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Bringing Meaning into Making

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Bringing Meaning into Making: How Do Visitors Tag an Exhibit as Social when Visiting a Museum

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Abstract: It has been 20 years since the adoption of the 'meaning-making' paradigm as a lens for reaching a better understanding of the museum experience. My paper presents parts of my doctoral research which micro-analyzed visitors' encounters in order to explore the ways and means they use to shape and share their meaning-making. It argues on the nature of meaning-making as a social activity by exploring the process of making rather than evaluating the depth or validity of meaning. Towards this direction, I conducted qualitative research across three non-national museums in London, UK, and collected data by implementing audio and video-based research that successfully captured visitors' interactions in their context. Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis provided the key concepts of the analysis which revealed three major patterns, all highlighting the performative, social and sequential character of the meaning-making process. By bringing together theory and practice, my paper invites museums to consider meaning-making as a process as well as the product of this process through which visitors socially make meaning about themselves, others, the exhibits as well as the institution in which their interaction occurs.

Keywords: Meaning-making, Social Interaction, Museum, Visitors

Meaning-making in Museums¹

It has been twenty years since the adoption of the 'meaning-making' paradigm and its implementation in the museum realm in a systematic attempt to achieve a better understanding of what takes place in the galleries (Silverman 1990; 1995). Apart from triggering excitement across the members of the museum community -both scholars and practitioners, its adoption resulted in a series of publications in which authors explored the process of visitors' meaning-making. Their way to investigate the specific process was mainly by capturing and analyzing visitors' conversations within the museum as well as interviewing them before, during and after their visit (e.g. Allen 2002; Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson 2002; Leinhardt and Knutson 2004).

In this article, I argue that just as learning is both a process and the product of this process, meaning-making is not only the result of the process of making sense but also the process of making sense. For convenience, I will refer to the process as *making* and to the product as *meaning*. Additionally, this article argues for the nature of meaning-making, irrespective of its duration, depth or validity, as a social activity. It presents parts of my doctoral research at the Institute of Archaeology, University College of London, which micro-analyzed visitors' encounters across three museums in London (the Courtauld Gallery, the Wellcome Collection and the Horniman Museum and Gardens) in order to explore the ways and means they use to shape and share their meaning-making. Thus, rather than evaluating the meaning as expressed through visitors' experiences with the exhibits, I explored the making in a systematic attempt to understand how visitors share aspects of the 'context' and 'content' with each other.

¹ Throughout this article, I use the term "museum" to refer to numerous institutions of informal learning, such as art museums or institutes, history, anthropological, science centers, zoos, natural history museums, historical sites, national parks, archives and so forth.

Visitors and their Meaning-making in the Museum

The meaning-making paradigm treated the museum learning as a social process with language as one of its social practices and an uttered expression of the participants' personal and social context. Meaning-making widened our perception of who our visitors are and how this museum experience looks like by appreciating the variance and diversity existing across the visitors, their meaning, and agendas (Silverman 2013) as well as acknowledging the social functions and foundations of the museum itself. Meaning-making was the first step towards the transformation of the museum into an inclusive and democratic place where all possible meanings can find their 'home'. Additionally, its adoption shifted the interest from identifying and measuring "cognitive" and "affective" outcomes to the experience itself; that is, what people see and do in the exhibitions (Schauble, Leinhardt, and Martin 1997).

"Opening museums to multiple voices and views" (Roberts 1997, 152) leaves space for debate, discussion and engagement, allowing the same exhibit to trigger different responses and meanings and subsequently, experiences. That is, at least as I see it, one of the main reasons why we prefer talking about making meaning in the museum rather than learning as the visitor is an active co-meaning maker, constantly (re)shaping his/her interpretations and understandings of the world (Silverman 2013) through social interaction, exchange and engagement.

