

‘The Sensational Museum: Using What We Know about Disability to Change How Museums Work for Everyone’: Keynote (23 October)

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Part One: Access or Inclusion?

[The Sensational Museum](#) is a two-year research project funded by the United Kingdom’s Arts and Humanities Research Council. It is a collaboration between academic researchers and partner organisations from the museums and heritage sector.

The museums sector wants to offer all visitors memorable, inclusive, engaging, and enjoyable experiences. According to the new ICOM definition, museums should be ‘accessible and inclusive’.

But access and Inclusion are not the same thing. ‘Access’ is the general name for the range of supports put in place to help people who cannot access standard museum content.

Access might include sign-language interpretation; audio description; tactile models; ramps; induction loops. It might also include interactive content that makes museum displays more interesting or easier to understand, guided tours, and docents who can explain museum displays. Access programming is often an add-on or supplement. It is planned after the exhibition or museum has been designed. It only happens if time and money allow.

In a way, access is the opposite of inclusion. Inclusion is when everyone feels at home in the museum, as if it has been designed especially for them. It is when everyone can enjoy the museum without having to rely on additional, specially designed ‘access’ content.

Museums of science and technology are leaders in producing engaging and exciting content. Displays often include interactive gadgets such as touchscreens, joysticks, and multi-media sound and vision. But this content is not accessible to everyone. And even the most standard museum design – the ‘look-and-learn’ display - is only accessible to people who can read and interpret the texts provided.

This situation is not surprising when we remember that almost without exception, museums are designed by and for non-disabled people. This means that exclusion rather than inclusion is embedded into the museum sector’s processes. Museums and galleries position the sense of sight at their very heart by putting their artefacts on display for visitors to look

at. Indeed, this privileging of the sense of sight is so pervasive and such a quintessential part of the museum experience that it has remained largely unchallenged since modern museum culture developed in the nineteenth century. As Fiona Candlin points out, “Blind people are constituted as a marginalized group not because their blindness makes them so, but because the ocularcentricity of museums and galleries ensures that non-visual engagement with art and artefacts remains virtually inconceivable in all but the most innovative of institutions.”

To resolve this problem, museums increasingly provide access to their exhibitions and artefacts for everyone, with their evolving practice including accessible offers (such as audio description, sign-language, audio-guides, interactive content, community, and educational programming) for people who cannot experience the museum in traditional ways. Yet, this reliance on ‘access’ provision to support non-traditional visitors perpetuates a dichotomy between ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’ people that marginalises and under-values non-normative ways of experiencing the museum.

Paradoxically, when museums provide alternative ways of accessing content for specific audiences, they unwittingly exclude from mainstream provision those people who want or need to access museums through senses other than sight. Consequently, even as museums aim to create welcoming experiences for all visitors, their assumption, that sight is a necessary part of the optimal museum experience, risks alienating people who prefer to access and process information in ways that are not only – or not entirely – visual.

This is the challenge: how can museums create inclusive interventions (interventions accessible to everyone) without having to spend time and money on also creating ‘accessible’ programming for minority audiences.

The Sensational Museum aims to address this systemic issue by rethinking the role and place of the senses in the museum. It declines the orthodox classical assumptions of the fixed array of five bodily senses (that have privileged sight, and reductively contained our other senses) in favour of a new sensory logic. It leverages the liberating notion of ‘Sensory Gain’ and the idea that everyone can benefit from the ‘access’ traditionally offered only to disabled visitors.

TSM asks what would happen if we reconceptualised museums so that the additional services provided for disabled visitors were at the heart of how museums work for everyone. In our first phase, we are collecting all the wonderful examples of inventive access

programming that already exist and using them to rethink the way museums speak to all our senses. Moving access from the margins to the centre; making it the beginning of a museum's journey, rather than an add-on if time and money allow.

We invite you to share your existing good practice via our website.

[Part Two: Case Study: The Technicians Gallery, Science Museum, London, UK](#)

Today I would like to share examples of good practice that we have already found in science museums in the UK. Science Museum Group, London, UK opened their Technicians Gallery in October 2022. Technicians is an interactive careers gallery aimed at young people (ages 11-16). Technicians is a visually appealing gallery that uses strong colours; film; audio; interactives and touch-objects to engage its young audience.

