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## HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

### Anna Craycroft: On Being Understood

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Interview with Anna Craycroft on the occasion of her exhibition *C'mon Language* at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art. Documentation from Matt Keegan's Workshop - Images are Words

**MutualArt:** *The title of your PICA exhibition C'mon Language is a gentle plea. It sounds like you are being put-on and there is a problem with the mechanism of language, so you are asking it to work just a little harder or get lost. But there is also this play on words where "C'mon" is a homonym for "common," which would be something that is shared. What does this title mean to you?*

**Anna Craycroft:** All of your interpretations are spot on. "C'mon" has been interpreted by French-English speakers to be possessive. "C" mon = c'est mon -- *it is my language* -- which I love. The word is also an invitation outwards -- for people to join in on the activity -- an impatient encouragement -- *C'mon!* Generally I would say the title is about the slippage of language -- that it is not a fixed thing. It is not mine, or yours, it is incomplete, it is fragmented, its form and meanings are determined both collectively and individually. That it can be both a facilitator and a hindrance. Also the homonymic quality of the truncated word illustrates that language takes many forms: that it is a sound as much as a sign, spoken and felt, heard and seen, abstract and concrete.

**MA:** *This project is engaged with ideas surrounding early childhood development. It seems to me that your interest in this subject has something to do with a spirit of exploration or play where meaning is not fixed, and instead insists on openness and the discovery of connections between things. How does play function within this piece and your work more generally?*

**AC:** My interest in early childhood is actually a broader interest in human development. I focus on childhood, in part, because it is the most blatant representation of growth and change and it's a relatable experience for people of all ages. But yes another key reason why I am interested in early childhood, specifically, is because the space of childhood is marked by openness and a freedom of discovery. Though I think that we have the possibility to unfix our meanings at all stages of life, adults are often stuck relative to a norm. Because we live by conventions, any alternative choice winds up inadvertently pointing back to standard just by the very fact of being an alternative to something. Whereas within the realm of childhood, there is not yet an absolute, everything is still being understood and defined so anything is possible.

Documentation from Ohad Meroni's Workshop -- Flat Dance

When I am forming a new project I like to occupy this kind of space -- to open all associations, to let logic come and go. This means that my work usually develops from a complex mess of thoughts, references and associations that continually shape-shift and reorient. I begin with a question like, "How does one become an individual?" (my opening question for my 2008 Agency of Orphan project) or, "How do we make ourselves understood?" (my opening question for *C'mon Language*). This query is then framed and reframed through a vast sweep of other fields and interests that are only tangentially related at first. Slowly I accumulate research and build relationships to form an idiosyncratic thesis that determines the parameters of a series of art objects and exhibitions.

*C'mon Language* is a project that was designed to include the public in my private process of play and discovery. Instead of working out an idea by going around meeting with scientists and academics and artists to talk about or collaborate on a given idea, I have created an exhibition that is a public meeting place for this -- inviting guests and audiences to explore these inquiries with me.

**MA:** *Not only are you interested in the subject of early childhood development, you make a point of inviting children to come in and explore the spaces that you have created. Children are not a target audience for most contemporary fine art. What is achieved through this engagement and how does it relate to your larger project?*

**AC:** I always consider children as part of my audience -- in this show specifically, a class of six year olds collaborate on the progress of the exhibition by visiting and contributing every week. Because I am thinking about human development, I am curious about how people at different stages of life will engage with the actual work. I'm not only interested in childhood as an idea. I also wonder about it as a reality.

In some ways I don't see a huge distinction between children and adults -- particularly in regards to what they can contribute an art audience. Too often kids are judged according to limitations that adults can be just as guilty of. Both can be impatient, uninformed or resistant to thinking in complex, abstract ways. But there are ways through this -- as exemplified by some of the

tenants that have been in early education since the beginning of the 19th century -- hands-on learning, developmentally specific forms, attention to the psychology and experience of the individual. I guess I see the "limitations" that we attribute to children as an opportunity to utilize the innovations developed in early education pedagogy. And I see the pedagogy of early education as an emblematic ideal for the artist's potential.

Documentation from Emergent Curriculum -  
- Heather Donahue & Grace Hwang -- Roll,  
Spin, Flip

**MA: While much of *C'mon Language* is located in the programming, you have also designed an environment with specially-made objects. These functional objects, and the space they create when collected together, are not just about utility. How do aesthetic concerns play into your environments?**

Documentation from Ohad Meroni's Workshop -- Flat Dance

**AC:** Yes it's a flip-flopping between utility and aesthetics -- between engaged use and removed reflection -- to hopefully create different avenues of access for the experiences and associations of the audience.