Meaning-making and the Sociocultural Means of Making

Research has shown (Allen 2002; Blud 1990; Falk and Dierking 2000; Litwak 1993; Moussouri 1997) that the majority of visitors come to museums as part of a wider social group. In particular, motivational studies have indicated that social interaction and collaboration are among the most prevalent reasons for visitors coming to museums with others (Falk *et al.* 1998; Packer and Ballantyne 2002) with "spending time" and "a day out with friends and family" being one of the six main reasons for visiting museums across the UK (Moussouri 1997). Visitors use the content of the exhibition as a source of information, based on and through which they develop and negotiate their ongoing relationships and learn more from and for each other. Litwak (1993, 11) explains that visitors actually choose the museum as a setting for "a shared mutual experience with their companions" during which they discover things and create a deeper understanding about themselves, their companions as well as the surrounding world.

One of the basic sociocultural means visitors use to make meaning is through talking. Researchers have captured and analyzed visitors' conversations (Allen 2002; Leinhardt and Crowley 1998; Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson 2002) by exploring the talk that focuses on the context and content of the exhibitions while excluding the verbal exchanges addressing planning and managing decisions (Leinhardt and Crowley 1998). Apart from being one of the basic sociocultural means for visitors' meaning-making, conversations were further treated as the result of the negotiation between elements of visitors' ongoing encounters and those gained through previous experiences (Allen 1997; Blud 1990; Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson 2002; Leinhardt and Knutson 2004), what Falk and Dierking (1992; 2000) referred to as "personal context" while Doering and Pekarik (1996) as "entrance narratives".

Although the multimodality of meaning-making was acknowledged (Lemke 1998), the analysis focused on individual, verbal responses rather than treating everything as chained in order to make meaning (Goodwin and Heritage 1990). Addressing the aforementioned gap, a few researchers included in their analysis visitors' non-verbal behaviors (Meisner *et al.* 2007; Rahm 2004; Rowe 2002; Weier and Piscitelli 2003; Wells 1998). Bolstered by those studies conducted in the last decade, my research treats communication as one, with visitors drawing upon both verbal and non-verbal behaviors in order to get their message through to the others. Acknowledging the multimodality of the museum encounter was further reflected in the transcripts used for the analysis of data and embedded in my thesis. This way of representing

social interaction and communication is considered suitable in giving the simultaneous, minute-by-minute occurrence of the finer details that comprise social interaction.

Exploring Meaning-making in Museums

Exhibits are “social objects” (Simon 2010), sparking our visitors’ imagination, stories, and social sharing. Other visitors, exhibits, interpretation resources, aspects of the context all interplay in the making of meaning. Back in 1998, the PISEC project (Borun et al. 1998) tested a number of observable behaviors as learning indicators for family science learning in the museum and found as unrelated to learning the following ones: calling someone over, pointing at an exhibit, expressing like/dislike, and approaching/withdrawing from an exhibit. A year later, Griffin argued that especially pointing gestures indicate that visitors share “learning with peers and experts” (Griffin 1999, 116). Based on those two findings, I explored the PISEC-unrelated-to-learning-behaviors as indicators of social interaction and means of sharing meaning-making by audio and videotaping visitors’ encounters with seven exhibits. Following the key concepts of Conversation Analysis and Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1992), I focused on the making of meaning and micro-analyzed the sociocultural means visitors use when experiencing the exhibits with others in order to share their focus of attention and meaning-making. What visitors do and say in front of the exhibit came under the term *performance*, a term borrowed by Goffman (1959) and used to refer to visitors’ verbal and nonverbal interaction. I captured visitors at least in dyads -and thus, in different types of social groups- a choice allowing me to realize the variations existing in the interaction emerging across different groups of visitors.

