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# Composite Method: Studying the Absent Presence of Race in Facial Composite Practice

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## Abstract

This methodographic paper explores the performativity and materiality of methods in STS research practice. Studying the absent presence of race in facial composite drawing in the Netherlands, the confidential nature of criminal investigations put constraints on our possibilities to study this practice. To generate data to work with, we created an ethnographic experiment producing two facial composites in collaboration with two forensic artists. We recorded the drawing process using a variety of (audiovisual) technologies to produce different materializations of the event. Tinkering with and analyzing the generated materials sensitized the ethnographers to three different modes of doing difference in which race surfaces in the process of facial composite drawing: 1) touching as describing; 2) layering and surfacing; and 3) articulating the common. We argue that different modes of doing ethnography, for instance, conducting research with audiovisual and experimental methods, can open up new ground to approach difficult and slippery objects such as race.

**Keywords:** ethnographic experiment, absent presence, race, facial composite, co-laboration

## Introduction

This paper is an ethnographic account of the performativity and materiality of methods in STS research practice. As part of a research project on how race comes to matter in forensic identification technologies, we studied the knowledge practices of forensic artists who draw facial composites for criminal investigations in the Netherlands. In this paper, we reflect on how our own knowledge

practices are performative of our account of the absent presence of race in this specific forensic technique. Together with our interlocutors, we carried out an 'ethnographic experiment' (Mann et al., 2011; Fortun, 2012). In this experiment, we created two facial composite drawings outside the forensic setting of the police station. This collaborative experimental set-up and our use of



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audiovisual methods shaped our data and analysis in particular ways. In this paper, we address how the material affordances and limitations of our methods sensitized us to the enactment of race in facial composite practice in a different way than ethnographic observations in the questioning room at the police allowed for.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we aim to contribute to the STS literature on ethnographic experimentation (see for example Mann et al., 2011; Fortun, 2012; Niewöhner, 2016; Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2018) by providing a methodographic account (Greiffenhagen et al., 2011; Lippert, 2020) in which we explore the work that audiovisual methods can do in and for STS research practice. Methodography comprises the empirical study of qualitative research methods in practice by addressing “what it means to do ethnography in STS settings” and attending to how data gets configured in ethnographic collaboration (Lippert and Douglas-Jones, 2019). In particular, we focus on how the use of audiovisual methods in our ethnographic experiment, generated opportunities for ‘co-laboration’ and joint reflexive moments (Niewöhner, 2016) between the researchers and forensic artists.

Second, we aim to contribute to the STS literature on the (re-)surfacing of race in forensic practices, the case of facial composite drawing. In contrast to the ample work produced on race and novel forensic DNA technologies (see for example Ossorio, 2006; Sankar, 2012; Schwartz-Marín et al., 2015; Skinner, 2018; M’charek et al. 2020; Hopman and M’charek, 2020), the mundane forensic practice of facial composite drawing has not yet received any attention from STS scholars (one exception is Nieves Delgado, 2020). Combining written text with audiovisual montage, we demonstrate how race comes to matter in the practice of facial composite drawing. Thereby we build on the notion of absent presence (Law, 2004) as an analytical tool that allows us to study how race comes about as a relational object (M’charek et al., 2014a). As Law (2004: 83) writes, “what is being made present always depends on what is also being made absent”. We attend to the presences and absences through which race comes about in facial composite drawing by closely following the making of two facial composites in the experi-

mental sessions. In our methodographic account, we emphasize how tinkering with the different (audiovisual) recordings and combing them in a montage, served as a way to address this relationality and bring to the fore material-semiotic realities made absent from the final image, but that nonetheless form part of the facial composite.

The film clips in this multimodal article (Collins et al., 2017; Westmoreland, 2017) make tangible the technologies and materialities through which race is enacted in the practice of facial composite drawing. We invite our readers not only to follow the written argument, but also to watch the clips. In this paper we argue, based on our analysis of *both* the absent presence of race *and* our research method, that different modes of doing ethnography, for instance conducting research with audiovisual and experimental methods, can open up new ground to study difficult and slippery objects, such as race, in practice.

## Race and facial composite drawing

M’charek et al., building on the work of Law (2004), argue that race in Europe can be understood as a pattern of absences and presences: “race in Europe is an *absent presence* that oscillates between reality and nonreality because it is not a singular object but rather a pattern of various elements, some of which are made present and others absent” (M’charek et al., 2014a: 462). Race comes about in “many different guises” (M’charek et al., 2014a: 462). Balkenhol and Schramm (2019: 587) therefore argue that it is important to “draw careful attention to the heterogeneous, fluid and often surprising ways in which race may surface in concrete practices”. This calls for a relational approach to- and ethnographic exploration of- how race is enacted in practice, rather than defining what it is beforehand. One good candidate to study the absent presence of race is forensic identification technologies.

Forensic identification technologies rely on a range of actors such as police officers, forensic scientists and legal experts. In the context of different settings such as the courtroom, laboratory, crime scene and media, a continuous exchange between materials, knowledge and people takes place. In facial composite practice for

instance, a facial image of an unknown individual suspect is drawn in a collaboration between a forensic artist and a witness and circulated via the media. In order to arrive at the facial image, witnesses and forensic artists need to differentiate between individuals. However, to make comparison and communication possible, the individual suspect is placed within a broader population (M'charek, 2000). In facial composite drawing, devices such as descriptive categories and reference images are used to aid this process.

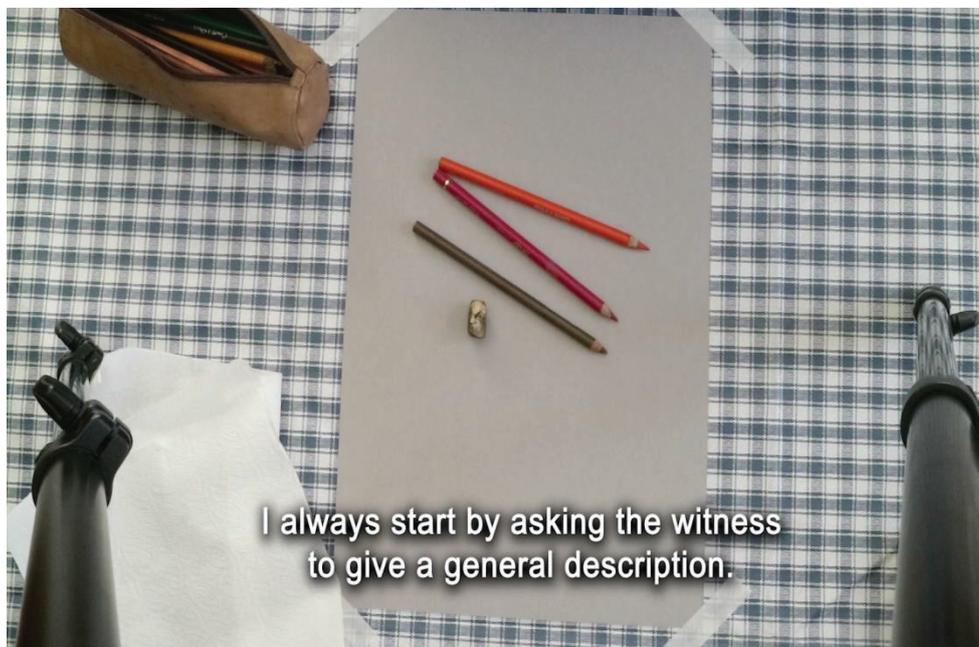
As we show in this paper, it is in these practices, in particular in the oscillation between the individual and the population, that race surfaces. To be sure, race here cannot be reduced to something fixed in the body, neither a quality of the body but, as M'charek (2013) argues, is a relational object that is enacted differently in different practices. A relational approach thus allows us to attend to the different materialities of race without fixing and naturalizing it (M'charek, 2013: 424).

