

The Choreography of the Museum Experience: Visitors' Designs for Learning

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Abstract: This paper acknowledges the multimodal and social nature of the museum experience. In this paper, we advocate the view that, within this multimodal frame, visitors are agents of their own design for learning as they engage with the exhibition and each other, redesigning the stories told by the curators. Audio-visual data from two individual projects in the UK illustrate the multimodal, embodied and social nature of the museum experience, which is often assumed to be ocularcentric and logocentric, and suggest that visitors learn by constantly making selections and transformations of the exhibition design, based on their own interests and responses to the various prompts emerging in and through social interaction. As such, the data analysis foregrounds the modes of movement, gaze, deixis and posture, which, alongside speech, are integral elements of the learning experience. Shifting our research focus on visitors' redesigns of the exhibition poses a challenge to the curatorial design and has implications for exhibition-makers as it calls into question the assumptions of what should be learned and why, as well as how the resources in the exhibition space should be organised.

Keywords: Museums, Multimodality, Designs For Learning, Visitors, Social Interaction

Introduction

In this paper we examine the museum visiting experience from a multimodal perspective, attending to the significance of the mode of movement in the shaping of learning. In the first part of this paper, we examine how bodily movement has been accounted for within the visitor studies and museum studies dominant paradigms, while proposing a theoretical approach to the study of movement which is informed by a social semiotic and multimodal perspective.

In the second part, we offer two instances of museum visits, involving two pairs of visitors, which were conducted as part of two different museological projects. We turn to these fragments to illustrate how the body can be considered in this kind of analysis and to discuss the significance of these finds in relation to the designs for learning and engagement that curators realize through exhibitions.

The Need to Explore Social Interaction

Visiting a museum requires visitors' active bodily engagement such as entering the gallery space, scanning, exploring, perusing, walking, as well as several modalities of social sharing, such as talking, taking photographs, and pointing. Researchers have attended to visitors' bodies while in the galleries as part of a broader investigation of their movement patterns through the gallery space. In most cases, this is to determine the effectiveness of the exhibition design, the "attracting" and "holding" power of an exhibit (Bitgood 1992; Bitgood et al. 1986) while in other cases, it examines the ways in which specific features of exhibits prompt particular behaviours (Dierking et al. 1985). With the underlying assumption being that all movement unfolds in response to the design of the exhibition, this branch of research downplays visitors' agency. Additionally, sociocultural research conducted in museums has shifted the attention to visitors' agency for their learning by capturing and analysing their conversations (Leinhardt and Knutson 2004; Leinhardt and Crowley 1998; Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson 2002) with a few exceptions exploring

also visitors' non-verbal behaviours, as they arise in and through social interaction (Christidou 2012, 2013; vom Lehn 2002; Christidou and Diamantopoulou in press).

Recently, researchers (Davies and Heath 2013; Pattison and Dierking 2013) have again asserted the importance of social interaction for the shaping of the museum experience and have called for further investigation by shifting the analysis from visitors' individual to collective responses, while focusing on their actual engagement with each other and the exhibits. To this direction, this article suggests that once these contingencies of the museum visit are acknowledged, the question that arises is whether current perceptions of the museum visitor as a static viewer engaged with the collections in mainly an ocularcentric manner are actually pertinent to the contemporary perceptions of communication as multimodal (Kress 2010). By bringing into the foreground the multimodal aspect of communication and the agency of the visitors in shaping this social experience, we propose a way to account for the manifold ways in and through which visitors engage with the artworks and museum artefacts and each other.

Theoretical framework

In our research, the museum experience is treated as a multimodal, social, embodied and contextual event during which visitors "actively create the contexts in which they experience particular exhibits" (vom Lehn et al. 2001, 207) by drawing upon a range of modes – culturally shaped resources, such as speech, gesture and movement. We postulate that visitors design their own learning experience, as they navigate the galleries, with movement being a significant manifestation of this enterprise. Our approach to researching visitors' movement is anchored in multimodal social semiotic perspectives on communication and representation (Kress 2010).

