ that they have.

This relates to one of the questions I received at the symposium at the Van Abbe Museum, which was what I think the museum of the future would look like. At the museum of the future - in which access for people with disabilities would of course be optimized -, one of the fascinating cross overs could be that people with disabilities are encouraged and facilitated to share their skills for experiencing works of art with all other people interested in these skills. This might enable others to experience aspects of the artwork that they wouldn’t have experienced otherwise, for example acquiring the ability of viewing it ‘widely’.

The topic of the Special Guests symposium at the Van Abbe Museum originally was ‘inclusion & the museum’, but shifted quickly to ‘access’. I find it interesting that at a seminar organized on the topic of ‘inclusion’ almost all the participants spoke about access. Why this shift? Of course one obvious reason for this is physical access: if one do not have access to the space where things are happening, e.g. the exhibition space, then one is excluded and will not experience anything of the art works. But in another sense I think the stressing of access has to do with the possibility of getting access to artworks, which is achieved through perception. Importantly, if one has different skills of perceiving artworks one can be responsive to different affordances and have different experiences. And basically what Van Abbe does in their program for people with disabilities – named Special Guest Programme - is having them use other abilities to pick up affordances offered by the same work of art. For instance, blind people my touch the artwork, smell the artwork and lift the artwork. So they basically rely on the abilities they do have in order to use other possibilities for action, other affordances offered by the artwork; to get access to the artwork and experience it. But if that is the case then it is still the phenomenon skilled affordance responsiveness, albeit using other abilities than people typically use, that characterizes their engagement with the work of art. So the Skilled Intentionality Framework still applies.
Another thing that is important in the Skilled Intentionality Framework in the context of disability studies is that in the ecological niche of the human form of life there are not just a few affordances, but an endless number of affordances, and in any situation we just tap into the ones that are at that moment relevant for us based on what we care about, but also given what we can do, thus given our abilities. This means that blind people, for example, that touch the sculpture and smell the sculpture and lift the sculpture are using only some of the affordances that are available there in the situation, which is a subset of all the affordances offered by the work of art in its context. But similarly, and I think this is crucial, people who do not count as disabled can also only grasp a small subset of all the affordances available and have a grip on just that subset, because nobody has all the skills that are there in the human forms of life. So also from that perspective there is not a real difference between the disabled and the abled ways of engaging with the world. Individuals from both groups of people are limited in the grip they can get on the enormous amount of available affordances. Of course I would not deny that there are differences between people from both groups. (Think for example in the amount of situations of discrimination encountered.)

Another example of the relevance of skills is there is uncertainty among abled people about how to deal with disabled people, which is also a skill that one of course certainly could acquire. In fact, the museum of the future might be useful for the development of this skill of interacting with for example blind people, for example because there are events in which blind people are the majority but non-blind people also participate and interact with them. Being more around people with disability will take away one’s shyness in interacting with them and allow one to acquire the skills to engage with them, which is important and not difficult but which one needs to learn.

This affordance-based approach could also be interesting for the Van Abbe Museum itself, given its interest in the use of the museum. In the museum of the future people will be encouraged to use museum much more. Affordances are all about possibilities for use, and therefore a helpful concept to better understand the ‘museum for use’. The framework I have sketched suggests the two main aspects in stimulating use: 1) what is used are the different aspects of the museum environment (works of art primarily, but also texts, brochures, audio recording, etc.) and 2) it is the abilities of people that give access to these aspects of the environment. From this the following suggestions follow: allow people to reach out to the different aspects of the environment (physical access is part of this; but it could also mean giving them access to other layers of the work of art, for example by bringing in the artist if he or she is still alive), and stimulate people to be more open for unorthodox affordances. Some ways to realize this are to: increase their playfulness; place them in a group with people with skills from different socio-cultural practices; place them in a group with people with disabilities; allow people to ignore the societal conventions that typically limit their freedom (i.e. exploration of unorthodox affordances), for example by exploring as many affordances as possible of a copy of the work of art; use tools to extend the skills people have and allow them to pick up novel affordances; have someone demonstrate unorthodox affordances; place the artwork in an entirely different context in which we do explore more than in an museum, say in a children’s playground.