



Meaning-Making and Degrees of Freedom

by Stephanie Ross

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If we invite visitors to exercise their creativity and imagination in making meaning in our exhibits, is it ever appropriate to later declare "This won't do, you've gone too far!"?

The meaning-making paradigm discussed in this issue of *Exhibitionist* invites us to ponder many aspects of the museum-going experience. One question perhaps underlies them all: just what sorts of meaning can museums and their contents present? The variety of museums is of course relevant here. Should we expect art museums, science museums, natural history museums, corporate museums, to function differently as meaning presenters? Do they provide qualitatively different experiences for their visitors? As a philosopher of art, I concentrate on art museums in this essay, but I will try to arrive at conclusions relevant to all these cases. Consider a variant of our initial question. Where is meaning located in the museum? Presumably, museums bring together objects that possess some degree of inherent significance. Moreover, the range of such objects is vast. It includes works of art, didactic constructions and displays, sacred artifacts, rocks and gems, worn clothing, documents and letters, wax figures, fossils and rockets, bowls and bras. (These last two are found in two of my favorite 'corporate' examples, the Tupperware Museum of the Container and the Frederick's of Hollywood Museum.)

Some of the objects I've just listed gain significance when they are brought within the museum's precincts. Philosophers defending an institutional theory of art have discussed this change in status. But museum exhibits generate additional layers or levels of significance. While the individual items themselves have meaning, further significance accrues from their juxtaposition with one another. Tiffany Sutton explores the ramifications of juxtapositionality in a forthcoming book *Historical Framing: A Myth about the Classification of Visual Art*. Juxtapositions to some degree guide our attention, making salient the traits shared by juxtaposed items. Just as the performing arts offer two levels of artistry and interpretation, that of the playwright or composer who creates the original script or score and that of the actor or musician who interprets it, so too juxtaposition in museum exhibits superimposes an additional layer of creativity, that of the person who designed the exhibit, on that of its component items.

Just what sorts of meanings can museums and their contents present?

Museum visitors are invited to make sense of the exhibits they view. How free, then, are viewers to construct meaning as they wander through an exhibit? Are there any constraints that limit the meaning they can extract? In particular, ought we to reproach viewers who extract extremely personal or idiosyncratic meaning—a gallery version of "They're playing our song"—from the exhibits they view? And what of coherent yet crazed assignments of meaning?—an artworld analogy to conspiracy theories or to such wrongheaded yet explanatorily-powerful views as Ptolemaic astronomy or Berkeleyan immaterialism. In short, if we invite museum-goers to exercise their creativity and imagination, is it ever appropriate to later declare "This won't do, you've gone too far!"?

To pursue this question, I shall first turn to the case of linguistic meaning. We are immersed in meaning making the moment we begin to use language. This suggests we might understand exhibit meaning of the basis of the prior notion, linguistic meaning. After arguing that this hope is dashed by the mystery and complexity of linguistic meaning, I shall return to the museum to explore some additional riddles about interpretation.

Linguistic Meaning

We often distinguish linguistic meaning from other sorts of significance by claiming it is arbitrary or conventional. The conventionality seems at first glance to amount to this: few objects cry out to be labeled by the particular words that in fact serve to name them. Just as we might drive on the left—rather than the right-hand side of the road, so long as all drivers honor the same arrangement, so too



we might call dogs “cat” and cats “dog” with no loss of communicability, so long as all speakers use these words similarly. (So-called onomatopoeic words would be the only exception to this general claim.) While this observation might convey some extremely vague sense of what we mean by the conventionality of linguistic meaning, it does very little to explicate the more primary notion of meaning itself. Linguistic meaning is difficult to characterize, and we respond by attempting to reify it. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, showed how this impulse is captured by what they call the conduit metaphor. This metaphor, in its many variants (“I gave you that idea,” “It’s difficult to put my ideas into words,” “His words carry little meaning”), assumes that meaning is some entity that is somehow contained in and carried by the words we exchange.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein noted an early version of this tendency to reify meaning. In a common view he found exemplified in Augustine, Wittgenstein claimed that we mistakenly assume that all words function like labels or proper names—i.e., that the meaning of a word is just that thing in the world that it labels or refers to. This ‘Augustinian’ view can be defeated by acknowledging the great variety of words that don’t readily fit the proposed model: verbs (“run,” “complain”), abstract nouns (“happiness,” “justice”), theoretical terms (“muon,” “black hole”), names of fictional entities (“Lemuel Gulliver,” “the present king of France”), and various other terms that are non-denotative yet not nonsensical (“although,” “nevertheless”).

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What then are the determinants of meaning? Various contextual factors come into play here. Gottlob Frege noted the existence of pairs of words that refer to the same object yet differ in what he called their sense. His now classic example contrasted the phrases “Morning Star” and “Evening Star,” both of which refer to the planet Venus, but which convey importantly different pieces of information. Compare this example from Robert Stecker: the simple sentence “The bus is coming” can mean quite different things depending on whether the person being addressed is in danger of missing the bus or of being hit by it. The philosopher H.P. Grice (1957) proposed that what words mean depends in part upon an iterated structure of beliefs and intentions on the part of those who utter and understand them. And in a later paper (1975) he showed that words don’t always carry their standard or conventional meanings. Discussing this dialogue from a refined tea party: “Mrs. X is an old bag,” “Lovely weather we’re having today, isn’t it,” Grice argued that the force of the second utterance is not just to report on the weather but to reproach (through the failure to follow up) the rudeness of the prior comment. Thus

speakers can use words to convey something quite other than what those words conventionally mean. Irony and sarcasm are additional instances of such meaning-changing linguistic functions.