According to this theory, communication and learning happen as a response to a prompt, as individuals driven by their interests select aspects of the world to attend to, frame elements to engage with, and transform the resources that were initially made available to them (Kress 2010). The foregrounding of multimodality is significant in its application in the museum, as it is a reminder that meanings do not only emerge in the linguistic domain, but across a range of modes, such as speech, movement, and writing. The multimodal paradigm this article ascribes to offers resources to account for communication and learning in the museum in an all-encompassing manner. Despite the attendance to individual modes for methodological and analytical purposes, the paradigm offers a possibility for a synthesis of findings through the concept of "orchestration" of modes. It is the "orchestrated" effect of modes, such as speech, movement, and writing that produces the meanings which visitors make of an exhibition. The work each mode performs does not work in isolation, but in conjunction with other modes, either in complementary or contradictory ways. However, the ensemble that is produced by the coming together of the work of the different modes seems to be under temporary coherence and cohesion within the "text" we frame for analysis each time.

This understanding leads us to attend to the micro-movement of visitors not in isolation but in conjunction with communication that arises in other modes, assigning significance to subtle shifts of the body in relation to exhibits and the other visitors, as well as the shifts in gazing, and footing. The body is seen as the site of the emergence of meanings visitors make and of their interest which drives all representation and communication. Our approach is based on the claim that movement, as a mode realises all the elements that constitute communication (Kress 2010; Diamantopoulou and Kress forthcoming), i.e. interest, selection, attention, framing, engagement and transformation (Figure 1). Movement is governed by the logic of time and space: as it unfolds in space and time, it instantiates and materialises all the aforementioned elements of communication, while providing evidence for each of these.

In the case of the exhibition more specifically, this is manifested through a series of bodily configurations immersed in the space that the “exhibition text” organises. This multimodal encounter, within which movement is fore-grounded is happening across space and time and is organized by the logic of space and time. This could make us argue that movement in the exhibition space apart from being a sign of “embodied interest” is also a sign of agency (Diamantopoulou and Kress 2009).

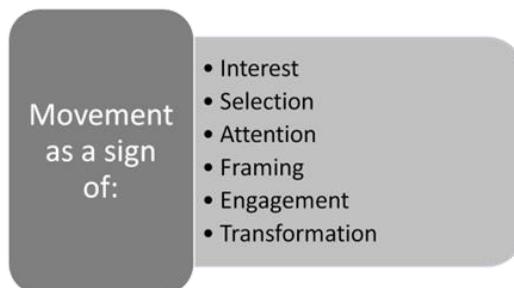


Figure 1
Source: Authors

We envision the encounter between the visitor and the museum (including the building along with the collection and other visitors) as an on-going “choreography of agency.” The metaphor foregrounds the fluidity of visitors’ encounters, their contextual and situational nature, while giving prominence to the mode of movement. Movement is a key mode amongst the embodied meaning making modes and one which is inextricably linked to the embodied practices of visiting an exhibition. As choreography is a type of performance, it allows people to connect with the objects and each other through actions, interactions and relationships, while demonstrating and embodying the deliberate choice of not only “doing”, but also “showing doing” (Schechner 2003). Specifically, “any behavior, event, action or thing can be studied as performance” and “can be analysed in terms of doing, behaving, and showing” (Schechner 2003, 32). Moreover, the concept of choreography entails the notion of design that is compatible with the conceptualization of visitor’s performance in the galleries as a design of their learning. It further highlights the authorship of visitors as active makers of meaning, while shifting the attention to social interaction, as well as the interplay and co-existence of agents on the museum floor (Christidou and Diamantopoulou in press).

The concept of agency has been extensively used in anthropological and social research and has mainly been associated with the work of Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell (Yialouri 2013) to account for this aspect of social action which is the ability to act upon the world, including all material artefacts. Our work contributes a social semiotic take to the notion of acting upon the world; one that originates in the work of Gunther Kress to account for both the interaction of humans with other humans, as well as their mediated action, involving artefacts. By doing so, we shift the attention to the semiotic activity of individuals in communication and representation (Kress 2010). Agency is attributed solely to human actors who are shaped socially and interact with each other, engaging artefacts in their social practice. Both interest and agency are embodied and materially realised in the instances of communication in the museum exhibition, as well as all sites of communication and meaning making (Diamantopoulou and Kress forthcoming).

To argue so, we have attended to the micro-movement of visitors in two case studies in conjunction with communication that arises in other modes, assigning significance to subtle shifts of the body in response to exhibits and other visitors, as well as to shifts in gazing and footing. By doing so, the museum visit is less concerned with “consuming”

heritage than with producing, sustaining, or revamping social roles and relationships. Our intentions in this paper are:

- to introduce the concepts of visitors' agency and embodiment,
- to discuss the centrality of the human social agency, and thus, emphasize the social context and its affordances, or constraints, in the shaping of the museum encounter, and
- to redirect the attention away from treating the museum as a collection of objects of high value to seeing the museum as a site of social, and corporeal practices.

