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# Can You See It?: Providing Visual Arts Access to Audiences with Visual Impairment and Blindness

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# Can You See It?: Providing Visual Arts Access to Audiences with Visual Impairment and Blindness

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of the Arts

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by

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**Preface**

In my junior year at Bard, I was going to do an internship with the National Parks Service on an exhibition for visitors with blindness and visual impairment. Sadly, it did not go through because of my school and music demands I had at the time, but I thought it would be a great topic for my senior project. At the time I was running the Strings for Cali TLS project, and my job was to provide music education access for musicians in Cali, Colombia. That is when I

realized that my project had to deal with accessibility issues. From there my interest focused on researching what major museums in the United States offered accessibility programs for people with disabilities. Among these museums were the Met Museum, the Guggenheim, the MoMA, and others. In the fall of 2019, I visited these museums to see how accessible their spaces were; I wanted to see how their interior spaces and exhibitions benefited people with disabilities. However, that task was not feasible.

After that, I reoriented my research to how accessible are museums websites for individuals with disabilities, especially for people with blindness and visual impairment. I found a lot of scholarship on the topic and got interested in it, but I was not happy with the writing result. My senior project board suggested to downscale it to something more specific like accessibility issues at Bard College. My adviser prof. Laurie Dahlberg suggested that this new project would involve interviews. The plan was to see how Bard College stands with issues of accessibility, and focus on how the departments of Art History and Studio Arts dealt with issues of accessibility with their students, especially for students with a visual impairment or blindness. Before conducting the interviews and my research, I had three basic questions that were used as a guide. Where is each department standing with accessibility issues? Where could it be? How do we get there?

My first interview was with the Director of the Art History Department and Visual Culture, Prof. Susan Merriam. The interview I had with prof. Merriam was a test interview to see if I had good questions that could help me for my research and for the next interviewees. She helped me revise my initial questions, and provided some context for what the art history program has done to provide accessibility to students with visual impairment. My second

interview was with the Director of the Studio Arts Department Prof. Ellen Driscoll. The questions I had for her focused on what is the possibility to understand the visual arts through other senses besides vision. I also asked if she had any experience with teaching students with blindness or visual impairment. My third interview was with the co-head of the Bard Disabled Union Finn Tait, who is a Bard student as well. Her interview is crucial to my project because we discussed accessibility and disability issues at Bard. We also discuss her work as a digital artist and how she translates her work into accessible media.

After the round of interviews was done, I organized my senior project into five sections. My introduction explains how my thoughts on visual perception have been informed by having sight and being an art history student, but changes as I get deeper into my research. The Language and Disability section is meant to inform the reader and myself the different types of visual impairments and blindness. That section also deals with respectful language that is to be used when conversing or refering to anyone with a disability. The Strategies to Increase Accessibility section explores alternatives to understand the visual arts through the perception of touch and hearing. Furthermore, the case study section provides more research on museum spaces being more accessible to people with disabilities. Lastly, Thinking about Accessibility and the Arts focuses on reviewing where Bard College stands with issues of accessibility with comments from prof. Driscoll and Tait.

**Introduction**

As a student of Art History, I have learned to study the visuals aspects of every artwork. When I took the Theories and Methods class with Prof. Alex Kitnick, the class focused on how

we can interpret artworks in many different ways through phenomenology, psychology, Iconography and Iconology, and other methods. After reading Simon Hayhoe's *Blind Visitor Experience at Art Museums*, I realized that much of the critical thinking and evaluation we did in Theories and Methods was made through visual perception. Visual perception was the most important lens on top of the smaller lens of interpretation. Individuals who are not blind or have any significant visual impairment consider visual perception as inherent to the critical thinking and evaluation of artworks. But this mindset only limits the artwork to be tied to visual perception only, even though most people still have four other four senses that can still be used to experience the arts.[1]

Proof of this is the Turkish painter Esref Armagan, whom Simon Hayhoe introduces in his book to further elaborate on experiencing and doing artwork with other senses like touch and hearing. Armagan was born blind and with no light perception. Armagan has never seen colors, shades or shadows, nor even foreshortening in paintings. However, Armagan is an accomplished painter like any other successful sighted artist. I myself was doubtful and had to go to the internet to see it for myself. His paintings are very vibrant and alive, as if he was actually not blind at all. It seems that he is able to see much more than a sighted person. Armagan's success as a painter comes from a family that encouraged him to draw and paint. Born in a working class family meant that he would have not attended a school for the blind, and for that reason he received little education. As a kid he would spend most of his time with his dad and family, and would often ask about the world that surrounded him. His family would let him touch as many objects as possible. Eventually, his father developed a new method to help him learn faster through his

