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Making meaning in museum exhibitions: design, agency and (re-)representation

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Based on a three year project 'The Museum, the Exhibition and the Visitors: Meaning making in a new arena for learning and communication' (funded by the Swedish Research Council) the article asks what might be constants of meaning-making as visitors engage in a Museum exhibition.

Taking a multimodal and social semiotic approach to communication and meaning-making, the paper stresses the centrality of human social agency. It emphasises that it is the social environment and its potentials which is enabling in relation to the potentials of available resources.

Our focus is on how meanings are made and remade by visitors, in constantly transformative processes. What underlie this transformation of resources for the making of new meanings are common principles of communication, initiated by 'interest'. These foreground the agency of all visitors in the processes of meaning making, as well as underpin the interplay between visitors, their interests, their backgrounds, their resources with aspects of the environment.

THE AIMS

The dazzling pace of development of the digital technologies of communication and information holds out the tantalizing possibility of an entire remaking not just of communication but of social relations in all domains affected by these technologies. There is much evidence of that already, whether in institutions and the public domain generally, or in the private domain – in as far as that distinction still holds. Advertising, the media gen-

erally, political communication, 'formal' education, commerce, public relations - to name but a few - are institutions directly and profoundly affected. 'The Museum' is entirely drawn in to this; and in many ways more so than many other institutions. In as far as it serves (in many cases) at least two masters, the state and 'the public at large', it is constrained by the demands of its political (pay-) masters and constrained by a fragmented, unstable, demanding public; it has both less freedom of movement and greater need for action than many other institutions.

'Dazzle' draws attention, inevitably. And so the digital technologies occupy centre ground in much public attention. Yet communication takes place irrespective of the technologies that are used. There is representation on the one hand and there is interpretation (as re-representation) on the other; those involved in the process of communication engage with representations – the exhibition in a museum, for instance. In visitors' engagement they select and frame aspects of the exhibition; from what has been framed for them (as a prompt for them), they make their interpretations as 'inner' representations. Agency is involved in representation both as outwardly visible/tangible signs and in inward representation as interpretation. Meaning is made in both processes. At some level of generality we assume this process to be constant: shaped by the specificities of the environment, of which the technologies form a part, and yet, at some level, irrespective of the specificities of environments.

In this paper our focus is on where and how meanings are made and re-made, in constantly transformative processes. It is on the agency of all participants in the processes of meaning making, and on the interplay between participants, their interests, their backgrounds, their resources with aspects of the environment.

OUR PERSPECTIVE: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The 'dazzling pace' of (digital) technologies is, we insist, enabled and 'produced' by the equally profound and far-reaching pace of social and economic change. In that, the museum has become a focal point, a point of intersection of social, cultural and technological forces. In many ways, the museum acts as a precise indicator of social, institutional and of individual

conditions: each of these perspectives provides a distinctive lens on each of the others. The move by the state and by society, in recent decades, to turn the museum into a specific kind of educational institution as one among others, is a part of that process: providing an increasingly diverse society with what has been called a generalized ‘social education’, an education aimed at enabling members of that society to participate in ‘the social’ with fuller understanding (Langenbucher, 2008).

In our approach the social is prior to the technological in a number of ways. If communication is about meaning first and foremost, then we assume that meaning arises in social (inter-) action. From that perspective, the media, as the tools / instruments (the technologies), of interaction, are secondary, in two ways. If the social was other than it is, many or most of the facilities of the digital technologies would not or could not be used in the way that they are; and if no meaning was generated in social (inter-) action, there would be nothing to mediate. If current processes of communication are marked by more horizontal forms of power, it is the result of social (and economic) changes. In as far as the digital media have been an integral part of communicational changes, that redistribution of power is a social fact first and foremost. The contemporary possibilities of agency in making meaning, as much as its recognition, are facts in which the digital media have not been causal – though the exploitation of such new arrangements of power has been enormously furthered by the ‘affordances’ of contemporary ICTs.

(MULTIMODAL) SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

The theory which we use is that of (Multimodal) Social Semiotics. In that label, the term “multimodal” is, in a real sense, redundant, given that semiotics is concerned with signs in all modes, as socially made resources for representation (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2010). The “social” in “Social Semiotics” is not redundant however. It marks off this approach from others in which systems of signs ‘exist’ and are available for use as compared to the approach here in which cultural resources for the making of signs are available in particular communities, and are used in the constant new making of signs. As a second and major point of difference, in the always new making of signs, the sign is based on the selection of an apt form for the expression/realisation of the meaning which the

sign-maker wishes to make. The relation of form and meaning in signs is motivated by the interest of the sign-maker, who chooses an apt form for the realization of the meaning to be realized.



