

Video-Based Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis

Capturing the sequential organization of social interaction in exhibitions

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Introduction

Video-based ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA) investigates how museum visitors look at and examine exhibits in interaction with each other. It is concerned with the moment-by-moment social organization of visitors' actions. The term 'ethnomethodological' indicates that the method requires the researchers to change perspective to understand how visitors orient themselves towards the exhibition and each other from their point of view. The method originated in the ethnomethodologically informed workplace studies (Luff, Hindmarsh and Heath 2000) where researchers analyzed the organization of social interaction at technologically rich workplaces. For a few years now, this method has increasingly also been used to analyze interaction between museum visitors. As findings made by researchers in workplace studies have influenced the design of technology, so the analyses of interaction in museums have been used to inform the development of exhibits and exhibitions as well as the design of interpretation resources like labels and technologies deployed to help visitors make sense of exhibits.

EMCA researchers use video and audio recordings as principal data complemented by ethnographic observations. The researchers inspect their recordings and fieldnotes to reveal how participants create activities or contexts of action through the production and design of their actions. Their analysis does not consider aspects of the visual and material environment to be external to participants' actions, but it examines how features and aspects of the material and visual environment are systematically embedded within their action and interaction (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; vom Lehn 2018). Thus, in referring to context, ethnomethodologists do not liken it to a container wherein actions arise, but conceive context as dynamic and continually renewed through actions that are simultaneously being shaped by the context in which they are produced. They, therefore, describe the relationship

between action and context as “reflexive” and aim to unpack how it is produced in and through social interaction. For this purpose, they analyze the production and design of action and address the question of why a particular action has been produced at a particular moment in a particular way. They observe how an action ensues in orientation to a prior action, and how its production and design are influenced by this prior action. At the same time, they show how each action provides the context for subsequent actions. This concept of actions that at the same time have retro- and prospective orientation is called ‘sequential organization’. The ethnomethodological conversation analysis unpacks sequences of actions and explicates how the actions are temporally organized and gain their sense and significance in particular, concrete situations.

Aim of the method

Research concerned with visitors’ interaction is interested in the ways in which visitors of exhibitions examine and make sense of exhibits in interaction with each other. The video-based EMCA thereby aims to reveal in detail how the engagement with and experience of exhibits is produced in, and through, interaction between visitors. Therefore, the socially produced experience of exhibitions is first based on the observation that visiting museums is a social activity; people say they come to museums because they would like to socialize with others (Jafari, Taheri, and vom Lehn 2013). And second, even people who visit exhibitions on their own encounter others whose actions they have to take into account when approaching and engaging with exhibits. For example, they can approach a painting only when the space is not already taken up by other people, and can only interact with hands-on or interactive exhibits if these are available and not occupied by others. EMCA reveals how people monitor the actions of others at neighboring exhibits and use their observations to organize their departure from and approach to exhibits as well as their engagement with exhibits in social interaction by examining in detail video-recorded sequences of interaction in exhibitions.

Step-by-step guideline

In this part of the chapter, I discuss the most important practicalities of data collection and analysis undertaken by EMCA researchers. It is important to preface this discussion by saying that in this approach, data collection and analysis are conducted in an iterative manner; the researcher begins with a few days of fieldwork in an exhibition and gathers initial data before returning to their desk for a preliminary analysis. This allows them to check the quality of the data and make necessary ad-

justments to the camera position and perspective or use a different microphone to improve the sound quality. The researcher then returns to the field to collect further, better quality data, before again returning to their desk for analysis, which in turn informs another phase of data collection. The process of data collection is completed when the researcher is satisfied with the quality of the data and observations from the data analysis become repetitive. Data saturation has been achieved. Although in EMCA data analysis always begins with the examination of field notes produced from observations in exhibitions, in this chapter I will focus, for reasons of space, on the collection and analysis of video recordings of interactions in exhibitions.

1. Collecting video data

The data can usually be collected by an individual researcher. However, gathering data in pairs can sometimes be beneficial, particularly when using more than one camera. Data collection begins with ethnographic field observations and note-taking in the exhibitions as well as with discussions with curators, managers and museum educators. The observations and discussions help to make decisions about the practicalities of data collection, including decisions about the number and positions of the camera(s). Camera positions are decided by taking into account research questions as well as practical considerations.¹