[1] Simon Hayhoe, Blind Visitors Experience at Art Museums (n.p.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 3.

hands. His father took a few pieces of board and a scribe[2], and scratched images of his surroundings into the board, so his son could feel the images with his hands. He gave it to his son so he could learn two-dimensional representation through his fingers. Before young Armagan could paint, he started developing his drawing techniques through touch and by asking constantly how the world around him was. With the help of his board and scribe, Armagan wanted to understand the visual environment of his friends and family.[3]

Armagan is a painter that even though he does not have sight is able to compensate for the lack of vision by using his other senses. A topic that has been central to my research is adaptation. In the interview with prof. Driscoll she mentions that to continue her life as an artist, she has had to adapt to the reality of only having 50% vision. That means that she is no longer able to use power tools and drive. Now she needs to be much more careful when and where she walks. To these adaptations there are good things, like still being able to see 50%, having the opportunity to still give classes, and still being able to support the Studio Arts department. For Armagan, there are also many upsides to being able to adapt to the circumstances of not seeing. He accomplishes his artworks through touch and his use of oil and acrylic painting. The advantage of oil and acrylic paint is that once the first layer is dried, you can paint a second and third layer over it. With his fingers, Armagan would build layer by layer, knowing which one was the first layer and the subsequent layers. If he were to use a brush, he would not be able to track the progress of his painting. A brush would be the extension of an artist's sight, but Armagan's fingers are in a way his eyes. Armagan says, "I think that painting with my fingers

[2] A scribe is  sharp tool designed to make measurements on metal and wood
[3] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 6-9.

just means that I am able to follow what I have done. Brushes don't do that since I must touch what I have just done.".[4]

On a philosophical level, Armagan is like a potter. He molds and shapes his vessel the way he wants it to be. He adds the initial layers to form the base and then works his way up to get his preferred shape. He then goes on to subtract pieces of the clay to refine his vessel until he gets the final product. All of it was done with his hands and the process was imaginative and creative, but without sight. As time went by, Armagan developed his painting skills by using a piece of clay to do outlines of the objects before he applied paint inside of them. Once the paint is applied, he can remove the pieces of clay. Armagan's painting techniques have allowed him to represent foreshortening and perspective. Thanks to the conversations with his sighted peers, he has been successful in understanding the nature of perspective.[5]

Thus, Armagan does rely a lot on his sense of touch, but he uses his other senses as well. In combination with his senses of touch, hearing, smell and taste, Armagan is able to navigate the visual environment by orienting himself with his other senses. What is considered visual arts therefore does not necessarily depend on the sense of vision. Armagan's senses help him paint. Maybe we need to do more research to experiment more with our other senses. If our understanding of visual arts has been stifled by an ocularcentric bias, then that means that there is a lack of research considering how the absence of human senses might boost creativity and increase understanding of the visual world, even without vision.[6] Theories of art appreciation by individuals who are not blind rely on scientific theories of perception and cognition. These

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[4] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 9-10.
[5] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 10.
[6] Simon Hayhoe uses this term "ocularcentrism" in *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums*, where he credits the term to Martin Jay, who described the concept in *Downcast Eyes* (1993). It describes the bias of a society's privileging of sight and visual knowledge.

theories rely on the deficit model of disability, the belief that impairment is a disability and reduces the ability to perform in society. Hayhoe says that most current research on perception is mostly done on individuals who are not blind.[7] The research involves blindfolding individuals in short-term experiments, with the belief that this experience of perception is enough for understanding blindness.[8] However, a researcher cannot simply understand the perception of a blind individual by simply blindfolding themselves once or a few times. They have to live in blindness for a longer period of time for the body to adjust to the absence of sight. This would be a way to understand the perception of blindness or of other types of visual impairment.

The outcomes of such experiments do not benefit most individuals who are blind, because most of their focus is on individuals with congenital total blindness; a small minority in the blind population. By focusing on studies of congenital total blindness, the research limits the understanding of other kinds of blindness and visual impairments. Other research has focused on the ability of individuals with blindness or visual impairment to perceive three-dimensional works as well. In some cases, there is research on the works of artists that are blind. This particular research has mostly been concerned with how accurately they can produce artworks like sighted artists, instead of doing more research in getting to know the lives and perception of individuals with different types of blindness and visual impairments.[9] Georgina Kleege provides research and insight into what it means to be a teacher with blindness.

