

Diverse Audiences: Disability Access and the Art Museum

REBECCA MCMILLEN

Introduction

According to the United States (U.S.) Department of Commerce, over 54 million Americans have a disability.¹ Despite these pandemic numbers and decades of disability legislation and policies aimed at advancing the treatment and understanding of people with disabilities, some art museums have continued to lag behind fulfilling the legal requirements of disability laws and research.² While some art museums have been questioned about their tentativeness to engage all people in the community others have begun to recognize the need to broaden and diversify their audiences.³ This research examines the social role of the art museum and disability access in museum education programs. In addition, this article highlights art museums in the U.S. and abroad that not only demonstrate compliance with current disability laws and guidelines, but also serve as model examples of socially inclusive and accessible educational cultural institutions.

Excluded Audiences

For much of the last century, people with disabilities in the U.S. and other Western nations like Australia and the United Kingdom (UK), lived in institutions, such as psychiatric hospitals, nursing homes, or hostels for specialized disability groups.⁴ Society distanced itself from people with disabilities who were separated from the community and often were institutionalized for their entire lives.⁵

In 1974, the United Nations played a significant role in bringing about changes by issuing the Declaration of Rights of Disabled Persons.⁶ In 1981, an International Year of Disabled Persons was also declared by the United Nations that helped raise public awareness about the rights of people with disabilities.⁷ It was not until 1990, however, with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), that the United States began to remedy the effects of past discrimination toward people with disabilities. Today, public institutions, such

as art museums, must comply with a range of laws that stipulate appropriate treatment toward people with disabilities as governmental bodies rightly assert that it is to society's advantage that everyone be treated equitably and that all barriers to accessibility be removed.⁸ Nonetheless, some art museums have failed to implement social reform within museum programs.

The Social Role of the Art Museum

The term "social exclusion" originated in France during the 1970s and, while its meaning has shifted over time and varies from the contexts in which it is used, it remains multidimensional in nature.⁹ Initially, in art museums, social inclusion was perceived as a synonym for access or audience development.¹⁰ A growing body of literature, however, suggests that if art museums are to become effective agents for social inclusion, then a paradigmatic shift in the purpose and role of art museums, along with serious changes in working policy, practices, and outcomes, should take place.¹¹

Sandell suggested that art museums should contribute toward social inclusion on an individual, community, or even societal level.¹² For example, on an individual level, art museums can help promote enhanced self-esteem, confidence, and creativity among individuals. On a community level, art museums may be a vehicle for social regeneration that empowers communities to take greater control in the development of the type of neighborhoods in which people want to live, where outcomes may include enhanced community self-determination, increased participation in decision making processes, and democratic structures.¹³ From a societal level, art museums have the potential to promote tolerance and respect and to challenge stereotypes such as misconceptions about people with disabilities.¹⁴ As Macdonald noted, museums as mediums of mass communication possess a strongly perceived cultural authority as an agent of social change.¹⁵ As agents of change, art museums frequently may contribute positively towards a wide range of social issues, such as poor health, high crime, low educational, and employment levels.¹⁶

The concept of social inclusion has been embedded into central governmental policy in places like the U.S, the UK, and Australia and is becoming increasingly more prevalent in the museum sector of other Western nations. As the

major cultural institutions within their communities that provide opportunities for life-long learning, entertainment, and leisure-time opportunities,¹⁷ art museums should cater to a range of audiences and encourage active participation, interactive opportunities, address different levels of knowledge, and provide ways of accessing information while allowing visitors to feel at ease in their surroundings.¹⁸ Indeed, recent modern definitions of museums hold to the concept of museums as institutions of public service and education that are also places of “inclusion that welcome a diverse audience and that reflect our society’s pluralism in every aspect of its operations and programs.”¹⁹ As a result of the American Association of Museums (AAM) report of 1992, *Excellence and Equity*, museums today are aiming to focus their energies on the communities in which they reside and the public they serve.²⁰