Sensitized by this relational approach to race, Ryanne<sup>1</sup>, part of the RaceFaceID project<sup>2</sup>, set out to study the practice of facial composite drawing in the Netherlands. To do this, she was granted access to a forensic department of the Dutch police where she conducted fieldwork for over

one year. While Ryanne was able to observe the making of the facial composite in the questioning room<sup>3</sup>, she encountered several methodological challenges. These challenges led us to develop an ethnographic experiment. Before moving to the questioning room at the police to see what these challenges entailed in Ryanne's research practice, we explain what a facial composite is and what it is used for.

## The facial composite in criminal investigations

A facial composite drawing<sup>4</sup> is the facial depiction of an unknown criminal suspect based on a description of this individual by an eyewitness of a crime. Portraying a face of an unknown suspect is not a new criminal investigation tool and neither an exclusively Dutch practice. One of the first known facial composites was made in 1881 in the United Kingdom of the British 'railway murderer' (Taylor, 2000: 12). In absence of evidence that could lead to a suspect, the criminal investigation team may call upon a forensic artist. It is the task of the forensic artist, together with the eyewitness, to create a facial image of the suspects face.



**Clip 1.** Introduction to the complexity of facial composite drawing. We hear both the forensic artists explain their drawing method and we see the materials involved in the process. In the first case the image is cropped around the drawing paper. In the second case the frame is wider, showing the position of the paper on the table between the legs of the tripod on which the camera is mounted. All clips can be accessed here: <https://vimeo.com/channels/1451961>

During Ryanne's fieldwork period in 2016–2017, facial composite drawing was a practice that was hardly standardized in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> All elements, from forensic artists to drawing- and interview techniques, reference materials, witnesses, criminal investigators and questioning rooms, differed on any occasion. In Clip 1, we emphasize the variety in ways of drawing facial composites by contrasting the beginnings of the two composite sessions in the experiment. The short clip demonstrates that not only the materials differ, such as the different drawing papers and pencils, but also the artists, which becomes observable by seeing different hands moving in and out of the frame and listening to their different voices. In addition, the explanations provided in the clip, hint at the differences in drawing style, reference material and information gathering that are used by these artists. To watch Clip 1, click on the image.

When a composite drawing is requested by the police, the forensic artist sets up an interview with the witness and introduces the witness to the process. In the interview, the witness provides a description of what they remember about the appearance of the suspect. Communicating a visual experience and retrieving a face from memory is hard work. In forensic psychology, emphasis is put on the difficulties of verbally describing a face from memory (see for example Van Koppen and Lochun, 2010). The forensic artist brings reference materials to the interview that are used to help the witness articulate what they remember about the appearance of a suspect. This material consists of photographs or illustrations of different faces or facial features, precisely to go beyond the verbal.

In addition, an eyewitness account is not a straightforward process of verbalizing what a witness saw with their eyes only. For example, a particular accent or the proximity of an asylum center might make the suspect look like 'a foreigner' (Jong and M'charek, 2018). Or the smell of alcohol and dirty clothes might make somebody look like 'a homeless person.' Experiences, histories, knowledges, biases and other sensorial perceptions of the onlooker are folded into what is seen. As Haraway noted, vision is always an embodied and situated practice: "the

view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body" (Haraway, 1988: 589).

From the situated practice of the witness-interview, we also learn that the forensic artist is not merely a mediator between the mental image the witness holds of the suspect and the product of the facial depiction. As the interview commences, the reference materials are laid out, the eyewitness account takes shape and is translated into the drawing. This situational becoming of the eyewitness description is why forensic artists prefer not to sit right in front of the eyewitness when doing the composite, but side by side, to avoid that the witness starts describing features of the face of the artist (Taylor, 2000: 214-215).<sup>6</sup>

When the facial image on the paper corresponds to the witness account of the suspect, the facial composite is first fixed by either using fixative or saving it on a desktop, and then handed over to the criminal investigation team. The criminal investigation team decides if and where to circulate the facial depiction. When presented in the media, a facial composite is always accompanied by contextual information such as the type of crime, date, time and location.<sup>7</sup> The aim of circulation via mass media is that members of the public recognize an individual in the composite drawing and subsequently that one of these recognized individuals can be identified as the suspect of the crime by the investigation team.

We should stress here that the drawing that results from the interview will not be a representation of a single individual. It is not a portrait photograph, but rather a composite face based on the descriptive categories used by the witness. In the search for an individual, the facial composite produces a 'suspect population' (Cole and Lynch, 2006) that is narrowed down by certain physical characteristics and facial features. A composite should therefore look neither too specific nor too generic. When the composite drawing is too generic, criminal officers, who have to trace every single lead, face the risk of receiving too many leads pointing to a range of different individuals. As such, the composite loses its function. This is where circulating a composite representing a minority population, or an 'uncommon' face, becomes more informative than a composite that

resembles someone from the majority population in a specific area (M'charek, 2000). The public is invited to locate the individual suspect within a certain *population*.

Population categories thus play a crucial role in decision making around the use of facial composites and in mobilizing the public. Such categories also play a role in the interview with the witness. In making the facial composite, different population categories come about in verbal descriptions, sorting of reference materials and the act of drawing. These categories are articulated and redefined in order to shape, reshape and refine the facial depiction. In the RaceFaceID project, we ask when and how, in these processes, population becomes race.

### From fieldwork to experimental film

On a Thursday morning in the spring of 2016, Ryanne sits in the corner of an interrogation room in a police station in the Netherlands. Ryanne was assigned that particular chair in the corner because, as the forensic artist told her: "we don't want the witness to describe *you*." Her position in the room, out of sight from the witness, was thus a consequence of the practice of composite drawing in a criminal investigation. This room was not very different from any other questioning room Ryanne had encountered: unpretentious white walls, blinds to keep inquisitive eyes out, a desk with a computer and just enough chairs to accommodate all people present. The absence of a clock in the room suggested the irrelevance of the passing of time. The people gathered in this room included one facial composite drawer, an eyewitness, two criminal investigators and Ryanne, the ethnographer.

