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**Discovering “Experience-ables”:
Socially including visually impaired people in art museums**

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Discovering “Experience-ables”: Socially including visually impaired people in art museums

Abstract:

This paper investigates how visually impaired people (VIP) examine works of art together with sighted companions in museums and galleries. It is principally concerned with how shared experiences of works of art are produced in interaction between sighted and visually impaired visitors. It explores how the participants orient to the differential ways in which each other has access to the pieces through sight, touch and other means. The analysis suggests that the experience of exhibits is a collaborative achievement to which visually impaired and sighted participants contribute by aligning with each other’s particular mode of orientation to the artworks. As the participants examine the exhibits they establish what exhibit features they inspect and how they experience them in, and through talk, bodily and tactile actions. The analysis is based on video-recordings produced in a large museum in London.

Keywords: art museums, visually impaired people, social interaction, tangibility, video, social arts marketing

Discovering “Experience-ables”: Socially including the visually impaired people in art museums

“Going to a museum and having somebody guide me around and give me the information I need is superb, really quite exciting. But getting there and being disappointed because of a lack of information, or misguided information ruins it for me.” (A VIP in RNIB, 2003)

Introduction

Visually impaired people (VIP) are a little noticed segment of the museum audience. Although VIPs have below-average vision they often visit exhibitions of visual art (RNIB, 2003). Throughout their visits they interact with companions and use the tactile, technological and human resources provided by museums to make sense of the artworks. Information and interpretation resources designed for VIPs have become commonplace in museums since policy makers and museum managers have been pursuing an agenda of social inclusion (cf. Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2000; Social Exclusion Task Force, 2006). In the UK the social inclusion agenda has influenced the development of social and cultural institutions since the late 1990s when the newly elected Labour government placed social exclusion at the heart of its policy initiatives (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2006). These policies particularly addressed the exclusion of certain parts of the population from access to public resources due to their physical or mental abilities.

In light of these policy initiatives a growing body of research has emerged which explores the impact of the provision of resources that facilitate social inclusion. Such research considers activities like using public transport (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003;

Lucas, Grosvenor, and Simpson, 2001), engaging in sport (Atkinson et al., 2002) and visiting libraries, museums and galleries (Carey, 2007; Sandell 1998). These studies coupled with further advances in public policy increasingly influence the resources that organisations, companies and cultural institutions provide in order to “include” wider parts of the population in their offerings. Thus, they impact on the marketing practices of organisations by encouraging them to develop and provide resources that attract new customers and audiences and enhance their experience of social and cultural institutions (Arts Council of England, 2008; Dodd and Sandell 1998, 2001; Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2000).

For example, museums displaying visual art limit access to the exhibits for people who are unable to look and see the exhibits; other forms of engagement like touch are prohibited. Such limitations to the access of exhibits in art museums pose a barrier for visually impaired visitors. They cannot engage with the works of art and experience the pieces because they have below-average vision. It is often argued that interpretive resources like Braille labels, audio-guides, hands-on workshops and guided tours may enhance VIPs’ access to the art and thus facilitate their social inclusion in the museum audience (cf. AEB 1996; Candlin, 2003; Newman, McLean, and Urquhart, 2005; Newman and McLean, 2002; Saerberg, 2006; Sandell 1998; for a critique see Hetherington, 2003). Such resources are increasingly provided by museums that strive to socially include all parts of the population. They spend considerable funds on the development of interpretation material and events to encourage excluded audiences to visit their exhibitions and to enhance their experience of the exhibits. The development and deployment of interpretive resources to help include visually impaired people in the museum audience contribute to wider social and political efforts towards a more socially inclusive society. They turn museums into “agents for social inclusion” (Sandell 1998).

Whilst this research has had some influence on policy development and museum practice, it has shown relatively little interest in the ways in which VIPs use the resources provided by museums to access and make sense of works of art. Thus, for example, little is known about how VIPs examine and make sense of works of art by using tactile resources or by interacting with sighted companions or guides. Marketing research on the exhibition-floor can make an important contribution to this gap in the research. By exploring in detail how VIPs explore galleries and examine works of art in interaction with sighted companions this paper adds to recent discussions about social marketing (Kotler and Lee, 2008), arts marketing (Kerrigan, Fraser, and Özbilgin, 2004; Rentschler and Hede, 2007) and social arts marketing (Sismanyazici Navaie, 2004). It also contributes to debates in consumer research and retail marketing concerned with people's activities at the "point-of-sale" (Belk 1975; Clark, Drew, and Pinch 1994; Phillips and Bradshaw 1993). The analysis uses video-recordings of visitors in art museums as its principal data. They have been produced in an exhibition shown at a large museum in London. Before turning to the observations and findings, some background to the research is provided and the research methods, are explicated.

Social Inclusion and Social Interaction in Museums

Over the past decade there has been a large increase in funding for museums that has been used to refurbish and renew existing exhibitions and create new ones. This increase in funding has been accompanied by growth in visitor numbers and a recognition of museums' contribution to education and social inclusion (cf. Anderson 1999; Hooper-Greenhill 1991; Dodd and Sandell 1998). The growth in funding for museums and the increasing importance of museums as educational institutions has encouraged studies concerned with the "museum experience" (Falk and Dierking, 2000). These studies are

often influenced by developments in the behavioural and cognitive sciences where there is a long standing interest in art perception (Goguen 1999; Solso, 2004). These studies of the “aesthetic experience” (cf. Arnheim 1999; Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999) are preoccupied with the subjective and cognitive aspects of people’s encounters with works of art. For example, they explore the neurological specifics of the “aesthetic experience” and “beauty” (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999) and investigate the relationship between art perception and emotion (Brown 1999). This research, however, is rarely interested in the situation in which people encounter and experience works of art, and sometimes considers social interaction as detrimental to the quality of the aesthetic experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990).

