

## ***Museum encounters: A choreography of visitors' bodies in interaction***

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**Abstract (150 words max):** By viewing the museum experience as inextricably linked to an interactive nexus of bodies and objects arranged in the museum space, this paper foregrounds the significance of movement in the shaping of museum encounters. Informed by the fields of dance, symbolic interactionism and multimodal social semiotics, it introduces a conceptualisation of visitors' movement as choreography unfolding either in compliance with the museum 'script' (scripted choreographies), or in response to prompts from other visitors sharing the same space (improvised choreographies). Attending to visitors' positioning and alignment as key resources of movement, the analysis of video data from two London galleries illustrates how visitors oscillate between performing 'scripted choreographies' and 'improvised choreographies' through shifts in positioning and alignment, while being spectators of other visitors' choreographies. Both kinds of choreographies are continuously shaped in interaction with the 'scripted' museum stage and other visitors' 'scripted' and 'improvised choreographies'.

**Keywords:** museum, visitors, embodiment, choreography, space, movement, multimodality

### **Museum encounters**

This paper introduces a conceptualisation of museum visitors' movement as a performance, and particularly as choreography, highlighting its centrality in shaping meaning (Biehl 2017; Diamantopoulou and Christidou 2016). By drawing links between museums, theatrical performances and dance, it reimagines the museum space as a stage on which the exhibition is carefully arranged (Maure 1995; Yellis 2010; Duncan 1995) and where visitors perform moment-by-moment (i.e. Biehl 2017; Casey 2005). Building upon our previous work which introduced the multimodality of museum spectatorship (Christidou and Diamantopoulou 2016), this paper brings together resources from the fields of symbolic interactionism, dance theory and multimodal communication in order to make aspects of visitors' movement more visible.

Our focus on the body and movement in museums aligns with an emerging scholarly interest in movement, alignment and embodiment in museums (i.e. Hale 2012; Laursen, Kristiansen and Drotner 2016; vom Lehn 2013; Tzortzi 2014; Christidou 2018; Steier 2014). The research resonates also with recent interest in the dynamic and fluid interaction between people, objects and spaces (i.e. Meyer & Wedelstaedt 2017a, 2017b; Woermann 2017) and

builds on this to foreground the importance of movement in the shaping of this nexus. We take a broad approach to movement in museums, shifting our interest away from timing ‘pauses’ in front of exhibits as signs of engagement (i.e. Bitgood 2010; Serrell 1997) to exploring the body on the move as it interacts with other bodies, spaces and exhibits (Christidou 2018; Shapiro, Halls and Owens 2017). At the same time, we are interested in both the overall movement of the whole body and its particular movements such as leaning, turning the torso and so forth.

In the first part of this paper, we detail our theoretical approach to the study of moving bodies in the museum. The second part illustrates the application of this theory through two video excerpts chosen as representative of visitors’ performances in museums. These have been selected from two research projects in two museums in London, UK: the Museum of London and the Courtauld Gallery. Through the analysis of these videos, we explore the ways in which museum visitors interact with each other, the exhibits and the space. By attending particularly to visitors’ body posture and alignment with other bodies, we identify the significance of these two resources in embodying aspects of the museum script, as well as facilitating improvised performances. Our findings show that visitors oscillate between performing ‘scripted choreographies’ and ‘improvised choreographies’ through shifts in posture and alignment, and that both choreographies are continuously shaped in interaction

with the curated museum stage, as well as the ‘scripted’ and/or the ‘improvised choreographies’ of other visitors.

### **Museum galleries as a scripted performative stage**

Considering museums as highly performative spaces, scholars have often resorted to the metaphor of performance to describe the museum experience, drawing parallels between theatres and museums (Casey 2005; Garoian 2001; Hale 2012; MacLeod *et al.* 2018; Maure 1995). Specifically, museum space - as a highly “choreographed environment” (Garoian 2001, 246) shaped by the curatorial design of the exhibitions and the architectural design of their building – is seen as a stage.

Through the curation of the exhibitions and artworks, informed further by the visiting rules regarding visitors’ performances (Crawley 2012; Rees Leahy 2012; Psarra 2009), museums compose particular ‘scripts’ - that is, an ‘interplay of sensory stimulation’ and a ‘rhythm’ for visitors to follow (Austin 2012, 109). Visitors’ compliance with the script is largely evaluated through their embodied performances in the museum space, manifesting proper decorum and attendance to the prescribed rhythm. In this paper, we refer to performance as ‘any behavior, event, action or thing [...] in terms of doing, behaving, and showing’ (Schechner 2003, 32) which participants enact as they follow or deviate from the script.

