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Struggles and Successes in Accessing Art

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Struggles and Successes in Accessing Art

Abstract

According to the 2021 American Community Survey, 13% of Americans self-reported being disabled. That is over 42 million people. Many of have the same interest in attending art museums and galleries as non-disabled Americans, but face additional barriers. It is critical for art museums and galleries to recognize these barriers and take steps to reduce them. Several large art museums have begun innovative programs that can provide an example of what an art space with the time, staffing, and resources can achieve. Although accessibility requires a plethora of considerations to be done properly, museums and galleries have shown incredible progress in the past fifteen years that will hopefully expand to more places in the future.

Keywords

accessibility, art museums, art galleries, disability

Disciplines

Arts Management | Disability Studies | Social Justice

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Theodore Szpakowski

Struggles and Successes in Accessing Art

This semester, I visited the Schmucker Art Gallery multiple times. I greatly enjoyed the exhibits there, particularly the print by Faith Ringgold that I focused on in a paper and the Chinese tomb rubbings on display early this fall. However, as an autistic person, I sometimes had difficulty staying in the gallery for as long as I wanted or needed to be there. One of the symptoms of autism that I experience is sensory sensitivity, which made the bright lights of Nekisha Durrett's *Magnolia* difficult for me to handle. The text on the exhibit labels was also fairly small—I would have strained to read them without my glasses. Someone with worse vision than mine may not have been able to read them all. These accessibility problems mean that not everyone is able to enjoy the excellent work on display equally. The Schmucker Art Gallery is small, and may not have the resources to make all the changes that would be best. However, several larger art museums have begun innovative programs that can provide an example of what an art space with the time, staffing, and resources can achieve. Although accessibility requires a plethora of considerations to be done properly, museums and galleries have shown incredible progress in the past fifteen years that will hopefully expand to more places in the future.

One consideration art museums and galleries must make when evaluating accessibility programs is whether equivalent experiences are provided for disabled and non-disabled visitors. Some museums have had success hosting special events for groups of disabled people.¹ However, true equity means that disabled people should be able to visit at any time, not just during designated events. This is part of a larger theme in disabled people's art museum

¹ Fiona Candlin, "Blindness, Art, and Exclusion in Museums and Galleries," *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 22, no. 1 (February 2003): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5949.00343>.

experiences—the desire for autonomy.² In focus groups, people with low vision noted that guided tours at art galleries can be constricting.³ Instead of following someone else’s path through the gallery on their time schedule, participants wanted to wander more freely and choose how long they spent at each exhibit.⁴ Additionally, these may need to be scheduled ahead of time, which means that these people cannot make impromptu visits the way non-disabled people can.⁵ Properly made audio guides may suit this population better. Another group of blind people and people with low vision had specific negative feedback on touch tours.⁶ They reported that the docents leading these tours in art museums and galleries failed to understand the logistics of touch, for example how much time is needed and the kind of description that is needed.⁷

Blind people and those with low vision are often the most obvious group of people to consider in accessibility provisions at art museums and galleries. However, it is important to consider other disabled populations as well. There are additional barriers that exist even when people are able to physically see the art. In large art museums, tiredness is a factor that needs to be considered. Placing seating at exhibit components and throughout and between exhibits can allow disabled people (and others) to rest when they need it.⁸ Autistic people may need to rest in a different way, by going somewhere that is less overwhelming than a brightly lit, crowded, loud

² Leona Holloway et al., “Making Sense of Art: Access for Gallery Visitors with Vision Impairments” (paper, CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Glasgow, Scotland, UK, April 2, 2019), 5, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3290605.3300250>.

³ Gretchen Henrich, Felice Q. Cleveland, and Emily Wolverton, “Case Studies from Three Museums in Art Beyond Sight’s Multi-site Museum Accessibility Study,” *Museums and Social Issues* 9, no. 2 (October 10, 2014): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1559689314Z.00000000023>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alison F. Eardley et al., “Redefining Access: Embracing Multimodality, Memorability and Shared Experience in Museums,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 3 (July 28, 2016): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12163>.

⁶ Candlin, “Blindness, Art, and Exclusion,” 103.

⁷ Ibid., 104

⁸ Christine Reich and Minda Borun, “Exhibition Accessibility and the Senior Visitor,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40479198>.

museum floor.⁹ Creating “designated sensory retreat rooms” for autistic people and others with similar needs helps these individuals to stay regulated during their visit.¹⁰

Beyond the considerations specific to the art world, there are more general access barriers that art museums and galleries should consider. High noise level can be a barrier to autistic people who are sensitive to noise as well as those using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices whose devices may not be heard in these environments.¹¹ Heavy doors and steep ramps can prevent issues for those with mobility challenges.¹² Situations also exist where measures taken in hopes of increasing accessibility come off as unhelpful or even harmful to disabled people. Sometimes, the main entrance is not accessible, so disabled people are expected to use the back entrance. This can be frustrating, especially when disabled people are made to separate from the group they are traveling with.¹³ Disabled teenagers in Sweden also reported the dehumanizing situation in which the only elevator available for their use was designed for goods, not for people like them.¹⁴

There are also several reported examples of disabled people having issues with staff in art museums and galleries. The blind people and those with low vision in Candlin’s study expressed frustration over being treated as if they had lower competency or intelligence than sighted

⁹ Autistic Self Advocacy Network [ASAN], “Autistic Access Needs: Notes on Accessibility,” 2011, <https://autisticadvocacy.org/resources/accessibility/#autistic-access-needs-notes-on-accessibility>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ ASAN, “Autistic Access Needs,” 4; John Dattilo et al., “‘I Have Chosen to Live Life Abundantly’: Perceptions of Leisure by Adults who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication,” *AAC: Augmentative & Alternative Communication* 24, no. 1 (March 2008): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07434610701390558>.