Kawashima suggested that areas of cultural policy, such as audience development and social inclusion within the art museum sector are closely related to accessibility.²¹ Cultural policy in the West has called for cultural institutions and their programs to be relevant, educational, and inclusive to as many audiences as possible.²² With overriding policies regarding social inclusion and audience development, some museum staff have begun to create audience development projects in order to increase audience numbers and to diversify their audience base. In addition, they are being asked to show their contribution to tackling the issue of social exclusion.²³ There are a wide variety of socially excluded groups, however, and as Delin has suggested, the dark history of social exclusion among people with disabilities, and the social effects of this history, cannot be ignored by the art museum.²⁴

Accessible Educational Programs in the Art Museum

Within the current climate of the museum industry, disability access in art museums is becoming a growing topic of discussion, as well as the need to represent the “voice” of people with disabilities.²⁵ However, despite the current dialogue on the importance of ADA compliance and the need to make progress for disability access in art museums, there remains a gap in the literature for determining how and what art museums are doing to achieve disability access. Unfortunately, there remains a debate among some within the art museum field

regarding the desirability of attracting diverse museum audiences, specifically those with disabilities.²⁶ Lost in this discussion are the millions of potential art museum visitors who either do not have access or do not fully experience art due to museum impediments. Other museums, however, are implementing disability access programs in the endeavor to becoming socially inclusive and accessible educational cultural institutions.

In the mid 1990s, the Museum Access Consortium (MAC) was founded in New York to provide a forum for addressing accessibility issues specific to museums.²⁷ MAC believed that “the strongest institutional commitment to accessibility occurs when all departments share in the responsibility for physical, programmatic, and attitudinal accessibility.”²⁸ MAC’s broader concept of accessibility often can be seen filtering through the museum sector on a global scale. For example, the Horniman Museum in London has the following statement welcoming all museum audiences:

The Trust welcomes all visitors to its premises and is committed to implementing fully its obligations as an employer and service provider under the Disability Discrimination Act. The Trust believes that improvements in access to its facilities and services for people with disabilities are of general benefit to all visitors and staff.²⁹

Horniman Museum’s statement is a prime example of how some museums have implemented a specific accessibility statement that outlines and expresses their intentions to be a cultural institution that fosters and promotes accessibility and social inclusion. Some museums, have taken it a step further by creating entire Disability Action Plans (DAP) as is the case in Australia’s largest museum organization, Museum Victoria.³⁰ The purpose of Museum Victoria’s DAP builds upon current initiatives to ensure that people with disabilities are able to fully engage with the museum.³¹ According to Museum Victoria, enhancing access and participation for people with disabilities is an important step toward social inclusion.³²

Another Australian museum currently offering an educational program for people with disabilities is the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (MCA).

In its seventeenth year, the *Bella* Program at the MCA offers gallery-based sessions and hands-on workshops addressing issues of access to contemporary art and culture for people with disabilities—including sensory, behavioral, and intellectual disabilities—or for those who are at a financial, social, and geographic disadvantage.³³ In conjunction with the *Bella* program, the MCA has also offered a program for young people and adults with disabilities called *Good Vibrations*, which is a touring interactive art access project. Participating audiences step into a vintage campervan fitted out with highly advanced technical receptors and equipment, panels of speakers, and sensory computers to experience the sights, sounds, and vibrations of the world around them.³⁴ Children with sensory disabilities, including vision and hearing impairment, are able to have a fully engaging experience of the environment. Programs such as *Bella* and *Good Vibrations* serve as examples of how some art museums are attempting to become more inclusive and diverse in the educational programs they offer to the broader community.

U.S. museums are also beginning to offer more diverse and inclusive educational outreach programs. For example, the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art (BMoCA) in Boulder, Colorado, offers a program called *BMoCA Access*. *BMoCA Access* seeks to reach out to those audiences who may not otherwise enter or engage with the museum, specifically young people and adults with disabilities. BMoCA staff work closely with staff and volunteers from *Imagine!* Established in 1963, *Imagine!* is a private not-for-profit organization and the first community-centered board (CCB) in Colorado.³⁵ A CCB is a local area's single point of entry into local, state, and federally funded programs for people with developmental disabilities in a community. *Imagine!* staff work alongside BMoCA in providing art museum visitors and participants for *BMoCA Access*, as well as providing caregivers for the participants of *BMoCA Access* who require it. Young people and adults with disabilities are invited to BMoCA to view art exhibits and participate in an art workshop arising out of the current exhibition.³⁶ After visitors have toured the exhibition and discussed questions about the exhibition, they then engage in a one and a half hour long art-making workshop related in some way to the exhibition they have just seen.