In her book *Sight Unseen*, Kleege describes her frustrations and adaptations she has made in her life, and further elaborates more on the topic of ocularcentric bias as an issue in society. She mentions that when individuals lose or are losing their vision, they fear that sighted

[7] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 23-24.
[8] Hayhoe.
[9] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 24.

individuals will not adjust to their vision loss. On top of that is the fear of society towards blindness, and for many blindness means darkness.[10] Human experience is essentially visual, but that does not mean that to not see is to not be alive.[11] Those who do not have a significant vision impairment are afraid of those who have it, and therefore avoid having to deal with individuals with any vision impairment or blindness.[12]

Throughout her teaching years, Kleege has found effective ways to talk about blindness with her students, who for the most part are sighted. She thought of talking about blindness from a medical perspective or the different types of legal blindness, but she chooses to explain how her condition will affect the students. For example, some students will have to read to her their papers and exams. Class attendance will be taken by someone else besides her.[13] While reading Kleege's book I realized something. Research should be more focused from the experience of those with visual impairment or blindness. This perspective will help scholars understand better blindness and how much we actually know about it. Many institutions worldwide have made it possible to provide accessibility to blind and vision impaired people, but sometimes it seems one sided.[14] Kleege wants to bring her experience of being blind to the public, as a way to bring others to be society.

**Language and Disability**

[10] As stated before, not all types of blindness mean that the individual has zero light perception. Further in the paper I will discuss all the types of vision impairments and blindness.
[11] Georgina Kleege, Sight Unseen (n.p.: Yale University Press and New Haven & London, 1999), 30.
[12] Kleege, Sight Unseen, 35.
[13] Kleege, Sight Unseen, 11.
[14] I talk more about his argument in the section of "Strategies to Increase Accessibility" in my paper.

Vision impairment can include a range of symptoms such as blurred vision, tunnel vision, peripheral vision, spots on vision, achromatism, or a combination of all of these symptoms.[15] Blurred vision causes sight to be unclear, while periphery vision only lets the individual see through the sides of the eyes. Spots on the visions does not let the viewer fully experience complete vision; vision gets disrupted by what appears like floating dots. With achromatism, the viewer might be able to see colors or none of them, while tunnel vision limits the field of sight. The types of blindness are congenital early total blindness, congenital early partial blindness, and late onset blindness. Congenital early total blindness means that the individual has no visual memory or the individual's memory is solely on restricted light perception. Congenital early partial blindness refers to individuals who have visual memories or can understand visual reference. Late blindness describes those who start losing their vision due to aging,[16] which is related to cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy.

Cataracts are a condition in which the opacity of the lens interferes with vision function. Patients with cataracts may have blurred vision or glare. Glaucoma is a group of disorders characterized by glaucomatous optic nerve damage and visual field loss. Age-related macular degeneration is the loss of central vision. There are two types of diabetic retinopathy: nonproliferative and proliferative. Nonproliferative is characterized by abnormalities of the retinal circulation. Proliferative is characterized by the new blood vessels.[17] Other factors that contribute to vision loss are eye disorders, eye injuries, and birth defects. Those can be caused by

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[15] In this section I will provide the most known or relevant descriptions of types of visual impairment and blindness. This is a very limited list, as there are many more conditions relating to the eyes.

[16] Simon Hayhoe, Arts, Culture, And Blindness: A Study of Blind Students in the Visual Arts (Youngstown, NY: <teneo> // press, 2008), 29-30.

[17] David A. Quillen, "Common Causes of Vision Loss in Elderly Patients," American Family Physician, https://www.aafp.org/afp/1999/0701/p99.html.

Wagner Syndrome, which causes progressive vision loss beginning at an early age.[18] It could also be an accident that damages your eyes, or even Amblyopia (lazy eye), which happens when one eye fails to properly work with the brain.[19] All vision impairments and types of blindness can deeply affect the experience of these museum visitors. While many of them might not see, that does not mean they cannot gain any experience or appreciation from art.

To reach visitors with disabilities, museums have to consider what kind of language they will use when communicating with audiences who have any disability. There are different ways individuals with disabilities prefer to be addressed, but that does not mean that everybody uses the same vocabulary. For example, individuals with blindness or visual impairment might want to be called "blind" or "visually impaired". Outdated words like "invalid" should not be used.[20] In addition, museums or any institution should keep in mind that not every individual wants to disclose their disability. Some do not even identify as a person with any disability, generally we refer to the person first and the disability second. This is called Person-First Language. [21]

Another example is to use "a person of short stature or little person" as opposed to the words "dwarf" or "midget". Thus, a person is not a disability; a person has a disability or a condition. As stated before, always ask the individual's language preference, because it is different for everybody. Some do actually prefer to be identified with their disability first. This is called Identity-First Language; for example, one may wish to be referred to as "a blind person"

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[18] "Wagner Syndrome," Genetics Home Reference, https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/condition/wagner-syndrome#.
[19] "Amblyopia," MedlinePlus, https://medlineplus.gov/amblyopia.html.
[20] "Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!," AUCD, http://www.aucd.org/docs/add/sa_summits/Language%20Doc.pdf.

