The Communication of Memory and the Inhabited Experience

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This paper proposes that memory and the inhabited experience are a particular form of embodied communication. In doing so, it privileges personal and interpersonal accounts of the everyday as an impetus towards shaping practice-led research in communication design that encompasses ambiguity, authorship and co-creation. How we share, perceive and translate the embodied experience—from making to writing to receiving—offers an opportunity to position the practice of communication design as both a narrative and a verb. Recent works by the author: Objects of Memories (2010-13), The Name of a Room (2011-13) and Interior Memory: Re-imagining Home (2014) are examined as methods of inquiry that define embodied communication as an act that materialises an ephemeral experience. Reflection and slowness, in particular, working with hand tools, paper and the photogram are the processes employed that enable memories to surface and draw connection to embodiment and lived-in space. Furthermore, materiality, metaphor and Gestalt principles are discussed as means into how we reflect upon and communicate embodiment through the process of making.

**KEYWORDS**: Memory, uninhabited, embodied experience, re-imagining, communication, space

Cet article propose de considérer la mémoire et l’expérience habitée comme des formes particulières de communication incarnée. Pour se faire, nous avons privilégié les récits personnels et interpersonnels de la vie quotidienne comme des moyens de mise en forme d’une recherche fondée sur la pratique dans le design de communication, ce qui comprend l’ambiguïté, le statut d’auteur et la co-création. La façon dont nous partageons, percevons et traduisons l’expérience incarnée – du faire à l’écriture et à la réception - offre l’occasion de considérer la pratique du design de communication comme récit et comme verbe. Les récents travaux de l’auteur : Objects of Memories (2010-13), The name of a room (2011-13) et Interior Memory: Re-imagining Home (2014) sont étudiés comme des méthodes d’enquête définissant la communication incorporée comme un acte permettant de matérialiser une expérience éphémère. La réflexion et la lenteur, qui se manifestent en particulier lors du travail avec des outils manuels, le papier et le photogramme, sont les procédés utilisés pour permettre aux mémoires de faire surface et de se connecter au processus d’incorporation ainsi qu’à l’espace vécu. Par ailleurs, la matérialité, la métaphore et les principes de la théorie de la Gestalt sont abordés comme des moyens pour réfléchir et communiquer l’incorporation au travers du processus de production.

**MOTS-CLÉS**: Memoire, l’inhabit, expérience incorporée, re-imagination, communication, espace
Embodied Communication

I am sitting on an upholstered green and gold patterned cushion chair in my living room looking at a print of a photogram image I created from memory of a room I inhabited over thirty years ago. The warm colors of orange and brown bleed together which create a surface texture on the walls that in reality would have been uniformly painted or wallpapered; a detail I cannot remember. Rather than trying to capture an accurate image of the room, the photogram I made instead captures my emotional and embodied experience. The image allows me to imagine myself in that room once filled with furniture and personal belongings. I invite others to also imagine themselves there and allow the empty interior to activate their own memories of a room. It becomes secondary that the image is a re-creation of my parent’s bedroom where as a child I often fell asleep. The nondescript portrayal of the room is enough to prompt the beginning of a conversation about memory, imagination and the inhabited experience. I pick up my calligraphic pen, hold it in my left hand, drip it in white ink and write a memory.
I cried myself to a sleep while lying on my stomach at the foot of mom and dad’s queen-sized bed. The brown patterned quilted bedspread offered little comfort. I felt a profound sense of longing for mom when she left for the night. This episode was never repeated, but permanently etched as a moment of transition from dependence to independence. (excerpt from Objects of Memories, Falling Asleep, Salen, P. (2012))

Figure 2: Objects of Memories, Salen, P. (2010-2013)

The image is small 9.5 x 14.5 cm. I have to be selective with words. After writing, I pick up my scalpel to cut the paper and fold to form an object like a bed as a reference to the type of room I am recalling.