We also infuse the aforementioned theatrical analogy with Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (1959) for which he used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people's interactions showed patterns of cultural scripts. As such, we posit that museum visitors perform 'drama'. Particularly, we turn to Goffman's notions of 'frontstage', 'improvisation' and the 'roles' one may acquire in and through social interaction. These three notions become very relevant in our analysis of museum galleries, as visitors, apart from being expected to perform in very specific ways, often find themselves in front of an audience (Goffman 1959) - that is, other visitors visiting the museum. As such, when navigating the museum and positioning themselves in the galleries, visitors regularly need to take into consideration other moving bodies and thus, improvise.

Building on Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, we consider museum galleries as 'frontstages' where the visitor is "performatively attuned to the spectacle of the performance of others" (Bagnall 2003, 95) oscillating between the roles of 'spectator' when attending a performance given by someone else and that of 'spectacle' when performing for an audience. In both roles, which can be assumed simultaneously, performances are mediated through the use of their bodies (Biehl 2017). Seen in this light, the museum galleries are re-imagined as theatrical stages and the museum experience as a performative event that involves actors who perform and spectators who not only observe and evaluate the performance but also co-act

and thus ‘contribut[e] to the creation of a performance by participating through their physical presence, their perception and responses’ (Biehl 2017, 13).

### **Performing in the museum**

According to Goffman, the mutual orientation of participants’ bodies creates an ‘ecological huddle’ (1964, 64), a visible embodied practice which publicly demonstrates participants’ orientation toward each other and particular objects in the setting. When such ecological huddles are created in the museum space, visitors perform their participation in or disengagement from these through shifts in positioning and alignment - two key resources of movement.

In this paper, similarly to others (Heath *et al.* 2002), we call the context within which these huddles arise ‘ecologies of participation’. Each ecology of participation is informed by the immediate physical context (i.e. layout of exhibition and resources) in which it unfolds and the emergent social context arising through visitors’ interactions with each other.

By applying the metaphor of ecology to the museum encounters, we foreground their emergent nature as they arise in the continuously unfolding nexus of bodies, space and objects. As such, each ecology comprises the immediate ecology of the exhibit, shaped by the museum script, and the performative space, shaped by those performing either as spectators or

spectacles by ‘dynamically moving in and out of converging and diverging [movement] trajectories’ (Mondada 2009, 1978).

We focus on movement as the key mode through which visitors move in an out of ecologies created either by themselves or by other visitors in the same museum space. As visitors perform within their own ecology or while transitioning to another, they draw upon sequences of movements in space and time including whole body movements, gestures, footing, shifts in posture and so forth. These performed sequences are informed by various rhythms emplaced in the architectural design of the building and the gallery rooms, the curated exhibitions, and the rhythms created by those being present in the same space. When visitors are moving from one exhibit to another, they are constantly creating new, interwoven and interdependent ecologies of participation - and thus, new rhythms, in which their bodies interact with those of others, the museum collection, and the staged space.

### **Museum choreographies**

Visitors’ transitory movement from one ecology to another allows us to reimagine their movement in the gallery as the movement of dancers on a theatrical stage. We reinforce this metaphor by drawing parallels to dance (Carter 2000; Brodie and Lobel 2012; Biehl 2017; Olsen 2014), rethinking visitors’ performances as ‘choreographies’.

We apply the term choreography not only as a metaphor, but as an analytical term to describe and capture how visitors engage with different resources and organise them into a performance arising within a social and institutional context during their fleeting encounters with other bodies, space and exhibits in time. It is through such choreographies that visitors continually negotiate the relationship between their own bodies, those of others, the museum exhibits and the space in a dialectic relationship which Merleau-Ponty calls ‘intercorporeality’ (1962, 168).

Drawing on Olsen’s conceptualisation of choreography as a ‘form-giving process that draws on all [...] resources’ (2014, 83), we acknowledge the range of resources that visitors may employ in order to shape and perform their choreography. These are heterogeneous, ranging from movement, speech, gaze, gesture, visitors’ clothes, objects and space, to the discourses that regulate them. Although we acknowledge their contribution to the shaping of each choreography, this research focuses on the alignment and positioning of visitors’ bodies in space, as key resources in the shaping of visitors’ performed movement sequences within each ecology.

The conceptualisation of the museum experience as choreography enables us to talk about visitors’ movement in the galleries as a response to both the museum script and the prompts triggered by the performances of others. It further allows us to foreground the sequential nature of each individual choreography and the collective sequentiality of all



choreographies unfolding at the same time as each individual choreography influences the emergent mediated collective performance - the 'collective choreography'. In this paper, we discuss visitors' choreographies as being 'scripted' and 'improvised'.

