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# Museum Disability Access: Social Inclusion Opportunities Through Innovative New Media Practices

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According to the American Alliance of Museums, museums “need to innovate in order to successfully navigate the rapidly changing landscape of the 21st century.”<sup>1</sup> Since their inception, museums have adapted out of necessity to ever-changing environments. The modern museum is no exception. The technological advances of the new millennium ushered in another need for change, requiring museums to find innovative ways to stay connected with their tech-savvy visitors.

Traditionally, disability access related more to physical barriers and the universal design of a space. However, with increased use of technology, particularly via the web and mobile access, technological, digital and information access barriers have become as important as physical ones.<sup>2</sup> For example, the 1990s introduced new forms of internet technologies such as JavaScript, Java, and Flash. These technological advances proved problematic for some in the disability community since some auxiliary aids only handled HTML effectively, creating yet another barrier for some people with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> The Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) was subsequently founded by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) to provide Web accessibility guidelines, such as ensuring sufficient contrast of text and background for those with color vision deficit and keyboard shortcuts for hyperlinks.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, cultural institutions now realize that the same level of attention given to physical barriers must be given to non-physical and information access barriers.<sup>5</sup> In fact, some art museums now include digital access into the definition of disability access.<sup>6</sup>

## **Social Inclusion and Accessibility Theory**

Disability access and social inclusion are not new issues for art museums. Sandell (2003) noted that if museums are to become effective agents for social inclusion, then a paradigmatic shift in the purpose and role of museums, along with serious changes in working policy, practices, and outcomes must take place.<sup>7</sup> Sandell maintains that museums have the potential to empower

individuals and communities and help combat the many disadvantages people with disabilities face which place them at risk of being socially excluded.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, visitors with disabilities continue to feel socially excluded or isolated from art museums.

According to Kawashima (2006), cultural institutions and their programs should be accessible, educational, and inclusive to as many audiences as possible.<sup>9</sup> This can be partially achieved through outreach. Outreach or cultural inclusion typically refers to the many projects and programs that take art from its usual venue to areas where audiences have limited or no access to the arts.<sup>10</sup> Examples may include providing museum learning programs, experiences, and exhibitions specifically designed for people with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

Sandell (1998) identified three social inclusion strategies for museum outreach: (1) The Inclusive Museum, (2) the Museum as Agent of Social Regeneration, and (3) the Museum as Vehicle for Broad Social Change.<sup>12</sup> As Sandell explained, the inclusive museum is one that removes any barrier that hinders art museum access.<sup>13</sup> Barriers may be physical, economic, intellectual, psychological, or geographical.<sup>14</sup>

Both Sandell and Kawashimas' social inclusion and outreach strategies target those who are unlikely to visit the museum unless a specific accessible project, program, or event is offered. For example, Sandell's strategies often tend to focus on projects, programs, or exhibitions implemented by museum staff, often working together with organizations within the community.<sup>15</sup>

Hollins (2010) added the concept of empowerment for people with disabilities in her discussion on emancipatory research.<sup>16</sup> Based on the social model of disability that rejects an individualist, medicalized concept of disability, emancipatory research draws attention to the multiple barriers that exclude people with disabilities from fully participating in society. Furthermore, this emancipatory research aims to give people with disabilities control over the research agenda and can be a tool used as a guide to inform the ways museums establish relationships with the disabled community.<sup>17</sup> According to Hollins, these relationships should be more than a mere short-term consultation or narrowly-focused on creating purely physical access.<sup>18</sup> Instead, relationships should be collaborative and holistic in order to be equitable and inclusive.<sup>19</sup>

[T]he development of a holistically inclusive museum requires that thinking 'behind the scenes' gives priority to disability access and representation

through a fundamental rethink of organizational practice and behavior – a process which results in ensuring access not simply to museum buildings but to the process of decision making which shapes the museum’s services and facilities.<sup>20</sup>

This study highlights Sandell, Kawashima, and Hollins’ theories and examines how one museum’s accessibility practices unknowingly affected a group of visitors with disabilities. Results suggest that disability access goes beyond a museum’s physical space and universal design. Participants with disabilities desire to feel included. While there are many innovative new media strategies being utilized by museums to achieve greater accessibility and inclusion, there are additional opportunities for art museums to utilize emancipatory theory to better serve their patrons with disabilities.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This qualitative research study utilizes data collected from a focus group to allow for an exploratory discussion of how museum accessibility impacts social inclusion.<sup>21</sup> A focus group was chosen because (1) it is well suited to exploratory studies where the aim is a broad description of participants’ thoughts, feelings, and priorities concerning the issue in question, (2) it can be used with homogeneous participants, such as people with disabilities, and (3) it relies on a semi-structured group interview moderated by a group leader.<sup>22</sup>