Fig 1. Museum of London: Display case with prehistoric tools

Translated into a methodology for visitor studies in the museum (Diamantopoulou, 2008; Insulander, 2008; Insulander, 2010; Insulander & Lindstrand, 2008, 2013; Insulander & Selander, 2009; Lindstrand, 2008), and the study of meaning-making in this context, it permits making hypotheses about the interest and intended meanings - of the sign-maker based on the form of the sign. This applies to the initial sign-maker – as when the curator (or a curatorial team) decides to display prehistoric tools as aesthetic objects in one exhibition (Fig 1) and as objects of scientific examination and analysis in another. It applies, equally, in the sign-making as interpretation of visitors, who in a ‘map’ (Figs 2 and 3) both select, arrange and document, in a drawing as the form, the meanings to which they wish to draw attention. The criterial aspects of these meanings are represented in the components of the drawing and the relation between them as arrangements.

Methodologically it makes it possible to treat all aspects of the exhibition and those of the signs which form the interpretations of a visitor, as the

realization of the interest of the sign-maker in focus – curator in one case, visitor in the other. The methodology can reveal the interest of the curator (in her or his role as mediator of government policy via museum policy), as much as the (often diverse) interests of a curatorial team, constituted by the collective interests and social formations of that team.

In the context of this theoretical / methodological frame, we examine the relation of museum and visitor via the practices and effects of representation. ‘Communication as social practice’ provides the more general frame. Given the constancy of processes of representation and interpretation, visitors are likely to make their interpretations/representations in ways largely akin to the manner in which humans have done for centuries: abstracted and / or embodied, sensuous in the ways that culturally available meanings are socially embodied and the senses shaped in cultural environments and social practices. Yet the present environments in which they do so and the potentials of the resources available as tools to use in that process, are profoundly different from those of even a century ago.

In this frame (including the framing of our research) we consider five broad questions around representation and interpretation: 1. Who represents; and who interprets (‘re-represents’)? 2. What is represented? 3. How is what is represented, represented? 4. What is not represented? 5. What could not be represented given the modes (and their affordances) or the ensembles of modes available in a culture?

These five questions allow us to address meaning-making in the museum, always in relation to a) the social environments in which communication takes place with their specificities; b) the cultural resources for representation available in any one (social) site; and c) the technologies of dissemination (as well as production, reproduction) (the ICTs) in use.

Taking an ‘audio-guide’ as an instance of the application of the five questions just above: it presents an account based on the selections of a curator of elements of an exhibition (responding to questions 1 and 2). Power is at issue in different ways (e.g. will there be a multiple choice question sheet at the end? are the ‘interpreters’ children on a school visit, or casual visitors?). That involves ‘what is represented’, in that speech and not image is the mode used; and speech is likely to be used as a ‘supplement of meaning’ to aspects of the exhibition which are ‘present’ to the visitor in that exhibition.

Let us refer to the example of fig 1 above, from the perspective of question

3. In the exhibition 'London before London', prehistoric tools are shown in large glass cases, in a bluish-white light, much as they might be in an art-gallery. In our (Foucauldian) terms we would say, they are shown within an 'aesthetic discourse'. Under 5 we would ask: 'given a specific medium, can texture be represented? or smell? or temperature? or taste? or sound? Or under 4: what is not represented that could have been? That is, what selections and exclusions have been made, in any given environment, for reasons of an ideological kind; or because of a limitation in the choice of modes – e.g. not colour or not moving image.

We would ask the same questions of the representations-as-interpretations made by the visitors to an exhibition: whether their representations had been made on the spot, so to speak – with a digital camera, maybe; or spoken into a sound-recorder; or somewhat later on some internet site, as blog with writing and image; as a video uploaded later; or in response to a request, as in our case, with paper and pen; or in response to a question in an interview at the end of a visit.

To sum up at this point: our focus is the (transformative) agency in meaning making – whether that of the curator or of the visitor. We insist that the focus on representation is essential to get a picture 'in the round' of all aspects of communication. Further, we wish to draw attention to some constants, lest in a totally absorbing attention to flux, essential social human constants are lost sight of. In the case of the Museum and its social purposes, for it to be successful all these factors need to be understood in their totality and interaction as best as can be.

