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Depicting by gesture

Jürgen Streeck

The University of Texas at Austin

This paper deals with ways in which gestural “pictures” are made, i.e., manual depictions of phenomena in the world. The view that “iconic” gestures uniformly function by way of some resemblance between signifier and signified is rejected, giving way to an understanding of depiction by gesture as the achievement of a heterogeneous set of practices, some of which rely on relations of contiguity or indexicality to evoke commonly known objects or scenes. Others seem to be derivative of other representation methods (e.g., drawing on surfaces). The paper reviews some existing work on gestural depiction methods, offers a working heuristics, and illustrates some of its categories. It is suggested that some of the basic ways in which actions of the hands evoke the world in gesture correspond to fundamental modes of existence and activity of human hands *in* the world: hands depict by enacting their familiar, “real-world” capacities as users, transporters, experiencers, assemblers, molders, and shapers of things.

Keywords: depiction, description, iconicity, indexicality, gesture

This paper¹ deals with ways in which gestural “pictures” are made. Traditionally, these gestures are called “iconic”, and the fact that we can often see what a gesture refers to is explained by its *similarity* with what it depicts. Similarity (resemblance) is the core notion by which iconicity is defined. Thus, Ekman and Friesen in an influential paper (1969) suggested that an iconic gesture “looks in some way like what it means, its significant” (p. 60). In this they followed Morris, who wrote that “an iconic sign ... is similar in some respect to what it denotes” (1946, p. 191), that “the iconic sign ... is like what it signifies” (p. 201; emphasis J.S.)

But it is not evident how two hands can “be like” or “look like” such diverse phenomena as swimming-pools, polka-dots, or an acrobat’s routine, to name some random phenomena that gesturing hands can depict for us. Maybe in some language of theory, “similarity” can be given a definition that is so abstract that it is possible to accommodate even these visually dissimilar signifieds rendered visible by two hands. In this paper, however, a different approach is taken. It is assumed