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Embodied interpretation: Gesture, social interaction, and meaning making in a national art museum

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ABSTRACT

This study expands on sociocultural approaches to meaning making in art museums by exploring the physical aspects of interaction with art in traditional gallery spaces, and in the context of technology use. The notion of ‘embodied interpretation’ is introduced to explore the complexity of embodied interaction in interpreting art, and to contribute to existing vocabularies of gesture. The research is informed by sociocultural perspectives on meaning making as well notions of embodied interaction, and asks the following research questions: “What are the relevant bodily and gestural practices that shape socially situated interactions in art galleries?” and “What insights into meaning making in art museums can be gained through an approach of embodied interpretation?” The study incorporates interaction analysis and design-based research methods to investigate three episodes from a national museum in which groups of adolescents interact with three different kinds of objects: a sculpture, a painting, and an interactive tabletop. Analysis reveals that visitors use gesture, as well as bodily positioning and movement in a variety of ways to coordinate social processes, and to mediate thinking and perception in the interpretation of art.

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1. Introduction

Cultural practices related to art museum visits historically involve hushed social interactions, with exhibitions designed to encourage individuals walking reflectively from artwork to artwork, gallery to gallery, constructing meaning through observations and perhaps talking quietly with friends or family about curated displays (Bennett, 1995; Bourdieu et al., 1990; Pitman & Hirzy, 2010). However, in recent decades, a broad range of digital technologies and devices have been introduced into interpretive encounters with art in museums (Jones-Garmil, 1997; Witcomb, 1997), with visitors accessing and producing interpretations across different types of interfaces, platforms, and devices, or what Kidd (2014) calls ‘transmedia’ interactions. The expanded range of possibilities for interaction is disrupting traditional conceptions of social and physical interaction in art museums, as visitors’ engagement with digital interpretive media also bring new gestures, behaviors and movements into these spaces (Bowers et al., 2007; Heath & vom Lehn, 2002). In this article, we are interested in these newer forms of visitor experience, but particularly in light of meaning making and bodily practices in traditional encounters with authentic artworks.

Meaning making from a sociocultural perspective highlights language as the primary mediational tool (Vygotsky, 1986), with physical and material aspects of the setting often analyzed as context (Goodwin, 2000). In museum learning research, this approach has fostered attention to visitor conversation as means for understanding meaning making practices (Pierroux, 2010; Leinhardt, Crowley, & Knutson, 2002). In this study, we expand on such approaches by analyzing the physical aspects of visitors’ meaning making, both in encounters with different types of art in traditional gallery spaces, and in interactions with a digital interpretive media. We draw on Goodwin’s (2000) concept of embodied interaction, which encompasses participants’ orientations and

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movements in relation to each other and the surrounding environment, as well as their gesture and talk. We propose the concept *embodied interpretation*, building on the notion that gesture and movement are part of the socially situated ways in which visitors interact with and make meaning from paintings and sculptures in a gallery (Steier, 2014; Heath & Hindmarsh, 2000; Streeck, 2009b).

Our aim is to develop the concept of embodied interpretation by investigating social interactions across different types of museum objects and activities. Specifically, we analyze young adult visitors' (17–18 years old) embodied interpretations with three different kinds of objects in a national art museum: a painting, a sculpture and an interactive tabletop. We focus on how positioning and orientation to these different kinds of representations influence meaning-making processes, and how these relate to other types of naturally occurring movements, gestures and talk. What are the relevant bodily and gestural practices that shape meaning making in these contexts? What insights into meaning making in art museums can be gained through an approach of embodied interpretation? In posing these questions, we aim to better understand relationships between representations, embodied interpretation, and meaning making in art museums. We present below a review of theoretical perspectives relevant for framing the concept of embodied interpretation applied in this study.