We want to focus at the (relatively, more or less) stable givens of communication in museums: as sites for making meaning and for communication; the exhibition as a designed space organized, as the result of processes of selection, themselves guided by yet other designs – those of the Museum and the State, because, as in the research project in which our work was done, we have a sharp eye on the constantly reconfigured relations of State, Society, Museum as institution, and visitors as 'representative' of a specific – often fragmented, increasingly diverse – public.

The constants of communication include, centrally for us, the processes of transformation that the visitors of museums are involved in as they make meanings of the designed environments. Our contribution is aimed to show what can be done representationally with a specific kind of resource, bring-

ing technologies and other resources agentively into communicative action in that wider frame.

CONSTANTS OF COMMUNICATION:

EXAMPLES OF MUSEUM VISITORS' MEANING MAKING

Here we wish to show how various resources integrate with an overall design made by visitors in their engagement as communication in a gallery. Our focus is on representations, from the starting point that all participants in communication are seen as producers. We look at how social environments, as well as resources for representation and technologies of dissemination offer different possibilities and restraints in communication.

In this article we are keen to foreground the agency of the visitors in their making of meaning, with and to some extent 'irrespective' of the resources involved. While the motivation for the introduction of digital technologies in the Museum (and their use, we admit, by researchers as well) in general seems to be to develop tools that 'enhance' the museum experience and maybe 'learning', the question of what communication actually is, and what constitutes meaning-making is not really posed. We wish to make that a guiding issue.

This transformative engagement with resources is what we refer to as (re-) representation. The examples of our study come from the Museum of National Antiquities and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm as well as from the Museum of London, in London. We focus on instances of visitors' interaction - with the exhibits and with each other - and on their use of digital camera and audio guide as tools for engagement, selection and framing of aspects of the exhibition, in order to discuss the visitors' agency in (re-)representing the meanings made by curators.

In the study we approached visitors as 'pairs' – friends, grandparent and grandchild, couples, etc. All were asked for their consent to be video recorded, given a digital camera to take photos as they wished, asked to wear an audio-recording device, asked to draw a 'map' representing their sense of the exhibition at the end of their visit, and asked to participate in a brief interview.

The following examples have been selected in order to illustrate some central aspects regarding the nature of meaning-making in exhibitions, how it is expressed in the form of (re-)representations and how it is influenced

by matters regarding social agency. The principled engagement with the various resources of the exhibition is linked to the visitors' interest, agency, selection, framing and transformation. The examples are organized with the three aspects in mind regarding the conditions for meaning-making presented above: a) the social environments in which communication takes place with their specificities; b) the cultural resources for representation available in any one (social) site; and c) the technologies of dissemination (as well as production, reproduction) in use.

A. AGENCY AT PLAY: MEANING-MAKING AS A SOCIAL VENTURE

Albert, 11 years old, and his aunt Anne, 25, visited the Museum of National Antiquities and the exhibition Prehistories I. They decided to use the museum's audio guide, available for loan to visitors at the reception desk. The guide offers a way to closely study some of the themes that are introduced by way of the arrangement of objects, in panels and in other resources. The tracks of the audio guide are activated through transponders that are placed at selected spots of the exhibition. Narrations of about two minutes are played when visitors press a button on their guide; in some cases it is possible to listen to additional narrations giving 'in-depth information' about the materials already introduced.

Within the frame of our research, it seems that the audio guide shapes the visitor's focus of attention to a selection of themes and objects made by 'the curator' as a producer. In this way, the producer's agency and authorship is emphasized, rather than the agency of visitors. As a consequence, the two companions didn't talk very much to each other, as they listened to the guide and walked through the gallery. In this way, it seems that technology do change the way the participants communicate and equally change their agency in terms of choice and selections.

For the researcher/bystander this way of 'reading' the exhibition has consequences for the possibility to obtain data, in terms of signs that are made outwardly, like speech and gestures in social interaction. Even though the conversation was limited, it is possible to see on the video how the pair stops at points suggested by the guide; and their body positions reveal their engagement with a specific content or theme. In this way the visit appear to be framed by someone else's interest and Albert and Anne devote themselves to following the instructions on the audio guide rather than making

choices according to their personal interests. Compared to other visitors' in this exhibition, it seemed as though this visit became more of an individual experience. In the interview afterwards, this was confirmed by Anne who said that she regretted to have chosen to go with the guide, in that it became a restriction for her engagement with the exhibition, and that she would have wanted to read more of the written texts.