[21] The Person-First Language is the one I use in my paper. I tried to keep it as consistent as possible. It shows more respect.

instead of "a person who is blind". When conversing with people with a disability and with others that do not have one, avoid the terms "normal" or "able-bodied". These words can be condescending to individuals with a disability, and at times it can make them feel excluded. Use neutral language and do not use condescending euphemisms. People with disabilities are humans; they must not be separated into a different category. Most importantly, only mention someone's disability whenever it is important to the story.[22]

**Strategies to Increase Accessibility**

**I. Touch**

Without the visual perception, an individual can use their sense of touch to try navigate a sculpture or a relief that is open to the audience in a museum or institution. Some museums have led the way in developing touch-based exhibits for sight-impaired and visitors with blindness. For example, the Art Institute of Chicago has an interpretive format called TacTiles[23], which are relief copies of original paintings made by a 3D computer system. This innovative program was developed by designer Helen Maria Nugent.[24]As opposed to just hearing a verbal description or seeing guided tours of artworks, visitors with a visual impairment or blindness, will experience the TacTiles with their hands. Museums that do not permit visitors to touch the artworks overlook the tactile senses of sighted visitors and those who are visually impaired or blind. Scientists Simon Lacey and K. Sathian argue that it is possible for the hands to acquire

[22] "Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities," ADA National Network, https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing.

[23] I wrote "TacTiles" because the Art Institute has it written like that on their museum webpage. On other parts of the paper that do not relate to that museum, I will write "tactiles".

[24] Helen Maria Nugent, "Consulting / TacTiles," Haelo Design, http://haelodesign.com/tactiles.php.

information about an object by exploring the different sides of it.[25] A person who is visually impaired comes to know better an artwork when they touch and feel it with their hands. Thus, handling TacTiles increases the level of understanding and appreciation of an artwork and provides access for those visitors who are visually impaired. The question is whether or not the individuals with vision impairment can clearly understand the composition of the TacTiles.[26] A good solution might be to take the customizable tour in the The Art Institute of Chicago that includes the use of TacTiles Kits in conjunction with verbal description tours. But still, the composition of the TacTiles are not clear enough for the person who has vision impairment or blindness, because there is no clear distinction in the composition and subject matter. The individuals cannot also touch the color. But they are still a good option for experiencing the arts.

## II. Audio (Verbal Imaging)

A musician that is deaf might feel the reverberations of music in a concert hall, but they still can't hear Beethoven's 9th symphony. That is to say, in some ways our body can make up for the missing body parts or parts that are not functioning as they should.[27] Therefore, audio tours can be a great aid for those who are visually impaired or blind. Moreover, they can benefit those who can see. Writer and producer Lou Giansante has produced verbal description audio tours for both audiences with sight and audiences with blindness and vision impairment.

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25 Simon Lacey and K. Sathian, "Please DO Touch the Exhibits!," in The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space, ed. Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone (n.p.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 4.

26 Paulette Bette, "Touch and See," National Endowment for the Arts, https://www.arts.gov/NEARTS/2015v1-challenging-notions-accessibility-and-arts/touch-and-see.

27 Ellen Driscoll, interview by the author, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, March 4, 2020..

Therefore, it creates an inclusive experience for both audiences to be together in an exhibition. Generally, a traditional audio tour gives historical context of the artworks and information about the institution, but it does not always include verbal descriptions of the artworks. Verbal descriptions tours represent the visual world through words. The goal is to have verbal description audio tours for both audiences, even if they are a little longer than traditional audio tours. [28]

Giansante produces verbal description audio for both audiences because sighted audiences prefer to hear descriptions of what they see, and individuals with blindness or vision impairment will need all the detailed descriptions they can get. However, Individuals with sight might take for granted their vision.[29] I recall that as a freshman at Bard College I would go to the Met Museum to do art history assignments. One of the assignments was to look closely at any artwork the student chose. I chose a fresco. The assignment should have not taken that long, but I remember spending like five hours at that fresco. The fresco was simple, but by looking at it constantly and from many directions, I understood what I was looking at. Ever since then, I take my time when looking at artworks. Professor Katherine Boivin said once, "The more you look, the more you will understand."