According to Gibbs, the main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon participants’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way that would not be feasible using other methods.<sup>23</sup> Such attitudes, feelings, and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or social setting, but are more likely to be revealed via the social interaction of a focus group.<sup>24</sup> Another goal of the research design is to incorporate emancipatory theory in order to give participants a greater voice. According to Kitzinger, interaction is a key feature of focus groups because the interaction between participants highlights a variety of worldviews and language along with values and beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Interaction also enables participants to ask questions, as well as to reevaluate and reconsider their own understanding of their experiences.<sup>26</sup>

For this study, six focus group participants were identified with the assistance of local disability organizations. Once identified, the participants were randomly selected. Four of the participants had varying degrees of cerebral palsy and relied upon the use of electric wheelchairs. In addition, two disability

advocates were purposely selected based on their familiarity with the participants and their ability to accommodate the participants' special needs. Due to the limited communication abilities of some of the participants, the advocates, in some instances, were required to assist in the communication of the thoughts and opinions of the participants. Disability advocates were also invited to participate in answering research questions given their broad knowledge and insight into the local disability community.

Prior to the focus group, participants toured a medium-size art museum located in Central California to view the exhibitions on display. Participants arrived at the museum together in a bus outfitted for their needs. The participants then toured the museum on their own as a group when the museum was not open to the public. During the tour, the researcher observed the participants and the museum staff to supplement data collection. Participants were not provided ahead of time with any agenda or direction of what they should be observing during the tour. While the museum staff was informed in advance of the tour, the museum staff did not know the participants would be evaluating the accessibility of the museum and its exhibits. Prior to the tour, participants were not familiar with any of the museum's current exhibits, although one of the participants previously had visited the museum.

After their tour, participants gathered in a conference room and were asked a series of questions about their experience at the museum and on broader topics, such as disability access, social inclusion, and new media. Participant responses were filmed, transcribed, and coded. A second researcher independently coded the transcript in order to minimize subjectivity and personal bias. Coding was classified into major themes and sub themes, and traditional pragmatic content analysis was conducted.<sup>27</sup> Coding and selection of relevant quotes were compared, and through discussion, a common set of codes was agreed upon that covered the preliminary findings of both researchers. Analysis was then refined according to the new common set of codes and the findings of both were merged into a common account of the results. Data used in content analysis included human speech, observations of behavior, and various forms of nonverbal communication.

## Results and Discussion

Observation of the participants and analysis of the transcripts revealed two main themes: (1) participants, at times, felt socially excluded, and (2) the participants wanted to be socially included. In general, participants felt socially included when they could identify with the exhibitions, but felt socially excluded when they perceived mental or physical barriers.

Main Themes	Example of Participant's Comments
Social Inclusion	[I feel included when] "art is being explained to me." [Being included] "makes me feel a part of what's going on in the art world."
Social Exclusion	[The museum can be more accessible] "by getting more ideas from the disabled community." [Becoming more accessible] "would make us feel like we're wanted."

Table 1: Example of Focus Group Data

While many of the participants appeared to be happy and enjoyed attending the museum, there were practical, informational, and possibly attitudinal barriers they were forced to navigate. When asked to describe their perception of "access" in the art museum context, participants referred to it in terms of physical space and the ability to "to get around freely," as well as being socially included and being "a part of what's going on in the art world." When asked whether they thought the museum was accessible for people with disabilities, one participant commented, "they don't look at it from our perspective sitting down, they look at it from standing."

To determine whether perceived accessibility affected their level of museum satisfaction, participants were asked on a scale of 1-5 to rate their experience at the museum, with 1 being not very good and 5 being excellent. Participants rated their experience from 3-5. Participants were then asked about what specifically would make them want to return to the museum. All but one response focused on removing perceived accessibility barriers: "If they changed the time they open," "If there were interactive exhibits," "The numbers on the audio guide need to be bigger," "The sculptures need an extra rope surrounding them. It would be an extra precaution when we back up (in our wheelchairs) if we hit the rope we know we went too far."

