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| Paper Name: | Do touch the Art - a museum & galleries perspective on access | |
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1. (Image: A sleeved hand holds hand of Henry Moore Sculpture)

When I was a boy three artworks I encountered made quite a difference to my life:

2. (First “Close” Encounter)

The first was responding to images of Henry Moore’s drawings and sculpture in projected slides in Second Form Art. I pinched out my own version of a Moore family group in clay.

(Images: Henry Moore “Family Group” 1944, mixed media drawing, “Helmet” 1939-40, Lead Sculpture and Donnelly, Clay figures, 2nd Form, 1975.)

3. (Second Close Encounter)

The second was being mesmerised (as a young teen) by James Gleeson’s “The Sower” on a visit to the Art Gallery of NSW, and then searching for a postcard in vain.

(Image: James Gleeson “The Sower” 1944, oil painting, Collection: AGNSW)

4. (Third Close Encounter)

The third was on an art excursion to the Archibald Prize in 1976 and coming face to face with Brett Whitely’s “Self Portrait” that had just won.

(Image: Brett Whitely “Self Portrait” oil and collaged elements on canvas, Collection: AGNSW.)

They were, for me as a sighted child, three decisive close encounters with Art. They had a big impact upon me, changing how I thought about Art, about myself, the possibilities of making Art and of sharing my excitement about Art with others.

I believe people who are blind or have low vision also need such direct and meaningful encounters with Art so that it can make a difference to them as well; how they think about Art, themselves and the world.

5. In the time I have now I would like to just touch on how this might happen. On one hand, it is important to have art teachers who can develop ways of engaging young people who are blind or have low vision with the world of Art and Art making.

On the other hand, art institutions, galleries and museums need to be more accessible to these young people and to all who are blind or have low vision.

And on a third hand, people who are blind or have low vision need to be confident that a visit to these institutions will be worth it.

(Image: Cartoon showing person who is blind with guide dog. The dog is explaining an abstract painting before them: “Now, this painting would seem to echo the work of the Fauves and the cubists while moving towards a more whimsical, more pure form of abstraction.” - Reproduced with kind permission by Tohby)

So, what is available?

6. In 2004, a survey of 45 Melbourne Galleries and Museums, where half responded (see appendix A), revealed the vast majority had not had “any requests for assistance from people who are blind or have a vision impairment to access exhibits”, nor had they “ever mounted exhibits that specifically target people who are blind or vision impaired”. In general few of the respondents had ever tried to “(make their) collection and exhibits more accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired” and most cited at least one or two “obstacles that prevent any of (their) exhibits from being accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired” - if they saw it as an issue at all. Indeed one or two of the respondents implied that they were not sure the survey was serious and for many the issue had never crossed their hypothetical radar.

“Artist-run” spaces that responded expressed a willingness to at least try things but only on an ad-hoc basis.

And, disappointingly at that time, our major gallery, the NGV (Australian or International version) only offered the very occasional “All Abilities Access Viewing” sessions where the all-in, generalist approach was likely to be overwhelming to a blind or low vision visitor and, although Auslan may be available, touching was certainly not on the program.

7. In seeking to find out what might possibly be done, in 2007 I was fortunate to travel and attend the

In Touch With Art Conference

at the **Victoria & Albert Museum, London**. There was an

- **Inspiring array of museum rep's, artists (sighted and blind), educators & practitioners**

(Images: Conference Logo, plus foyer of V&A with hanging glass sculpture by Chihuly)

8. The Ways to Access Art for people who are blind or have low vision I encountered were:

- **Touch Access to Art**

- **Touch Displays**

- **Access to related objects**

- **Tactile Images and**

- **Audio / Verbal Description**

Much of what has occurred is Thanks to their DDA. The **Disability Discrimination Act** in the UK has certainly “encouraged” institutions to do the right thing and work towards addressing the glaring imbalances that exist in terms of access to the arts for everyone. However, what has been achieved so far has its critics in terms of perceived tokenism, concerns over maintenance of programs and commitment to ongoing improvements and inclusiveness.

(Image: View of the complete **Mother and Child sculpture by Henry Moore** in the first slide.)

9. (Touch Access to Art)

In the V&A Museum itself

Touch access is available to people who are blind or have low vision with conservator's **gloves in the main sculpture gallery, along with Touch Displays**

(Image: View of main sculpture gallery showing numerous marble busts and other sculptures on display)

10. (Touch Access to Art)

At the British Museum

Touch Access to sculptures is available in the Egyptian Gallery, a wonderland of monumental sculpture. Note the sign. Interestingly, one conference delegate claimed that the Brit actually had about 200 major pieces deemed appropriate for access and asked why not more of these have been made available already.