A curator of a show once asked Giansante why it was necessary to describe the exact dimensions of a cup to a sighted audience. Giansante's response was that detailed descriptions help sighted viewers trust what they are seeing. Audiences with a vision impairment or blindness need the dimensions of the cup to imagine it in their minds. This approach to verbal description brings new visual insights to tour guides. Moreover, Giansante offers other tips to make verbal

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[28] Lou Giansante, "Writing Verbal Descriptions for Audio Guides," Art Beyond Sight, http://www.artbeyondsight.org/mei/verbal-description-training/writing-verbal-description-for-audio-guides/.
[29] Giansante, "Writing Verbal," Art Beyond Sight.

descriptions effective. First, a writer must be familiar with the artist, style or school of art, reception, and historical context. Based on his research, the writer will choose what to say or what to omit, as long as it is supported by evidence. He can add what the artist thinks of their work, and it can be recorded into the verbal description tours and presented later. A verbal description can start with the information of the artist, medium of the artwork, and what year it was made. The content of the description should be clear and easy to understand; the information is not for a reader, but for a listener. The degree of clarity of the sentences will either guide the listener or confuse him. The verbal description should give a summary of how it looks as a whole. [30]

Giansante says that a point of view must be established in the verbal descriptions, and these will vary depending on the type of artwork. For example, if you are using directions to orient the viewer/listener to a figurative painting, you need to clarify whether you are referring to your own point of view from outside of the artwork, or to the point of view of the subject within the painting. If you are describing sculpture or architecture, you must orient the viewer/listener: is one looking from the corner of the building, and if so, how does the building look? Is the sculpture in the round? From what point of view are we looking? The goal is to build an image in the listener's mind. That order should be disclosed to the listener at the beginning.[31]

Giansante reports that comparisons to the human body can be helpful; for example, an artwork can be described as life size or twice as life size. Other comparisons can be drawn with other objects, animals, and even architecture. The body can also be used as a tool to understand

[30] Giansante, "Writing Verbal," Art Beyond Sight.
[31] Giansante "Writing Verbal," Art Beyond Sight.

shapes and poses of a figure or sculpture. If you have a sculpture that resembles a human body, the viewers/listeners can try to mimic the body posture to understand it.[32]

Creating verbal description tours for both sighted audiences and audiences with blindness is a focus that every museum or institution should consider for the future. There are different methods to deliver verbal descriptions like audio players, cell phones, and smartphones or pads.[33]

**One case study: The *Savage Beauty* Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art**

Author Simon Hayhoe's experience of verbal imaging took another direction, according to an experience that he recounts with a woman named Edi, an individual who progressively lost her vision due to macular degeneration. Edi has a hearing impairment as well, but she points out that her hearing impairment is weaker than her macular degeneration. The purpose of the interview was not to propose a set of guidelines of how to successfully produce a verbal description, but rather to understand how the curation of the exhibition, museum staff, and other parts of a museum give access to individuals with a vision impairment or blindness. Edi is an eighty year old New Yorker who is an art and music enthusiast. Since a very young age she has enjoyed both practicing arts, and both inspired her to attend many museums throughout her lifetime. Despite her vision loss, she still has a vivid visual memory. She still has the opportunity to distinguish colors, but as time passes her vision keeps getting blurrier.[34]

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[32] Giansante "Writing Verbal," Art Beyond Sight.
[33] Audio players have a touchpad just like a phone, but they would need help from a sighted person or staff to enter the stop number to hear the verbal descriptions. Some companies give the option for visitors with sight or blindness to dial a number in their cellphones to listen to audio stops, but not everybody wants to use their cellphone on a tour because it means using their battery. Other options are applications on phones like the VoiceOver in iPhones and TalkBack in Android phones to make text audible to people who are blind or visually impaired.
[34] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 114-116.

As part of the interview, Hayhoe accompanied both Edi and her friend to attend the *Savage Beauty* exhibition of fashion designer Alexander McQueen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The live verbal imaging tour was led by a museum staff called Anne. In the tour, she covered the working life of McQueen until his death in 2010. The tour ranged from physical description of the pieces to the context of the exhibition and biography of McQueen. Anne included detailed descriptions of textures, colors, forms, room descriptions of the exhibition, curation, and how it was all organized. The exhibition's lighting was a mix of dark, bright, and light colors. These color contrasts were helpful to Edi to see because she was able to discern the colors.[35]

The curators of the McQueen exhibition focused on senses of vision and hearing. They created a significant audio component by choosing a variety of music and sound that would play in various parts of the exhibition, complementing themes of McQueen's designs. For example, ethereal Scottish-theme soundtracks, which was suitable for the traditional costumes of the Scottish highlands made by McQueen. The high ceiling and soft walls helped control the echo in the exhibition. This great use of acoustics helped the music and the voice sound much clearer.