This brief example, from Objects of Memories (2010-2013), a component to the practice-led research undertaken during my doctoral studies completed in 2014, begins to form the definition of embodied communication as a practice that takes into account the physical, emotional and sensory as integral to communication inclusive of its various modalities of expression. Linguist Jens Allwood suggests that embodiment makes the intangible tangible and amenable to observation, consideration and investigation. Additionally, embodiment renders a particular phenomenon possible to experience in concrete terms (Allwood. J. (2008). Objects of Memories comprise 1,165 hand-sized paper sculptures originating from photograms created of past rooms. Each sculpture depicts a hand-written memory.
associated with a room either within my previous twenty places of residence or of those I have been a guest in such as, family and friends. The research surveyed nearly forty years of personal experience with 260 rooms recalled. In relation to Allwood’s description of embodiment as making the intangible visible, the photogram is used as a technique because of its reliance on contact with light and touch to form an image. The slow reveal and imperfect chemical process of making a photogram, combined with working with the directness of hand tools and the materiality of paper established continuity between chance, memory and thoughtful decision-making. The result is that the process grounded me in the present while simultaneously the images and paper artefacts activated, quantified and made visible my memories. Holding the scalpel, cutting the paper, folding and hand-writing the text is an expression of embodied communication.

My practice in communication design embraces analogue image making techniques because it embodies contact, sensing and excitement. Contact is possible without awareness, but for awareness contact is essential. Sensing determines the nature of awareness. e.g., acoustic, tactile, and proprioceptive. Excitement involves physiological stimulation as well as the spectrum of emotions (Perls, F. S., Hefferline, R.F., Goodman, P. (1972). These principles are at the core of Gestalt psychology. The term Gestalt means ‘unified whole’. In the 1920s psychologists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka founded the Gestalt school of psychology in Germany. They developed a series of theories of visual perception. They believed that mental experience was dependent not on a simple combination of elements but on the organization and patterning of experience and of one’s perceptions. Thus, behavior should be studied as a network rather than separated into discrete components. In this view perception, learning, and other cognitive functions are seen as structured wholes. Gestalt has specific observable psychological properties that give an autonomous measure of depth and perspective to an experience. The Gestalt principles: similarity, continuation, closure, proximity, figure/ground and symmetry directly influence awareness and the communication of the body in space and in the production and the encounter with an object. My theory of embodied communication situates contact, awareness and excitement through the process of making as an intimate exchange between the maker and the receiver and in turn generates a new embodied narrative.

Communication is sensorial. The making of an image and an artifact is both explicit and vague. Such phenomena begin within the body—a hidden and complex network of neural signals to be interpreted by human consciousness. Phenomenology explains consciousness as the process of
embodiment whereby the mental experience is derived from having bodily experience in the physical world of objects and social world as an interaction with people (Bermuudez et al., 1995). The principal definition of embodiment is the experience of being consciousness. If we perceive the world in terms of our potential for interaction with our body, it is therefore correct to call perception “embodied.” Cognitive psychologist Arthur M. Glenberg claims perceptual systems have evolved to facilitate our interactions with a real, three-dimensional world. To do this, the world is conceptualized as patterns of possible bodily interactions, that is, how we move our hands and fingers, our legs and bodies, our eyes and ears, to deal with the world that presents itself (Glenberg, A. M. 1997). Similarly, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnsen state meaning is closely related to our bodily experiences (Lakoff, G., Johnsen, M. 2003). Philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s response to space engages all senses that make up an embodied experience (Bachelard, G. 1994). Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues embodiment is also a semiotic function in which body and mind are perceptive and expressive of one another. He claims there is a semiotic difference between expression and perception. Encoding (production and form) and decoding (analysis and meaning) in communication are reverse processes. The signifier/signified process could operate reversibly whereby expression (production and form) and perception (analysis and meaning) could become perception/expression and vice versa. Analysis and experience join together to constitute human embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, M. 1945). Linguist Richard L. Lanigan states this is true of all human interaction whether it be an encounter with another person or an encounter with an object. The fundamental difference is that objects do not respond to verbal expression. Objects have a constant value of “expression,” in that they are actual and unchanging. Our analysis of objects determines our experience of them (Lanigan, R. L. 2015). However, according to anthropologist Tim Ingold the properties of materials and therefore objects are not fixed attributes of matter but are processual and relational. (Ingold, T. 2007). Ingold questions what constitutes materiality by suggesting intangible aspects of our lived experience such as the sky or a sunset—I would add the space that encloses a room and the memories that float within—are equal to the things we can grasp. Another view to describe embodiment, offered by Allwood, is the metaphorical use of the term body that includes “body of knowledge” as an extension of the body as a carrier of knowledge. All of the above descriptions imply storytelling. Our experience of the world, through our bodies shapes our everyday systems of perceiving and communicating.
Figure 3: Objects of Memories, Salen, P. (2010-2012)