Ryanne was writing as much as she could in her notebook, as the facial composite drawer started to interview the witness. Opposite to the drawer and next to the window sat the seemingly nervous witness, between them only a small table filled with a desktop computer and one big open black folder. The witness, struggling to find the right words to describe the physical appearance of the suspect, flipped through the pages with facial images, selecting, pointing, naming, doubting, negotiating and jumping back and forth between images while discussing the images with the facial

composite drawer. From her chair in the corner of the questioning room, Ryanne tried to observe what the facial composite drawer and the witness were doing. She wrote down the words: flipping, pointing, jumping. But she could not see what was happening *on* the table and the drawing paper. What did the witness point at? What did the drawing process look like? Processing her notes later on, she realized the limitations of her observations.

The facial composite drawer, aware of the difficulties of verbalizing physical appearance, uses visual reference materials precisely to avoid verbal accounts, to avoid words. Challenged to attend to what happened with the reference images and on the drawing paper at the table however, Ryanne found herself producing her own written descriptions of the images. She noticed that in her writing, she herself reified the categories the drawer so carefully tried to avoid. What happens in the non-verbal interaction between the witness, the artist and the reference material and on the drawing paper are thus crucial aspects of facial composite drawing practice. Ryanne was not able to address and analyze these non-verbal ways of doing similarities and differences through her ethnographic method of observation in the police station. Was jotting down field notes the best way to go about generating data? It surely was the only tool she had for the moment, as she was not allowed to make use of any kind of recording device during the sessions due to confidentiality agreements.

Ryanne's concerns about doing research 'well' resonate with recent discussions in STS about how our methods shape the knowledge we produce as STS ethnographers (Law, 2004; Lippert and Douglas-Jones, 2019). Discussing the shared challenges of doing fieldwork in forensic settings and studying race, Ryanne and two of her colleagues in the RaceFaceID Project, Lisette and Ildikó, developed the idea of working together to attend to the facial composite practice in a different way. We aimed to create a space in which the making of a facial composite drawing could be witnessed and recorded in a way that the institutional space of the questioning room did not allow for. We opted for a format that not only made it possible to generate different materializations of the event: film, drawing, note taking, audio recording

and sensorial experience, but that also made it possible to juxtapose these materials in an experimental montage to attend to the absent presence of race in the practice. Together with two forensic artists we therefore set up an ethnographic experiment in which we created two facial composite drawings.

**Ethnographic experimentation: co-laborative explorations**

Creating two facial composite drawings outside of the police headquarters made it possible to work around confidentiality and ethical agreements Ryanne had with the police. These agreements included the prohibition to audiotape interactions in the questioning room, limitations to collect visual material and instructions to anonymize all information that could be used to trace a specific criminal investigation or individual. But designing an experimental setting ourselves did not come with less ethical considerations, it rather elicited different ones.

First, whose face to use as a ‘suspect?’ Facial composite drawings are criminal investigation tools. Composite drawings are circulated to the broader public: “Who recognizes *this* suspect’s face?” The face in a facial composite drawing is thus criminalized by its mere presence in the medium itself (M’charek, 2013). This made us hesitant to ask just anyone. We would have offered our faces, but it had to be a person unknown to the facial composite drawers. We decided to ask the partners of Ryanne and Ildikó to contribute

their faces. Both of them understood the implications and agreed to their face being used in a composite drawing. Lisette volunteered to act as the ‘witness’ in one session and a forensic science student volunteered to participate in the other session. For our experiment, we asked the ‘witness’ to look at the portrait picture of the ‘suspect’ and to describe the appearance to the forensic artist. Hence, some of the elements that are specific to the facial composite drawing in a police setting, such as the need to remember and emotions that come with experiencing assault or witnessing a criminal event (Van Koppen and Wagenaar, 2010), are not part of this experiment.

Second, how to get the forensic artists on board of our experiment? Shared interests are crucial for working together, although these interests do not have to be the same for all actors involved (Star and Griesemer, 1989; De la Cadena, 2015). In the case of the facial composite, the lack of publishable material was a shared concern between the ethnographers and the forensic artists. Privacy regulations and confidentiality agreements form a barrier for forensic artists in compiling a portfolio with which they can present their work to the police and public. So we agreed on a trade-off. Aside from working on an experimental film, Ildikó edited a clip for one of the drawers to use when presenting her work in public settings.

We worked with two forensic artists who were key interlocutors in Ryanne’s fieldwork at the Dutch police. Both artists, each with years of experience in drawing facial composites for the police, were eager to be part of the experiment.



**Figures 1a (left picture) and 1b (right picture).** These pictures depict two techniques used by two different composite artists. The placement of the pictures next to each other invites the viewer to compare the techniques and observe the differences.

One artist works as a criminal investigator for law enforcement and draws with a pencil in black and white. She uses a Jacques Penry PHOTO-FIT toolkit from the early 1970's with parts of faces as a reference database as pictured in Figure 1a (Penry, 1971). The second drawer is an artist who works as a freelance composite drawer for law enforcement. She uses different techniques, working with colored soft pastels and images of faces cut out from magazines (Figure 1b).

The working relationship we maintained with the composite artists is best characterized by what Niewöhner (2016) refers to as 'co-laboration.' Co-laborative anthropology is about "creating space and infrastructure for 'reflexing' as a collective epistemic activity" (Niewöhner, 2016: 5). This mode of working together does not require a shared goal nor does it produce interdisciplinary shared outcomes<sup>8</sup> but rather fosters disciplinary reflexivities. Niewöhner proposes a conceptualization of reflexivity that redistributes it as something that is produced between actors in/and the phenomenon rather than a quality that can be monopolized by the ethnographer. This conceptualization of reflexivity also gives room for an account of the skilled work of the forensic artists.

While preparing the two sessions with the composite drawers and thinking with the generated material afterwards, we kept referring to our project as an 'ethnographic experiment.' It was not an experiment aimed at testing a predefined hypothesis, but rather a set up aimed at generating an experimental openness, crafting space for us to be taken by 'surprise' (Hacking, 1983; Rheinberger, 1997). Driven by our curiosity about the absent presence of race in facial composite drawing, we created a stage for reality to unfold in order to generate knowledge (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2018). The aim was not to produce general or representative knowledge, as Mann and colleagues describe the specificities of the ethnographic experiment: "the creativity of experimental methods is in their ability to configure reality in an original way. Rather than linking causes and effects so as to create predictability, ethnographic experiments generate unprecedented possibilities" (Mann et al., 2011: 239). Drawing on Rheinberger's notion of experimental systems as "vehicles for generating

questions" that have to "engender unexpected events" (Rheinberger, 1997: 28–33), Fortun (2012) argues for 'experimental ethnographic systems' in which the ethnographer stages encounters for new articulation to emerge. It is in Fortun's (2012) sense that we designed our ethnographic experiment to be creative.