(Image: Egyptian stone Sculptures and notice re: blind access)

11. (Touch Access to Art)

At the Royal Academy of the Arts in their big

- **Summer Exhibition**

- all contributing sculptors are asked:
- “Can your work be touched by people who are blind or have low vision, with or without gloves?”

(Image: View of part of RAA Summer Exhibition 2007)

12. (Touch Access to Art)

At the Tate Modern

- Touching of original art works is available with the permission of the Sculpture Conservatorial & Curatorial Departments and
 - A list is provided of items safe to touch (with cotton gloves). With that you can explore the very beautiful Boccioni winged figure and others, including, while the special show was on, Louise Bourgeois' giant spider, “Maman”, some 5 metres tall, in the museum forecourt. The Tate has since purchased the work.
- (Images: Four of the Bronze sculptures marked for touch access plus outside sculpture of giant spider, “Maman” during Louise Bourgeois show.)

13. (Touch Access to Art)

At the conference I was invited up to Wolverhampton to see what their Art Gallery had created. Their

- Sensing Sculpture Gallery allows people to touch and experience everything on display
- (Images: Access officer, Doreen, with Carved Wood portrait plus felt pony and interior of gallery showing variety of sculptures.)

14. (Touch Access to Art)

In Birmingham, close by, I had a quick look at their BMAG. The set up in the

- In Touch Gallery was not as accessible as Wolverhampton but was still a big step in the right direction. It included, at the time
- a series of portrait busts around a table and other bronzes and interactives

(Image: Bronze Portrait Bust of African male with frizzy hair and beard.)

15. (Touch Access to Art)

A highlight of the trip for me was visiting The Henry Moore Foundation in

- Hertfordshire. At this up-market version of Heide perhaps, or Norman Lindsay's property in the Blue Mountains, the Education officers allow
- Access to Moore's small holdable maquettes prior to encountering large-scale works for visitors with V.I. by appointment. Guides also make use of white card to hold up behind some of the smaller figures so that the shape is more easily discerned by people who have low vision.

(Images: Interior of Maquette Room plus large outdoor sculpture: “Figure in Shelter”)

16. (Touch Access to Art)

In 2007 there was also a Winter Exhibition of Henry Moore sculptures at Kew Gardens, organised by the Foundation where 28 large-scale works were situated around the grounds with audio commentary available via mobile phone if you punched in the right numbers. (What I didn't find out was how much that might cost – the Gardens themselves were £12 entry)
(Images: Two large scale sculptures in Kew Gardens, “Large Upright Internal / External Form” & “Large Reclining Figure”.)

17. The importance of touch is also seen in some UK Educational Settings Art Through Touch operates parallel to and within institutions like Sefton's College & the Pocklington Foundation

The “Touch and See” approach involves

Drawing as a means to an end –touch, explore, draw, and make – working towards and then making a sculpture.

(Image: Person with V.I. involved in “Art through Touch” Touch Tour, exploring a bronze sculpture.)

18. There are also purpose-built Touch Displays.

At the V&A I was shown the

•**First Touch Display Table with stick-down Braille labels and objects fixed in the centre of the display.**

Barry Ginley, the V&A Access Officer whom you see here with his guide dog Lucy, admitted at the conference that his only big passion for Art is in making it accessible.

(Image: Barry Ginley holding bronze figurine in touch display, accompanied by Lucy.)

19. However, he is quite amazing, and has instituted a series of new Touch Displays including (V&A Museum)

•**Newer Touch Tables with**

•**Objects fixed**

•**Pull-out Braille panels and**

•**Standardised format that is repeated around the V&A, highlighting facets of the various galleries.**

(Image: Touch display showing Victorian tableware with Braille pull-out notes & Please Touch sign.)

20. (Touch Displays V&A Museum)

•**Some displays are specific to their context**

•**A Touch access display for a silver mug was a involved solution to the problem of allowing general access to an intrinsically expensive piece. . .**

(Images: Silver Mug in dome-shaped perspex case, allowing touch access through vertical supporting bars.)

21. (Touch Displays)

At the conference we heard from Cyrille Gouyette, Access Manager for Disabilities & Young People at The Louvre, Paris

Amongst the many initiatives the mega museum has in place, there is a

•Tactile Sculpture Gallery with

- a room of resin and (plaster) casts as well as some bronze, involving
- 15 pieces changing with the theme. e.g. “The Sculpted Movement”, or Animals as symbols of power.