Three broad patterns were identified with “attracting an audience” as the most frequently recurring performance across the three case studies as it addressed visitors’ social need to share something with others (e.g. Blud 1990; McManus 1989; Moussouri 1997) and included their attempts to attract the others’ attention. The second category, coined “telling and tagging”, refers to the practices of storytelling and pointing out something (verbally and non-verbally). These two practices may often be detailed by either the authoritative voice of the museum through “text-echo” (McManus 1989) when visitors quote passages directly from the provided interpretive text, or the voice of the visitor through his/her own storytelling. Apart from “text-echo”, visitors may rephrase the interpretive text as they filter the provided information to tailor their own needs as well as their co-visitors (Allen 2002; Crowley and Jacobs 2002). By adopting aspects of the institution’s language into their own discourse –through direct or rephrased text-echo- and detail their meaning-making through their own storytelling, visitors discover the exhibit not only in the light of the institution’s authoritative voice, but also in relationship to their own personal context, blending together their own personal reflections and stories and those provided by the museum. The third category, coined “animating through “displaying doing”, includes those incidents when visitors use their own bodies to bring the exhibit, or aspects of it, into life. This category comes under scrutiny for the first time concerning non-interactive exhibits, exploring the ways in which visitors use their bodies to elaborate and enrich their meaning-making. These three categories bring forward the fact that being the recipient of one’s attempt to share his/her meaning-making allows experiencing the exhibit through this person’s eyes; that is, the exhibit is infused through what this person says and does. This social sharing actively constitutes and occasions the exhibits as well as the ways in which visitors will experience them (Heath and vom Lehn 2004).

In the following incident (Table 1), involving two women, W1 is the “designated reader” (Hirschi and Screven 1988, 60), responsible for reading the interpretive text aloud to W2, who is older in age. As they reach the painting, W1 starts reading the label silently while W2 is standing at her left. Another visitor, M, arrives at the painting and stands behind those two women. When W2 leans towards the label, W1 says “*it’s another of his*”, introducing the painting to W2 by linking it to the one they had just looked at. W1 positions herself closer to the label, followed by W2. The presence of those two women in front of the label blocks M’s view, who then repositions himself in order to have visual access to the label and continue his reading. W1 starts reading the second paragraph of the label aloud. She animates the text through pointing and

iconic gestures in an attempt to draw relevance and attention to what she is quoting. W1 uses her right hand and points at the label text to demarcate that she is reading it. As she is quoting from the text, she gives out an iconic gesture of doing dots while reading aloud the “*small dots of colour*” part of the text. Then, she points at the painting’s frame and rephrases the text (“*he painted far, creating more like a frame*”) moving her hand up and down, right and left to make the frame more salient. Her gesture is noticed by M, who happens to share the same space. He attends her gesture and then he moves away. As W1 keeps reading, she once again animates the text when she comes across the phrase “*robust figure*”: she points with her right hand towards the painting. Upon reading “*delicate*” aloud, she immediately gives an iconic gesture by extending her hand, folding her three fingers and moving them slightly towards the floor. Then she continues reading and before finishing the paragraph she performs another pointing gesture towards the painting, when she reads the phrase “*frivolity of her actions*”. When W1 finishes her reading, she flicks her gaze on the painting and then moves away. W2 lingers for ten seconds, looking at the painting and label and then moves away, joining W1.

Table 1: Incident from the Courtauld Gallery [05.07.2010, 12:50 pm]

	W1 and W2 are walking towards the painting, with W1 looking at the painting while W2 is looking at and talking to W1. 
0:06	W1 and W2 are close to the painting’s label. W1 is facing the label.
0:06.9	W2: She is up, to California. W1 is reading the label while W2 is standing next to W1 on her left. M is standing behind W1 and W2, facing the painting. 
0:09.5	W2 is approaching the label. 
0:10.5	W1: It's another of his.