Thus we did not aim to replicate a police composite drawing session, where the ethnographer was hidden in a corner of the room as not to interfere with the process. We set up an encounter that allowed for interaction between the ethnographer, forensic artist, witness and recording equipment, to study the absent presence of race in facial composite drawing in a different way, for new articulations and questions to emerge. In particular, it was through the editing and analyzing of the audiovisual materials that we produced novel configurations of the composite drawing sessions.

## Experimental film and montage

In editing the recorded footage and composing this multimodal article, we drew on literature from the field of visual anthropology (Banks, 2007; MacDougall, 1998, 2005) as well as STS (M'charek, 2014). In the tradition of experimental film, montage can evoke hidden dimensions of ethnographic reality (Suhr and Willerslev, 2013). Rather than considering audiovisual records as imprints or representations of 'reality,' experimental filmmakers separate the image, sound and text to evoke 'the invisible' or to make conceptual and theoretical statements. As M'charek explains:

Just like a collage, a montage is about making rather than representing nature out there. But a montage is somewhat different too. Firstly, montages are often politically motivated, in the sense that they aspire to create a political effect. Secondly, for example in film montage, the aim is to narrate a story without relying on spatial or temporal continuity. With a technique of rapid cuts juxtaposing different times and places, film montage does not hide temporal ellipses but rather draws attention to them. (M'charek, 2014: 46–47)

Working with layering, juxtaposition or sensorial dissonance, experimental filmmakers also reflect

on the material and technological affordances of the medium itself. Participants, including the researchers, interlocutors and audiences are invited to explore, see and feel rather than read and listen. As such, experimental film “invites the spectator to undergo a visual and auditory experience we might describe as a performance” (Schneider and Pasqualino, 2014: 4). Composing our film clips, we aimed at crafting a reflexive space for co-laborative performance that does not end with(in) the experiment but unfolds and extends beyond it through inviting our audience to engage with the experimental montage. The film clips offer a platform for visual engagement with the process of drawing the facial composites, the materials and technologies involved. Hence, audiovisual montage is not only another method for generating ethnographic data, but becomes instrumental in the analytical process of meaning creation.

As scholars in STS and feminist theory have argued, picturing practices are reliant on different technologies, and on embodied and partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988; Minh-ha, 1982). We draw on the concept of technologies of vision (Haraway, 1988; Grasseni, 2007) precisely to attend to the complex material and technological configurations of drawing the facial composite. As we suggested above, vision here is not only a matter of remembering, describing and drawing but is dependent on the paper, pencils, crayon, drawing

board or computer, reference images, and bodies present. Simultaneously we emphasize how our camera, sound recorder and the experimental setting itself are all constitutive of making the facial composite. Take a look at Clip 2 and pay attention to how these interactions take shape in practice.

### Composite method and the absent presence of race

On the morning of one of the ethnographic experiments, the living room of a residential house in the south of the Netherlands was set up for a facial composite drawing session. The mood was cheerful, playful even, amongst the people gathered around the dinner table, quite different from the atmosphere in the questioning room at the police. Ildikó positioned the tripod with camera on the table to record the drawing from above. A black voice recorder was placed next to it, to record the sound, and Ryanne sat down with a notepad and pencil to write down what she could observe. The artist put a brown leather case with pencils on the table. She took out an eraser and three pencils: red, orange and brown (see Figure 2a). Under the tripod, Ildikó fixed the drawing paper to the table with masking tape. The artist put a wooden box with colored soft pastels and a box with bright white tissues on the table. If it weren't for the contrasting white color of the tissues, the grey color



**Clip 2.** Technologies of vision. Drawing a facial composite is a complex process in which various technologies of vision are mobilized. For the moment, we withhold the image of drawing the face and steer attention towards the verbal description, materials, imaginations as well as the materials generated by the ethnographers such as field notes and additional audiovisual recordings.

of the drawing paper would go unnoticed. When Ryanne asked about the color of the paper, the artist explained that the greyness of the paper was used to accentuate skin tone.

Then the artist placed a white plastic Tupperware box on the table (see Figure 2b). The box was filled with envelopes with written labels: “white middle 30-40,” “white young 15-30,” “Moroccan young,” “African,” “white old,” “Balkan,” “Turkish Moroccan old,” “Eastern Bloc,”<sup>9</sup> “South America,” “Mediterranean: Portugal Spain Italy Greece,” “foreign diverse,” “girls,” “Moluccan,” “Asian.” These envelopes contain hundreds of pictures of faces in different shapes, colors and sizes, cut out by the artist from newspapers and magazines. The labels on the envelopes in the Tupperware box represent a configuration of skin color, ethnic, national, regional and continental categories. By linking these categories to physical appearances, through the collections of images inside the envelopes, population becomes race.

The content of the envelopes is the result of 30 years of experience with drawing facial composites. During these years, new categories were added by the forensic artist when her practice required so. The category “girls” for example was added after the composite drawer was asked to draw her first female suspect. In her career, the artist was only asked to draw girls twice, which made further division of the category irrelevant for her practice. In contrast, the category “white” [men] has three subdivisions: young, middle, old and the category “Moroccan” [men] has two subdivisions: young and old. A new envelope comes

about when a (new) category holds descriptive relevance. The collection of envelopes thus gives an insight in what categories were made relevant in practice and reveals how, throughout the years, witnesses used different categories to differentiate between populations.<sup>10</sup> It is telling that the categories on the envelopes resonate with the colonial and migration history of The Netherlands while, ‘Dutch’, as a category, is notably absent.<sup>11</sup>

The envelopes that organize the reference materials are used as devices to move from a category or population to features of the individual suspect. The other forensic artist we worked with has her reference material organized differently. She uses two folders: one containing images of facial features of people with light skin tones and the other folder containing facial features of people with dark skin tones. These images are all in grey scale and taken from standardized police photos.<sup>12</sup> In our experiment, she presented the two folders to the witness with the question: “which folder do we need?” Doing so, she avoided any verbal reference to the binary categorization of skin color that lays at the core of the organization of the reference images in the two folders. As such, prioritizing skin color as a marker of difference.

Thus, the separation of reference images in the two folders materializes race as skin color, while the envelopes fix the relation between ethnic and national categories and physical appearance. But race figures not only in these categorization systems. As the suspect is made known, through situating the individual in population



**Figures 2a (left image) and 2b (right image).** Preparing the table. Left image, with the drawing materials laid out, the artist is ready to start drawing. Right image shows the Tupperware box with envelopes that contain reference images of faces.