For ethical reasons, visitors are informed about the ongoing recordings with signage positioned at all entrances and exits of the exhibition where data collection is taking place. The precise text and its design are agreed upon with the museum management. In the museums where I gathered data for my own research, visitors have been informed that audio/video recordings were being made in this exhibition for research and teaching purposes, allowing me to use video-clips and images from the videos in presentations and publications. The signage also informs visitors exploring the exhibition that at any point during their visit they can approach the researcher or a member of museum staff to ask for cameras to be switched off or to wipe recordings should they feel they have already been filmed against their will; in such cases I offer visitors the option of deleting recordings. Once the signage is in place, the researcher begins to gather video data with cameras mounted on tripods and positioned near exhibits, often in corners of exhibitions so that they are out of visitors' navigation paths. I use conventional digital camcorders that allow the researcher to attach an external microphone. Because visitors often talk quietly in ex-

1 For example, the researchers need to ensure that emergency exits are not obstructed and that visitors' exploration of an exhibition is not disturbed by cameras and tripods standing in their way.

hibitions, it has proven useful to deploy small, wireless microphones that selected visitors carry with them as they explore an exhibition.²

To avoid drawing undue attention to the camera, the researcher switches the red camera light off while data collection is in progress. For the same reason, the researcher does not stand behind the camera and only returns to it to check whether it is functioning properly. Thus, they are able to continue to observe visitors in the exhibition and take field notes while the recordings are ongoing, to organize the hand-over of microphones between visitors, and to conduct informal conversations with visitors and museum staff. The amount of time expended on data collection varies depending on the research question pursued, the number of visitors occupying an exhibition, and the quality of the data generated through the recordings. It is advisable to gather data on different days of the week and at different times of the day, as this will ensure that a wide variety of visitors is included in the data corpus, reflecting different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.³

2. Analysis of video recordings

The analysis focuses on the inspection of the interaction recorded by the video camera(s). The field notes taken while observing events in the exhibitions as well as the notes from informal discussions with visitors and museum staff complement the analysis. Compared to observations, video recordings have the advantage that researchers are able to view situations repeatedly, in slow-motion, and frame-by-frame. This makes it possible to examine sequences of interaction in detail, i.e. action-by-action. The analysis begins with screening and indexing the recordings. The researcher views the recordings in the spirit of an ethnographic observer and makes notes of events they consider to be noteworthy and relevant for their analysis. This initial analysis is used to develop research questions that they may pursue as the analysis progresses. It also serves to create a collection of fragments of interaction that show ‘interesting’ phenomena related to the research questions.

The data corpus is often very voluminous. Recording visitors’ interaction over the course of a week can generate more than 30 hours of recordings that need to be screened and indexed. It is therefore impossible to inspect the entire corpus in detail. Such an intensive analysis of the entire corpus is also not required because each individual data fragment reveals an organization of actions the researcher can

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- 2 I can say from experience that visitors tend to forget they are carrying microphones around the exhibition, even when they hold them in their hands. Often, I had to go off searching for visitors in a museum because they had left the exhibition where data were collected without returning the microphone.
 - 3 Further practical suggestions on data collection can be found in Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff’s (2010) book on “Video in Qualitative Research”.

examine. This observation is based on the ethnomethodological assumption that actions are not produced by accident, but they are always organized in themselves and in relationship to prior and subsequent actions; they always arise within an interactionally produced and organized context.⁴ The detailed analysis of actions, therefore, is concerned with unpacking the practical and interactional organization of the context of actions and revealing the actions that make up this context. For this purpose, it is crucial that the researcher transcribes the recordings of fragments of interaction in which the phenomena of interest to the researcher were observed. Examples of such phenomena that have interested me in my research include departing from paintings (vom Lehn 2013), the revealing of surprising aspects of exhibits (Heath et al. 2012) and the reading of labels and text panels aloud in science centres (vom Lehn and Heath 2006). Transcripts are immensely helpful in unpacking the organization of actions. For the analysis of participants' vocal utterances, the researcher uses a transcription system developed in the 1960s (Hepburn and Bolden 2017). As the transcription of participants' bodily actions has long lacked such a transcription system, I have developed a technique for my own research that draws on recent developments in the ethnomethodological analysis of interaction (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; Mondada 2018).

Although the researcher remains responsible for the analysis, it is helpful to discuss fragments from the data corpus in small groups.⁵ In such data workshops, the researcher shows one or two short video fragments to evoke responses and suggestions for analysis from the group. The discussions serve to enhance the analysis, improve transcripts and possibly also develop new research questions. It can also be helpful to invite not only colleagues to participate in data workshops but also practitioners, such as curators, managers and museum educators as well as visitors. Despite the importance of group discussions and data sessions for research, it is important to note that the analysis remains the responsibility of the researcher; the discussion only serves as an "aid for sluggish imagination" (Garfinkel 1967).