The exhibition provided most of what was necessary for Edi, but there were aspects of the exhibition's design that were not good for anyone with vision or hearing problems.[36] For example, despite the great acoustics, the labels with small fonts and colors, were unsuitable for audiences with a vision impairment. It is better to have a simple label description without embellishments. The font size and color should be carefully chosen, opaque or dark colors will not be distinguishable. Hayhoe never reported if there was any Braille description in the

[35] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 116-117.
[36] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 119.

exhibition, but this is a viable option that should have been integrated in the McQueen exhibition. Perhaps the worst part of Edi's experience as reported by Hayhoe involved the other patrons. Due to the great popularity of the McQueen exhibition, the space was always crowded. Therefore, Anne had to be closer to Edi, so Edi could hear Anne better. There was resentment from the other museum visitors about Edi, Hayhoe, and Edi's friend, who were thought to be going ahead of the paying customers. Another individual in the museum wanted to attack Anne because it was disrupting her audio guide in the exhibition.[37]

**Thinking about Accessibility and the Arts at Bard College**

Recently, I interviewed several individuals at Bard College who I thought would have perspectives on these questions of art and accessibility to the individuals with blind and vision impairment. These were the Prof. Ellen Driscoll and Finn Tait. I asked them all a series of questions regarding "accessibility" or "inaccessibility" and what it means to people with blindness, vision impairment, or any kind of disability. Before the interviews, I had not that much knowledge of how Bard College handled the issues of accessibility, but after meeting with both Prof. Driscoll and Finn particularly, it was very alarming to see how far behind Bard is on these issues.

The Bard Disabled Union was created to address the lack of community or group organization for students that have any kind of disability at Bard College.[38] Through my conversation with Tait, I learned that a lot of students had bad experiences with both the school

[37] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 118-120.
[38] The Bard Disabled Union is composed of 53 people with disabilities, including physical and mental disabilities, or both. However, Finn Tait explained that there are not a lot of people with traditional disabilities such as visual impairment or people in wheelchairs; she thinks this is because any visit to Bard reveals the limits of campus accessibility.

and the disability offices over problems with professors, housing, and health services. There was no platform for them to express this to the school. Many students didn't know you could report a teacher for denying an accomodation, and they were unaware of their rights or what opportunities were open to them, mostly because there is not a full-time employee in the disability office. Prof. Driscoll said, "With no one in the disability office, there is not that much that you can do. Without that person up the hill in that office, it is a bit challenging." For that reason, the Bard Disabled Union wrote a list of prioritized demands to the school, as a way to improve access to students with physical, mental, sensory, and any kinds of disability issues. The Bard Disabled Union is proposing that Bard College should use a universal model instead of an accomodation model when dealing with issues of accessibility. As Tait explained, the accommodation model views the disability as a barrier to access. The universal model puts the responsibility on the facilities and the accommodation model puts the responsibility on the disability. In other words, a student can't access information because that information is not in an accessible form for everyone (universal model), instead a student can't access information because he/she is blind or has a visual impairment (accommodation model). Tait elaborated more and said, by reframing it like this it creates a culture of accessibility, and it also improves accessibility beyond disabled people. [39]

At the beginning of my research, I thought accessibility was reserved separately for different groups; for example, people with visual impairment had their own accessibility issues just as individuals with who are deaf had theirs. I now understand that this is a very narrow way to view issues of access. A solution to any access issues for a community with visual impairment

[39] Finn Tait, interview by the author, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, March 5, 2020.

can benefit a community with other disabilities. When Finn introduced me to both these models, I was clueless as to what they were. I first assumed that the accommodation model was better because it implies "accommodating" specific needs. To my surprise, the universal model is better because it strives for inclusive universal access, not separate "accommodations" for those with a disability. Ramps are a great example of universal accessibility because they are good for individuals with wheelchairs, strollers, or the elderly. In the end, ramps benefit everyone, not a particular group of people.[40]

As Hayhoe argues, "there is an extra dimension to understanding the visual arts" beyond our perception of sight. I asked Ellen Driscoll if there was some way to understand visual arts through a different perception other than vision. I asked her because she has recently lost sight in one eye and other mobility functions due to a brain tumor, and has had to depend on her other senses to adapt, especially her remaining functioning eye. She responded that many disciplines such as the visual arts, music, and other disciplines, were constructed upon the understanding that sight is needed in order to practice them to the fullest. She noted that even if one describes an artwork verbally,

> It will still never make up for the fact that you cannot see that picture… If I describe the picture to you again, it would not do it justice without your eyes. … I'm saying that one has to accept the limitations of the body. … Institutions like the MET house visual materials that are meant to be seen by sighted audiences. However, the Metropolitan Museum does offer many programs for those individuals with visual impairments and blindness. Some museums have braille signs or sculptures of the Mona Lisa for people to touch. You could maybe feel her head, hair, and eyes. However, that replica was not made by Da Vinci. It was made by an artist in a studio seeing a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, it was not made by Da Vinci. Touching it is not as approximate as seeing the original Mona Lisa.[41]

[40] Tait, interview by the author.
[41] Driscoll, interview by the author.