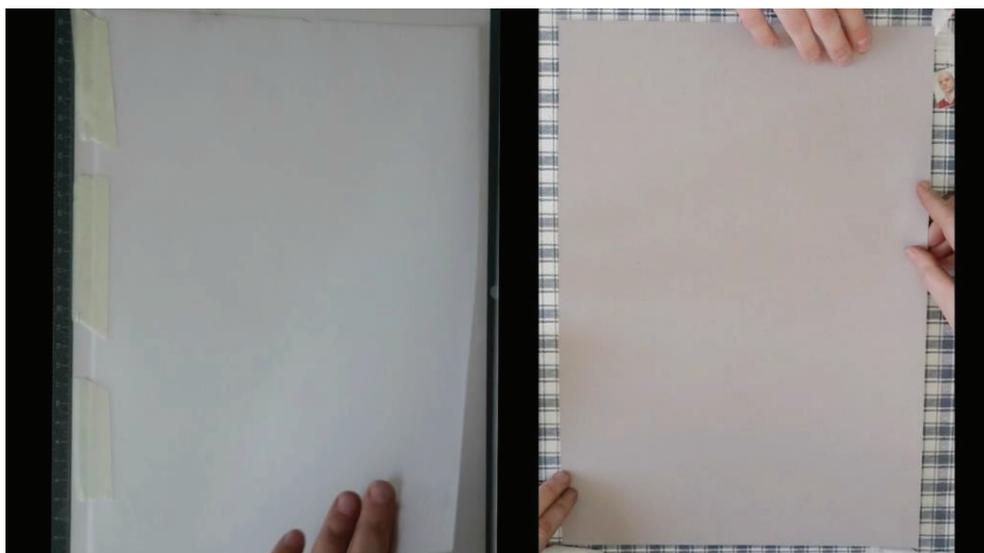
categories (see also M'charek et al., 2014b), the potential of racialization always haunts the composite drawing practice. In our analysis of the two drawing sessions, we distilled three different modes of doing difference in which the relation between the individual and the population takes shape in facial composite practice: 1) touching as describing; 2) layering and surfacing and; 3) articulating the common.<sup>13</sup> We disentangled the collected materials: written fieldnotes, visual images, sound, transcriptions, verbal and sensorial information, and layered these in an experimental montage to visually present the three modes in film clips that accompany the discussion of the three modes of doing difference.

**Touching as describing**

We might think about the drawing of a facial composite as a sequence of consecutive translations (Latour, 1999) from a mental image into a verbal description into a graphic image. Research, in particular within forensic psychology, often deals with verbal descriptions of witnesses only, not including other ways of communicating physical appearance (see for example Van Koppen and Lochun, 2010). In our experiment we learned that there is much more at stake in making a facial composite than moving between the realm of the

visual and verbal. "How is the chin?" the composite artist asks. "Well..." and Lisette, in her role as witness, touches her chin with her left hand. "This part *here* is not so pronounced but the jaw's line goes more *like this*." This, here and like this in the witness' description become tangible by her fingers wandering over her own face. The forensic artist nods approvingly and starts to draw.

This made us curious about the instances in which Lisette and the artist were using the words "this" and "that." In order to explore further these instances, we shifted our attention to observing the visual material. To what were these indicative pronouns referring? Watching the footage, we could hear the words but not see what the witness did or pointed at (see for example Clip 3 [00:18-00:30]). Filming an event thus also comes with its media specific limitations. Importantly, no method holds the promise of a 'full picture.' Just as Ryanne, in the questioning room of the police, could not see everything that she thought would be relevant, by placing the camera on top of the drawing table in the experimental setting, Ildikó also cropped out elements that proved to be crucial later on. Everything outside of the frame of the camera was rendered invisible. However, we could hear the description on the sound recording



**Clip 3.** Modes of doing difference: touching as describing. The montage attends to the effects of fixing the camera above the drawing paper during the composite sessions. The close-up of the hands wandering over the face [00:50-01:00] was filmed as an afterthought while we were analyzing the footage. The discussion of the resulting depiction was filmed with a handheld camera at the end of the drawing session [01:18-01:22].

and Lisette, who was acting as the witness, could also recall what had happened.

Lisette noted that the touching of her face was rather an unconscious reflex in the moment of trying to communicate to the forensic artist what she remembered about the shape of the suspect's face. The touching and pointing proved effective as it encouraged the forensic artist to draw. Using her own body as a reference, Lisette simultaneously performed a comparison between her own face and that of the suspect, by touching her chin. From the similarity of both having chins, she was able to point at the difference between her chin and that of the suspect. The facial shape of the suspect here comes to matter through the articulation of difference mediated by the body of Lisette as a reference and touch as a mode of specification.<sup>14</sup> Touch here thus not only implies a bodily gesture, but performs an act of world making (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009).

This experience also made us attentive to other ways in which touching, pointing and gesturing played a role in the drawing process. Take for example the following instance. For the drawing paper not to move while recording, we fixed the paper to the drawing board with a piece of adhesive tape. Shortly after the drawer started to outline the face with a pastel, she stops. Something is wrong. She says: "I put the paper upside down, can I still turn it?" After detaching and turning the cardboard around, in Clip 3 [00:00–00:10], we see how the drawer gently strokes the surface of the paper with the top of her fingers. "Look," she says, "see the dimples" referring to the structure of the paper. She explains that smooth paper will not allow long work on the drawing as the paper will get clogged. When she starts to draw the egg-shape again, on the other side of the paper, the texture of the cardboard becomes visible: small symmetrical dots as a first outline of the facial features and their approximate position emerge (Clip 3 [00:10–00:18]).

The texture of the paper enables the gradual transformation of the facial composite from a generic human face into an individualized face. The face thus consists not only of colors, shades, and lines but also of dots which are alien to the face yet constitutive of it. We again see how vision is not only about the realm of the visual but also,

in the case of drawing a facial composite, linked to touch and texture. Vision here entails a distributed attention involving a variety of senses but is also reliant on a variety of technologies. Both the physical body and the rough paper allow oscillation between the population and the individual, until the paper becomes clogged and the image more distinct.

In the example above, the chin was not racialized through the act of touching. However, in touching as a way of doing difference lies a potential for the racialization of facial features.<sup>15</sup> Race may surface when a hand touching the face to articulate difference enacts a stereotype. For example, using the hands to make 'slanty eyes,' not to describe the shape of the eyes of the individual suspect, but to mobilize a stereotype in order to situate the suspect in a racialized population. Thus, race is not necessarily implicated in the gesture itself, but comes about in relation to racial stereotypes.

### **Layering and Surfacing**

Separately recording the audio and video files allowed us to analyze the recordings as different layers and reconfigure the materials in different ways. By replaying, pausing and fast forwarding the video recordings, we could jump through the linear time line of the drawing process. Layering text, sound and image enabled us to foreground certain aspects of the composite drawing practice, while backgrounding others. Paying close attention to the emergence of the facial features on the drawing paper, instead of the whole process at once, sensitized us to see that the composite face was made layer by layer. Clip 4 is illustrative of this continuous process in which the face, layer by layer, comes about. From a blank piece of paper [00:01] to a facial outline [00:16] and a sketch of the face [00:56]. The face is not simply composed by assembling different ready-made parts, the artists rather employ a process of surfacing and layering.