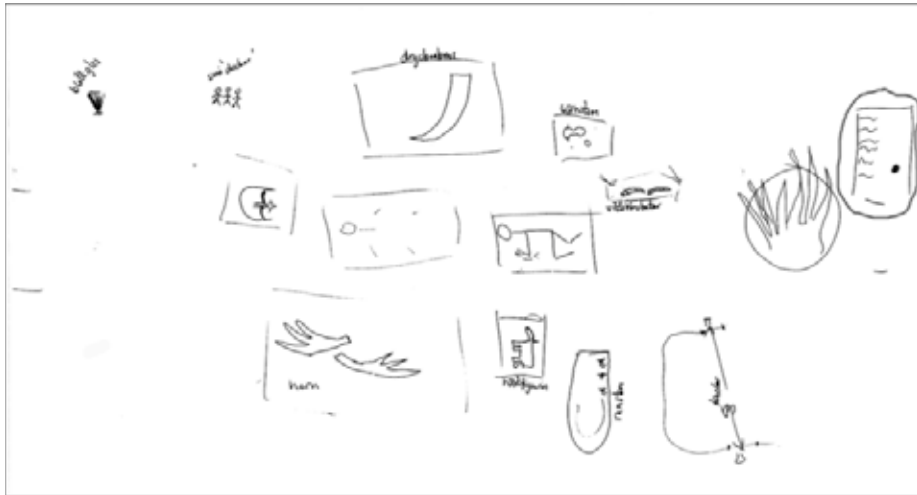


Fig 2. Text panel with transponder in the upper right corner (circling made by the authors)

In the 'map' made by Anne (fig 2) at the end of the visit, the audio guide is represented as a text panel with transponder, a record of something that was particularly salient during her visit. Her decision to represent the audio guide indicates how technological, representational and social aspects are mutually intertwined in meaning making – but that the social is foregrounded also by the participants in the study. In our approach, the use of paper and pencil allowed this participant to represent how technology had shaped her 'reading' of the exhibition in significant and perhaps not desirable ways. At the same time, the map is also a key into her engagement and interest in the material aspects of the exhibition, as she has selected and (re-)represented specific objects and findings, such as a two different burials with human skeletons, arranged in the center of the drawing.

Looking back at the set of questions proposed above, our first example deals with question 1 and 2, asking Who represents and Who interprets, and What is represented?

Another example, from the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, provides a similar outlook on visitors' interest and agency in their work to engage with an exhibition. Bridget and Bill, a couple in their thirties, visited the exhibition 'The Middle Kingdom' at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm.

In the context of this article we would like to focus on our conversation with Bridget and Bill after their encounter with the exhibition, as it provides an opportunity to say something about interest and agency as rooted in social aspects of meaning-making, and about the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations within an exhibition.

As with all of our participants in the study we began our concluding interview by asking Bridget and Bill to draw a map of the exhibition. Bridget used her map (Fig. 3) as a basis for a recount of her interests in relation to various aspects of the exhibition and of the choices she had made during the visit. She explained that once inside the room she had walked straight to an exhibit with colourful dresses that caught her attention. However, Bill had walked in an opposite direction and she instantly felt a need to comment on and talk about the things she encountered. She therefore decided to change direction and join Bill in his trajectory, thus re-designing her initial path of navigation and thereby changing the order in which she would encounter the various parts and elements of the exhibition.

The red oval (added by the authors) shows where Bridget has drawn the entrance to the exhibition space. The red circle (added by the authors) indicates where she has drawn the exhibit with dresses. The line in zigzag marks her navigation path.

As it turned out during our conversation, both Bridget and Bill thought that they shared a common approach to the exhibition from that point, but it became clear that they had interpreted the design of the exhibition differently. They had agreed on the direction, but not on the relation between the display cases to the left and right in the corridor. As Bridget has indicated on her map she moved in zigzag, since she figured that the corridor itself represented time (indicated by the name of the represented dynasty in writing on the floor) and that the display cases to her left and right were con-

nected in the sense that they presented objects from the same historical period. Bill, on the other hand, had figured that the idea was to take one lap at the time, beginning on the left side – or the “outer circle” – and then taking the “inner circle” by walking through the exhibition again, now focusing on the display cases to his right. Apart from moving in the same direction, they had interpreted the design of the exhibition in different ways and attributed different logics to it, even though Bill found it difficult to see the logic in “his” exhibition. He explained that he had difficulties in understanding how the second lap made sense in relation to the rest of the exhibition.