(Image: The Tactile Sculpture Gallery in the Louvre showing shaped handrail and tac-tiles around sculptures.)

22. (Touch Displays)

Back in the Wolverhampton Art Gallery the

•Sensing Sculpture Gallery has a number of interactive touch displays, commissioned by the gallery.

•Including Sensory Drawers and a

•Multi-Sensory Tunnel consisting of an aromatic textile installation, sound and light effects.

(Images: Close-ups of Sensory Drawers and aromatic multi-sensory tunnel.)

23. (Touch Displays)

Wolverhampton Art Gallery.)

There are also

•Interactive Displays in their Georgian Room with

•Specially designed furniture

•Dress-ups and

•Audio Stations

(Image: Interior of Georgian Gallery showing tables with Pull-out drawers and other objects.)

24. (Touch Displays)

The British Museum, like the V&A, has a number of programs that satisfy the general public’s desire to touch along with people who are blind or have low vision

•Their "Hands On" Desks, in a number of galleries make links with the exhibits through

•Handling sessions with a curator. These are gazetted in the museum information brochures.

(Images: Two of the Hands On desks, African and Enlightenment, and some of the objects available for handling)

25. (Touch Displays)

The British Museum also has

•Self led touch tours of the Parthenon Introductory Gallery which recreates sections of the original (Greek) marbles and is fully touch accessible

(Images: Full-size cast of human figures and horses frieze from Parthenon entablature with Braille Labelling)

26. (Touch Displays

British Museum)

Touch Access also occurs with replicas in special exhibits, such as this

(Images:) Replica Bronze Egyptian cat sculpture with signage inviting people to touch.

27. Then there is Access to related objects

The Tate Modern offers

•Touch Access to art objects commissioned through Dept. of Education & Interpretation, quite a treasure-trove of things are available in their drawers, and

(Images: Drawers full of sample canvasses and art objects in different materials including original Giacometti figure)

28. (Access to related objects

Tate Modern)

•Related found objects are available for use in verbal descriptive tours of representational paintings and other works

(Images: Drawer of fabrics related to paintings plus Marcus Dickey Horley, Curator of Access Projects, showing metronome for use with Surrealist painting.)

29. With Tactile Images

The RNIB are heavily involved in the design and production of Tactile Images for exhibitions.

Their signage consultant cited her First job: designing tactile images of the **British Crown Jewels** for the Tower of London. She emphasized that

What's obvious to the eye is very abstract when you are blindfolded. As an example, life-size images of a folded sheet of paper, envelope and stamp were far more difficult to decipher than a human figure – a stylised policeman.

(Images: Sue King showing Crown Jewels Tactile Image & Master for Postage and Policeman Thermoform Tactile Images)

30. (Tactile Images)

In the V&A

Tactile images accompany some paintings and are also used for special exhibitions.

(Image: Portrait by Gainsborough in oils along with tactile image from accompanying Braille catalogue)

31. (Tactile Images)

At the British Museum

Books with large print, tactile images & Braille are available for many temporary exhibitions. Size is kept large so they are a little harder to walk off with.

Tactile images are now automatically included in the design process of many British Museum Exhibition Projects.

(Images: “Swell Paper” tactile images from Chinese Emperor exhibition & Egyptian Gallery)

32. (Tactile Images)

With the National Portrait Gallery

Books with large print, tactile images & Braille are available in many of the rooms from clearly posted stands.

However the guards do say they are not often used and one needs to consider why this is so.

(Images: “Swell Paper” tactile image of portrait of James Cook, plus book stand with large print and tactile image guide books.)

33. (Tactile Images)

At the Tate Modern

A variety of Tactile images are used during audio described tours and in combination with related objects.

(Image: Example of tactile image – detail of a Lichtenstein pop art painting)

34. (Tactile Images)

But Tate Modern also developed, through the collaboration of Caro Howell and Dan Porter,

i-map, an accessible, interactive website using on-line images as templates for swell paper tactile images, audio-descriptions and simple animations, as part of Tate On-line. These break down the images into their component parts so that they can make more sense.

(On-line images as templates for tactile images, audio-descriptions and simple animations www.tate.org.uk/imap)

Image: Francis Picabia: the Handsome Pork Butcher, Oil and mixed media on canvas circa 1924-6, 1929-35)

35. (Tactile Images)

In the US, Art Beyond Sight & American Printing House for the Blind have produced

Art History through Touch and Sound. They plan to place 21 volumes of the series on-line. Vision Australia has 6 of the books that are available in print Braille and tactile image. Art Beyond Sight are currently conducting a multi-site museum accessibility study in the U.S. that will define, document and

evaluate museum “best practices” for making their collections accessible to visitors with disabilities.