2. Perspectives on art and meaning making

Studies of meaning making processes in art museums are intertwined with the disciplinary domains of art history, visual studies, and aesthetics, which address issues of interpretation, experience, and evaluation, or aesthetic judgment (Pierroux, 2003). Therefore, to study visitors' meaning making in encounters with different types of artworks, it is useful to draw on this disciplinary vocabulary to describe visual characteristics of paintings, sculptures, and (digital) reproductions, as well as to distinguish cognitive processes involved in their perception, understanding, and appreciation. In the cognitive sciences, the latter involve studies of “the way viewers acquire, represent and manipulate information embedded in the formal and compositional structure of artworks in order to recognize and evaluate their content” (Carroll, Moore, & Seeley, 2012, p. 48). In this study, we draw broadly on these domains to identify aspects of art interpretation that are relevant for our analysis.

Aesthetics, art history and visual studies involve the study of how artists employ techniques, subject matter and formal strategies to draw viewers' attention to certain aspects or features of a work, but also concern the ways in which perception, emotion, and expertise figure into the reception and analysis of art (Baxandall, 1985; Holly & Moxey, 2002). In figurative painting and sculpture, artists are trained in expressing psychological representations of human action and gestures. Expressive techniques are based on the understanding that viewers *anticipate and complete* depicted actions. This human capacity is attributable to the structure of social action itself, that is, as an embodied part of our empathy with human behavior (Streeck, 2009b). This empathy may be ascribed to the imaginative capacity of the beholder, but also to the socialized competence for perceiving motions as meaningful (Streeck, 2009b). In terms of interactions with digital representations of art, experimental studies in aesthetic science have shown that expert and novice viewers of different ages rate the properties of artworks reproduced as images on a computer screen ‘remarkably similar’ to original artworks in a museum gallery (Locher, 2012). Accordingly, since our focus is not on problems of authenticity in art, but rather on how visitors' interactions play into interpretations of art in different settings, we did not distinguish between original artworks and digital representations in the design of the empirical study.

There is a long tradition of studies of interpretative processes and aesthetic experience from an information-processing perspective that do not account for social interaction (Leder et al., 2004; Bauer & Pierroux, 2014). This may be considered problematic, in that the majority of museum visitors are accompanied by friends, family or schoolmates, with different social dynamics and institutional practices guiding each type of visit (Crowley, Pierroux, & Knutson, 2014). As visitor studies have made the significance of the social context for meaning making in museums increasingly clear, sociocultural perspectives have been developed as an approach to analyzing interpretive processes (Pierroux, 2003, 2010; Falk & Dierking, 1992; Knutson & Crowley, 2010; Leinhardt, Crowley, & Knutson, 2002). Meaning making is studied as a mediated process in which resources, different aspects of context, and participants' previous knowledge become *actualized* through social interaction (Wertsch, 1991, 1998). In a museum gallery, a group of visitors engaged in interpreting an artwork may thus be considered a meaning making activity. Knowledge is distributed across the group, resources, and context, with language serving as central ‘mediation tool’ in thinking and communication. Analyzing participants' talk provides insight into visitors' collective meaning making process—on school field trips, family visits, or with friends (Pierroux, 2010; Knutson & Crowley, 2010; Leinhardt et al., 2002). Findings from these studies and others in the sociocultural tradition have identified the significance of previous knowledge, identity, and motivation for visitors' attention, talk, and engagement in art.

In this study, we expand on sociocultural research in museums by stressing an embodied perspective, which builds on the idea that analysis of physical movement and gesture may reveal aspects of meaning making not apparent in the analysis of verbal expression alone. Embodied practices are understood in a holistic sense of “gesture production, manipulation of tools, mobility in the local environment, and interaction with others” (Hall & Nemirovsky, 2011, p. 207). We synthesize sociocultural perspectives on discourse and gesture in the notion of *embodied interpretation* (Steier, 2014), bringing gesture and physical activity to the foreground in the analysis of mediated action.

3. Framework for understanding gestural practices

Gesture may be regarded as a collection of human practices that use the hands and body to mediate inter-subjective understanding in situated contexts (Streeck, 2009a). Research has attempted to categorize gestures in different ways, mainly with a focus on hand gestures. McNeill (1992), in important early work on gesture, identified four types of gesture: deictic, beat, iconic, and metaphoric. Deictic refers to pointing gestures, and are often used to mediate joint attention in a particular situation. Beat gestures are simple,

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