The examples I have been assembling combine to show that linguistic meaning is puzzling and elusive. It resides not in words or in minds or in the world, but in a complex embracing all of these and more. Does this analysis advance our understanding of exhibit meaning? Certainly, museum exhibits contain considerable verbiage. Critics complain they function all too often as “books on a wall.” But exhibits also contain objects that themselves have denotative force. While the theories we have canvassed could explain the signage in such exhibits, they don’t offer an adequate account, even on a metaphorical level, of the complex transaction enacted amongst the objects displayed, the people, processes, and forces that created them, the museum professionals who selected and installed them, and the visitors who ponder them. What sorts of meaning over and above linguistic meaning must we acknowledge in order to appreciate the meaning inherent in museum exhibits?

Interpretive Freedom or Interpretive License?

Certainly objects and events can themselves have meaning. In an art museum, we assume that the items viewed were generally created (or selected) by artists. We also assume they were meant to delight our senses, or at least to invite and reward prolonged scrutiny. Following Arthur Danto’s suggestion in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, we might take it for granted that artworks differ from ordinary things precisely in demanding interpretation. As Danto puts it, their essence is “interpretari.” That is, artworks make statements (in contrast to quotidian things, which are mute), and the business of experiencing art is to reconstruct those statements. But are the statements made by works of art limited to those their creators intended?

Permissiveness is in vogue nowadays when we consider interpretation. Works of art certainly seem to be multiply interpretable. An example frequently cited in the aesthetics literature is Henry James’ short story “The Turn of the Screw.” Is it best read as a ghost story, or as a story of the psychological consequences of repression? Both interpretations fit the story, they cannot be entertained simultaneously, it is not clear which James himself intended, nor is it obvious that one makes the story measurably “better” than the other.

While we cannot often find two such complete, convincing, yet incompatible interpretations of a work of art, it will almost always be possible to spin out some additional understanding of a work that conflicts in some respects with interpretations already proposed. Are there any constraints on this process? And do we have reason to



privilege some interpretations over others? Some critics believe that the interpretation intended by the artist has priority. Others encourage us to opt for whichever interpretation improves the work, or is suited to an ideal audience, or makes the work more timely for present-day audiences, or recreates the work as it would have been understood by audiences at the time of its creation. Then again, some theorists decry the push towards meaning, the search for content in all works of art. (Cf. Susan Sontag's influential essay "Against Interpretation," which urges us to attend more to formal and surface qualities.)

These interpretive dilemmas have particular force in art museums. Items on display in other types of museums may well lack the sort of content we have been discussing. In science and/or natural history museums, for example, objects do not convey statements intended by their creators. Instead, such objects exemplify categories, demonstrate processes, pose conditions. What might meaning making amount to in these situations? Retrieval of intentions still plays some role here. That is, the exhibit designer's intentions might function somewhat like artistic intention, affecting both the significance of a single component and the force of the overall juxtaposition. But an exhibit that aimed solely at retrieval of the designer's intentions would be unacceptably authoritarian and didactic. Perhaps, then, the non-art museums are distinguished by a push for understanding rather than for sensory delight. Even this suggestion seems overly restrictive. Why shouldn't all museums aspire to do many things, to generate not only understanding and engagement but also amusement, or wonder, or distraction, or delectation, or sorrow, or profound thought?

If we accept this vague yet generous charge, we are once again brought up against our opening question, namely, are there any constraints in place that limit the meanings or interpretations to which visitors can leap? I think one response exhibit designers would like to rule out is mere free-association. Clive Bell gives an example in the artistic

case that illustrates what I have in mind here. In an essay defending his claim that significant form is essential for art, Bell explains that the presence of such form in visual art triggers an aesthetic emotion in him. But he admits to being a poor appreciator of classical music and confesses that whenever he attends live performances, he tends to use the music merely as a background for emotionally-charged day dreams and imaginings. The assumption is that to behave in this way is to misuse the music by failing to discern its (aural) significant form.

We want to empower museum-goers, to encourage the activity of meaning making, but we certainly do not want to endorse the sort of daydreaming that Bell described. To do so would make museum exhibits the equivalent of muzak that lulls us in elevators and dentists' chairs. The task, then, for those who seek to elucidate a new paradigm for viewers of museum exhibits of all sorts, is to set out the parameters of meaning making in such a way as to avoid making this activity all-inclusive and unconstrained. In effect I am requesting a formula for responsible or appropriate meaning making. We want to allow creativity, and flights of fancy, but stop short of saying anything goes. I suggest the relevant constraint concerns the body of beliefs with which new views are integrated. Bursts of meaning making that connect with wrong, or pernicious, or irrelevant, views should be dismissed. Such creations will inevitably lie along a continuum. A viewer who entertains a quirky counterfactual supposition errs less than one who develops and endorses an entire false world view. Judgments of relevance will always be a matter of degree, with some departures more acceptable than others. Clearly much work remains to be done here. But just as consulting philosophical views about linguistic meaning helped clarify some earlier issues, consulting standard philosophical accounts of coherence, truth, and theory-building might help us with the present task of more fully formulating the constraints on meaning making.

**Do we have reason
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