The aesthetic decisions -- with all of my work -- are about reference. The objects I make are always derivative of a pre-existing form. I want the work to remind audiences of spaces that they have experienced already. In the case of *C'mon Language*, the references are to a classroom (child and adult size desks and chairs), a gallery (white walls and Plexi-vitrines), and an art studio (art horse drawing benches and drawing boards). But the design of the elements are altered somewhat -- benches stack to become a wall of shelves, drawing boards hang in grid as a gallery display -- in order to take these references and bring it into the present logic of the exhibition.

**MA: The exhibition is composed of different elements, including a symposium, lectures, performance, an exhibition space, writing and documentation. How do all of these parts fit together? With all of these different moving parts where does the art reside?**

**AC:** Beyond the obvious that it all takes place in the same physical space, the coherence is up to any given member of the audience.

Your question about locating the art -- that was question that preceded my making the show. I was in something of a stuck place with my work, trying to understand where the planning stops and the art begins. How does an artist determine the form with which they will communicate?

I'm definitely at a moment in my work when I am wondering what about art is valuable and meaningful to me, and why I should bother making it for myself and others. The best examples I have seen of this are in the work of the early education pedagogues that I have been referencing -- Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, Friedrich Froebel, Loris Malaguzzi etc. All of these people developed a theory and practice that was both abstract and tangible -- to explore, illustrate and cultivate how people navigate the world. Their engagement across different fields -- from science to the arts to political policy and social reform is deeply inspiring to me. They each have distinctive visual aesthetics or forms that are characteristically *Montessori* or *Waldorf*. If I can get anywhere near the breadth of their accomplishments, then maybe I will be getting to where "the art resides." For now I'm just aping fragments in a kind of mash-up to see what resonates most deeply for me through the process.

Documentation from Margaret Mathewson  
workshop -- Random Weave

**MA: In the materials prepared for the exhibition you say that *C'mon Language* is an art exhibition surrounding the question, "How do we make ourselves understood?" Since June you have asked experts in various fields to come to PICA and hash out this question. Have any answers been revealed through this process?**

**AC:** "How do we make ourselves understood?" is a question modeled on the open-ended inquiry or "provocation" that directs much of the curriculum in Reggio Emilia pedagogy -- which inspired the show. I wanted a question for *C'mon* that was paradoxical as well as open ended.

The "we" in that question is funny because it suggests a unification, agreement and resolve. But there cannot be one since there was no single occasion in the exhibition at which all the voices were heard together. Because *making ourselves* (from childhood through adulthood) is an ongoing process, the question also implies the transience of being understood. So it is important to see all of the "answers" as relative to individual people and individual moments. As such they are also not answers, because they are also potentially undone once they come in contact with the next moment or another individual.

**MA: This question about understanding you are asking is larger than the framework of fine art. You have addressed this by inviting a diverse group of people to speak on the matter from a wide variety of disciplines. How do you feel that the location of the museum as a site for the discussion has colored the discussion?**

**AC:** In some cases it was tricky to explain in advance what the relevance of the disciplines -- physics, linguistics, traditional craft, philosophy etc. -- had to do with one another or with contemporary art. Fortunately PICA is the kind of institution that embraces a range of content and approaches.

My initial interest with housing a range of content within the PICA gallery was to compare the lexicons of different fields in a single context. Because the *C'mon* installation has a strong aesthetic and has because of the emphasis on the visual through written, drawn and photographic documentation -- there is a consistent framing of the various languages within a sensory realm.

Documentation from Emergent Curriculum -- Heather  
Donahue & Grace Hwang -- Roll, Spin, Flip

**MA: What do you think of the term "Relational Aesthetics," and how does your work relate?**

**AC:** I can see how *C'mon Language* could be considered according to the parameters of art historical frames for contemporary work with a social component -- Relational Aesthetics being one, Social Practice being another. However, the standards by which I measure my work are rooted in the lineage of the early ed. pedagogues that I have been talking about -- whereby their

visual, political, intellectual and esoteric innovations stand as models for contemporary art practice.

### **MA: What role does documentation play in your work and C'mon Language more specifically?**

**AC:** Documentation is the heart of the project in its relation to Reggio Emilia. In Reggio, teachers record with photography, note-taking, drawing, video and sound to preserve the learning process of each student as it develops. Through this, the unique ways that each student thinks and engages their world is revealed.

Documentation from Emergent Curriculum -- Sammy Loper's workshop -- Did you see that?