Not surprisingly, physical barriers tended to dominate the focus group discussion. The participants were quick to note how physical barriers pose chal-

allenges to disabled museum patrons. For most participants, the physical barriers affected their museum experience on a very practical level. For example, some sculptural displays and paintings were “displayed too high.” This meant participants had to strain their necks to see the artwork. Other barriers would likely appear seemingly minor to non-disabled museum visitors, but were important for the participants. For example, the limited opening times of the museum meant that it would be very difficult for participants to attend, given that they were dependent on the availability of their bus transportation. Another central issue was the ease of which the bathroom and main entry doors opened. Participants expressed a desire to navigate the museum independently and to be able to open doors via a push button. Some of the participants, however, were also quick to note the positive physical features: “I like that there are no stairs, I’m grateful for that.”

Participants associated access with restriction and freedom. While it was evident that the participants enjoyed their visit, some would have liked to return to the museum independently. Given some of the aforementioned physical barriers, however, this would not be possible. Unlike other museum visitors, the participants need the assistance of their disability advocate or museum staff in order to navigate the art museum’s physical barriers. As Hollins points out, autonomy is important to those with disabilities. In this case, whether it was the museum’s hours of operation, the narrow doorways, or lack of push buttons, these visitors felt restricted and did not feel they had the freedom to tour the museum independently.<sup>28</sup>

Outside of physical improvements, participants were asked if there were other ways that the museum could increase accessibility and encourage people with disabilities to visit. Participants expressed an interest to be informed with “advertisements, TV and newspaper ads.” Participants appeared aware of the programs offered and hoped the museum would spread the word about upcoming offerings so the disability community could be informed of what is available: “I would like see artwork done by artists with disabilities,” “I wish there were educational lessons, docent-led tours,” and more “special events.”

Overall, the participants’ exhibition observations are not uncommon for museums. Art museums traditionally have struggled to find a balance between their visitors’ needs and limited physical spaces, staff, and annual budgets. Within these familiar obstacles, however, lie opportunities to reach new and

old audiences alike though the use of new media. For example, the Herbert Museum in Coventry, England curated an exhibition called EXTRACT/INSERT. This three-dimensional experience mixed the real world with the virtual. Utilizing a combination of audio, video, virtual world technologies, and sensor systems, participants were able to “see” into another world and experience avatars walking into their physical space.<sup>29</sup> In other words, participants and avatars were “extracted” and “inserted” into each other’s realities.<sup>30</sup> Exhibition visitors need not even be physically present; they could also experience the exhibit virtually via the internet. While many of the exhibition’s visitors were children and people with disabilities, EXTRACT/INSERT demonstrated that inclusive exhibitions do not have to be mutually exclusive to participants. As Kawashima suggests, programs and exhibitions should be accessible, educational, and inclusive to as many audiences as possible.<sup>31</sup>

Another innovative, new media disability access example can be seen in Didú, a relief printing technique developed by the Spanish company Estudios Durero (see Appendix/Image A). Through the technique of Didú, graphic designers are able to reproduce digital images with a variety of textures, shapes, and volumes, which allows people to touch images in order to “see and experience them.”<sup>32</sup> This technology, accessible to everyone, also has the potential to open the door to the world of art and photography for the visually impaired. For example, Estudios Durero has produced several projects using the new media of Didú. One example is the “Touch Art” exhibit in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. In this project, five paintings from the permanent collection of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum were reproduced using the Didú technique. Viewers were allowed to touch the image mounted on the wall while listening to an audio guide developed to guide their touch interpretation of the painting. People who do not have a visual impairment have the option of wearing a mask in order to gain a deeper touch experience.

Similarly, the Prado Museum in Madrid also has an exhibit called Touching the Prado, which houses six Didú reproductions of famous works of art by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Francisco Goya, and El Greco. This exhibition was curated with the assistance of professionals in the field of visual impairment and is the Prado museum’s first innovation featuring a technology-based initiative focused on visually-impaired visitors.<sup>33</sup> Accompanying the six reproductions is text written in Braille. Sighted guests may also view the work

through darkened glasses and an audio guide. This exhibition allows for the reality of the painting to be perceived through touch, in order to mentally recreate it as a whole, providing an emotional perception of the work.<sup>34</sup>

In her exhibition *What Can a Body Do?* curator Amanda Cachia also explores the possibilities of new models of museum access:

Access involves more than checking off a list of practical accommodations. It is a way of thinking about the world that challenges us to imagine how another body, another self, experiences it...[in this exhibition] access is treated not as an afterthought but as a creative process intrinsic both to art practice and curatorial practice.<sup>35</sup>

Held in the Canton Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, Cachia explored the meaning of access beyond just the physical space of the museum and investigated the theme of disability within the content of an exhibition. Nine contemporary artists demonstrated new possibilities for the disabled body across a range of media by exploring bodily configurations in figurative and abstract forms.<sup>36</sup> In Cachia's exhibition, access was treated not as an afterthought, but as a creative process intrinsic to both art and curatorial practice.