Perhaps surprisingly, research in the social sciences concerned with art perception and museum audiences does not address this lack of interest in the situation in which aesthetic experiences arise. For example, whilst powerfully demonstrating the influences of social structure and education on people’s understanding and concept of art, Bourdieu’s (1990 and 1991) famous works imply an individual’s cognitive ability to make sense of the works. Furthermore, this preoccupation with the individual in studies of art perception is surprising because original artworks are predominantly encountered in museums where people go as a family and with friends (MORI, 2001; Wright 1989). The encounter with works of art in museums often occurs in social situations (vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh, 2001).

As people explore museums they examine exhibits in interaction with each other. They make sense of the pieces in and through talk and interaction. Within Visitor Studies, a largely applied field of research, there is a large body of studies concerned with the impact of talk on people’s experience and learning from works of art (Piscitelli and Weier, 2002; Silverman 2010). Yet, few of these studies explore how particular aspects and

characteristics of exhibits are rendered noticeable and worthwhile examining in interaction with others. Drawing on a corpus of video-recordings gathered in a range of museums and galleries Heath and vom Lehn (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004; vom Lehn, 2006a and 2007), explore, for example, how people configure each other's looking at, seeing and experiencing of exhibits, in and through social interaction. These studies, like most research on social interaction, presuppose that the participants have average vision. They assume the participants involved in the situations at the exhibits can see and experience the works in the same way, have equal access to each other's visible actions, and thus, based on their visual faculties, are able to create shared experiences of the exhibits.

In the case in hand, the interaction at the works of art involves two participants, one of whom is visually impaired. Relatively little research has been conducted to investigate how people with differential access to the visible world create a shared experience of the material and visible world, and how they constitute objects in and through interaction. Quite recently a few (visually impaired) sociologists (Michalko, 2001; Saerberg 1990, 2006) have addressed this lack of research. Their studies are primarily autobiographical accounts of living with blindness. They discuss everyday activities and the experience of social situations from the perspective of a blind person (Michalko, 2001). They provide accounts of social interaction as experienced by visually impaired participants. Their studies particularly focus on the ways in which visually impaired people navigate public spaces like pavements and the problems they face when crossing streets; they include navigation with a dog, a cane and a human companion (Michalko, 2001; Saerberg, 2006). This small body of research is complemented by ethnographies that explore the everyday experience of deaf-blind children (Goode 1994), navigation training (Länger, 2002) and interaction among visually impaired people (Länger, 2002). Despite the important contribution of these studies to our understanding of VIPs' experience of social situations

we still know relatively little of the organisation of talk and interaction between sighted and visually impaired participants.

Research on vision and communication provides some insights on the difficulties that may arise in interaction where visually impaired participants are involved. Studies suggest that bodily and visual action provides participants with important information about each other's state of participation in a situation (Argyle, Lalljee, and Cook, 1968). A slight change of head direction, a minute delay in making eye contact or a gesture can influence the organisation of sequences of interaction (Goodwin, 1981; Heath, 1986). Problems in interaction and communication arise when a participant is not able to see these "visual cues" (Kemp and Rutter, 1986; Rutter, 1984; Rutter and Stephenson, 1977). Unfortunately, few studies draw on these arguments and, if they do, they are primarily interested in trouble occurring in talk between visually impaired and sighted participants (Coates, 2003), rather than in the practical organisation of interaction through which sighted and visually impaired participants concertedly make sense of the material and visual world they inhabit.

This paper aims to contribute to current debates in arts marketing concerned with social inclusion and the arts and to the work of marketing practitioners who are involved in providing resources that can facilitate access to works of art (cf. Hill, O'Sullivan, and O'Sullivan, 1995; Kerrigan, 2009; Kerrigan, Fraser, and Özbilgin, 2004; Rentschler and Hede, 2007). Thus, it will add to discussions about marketing's contribution to facilitate social inclusion in museums. However, by focusing on the interaction between sighted guides and VIPs the analysis shifts away from social policy concerns and turns to the "fat moment" (Garfinkel 1967) of social inclusion, that is the moment when a guide and VIP establish a shared experience of an exhibit. It may be worthwhile here to elaborate on the notion of "social inclusion" this paper will employ.

In the literature, social inclusion is principally conceived of as a social policy approach designed to widen access to society's resources and to encourage and enable all parts of the population to participate in society, science, education, art and culture (cf. Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2000; Sandell 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). These policies have supported initiatives to facilitate participation with the arts; for example, they have encouraged the widespread deployment of ramps and lifts to facilitate physical access for wheelchair users and of audio loops and subtitles for the deaf in cinemas and theatres (Arts Council of England, 2008).

This paper shifts the focus from a social policy perspective to the interaction on the exhibition-floor. Visitors who explore exhibitions often have differential access to the exhibits; for example, they may have a different educational background and divergent knowledge about the pieces on display, or they may simply look at different aspects of the same exhibit. Hence, as people face exhibits in museums their perspectives on the pieces diverge they may look at the same object but experience it in different ways. This divergence in perspectives of exhibits encourages interaction and discussion between the participants.¹ Very often one participant notices an interesting feature and configures the way in which the other is looking at it. They thus facilitate their companion's seeing and experience of this specific aspect of the exhibit.