0:12.9	<p>W1 approaches W2 in front of the label. Shifts her right hand and points at the label. M tries to read the label but W1 shifts her posture and blocks his view.</p> 
0:13.7	<p>W1: Seurat's divisionist technique of painting (points with right hand at the label text) with (doing a gesture animating dots) small dots of colour has been extended here to the dark border (points with right hand at the label text).</p> <p>M walks to the left side of the painting in an attempt to read the label. M stands behind W2, reading the label.</p> 
0:20.3	<p>W1: He painted far (-) creating more like a frame (pointing at the frame of the painting. She starts pointing from the bottom left corner to the right, then top right, top left corner, ending at bottom left corner).</p> <p>M shifts his head and follows W1's hand.</p> 
0:24	<p>M moves away</p> <p>W1: (pointing hand is now lifted and close to her face) The subject, a woman at her toilette, seems to be a return to the themes of nature and artifice, and public and private life, which Seurat had earlier explored in his scenes of outdoor recreation. The imbalance between the robust figure (lifts her right hand and points to the painting).</p> 

00:39.2	W1:= and the delicate domestic objects seems intentionally ironic, as does the contrast between the (her hand now makes an iconic gesture meaning delicate by attaching her fingers together, which immediately shifts to a pointing gesture).
	
0:45.4	W1: = gravity of her classical pose (swings her right hand forward) and the frivolity of her actions (pointing at the painting).

My research brought forward the fact that visitors use their fingers to link the interpretive text to the actual exhibit especially when visual links are provided through the labeling as seen in the previous example. The next incident from the Horniman Museum and Gardens (Table 2) starts when the person who arrives second at the exhibit (W) spots something familiar within the glass-case. Specifically, W is drawn by the canopic jars, a discovery that prompts her to turn to her right, where M is, and share it by using a deictic adjective (“*these*”) elaborated by a deictic gesture towards the objects. This performance falls under the “attracting an audience” category while it further succeeds in engaging the other two members of her group (M and D) in a collaborative exploration of the exhibit. W notices the label on her right side of the glass-case and she approaches it in an attempt to find more information. Her movement reflects her desire to spend more time with the exhibit, a performance acknowledged my M, who rejoins with W and D. Once M has approached the exhibit, he takes the lead and points at the first paragraph of the text. His performance not only confirms his attendance but also his desire to become the “designated reader” (Hirschi and Screven 1988, 60) of his group and thus, participate actively in their shared meaning-making. M starts reading the text aloud, paragraph-by-paragraph (“*Ptah-Soka-Osiris. A figure, placed in the tomb, which contained text from*”) while using his finger to indicate the source of his text-echo, which in this case is the first paragraph of the label text. He stops reading aloud only to share again after a second a comment on the specific exhibit (“*that’s before Christ*”). This information is a rephrasing of the interpretive text, which reads “713-332 BC.”

After three seconds, M expands his identification by using the location description provided in the interpretive text (“*it says centre*”), a performance acknowledged by W who in return, points at the center of the case while elaborating her gesture by using a deictic adjective (“*that*”). Her performance reflects her awareness of the density of exhibits in the specific glass-case and thus, W combines a deictic gesture with a deictic adjective in an attempt to ease their identification process. W then leans closer to the case and D, while still pointing at the center of the case, and repeats M’s quote (“*that’s before Christ*”), a performance that is seen as a means of confirming and securing D’s attention. They all look at the case in silence for a couple of seconds and then, W’s next performance coincides with the start of D’s utterance and as a result, there is no expansion but just a couple of “*that’s*” and “*so*”. This gap in their interaction allows M to take the lead once again, who this time lifts his hand and points out the exhibits while elaborating them further with deictic adjectives and adverbs that link the exhibits to their specific locations within the case (“*left is that*” “*left bottom which is just there*”). W immediately shares the information that she just found in the interpretive text (“*had that in coffins, here in the afterworld*”), followed by a pointing gesture towards the label on the right. She then puts her hand down, allowing M to take the lead anew, who this time shifts his hand and points at the interpretive text while using text-echo (“*amulets top right, this one and*”), linking visually the location description (“*top right*”) to the deictic adjective (“*this one*”).