(Image: Art History through touch and sound website homepage)

36. (Tactile Images)

And the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford, promote their T3 Talking Tactile Technology Tablet.

It is a Multi-sensory device attached to PC

Using a swell paper diagram placed over a sensor pad with pre-programmable and self-authoring overlays available.

It is touted as a more cost effective means of imparting information in a tactile and audio form than some of the more time and materials expensive options, such as the next example

Images: T3 with anatomy overlay plus Colour wheel overlay.

37. (Tactile Images)

Loz Simpson, at Topografik in the UK offers

- Touch for everyone
- Universal Access for All
- bronze relief sculptures
- 3-D relief models, plans & maps with audio sensor points.

(Image: the bronze relief sculpture depicting John Martin's painting 'The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah' as encountered at the Laing Art Gallery, in Newcastle-on-Tyne where it is one of six pieces that Topografik have produced, plus talking display of the “Stairway to Heaven” Locks, Warwickshire.)

38. And then, there is Audio / Verbal Description , which many of our Australian institutions now offer, some following in-servicing by Vision Australia personnel.

A Definition:

“Putting pictures into words. To approximate the experience of looking at art; to enable dialogue and interaction with art; to excite, inspire, to do all the things art does”.

Image: Picasso Collage: Still Life of Bowl of Fruit with violin on Table

39. (Audio / Verbal Description)

It is one answer to the question:

“How to explore art work, especially pieces where touch won’t help”?

Audio / verbal description must involve

- Collaboration with people who are blind or have low vision
- direct description
- powerful metaphors, and
- be poetic and descriptive

However I am very mindful of the blind Braille teacher who said emphatically to me late last year: "I am tired of audio description, it is not an experience of art, it is someone else's account!"

(Image: A favourite work for Caro Howell, Whitechapel Galleries, an old photograph by Robert Doisneau: "Un Regard Oblique" 1948)

40. (Audio / Verbal Description)

At the Tate Modern

Four tours are on offer for its permanent collection. Verbal description is also available for temporary shows. Making use of related objects where appropriate.

(Image: Sculpture of Bronze Hanging Figure called "Arch of Hysteria" by Louise Bourgeois from temporary exhibition at Tate Modern)

41. (Audio / Verbal Description)

And at the National Gallery of London

'Art Through Words' sessions consisting of description, interpretation and discussion of a painting.

I am told The Gallery no longer uses tactile images in general. Again I wonder why.

Image: Painting of "the Ambassadors" (two Elizabethan men and their accoutrements) by Hans Holbein

42. Well, what's happening now - at least in my home town of Melbourne?

With the sad closure of the Vision Australia School and all the additional work and angst that involved, it wasn't until the start of this year that I sent out my request for an update of the 2004 survey.

With the returns only just in and judging by what has been possible over the last few years in visiting institutions with my students, the situation appears to have improved a little.

43, (Responses)

(Image: Entrance Sign at NGV International – "To protect the collection, please do not touch the works of art".)

44.

(Image: Student who is blind investigating a Peter Corlett's "Tarax Play Sculpture" at the McClelland Art Gallery + Sculpture Park.)

45. There are many issues to be resolved and some of these circle around notions of an art work's value and uniqueness, its insurability and how "precious" we consider some cultural items to be. One art conservator suggested that in her "personal" opinion there are:

“no particular obstacles that should prevent access to artwork for blind and vision impaired audiences” and that she “would be very supportive of tactile access to artworks for the vision impaired if suitable artworks were proposed. In fact (she said) when I consider the broad collections I have dealt with throughout my career there would only be a small minority of artworks that would not be suitable and many that I myself would have engaged with and enjoyed so much more if I could have experienced them through touch”.

(Images: “No touching artworks” sign at National Gallery of Australia and a “Please Touch” sign from the British Museum.)

46. (Conclusion - A need for greater:

Education

Awareness

Preparedness to rethink and provide better access in response to the DDA as part of DAP.)

There continues to be a need for greater awareness of access issues for people who are blind or have low vision and a greater preparedness to allow direct access to art works within the arts and museum community as a continuing response to our own Disability Discrimination Act and as part of individual Disability Action Plans. Indeed, there needs to be a greater preparedness in the general community for this to happen as well. The message that things are changing needs to get out to the blind community and, when they respond, they should not be disappointed.

(Image: Student who is blind investigating a Bruce Armstrong sculpture at Heide MOMA.)