In the case in hand, the participants' access to the exhibits is characterised by their different visual faculties. The museum therefore provides interpretation resources to make up for the impairment of the VIPs, thus facilitating their inclusion in the museum audience. Such resources include sighted guides whose ability to see allows them to notice visible exhibit features and bring them to the attention of the VIPs.

¹ This observation stands in some contrast to the stance that the emergence of social interaction relies on a "reciprocity of perspectives" (Schutz, 1967), and points to the momentary and fleeting character of shared experiences and "intersubjectivity" that need to be ongoingly produced (Heritage, 1984).

This paper examines the moment when the sighted guides and VIPs examine exhibits and create shared experiences of exhibits in and through interaction with each other. The analysis focuses on the moment in which the participants inspect an exhibit feature and render specific exhibit features experience-able for each other. The study of these moments of shared orientation and experience require a detailed inspection of how the participants practically organise their access to and examination of the works of art. Interviews and observational methods are not suitable for the discovery of such detail because they do not generate sufficiently fine grained data that allow the researcher access to the social organisation of actions in and through which the participants configure each other's orientation to exhibits. Hence, this paper relies on the scrutiny of video-recordings of the interaction between VIPs and sighted guides.

Methods and Data

In recent years, qualitative research methods including ethnography, video analysis and qualitative interviews have grown in significance in marketing and studies of cultural consumption (cf. Belk, 2008; Carson et al., 2001; Goulding, 2002). Studies shed light on the range of social action and interaction involved in cultural consumption in the privacy of the home as well as in museums and other cultural venues. They explore the social context in which people watch television, listen to music, use technology at home (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992), view films in cinemas (Srinivas, 1998), participate in music events (Hitzler and Pfadenhauer, 2002; O'Reilly and Larsen, 2005) and respond to exhibits (Goulding 1999, 2000 and, 2001; Joy and Sherry, 2003).

These studies highlight the “embodied” nature of the experience of cultural events and works of art. Yet, by focusing on the quality of the experience they fail to examine the action and interaction through which the experience is produced. Video-recordings provide

access to such action and interaction. Over the past couple of decades they have been employed in marketing and consumer research to explore shopping and cultural consumption (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Schroeder, 2005; Underhill 1999). The analysis of video-recordings provides resources to understand people's conduct on the floor of shops, at cultural events and in exhibitions and encourages research that reconsiders concepts of "shopping", "museum visiting" and "experience". For example, video-analysis reveals that shopping is comprised of a range of activities including walking through shopping isles, glancing at products, inspecting objects, looking back and forth, etc. A careful analysis of video-recordings can unpack these activities and show how they are embedded within the material, bodily and social circumstances (e.g. Underhill, 1999).

Video-recordings are a very complex type of data. They often involve multiple participants engaged in verbal, bodily and material action while using tools and technologies (Heath and Luff, 2000). The complexity of video-recordings requires a particular approach to arrive at meaningful conclusions. This paper draws on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Have, 1998; Sacks, 1992). The thrust of the analysis focuses on the situated and emergent character of social action and the methods and techniques that participants use in the accomplishment of their actions to orient to and make sense of the actions of others. It requires detailed transcriptions of participants' talk and bodily actions to examine how participants produce their actions one moment after the other. The participants' actions thus ongoingly produce and renew the context in which they are produced (Heritage 1984, 242).

Rather than relying on a system of codes or categories developed by the analyst to ascribe the actions meaning, the present research is concerned with the participants' perspective of exhibits as and when they encounter and examine them. It investigates how

participants treat co-participants' actions by inspecting moment-by-moment how a participant's action orients to their co-participant's prior action and provides the framework for the next action. Thus, the analysis explores the emergence of the interactional environment of each action by elaborating on the sequential organisation of actions (cf. Have, 1998; Heritage, 1984).

Social interaction involving VIPs places particular challenges on the sociological analysis. Some argue that sighted social scientists cannot apply a perspective to the interaction that is adequate to capture the "experiential style"² VIPs bring to bear when acting in and upon their environment (Saerberg, 2006). Our interest in this study, however, is not in reconstructing the participants' subjective, cognitive experience of the exhibition, and the analysis does not consider the experience of the pieces to be lodged inside the individuals' heads. Instead it views participants' experience of exhibits as collaborative achievement that arises in and through interaction between VIPs and their guides. Hence, the analysis focuses on the ways in which the participants establish shared perspectives and experiences of the exhibits in and through their talk and interaction with and around the works of art.

This paper was motivated by an evaluation of a workshop held at a museum in London. The workshop involved VIPs and volunteers who served as sighted guides. The guides have not received any formal training to navigate spaces with VIPs; some of them have volunteered as guides before, whilst others have little experience in exploring spaces like galleries with VIPs. Each VIP was paired with a sighted guide and together they explored the exhibition. The museum's education centre solicited the evaluation to find out whether VIPs with the help of sighted guides were able to navigate the exhibition and how they examine and make sense of those works of art that they are allowed to touch. The

² Saerberg (2006) develops the concept of "Wahrnehmungsstil" ("experiential style") to describe the different ways in which sighted, blind and partially sighted participants orient to and act in the world.

researcher proposed to gather field observation and video-recordings in the exhibition. He argued to the exhibition design team and the museum educators that the video-recordings would provide valuable information about the ways in which the tactile and material resources in the exhibition were used and how they helped VIPs to make sense of the works of art.