### ***Museum encounters: scripted and improvised choreographies***

Within this theoretical framework, we explore how visitors perform on the museum stage both through 'scripted choreographies' (scripted action) arising through resonance with and in response to the scripted stage of the exhibition, and 'improvised choreographies' (impromptu action) emerging in response to prompts performed by others (scripted action and impromptu action).

We use the hybrid concept of 'scripted choreographies' to account for the orchestrated movement of visitors shaped by the particular affordances of the designed museum space and the rules for conduct within it. More specifically, scripted choreographies are performed when visitors engage with the prescribed path of the exhibition, taking into account the objects, space and visitors' 'scripted' movement arising in resonance with museum visiting protocols without significant distraction by the prompts of others' choreographies. In other words, in a scripted choreography the dominant *modus operandi* is an alignment with institutional discourses about how one should behave and encounter the exhibition within the museum space.

Visitors move around the museum following the curatorial script, similarly to dancers who perform on a stage following the choreographic design which ‘determine[s] the architecture of the dance, how it unfolds in time and space’ (Olsen 2014, 170) and how dancers should embody it while making available a shared ‘movement vocabulary’ (Olsen 2014, 75). Similarly, the specificities of the scripted museum space shape the visitors’ movement vocabulary and inform their performances. For instance, the embodiment of the museum script is evidenced in the comportment visitors adopt by drawing upon a number of movement resources, including posture, alignment, proximity and pace (Diamantopoulou & Christidou 2016; Rees Leahy 2012).

At the same time, museum choreographies can subvert the scripted rhythm when visitors make selections to approach or ignore certain exhibition areas and exhibits, responding both to their personal agenda and to what unfolds moment-by-moment on the museum stage. These selections can be seen as ‘judicious editing of [the curator’s] script’ (Rees Leahy 2012, 85). In such instances, visitors, like dancers, perform a series of improvisations through the use of movement, subtle shifts of their bodies and gaze, facial expressions and gestures.

Employed in dance ‘as both a mode of performance and a resource for choreographed and composed work’ (Olsen 2014, 67), improvisations are performed based on the participants’ ‘mutual anticipation, responsive adjustment and conjoint coordination of

movements’ which ‘can be equally ascertained through internalized experiences and embodied knowledge that allows for the anticipation of alter’s movements’ (Meyer & Wedelstaedt 2017a, viii). As such, improvisations are the result of visitors ‘exploring and organizing movement in the moment. [...] staying present to what unfolds’ (ibid) by displaying a continuous ‘embodied awareness’, ‘readiness’ and ‘responsiveness’ to the movement of others on the same stage. Each improvisation is in symbiotic relationship with the improvisations performed by others in the same or adjacent ecologies of movement, irrespectively of whether they arise in resonance or dissonance with them.

### **Research questions**

In this paper, we attempt a deductive approach to our large dataset by transposing concepts from Goffman and dance studies onto the study of visitors’ museum encounters, complementing our analytical and interpretative framework with Kress’s social semiotics, as outlined below. We particularly seek to explore:

1. How do visitors ‘frame’ their ecologies of participation through movement and how do they ‘perform’ and negotiate their participation within and across different ecologies?
2. How do visitors use positioning and alignment to perform and orchestrate their participation?

## **Analytical categories**

Our interest in movement spurs from our engagement with Kress's multimodal social semiotic theory of communication (2010) which recognises movement as a significant embodied communicational resource amongst others, such as speech and gaze. The semiotic aspect of the theory - which views each act of communication as comprising *signs* which are 'motivated conjunctions of forms and meaning' (Kress 2010, 10), offers us the concepts of signs, modes and resources as analytical tools. For Kress, movement is a 'mode' people use to make meanings, alongside speech, writing, image, gaze, photography, and so forth. The multimodal aspect attends to the multiplicity of 'modes' - that is the 'culturally shaped resources' - through which meanings are realised in our social worlds. Modes operate in orchestration and comprise a number of resources each of which realises particular meanings and aspect(s) of what people intend to communicate.

In this paper, we view movement arising with the social and institutional space of the museum as a sign of visitors' embodiment of their agency and of the relevant 'museum scripts'. Specifically, informed by Kress's theory and its tenets about the social shaping of the cultural resources of the modes, we extend our analysis to an exploration of any institutional discourses and the potential to render these visible through the study of movement. In our analysis, we hypothetically recover meanings by attending to the materiality of visitors'

movement as a sign of their interest to respond to the museum script and orchestrate their performance in space accordingly.

