

The exhibition ‘Gestures – in the past, present, and future’

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How can multimodality leave the labs, books, and universities and make a difference in and for society? This talk presents the exhibition ‘Gestures – in the past, present, and future’ in Chemnitz (November 2017 – March 2018). It is the first ever exhibition that traces human gestures as a means of communication, starting from their relations to traditional crafts to the future of gesture control. The exhibition presents current gesture research in its many facets and practical applications, explains the function of (both symbolic and co-speech) gestures in human communication, and outlines the rapidly growing importance of gesture control (e.g. in smart homes, interaction with self-driving cars, and human-robot interactions). It also discusses risks and fears related to these technological developments, for example of robots replacing humans at work.

The exhibition centres on the scientific perspectives of the MANUACT project, but combines them with artistic installations, and fascinating interactive exhibits (specifically developed for this exhibition by the Ars Electronica Futurelab, a worldwide leader in media art). Difficult and little-known academic research is presented so that it can be (literally) grasped. Forms of presentation have been found that appeal to both children and adults. Artistic research forms an integral part of the exhibition.

The exhibition was a success, with more than 16.000 visitors, 100 media reports, as well as 82 guided tours with more than 1500 participants. However, the numbers do not tell us if it changes ongoing discourses, or people’s understanding of the topics in question. The talk critically re-evaluates how the impact of multimodal research should be understood, stressing the role of individual feedback and the potential for impact when previously separated contexts and worldviews are brought together.