Data collection was carried out during the workshop. It involved observations in the gallery and video-recording at exhibits that the researcher selected in discussion with the designers and educators. The data corpus is comprised of 50 fragments of interaction between a VIP and a sighted guide and involves ten VIPs and nine sighted guides. After an introduction in the meeting room of the museum's education centre each VIP was paired with a sighted guide and they then explored the exhibition in pairs, examining the exhibits together.

The video-data were gathered with three cameras mounted on tripods placed at locations near exhibits where they did not obstruct pathways, access to works of art or information resources. The positions of the cameras were decided in discussion with the museum managers and staff. To minimise the impact of the cameras on the participants' behaviour the researcher did not stand behind them but only returned to them to change tapes. As in related research that we have undertaken in other exhibitions the participants did not show much regard for the cameras but conducted their visit naturally (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff, 2010; vom Lehn, in press).

Filming of the general public and, in particular, of visually impaired people who cannot see the cameras involves certain ethical considerations. Prior to entering the gallery, the participants were informed about the research and its purpose. A member of the museum's education team asked the workshop participants for their permission to video-record and observe their behaviour in the exhibition. They were also informed that the recordings

would be used for an evaluation of the exhibition and as part of a research project. It was clarified that pictures of their interaction in the exhibition might be used in the evaluation report and in publications and presentations. They also were informed that they could opt out of their participation in the study at any point during or after the workshop; video-recordings would be wiped if any of the participants decided they did not want to take part in the research after all. Only after all participants in the workshop confirmed they were happy to participate in the study, were the video-cameras switched on.

The recorded data are the basis for developing the analysis. The entire corpus was reviewed, events and activities of initial interest were marked. Events and activities of a similar kind were copied onto 'collection tapes'. By inspecting collections of similar kinds of instance it is possible to compare and contrast the organization of such events and elaborate patterns and commonalities across the collection. The analysis proceeded "case by case" and involved the detailed investigation and transcription of particular fragments of data. The talk in the fragments was transcribed and the bodily actions of the participants mapped onto their talk. The transcription system and techniques used for the analysis is based on developments in conversation analysis and cognate approaches to the study of social interaction (cf. Jefferson, 1984; Heath, 1986; Heath, et al., 2010; Kendon, 1990; vom Lehn, in press). Through the detailed analysis of single instances and by comparing and contrasting reoccurring actions and events between various fragments, we began to identify the patterns and organization of conduct and interaction. In common with more traditional ethnography, these instances were selected to discuss in this paper as they provide interesting or clear instances to reflect the more common themes that the research is concerned with.

Encountering Works of Art

There is a growing body of video-based research concerned with the interactional constitution of objects. Studies have been undertaken at workplaces (Goodwin 1994; Heath and Luff, 2000; Hindmarsh and Heath, 2000) and more recently in museums and galleries (vom Lehn et al., 2001). These studies largely involve participants with average sight and presume that visitors who jointly encounter a work of art can see the pieces in the same way (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004; vom Lehn, 2006a). They point to the importance of the shape and character of gestures and bodily orientation as well as to the interplay of talk, bodily actions and visible environment. They suggest that people's experience of exhibits arises in interaction between participants who, in principle, can access the pieces in the same way (cf. Heath and vom Lehn, 2004; vom Lehn, 2006a and b; vom Lehn, 2007).

In situations that involve sighted and visually impaired participants (VIPs), the mutual access to aspects of the visible environment, including the participants' bodily and visual orientation as well as their gestures, becomes uncertain. And the participants themselves treat their differential access to the works of art as an interaction problem. As the VIPs enquire about visual aspects of the environment, the sighted participants are not sure if and how much of the environment and of their visible actions are noticeable to the VIPs. Hence, the applicability of insights that research has produced with regard to the importance of the visibility of deixis, bodily orientation and gaze exchange in social situations requires reconsidering. Whilst there is some research on blind or visually impaired people's consumption behaviour (Menzel Baker et al., 1999), relatively little is known of how VIPs examine and make sense of museum exhibits when they explore them with sighted companions or guides.

In the case in hand, the museum invites and encourages visually impaired and sighted visitors to explore exhibits through touch. The analysis of the field observation and video-

data suggests that the VIPs make extensive use of the possibility to touch the works of art and other objects provided by the museum and they draw on the descriptions of exhibits offered by their guides to make sense of the pieces. After arriving at an exhibit the exploration of the piece often begins with the VIP stroking it with their hands while the guide observes their actions. After a short while the guide provides the VIP with information about the work of art available only to sighted visitors. In fragment 1 the VIP arrives with two sighted guides. On arrival at the piece the VIP takes his hands to the canvas where the British artist Lucian Freud is depicted, and strokes the piece with both hands.

Transcript 1: G1 – Male Guide, G2 – Female Guide, P – VIP (Lucian Freud)³

P: this is nice I wonder what it is meant what its meant to be:
G2: its ehr:m its ehr:m an interpretation of a portrait by Lucian
Freud
P: alright↓

The two guides standing near the VIP observe his actions at the piece. While the VIP strokes the work of art he likens his experience of the exhibit to that of another piece he has encountered on a different occasion (Image 1.1.). His talk then addresses the work in hand occasioning the female guide to provide him with information about it. Her voicing of “its ehr:m its ehr:m” (Image 1.2.) makes her hesitation audible and prefigures the description of the piece as “an interpretation of a portrait by Lucian Freud” (Image 1.3.).