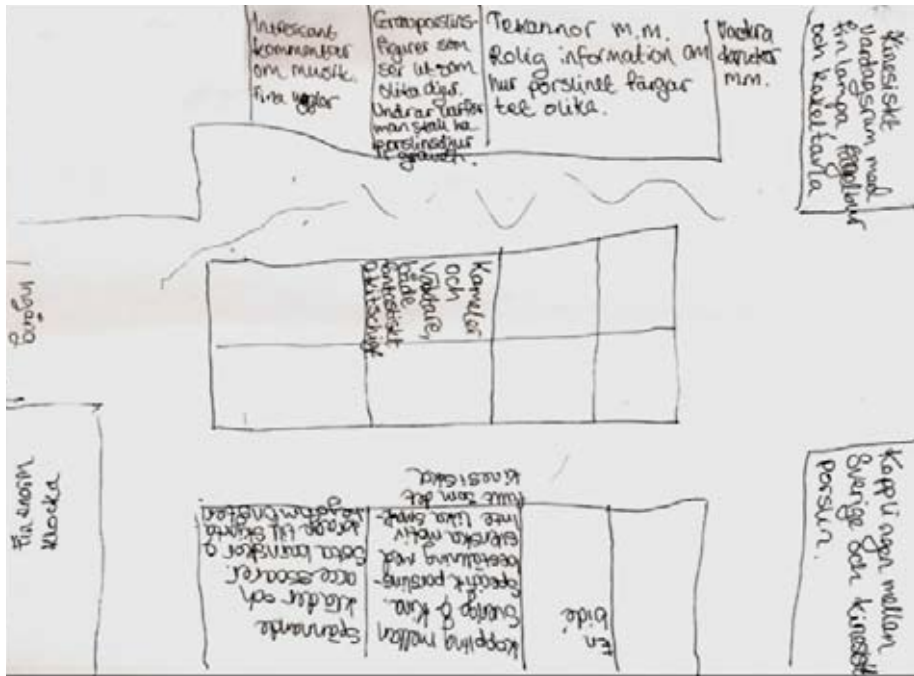


Fig 3. Bridget's 'map' of the exhibition

Bridget's decision to change her path indicates how the social aspects of the exhibition as an arena for communication affects the selections – and thus the meanings – made during the navigation through it. By altering her trajectory, the exhibition-as-text changed. In the same way the two visitors designed their own individual exhibitions through the strategies they

applied, resulting in differences in terms of the meanings they made. At the same time, the example shows how (social) meaning was introduced as Bridget had to make a decision whether to give priority to the possibility of interacting socially with Bill during the visit, or to focus primarily on the objects that caught her attention at first. In terms of agency, she made an active decision based on her evaluation of what was more important to her in that situation: to interact socially with her partner rather than experiencing the exhibition in a certain order.

B. MEANING-MAKING AS PRINCIPLED ENGAGEMENT WITH AVAILABLE MODES

Carl is a 12 year old boy who visited the Museum of London with his mother Christine. When he was asked to draw a map of the exhibition, he chose to represent an airplane, a tree, a spear, a tool and a skull (fig 4). Each of these elements stands for items that were displayed in different parts of the prehistoric exhibition 'London before London'. The items in the 'map' feature elements that were salient for this visitor. Clearly his attention was particularly drawn by a small model airplane, which was set within a diorama. This showed that the contemporary site of Heathrow airport was a site of archaeological importance, as there had been an ancient settlement. The technology used in the diorama enabled Carl to view the contemporary airport and the settlement alternatively, through the use of mirrors and lights. Carl's map shows his interest in this exhibit very clearly, considering the size and the placement of the airplane on his map.

Some would perhaps argue that the 'map' is an instance of misconception and misunderstanding of the exhibition designer's intentions, since Carl has mixed pre-historical and contemporary objects in his (re-)representation. By contrast we see this as an instance of communication as meaning-making in a process of framing, selection and interpretation, an 'accommodation' of specific prompts in the exhibition and a transformation of this into a new, meaningful entity to this 're-designer' of the exhibition. This interpretation also says something about what is recognized as relevant



Fig 4. 'Heathrow': A twelve year old boy's map from the exhibition 'London Before London'

knowledge, and in this case there is no syllabus, no ways of assessing what has been learned, that relates to a certain standard .