A multimodal social semiotic view of movement acknowledges the diverse number of resources of movement that come into play in the shaping of visitors' performed sequences (e.g. orientation, speed, rhythm etc) operating alongside the multiplicity of other modes of communication and their own resources for communication (e.g. the mode of speech and its resources of pitch, volume, etc). Drawing from this, we attend to choreography not only as an assemblage of modes, but also as predominantly realised through a multiplicity of resources of movement inherent to it, such as alignment, positioning, deixis, pace and rotation, which are most pertinent to the navigation of visitors in the galleries.

Kress's theory prompts us to venture into assigning more significance to movement, by making visible what happens within the multimodal ensemble of each visitors' performance. Our starting point is the body and its subtleties of movement unfolding within the interactive nexus of the museum encounters (objects, bodies and space) assigning equal importance to each of its components. With this understanding in mind, we attend to two of the various resources of movement, positioning and alignment, treating them as the agentive choices of visitors who remain alert to what unfolds on the museum frontstage (Christidou 2018).

Positioning and alignment become important analytical terms in our attempt to locate visible and material evidence (signs) of visitors' interactive responses to prompts arising in the scripted environment and in the choreographies of other visitors. Positioning brings our attention to the body and how it is configured in space through a sequence of postures, while alignment invites an engagement with the ways the body relates to and aligns with other elements in the encounter, including objects, bodies and space. Both these resources are indicative of the choices visitors make in relation to orienting to space and exhibits while also being aware of the moment-by-moment shifts in the ecologies of participation and performances surrounding them. Positioning and alignment are significant to attend to as they also allude to the epistemological commitment visitors constantly make in terms of adopting and performing ways of knowing while engaging with the museum script.

The choice of these two particular movement resources enables us to converse with research within the field of visitor studies, which often considers the fixed/stable alignment and the positioning of visitors' bodies in front of exhibits as indicative of their engagement with the exhibits and thus, the museum script (i.e. Bitgood 2010). In this paper, we rethink the resources of positioning and alignment as inextricably linked to visitors being 'on the move' (Christidou 2018). Although both resources are captured in this analysis through sequences of still shots, they are not viewed as static entities, but as inherently dynamic.

## **Limitations**

Transposed from the realm of dance, the theory can arguably help us see that choreography is a complex multimodal assemblage of modes and unfolds as an orchestrated effect of this multiplicity of modes working together in the shaping of museum encounters. Despite the possibilities entailed in this analytical and interpretative framework to view visitors' performances as multimodal ensembles comprising modes beyond movement, this analysis does not endeavour to attend neither to the diversity of resources entailed in movement, nor to the multiplicity of modes comprising each multimodal performance arising within each ecology. The priority is to closely attend to the range of meanings that arise by simply attending to one two aspects of movement, inspired by the tenet that each mode realises meanings through different resources. This could be the basis for further work bringing in a study of multiple modes in orchestration during the making of an ecology of movement. Here, we delve instead into uncovering the multiplicity of meanings that the different resources of the mode of movement make available, which is another aspect of Kress's understanding of the different 'sites' where meanings arise.

Acknowledging the potential limitations of working within the confines of the materiality of movement that interests multimodal social semiotics, we understand that choreography can be an experience deeper than its visual manifestation through these resources. Choreographic movement is often inspired by the inherently expressive and

receptive state of a dancer (Olsen 2014) and justifiably has thus been more akin to a phenomenological rather than a semiotic exploration. On this basis, we would not expect for all resources which prompt the making of a museum choreography to become materialised, visible and hypothetically recoverable in the movement of a visitor. This is a reminder of the limitations of this research as what we consider to be a choreography performed by the visitors cannot be exhaustively researched by only attending to aspects of movement.

### **Data set**

In order to account for the scripted and impromptu movements of visitors within the museum space and in relation to other bodies, we draw upon a larger dataset collected by both authors through audio and video-based data collection methods, a longstanding practice in museum settings (vom Lehn & Heath 2006).

In this paper, we present two excerpts of visitors' interactions selected from two large datasets collected in the UK between 2007 and 2012. One of the datasets comes from the Museum of London, and the other from the Wellcome Collection, the Horniman Museum and Gardens and the Courtauld Gallery, all in London, UK. The former dataset was collected as part of the international project 'The museum, the exhibition and the visitor: Learning in the new arena of communication' funded by the Swedish Research Council involving a number of case studies from two museums in Stockholm, Sweden and one in London, UK. Pairs of



visitors, who agreed to participate by consenting in writing, were observed as they were visiting the galleries, while being audio and videotaped. The second project, conducted by the second author, investigated the use of pointing gestures in the aforementioned three museums in London, UK through video-based research. Visitors consented by agreeing to enter the exhibition area marked accordingly (Gutwill 2002). All names have been altered to maintain anonymity.

