9.3 The art of noticing: faces everywhere!

Objective

This exercise shows you how to compose a face by mixing the most disparate objects. This exercise will help you to appreciate the irresistible power of cognitive frames in organizing experience in meaningful forms.

Background

The human mind does not feel at ease with randomness. For instance, it is incredibly hard for us to create a casual distribution of points on a surface. As Adrian Frutinger showed, if we try to arrange 16 points in a square, it will take much longer for us to arrange them in a random configuration (as in fig. 9.3 left) than in a regular scheme (fig. 9.3a centre and right).

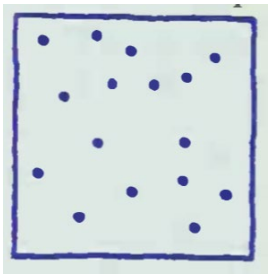
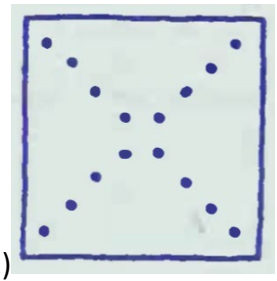
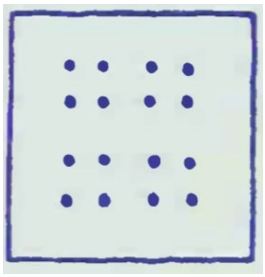
(1)  (2)  (3) 

Fig. 9.3a - Disorder and order

The difficulty of processing randomness is a result of how our we evolved as living beings. Our brain performs many functions, but certainly one of the most important is to preserve our past experiences and make them available for later reuse. This ability makes our interaction with the world more efficient because our memory stores a set of patterns, scripts, procedures that can be quickly recalled. It also makes our interaction more effective because we can revise these patterns when they do not prove to be adequate. This is what we call learning.

The patterns that are most easily recalled are the ones we use the most. Among these, we can find our ability to recognize faces.

Facial features carry a wealth of social information. Let's do a thought experiment. Let us think back to what we do when we see a person who is approaching us from afar. Our gaze observes the body, the movements, the objects in his hand and many other details. However, many studies show that our gaze tends to gravitate to the face, and in particular around the eyes, nose, and mouth. With a few data, our brain is able to select from thousands of faces encountered in the course of life, to understand if it is a known face, to evaluate whether the attitude is hostile or friendly, and to attribute the intention of the incoming person.

This ability to easily recognize known forms gives rise to a phenomenon called *pareidolia*, namely the tendency to recognize familiar figures in shapeless things. The brain cannot avoid giving known forms to its surroundings. The illusion from pareidolia is in action when we see known shapes in clouds or in landscape.

The artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) resorted to this cognitive bias to paint faces assembled from the most diverse objects (fig. 9.3b). The Civic Museum Ala Ponzone in Cremona (Italy) exhibits a still life of vegetables in a bowl, called 'l'Ortolano' (the market gardener, fig. 9.3c1). The work is displayed in a glass case containing a mirror below to allow the observer to reveal a face (Fig. 9.3c2).

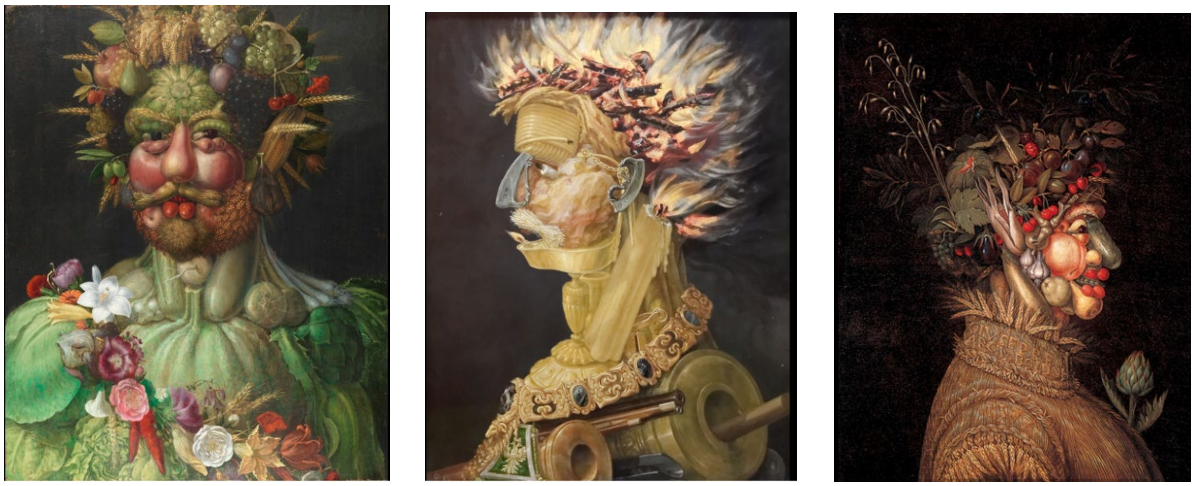


Fig. 9.3b - From left to right: 1. Vertumnus (1591); 2. Fire (1566), 3. Summer (1572), G. Arcimboldo.

Fig. 9.3c – The Ortholan to the right (1) and to the reverse (2), G. Arcimboldo (1587-1590).

Emanuela Pulvirenti on the site http://www.didatticarte.it/Blog/?p=4857 reports many examples of faces made with diverse objects, demonstrating the ease with which we can put together few objects to obtain something that resembles a face.

Instructions

This exercise aims to use the illusion of pareidolia to see faces and to identify any emotion evoked by the imagined face. Follow these steps:

1. Search for products and objects in which you see faces (a simple example is the front of most cars).
2. Take or find at least 3 pictures of these objects and draw the face you see on them with a marker or digitally through a graphic tool.
3. Identify the emotion(s) that the imagined face awakens in you.
4. Reflect on whether that emotion can have an impact on how much you like the product, how easy or comfortable it is to use the product, etc.
5. Compare the object with faces in similar products or objects in which you do not see a face (e.g. a car without a face or with a less pronounced 'facial' expression) and reflect on whether having a face makes a difference in the way you perceive the product from the aesthetic or functional point of view.