The *C'mon Language* exhibition includes the varieties of documentation material which are on view at all times. A running slideshow shuffles through all of the photographs taken by contributors to the show. Hundreds the drawings and notes made on the clipboards during events are on display. Sculptures, art materials and various teaching tools are also on display. Each week, the furniture in the space is arranged and rearranged depending on the events. The accumulation of these materials tells the story of the developmental process of the exhibition.

**MA: There are multiple locations to enter and experience this artwork. No one position is privileged and no one person will be able to contain it all. You as the artist must above all, have the most accumulated points of contact. How has this exhibition changed you?**

**AC:** Because there was a core group of participants -- about eight - 10, 16 to 30-year-old artists and art students, there are others who have spent at least as much time as I have in the exhibition's schedule of events. In addition, Kristan Kennedy -- PICA's visual arts curator -- and I certainly did equal preliminary work on the ground canvassing and problem-solving during the year and a half leading up to the show.

There are so many levels at which I have been learning -- from the labor of seemingly endless administration to the necessity of whipping off a new piece every week for the "correspondences" submissions to *The American Reader*.

But sure, because the show has been born out of my personal agenda, my investment in it would anticipate a greater impact being had on me. I think though it's too soon for me to answer your question. Maybe if you keep asking me over the next couple years I will gradually accumulate an answer that documents the process by which I have been formed. I'm looking forward to that.

### **C'mon Language Highlights from the exhibition**

#### **1. Anna Craycroft: C'mon Language**

Exhibition space  
June -- September 2013

Documentation of Drawing Boards taken after Richard Taylor's Workshop -- Defeating the Art/Science Divide

The main site for the show is broken up into two sections. One behaves as a stage ready for action, set up like a classroom with furniture for drawing conceived of by Craycroft and based on an art horse drawing bench design often found in life drawing classrooms. Craycroft's benches lock into each other to form a bookshelf and room divider, further transforming the space when not in use by visitors. The adjacent room is a more traditional exhibition space that displays documentation of the activities that have transpired there.

#### **2. Anna Craycroft: Correspondences**

The American Reader  
Weekly

The American Reader is a monthly journal interested in fostering critical engagement with literature. For the length of the *C'mon Language* exhibition Craycroft posts weekly entries to their online edition, "In Conversation" series, with thoughts about the overlap between her own art practice and writings on early childhood development by such luminaries as Maria Montessori, Freiderich Froebel, Rudolf Steiner and Maxine Greene.

To visit *Correspondences* at The American Reader click [here](#)

#### **3. The Butterflies Art Adventures Travelling through Time to See What They Can Make**

Justine Larson -- Atelierista from the Helen Gordon School and her 10 kindergarten students hold their classes in the context of the *C'mon Language* exhibition.  
Weekly, Thursdays from 1-3 p.m.

Butterfly Art Adventurers participating in Emergent Curriculum -- Heather Donahue & Grace Hwang -- Roll, Spin, Flip

In an effort to represent the principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach in education Craycroft invited a group of kindergarteners and their teacher to use her exhibition as part of their curriculum.

#### **4. Documentation**

*The Web App:* Jon Kessler's interactive app for iphone, ipod and ipad  
Ongoing through the duration of the exhibition

Within the exhibition itself people are able to post pictures documenting their experience of *C'mon Language* to an ever expanding video slideshow running in the exhibition space, the program for which was created by Jon Kessler for his 2013 exhibition *The Web* at the Swiss Institute in NYC. Preserving the use of more analog methods, drawing boards with notes and

pictures created by audiences during events in the space are on rotating display. Both act as an archive of the activities that transpired, which have inquiry and participation at their heart.

## 5. Programming

Workshops and lectures

June -- September 2013

Documentation from Isla Leaver --Yap's Workshop -- Open End

The meat of the exhibition has been the programming which continues through September. More classroom than presentation, Craycroft invited a wide array of experts, in fields as far-ranging as linguistics, science, psychotherapy, and art, to answer the question, "How do we make ourselves understood?" Despite all of the discussion that has taken place on the topic since the symposium in June that kicked-off the exhibition, this is still an open question. If in the Portland area in the coming weeks check out:

A. L. Steiner (artist): *F is for Feeling*  
August 29, 1-4 p.m.

Satya Byock (psychotherapist): *Exploring the Language of The Unconscious Mind*  
August 30, 4-6 p.m.

Nick Hallett (composer): *Songs Without Words, Communication Beyond Language*  
September 5, 1-3 p.m.

For more about *C'mon Language* programming click [here](#)

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