The frequency of these pointing behaviors is reinforced when numbers are used to address the exhibits as well as when location description is given (such as 'top left: canopic jars'). The pointing fingers are means of confirmation of validity of what is being told as they link the 'voice of the museum' (labels) to the objects while it is of great sociocultural use as they encompass in one action the body of the visitor, aspects of the exhibit and of the wider context in which the performance is situated, and parts of the discourse. By doing so, pointing gestures facilitate the creation of visual links/vectors among the visitors and the exhibits which demonstrate a type of connection/correlation; a possible bond.

Table 2. Incident from the Horniman Museum and Gardens [2010-11-06, 14:53 pm]

	M, W and D approach the exhibit. M walks ahead fast with W and D following him slowly. As they walk ahead, W turns her face towards the Life after Death glass case. D attends her shift in gaze, and also turns towards the same direction.
0:20.4	W is facing the case. D is a few steps behind her, looking at the case. M moves away.
0:24.7	D turns her face away and leans towards W.
0:26	W: These (-) (points with left hand, facing M) 
0:28.7	W places her hand down and faces the case.
0:30.9	W approaches the label text. M approaches W.
0:33.9	M points at the label's first paragraph M: Ptah-Soka-Osiris. A figure, placed in the tomb, which contained text from... (moves his finger along with text)
0:41.6	M: That's before Christ (puts his finger down). 
0:44	M lifts his right hand and points at the label. M moves his finger along with text.
0:44.7	M: it says (.) centre.
0:47	D stops talking. W and M point at the centre of the case. D attends their indications. 

0:48	W leans closer to the case and says to D while still pointing with left hand. W: that's before Christ. 
0:48.7	M puts his hand down, followed by W.
0:50.5	W points again with her left hand. W: That's. D: = so.
0:52.6	W approaches M, who is in front of the label. D is looking at the objects.
0:53.9	M lifts his right hand and points at the text.
0:54.5	M: left is that (pointing towards the case) from figurines (points again at the label's next paragraph) left bottom (points towards left bottom side) which is just there (points again in text's next paragraph).
1:02	W: (shifts her left hand and points at the label text) had that in coffins (.) here (.) in the afterworld. 
1:04.8	W puts her hand down. M is still pointing at text. M: I knew it! Top right (shifts his hand and points at the object) W and D also have shifted their left hands and point M: This one and  

Using your Camera: A Ubiquitous Sociocultural Means

Taking pictures is a common behaviour within the gallery space (Weilenmann, Hillman, and Jungslius 2013). My analysis treated the performance of taking a photograph as a sociocultural means of directing attention. Shifting your camera to take a picture is considered a pointing device, an alternative way to tag something, and a performative means in a twofold way. Firstly, it constitutes an observable and a reflective performance, as other people in the gallery space can see someone taking a picture. In addition, apart from being connected to a person's identity, taking pictures is also a social performance. Van Dijck (2008, 62) refers to pictures as "the new currency for social interaction" and objects that function as souvenirs, tools for remembrance and reminiscence, which are subsequently shared with others. Hence, taking photographs in the museum is both a memory tool and a communicational device moving "from sharing (memory)

objects to sharing experiences" (van Dijck 2008, 60). This is a sociocultural means that calls for more attentive analysis as it is a ubiquitous performance, especially in the 21st century museum where almost everyone is an owner and user of a digital camera or gadget that takes pictures.

Conclusions

This article argues for the importance of social interaction for the shaping of the forthcoming meaning, irrespectively of its depth or validity. Experiencing the exhibits is a process that takes place at the confluence of a number of 'contexts' that are constantly negotiated through visitors themselves. Meaning-making can be found at the intersection of all those contexts. Listening to visitors' conversations allow us to grasp only a glimpse of those contexts while setting aside the possible ways through which visitors infuse their experiences through social interaction and by deploying resources provided by the institution itself. In addition to studying conversations, micro-analyzing the sociocultural means through which visitors make and share their meaning contributes to achieving a holistic understanding of the meaning-making process and realizing the multiple contexts in which even a fleeting encounter takes place.