Our intention has been to capture visitors' performances *in situ* and within the context of bodies, spaces and exhibits while attending to the momentary orchestration of the multiple modes comprising these performances. When revisiting the dataset for this paper, it became evident that the video excerpts we had collected during the aforementioned projects either complied with the rules of conduct in the museum setting or broke some of these rules. We then thematically categorised the excerpts into 'scripted', 'improvised', and 'a mix of both'. In this paper, we have included two excerpts bringing together both scripted and improvised instances of engagement with exhibits and people in two museum settings; one illustrating an instance of breaking the rules, the other foregrounding the compliance with the script.

The first excerpt features a pair of visitors and a third party in a busy exhibition space at the Courtauld Gallery, whereas the second presents a pair visiting a quiet exhibition space at the Museum of London. Excerpt 1 illustrates an instance during which three visitors are aligning and positioning in front of a painting with their ecologies of participation emerging

in relation to the specific artwork and its respective interpretive text. The excerpt also exemplifies the nature of museum galleries as ‘frontstages’ on which different ecologies intermesh and the roles of ‘audience’ and ‘spectator’ are assigned through social interaction. Specifically, it examines an instance where these two types of choreographies are co-present as different ecologies of participation intermesh. The convergence of these ecologies causes tension among these visitors whose roles as both spectator and spectacle are not mutually acknowledged. It illustrates both how visitors perform according to the script while responding to the moment-by-moment social presence of others through a series of improvisations.

Excerpt 2 illustrates an instance of two visitors following the museum script. This is an example of visitors moving through the gallery space and experiencing ‘art on the move’ (Christidou 2018) without encountering other bodies in the space. The second excerpt illustrates how two visitors oscillate and transition smoothly between scripted and improvised choreographies as they achieve shared attention and participation in the same ecology through negotiation.

### **Exploring museum encounters: Positioning and alignment as analytical categories**

In our analysis, we pay attention to how visitors’ bodies are aligning with objects and other bodies in the scripted space of the museum in ways that their ‘interactional dance goes beyond

the individuals who accomplish it, as the co-participants sustain the situation, and the situation itself influences its participants at the same time' (Meyer & Wedelstaedt 2017b, 1-2). Both excerpts illustrate how visitors through their embodied shifts in posture and alignment manage to oscillate between performing both 'scripted' and 'improvised' choreographies manifest through shifts in posture and alignment. These two kinds of choreographies are both continuously shaped in interaction with the 'scripted' museum stage, and the 'scripted' and 'improvised choreographies' of other visitors.

In our approach, the analytical focus is on movement as realised through shifts in visitors' positioning in space and in time. The notion of positioning, as conceptualized here, involves visitors either assuming a particular posture or shifting through a sequence of postures in a particular spatial and temporal configuration. It is thus a process which involves a dynamic 'orchestration' of movement resources as visitors' bodies respond to prompts. We particularly attend to how visitors through shifts in posture and alignment of their bodies with other bodies and the exhibits as these two resources of movement (positioning and alignment) make positioning visually and materially evident. We attend to the significance of their subtle nuances as they embody signs of visitors' interaction with resources on the exhibition stage and the performances of others. We further expand the definition of alignment within the field of Somatics, as the 'relationship of body parts to one another' (Brodie & Lobel 2012: 184).

### *Posture and alignment as resources for establishing ecologies*

In the first excerpt, we join Maria and John at the Courtauld Gallery. Positioned next to each other and in front of Seurat's painting 'Woman Powdering Herself', the pair is looking at this painting, with Maria standing on the right and John on the left. While being engaged in this performance, another visitor, Jenny, arrives at the same painting and positions herself behind the pair.

The positioning of both the pair and Jenny in front of the painting is a sign of their intention and subsequent engagement with the specific artwork. They further draw upon nuanced embodied practices in line with the rules entailed in what is considered as 'following the museum script'. Through these brief, embodied performances, visitors declare some of the space of the museum scripted stages as 'theirs', preparing the ground publicly for their forthcoming ecology of participation to unfold. As soon as Jenny and the pair position themselves in front of Seurat's painting, John immediately shifts and rotates his body slightly to his right, extending his left hand to point towards the other side of the room (Figure 1a). We assume that his performance is directed towards Maria as he aligns his body with hers maintaining close proximity and visual contact with her despite turning his head to the right. This performance, following the establishment of the space for their ecology, is an embodied sign of their attempt to embark on their joint exploration of the painting.