Figure 4: The Name of a Room, Salen, P. (2011-2013)
Structuring memory

Transcribing, documenting and disseminating memories require internal and external awareness as well as spatial sensitivity. Records of the past are not just found in material, but are also etched in our embodied skills and spatial orientations, which highlight physical and sensory production and knowledge exchange. For efficiency, interpretations of daily actions and decisions are performed habitually. We often do not notice the sensations of our body unless there is an acute awareness that draws attention to a particular reaction, such as pain or laughter. However, the body is always communicating and connecting us to the present. The body as a whole can be looked upon as an instrument of communication: receiving, evaluating and transmitting messages (Ruesch, J., Prestwood, A. R. (1950, 1972).

Like communication, memory is embodied and is what makes our experiences unique. Henri Bergson was the first philosopher to have devoted rigorous attention to body memory. He argues in Matter and Memory that memory is a combination of ‘habit memory’ and ‘pure memory’ (Bergson, H. (1896, 2004). Habit memory is a form of memory that accumulates in the body obtained through certain forms of automatic behaviour through repetition. Pure memory refers to the survival of personal memories in the unconscious. In this mode of memory nothing of the past is forgotten; it records, in the form of memory-images, all the events of our daily life as they occur in time; it neglects no detail. Habit memory is acquired deliberately, while pure memory is entirely spontaneous, both in its preservation and in its reproduction (Whitehead, A. (2009). According to Glenberg, memory is embodied by encoding patterns of action. How the patterns combine is constrained by how our bodies work. If embodied memory and conceptualization are patterns of possible actions, then it must incorporate information about spatial layout (Glenberg, A. M. (1997). Likewise, the materiality of memory takes on a distinct spatial dimension in both form and image. Translated to my work this implies an encounter—temporally, visually, and tactually. Referring back to Gestalt, artefacts of communication design also include spatial interaction such as, proximity, distance and scale. In architectural terms, scale encompasses perceptual and bodily relationships. Architecture, according to Juhani Pallasmaa, frames and structures, separates and unites, prohibits and facilitates, refocuses and slows down our experience of the world. As a consequence architecture is an integral part of our embodied self. Architecture always has a mediating role instead of being the end itself (Pallasmaa, J. (2011). This also applies to the architectural image as evidenced in both my two dimensional and three-dimensional works that form a link between memory and inhabited space.
Memory and space are inherently abstract. Our understanding of abstractions is commonly transmitted through metaphor, the properties of material or the tactility of an object. Inspired by Bachelard’s poetic articulation of the house as a metaphor for being human, Pallasmaa investigates the significance of architecture through the image. He argues the architectural image relates to our experience of the body through a process of unconscious internalisation, identification and projection. As an abstraction and condensation of the experiential, the architectural image fuses the multiplicity of experiences into an idealised order. Thus, encapsulating our feelings of self (Pallasmaa, J. (2011). As previously noted, our bodies are in constant interaction with the environment, which continuously informs and redefines present and past perspectives. The body and the inhabited experience are mutually defined in metaphoric terms. Both house memories and embody communication.