In our discussion, Prof. Driscoll stressed adaptation:

> For example, I have one eye that works fine. But to be honest, you will never replace the experience of seeing. Cultural adaptations can be made but they are not exact, one-to-one substitutes. There might be amazing ways that the body might compensate, but there might not be any at all.[42]

After that response, I told Prof. Driscoll that I have been trying to find a substitute for vision. To find the best alternatives to the perception of sight. If sight is not functioning, what can we do about it? It did not pass my mind that there is no substitute for vision: the reality is that you cannot replace vision with anything. The experience of seeing is reserved to that experience only. Even if the body tries to compensate for it, the ability to see cannot be substituted. To this, Prof. Driscoll said that she is probably reacting to the fact that she has one eye, and not two; it is part of her adapting to this new situation. She goes on to say that not everything is available to her, and she has to stop thinking that everything actually is. She cannot drive or ride a bike. She cannot teach in the woodshop because she does not know where the blade is. She just has to accept that. She does not want to endanger any of her students. Adaptation does have many upsides for her. She feels strong and able, and she still has 50% of her vision. I also asked Prof. Driscoll about how Bard could accommodate people with blindness and vision impairment, and she suggested the professors would need special training, but also "the knowledge to understand that the experience of seeing cannot be replaced." She noted that wealthy institutions can do much more to make their programs accessible. Smaller institutions with less funding may find it an obstacle to achieve this goal.[43]

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[42] Driscoll, interview by the author.

[43] Driscoll, interview by the author.

In my interview with Tait, I asked her the same question I asked Prof. Driscoll, is it possible to appreciate the arts through other senses besides vision? Tait said that, as a digital artist, she focuses on alternative media. She creates works so people can have equal, but different experiences. “Just as moving as a visual experience,” she said.[44] Tait wants her work to be as unique as the experience of seeing. She does understand that if vision is not present, you cannot recreate that experience, but surely you can stimulate in other ways. I then asked her why it is important to make the arts and any discipline accessible to students and other individuals. Tait says that, as a studio arts major and written arts major, it is crucial to make them accessible. A lot of her work is informed by her disability and accessibility. The arts are tied to the medium, individuals with blindness or vision impairment will not be able to experience it in the same as sighted visitors. Most artworks were created without thinking of disability in mind, and to translate them into a different perception or medium is hard. You have to reproduce a work that is understandable to a variety of individuals. Tait has been to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the experience was not accessible for her. The professor who was giving the tour did not use the elevator. She says that it is a challenge to translate a world that has been built into a narrow mindset of ability. One of Tait's works has been translated into braille print, and she constantly is finding ways to translate her work into other modes of perception.[45]

In the same way that Tait wants to provide access to her digital artwork to everyone, she does the same thing in her work with the Bard Disabled Union at Bard College. The Bard Disabled Union is a community project, a place for students with disabilities to come. The students that approach Tait are in need of an accommodation that might help compensate for any

[44] Tait, interview by the author.
[45] Tait, interview by the author.

of a variety of learning or physical disabilities. Students should know that they are not alone, there are other students with disabilities in the college. A lot of freshmen coming to Bard do not realize how disabled they are, until they leave the support systems of their homes. They realize that they need more support at Bard. Thus, Tait works with every student to find the best accommodations for them; for example, someone with chronic pain may not easily be able to carry a lot of books. In such cases, technology substitutes like a kindle, computer readers, and print outs might be helpful. Some people make the mistake of believing that students seeking accommodations are trying to game the system. Tait argues,

> Students don't come to me asking how can I get a single, normally they come to me saying, I have horrible migraines, I have no problem with my roommate, but they turn on light. People come to me (hopefully that changes) because I will always primarily advocate for the student over anything else. I want to protect that.[46]

**Conclusion: what might be done**

The experience of seeing cannot be replicated or experienced without the eyes. Like the other senses, they are unique and dependent on each other, but not completely so. As recounted by Prof. Driscoll, our bodies may or may not be able to compensate for the missing senses. It will vary between each individual. A missing sense does not mean that our bodies cannot be stimulated through other senses or not be stimulated by things that are related to our missing senses. Take the example of the Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci as mentioned by Prof. Driscoll. The original painting of the Mona Lisa might be seen or not by individuals with a vision impairment or blindness. A tour guide might describe her through verbal imaging, but the full experience of seeing will not be there. A tactile can be made of the original painting, to

[46] Tait, interview by the author.

provide some insight through the sense of touch. It will not be the same as actually seeing it. I believe that there is still room for understanding an artwork even if an individual has a vision impairment or blindness.