¹² Agneta Fänge, Susanne Iwarsson, and Åsa Persson, “Accessibility to the Public Environment as Perceived By Teenagers with Functional Limitations in a South Swedish Town Centre,” *Disability and Rehabilitation* 24, no. 6 (January 2022): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638280110089906>.

¹³ Yaniv Poria, Aerie Reichel, and Yael Brandt, “People with Disabilities Visit Art Museums: An Exploratory Study of Obstacles and Difficulties,” *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 4, no. 2 (May 6, 2009): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17438730802366508>.

¹⁴ Fänge, Iwarsson, and Persson, “Accessibility to the Public Environment,” 324.

people, as shown in programs that never went beyond a very basic level.¹⁵ They were not given the same opportunity to advance that sighted people were.¹⁶ A similar experience was reported by the disabled people in another study, who said that staff either talked down to them or ignored them completely and chose to communicate with non-disabled friends and family instead.¹⁷ Having good intentions does not solve the problem when staff are not informed on how to be helpful. Staff at the Mattress Factory, a contemporary art museum focused on installation art, wanted to help blind people and people with low vision in their descriptions.¹⁸ However, they needed training in order to understand the experiences of these populations and thus create useful descriptions, rather than guessing what they thought would be helpful.¹⁹

Despite the challenges, there are art museums who are doing a good job with accessibility, both in the United States and elsewhere. One of these is the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, PA—which is especially fitting since Warhol himself had a childhood neurological disability.²⁰ In 2016, a team at the museum began developing an app called *Out Loud*, which served as an audio guide allowing people with visual disabilities to navigate the museum without need for advance scheduling or docent assistance, as well as providing additional information to all visitors regardless of disability.²¹ It also includes transcripts that make it suitable for Deaf and Hard of Hearing visitors as well as those with auditory processing difficulties.²² In addition, the Andy Warhol museum has created computer-created tactile reproductions of 14 artworks in their

¹⁵ Candlin, “Blindness, Art, and Exclusion,” 102.

¹⁶ Candlin, “Blindness, Art, and Exclusion,” 102.

¹⁷ Poria, Reichel, and Brandt, “People with Disabilities Visit,” 123.

¹⁸ Heinrich, Cleveland, and Wolverson, “Case Studies from Three Museums,” 135.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Beth Ziebarth et al., eds., *Inclusive Digital Interactives: Best Practices + Research* (Smithsonian Institution Press, September 2020), 245-246.

²¹ Ibid., 245

²² Ibid.

collection out of acetate.²³ These use “simplified forms and special patterns to enhance comprehension” along with visual and tactile description, in order to create a parseable experience of the work for those who are blind or have low vision.²⁴ It does not exactly match the experience of someone seeing the works, but it is an equivalent—for the 14 selected works. The overall experience is not yet equivalent, but it’s possible that more tactile reproductions will be created in the future.

Another example of an art museum doing successful work around accessibility is the National Tile Museum in Lisbon, Portugal. The goal of their accessibility project, completed in 2010, aimed to allow “independent and impromptu visits” by disabled visitors, which would allow disabled people the same freedom and autonomy as non-disabled visitors.²⁵ Their project had three steps, focused in order on physical access, access to information, and access to alternate formats.²⁶ Alternate formats that they used included replica tiles with raised surfaces for a selection of tiles that were easy to understand tactilely, important to the collection, and relevant to modern visitors.²⁷ A gallery study indicates that 3D models for touch are appreciated by both blind and sighted people, so this seems to be a smart strategy for the museum.²⁸ They also fulfill the museum’s goal of offering autonomy, since these models can be experienced by a blind person alone without a docent needing to facilitate.²⁹ The tactile models were not the only way that the National Tile Museum accounted for sensory disabilities. They also created labels in large print and Braille, audio guides, sign language guides, and text guides so that there were

²³ Ibid., 255

²⁴ Ziebarth, “Inclusive Digital Interactives,” 257-258.

²⁵ Eardley et al., “Redefining Access,” 267.

²⁶ Ibid., 268

²⁷ Ibid., 268.

²⁸ Holloway et al., “Making Sense of Art,” 2.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

options for blind, Deaf, low vision, Hard of Hearing, and non-disabled people.³⁰ The majority of the comments on the audio guide were positive, with an average of 4.78 rating on a 5-point scale.³¹ One problem with this program was that the audio guide did not provide specific audio instructions for the tactile exploration, as is considered best practices, because it was thought that including too much audio would worsen the experience of sighted visitors.³² In trying to make a product that worked for everyone, they made their program somewhat less useful for the original target audience.

According to the 2021 American Community Survey, 13% of Americans self-reported being disabled.³³ That is over 42 million people.³⁴ Many of have the same interest in attending art museums and galleries as non-disabled Americans, but face additional barriers. It is critical for art museums and galleries to recognize these barriers and take steps to reduce them. Nekisha Durrett's *Magnolia* is proof that not every work of art can be made accessible. Meaning would be lost if the piece was less intense. Similar issues come up around the issue of tactile representations—artists want the integrity of their pieces to be preserved in the translation process, but those making these representations often need to simplify the work to make it tactically understandable.³⁵ Despite these challenges, museums such as the Andy Warhol Museum and the National Tile Museum show us that major strides toward accessibility can be taken with enough time, effort, and resources. Now it is up to each museum and gallery to determine what steps make sense in their context.

³⁰ Eardley et al., "Redefining Access," 276.

³¹ Ibid., 271.

³² Eardley et al., "Redefining Access," 269.

³³ U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S1810; <https://data.census.gov>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Holloway et al., "Making Sense of Art," 5; Eardley et al., "Redefining Access," 268.

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