Case study

The fragment of interaction that I examine here to illustrate the process and practicalities of the analysis has been drawn from a larger data corpus of video recordings

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- 4 Explanations of ethnomethodology and its premises can be found in (vom Lehn 2014, 2019) as well as in Heritage (1984). Readers who would like to consult the original text, can be referred to Garfinkel (1967, 2002).
 - 5 Data workshops and group discussions of video data are explored also in Tuma, Schnettler und Knoblauch (2014), who have developed "Videography". The origin of data workshops, however, probably can be traced back to conversation analysis, critical literature studies and maybe also Talmud and Bible studies.

gathered at an exhibition of Rembrandt paintings shown at the National Gallery in London. When screening the data corpus, I became interested in how visitors come to look at particular aspects of a painting together. Therefore, I created a collection of fragments of interaction that show moments at which the phenomenon of ‘looking together’ can be observed. In the following, I discuss one such fragment that exhibits this phenomenon particularly clearly.

The interaction was recorded at a painting titled *A Man seated reading at a Table in a Lofty Room*⁶ that was painted probably by a follower of Rembrandt. It shows a large room where a man is sitting at a table positioned in front of a big fireplace. The scene has been illuminated from a window behind the man. In the situation captured by my camera, two women approach the painting from the left, where they stand for a considerable length of time looking at the work. In the following I will refer to the two women, whose real names I do not know, as Jo and Paula. When entering the exhibition, they have agreed to participate in my research and to wear a wireless microphone that captures their exchange (referred to in the transcript format as ‘talk’) while they explore the gallery. A moment after Jo and Paula come to stand in front of the painting, Paula, speaking and gesturing, refers to the fireplace in the painting that dominates the right-hand side of the work. My interest in analyzing the participants’ interaction lies in the moment when Paula draws the attention of her friend to the fireplace, who in turn indicates that she has seen the object as well. It is in this moment, that the two participants look, at least briefly, at the same aspect of the painting. Let us first inspect the transcript of the participants’ exchange.

Transcript 1⁷ – Transcript of the exchange between Jo and Paula

National Gallery – Rembrandt 400

Jo (Jo) and Paula (Pa)

A Man seated at a Table in a Lofty Room (1628–30)

1 Pa: .hhhh (.)
 2 look at all that (.) porcelain thats a fireplace
 isnt it (.) >-1
 4 theres a tall fireplace >-1
 5 [] >-1
 6 Jo: quite difficult to see::? isnt it?

6 A photograph of the painting can be found on the website of the National Gallery <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/follower-of-rembrandt-a-man-seated-reading-at-a-table-in-a-lofty-room> (23.7.2024).

7 For an explanation of the transcription symbols see footnote 1. As the transcript captures spoken language it does not use grammatical notations like apostrophes or full stops at the end of sentences. Question marks do not mark the end of an utterance and define it as a question, but indicate a rising intonation.

- 6 Pa: =yes
 7 Jo: thats the sort of darkness
 8 Pa: =yea :h

What interests me in the analysis is how Jo and Paula look at the fireplace together and make this shared orientation towards this aspect of the exhibit observable for each other. The moment is captured in *Transcript 1*. The interaction begins with Paula inhaling audibly (line 1), followed by a description of the fireplace, which she believes is made of porcelain (line 2). This part of Paula's utterance is followed by a brief pause (.) (line 2) before she produces a further description of the fireplace, emphasizing the object's size, "theres a tall fireplace" (line 3). Jo begins to produce an utterance, "quite difficult to see" (line 5), overlapping with Paula's description of the fireplace. Paula's second description of the fireplace after the brief pause is prompted by Jo's lack of response to her friend's initial description of the object. While Paula's brief pause (line 2) encourages Jo to produce a response, Jo does not take the opportunity to speak. Only when Paula gives her second description does her friend follow up by reporting her own impression of the fireplace. Based on the exchange between the two visitors, we can argue that they are looking at the painting together when they produce utterances by which they make observable to each other that they are both directing their attention to the fireplace in the painting. Moreover, by saying that the fireplace is "difficult to see", Jo provides an explanation why she did not pay attention to her friend's description of the object in the painting earlier.