But the visually appealing design does not mean that the gallery is not accessible to people who do not need or value visual information. The sculpture is described in the gallery guide that is available both in the gallery (in large print and braille) and online (PDF and Word):

“An oversized sculpted ‘kit of parts’, like those familiar from model-making kits, introduces Technicians. The pieces within the sculpture are oversized wooden objects. Each object is the tool or equipment used by a type of technician. Across this installation, which also features film, 12 lesser-known technician roles are showcased. One example is that of the prosthetic leg shaped by Prosthetic and Orthotic Technicians. The film shows the technical care and attention to detail they apply to their work in action.” [\[from the Large Print Guide\]](#)

Importantly, this description does not attempt to describe every feature of the sculpture. It starts with an overview. This replicates in words the impression created by the sculpture. It provides an equivalent, but different first sense of the gallery's theme. As well as giving us a sense of what the sculpture might look like, this description also explains the sculpture's design: it provides a narrative interpretation of the objects by telling us how they relate to the 'kit of parts'.

The text then goes on to focus on one object. This emphasizes the shift from general to particular and tells people that detail is as important as the general first impression. Here, the prosthetic leg in the bottom right-hand corner is selected. This choice is important

because it welcomes non-normative bodies in the gallery. It celebrates diversity by showing that non-normative bodies can be at the cutting edge of technical prowess. This means that non-traditional visitors are represented in both the content of the exhibition and the way this content is communicated.

Alongside this traditional AD available in print and online, the Technicians Gallery also provides a more innovative audio descriptive guide for 'those who love to listen' via QR codes and created and delivered by Smartify. Unlike traditional AD, this is not restricted to blind and partially blind people but advertised to and available for everyone. This audio guide was co-created by young people, including people with lived experience of blindness, a spoken word poet and real-life technicians. The various texts are voiced by people with a range of regional and international accents (including inner-city London; Germany and the North and South of England.)

Science and Technology Museums around the world are known for their interactive displays, and the Technicians Gallery is no exception. Each 'world' features several interactive displays where visitors can experience real-world technician tasks.

These kinds of Interactive displays involving a touch screen and joystick are usually very reliant on both a visitor's confidence with technology and their levels of sight and hearing. They are thus not often described by audio guides and remain both inaccessible and invisible. But in the Technicians Gallery, the audio not only describe the interactive, but also provides an alternative and equivalent interactive experience of using it based on sound. (A transcript and sign-language version are available for Deaf visitors).

As the technicians discuss their work as welders, they emphasize the non-visual nature of the role:

“Imani: – the main skill needed for welding is precision, and you might think that's all about just having a keen eye: painstakingly following the line of the weld's seam as you move the torch along and feed in the filler metal that welds everything together... And, that's obviously part of it. But once you put your helmet down and the welding starts, you can barely see a thing!

Ant: You're right, and I think that does actually surprise a lot of people – once you're off, you're in a different world. With your helmet on, you spark up your welding torch; and it really does spark - it's a tiny lightning bolt that fires out of the torch to melt the

metal rod you're feeding through. When that spark is lit, your whole field of vision goes dark. It's like it's night-time all of a sudden. And there, in the centre of that darkness is a white-hot light, burning like the sun, with white rays splintering off around it. Then, as soon as you stop, it's as if the lights come back on and you can see everything again.

Imani: It means you have to rely on your other senses far more than you might have thought.

Ant: Exactly! – one of the best ways to know you're getting a good weld is by sound.'

This example is significant because it questions the predominance of the visual in the welding industry AND in the museum. It does the former through what the characters say.

And it does the latter through the medium of delivery: audio.

After this exchange, the technicians play two different welding sounds and invite the listener to decide which one is the most effective weld. The audio guide provides an interactive activity that is equivalent to, but not the same as the touch-screen version. Between them, these different ways of interacting with the exhibits allow the museum visitor to choose how they want to engage with the exhibit, and which of their senses they want to prioritise. As with the reference to the prosthetic leg, this celebration of the sense of hearing reminds us that there is a technician role for everyone.

There are several reasons why the Technicians audio description guide is inclusive:

- It is free to use and available to everyone
- It includes navigational information and so allows people to visit independently
- It celebrates and engages the non-visual senses
- It was designed at the same time and in conjunction with the permanent exhibition
- It was co-created by its target audience (young people, some of whom are blind or partially blind)
- It is interactive, engaging and playful; echoing the atmosphere of the visual displays
- It includes a range of voices from different cultures and ethnicities
- It values personal experience and opinion rather than curatorial-led 'objective' knowledge

Conclusion

We want all different kinds of people to visit museums. So we need to take into account many different preferences. Many people enjoy the traditional way of visiting a museum. They like to look at exhibits and read about them. But this way of being in a museum can be very alienating for other people. Some people like to listen; some people like to touch. Some people like bright light; some people prefer atmospheric lighting. Some people like noise; some people prefer quiet. It is impossible to create a museum that will work for everyone. But it is possible to create a museum where everyone will find something that works for them. Where everyone will be able to choose how they would like to explore the content. The Sensational Museum is exploring ways of mobilising all our senses, as well as ones we are yet unaware of, to radically rethink what a museum can be.