## Figure 1a. Merging of ecologies of participation

In this case, John is the performer and Maria is the intended spectator of his performance as indicated through John's shift in posture while facing her. Nonetheless, as Jenny has positioned herself closely behind them, she also partakes in the pair's ecology of participation as an unratified participant, whom Goffman (1963) calls 'bystander'. Although Maria is addressed as the spectator, she does not respond to his movement improvisation but maintains her alignment with the painting. It is potentially this lack of acknowledgment of his performance that prompts John to regain his previous posture and alignment with both the painting and Maria.

Concomitantly, Jenny is standing still, with her head tilted to the left, a posture indicating that she is possibly reading the label displayed on the left side of the painting. John's position right in front of her suggests that he is participating in her ecology as a 'bystander' - in those instances where he remains still - and as a performer when the continuous shifts in his posture and alignment obstruct Jenny's view and prompt her to adopt a different alignment with the painting, its label and the pair standing in front of her.

The ensuing movement sequence illustrates how visitors draw upon nuanced shifts in movement to perform 'improvised choreographies'. John shifts to his right after a few seconds of relative stillness in his position, facing the painting. This shift in posture and

alignment is a scripted performance functioning as a sign of a potential shift in his interest as he leans towards the right side of the painting. Through these shifts in posture, John is expanding the boundaries of his ecology of participation to which Jenny immediately responds by moving slightly to her right to continue reading the label without being obstructed by John. Her response to his movement is an ‘improvised choreography’ prompted by his ‘scripted choreography’.

Seconds later, John steps forward approaching the label making another shift in posture and alignment that obstructs Jenny’s reading yet again (Figure 1b). She responds by rolling her eyes and sucking her cheeks; two facial gestures that could be seen as an embodiment of her annoyance towards John’s performances. Despite grimaces, gestures, and facial expressions having different meanings in different cultures, Jenny’s given performances (physical manoeuvring and grimaces) are seen in the particular context and in relation to John’s shifts in alignment and position. Jenny’s responses, although embodied, are performed rapidly, without being noticed by John.

Figure 1b. Negotiating the space.

***Posture and alignment as resources for negotiating shared attention***

In the second excerpt, we join a pair of visitors, Staffan and Eva. Upon entering the 'London Before London' exhibition at the Museum of London, the pair walks ahead, and starts navigating their way through a gallery corridor with glass cases on both the left and the right side. Eva is exploring the left side, while Staffan looks at the exhibits to the right. After a while, Eva sustains a fixed position in front of a specific glass case, and Staffan approaches and stands next to her, their heads and torsos aligned. Eva gradually moves along towards another exhibit also on the left side, disrupting her alignment with Staffan and their convergence of standpoints. Staffan shifts to view the exhibits at the opposite side of the corridor, while maintaining parallel alignment with Eva as they both perform their scripted choreographies.

After a few seconds, Eva moves further along. This shift in alignment prompts Staffan to rotate momentarily backwards towards her and then back to his previous posture and alignment, remaining static with his back facing Eva. This is a sign of a shift in his interest as Eva's ecology entails an exhibit he seems to have already considered. A few seconds later, Eva's subtle shifts in posture and alignment with him and the exhibit signal that she is moving on. Staffan immediately shifts his weight to the left and slightly rotates his head and upper torso to face her, while extending his right hand pointing towards the exhibit. As Eva does not respond to Staffan's performance - functioning as an invitation to enter his ecology- Staffan unfolds his own performance into her stage by initiating a full rotation towards her, assuming

a parallel alignment with Eva while continuing to mark his own stage through pointing towards the exhibit (Figure 2a).

The ensuing encounter signals a moment of negotiation, as their two independently arising scripted performances merge, while their ecologies of participation and scripted performances converge. Eva responds to Staffan's posture and alignment by rotating slightly to the right while still attending to her original stage of performance. This transitory movement is met by Staffan's sustained alignment with her, marked by a slight shift of his weight to the right. This further prompts Eva's eventual rotation to her right, towards the space which Staffan holds. Both bodies congruently rotate towards Staffan's point of interest and unfold their scripted choreographies. The diagonal alignment of their bodies with the new focus of attention (Figure 2b) is a sign that Eva has now entered the stage where Staffan previously unfolded his 'scripted choreography'.

Figure 2a. Invitation into an ecology of participation.

Figure 2b. Negotiating a joint performance in space.