³ The transcription broadly follows Jefferson’s (1984) notation system. The transcription captures what participants say, when, and as far as possible, how it was said. It includes minute pauses in tenth of a second, (.3), emphasis, elongation of sounds, ‘:’, overlaps, ‘[’, in talk, changes in intonation, ‘↓’, and ‘=’ talk that latches onto prior talk.

Image 1.1.



Image 1.2.



Image 1.3.



G2: its ehr:m its ehr:m an interpretation of...

By making her hesitation in providing information about the piece audible, the guide projects a forthcoming utterance that allows her time to look for information in the label. The VIP and the other guide attend to her hesitation by quietly orienting to the work of art until she begins to provide information about it. Her shift in visual orientation from the canvas to the label is occasioned by the VIP's verbal and tactile actions. As his tactile exploration of the piece arrives at the bottom of the canvas he voices a question, "what its meant to be:". The woman attends to his question by turning her head to the right where the label is, and then begins to talk.

The information provided by the guide is taken from the label on the wall to the right of the canvas. The VIP has not noticed the label and displays that he understands the woman's description of the piece as a portrait of Lucian Freud, "alright↓". For the VIP it is not important or relevant where the guide has drawn the information from; her shift in visual orientation to another object is not implicative for his orientation to the piece. Instead he keeps his hands on the canvas and moves them back up towards its centre.

The information the guide provides the VIP with is circumstantial and not directly related to the VIP's tactile experience of the piece. It involves talk about the artist or about the figure depicted in the picture, rather than about the qualities of the exhibit. In other cases, the talk between guide and VIP is concerned with the actual work of art and the

VIP's examination of it. Fragment, 2 begins when another guide and VIP explore the same portrait of Lucian Freud. While the VIP strokes her hand over the canvas the guide observes her and they both discuss the importance of touch as a mode of access to the world. After a few moments, the VIP notices particular features of the work of art and brings them to the attention of the guide.

Transcript 2: Guide (G) & VIP (V) (Lucian Freud)

V: This .hs got wonderful feeling to it because its got like liddle
(.) threads and (.3) I don't know is this feathers up here?
G: ya:h↓
V: liddle feather bits yah↓
G: =liddle feathers and ([so difficult)
V: [yah
This got all sorts of thin:gs around it

The VIP provides an assessment of some of the exhibit features, “wonderful feeling to it”, and describes further aspects of the piece, “its got like liddle threads” while carefully pulling a thread on the canvas (Image 2.1.). A moment later the VIP touches objects she cannot identify, “I don't know is this feathers up here?”. The guide stands to her left and monitors the VIP's tactile examination of the exhibit. As the VIP voices her question with regard to specific features of the artwork that she touches with her fingers, at this very moment the guide aligns with her. She turns her head from the exhibit to the VIP and confirms the VIP's suspicion about this exhibit feature, “yah”, and, “liddle feathers” (Image 2.2.). The VIP in turn continues to explore the exhibit and raises further questions regarding other aspects of the piece.

Image 2.1.



V: its got like liddle threads

Image 2.2.



G: yah little feathers

The analysis suggests that sighted guides indeed provide VIPs with information that they have no or little access to due to their sight limitations. The information they provide, however, is not independent of the VIPs' actions but is produced in alignment with the way in which the VIPs orient to and examine the works of art. The guides often offer information in response to questions about the exhibits posed by the VIPs. In their responses the guides draw on and read out loud labels, and they augment the VIPs' description of their tactile experience of an exhibit feature by providing them with a description of their visual experience of the same feature.

The guides' alignment with the VIPs' examination and experience of the pieces is facilitated by their close monitoring of the VIPs' actions. They see what exhibit features the VIPs are touching and assess the VIPs response to these features. Their observations of the relationship between the exhibit and the VIPs' actions allow them to design their descriptions of the exhibits in alignment with the VIP's experience of it. Their descriptions augment the VIPs' reported experience of the exhibits, rather than challenging and discussing it with them.

The analysis suggests that the guides do not determine how the VIPs encounter and experience exhibits, rather they add to their tactile experience of the pieces by providing reports or descriptions of what they see. In turn, the VIPs report how they experience the

exhibits. Thus, they provide the guides with information that allows them to align with the VIPs' orientation and experience that is available to them only by observing the tactile actions on the exhibits and listening to the VIPs' descriptions.

The experience resulting from the interaction between guides and VIPs fundamentally differs from the experience that each of the participants would have when individually encountering the works of art. The interaction between VIPs and guides fosters an environment in which the participants acquire information about the exhibits that they would otherwise lack because of their mode of access to the objects.⁴ Hence, it is the interaction between the participants that enables them to address or even overcome the differential access to the visible and tactile environment. The VIPs' experience of the exhibits is informed, and may be shaped, by the descriptions provided by the sighted guides. The guides in turn see and experience the exhibits in light of the VIPs' actions. By observing and aligning with the VIPs' tactile examination of the works of art the guides notice exhibit features they otherwise may have failed to see. Thus, the VIPs' actions render visible aspects of the works of art and provide the guides with resources to use in their descriptions of the exhibits.

Differential Access

When the guides describe visible aspects of exhibits and their features they provide the VIPs with ways of experiencing aspects of the exhibits they have no access to. The guides' descriptions not only depict their visual experience of the pieces, but they also serve to instruct the VIPs' experience of the works of art. The descriptions may augment the VIPs' experience and understanding of the object they are touching and 'direct' or 'guide' the ways in which they stroke and feel them. Thus, the descriptions have the potential to enrich

⁴ It may be worthwhile adding here that sighted guides and other sighted visitors often hesitate to touch exhibits.

the VIPs' experience of the exhibits by giving them a sense of the sighted experience and by supporting their tactile exploration of the pieces.

