

Task #2a: Manwatching

Explore the Relationship Between Spatial Environment and the Human Body.

Task #2a is divided into two subtasks for students:

- 2.1 Mapping movements, positions, and motion in space
- 2.2 Improvising movements, positions, and motion in space

We can view movement in the school building as a familiar dance or choreography. The teacher enters the classroom, the students stand up, sit down, look at the board, listen, write, discuss, exit the classroom, chat, enter another classroom, sit down, the teacher enters the classroom, the students stand up, and so on. It is so familiar that we don't even notice it while we are focusing on the content – what somebody says or presents, what we think about it, or how we feel. In this task we will look at this ordinary and invisible movement as though it were an undiscovered field of research. How do we sit? How do we walk? How do we listen, chat, discuss? What positions do we take? How are our hands moving? What about the head and feet?

2.1 Mapping Movements, Positions, and Motion in Space

The aim of the first part of the task is to learn to notice the nuances of our everyday movements and positions, and their relation with the objects and environment around us. We will study people like nature observers. Although it seems like a simple and clear task, it should be discussed together beforehand. Whom to observe? Considering the structure of a school day, one probably spends most of the time near their deskmate. Therefore, a deskmate would make a good unsuspecting target of observation. For the observation results to be as honest as possible, the deskmate should be unaware of their contribution to science; otherwise, it is easy to be tempted to keep a better posture than usual and stand out with a variety of body positions. But we are interested in the human being in his/her naked sincerity – not only moments of excellence, but also moments of sunken posture or lazy lounging. Everyone does this, and in these brief occasions of laziness one can be very inventive in making oneself comfortable, even amidst the most spartan furnishings and settings.

If an entire class is involved in the School Space Project and observing each other, it may be useful to apply some simple strategies in order not to give the game away. The observer might draw lots or secretly choose a certain period of time when he or she will carry out the observation. In this case, the subject may be aware of being under the observer's attention, but doesn't know exactly when.

The next important consideration is to record the survey results. To that end, everyone should find the most convenient way for themselves, which would also allow the information to be conveyed as accurately as possible.

Verbal description might initially seem like a better idea to most people than drawing, but since we are dealing with spatial bodies and positions, I would rather recommend sketching. Drawing skills are not important at all at this point. The focus is on conveying the peculiarities of the body posture, and, to that end, something like a stickman is good enough (yet, since bodies are three-dimensional entities, try to use a bit more than mere lines). Before diving into the observation action, try to scribble and practice a bit to figure out the most convenient sketch character for yourself. Experiment with different styles to find out which drawing method works best for you. It should be one that allows you to sketch quickly and in an understandable way. Once you have worked out your sketch character, find an observation notebook and start the research.

Some examples of simple sketch characters:



Questions we are interested in: Which body positions do people take during the school day? How many different positions can you notice? Why are they taking such positions? How does the space impact people's positions, movements, and relocation in space? It is easier to start by noting down different body positions and proceed with presenting the observation results afterwards. By sharing the results with each other, you can find out which are the most common positions and movements, which are rare, and how the environment is favouring or halting them.

2.2 Improvising Movements, Positions, and Motion in Space

The second part of the task implies becoming an artist and an architect at the same time. You have to be able to imagine yourself as a dancer, actor, or performance artist who starts to observe one's own body movements, positions, and motion in space. To do this, the architect's mind draws inspiration from the surrounding space.

The aim is to explore different elements of space (doorways, stairs, spaces under the stairs, spacious halls, narrow corridors, spaces behind the corner, niches, alcoves, ledges, and so on).

How? This is the creative challenge. How many different ways to step on a stair can you invent? Is it possible to lie down on a stair step? In which places will your hands

reach something above your head? Can you find a spot where you can touch the wall on both sides with arms outstretched? There are endless possibilities. Take a look at some video clips for inspiration (links below). The key is to find commitment: the ability to take on the task of creative movement as seriously as something more routine, such as solving a maths formula or filling in the gaps in a workbook.