Other examples of U.S. museums designing and implementing inclusive educational programs for visitors with disabilities can be seen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York City, The Art Institute of Chicago (ARTIC), and the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston.

The MET, for example, has an Access and Community Programs department. While uncommon within art museums to have an entire department dedicated to access, generous outside financial support has allowed for the growth of the department.³⁷ The MET currently offers programs for visitors with disabilities and has divided them into programs for mobility impairments; hearing impairments; hearing loss; loss of sight or partially sighted; learning, developmental, or physical disabilities; and dementia. The extensive list of programs the MET offers demonstrates what museums can achieve when equality, inclusion, accessibility, and diversity become the norm.

Opportunities for social inclusion for people with disabilities in museum education programming may also be seen in the Art Institute of Chicago (ARTIC). The Art Institute offers American Sign Language interpretation guided tours for the hearing impaired or deaf. In addition, the museum also provides guided tours for the blind with museum education staff that are trained to teach about art to those who cannot see. For example, the *Touch Gallery* is a specific gallery space within the Art Institute that exhibits five portrait busts from its permanent collection that can be explored by sight and by touch.³⁸ Labels are available in large-type print and Braille. The bronze and marble sculptures in the exhibit reflect cultures from around the world and provide an enriching experience for all audiences, not only those who are blind or visually impaired.

Further advances to engaging visitors with vision impairment are also evident in the ARTIC through the new *TacTile Kits* which consist of a series of well known artworks from the Art Institute's collection whose images are transferred onto hand-held tiles that are designed to be touched.³⁹ The texture and composition of the image of the art work, along with information in Braille, are reproduced on the tiles, making these works legible through touch.

Similar to *BMoCA Access*, is the Boston Museum of Fine Art's (MFA) *Access to Art* program. *Access to Art* is a program catering to groups of people with disabilities, which may include physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, and

people with dementia or memory loss.⁴⁰ This tour is also offered whenever the museum is opened and available in American Sign Language, Cantonese, and Spanish. Additional programs that MFA offers are *Access to Art: Explorations* which is an interactive, multidisciplinary workshop offered once a month for adults with disabilities. This multi-sensory program focuses on the cognitive disabilities and disabilities that may affect verbal communication and does not require participants to be verbal.⁴¹ The intention of such a program is to be as inclusive to as diverse range of people as possible and thus friends, family members, and caregivers are also welcome to participate. Educators of this program are experienced in both art and theater and sometimes music.⁴² Other programs offered by MFA are *Artful Adventures* specifically for children with disabilities, and *Feeling for Form*. This program is similar to the ARTIC's *Touch Gallery* where a tour of selected artworks from the museum collections are available to visitors who are visually impaired or blind. The tour is a tactile exploration of sculpture and furniture where through verbal description, touch, and tactile diagrams participants can experience art in rich learning experiences.

Conclusion

People with disabilities have the same needs and desires as the rest of society. All people deserve the right to enjoy, experience, and learn about art through one of art's greatest advocates – art museums. Art museums implement educational outreach programs to promote the arts and provide access and learning to its art collections and exhibitions, and to fulfill the museum's role of being socially inclusive cultural institutions. Through the investigation of examples from the U.S., the UK, and Australia, it is evident that steps are being made within art museums to design and implement enriching educational outreach programs for people with disabilities. The programs provide opportunities of social inclusion on individual community or even societal level.⁴³ Furthermore, art museums are now beginning to embrace the mandates put forth in the AAM report of 1992, *Excellence and Equity*, to be more inclusive places and to welcome diverse audiences.⁴⁴ Art museums that offer accessible educational programs should endeavor to measure themselves against these accessibility standards to ensure that their policy, planning, and implementation

of programs for people with disabilities are of sound quality and are indeed truly inclusive for all audiences.

While some museums offer rich, inclusive learning experiences for their audiences with disabilities, there remain a significant number of museums that have yet to offer educational programs specifically for people with disabilities.⁴⁵ Despite a growing recognition of the need to address issues of diversity and accessibility in art museums, many museums have yet to fully embrace inclusive policy strategies within art museums.