Despite the guides' best efforts, VIPs sometimes have difficulties in identifying the exhibit features. They may stroke an object with their hands but the texture of the piece does not allow them to discriminate particular features and the object's structure. In fragment 3, a guide and a VIP examine the texture of the Lucian Freud portrait. The piece made from bits of soft fabric and feathers, reflects the abstract design of the original portrait. In the case in hand the VIP strokes the exhibit for a few moments while the guide reads aloud parts of the label. The guide then talks about the relationship between the portrait depicted on the label and the fabric copy the VIP examines with his hands.

Transcript 3: Guide (G) and VIP (V)

G: but you know his eh face is not really detailed
V: mhm
G: so you cant really see (.) his eyes (are)
And its very very colourful its painted in a way that you
cant see the details
V: what deliberately? (so [)
G: [deliberately yah it seems a little
bit distorted
V: mhm
G: But this is just the way it was painted
V: and does it (.) does this ehm fabric reflect that or (is)
G: it does actually yah the nose is rather distorted (.) if you
→ go further down (.) that's the no::se
→V: mhm
→ (.3)
→G: this is the nose
→V: oh yah
G: and it's not really straight it's a bit turned (.) to the
left side
V: mhm
G: because on the painting the nose is curved to the left side
as well
V: yes
G: you know its rather distorted [(.) yah
V: [mhm

She confirms that there is a noticeable resemblance between the painting and its fabric copy and points to the depiction of the nose in the two pieces. Thereby, she highlights that the nose in the portrait is “distorted” and instructs the VIP to move his left hand downward

where the nose is in the portrait, “if you go further down that’s the nose”. The instruction suggests that whilst the guide monitors the VIP’s stroking of the exhibit, she does not attend to the faculties of the VIP. As the guide notes that, “the nose is rather distorted”, she points with her right forefinger to the portrait, an action the VIP does not noticeably attend to (Image 3.1.). He keeps on stroking parts of the portrait by moving his left hand up and down on the canvas. The up-and-down movement of his left hand over the surface of the work of art suggests that he might be looking for the exhibit features described by the guide. This sense of the VIP searching for specific exhibit features is enhanced when the guide instructs him to move his hand further down on the canvas. A moment later, the guide takes the VIP’s left hand and physically moves it to the centre of the picture where the nose is, the guide’s hand resting on top of that of the VIP. The guide displays that the VIP now touches the nose by changing the deictic reference from “that’s the nose” to “this is the nose”, and defines the VIP’s tactile experience of the exhibit by holding his left hand with her right hand over the portrait’s nose (Image 3.2.). The VIP acknowledges the discovery of the ‘nose’, encouraging the guide to release his hand and turn to the right to retrieve further information from the label (Image 3.3.).

Image 3.1.



G: the nose is rather distorted

Image 3.2.



G: this is the nose

Image 3.3.



Descriptions that guides provide VIPs with, serve as instructions to experience exhibit features in a particular way. The descriptions instruct the VIP to orient to and explore a

particular exhibit feature. Here, they are designed to guide the VIP's stroking and feeling of the piece in order to elicit a response to the "distorted nose" in the portrait. The VIP however finds it difficult to discriminate this exhibit feature because it is made from a material that makes it is hard to identify the subtle structures of the canvas by stroking it. The guide takes some time to attend to the VIP's difficulty of finding the nose on the canvas and then helps him by physically guiding his left hand across the canvas.

The two participants have differential access to the exhibition. The guide's ability to see visible features of exhibits allows her to talk about aspects of works of art not accessible to the VIP. Thus, she attempts to provide the VIP with access to those exhibit features and include him in the experiential realm of the sighted. The inclusion of the VIP unavoidably remains partial because of his lack of sight. Yet, the possibility to touch and feel exhibit features augments the VIP's experience of the piece as he can relate it to the guide's description of its visible features.

Exhibits with little marked textures like paintings are difficult to explore by touch only. Descriptions offered by sighted guides provide the VIPs with information about textures to 'look for' with their hands. Still, it often remains difficult for VIPs to discriminate and identify particular exhibit features even when their hands are touching them. Their inclusion in the realm of the sighted requires resources that allow the discovery of textures and features noticeable for them.

Discovering 'Experience-ables'

The designers and curators of this exhibition deployed material objects near some exhibits to provide VIPs with tactile resources to make sense of the original works of art. The objects resemble features of scenes depicted by the paintings. For example, one of the paintings is a portrait of David and Richard Attenborough. The portrait shows the two

brothers sitting on wooden chairs; between them is an African sculpture. An object that resembles the sculpture in the painting is attached to the wall to the right of the artwork.

Fragment 4 begins after a VIP and a guide have discussed the painting for a few moments. They then turn to the object and the VIP strokes it with his hands. The guide observes the VIP's stroking and describes the visible features of the object as the VIP touches it. A moment later, the VIP enquires about the quality and type of the wood, thereby likening it to mahogany, "almost like mahogany" (line 6).