Carl (re-)represented / transformed the resources that were made available in quite distinctive ways. The main driving force in this process of transformation and in this (re-)representation is his interest. Different interest produces different sequences of attention, framing, selection and transformation. As an example, figure 5 shows the map drawn by Debbie, an 18 year old German girl who had come to London with a friend to “get to know England”. They spent a significant period of time in the exhibition.



Fig 5. Visitor's 'map' of 'London before London'

Her drawing is not a representation of any existing part of the exhibition: rather it is a tightly integrated, closely coherent 'collage' of elements from various parts of the exhibition.

Looking at the salient aspects of these responses, such as the choice of artifacts, size and centrality in the rendering of their representations, the degree and form of coherence, we can ask: What is it that causes the visitors to make selections and what are the principles that inform their interpretation? In both these responses to the exhibition (and to our task for them), what stands out quite starkly is the notion of interest that informed the selections. What does emerge is that there is – nearly as a matter of course - a contrast between what is represented as salient in the exhibition and what is re-represented with salience by the visitors in their relation to that exhibition. What is apparent in all case though is that the visitors make meaning from and re-represent aspects of the exhibition according to their own interests and agendas. These inform what they frame into their own signs of what the exhibition is about.

Looking back at the set of questions again, these two examples especially relate to questions 2, 4 and 5: What is represented? What is not represented and what could not be represented given the modes available in a culture? Looking at both Carl's (fig 4) and Debbie's (fig 5) drawings, both deal with representational difficulties due to limitations in terms of the modes available (within the situation where the drawing took place) to signify the aspects of the exhibitions that they wanted to (re-)represent. In Carl's case, the dilemma had to do with pictorial anachronism – how to make connections across time in an image. In Debbie's case she wanted to represent abstract relationships between objects, artifacts and themes across space.

C. TECHNOLOGIES AS RESOURCES FOR SELECTING AND FRAMING

Erin, 8 years old, came to the Museum of National Antiquities with her mother, and visited the exhibition Prehistories II. Since Erin couldn't yet read very well, her mother read some of the written texts to her. When her mother spoke out loud and commented on something she had read, Erin wanted to know what her mother's comments were about and asked her to explain what the text says. During her visit, Erin took a lot of shots with her digital camera. In comparison with all the other visitors in this study, she was the one who took the most pictures – her 'collection' consists of 43 photographs. She seems to have been devoted to her 'task' of documenting the exhibition. From the perspective of question 3, we can treat her shots as a collection of aesthetically appealing objects.

Erin moved around a lot inside the different rooms, apparently searching for nice motifs for her camera: she selects. Her interest in the many objects which she encountered was manifested in her collection, as things that in some way or another stood out as especially beautiful, strange or just interesting to her. It seems to have been the appearance of those objects, rather than any intended meanings of the curators that seem decisive for her engagement. Her interest in this situation was both about looking at exciting things in the museum and about performing her task to document the exhibition. The camera was used by her as a resource for framing the visit and it played an important part in Erin's meaning-making through her selections. The camera allowed her to frame aspects of the exhibition; and it allowed her to express her interest, attention and engagement during the visit.

Frances, a lady in her late sixties visited the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities with her husband, her brother-in-law and his wife. The following excerpt from our interview with her, concerning her pictures from the exhibition, shows how mobile technologies such as a digital camera can affect the approach to museum exhibitions and how they can influence the meanings made in relation to it.

- Interviewer: Is this the first picture? It says sculpture from the Song-dynasty.
- Frances: Yes...
- Interviewer: Is that the first image?
- Frances: Yes, when I discovered that there were different dynasties and different objects, I began to take pictures of the objects and the descriptions that informed of where they came from and from what time. So my idea was that if I had strolled like this by myself I would, one doesn't remember, one doesn't remember from the exhibition all the time. Then one could go home and read. That's how I thought.
- Interviewer: Okay.
- Frances: Otherwise I wouldn't remember.
- Interviewer: As an aid for the memory?
- Frances: Yes, as an aid for the memory.
- Interviewer: Anything else you thought about in connection to what was written here?
- Frances: No, I thought it was very difficult to read. It was hard to read the description. I thought that I perhaps could go home and read. But now I rem.. I think there was a picture... Were there no pictures before this? I took... yes this is the last picture. That's the end.