In a facial composite, instead of drawing (parts of) the face by putting "hard, dark lines of equal 'weight'" on the paper (Taylor, 2000: 113), the mouth does not have lines, just darker and lighter drawn patches indicating shadow or reflection of light. These patches are not immediately put side by side on the paper, but are the result of layering

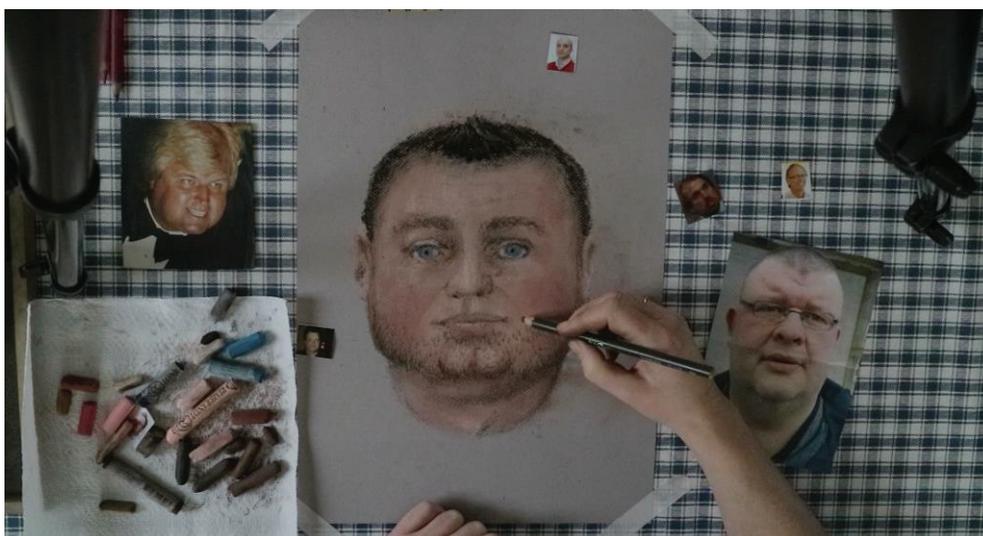
one material on top of the other: pastel on paper and pastel on pastel (Clip 4 [00:00–00:19]). By layering, the forensic artist suggests depth to articulate the individual and specific facial shape. Layering is also used by the artist to make a part of the (sur)face vague while other parts are made to stand out. This is done in cases in which the witness is not completely certain about what they have seen. Layering is thus a technique that allows the face of the suspect to come to the surface slowly. Layering allows room for error and correction as a layer can be added to partially cover what was there before. We see this for example in the moving of the hairline in the color facial composite in Clip 4 [00:46–01:00].

As the clip demonstrates, not only the layers of pastel and pencil on paper but also the layers of different materials and equipment on the table are important. In the case of the PHOTO-FIT drawing there is a light table on top of which tracing paper is attached.<sup>16</sup> Then, the different eye, nose or mouth samples are slipped under the tracing paper and the witness is asked to place them in the right position (Clip 3 [01:04]). Element by element: hair, eyes, nose and mouth. The composite drawer then takes her pencil and draws the contours of the facial element on the paper. But we should not stop at the surface of the paper. Perhaps not as visible as the pastels and reference materials, our recording devices and all digital devices used to make and watch the clips

are additional layers that shape the materialization of the composite faces.

Layering also happens when the witness glances at the reference material, selecting and putting aside pictures that do, do not or might resemble the suspect's face. The catalogues or the Tupperware boxes holding the envelopes with the reference images are of importance. Several rounds of selections are made across population categories: "Male, white, between age of 30 and 50." When the forensic artist selects a single envelope and spreads its content over the table, the witness is presented with a large variety of images of individual faces, displaying a range of skin tones, nose shapes, hair colors, facial contours etc. Race, though being at the core of organizing the reference materials becomes absent present. As the redundant envelopes are literally taken off the table, the focus shifts from differences between populations to the differences between the *individual* faces that are now spread on the table. However, when the witness shuffles, selects and clusters these facial images, new (potentially racial) categories surface.

Layering in the process of making facial composites thus always implies an accumulation of visual information that adds up to a final verdict. From the flat surface of the paper to the layered drawing, a suspect's face emerges. At the end of the facial composite session, the reference materials and categories that informed the forensic artist about the suspect's face are folded



Clip 4. Modes of doing difference: layering and surfacing. The clip shows how the face comes about layer by layer.

into the image. Although the drawing is fixed on a screen or paper, the facial composite, as a materialized image of a suspect's likeness is never final. The facial composite needs openness to elicit recognition from the public. When it circulates, the media and the public add additional layers of interpretation to the facial depiction. Yet again, new classifications may surface.

### **Articulating the common**

Working with the collected material and transcribing one of the interviews we were struck by the number of times one of the witnesses referred to 'the normal' when describing our suspect. The words 'normal' or 'ordinary'<sup>17</sup> and 'just' were used frequently (in Dutch *normaal* and *gewoon*). When answering the question of the forensic artist: "Can you remember where the beard grows?" our witness thinks for a second and then answers: "Everywhere! Actually, just like a normal beard." What to make of this?

'Normal' is always situated and contextual. It must be contrasted with or measured against that which stands out: the abnormal, the not-as-usual, atypical or unexpected. This has implications for criminal investigation in general and the forensic art of making facial composites in particular. The first implication is that deviance might be beneficial for criminal investigation: finding a suspect

with two noses and one eye is easier than finding a suspect with one nose and two eyes. The second is that our attention automatically tends to shift to that which is abnormal in contrast to that which is normal, usual and expected. Witnesses have difficulties recalling the face of a 'normal' looking individual (Mancusi, 2010: 29).

Let us go back to the field notes Ryanne made during the composite drawing sessions. Here she had initially overlooked the frequent use of the word "normal." Why? What made her focus on all that is different? What made her take words such as "normal beard" for granted? Reflecting on her role as an ethnographer studying race and differences, she had to recognize that she did not make the normal a matter of concern. She never questioned what the "normal beard" was made to look like. That is, until she started to analyze the transcript. It was through contrasting the written notes with the transcription of the audiovisual recordings, that this became observable and a point of attention. What happens then, if we shift from a focus on what stands out, to that which is the same, normal, usual, unquestioned, expected?