My research is resonant with previous findings and observations that explored the museum experience by investigating social interaction (Heath and vom Lehn 2004; Meisner et al. 2007) while my findings reinforce previous arguments on the importance of "identification" (Allen 2002; Fienberg and Leinhardt 2002; Silverman 1990) and the existence of a sequence in the meaning-making process with visitors tending to identify first and then proceeding to making meaning. During this stage of identification, which is the foundation on which visitors build their experiences, visitors enact aspects of their identities by drawing upon the physical context while reshaping those further through their ongoing interaction. My research, among others, showed that mutual interest is socioculturally negotiated and manifested through visitors' performances. If, according to Falk and Dierking (2000), narration or storytelling and observation are two of the possible means for sociocultural information to be shared in the museum, my research argued that reference (verbal or non-verbal) is also a way for information to be represented and shared in visually complex environments such as museums. This finding may have further implications for design.

Additionally, as seen in the examples, visitors use their fingers to link the interpretive text to the actual exhibit. Reference (verbal and non-verbal) was of great sociocultural use as it encompasses in one performance the body of the visitor, aspects of the exhibit and of the wider context in which the performance is situated, and parts of the discourse. This is a part of a very powerful sociocultural design as pointing something out is a strong dissemination tool. As identification is the first stage of meaning-making, exhibit designers should aim at easing visitors' identification processes. By building upon visitors' entry points to their interaction with the exhibits and each other, museums can participate in visitors' naturally emerging conversations and thus, become more inclusive. Some suggestions towards this direction are the following:

- Front-end, formative, and summative evaluation can help improve the relevance, functionality, and effectiveness of the exhibits and their framing on visitors' meaning-making.
- Design to encourage social interaction:
 - Design exhibits and provide interpretive text visibly accessible to multiple participants.
 - Provide visual links to the objects in the interpretive text. Point out things to notice.
 - Challenging information may spark a buzz around the exhibit but visitors first have to be able to identify the exhibit and locate the artefacts, especially when displayed in a glass-case among others. Support direct experiences with the exhibits by writing labels that direct attention to those objects. Do not let your visitors get lost: if you use numbers to address the exhibits, place them in ascending order. If you use location description, do not allow the density of objects to trouble them. When addressing an exhibit that displays a number of objects, consider placing the interpretive text within the case to facilitate visitors in drawing links between the text and the relevant objects without having to move back and forth.

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Appendix – Transcript Conventions

Capital letters	to indicate raised intonation.
Bold letters	to indicate verbal exchanges.
(laughs)	to indicate laughing.
(.)	to indicate a pause less than a second, less than taking a breath.
(0.5)	to indicate a pause of 5 seconds. Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence in seconds.
=	when utterances are one after the other with no interval in-between them.
(-)	to indicate inaudible words.
()	to place nonverbal behaviours simultaneously occurring.
M	male participant.
W	female participant.
D	female child (up to 18 years old).
S	male child (up to 18 years old).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dimitra Christidou, PhD: Dimitra Christidou holds a PhD in Museum Studies from the University College of London, UK (2012). Funded by the Greek State Scholarships Foundation (I.K.Y.) (September 2008 – March 2012), her doctoral research sought to explore visitors' social interaction by focusing on the sociocultural means they use in order to achieve shared attention and subsequently, meaning making. Dimitra has worked as a museum educator at the State's Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece and had a six month internship at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK at the Department of Learning, Interpretation and Resources.

The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum addresses a key issue: In this time of fundamental social change, what is the role of the museum, both as a creature of that change, and perhaps also as an agent of change? The journal brings together academics, curators, museum and public administrators, cultural policy makers, and research students to engage in discussions about the historic character and future shape of the museum. The fundamental question of the journal is: How can the institution of the museum become more inclusive?

In addition to traditional scholarly papers, this journal invites case studies that take the form of presentations of museum practice—including documentation of organizational curatorial and community outreach practices and exegeses analyzing the effects of those practices.

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