If the Turkish painter Armagan has had the opportunity to paint, create, and understand artworks, then that means that he has an understanding of the visual world. Not through his eyes, but through his remaining senses, and with the help of his family and sighted peers. If Edi, the retired artist, can attend a McQueen show in the Met Museum and regularly attend exhibitions, so should other visitors with visual impairment or blindness hope to participate in museum-going.

A tactile Mona Lisa can be a superb aesthetic and sensory experience. The original Mona Lisa has been crafted and rendered by the original painter Leonard Da Vinci. The aesthetics and purpose of the oil painting has been there for centuries, a mark of the artist that has been preserved by the passing of time. Thus, those who appreciate the work are sighted audiences who traveled to the institution to see it. Yet if audio guides and verbal description tours are available, audiences with and without vision impairments can further appreciate it. However, audio guides and verbal descriptions might not be enough.

It is still a relief version of the original Mona Lisa, therefore, it is a reproduction of the original. Many details of the originals like the composition, color, depth, and subject will be lost for sure. Thus, the reproduction will focus more in the relief form of the subject. There will be an emphasis on the form of the body, the body in front of the landscape, and maybe the hands too. The visitor will have a chance to hold it in their hands. The original painting cannot be touched by anyone, except the staff that takes care of preserving it. But in this case, the visitor can hold it

and touch as much as they want. They could even touch and hear a verbal description of the Mona Lisa, as a way to understand the original one. But as Professor Driscoll pointed out, the tactile version might give a completely different interpretation of the original painting. However, hearing a verbal description with the tactile Mona Lisa might increase the understanding of it. The reproduction is obviously an alternative for encountering the original painting. There are no limits for learning, only different possibilities of learning. The tactile version can be used for both sighted audiences and audiences with blindness and vision impairment. Like Tait said once, "The best thing about accessibility is that it benefits everyone, not just those with a disability.".

Returning to Hayhoe's story of his recent visit to the Met with Edi, I expected that the McQueen exhibition curators would have incorporated the sense of smell and touch into the exhibition design. The smell and touch of leather or other fabric materials could have been a great feature in the exhibition, and pieces of fabrics, even small ones, could have been provided for the visitors to touch. A tour guide could have asked the individuals with a vision impairment or blindness if they can distinguish what kind of material is by smelling/touching a piece of leather or fabric. A special request could reasonably be made to receive funding for exhibitions that could benefit individuals with blindness or vision impairment. It is possible and often inexpensive to provide additional sensory materials for museum exhibitions.

Institutions should make their spaces more welcoming, especially to those with disabilities such as blindness or visual impairment, because they can understand visual concepts just like a sighted viewer.[47] Institutions should realize that sensorily enhanced materials that allow patrons to touch, hear, and even in some cases smell properties of the artworks, would be

[47] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 19.

appreciated by all audiences. Sighted audiences also need to be more empathetic toward individuals with disabilities, including those with blindness and visual impairment. An exhibition for all audiences is the goal. There needs to be more interaction between both audiences. The visual experience of art is unique to itself, but there is also another way to experience art: through a collective cultural experience. Visitors with a visual impairment do not experience artworks in the same way a sighted person does, but being part and feeling welcome in an exhibition is crucial. It creates a culture of belonging, and participating in a cultural discourse.

Access is about helping everybody with their different needs and meeting those needs through different ways. Let us look at things differently. Museums and other institutions have countless original works or reproductions of artworks that could be translated into other modes of perception. The original Mona Lisa serves as the model to reproduce different kinds of tactile versions of the original painting. Different versions could focus on a particular detail of the original painting, these details could then further be guided by special verbal descriptions. Moreover, a sculpture of the Mona Lisa could be another possibility of interpretation. Yes, the reproduction gets us farther away from the original painting, but technology is so advanced that it could open new doors to understand artworks. Many individuals with blindness or visual impairment have not had the chance to experience these artworks because institutions do not have the resources to support exhibitions for blind audiences. Many institutions think that audiences with blindness need the sense of vision in order to function like sighted audiences, but that is not the case.[48] A lack of vision does not mean that the individual is incapable of understanding anything. Let's get those original artworks into different modes of perception.

[48] Hayhoe, Blind Visitors, 19.

That way communities with disabilities like blindness and vision impairment can enjoy them fully.

Back when I studied in Puerto Rico, I knew a blind man. I do not remember his condition, but his daughter and son told me he lost his sight around the age of 10, so he still had visual memories from his childhood. Knowing him as an adult, he did not seem to have blindness. He attended social gatherings, went to the gym, and enjoyed seeing movies, even if his visual perception was limited. Most of these activities were done with his children or with friends. His daughter and son would describe to him in detail what the movie was about. He could fully enjoy these activities with the aid of his children. That is what accessibility is all about.

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