NOTES

- ¹ "Census Brief: Disabilities Affect One Fifth of all Americans", (U.S. Department of Commerce), <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/97pubs/cenbr975.pdf> (January 21st 2010).
- ² Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Re-Presenting Disability* (Milton Park; Routledge 2010), 13.
- ³ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, "Counting visitors or visitors who count", in *The Museum Time Machine: Putting Culture on Display*, ed. Robert Lumley (Routledge, London, 1988), 213-232.
- ⁴ "Life to Live: A History of people with disabilities in Australia" (Disability Services Australia Ltd) http://www.dsa.org.au/life_site/text/intro/index.html (February 2nd 2011).
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Ibid
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ Neridah Wyatt-Spratt & Pam Wyatt-Spratt, *Access all Areas: Guidelines for Marketing the Arts to People with Disabilities*, (Surry Hills, Australia Council, 1999), 7.
- ⁹ Ibid, 47.
- ¹⁰ Richard Sandell, "Museums as agents of social inclusion," *Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17, no. 4, (1998): 401-418.
- ¹¹ Richard Sandell, "Social Inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change," *Museum and Society*, 1, no.1 (2003): 45.
- ¹² Richard Sandell, ed., *Museums, Society and Inequality*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 5.
- ¹³ Ibid, 7.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 45.
- ¹⁵ Sharon Macdonald, ed., *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998): xi.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 46.
- ¹⁷ John Salmen, "Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disability Act and Museums," American Association of Museums Report, (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1998).
- ¹⁸ John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *The Museum Experience*, (Washington D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992).
- ¹⁹ American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*. (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992).

- 20 John Salmen, "Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disability Act and Museums," American Association of Museums Report, Washington D.C., American Association of Museums, 1998).
- 21 Nobuko Kawashima, "Audience Development and Social Inclusion in Britain: Tensions, contradictions and paradoxes in policy and their implications for cultural management", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 12, no.1,(2006): 55.
- 22 Ibid, 55.
- 23 Ibid, 56.
- 24 Annie Delin, "Buried in the footnotes: the absence of disabled people in the collective imagery of our past", in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 88.
- 25 Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Re-Presenting Disability* (Milton Park; Routledge 2010), 13.
- 26 Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, "Counting visitors or visitors who count," in *The Museum Time Machine: Putting Culture on Display*, ed. Robert Lumley (Routledge, London, 1988), 213-232.
- 27 Rebecca McGinness, (1999). *The Disabling Society* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge).
- 28 Ibid
- 29 Horniman Museum, "Horniman Museum Disability Policy" Horniman Museum (London: Horniman Museum), 1.
- 30 Museum Victoria, "Museum Victoria Disability Action Plan" Museum Victoria (Melbourne: Museum Victoria, 2009), 12.
- 31 Ibid
- 32 Museum Victoria, "Museum Victoria Disability Action Plan," Museum Victoria (Melbourne: Museum Victoria, 2009), 2.
- 33 "A Year in Review: MCA Annual Report 2007," (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) <http://www.mca.com.au/general/MCAAnnualReport10.pdf> (December 12th 2010).
- 34 "Good Vibrations," (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) <http://mcagoodvibrations.org.au/about>, (January 17th, 2011).
- 35 "About Imagine!" <http://www.imaginecolorado.org/about.htm> (January 3rd, 2011).
- 36 At the time of this research exhibitions are changed every three months.
- 37 "The Metropolitan Museum of Art Visitor Disabilities," <http://www.metmuseum.org/events/visitorsdisabilities/mobility>, (February 9th 2011).
- 38 "The Art Institute of Chicago," http://www.artic.edu/aic/visitor_info/access.html (February 10th, 2011).
- 39 Ibid
- 40 "Museum of Fine Art, Boston, Accessibility," <http://www.mfa.org/visit/accessibility/feeling-form>, (February 10th 2011).
- 41 Ibid
- 42 Ibid
- 43 Richard Sandell, "Social Inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change," *Museum and Society*, 1. no.1 (2003): 45.
- 44 American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*. (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992), 5.
- 45 The author of this article researched numerous well known art museums on the West Coast and Central U.S. to find that no programs were offered at all to people with disabilities.