### **Choreographies of visitors' bodies in interaction**



The excerpts illustrate sequences of museum choreographies marked with shifts from ‘scripted’ choreographies to ‘improvised’ and vice versa. It is through positioning and alignment of their bodies that visitors ‘frame’ their ecologies and negotiate the intercorporeal space, including or excluding others from it. At times, in resonance or dissonance with both the positioning and alignment of the movement of others, these visitors draw upon their own body positioning and alignment as resources for displaying, or not, shared interest in the same exhibit and for negotiating their ecology of participation. Through positioning, visitors shape and demarcate the social space in which they will unfold their ecologies of participation.

The unfolded ‘scripted choreographies’ are evident in instances where the visitors are responsive to the particular layout of objects, labels and gallery rooms and align with these elements, as seen in Excerpt 1 when the visitors position themselves and align with the painting and its interpretive text. These are interspersed with ‘improvised choreographies’ unfolding in parallel on the ‘frontstage’ of each museum encounter, performed ad hoc when visitors do not follow the scripted rules of conduct.

The analysis also made evident instances when ecologies of participation intertwine and converge. In Excerpt 1, we explored how three visitors performed on the ‘stage’ in front of the Seurat painting hanging in the Courtauld Gallery. In this instance, there is a convergence of three unfolding ecologies of participation on the same ‘frontstage’: one created by John and Maria, one by Jenny, and one created by all three of them. Within these

three intertwined ecologies created by these three visitors, the painting, the gallery space and time, we see how visitors' alignment and posture shape their museum encounters. For example, Jenny's positioning on the stage in front of the painting is a scripted choreography that allows her to align with both the painting and its interpretive text. At the same time, as she positions behind the pair (Figure 1b), she performs another 'scripted choreography' embodying her awareness of the rules regarding her comportment in the museum.

Nonetheless, in those instances when the emerging ecologies overlap, each performance has an affinity with the one preceding it and a role in prompting it, while it affects the one succeeding. Displaying embodied awareness in such intermeshing ecologies often is embodied through visitors' improvised choreographies. For example, Jenny remains in a state of readiness in relation to the ongoing negotiation of her ecology of participation which is shaped by her relation to others and the museum script. By maintaining an 'embodied awareness', she responds continuously to the presence and choices of the pair by performing multiple sequences of movement, involving body rotations, facial expressions and shifts in posture and alignment (Figure 1b).

While pointing out similar aspects of museum encounters, the second excerpt at the Museum of London offers an insight into how visitors' choreographies and improvisations shape the museum stage differently; not as a site of contestation among visitors' ecologies of participation, but as a site of convergence. Specifically, the excerpt showcases an instance

where visitors co-construct their performances on the ‘frontstage’ of the museum through an exchange of choreographic improvisations, which are significantly prompted by shifts of weight, pointing gestures, rotation, and alignment of posture and gaze. The characteristics of these choreographies constitute signs of visitors’ interaction with aspects of the surrounding bodies, objects, time and the space. At the same time, in those instances when the bodies and gazes are aligned, these also form markers of shared attention (Christidou 2018).

Both visitors are negotiating their relationship with the space and objects through their posture and alignment with objects of interest, whereas Staffan additionally negotiates with Eva the possibility of a shared experience by displaying embodied awareness and readiness to respond to her shifts in alignment and posture. Eva performs several shifts in posture and alignment. These shifts do not go unnoticed by Staffan who orchestrates his alignment in order to achieve shared attention with her. Initially he attends to Eva’s scripted choreography by rotating his torso and head towards Eva, while marking his space for the ensuing ‘scripted choreography’, keeping his feet anchored on the same space and his hand pointed towards his exhibit of interest. This holding of space through Staffan’s improvisation is both an acknowledgement of the performance of the other, as well as a marker of transition to ensuring scripted choreography (Figure 2a). During this transition Staffan becomes the spectator of both the exhibit and Eva’s choreography, while prompting her to participate in a scripted performance alongside with him.

Staffan performs several subtle movement improvisations responding to Eva's shifts in posture and alignment until he secures both physical alignment with her (Figure 2b) and alignment of their interests through shared attention. This offers a sign of resonance in the improvised choreography on the same stage. Eva's shift in posture (Figure 2b) can be seen as an embodied acknowledgment of Staffan's invitation to explore an exhibit, as he now holds the space for her by remaining still, awaiting her response to his invitation. This is a sign of his interest in framing and demarcating the space for Eva's performance, indicating where her focus of attention should be and on what. This shift constitutes a choreography resourced with other modes of communication, such as gestures, and gaze, which operate alongside movement and are actually ratified by it. This ongoing negotiation 'displays a commonality of readiness' (Kendon 1985, 237) as they sustain the same position, sharing the same orientation in space and towards the objects, as well as demonstrating responsiveness to each other's slight movement cues.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper, we introduced a composite theoretical framework informed by Goffman's dramaturgy, Kress's multimodal social semiotics and Olsen's conceptualisation of choreography which enabled us to foreground the significance of bodies and movement in the shaping of museum encounters.