Transcript 2 – Visual Transcript to Support the Analysis

National Gallery – Rembrandt 400

Jo and Paula

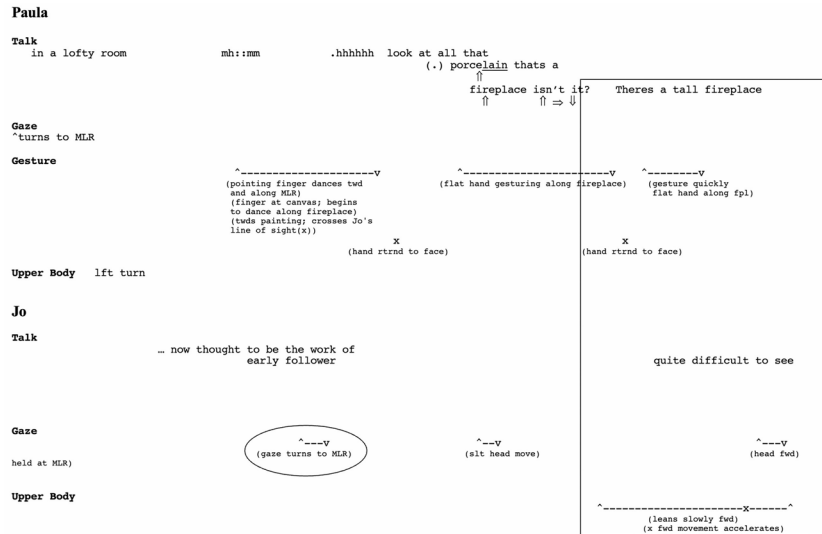
A Man seated at a Table in a Lofty Room (1628–30)

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- ↑ Gesture in the proximity of the painting
- Begins to complete gesture
- ↓ Gesturing hand is retracted

Fig. 1: Visual transcript to support the analysis, © Dirk vom Lehn.



When we turn from the analysis of the participants' exchange to include also their bodily action, transcript 2 helps to recognize how speech and bodily actions intertwine, and how the participants embed particular aspects of the painting within the organization of their actions. As yet, we do not have a standardized transcription system that represents non-vocal actions.⁸ For my research of visitors' action and interaction in museums, I have developed a transcription technique that is practical and effective to help me pursue my research questions. In doing so, I draw on the available conventions developed for transcribing conversation⁹ (Jefferson 1984) and the systematics for transcribing bodily action and speech used by scholars who have conducted similar studies at workplaces (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff, 2010).

Transcript 2 captures vertically the participants' actions, i.e. their exchange, direction of their gaze, and the orientation of their upper bodies, and horizontally the progression of the actions over time. If the reader focuses on a particular action, the transcript allows them to identify the interactional context in which this action has taken place; i.e. the action produced immediately prior to the action of interest, and the action produced immediately following.

The box on the right side of the transcript and the oval shape on the bottom left highlight for the reader particular actions that are relevant for my analysis. The oval

8 Mondada (2018) has developed a transcription system for multimodal, i.e. vocal and non-vocal actions that is increasingly adapted by scholars undertaking ethnomethodological analyses of interaction.

9 See footnote 1.

shape shows that Jo shifts her visual orientation just before Paula begins to describe the fireplace. A moment earlier, Jo audibly reads a part of the label on the wall to the right of the painting; now, she has turned to the painting itself. However, we cannot be sure which part of the painting she is looking at. A moment later, her head moves again, prompted by Paula's audible inhalation, “.hhhhh”, and her description of the fireplace, “look at all that porcelain that’s a fireplace isn’t it?”, which she accompanies with gestures with her left hand that distinguish the shape of the object from the other parts of the painting. A moment later, both visitors orient themselves towards the painting and produce overlapping utterances, “P: tall fireplace”, “J: difficult to see” (Transcript 1, line 3 to 5). Jo again moves her head by stretching slightly but noticeably forward, indicating that some effort is required to identify the fireplace in the painting.

The analysis of this brief fragment of interaction reveals the moment when the two visitors, through their exchange, orient themselves towards the fireplace in the painting (Transcript 1, lines 2 to 5). Paula refers to the size of the fireplace, while Jo, through her utterance and shift in head orientation and posture, indicates that she now sees the object as well, and why she initially had trouble seeing the object and had therefore failed to respond to her friend's actions (Transcript 1, line 5). A moment later, Paula agrees with Jo's assessment that the fireplace is difficult to see (“yes”), before Jo refers to another aspect of the painting, “thats the sort of darkness” (Transcript 1, line 7).

Transcript 3 – Visual Transcript used in Publications

Fig. 2: Visual transcript used in publications, © Dirk vom Lehn.

3 P: theres a tall fireplace



5 J: quite difficult to see::?

isnt it?

While transcripts 1 and 2 support the researcher in their analysis of the organization of sequences of interaction, readers will find them difficult to read and understand. In publications, I therefore tend to refrain from using such transcripts and

instead add transcripts that combine images from the video recordings and simplified transcriptions of the exchange. Transcript 3 illustrates the course of the interaction between Jo and Paula in a way that is (hopefully) easier to read than transcript 2. This type of transcription includes elements of the conversation between the visitors and annotated images from the original data that visualize the bodily actions.