In one of the composite sessions the drawer points out that the witness has not yet mentioned any "racial characteristics" in his description (Clip 5 [00:06–00:14]). The witness answers: "just Caucasian, just a normal white man." The



**Clip 5.** Modes of doing difference: articulating the common. This montage layers excerpts from the verbal interview over the footage of the sorting of the reference images that came out of the envelope "white, middle, 30-40." Emphasizing the variety of faces complicates the description "just a normal white man" given by the witness.

composite drawer selects the envelope for the witness to work with: “white, middle 30–40.” A little bit further in the interview he struggles to describe the nose of the suspect (Clip 5 [00:16–01:00]). Now watch Clip 5.

But what does a “white Dutch male” look like? The forensic artist knows very well that there is no such singular thing as a ‘white’ or a ‘Dutch’ appearance. This is where the reference pictures come in as we see these laid out on the table throughout Clip 5. Although the envelope “white middle 30–40” reifies the category, the facial images in it destabilize its presumed singularity. As the forensic artist Bailey comments in her handbook: “in a composite session, a picture is really worth a thousand words” (Bailey, 2014: 33). The drawer therefore asks the witness to attune to differences in skin tone while sorting through the pictures and to look for a hair color that the witness considers “dark blond” “...because what one person considers to be dark blond, another person thinks is something completely different” the drawer adds.

Articulations of the normal are always local and contextual. For example, Nieves Delgado (2020) shows that in the case of the Mexican facial composite system Caramex, the ‘brown *mestizo*’ is configured as the normal. In the context of our experiment, the ‘normal’ was articulated to be a “Dutch white male.” Interestingly, in the reference material ‘Dutchness’ figures as the unmarked category as there is no envelope with the label ‘Dutch.’ However, it operates as a standard against which the other categories take shape, for example “Foreign diverse.” While being constitutive of the classification system in the Tupper Ware box, ‘Dutchness’ does not explicitly manifest itself as a racial category. There is no labelled collection of facial images that connects a range of physical characteristics to this national category in the reference material.

In the interview, the figure of the “Dutch white male” as the ‘normal’ initially left its traces in the struggle of the witness to describe the specificities of the suspect’s face. The suspect’s perceived Dutchness and whiteness is only articulated when the drawer probes the witness for “racial characteristics.” Subsequently, the witness explicates Dutchness as being “white” and associates

the suspect’s appearance with the stereotypical image of the “Dutch farmer boy.” Such descriptions mobilize the artist to draw the envelope “white middle 30–40” out of the box. Thus while absent as a category in the Tupper Ware box, in this interview, Dutchness becomes racialized in the relation between the witness description, the labels on the envelopes and the reference images.

In both the making of the facial composite and the analysis of the recordings, it took a move of making the familiar strange to articulate the implicit assumption of the ‘normal’ as being the “Dutch white male.” In both cases it required a realignment of materials: verbal or written words, sound, images and categories. The composition or mode of togetherness of these objects changed the shape of what the “Dutch white male” in the experiment was made to be. As a racial category it figured as an absent presence (Law, 2004; M’charek et al., 2014a), alternately probed, articulated, reified and destabilized in the making of the composite drawing.

It is important to note that race is not *in* the reference materials or for that matter *in* the composite drawing itself. Race is brought about as a material-semiotic object in particular configurations (M’charek, 2013). Race endures as these configurations remain in place but there may be interferences that make it change shape, for example when the envelopes are opened and the images of individual faces spread over the table.

## Discussion: co-laboration and joint reflexive moments

The aim of our experimental co-laboration (Niewöhner, 2016) with the forensic artists was not to produce an accurate representation of an external reality in order to extrapolate our findings, but rather to create a space that generated moments and materials for creative exploration and different articulations. As such, the experimental set-up allowed for joint reflexive moments.

On several occasions, the forensic artists brought in stories of forensic facial composite cases to contrast with what was happening in the current session, or to explicate the procedure in the moment. In one of the drawing sessions, the artist was particularly eager to reflect on her actions in the experimental space. The fact that

Lisette performed as the witness in this case and was known by the artist as a researcher of the RaceFaceID project team, contributed to the articulation of this reflection as well. As the forensic artist herself noted: "I do say things to you now that I would normally not say to a witness." At this moment, she explained her way of probing Lisette's initial answer of "Southern Europe" to her question.

The forensic artist asked her to be more specific: "What do you mean with Southern Europe? What countries are you thinking about?" Lisette listed Spain, Portugal, Italy and the ambiguous addition of "in that area" in response. The artist pointed out that she very purposefully asked an indirect question, rather than the direct question of where the suspect came from. "This makes you think in a different way," the artist continued, "and then you tell me things like Southern Europe and you mention three countries instead of one... And I'll let you explain [what you mean by] Southern Europe because, let's say you then mention Morocco, then we are actually talking about a different continent."

In this vignette, not only the researchers, but also the artist actively engaged in and thought with the experiment, crafting a space for reflection. This is where we saw the ethnographic experiment unfold as a 'collective epistemic activity' (Niewöhner, 2016).

The experimental setting also allowed the forensic artists to compare their drawings with the picture of the 'suspect' right after the composite was finished. This provided a rare opportunity for the artist as the everyday reality of crime scene investigation is not likely to provide such a moment for reflection.

After being shown the picture the witness had to describe, the facial composite artist responds: "You accentuated his jaw but he doesn't have it! It is rounder, you told me to broaden this [points to the drawing] but he doesn't have a square shape at all!" The witness, somewhat disconcerted, expresses that he felt the reference images he was presented with showed mainly square faces. The artist then wonders out loud if she should reconsider the use of reference images in her practice.

The moment of comparison was not merely an afterthought but present throughout the process. For example, one of the composite artists noted that she was taking more time than usual, drawing the features in more detail. This was mentioned in relation to both the moment of the 'big reveal' and the fact that the process was being recorded. In addition, the artist for whom Ildikó edited the clip requested to end the video with a still of the composite drawing and the picture that the witness had seen beforehand, placed next to each other for comparison. With the clip she aims to show the potential of doing composite drawings for police practice.

For the researchers it did not matter whether the drawing looked like the photograph or not. We were interested in studying the absent presence of race in the drawing process. Importantly, these different concerns could co-exist in the experiment and would sometimes meet as happened in the unpacking of 'the normal' through the probing questions posed by the artist.

Our co-laborative experiment thus opened up a space for disciplinary reflexivity, enabling both the researchers and the forensic artists to engage critically, although not necessarily in the same way, with their own research and drawing practices. The reflexive moments created in the experimental setting also allowed for social and material articulations, such as the forensic artist's additional explanation about probing Lisette's initial answer and the artists comparing the witness description with the picture of the 'suspect.' In addition, the audio-visual exploration enabled the researchers to reflect on their research practices and to attune to different ways of doing difference, to touching as describing, layering and surfacing and articulating the normal. These reflexive moments would not (likely) have been produced in the questioning room while observing the drawing of a facial composite in an actual criminal case.