Transcript 4

VIP (V) and Guide (G)

4 V: y[ah
5 G: [it it even shines a little bit



6 V: =almost like mahogany one of the [really ()
7 G: [could be yah: he
8 although its dark brown mahogany is rather reddish isnt it

The VIP's suggestion that the wood the object is made from might be mahogany arises in light of his tactile experience of the piece and the guide's description of it, "it even shines a little bit". The guide's description, coupled with the tactile experience, allow the VIP to make sense of what it is he is feeling with his hands. The guide in turn aligns with the VIP's suggestion, "could be yah:". She then uses her visual experience of the object to shed doubt on the assumption that the wood might be mahogany. Thus, the two participants gradually develop a shared experience of the object by discussing their distinct

orientations to it. Thereby, they support their exploration of the object by embedding their experience of the piece in the ongoing activities; the guide describes how she sees the object in light of the VIP's report of his tactile experience of the piece.

The availability of the material object that both participants can experience in their own ways is critical to enable them to align their perspectives and create a shared experience of the sculpture. The participants, however, fail to establish the relationship between the painting and the object. As they are not able to agree on the type of wood the object is made of they turn to the right and continue their visit of the gallery.

Interpretive objects the participants can touch may indeed have the potential to support and enhance their experience of the original works of art. Such objects allow the guide and VIP to generate a shared experience of them, by applying their individual, distinct modes of access to them, i.e. touch and vision. However, often the VIP and guide do not use their experience of the object to make sense of the original work of art. Their examination of the interpretive device, the object provided by the museum curators attached to the wall to the right of the painting, overwhelms their examination of the original work of art.

There are however works of art in the exhibition that guides and VIPs both touch. In these cases, the sighted and the visually impaired participants create a basis for their concerted experience of the exhibit as they have at hand an object that, at least to some extent, they both experience in the same tactile way. The final fragment has been recorded at a sculpture made of wire and plaster. It begins when the two participants stand next to each other and both of them examine the object with their hands. After a few moments, the guide draws the VIP's attention to the texture of the figures and poses a question about the VIP's tactile experience of the sculpture, "can you feel like small little cones on the sculpture?" (line, 2). He voices the question just after the VIP moves his right hand from

the car in the centre of the sculpture to the figure closest to him. As he asks the question the guide himself strokes parts of the sculpture with his left hand.

Transcript 5

VIP (V) and Guide (G)

1 G: Kevin Kormi media artist could have said if I did (.)
2 can you feel like small little cones on the sculpture?
3 (.3)



4 V: what throughout? or:
5 G: just yah on the figures you (remember the figures) ti:ny
6 little: if I feel
7 V: ya:h
8 G: sort of dimpleness sort of texture to it



9 V: right ri[:ght

The question encourages the VIP to look for the texture of the sculpture. He moves his hand over various parts of the sculpture and asks for some clarification, “what throughout?” (line 4) before confirming its discovery, “ya:h” (line 7) and “right” (line 9). As the VIP moves his hands over the sculpture the guide expands its description; for example, when the VIP’s left hand arrives on the side of one of the figures in the sculpture the guide describes the “dimpleness sort of texture” of the object (line 8).

When guides touch exhibits they use their tactile experience coupled with their seeing of the pieces to describe them for the VIPs. By adapting a mode of access to the exhibit the

VIP can align with, namely touch, the guides foster an environment in which both participants can jointly examine and make sense of the exhibit. Thereby, the guide can use his observation of the VIP to time his descriptions of the object with the VIP's ongoing tactile exploration. For example, when the VIP's hands stroke over a part of the sculpture that is covered with little cones the guide poses his initial question regarding the texture of the object (line, 2).

Tangible exhibits can serve the participants to overcome differential access to exhibits. In this sense, these objects provide guides with resources that are "experience-able" for both, sighted and visually impaired people. By touching and feeling objects the participants obtain an experience that they both can share and align with. Unfortunately, some exhibits like paintings do not bear features that are readily available to a tactile experience. Guides then have difficulty to make their visual experience of the objects available to VIPs. Whilst the provision of objects near these exhibits offers VIPs some value, it remains difficult to relate the experience of these objects to the original works of art.

Discussion

Museums increasingly provide resources that attract excluded audiences and provide them with resources to access and experience the objects on display. Relatively little is known about how visitors use these resources to enhance their experience of exhibits. This paper has inspected video-recordings to examine how visually impaired visitors to an art exhibition encounter and experience works of art in interaction with sighted guides. Thus, it hopes to make a contribution to recent debates on the role of museums in social inclusion policy and practice.

The analysis suggests that the mere provision of interpretive resources like labels, tangible objects and guides is insufficient to achieve social inclusion in exhibitions. Social inclusion in museums is a practical achievement. It requires practical actions by the visitors (and guides), actions through which they use interpretive and other resources to make sense of the exhibits. These actions include the looking at exhibits, tactile actions across the surface of exhibits, verbal descriptions of exhibits and their features and so on. They are organised in interaction between the sighted and visually impaired participants. They closely monitor each other's actions and align their actions with each other, thus progressively producing a shared experience of the object they are jointly facing.

VIPs and sighted guides employ different “experiential styles” (Saerberg, 2006) when encountering the material and visible world; sighted participants often begin their encounter with the works by looking at them, even when they are allowed to touch them. Indeed, throughout their examination of the pieces they often remain hesitant to use their hands to inspect their material features. This hesitation to touch exhibits impacts the quality of the descriptions of exhibits that they offer VIPs. As the VIPs inspect the works of art with their hands, the sighted guides often rely on their visual experience alone to describe objects that the VIPs experience through touch. Hence, the guides' understanding of what an “experience-able” object is differs from the experience VIPs have in the exhibition. For example, sighted visitors often do not have a sense of what an object “feels” like, and VIPs cannot empathise with their descriptions of visible exhibit features. Whilst the descriptions may add to and enhance the VIPs' experience of the artworks, the participants have difficulties in creating a shared experience of the pieces. In these cases, the guides may compensate for the divergent perspectives on the objects by instructing or even physically guiding the VIPs' actions at the exhibits.