It is worthwhile emphasizing that transcripts used when analyzing video data do not replace the recorded interaction but are only tools that help researchers inspect and unpack the organization of actions. The representation of sequences of action in transcripts allows them to reveal their temporal sequence. Only by examining the interaction as captured in the recordings can the researcher see how participants orient themselves towards each other's actions, i.e. why an action is produced in a particular moment. Therefore, the analysis of interaction does not rely on transcription but on a detailed inspection of the video-recorded interaction, as far as it is visible and audible.

In the case of the analysis of the interaction in the National Gallery, I was interested in how visitors create situations when they look, at least for a moment, at the same aspects of a painting and how through their actions they create joint experiences. While it is often assumed that when two people stand next to each other in front of a painting they are looking at the same object and seeing it in the same way, the analysis of the fragment discussed here for illustrative purposes reveals that a joint experience of a work of art emerges in and through the interaction between the participants.

Method reflection

Video-based EMCA is a research method that can help to reveal the organization of actions. Its analytical perspective and methodological tools provide means to make observable the details of the production – the ‘when’ – and design – the ‘how’ – of actions and their orientation towards immediately preceding and following actions. Researchers with an interest in analyzing interaction in museums and exhibitions can use the video-based EMCA to investigate, for example, why visitors engage with particular aspects of exhibits, how they render their experience of exhibits observable for each other through vocal exchange and bodily actions, and how they organize their actions to create a shared experience of aspects of exhibits. This kind of research contributes to the analysis of the perception of artworks and to the analysis of action and interaction in museums, including art museums, science centres and science museums (Heath, and vom Lehn 2008). The ethnomethodological analysis of interaction using video-recordings as principal data can also be augmented by combining it with other kinds of data, such as experimental and interview-based studies. For example, video-based EMCA can be combined with *Mobile Eye Tracking*

and *Questionnaire* to reveal what aspects of paintings visitors look at when interacting with each other, or which parts of labels visitors read and how they embed parts of label text in their interaction with each other (Reitstätter, Pesen, and vom Lehn 2025).

In addition to contributing to social-science debates about social interaction, observations derived from studies using video-based EMCA in exhibitions can also inform the work of curators, museum educators and designers. So far, the work of these museum professionals is often based on “professional theories” (vom Lehn, Sang, Glassborow, and King 2017; cf. Kreplak 2018) about visitors’ exploration of exhibitions and their examination of and interaction with (interactive) exhibits. The ethnomethodological analysis of interaction in exhibitions compares and contrasts sequences of interaction at the face of the exhibit, allowing the researcher to identify patterns in the organization of actions. Examples of such interaction patterns include the creation of body formations at interactive exhibits, through which visitors differentiate themselves into users and observers (Heath and vom Lehn 2008). We have also investigated the organization of actions to uncover how visitors jointly leave paintings and move on to the next exhibit (vom Lehn 2013), how reading out labels encourages companions to inspect particular aspects of paintings (Heath, and vom Lehn 2004), or how visitors draw on and bring to life memories of experience when encountering exhibits (Meechan and vom Lehn 2024). Observations produced by the ethnomethodological analysis of interaction can also have practical implications. For example, curators, designers and museum educators can use the observations of the organization of actions at exhibits to inform the layout of exhibitions or the design of label text that is meant to be read out rather than being read in silence.

Studies using the video-based EMCA are work- and time-intensive. They require resources to purchase the appropriate technical equipment, such as cameras and microphones, as well as software to review the video data and edit images taken from the recordings. Researchers interested in using this method also need to be willing to invest time in acquiring the knowledge and technical skills to use cameras, microphones and software. They will also have to spend time analyzing video-recorded interaction in order to develop analytical research questions that are of interest to academic debates as well as to museum professionals. The selection and transcription of interaction fragments can take many hours. I therefore recommend the video-based EMCA as a method of analysis to researchers interested in understanding the practical organization of looking at and interacting with exhibits, and to practitioners who want to use detailed observations of action and interaction in exhibitions for the design, development and deployment of exhibitions. I also point out to researchers and professionals that it can be very useful to organize data workshops where they meet in small groups to discuss selected video recordings of interactions. Researchers and professionals who are mainly interested in the impact exhibits have on visitors’ experience and behaviour are advised to use other research

methods, such as *Affect-Reflexive Exhibition Analysis* or *AttrakDiff*. At the same time, the contribution visitors themselves make, through the organization of their actions, to the impact of exhibits on their experience and behaviour should not be ignored.

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