Contemporary dancers and actors carry out research and experiments on body movement daily. They have an extensive knowledge of the expressiveness and nuances of body language. We do not possess this knowledge, but nothing stops us from gathering it! This task is not about just running around scatterbrained, but quite the opposite: it provides as much gymnastics for thought as for the body. Where does the body fit? How does it feel in that space? How does it feel in a vast, open space? How does it feel in a corner? Which body position expresses introversion and withdrawal, and where is it natural to act like this? Where is it not?

Photograph your experiments and discoveries or combine them into a short video clip. To present your work, choose a few photographs from the first part of the task and 3-5 photos or a short (max. 1 minute) video clip from the second part of the task. Describe briefly which interesting discoveries you made.

A Few More Notes

1. Keep notes of your research and discoveries. Document the results of the observations, tried and tested thoughts, ideas, and revelations uncovered in the process. It is good to look back at these when proceeding with the next tasks!
2. Since it is mainly a practice of opening up perception and starting to notice things, the results don't have to hold any practical value. The aim is not to request anyone change their way of sitting or walking, but merely mapping as many different ways of sitting, stepping, and of other movements and positions as possible.
3. This task can by all means be accomplished in some alternative way - the subject of observation doesn't have to be a deskmate, different body positions can be conveyed in some other method than sketching, and there are no other limitations in exploring the space with your body than safety and respect toward the other people using the space.
4. It can first appear a bit unfamiliar and bizarre. If you feel that for some reason you don't get any ideas about positions to try out in space, it might be helpful to involve, for example, a PE teacher who is familiar with choreographic movement or a classmate who could share their training experiences. To get started, you can try some common practices from various sports - stretching, warm-up, and relaxation exercises. Examine how they work in different parts of the space and try to perform them in unusual places. This should give you some insight on how the body can be positioned and move in the space.
5. To clarify the difference from Task #1: In the current task we are exploring different places in the school building with our bodies (in the previous one we were searching for a nice or interesting place). This time we are using our body as a tool which measures length, width, and depth, as well as feelings, mood, atmosphere, etc. (last time we focused solely on movement).

Have fun exploring!

[video links on the next page]

Video examples of body movement in space:

Example #1

SHAPED: Dialogue Between Motion and Matter

<https://vimeo.com/118228956>

A creative performance that is simultaneously a dance act and a space installation. As a dancer is moving within a space, the designers slowly begin to alter his surroundings by building new shapes and spaces, which in turn start to inspire the dancer's movement. The designers are complementing the environment as the dancer is constantly adapting to and exploring the new elements being added. The solo performance is gradually morphing into an intense dialogue between the dancer and the space.

Example #2

Ergonomic Excursion: We Want to Become Architecture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Taq51-KBUn4>

<https://vimeo.com/102820770>

A dance action investigating the relationship between body and space. How to perceive space with your body and vice versa - how to understand the body through the built environment.

Example #3

Bodies in Urban Spaces

<https://vimeo.com/69324332>

This work by Austrian choreographer Willi Dorner is being performed in different places across the globe. Dancers have to find architectural spaces and places in the city that relate to their bodies. Usually, those places are not created considering the human body. It is exactly the unexpectedness and creating a novel situation that intrigues both performers and the audience.

Example #4

Only for tutors

The following video is mostly background information for the tutor. It is a bit too low in quality to be shown on the big screen in the classroom, and most of the clip focuses too precisely on the subject of gestures. Instead, we are aiming to focus on movement and positions in a simpler way. In the first part of the video clip, Desmond Morris - an English ethnologist, researcher of animal behaviour (including human), and author of numerous pop-science books explaining human behaviour - tells the story of how he became a manwatcher:

"Back in the late 1960s I was sitting in a restaurant on the island of Malta, talking to my publisher. I drew his attention to two men on the other side of the road who were gesticulating in a particular way. It was fascinating! My publisher said: 'You know, you look at people the way that a birdwatcher looks at birds.' I answered: 'Yes, I suppose you could call me a manwatcher'. This moment was the starting point for my research that would engross me for many years to come and take me to over 60 different countries".

The Human Animal by Desmond Morris - The Language of the Body

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTsp9A7OaBI>