EXTRACT/INSERT, *Touching the Prado*, and *What Can a Body Do?* are just a few examples of how some art museums are using new media to reach all audiences, regardless of their physical limitations.

In the present study, the participants' perceived accessibility barriers were not all physical in nature. On multiple occasions, participants expressed their desire to be accepted and to be a part of the art community. One participant noted: "I feel more accepted at other museums" and that the staff were "not as friendly as other museums." These perceptions raise the issue of potential attitudinal barriers toward museum visitors with disabilities. Often these are not conscious, intentional thoughts, but rather assumptions that stem from a lack of knowledge or information regarding visitors' needs. Understanding the relationship between social inclusion and accessibility and how they relate to new media is important for museum staff and visitors. Without this knowledge, the educational programs and exhibitions that museums design and implement

may be limited in the degree to which they are accessible for all people, not only those with disabilities.

In general, participants longed for additional social inclusion and indicated: "it would be good if the museum offered adult's art classes," "I would like classes in clay and drawing with pencils," "I would like to learn to make sculptures," "I would like to learn to paint," and "I would like to learn about artists and try to emulate them." Addressing the participants' requests, such as offering an adult art class that caters to people with disabilities, could begin the process of empowerment of individuals with disabilities. As Sandell notes, museums have both the potential to empower individuals and the ability to combat social exclusion.<sup>37</sup>

When probed, participants provided suggestions on how the museum could be made more accessible. Participants suggested that the museum first seek ideas and advice from the disability community, echoing Hollins' suggestions in emancipatory research.<sup>38</sup> In addition, participants suggested that if the museum held exhibitions featuring artists with disabilities, there would be a greater feeling of "belonging," "being wanted," and "part of the art community." As Hollins points out, museums have ample opportunities to establish and build relationships with the disability community.<sup>39</sup>

As participants observed, an inclusive and inviting museum should include not just programs for individuals with disabilities, but programs for all people, such as adult art classes, guided tours, and other art-related events and functions. These suggestions by focus group participants are not necessarily out of the ordinary. In fact, they are quite standard requests that, according to the AAM's guidelines for disability access in museums, should be part of the general functioning of a museum.<sup>40</sup> The participants' insight highlights an opportunity for all museums to utilize even more innovative exhibitions to better achieve access and inclusion.

## Conclusion

Participants in this study expressed a strong desire to be included and empowered. Whether this had to do more with the museum's accessibility barriers or the participants' physical limitations is uncertain. Nonetheless, it was evident that participants still felt like outsiders in some aspects of their visit and offered several meaningful suggestions on ways the art museum could remove

the limiting physical barriers. While museums are often limited in their physical structures and spaces, there appears to be ample opportunity to utilize innovative new media strategies to enhance disability access. For example, participants suggested that the museum invest in more interactive or touch exhibits. Participants also hoped for audio tour improvements that would make it easier to read, manage, and ultimately become a better museum experience.

Perhaps the most important theme brought to light by this focus group has little to do with physical museum barriers, but rather the desire and need of the participants to feel included. Museums have the ability to empower and include their visitors if only they would look for opportunities to do so. Indeed, Hollin's holistic and emancipatory theories call to share in the power and control with those patrons with disabilities in order to contribute to the dialogue and implementation of programs and exhibitions.

The participants' responses also demonstrate the need for additional study on how connected participants are to technology and whether social media strategies could enhance museum access. For example, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are all popular social media websites that easily could be used to bring accessible exhibitions directly to people with disabilities. As Russo, Watkins, Kelly, and Chan note, social media presents an ideal space for museums to connect with their audience and build authentic online communities for cultural information.<sup>41</sup> Through social media, museums have at their fingertips the potential for cost-effective avenues of communication with a potentially wide variety of audiences within the local community.

Finally, as participants, like those from this study, share their experiences, museums and their staff can begin to implement new, innovative policies to create a more inclusive museum. This research affirms the current gap between access and inclusion. No longer is accessibility or inclusion solely about addressing the physical space and universal design. Access and inclusion comprise avenues of museum policy-making, curating, information access, art practice, new technology, digital media, and partnerships. When museums adopt holistic and emancipatory organizational practice and behavior, they have the opportunity to become even more accessible and inclusive to all visitors.

## APPENDIX



A visitor at the Prado Museum experiences the Touching the Prado exhibit. Through the Didú medium, participants may ‘see’ a work of art by touching the raised surface of the image.

## NOTES

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