Through the use of ‘museum encounters’ as an all-inclusive term, we accounted for the dialogic relationship between visitors, exhibits and museum spaces. We considered museum encounters as manifesting at this dialogic relation between visitors, exhibits and curated architectural spaces (i.e. exhibition pathways) which, apart for making available a range of possibilities for engagement, can also constrain visitors’ performances in conjunction with the rules of conduct enforced in such spaces (Biehl-Missal and vom Lehn 2015). At the same time, museum encounters are tightly connected to the sequential, material, and cultural context of interaction, as well as to the spatial ecology of each encounter.

In the museum space, visitors’ encounters both with the objects and with each other unfold predominantly through movement in real time. Drawing on the metaphors of performance and choreography, we were able to foreground the organisation of movement as being co-created through the interaction of bodies and the exhibits in space and in time and reimagine the museum encounters as ‘an active entanglement between self, narrative and embodiment and space’ (Austin 2012, 117). These parallels also enabled us to argue about the sequential, fluid, contextual and situated nature of museum encounters. This theorization of museum encounters challenges the hegemony of vision and static spectatorship in the museum discourse and builds upon our own and others’ research foregrounding museum encounters as embodied experiences (Christidou and Diamantopoulou 2016; Rees Leahy 2012).

Furthermore, this paper introduced the concepts of ‘scripted’ and ‘improvised’ choreographies to account for the agentive and discursively shaped movement of visitors in museums. Both concepts have been selected to assign equal value to the agency of visitors when interacting with spaces and exhibits through movement, and to the agentive and scripted nature of the museum space and the curated exhibits, designed to prompt movement according to a ‘script’.

Through the two examples, the analysis illustrated the interplay and oscillation of visitors’ movement between ‘scripted’ and ‘improvised’ choreographies performed as they navigate space. The combined theoretical perspective used has informed our understanding of visitors’ movement as ‘scripted’ and ‘improvised’ choreographies unfolding within the institutional framework of the museum mainly through shifts in posture and alignment.

Using the analytical categories of posture and alignment as entry points into an exploration of movement in museums, we attended to performance as an intrinsic function in visitors’ movement within the nexus of museum encounters, building upon the theoretical basis of Kress accounting for movement as *communication*. Through the two excerpts, we looked at the ways in which visitors shift from moving to standing and vice versa, and explored the organisation of convergent trajectories, or ecologies of participation, in space through their ‘choreographic’ work.

The interdisciplinary interpretative framework to study of visitors' movement in museums, as well as the findings reiterating its importance have epistemological implications and can potentially inform professional curatorial practices. Engaging with the museum experience through this convergence of theoretical perspectives and epistemologies can potentially be a stepping stone in the direction of furthering on-going interdisciplinary conversations (Dicks 2014), while foregrounding the social worlds of museums and visitors' bodies in the negotiation and shaping of their museum encounters.

By bringing together concepts and perspectives from dance theory, multimodality, and Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, the discussion and findings of this paper are contributing to the recognition of the embodied nature of the museum encounters and the centrality of movement in their shaping. Furthermore, our work informed by a multimodal social semiotic theorisation of movement as comprising a number of resources, all significant of carrying meaning, shifts the attention to the multiplicity of factors shaping a museum visit as well as the complexity inherent in visitors' movement. This can invite a sharper focus on what visitors actually do when they move and reimagine it as choreography of looking, moving, pointing, posing, re-adjusting and so forth.

Our findings also have implications for museum professional practice pointing to the need for designing museum spaces by prioritizing movement and action as meaning making processes. This should take into account the affordances of movement and visitors'

choreographies as meaning making processes at the planning stage of exhibitions, asking not only questions regarding the ways in which the configuration of space will prompt movement, but also the ways in which the combined configuration of space and exhibits will jointly prompt visitor's choreographies. Perceiving the museum space as the stage onto which performances and ecologies of participation will arise can be an invitation for curators to consider the affordances and limitations of their scripts, and hypothetically recover the diversity of potential choreographed interpretations performed by several visitors.

A final implication is the enhanced awareness this research invites in terms of attending closely to the 'museum scripts' that may arise as dominant in particular intersections of visitors, spaces and exhibits, as well as the need to hypothetically recover the range of possibilities for visitor agency to arise. Our findings emphasize the need for a better understanding of museum encounters by adopting a more interdisciplinary perspective in order to shift the emphasis from objects and collections to including the museum encounters as a corporeal performance, unfolding within a nexus of bodies, objects, space and time.

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