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In 2009, the Powerhouse Museum opened the exhibition *Living in a sensory world: stories from people with blindness and low vision*. The creation of this exhibition presented an opportunity to develop public programs that explored the sensory world of people with blindness or low vision. The aims of the exhibition were used as the starting point in conceiving the programs to accompany it. These aims were to give Museum visitors an **understanding** of the world of the blindness and low vision community and to **celebrate** their achievements. The programs developed sought to enhance these aims and to provide an **opportunity** for Museum visitors, regardless of sight, to experience and explore the Museum in a sensory way.

The programs developed to achieve these aims were: *About Face* self-portrait workshops, opportunities to wear glasses replicating common vision complaints, piano performances by blind pianist Scott Erichsen, talks, tactile Museum tours and experiencing Museum objects through music.

Museums' core business is to attempt to engage diverse audiences with their collections and provide experiences and opportunities to do this, however, often these experiences focus on sight or audio programs with collections off limits for tactile experiences. The programs accompanying this exhibition were designed to allow all visitors to experience the Museum using senses other than sight, thereby allowing them to explore a sensory world and gain insights into what it might be like to have blindness or low vision.

A suite of programs were offered in 2009 over the June long weekend and again for the Don't DIS my ABILITY in December.¹ Programs were also delivered to

¹ Don't DIS my ABILITY is a month long event that celebrates International Day of People with Disabilities in NSW.

blind and low vision school and adult groups on booked Museum visits throughout 2009. Underlying each of these programs was the need to provide sensory access to our collections, primarily through touch, smell and sound.

In discussing these programs, I will attempt to analyse their strengths and weakness through considering the three aims of: understanding; celebration and opportunity.

1. Understanding

“Attitudes towards people with disabilities can only be challenged and changed if people without disabilities learn to recognise, appreciate and value difference as a strength and an asset.”² Museums and galleries are uniquely placed to challenge and change attitudes, the creation of the *Living in a sensory world: stories from people with blindness and low vision* exhibition and the accompanying programs allowed for attitudinal changes to take place.

Vision Australia supplied glasses for the public programs that replicated common eye conditions that included macular degeneration, cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and retinitis pigmentosa. Visitors were encouraged to try on the glasses to experience sight as it might be affected by the conditions. A significant number of visitors gained an understanding of eye conditions that family or friends had and there were many comments like, “I never realised it was like this for my grandmother.” A deep personal connection was made which is at the heart of museum learning.

One program that further sought to give participants an understanding of what it was like to be blind was *About Face*, a self-portrait workshop. This workshop was inspired by stories of Helen Keller touching the face of people she met and explored the relationship between our senses and perceptions of form. The workshop was facilitated by Sydney artist Jenny Pollack and staffed with Education staff and volunteers. Almost 1,000 Museum visitors made a self-portrait from play-dough while wearing a blindfold.

When relying only on touch, the face becomes a totally foreign object, what you feel is not necessarily what you see: your eyes feel bulgy and details like eyelashes and eyebrows are no longer the most obvious feature. Many participants found this task difficult and instead of reproducing what their fingers felt relied on memory in the construction of their self-portrait. Some of most realistic tactile portraits were produced by young children.

As well as constructing a self-portrait out of play-dough, participants also had the opportunity to create a tactile sketch portrait and write their name on paper that was then embossed using a PIAF embosser.

² M. Jai-Morincome quoted in Cultural Ministers Council, *National Arts and Disability Strategy* (Canberra 2009), 7

The programs were successful in that they provided people with an opportunity to experience blindness and low vision through the use of blindfolds and Vision Australia glasses while the *About Face* program gave visitors an opportunity to experience the familiar in a new way. In this way the programs achieved their aims of firstly increasing awareness of what it is like to be blind or have low vision and secondly increasing awareness and knowledge of eye conditions that result in blindness and low vision.

2. Celebration

The second aim of the programs was to celebrate the achievements of people with blindness or low vision. On each afternoon of the June long weekend the blind jazz musician Scott Erichsen gave a piano performance on the Museum's Stuart piano. Scott is a local Sydney musician who graduated in 2007 from the Conservatorium of Music with a first class honours degree. He is passionate about jazz and music improvisation, has released a CD *Early Journey's* and features in the *Living in a sensory world: stories from people with blindness and low vision* exhibition.

Museum visitors had the opportunity to not only hear Scott play the Stuart piano but also to hear him speak about his experiences as a blind musician and share his enthusiasm and love of music in a talk at the Museum.

3. Opportunity

The third aim of the programs was to provide an opportunity for Museum visitors, regardless of sight, to experience and explore the Museum in a sensory and tactile way. The handling of Museum objects can be problematic, but through working with curators, the Museum was able to offer sensory tours of the Museum. These described highlight tours for blind and low vision visitors focused on our Transport and Steam exhibitions where many of the objects displayed could be touched under supervision, Participants could feel the humidity of the steam, smell the oil from the steam engines and hear the noise they made. These tours are available on an on-going basis for booked groups.

In addition to the sensory tours, the Museum also has a series of touch trolleys which are staffed each morning by our volunteers. These touch trolleys use objects from the Education and Public Program collection and allow tactile interaction. Over the June long weekend objects were removed from the touch trolleys and set up on trestle tables throughout the Museum. This allowed greater prominence and access to the Education Collection and encouraged a greater participation.

In order to further enhance opportunities for people with low vision or blindness to access the Museum, auditory experiences were also made available through both spoken word and music from the *Sounding the Museum* project. To give the blind and low vision community greater access to our Museum DAISY³ players

³ Digital Auditory Information System

for the *Living in a sensory world* exhibition are available from front of house. These allow people to make their own way through the exhibition.

In 2000 the Museum embarked on a program entitled *Sounding the Museum*. This included commissioning local musician Romano Crivici to compose music inspired by popular objects in our collections and the responses of blind and low vision people to these objects. He was assisted by Jann Rutherford and poetry was created to accompany Romano's music. *Sounding the Museum* was funded with the assistance of an Australia Council Grant and ran in the Kings Cinema to allow visitors to experience these objects in a sensory way through music, not sight. *Sounding the Museum* is an on-going program that we hope to be able to offer as a regular program beyond the life of the exhibition.

As well as programs, practical measures were also taken in order to ensure that opportunities were available. This included a 'guide dog only' area that was set aside while the *Exploring a sensory world* programs ran so the dog's owner could spend a day at the Museum with an area provided in which they and their seeing eye dog could have some time out.

Tactile tours, touch trolleys and *Sounding the Museum* all provide different ways of accessing the and experiencing the Museum, thereby creating the opportunity to explore the Museum using a variety of senses.

The programs for this exhibition allowed all visitors to experience the Museum using senses other than sight, in other words to explore a sensory world and gain insights into what it might be like to have blindness or low vision. In this respect they can be regarded as having achieved their aims. The greater challenge that remains is to ensure these types of programs continue and are integrated into the ways museums conceive their exhibitions and the programs which accompany them.