The Choreography of the Museum Experience

The paper brings together data from two different projects to support the claim that movement is a significant, if not a leading, meaning making resource. The first project involved a number of case studies from two museums in Stockholm, Sweden and one in London, UK.¹ Pairs of visitors, who agreed to take part, were observed, as they were visiting the galleries, while being audio and videotaped. The second project investigated the use of pointing gestures in museums as a means for social sharing among visitors. The corpus of data included video-recordings of visitors at least in pairs across three museums in London, UK.

Through the detailed analysis of single instances and by comparing and contrasting characteristic actions and activities between various fragments, both projects sought to identify aspects, patterns and the organisation of the museum encounters. These two projects, both informed by social semiotic multimodal perspectives, used audio-visual data for exploring visitors' engagement with museum exhibits and paid close attention to the orchestration of the modes of movement, speech and gesture. In common with previous research (Falk et al. 2007; Insulander 2010; Lindstrand 2008; vom Lehn 2002, 2007, 2013; vom Lehn et al. 2001), these two projects postulated that much of what happens in the museum unfolds in and through social interaction, during which movement rises to prominence.

Two examples are used, one from each project, in order to showcase our findings and support our arguments. The first comes from the Museum of London and the second from the Courtauld Gallery. These instances have been selected, as they provide interesting or particularly characteristic instances which reflect the more common aspects/dimensions of museum encounters. They both describe instances of visitors discovering an exhibit after being summoned by their fellow visitors, with the second building upon the patterns emerging from the first example. Through these fragments, we begin to see how visitors carefully choreograph their action and interaction with their companions as part of their social experience.

Holding the Ground for Engagement

The first fragment showcases the agentic engagement of visitors with the exhibition design, while highlighting the significance of movement in visitors' engagement. It unfolds in the *London before London* gallery at the Museum of London and involves a male adult (M) along with a younger female adult (W) at the coin display within the Prehistoric archaeology gallery. It starts with M approaching the right side of the coin glass-case, followed by a slight movement to his left, while W explores an interactive exhibit, standing

¹ The two projects are: (a) the international project *The museum, the exhibition and the visitor: Learning in the new arena of communication* funded by the Swedish Research Council and (b) the co-author's doctoral project, funded by the Greek Scholarships Foundation.

at the left side of the gallery room. M explores the contents of the display, as indicated by the direction of his lower body and gaze for a few seconds (Figure 2). He then turns his upper body and gaze towards the right, facing W, while keeping his lower torso stable and his feet firmly on its initial place and calls her by her name (Figure 3).



Figure 2



Figure 3

Source: Authors

W turns to his side giving out an acknowledgment token (“yeah”) (Figure 4). W regains her previous positioning, facing and interacting with the interactive exhibit for about thirteen seconds (Figure 5), while M turns anew to her direction, monitoring her attendance. W starts walking towards his direction (Figure 6). Upon sensing or hearing his companion approaching from the right, M lifts his head slightly up, turning it to his right, shifts his weight to right leg, opens his torso to the direction of W and simultaneously points with his left index finger towards a pile of coins at the bottom right hand corner of the glass case (Figure 7). Once W positions herself next to M, she acknowledges the deictic gesture by uttering “yeah.”



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Source: Authors

M invites W to “*have a look at the coins found*” while gazing at the bottom right hand corner, indicating the locus of his attention (Figure 8). W positions herself closer to M, while facing the glass-case. She then bends her upper body and leans forward and down, lowering her gaze onto the coins first for less than a second and immediately raising her gaze towards the text; a shift that indicates her reading of the text (Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8



Figure 9

Source: Authors

W is scanning the interpretive text quickly from the left and settles on the right column of the text for six seconds. M remains in the same position and posture, looking at the text and then the pile of coins. M’s gaze remains fixed at the text, a sign of invitation for W to engage with the text further. W gives out an exclamatory “*aahh*” sound, to which M responds by a subtle nod, and then W continues reading the text for another two seconds. W then looks down to the left part and then again to the right of the text panel. Remaining slightly bent forward, she lifts her gaze and head to glance at the pots displayed in the glass-case above. During this time, M changes the focus of his gaze a few times, shifting it from the text to the pots above and then down to the coins. This shift in gazing may be seen as an embodied indication of a shift in attention, which is further acknowledged and attended by W, who engages in mimetic action, allowing her gaze to be guided and framed by her co-visitor’s performance. Research suggests that “free-viewing observers strongly follow the gaze direction of human actors in natural scenes” (Borji et al. 2014, 25). The performance of W, when following M’s gaze, may be seen as a potentially mimetic and transformative one (Wulf 2011) and may form a response to M’s potential intention to frame/or shape her attention by directing her gaze.