The three modes that resulted from the experiment shaped Rianne's ongoing fieldwork about the absent presence of race in facial composite drawing. She was able to bring these insights back to the questioning room at the police, broadening her observation to include bodies, movements and gestures that might indicate touching, pointing and layering. She also carefully noted

references to the common and the taken for granted, aware that in doing sameness also lays the potential to enact race in practice. Through the experiment she was able to relate to the field in a different way.

### **Endnote on composite method**

We took a mundane problem, namely the restrictions to the use of visual material from our field site, and transformed it into a productive ethnographic experiment. Tinkering with different materialities and technologies, working together with the forensic artists, recording, jotting, filming, observing, writing and experiencing we created or rather, we composed, an ethnographic experiment that allowed us to study absences and presences that would have remained hidden when staying in the corner of the questioning room at the police station. The aim was not to disentangle the different materials as a way of cutting the practice into manageable and separable chunks to simplify analysis but rather to add layers and complexities.

In this methodographic paper, we demonstrated the promising possibilities of experimental film and montage, co-laboration and ethnographic experimentation for STS research practice and, in particular, for the study of slippery objects, such as race, in forensic practices. Engaging with the experiment through audio-visual materials allowed us to carefully attend to how race comes to matter in facial composite drawing by different means and in various ways. The three modes of doing difference that we distilled from the experiment sensitized us to the enactment of race in the continuous oscillation between the population and the individual that is ingrained in the drawing practice. This oscillation materializes not only in the verbal interview. As we saw in the process of layering and surfacing, it also materializes in the equipment and techniques, for example in the specific texture of the drawing paper used by the artist, the process of building the face layer by layer on paper, highlighting some facial features while backgrounding others, and the organization and use of the reference materials. Furthermore, in the unpacking of the category of the 'normal Dutch white male,' it became visible how the material and the discursive can both reinforce and

destabilize one another. Materializations of faces and race thus happened in words, images, sounds and in between all these media.

As we addressed in this methodographic paper, different technologies produce different versions of the event. This is an awareness that we share with the forensic artists. We reflected on how attending to the complexity of the facial composite drawing practice through ethnographic experimentation and audiovisual methods, allowed us to study the absent presence of race and we built on this complexity in composing this multimodal paper. This effort in bringing together methodographic reflections on STS research practice, ethnographic experimentation and audiovisual methodology, was importantly guided by our research question on the absent presence of race in forensic identification. Thereby shedding light on the valuable insights that can be gained from attending to mundane practices, such as facial composite drawing, and what this can contribute to understanding the (re-)surfacing of race in forensic practices, opening up venues for future research.

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## Notes

- 1 In this paper we choose to use our first names to address the different individual experiences we bring into the research when this is relevant. In instances where we consider these differences irrelevant, we use 'we' to emphasize the collective authorship of this paper. See Mann et al. (2011) for a more elaborate discussion on how to address different authors and voices in academic texts.
- 2 The authors of this paper are part of the RaceFaceID project. This project studies the enactment of race in different forensic identification practices. In particular, technologies through which a face is given to an unknown individual suspect or victim. These technologies include genetic facial phenotyping, craniofacial reconstruction and the classic facial composite drawing where a facial image of a suspect's face is made with a forensic artist and witness. For more information about the RaceFaceID project see: <https://race-face-id.eu/>.
- 3 In the context of facial composite drawing, the questioning room at the police is often referred to as an 'interview room' to emphasize that the communication process while drawing is not an interrogation, as if the witness is a suspect, but more open and reciprocal. However, in this paper we use the term questioning room to address that the interview takes place at a police station.
- 4 In a forensic setting the forensic artist draws the facial depiction either by hand or with the help of computer software. In the Netherlands, during Rianne's fieldwork period in 2016–2017, some police officers worked with computer software like FACETTE Face Design system or PROFit Facial Composite System to make the facial composite. They are referred to as 'forensic operators' in contrast to 'forensic artists.' For this paper we only worked with and focus on forensic artists drawing by hand, we therefore use the term 'forensic artist.'
- 5 From 2019, the Dutch police force has taken steps towards standardization of the practice.
- 6 A facial composite drawing cannot be rehearsed or repeated. Not only will the facial composite be different the second time, also the mental image of the witness will have changed. In the field of forensic psychology, the verbal description interfering with the initial mental image in the witness' mind is referred to as the 'overshadowing effect' (Meissner and Brigham, 2001).
- 7 In the context of criminal investigation, the image does not travel alone. Rianne analyzes this in detail in other work. For the purpose of this paper we stay with the drawing process itself.
- 8 In that sense it resonates with the use of the term 'co-labouring' by De la Cadena (2015).
- 9 'Eastern Bloc,' in Dutch 'Oostblok,' is sometimes used by witnesses in the Netherlands to refer to any individual or group that is believed to originate from Central or Eastern Europe.
- 10 How populations are differentiated, what differences are made relevant in forensic identification practices and by whom, varies from case to case, from location to location and from technique to technique. Schwartz-Marín et al. (2015) demonstrate this situatedness in the case of Colombian forensic genetics. The standard set of four reference populations used in forensic genetic technologies, known as 'la Tabla,' corresponds to four different regions in Colombia thereby reproducing the common-sense notion of Colombia as a country of racialized regions.
- 11 For example, the background of the category 'Moluccan' is the relocation to the Netherlands of a group of 12.500 Moluccans in 1951 following Indonesian independence. In the subsequent decades conflicts between 'Moluccans' and the Dutch state received a lot of media coverage (Veenman 2001). Also the history of the so-called 'guest workers' is implicated in the categorization system. From the 1960s the Dutch government actively attracted migrant workers from Southern Europe, Morocco and Turkey (Lucassen and Penninx, 1994). The Tupperware boxes emphasize minority populations while the category 'Dutch' is marked by its absence.

- 12 Penry PHOTO-FIT Kit, 1972.
- 13 In this methodographic paper we emphasize how the ethnographic experiment enabled us to attune to these three modes of doing difference. Touching, layering and articulating the common in relation to the absent presence of race are explored and conceptualized in further detail by the different authors in forthcoming papers.
- 14 The drawing process encompasses a multi-sensorial 'education of attention' (Grasseni, 2007) in which the body becomes a tool for articulating differences and similarities. In the situated practice of facial composite drawing this has a rather improvisational and exploratory character, similar to what Myers and Dumit (2011) capture with their notion of 'haptic creativity' in experimental settings. In the acts of pointing, touching and specifying, the bodies of the witness and artist and the suspect's face are not stable but continuously negotiated as parts of shifting collectives.
- 15 The nose as a facial feature has for example a long and explicit history of being racialized (Gilman, 1999).
- 16 The artist requested us to emphasize that the light table was used for the experiment to provide contrast and make the composite drawing more visible *on* the video. She does not use the light table when she draws for criminal investigation thus this exceptional use formed another moment of 'collective epistemic activity.'
- 17 In Dutch "*normaal*" means according to the norm, average, common, ordinary and '*gewoon*' means just, ordinary, the everyday.