Frances explains how she used the camera as a tool for inscription (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2005). According to her account she used it primarily as an aid for her memory and as a way to overcome difficulties in reading inside the exhibition space, by saving pieces of information for later. The technology of the camera thereby offered a possibility to save bits and piec-

es of the things she was interested in, as a way of expanding the encounter with the exhibition over time and across social and physical circumstances. By deciding what she wants to bring with her in the form of pictures, she also sets the conditions for her own meaning-making later on. She re-designs the exhibition through the choices she makes and thereby restricts the meanings possible to make at a later revision of the pictures. Her activity within the exhibition is reminiscent of a collector who picks up things that seem to be of interest in order to evaluate them more thoroughly at a later point.

The example also gives an indication of another aspect regarding technology and meaning, as it turned out that we began the interview looking at the wrong picture. Instead of hesitating, she found a strategy to cope with the pictures at hand by explaining what she had thought when she took them. Later on she discovered that the first picture actually was the last one. The ability to re-organise the order of pictures in this way opens up for a re-design of the exhibition, as it is represented through the recordings. Pieces are combined in new ways, opening up for new meanings to be made in relation to the documented texts, objects and artefacts from the exhibition. Agency is central here, as it is up to the individual visitor to focus her attention and engagement in relation to her interest within the specific situation. The set of pictures from each visitor's interaction with the exhibition can thus be seen as a materialisation of their interest and agency in relation to the exhibition within the specific circumstances of their visit.

In this last pair of examples, the relation between the social, the cultural and technology is somewhat different. Question 1 and 3 are considered: Who represents; and who interprets? How is what is represented, represented? What is not represented and what could not be represented in relation to social, cultural and technological conditions? The digital camera served as the main medium that facilitated the visitors' engagement with the artifacts. It provided the legitimation of their navigation in the galleries. The participants were handling a medium which, for them, made the interaction with the exhibits easier, as it took away the awkwardness which 'direct engagement' might have entailed. In this case, what 'held the ground' for their meaning-making was the medium. This overpowered the possibility of their social relation setting and sustained the 'learning space' for each other.

Viewing and engaging with objects here happened mainly through the camera lens. It provided a framing of the object. The technology became the means of mediation. Nevertheless, these two visitors were agents in selecting and in framing aspects of the environment and in so doing shaping their own understanding of the gallery space. The use of the digital technology here offered the visitors the possibility of authorship.

CONCLUSION

The exhibition design is an articulation of apt signifiers, where the notion of aptness is conditioned by the various discourses in operation in the Museum. The design is the result of the agency and the work of the curator(s), it is the textual organisation of their discursive choices and selections. These become the prompt for the visitors' engagement and set the ground from which selections will be made by them on the basis of their interest.

This overall exhibition design has always included technologies, whether the 'new' digital technologies or older. These are part of a range of resources curators select from and employ to 'design' an exhibition, according to aptness for purpose. The re-design and interpretation of the exhibition relies upon the agency of the visitor and it is mediated by their interest. Whether digital or other, technologies have their effects. Technology offers possibilities for different kinds of representation and communication, as it provides additional tools for curators and visitors to investigate their own interests and make meanings about them in a range of 'tangible' way. The constants of meaning making though remain, even if and when integrated into the potentials of the technologies.

This insight into the concept of re-representation raises questions for us especially in relation to what a social semiotic perspective can offer in terms of learning. Should the recognition of the agency and interest of the learner be acknowledged as a necessary addition to a theory of learning? Such a perspective would shift the attention from technology as determinant of social interaction and learning, to the museum visitors as social agents and as 'learners' able to accommodate all technological resources made available through the exhibition design for shaping their own agendas for communication.

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p. 2 Staffan Selander
p. 4 van Gogh Alive: The Exhibition.
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p. 10 Staffan Selander
p. 14 Sophia Diamantopoulou
p. 19 Eva Insulander
p. 21 Fredrik Lindstrand
p. 23 Sophia Diamantopoulou
p. 24 Sophia Diamantopoulou
p. 36 Museum of National Antiquities
p. 41 Fredrik Lindstrand
p. 82 Flickr
p. 124 van Gogh Alive: The Exhibition.
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p. 135 Vaike Fors

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