As W is about to disengage herself from reading the text, she lifts up her torso and turns to the right, a shift in posture attended by M, as he follows that backward lift, taking it further back transferring his weight away from the case (Figure 10). As W sustains her place and is about to lean forward towards the case again, he simultaneously moves forward as well and gazes down for a second. W lowers her body and approaches the glass case to observe some detail more closely for two seconds. She then lifts up again and shifts her weight to the right away from the exhibit, while keeping her gaze still fixed at the coins. M is simultaneously shifting his weight to the right, moving his gaze away from the exhibit, and marking the end of their joint engagement, as they both turn around and move away by walking to the right side of the exhibit.



Figure 10
Source: Authors

This instance is illustrative of how visitors hold the ground for the engagement of each other through bodily movement and gaze. It is the initial movement of M that offers the prompts for the engagement of W by signalling to her where she should look and for how long. This is indicative of the strength of the agency of M in the shaping of the engagement and the design of the learning experience for W. M's movement is indicative of his interests and of what he has selected and framed as significant for them to engage with in transformative action. He indicates with his gaze, rather than his index finger, where W should look at, thus investing his gaze with deictic qualities. In those instances in which W's gaze is shifting away from the text which M is marking with his gaze for her, M's firm movement and gaze catches the subtle shift of W's gaze and redirects it back to the desired location, which is the text. The prolonged stillness in his movement, the firm posture of his body and the orientation of all body parts towards both the exhibit and W is reminiscent of his posture at his initial encounter with the exhibit. His orientation then was a sign of full immersion, engagement and interest with the new. In this case, where his orientation takes into account that of W as well, his posture is indicative of his interest to frame the exhibit for her and guide her through the text and artefacts, actually by blocking out for her the option of moving on to the next exhibit too quickly. The only active body part is his gaze which is suggestive of his design for the experience of W. He makes sure that she attends to all texts and coins in the exhibit.

W is responsive to his prompt and framing, willingly exploring the coins and reading the text toward which she is guided. In other instances though, it is the agency of W which is the dominant one. She may have taken a while to respond to the call of M to approach the chosen exhibit, but once there, she engages with his interest and exercises her agency to attend carefully to all the selections of M as a respondent to his prompts. Half way through the interaction, she seems to act as the initiator of prompts, making her own selections in terms of exploring aspects of the texts and artefacts, going back and forth between the texts and the coins. M remains responsive to these subtle changes of position and shadows his daughter's selection through the movement of his head and gaze, despite some instances of resistance where he tries through his gaze to get her to engage more with the text. W is also the one who gives the signal to M that the encounter with the exhibit has ended. He seems to be exceptionally responsive to this on both the occasions on which she signals the exit. In the first instance she prompts him to respond both to her exit signal, as well as to her immediate change of mind, as she shifts her body

away and towards the exhibit for a last glimpse at the coins. M remains tuned in to this subtle shift, as well as the one of their exit from the exhibit area.

The gentle and slight shifts of movement of these two visitors, in response to each other's prompts constitute a "dance of agency" which shapes the visiting experience and reflects the designs for learning that each of them have shaped in accordance to their interests and intentions. The subtle movements of the body (including gaze and deixis) of each visitor hold the ground for the engagement of the other visitor in this pair, or even other visitors in the vicinity, as other video excerpts from this research have shown (Diamantopoulou and Kress forthcoming). They also seem to be both prompting and holding the ground for a manifestation of agentic action in the other person. Such a transformative action can be suggestive of learning and the creation of a design of learning.

Movement in this instance has served as a prompt and invitation for engagement. It is a means for framing the visiting experience and in this particular instance has been the lead mode that has shaped the orchestration of all the other modes. Even though speech is limited in this example, we can clearly attend to the multimodal ensemble of speech and movement around the utterance of M "*have a look at the coins found.*" His movement just prior to speaking is that of welcoming W to his selected exhibit, opening up towards her side to receive her. This resonates with the verbal invitation to look at the artefacts, a linguistic utterance that ratifies what has been just previously expressed in movement.

