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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Shaping Experiment from the Inside Out

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Beginning from a performative premise that art and science are both entrenched in embodied and situated methods for enacting their phenomena, this paper explores the cognitive scientific experiment as embodied performance. Scientific experiments require the ongoing enrollment of participants, who are regimented in subtle ways to perform both as data sources and as ideal subjects. We elucidate embodied routines of reflexive regimentation that stage this enrollment at the microscale of laboratory interaction. What emerges when, instead of intervening on submissive subjects, the experiment becomes malleable and responsive, conforming to subjects' impressions of and aspirations for science? Blurring the boundary between research report and artist statement, this paper describes a collaborative performance made for the cognitive psychology lab.

EXPF: Shaping Experiment was a collaboration between a cognitive scientist and an ethnographer of cognitive science. EXPF inverted the agential structure of the cognitive psychology experiment, rendering it responsive to the impressions of its subjects rather than testing a hypothesis of the researchers. After having subjects complete what appeared to be a standard, computer-based cognitive psychology task, we elicited impressions about the experiment's purpose and suggestions for improvement. Our performance score required that we respond to subjects' feedback by revising the experiment before the next subject arrived, whose impressions revised the next version of the experiment, and so on in an iterated chain of performance and revision. In becoming responsive, experiment and experimenters became instruments to capture the invisible routines, expectations, and formalized power relations that make the experiment possible at the scale of laboratory interaction. This paper will report on the process and results of our collaboration. By rendering the cognitive psychology experiment as malleable bodies-in-interaction, this paper provides performative context for cognitive scientific facts, and intervenes in that activity, opening up possibilities for novel methodological relations and enactments.