Only when the sighted guides also touch the exhibits can they align with the VIPs experience of the pieces. They are able to provide the VIPs with an understanding of what an object they have “felt” with their fingers looks like. They develop descriptions of the pieces that involve their visual and tactile experience. These descriptions are designed to enhance the VIPs’ experience of the exhibits and to elicit a response from them that suggests they experience the pieces in the same way as their guide – a shared experience has been produced and social inclusion has been achieved, at least for the moment.

Implications for Marketing

The observations and findings from this small case study may have some important implications for the concept and approach that marketing academics and practitioners take with regard to “social inclusion”. The concept of social inclusion as it pervades policy and academic debates has a strong moral bias. It implies a normative agenda for the necessity to provide as excluded part of the population, like the visually impaired, with tactile and other resources that will include them. These tactile resources are supposed to be “used as optical prostheses, there to supplement an impaired and unfinished body and, by implication, aiding an ‘impaired’ subjectivity. As such, they constitute disability negatively through the idea of non-sight rather than more positively through an understanding of skilled, sensitive touch” (Hetherington, 2003: 113).

The analysis of the video-recordings discussed here suggests that VIPs are not passively following the guidance of their sighted companions but, indeed, their experience and descriptions of the exhibits also enhance the experience of the sighted guides. In this sense, then, the VIPs provide the guides with resources to make sense of the exhibits. Thus, the notion of the “(sighted) guide” that implies a power imbalance between the guide and the

guided is challenged and emphasis is put on the interactional achievement of social inclusion.

Video-based studies coupled with an appropriate analytic framework can be a powerful marketing research method to understand people's activities in and experience of exhibits and exhibitions. We can see how video allows researchers access to the social organisation of verbal, visible and tactile action at the "point-of-experience" (vom Lehn, 2006a) where visitors experience and make sense of exhibits. Thus, the analysis sheds new light on what Joy and Sherry (2003) have called the "embodied experience" of artwork, by elaborating on how bodily actions contribute to the emergence of an experience of works of art in museums. The analysis of interaction that involves visually impaired participants puts particular emphasis on this point, as these visitors rely on bodily actions to access the pieces; actions that sighted visitors can see and therefore draw on to provide descriptions and explanations of the exhibits. Furthermore, the visibility of VIPs' actions, coupled with their talk, often serves the "guides" as resources to notice exhibit features that their companions are able to experience. Their guides' descriptions, therefore, are often based on and guided by the VIPs' actions. Thus, the VIPs' experience of the exhibits is not defined by the guides, rather they co-create the experience that they have of an exhibit in and through their interactional examination of the piece (cf. Lusch and Vargo, 2006; vom Lehn, 2006a). In this sense, the experience that arises in interaction between VIPs and sighted guides bears many similarities to the ways in which two sighted participants examine and make sense of works of art in museums. In both cases, the participants have no direct access to the other's experience of the exhibits, but rely on observing the other and thereupon enquiring about the other's experience of the pieces.

The analysis suggests that the visual impairment of one of the participants requires actions from the guides that allow them to "read" and align with the VIPs' ongoing

experience of the material world. The guides' hesitancy to touch exhibits often undermines such an alignment with the VIPs. However, when the guides examine the exhibits through touch they are able to discover objects that the VIPs can also experience. By voicing descriptions of their tactile experience the guides provide the VIPs with resources they can align with, and thus an environment is created in which a shared experience of the exhibit can arise.

Aside from these substantive and methodological contributions to recent debates in marketing, this paper may also have some import for marketing practitioners in museums. Based on the analysis, it can be argued that tangible objects help VIPs to access and make sense of works of art. VIPs often visit museums with sighted companions. Whilst descriptions provided by sighted participants help VIPs to make sense of the objects, their experience can be further advanced when the sighted participants use their tactile experience of objects in their descriptions. Hence, by encouraging sighted people to use their hands and feel the objects, the experience of both, sighted and visually impaired participants can be enhanced.

The provision of interpretive objects near exhibits can be another way to help VIPs and sighted visitors make sense of artefacts depicted in paintings and other exhibits that cannot be touched. However, little is known of how people use such objects to make sense of associated exhibits, and how they embed them in interaction with others to examine the original works of art and to include others in their experience of exhibits. In the case in hand, the tangible objects have been attached to the walls near the exhibits and their labels. Studies of the use of mobile labels suggest that it may help visitors' understanding of the relationship between the interpretive objects and the original works of art if the objects are mobile and can be examined together with the original works of art (Heath and vom Lehn,

2004). The mobility of interpretive materials allows visitors to compare the information with the original pieces.

It is somewhat surprising that so far relatively little marketing research has been conducted concerning visitors' action and interaction on the exhibition-floor. Hence, little knowledge is available of how visitors draw on resources provided by museums to enhance each other's access to and engagement with exhibits. This analysis of the interaction between VIPs and sighted participants at exhibits provides us with an opportunity to scrutinise the ways in which visitors embed interpretive resources, including labels, tangible objects and exhibits in their collaborative examination of exhibits. Thus, the paper not only contributes to debates within arts marketing concerned with social inclusion, but also suggests that marketing research on the exhibition floor can enhance our understanding of cultural consumption at the point-of-experience and inform the design and development of exhibitions and interpretation material.

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