The Choreography of the Museum Experience: The Wider Social Context

The second fragment exemplifies more in depth how co-visitors' experience with an exhibit is contingent upon the context in which the encounter emerges (Christidou 2012; Heath and vom Lehn 2004). As aforementioned, the incident takes place at the Courtauld Gallery, also in London, UK and unfolds in interaction with the Seurat's painting *Woman Powdering Herself*. Again, we join a male adult (M) and a young female (D) entering the room. As they walk ahead, M turns to his right and notices Seurat's painting. Here, the shift in posture and gaze is an embodied indicator of his shift in interest and attention. Although it falls unnoticed by his fellow visitor, M reinforces his indication by giving out a verbal account of his performance. Specifically, as he faces the painting, he uses spatial deixis ("*that; that*") for locating the object of attention and a deictic verb ("*look*") that invites his companion to carry out an action, the action of "looking" in this case (Figures 11 and 12). Immediately afterwards, he turns towards his co-visitor in an attempt to secure her attention and thus, her attendance.



Figure 11



Figure 12

Source: Authors

He then, approaches the painting and situates himself to the painting's right side while leaving space for D, who joins him after a second, to occupy his left. It can be argued that "arriving second" (Christidou 2012) requires a number of performances given by the person who has arrived first in a systematic attempt to facilitate those co-visitors who had dispersed earlier to catch up and re-join them. Additionally, it requires a public display of re-joining given by the person who arrives later, signalling in this way the beginning of sharing attention with the members of his/her group once more.

Following her embodied acknowledgement of his intention to socially share and interact with her, M turns briefly to his left and faces her. This may be seen an embodied acknowledgement of her re-joining, as well as an embodied attempt to monitor her attendance further. M immediately performs an iconic gesture of "making dots", while repeatedly uttering the word "dot" eight times (Figure 13). Both performances (gestural and verbal) link to the technique the painter (Seurat) used for this painting and are part of his interpretation of this painting. M then consults the label in silence for a while (Figure 14) and when he finishes reading, he flicks his gaze between the label and the actual painting, before he concludes his performance by saying "*they paint in small dots.*" His utterance repeats the word he has previously uttered, reconfirming his interpretation, before reading the painting's interpretive text.



Figure 13



Figure 14

Source: Authors

He then reinforces his performance by offering a verbal and nonverbal account of a specific way to look at the painting, so as to unveil the millions of dots it features. Specifically, M instructs D verbally to squint, while walking backwards ("*if you squint or look in the long way, I feel it's all painted with water*") (Figure 15). D attends to his instruction and embodies her acknowledgement of attendance by squinting and looking at the painting (Figure 16). By imitating his performance, D sees the painting in the light of his performance.



Figure 15

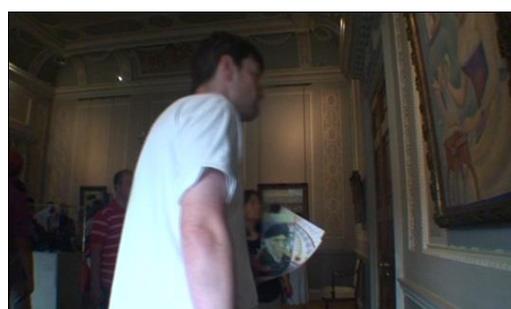


Figure 16

Source: Authors

A sudden noise and a few new visitors distract M's attention (Figure 17). He attempts to summarise his performance by giving out an utterance expressing an evaluation of his (*"The painting (-) ways of capturing the feelings rather than (-)"*) and then he moves on as more people have gathered nearby. While he is moving away towards the other side of Room 4, D lingers for a while, looking to her left (Figure 18). He then turns back and looks at D (Figure 19). His shift in posture and gaze can be viewed as two ways to reconfirm her attendance. D notices his pause and starts walking closer to him.



Figure 17



Figure 18

Source: Authors



Figure 19

Source: Authors

Interestingly enough, throughout this small interaction, D has not said anything at all. Instead, she has been constantly confirming her attendance by being physically present and in close proximity to M, following his indications and listening to him. Moreover, D has not only been drawn to and away from the painting by her co-visitor's performance, but has also seen the painting in the light of his performance; that is, she has seen the painting in very specific ways (i.e. squinting and stepping backwards). This on-going and embodied acknowledgment of her co-visitor may be seen as indicative of their relationship status, their social bonds, which also shape their encounter with the exhibit. This may be also related to one of Falk's visitors' identities (2009), the facilitator, which refers to those visitors coming to the museum on behalf of others' special interests in the exhibition or the subject-matter of the museum.