Metaphoric Communication

Dan and Erin hosted a small party during Brian and my overnight visit. We sat at the round dining table in their compact apartment drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and talking about nothing in particular. A voluptuous female friend of Dan and Erin’s was overtly flirting with Dan. No one took notice, but I felt annoyed and concerned for Erin. The room was beginning to shrink as the flirting continued. Erin happily walked into the adjacent

Figure 5: Flirtatious Fruit. Salen, P. (2012)
galley-style kitchen to prepare sliced fruit for dessert. I joined her. After the preparation we sat at the table and ate from our bowls. The tension was thick, a stark contrast between the soft, juicy moistness of eating the fruit. (Excerpt from Objects of Memories, Salen, P. 2012)

The title of this memory is Flirtatious Fruit. It combines flirting with the sensual qualities of fruit. Two other metaphors are used to describe the feeling of the situation, “The tension was thick” and “the room was beginning to shrink.” Thick gives tension a weight and volume also manifested in the physical appearance of the flirting female. The room closing in on itself references my narrow focus of attention. I highlight this example to draw attention not only to metaphors of language but also to materiality. In Objects of Memories the paper sculptures are an embodiment of my memories. The simple forms summon a sense of familiarity and emphasise memory as located in space. The paper sculptures give memories a tangible, yet fragile place that validates both significant and insignificant occurrences.

I have outlined embodied communication as an experience that encompasses body, mind and matter. In addition, metaphors are significant in communication. Metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff, G., Johnsen, M. (2003). They have the power to create a new picture of our past, present and future visions. Metaphors allow us to conceptualize the non-physical in terms of the physical. Lakoff’s concept of metaphor resides not in language, but in thought. This idea is traced to linguist Michael J. Reddy who claimed metaphor is an indispensable part of our conventional way of conceptualizing the world and that our everyday behavior reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience (Lakoff, G. (1993). We understand abstract concepts such as time and space through cross-domain mapping (Lakoff, G. (1993). In terms of metaphor, mapping is a set of correspondences or inferences that link one domain of experience to a different domain of experience. Metaphor involves both conceptual mappings, i.e., the fragility and impermanence of paper and memory to linguistic expressions such as flirtatious fruit to describe an experience in a room. Returning to embodiment, we understand language by creating embodied conceptualizations of situations the language is describing. Language about memory is rich with metaphor ranging from Plato’s model of the mind as a wax tablet to Augustine’s memories stored in a treasure house to Freud’s Screen memories and mystic writing-pad to photographic memory and computer metaphors such as memory sticks, cache and RAM. Each of these metaphors uses an object to place, locate, and describe the otherwise invisible. As physical beings, each of us is a container, bound by an interior and exterior orientation. We project our own inner and outer orientation onto other physical objects that are bounded. We experience many things, through sight and touch, as having distinct boundaries, and, when things have no distinct boundaries, we often project boundaries upon them. Rooms are such containers that house imagination.
and dreams and the tangible as experienced through interaction with where objects are located. Additionally, we speak and write in linear order. Speaking and writing are correlated with time and time is conceptualized in terms of space. Therefore, it is natural to conceptualize language in terms of space (Lakoff, G., Johnsen, M. (2003). Among the various functions of language, it serves as a surrogate for experience (Taylor, H. A., Tversky, B. (1992). Professor of Comparative Literature Evelyne Ender suggests, “We use words to invoke what is absent” (Ender, E. (2005), 167). As such, words and their typographic form represent both absence and presence.

**An Engagement with Titles**

Titling is a selective process and a mechanism for the transmission of memory. As an extension to Objects of Memories, The Name of a Room was created whereby I have assigned a title to each of the 260 rooms that captured my overall experience in the room. Titles are an entrance. They set the tone and contextual reference to the concepts, ideas and stories of what will follow whether through image, emotion, association, memory, or imagination. Titles forge an intimate connection between the author and the audience. In these works, the immediacy of the titles trigger and locate my memories attached to place. The titles also aim to articulate a personal experience to the viewer. Among the various creative ways titles are used as a design element, they function to communicate.

