

All the world's an image: is it turning artistic or autistic?

The title of Adas' talk playfully twists Shakespeare's famous line 'All the world's a stage' (*As You Like It*) to emphasise the importance and ubiquity of visual culture in our society. Relying on visual communication can be an especially powerful and empowering strategy in the hands of educators when children with autism are concerned. Indeed, many people with autism struggle to link meanings to verbal information, but as associative thinkers with a very selective attention to details they often excel in visual skills. For this reason, they are also less likely than neurotypical people to misremember data. Adas shared with us some of the iconic symbols (pictograms) he uses to help autistic children to transition from visual to verbal comprehension and production, unveiling details we would have otherwise remained completely unaware of: for instance, the icons are shown in black-and-white to offer the most general characterisation of things (e.g. bicycles, grape...). This is so because colours would mislead the autistic children into thinking that, say, white grapes and red grapes belong to radically different categories. Adas also reported anecdotes drawing on his own experience as an educator, recalling that one particular child once misapplied the 'wax statues' schema he had recently acquired ("statues are not real people") to a corpse at a funeral ("I am not afraid, she's not real"), with grimly humorous if involuntary effects. As public, we found ourselves engaged from the very beginning, having to answer questions on autism through an online competition game. Although our baseline knowledge of autism was overall already accurate, Adas' talk has made us aware of so many details and nuances that we now have a more personal, if of course still indirect, grasp of this multifarious phenomenon: from acknowledging that autism is anything but a monolithic disorder, meaning that it is almost impossible to draw generalisations, to learning that abstract concepts can be taught through body movements in a gradual transitioning from the tangible to the intangible; from being aware of the sensory overload they might painfully experience (as shown by virtual reality simulations) to refuting the commonplace idea that they cannot comprehend and creatively use metaphorical language. And much more. All in all, Adas' talk spurred a lively debate while making for a truly engaging and enriching experience itself.

Talk by Adas Viliušis, 2nd October 2019

Report by Davide Castiglione, 7th October 2019