From this example, we begin to see how social interaction and the social bonds between those two participants have led them to discover, approach and look at the painting in specific ways, while informing their forthcoming encounter. Moreover, the duration of this encounter is further informed by the ongoing occurrence of the social

interaction not only between these two visitors but also among the rest of visitors who happen to be in the same room at the same time (i.e. sudden, loud noise).

Conclusion

Building on a multimodal social semiotic theory of communication (Kress 2010), this paper has introduced a relevant theoretical framework to explore the interaction of visitors with each other and with the exhibits. This theoretical framework allows us to attend to aspects of communication that are less foregrounded in relevant studies, i.e. the agency of the visitors in shaping the museum experience and designing their learning, as well as the significance of the visitors' movement as a sign of this agency. Such a multimodal take on the museum experience has been the means for revisiting it as a corporeal experience materialised through movement.

Through an analysis of two instances of communication in pairs of visitors at the Museum of London and the Courtauld Gallery in London we have substantiated the claim that visitors' movement, studied in conjunction with the other modes they have available for making meaning, actually plays a leading role in shaping their experience of the exhibition and is the main vehicle through which they hold the ground for each other's engagement and learning.

The "choreography" of the visitors' museum experience in these examples is a manifestation of the visitors' intentions and interest to engage with the exhibition world and frame aspects of this world for one another (Christidou and Diamantopoulou in press). By virtue of their posture, feet position, their gaze and head movement (Goffman 1971), they display the focus of attention, and thus embodying their interest, as well as any, even subtle, change in it. From both examples, we can see that visitors who arrive second at the exhibit, align their bodies close to those who invited them over, and are expected to acknowledge mutual attention through their gaze, posture, feet position, head orientation, as well as brief acknowledgement tokens (i.e. "yes" or nodding positively). Visitors use movement to endorse each other's agency in the shaping of the experience. They engage with the way their visiting partners move and navigate space, and respond in movement to each other's prompt to view the exhibits in specific ways (Christidou 2015). They acknowledge the agency of their peers and exercise their own, shown by those instances where their movement flows along with their fellow visitor's movement, or it resists the suggested flow by initiating another. The shifting of agency in the social experience of the visit has been referred to as a "dance of agency" within this choreography of the museum experience.

The findings framed in these examples endorse those of previous research (vom Lehn et al. 2001) in terms of reinforcing the claim that visitors create their own context within which they experience the visit. They further support the claim that visitors design their own learning experience for each other through a communication process of making selections of what to attend to, of framing elements of the exhibition for each other and transforming aspects of the exhibition driven by their interests. The findings suggest that visitors mutually create for each other a "design for learning", a frame within which the museum experience operates.

To attend to this frame one would need to attribute significance to all the material manifestations of meaning across the multiplicity of modes involved in the visiting experience, e.g. speech, movement, gaze, gesture etc. The findings from these two case studies resonate with an earlier claim that the ratification and endorsement of what has been first expressed in movement manifests in the other modes such as speech and deixis (Diamantopoulou and Kress forthcoming). The shifting of attention to the agency of visitors and their designs for learning has implications for the curatorial designs for learning, as well as for all research that is oriented to maximizing the learning potential of

exhibits. Curators, apart from telling stories through the design of the museum exhibitions, also design the choreography of their spectators, since visitors are assumed to navigate the gallery rooms by adopting “organised walking,” with controlled “route, speed, gestures, speaking, and sound” (Borden 2001, 184). Visitors are assumed to engage by displaying different modes of attention and by taking different viewing positions. Curatorial intentions, irrespectively of their good character, are often not realized, as “the museum’s intended address to visitors - the ways in which curators attempt to “speak to” an audience via exhibits (Macdonald 2006, 221) - actually fails to work in practice. Most of times visitors’ designs for learning are “a more complex affair: disconnected, improvised and usually fun” (Annis 1994, 20).

The finding that visitors can potentially make their own meanings irrespectively of the design for learning which the curators materialise through an exhibition (Bezemer et al. 2012; Diamantopoulou et al. 2012) is significant in terms of rethinking the importance we assign to the curators’ design as the key determinant of the experience. It also reinstates the visitors as authors of their own experiences. It is through such a conceptualisation of communication, which “acknowledges the agency of learners” that we can begin to locate signs of new resources that visitors recruit and bring in to the equation.

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