*Figure 6: The Name of a Room, Salen, P. (2011-2013)*
Each letterform was placed on the selected image of the room to create its own page. The pages were sequentially adhered together to form the title. I cut through the paper tracing the letterforms with a concerted precision. The sound of cutting paper with a scalpel echoes the sound of tracing an image with a graphite pencil. It is also the sound of loss as in a severance from the paper. Cutting the letterforms created a commitment—a presence and permanence. The soft smoothness that I felt in the paper as I cut each letter and rotate the paper was soothing and reminded me of the comfort, innocence and curiosity. As an expression of embodied communication, an encounter when viewing the title pages entices the audience to share in this journey backward where the imperfection and visceral work of the hand is evidenced. Each letterform is embedded within the room but also literally stands apart from it. One can look at and through each letter’s shape while simultaneously reading the whole sequence of letters devoted to a single image in order to read the title. The collection of letter pages mimics the partial and holistic or Gestalt focus when surveying and occupying a room. The title in this work becomes the focus as I examine the relations between connotation and denotation of the word, its graphic form and the encounter with inhabited space to which it refers.

**Co-creation and the Transferral of Meaning**

*Figure 7: Interior Memory: Re-imagining Home. Salen, P. (2014)*
Interior Memory: Re-imagining Home was a project undertaken following my doctoral research which further examined how narratives of domestic space can be re-imagined after the space has been vacated. The central question guiding this project asked: how do reinterpreted images connected to the intimacy of an individual’s past home affect their memories of that place? In these works the images were created based on twenty participants involved in the study of their descriptions of a past room and their memories located within. It engaged in co-creation and explored how memories are affected when prompted by an image suggestive of an individuals’ once inhabited room. Using the same technique in my previous autobiographical works, the interior was translated as photogram images in an effort to challenge photographic realism and to invite a dialogue between imagination and memory located within the home as the context for a larger narrative about representation and meaning.

The photogram and memory are imperfect and subject to current conditions. Both the photogram and memory involve a nuanced interpretation that combines perception, emotion, orientation, and embodiment. The images made are disassociated from accurate translations of place, and instead explore symbolic and sensuous qualities that begin to define memory and the inhabited experience. These works open up new ways by which memory is summoned and presented as well as, how interior space is imagined, produced and discussed to facilitate a co-creation of meaning. The result of this research has shown that the photogram images have affected memories and have evoked atmospheres of the participants’ rooms. Subsequently, how we share memories and remember space is an open process—one conducive to co-creation.

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that memory and experiences of inhabited space are a particular form of embodied communication. As a practitioner and researcher, my interest lies in the transmission of direct experiences both immediate and from memory rooted within the inhabited environment—a space so intimately connected to the body, yet rarely the subject of discourse in the practice and processes of communication design. Because of its infiltration into private space, the inhabited experience is an important area of exploration as it forms immediate link to memory and the body. Communication as design lends itself to this area of study as it is connected to everyday life. The personal narrative and the value of communicating how something is created can establish deeper meaning with the maker and the audience thus resulting in a shift to focus on embodiment as a form of communication that encompasses both private and shared experience.

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Drawing attention to experiences of inhabited space, memory and embodiment as the common ground to initiate dialogue and creative interrogation is a rich area to investigate as an expression of the discipline as these experiences are as ubiquitous as the need to communicate.

An emphasis on self-reflection and slow processes, in particular, working with paper and the photogram are techniques used that enable memories to surface. Drawing upon inhabited space and memory as subjects, my research establishes a relationship with paper and three-dimensional form to express shared characteristics, such as commonality, spatiality, presence, and fragility. My works invite us to contemplate familiar spaces in order to grasp the subtleties that lie hidden, unspoken, etched, embedded or graced upon interior surfaces in an effort to observe and narrate embodiment. The intimate scale of my works is designed to offer a sense of privacy for both the viewer and the maker and provide a framework by which memories can be re-visited. Communication design is a relationship that functions at various scales and impact from the personal and intimate to the public and distant. Questions of proximity, scale and modes of encounter are concepts to be further explored as to how embodied communication is expressed and published. When we look holistically at the image, metaphor and the object that includes the body as part of the process that shapes and informs our collective experience, a new narrative in communication design can emerge.
RÉFÉRENCES


