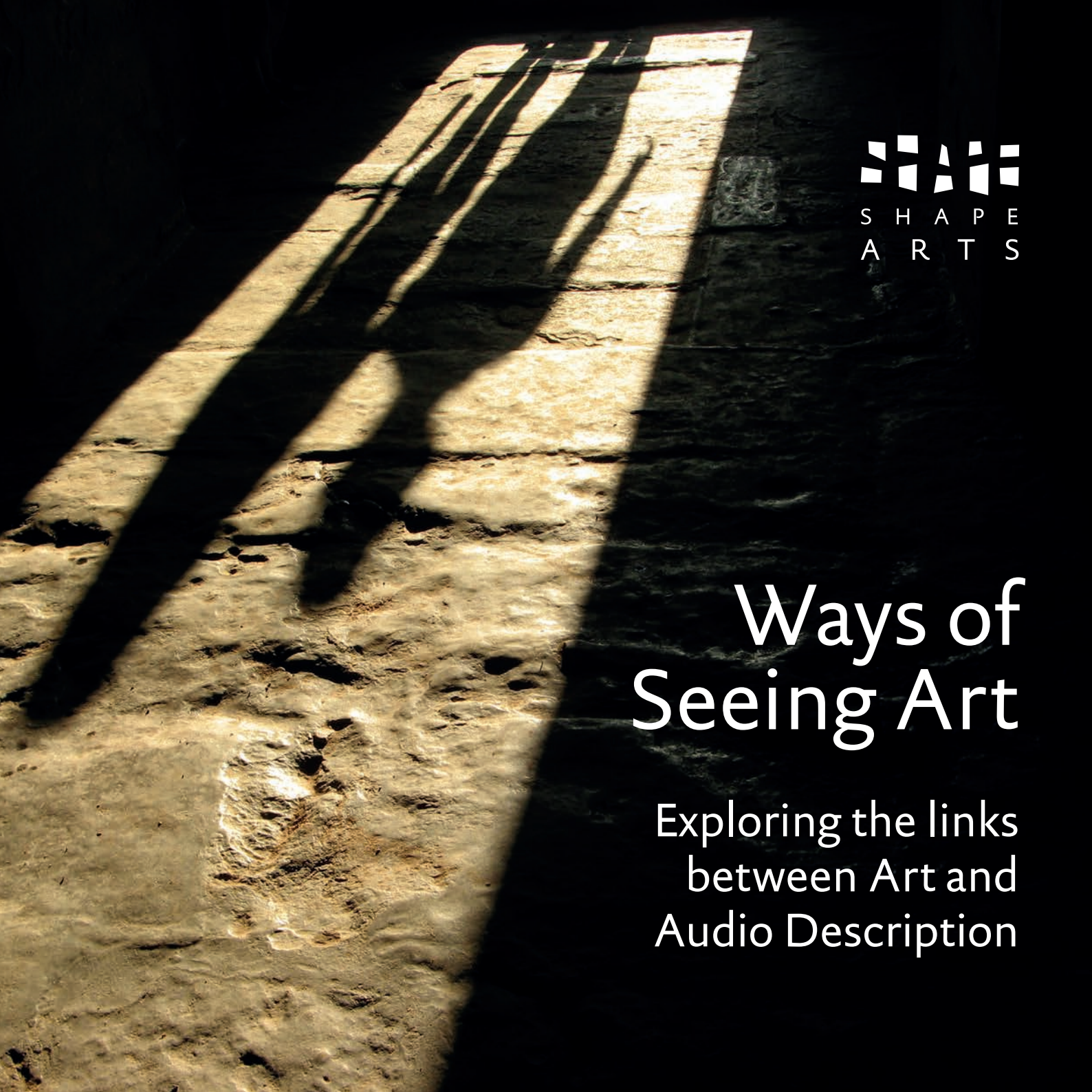

SHAPE ARTS

Ways of Seeing Art

Exploring the links between Art and Audio Description

Ways of Seeing Art:

Exploring the links between Art and Audio Description

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Ways of Seeing Art: Exploring the links between Art and Audio Description

Design: Catherine Quine.

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Introduction

Zoe Partington

In partnership with Tate Exchange, Shape Arts and blind and partially sighted artists, these articles present thought-provoking explorations in audio description and information from professionals in inclusion for blind and partially sighted people to art, culture and heritage. The publication is a celebration of inclusion for all. It is from a unique perspective with an emphasis on blind and partially sighted people. Often the very people we are trying to include can be excluded or neglected from the debates of creative accessibility. This document poses pertinent questions such as, 'who is asking who?' about the impact of audio description on blind and partially sighted people's experiences in museum and galleries. The future of interpretation combined with audio description, we believe, lies with collaboration, featuring a layer of different perspectives with blind and partially sighted people at the centre. The end game is to ensure that audio description can benefit us all and transform the offer in museums and galleries to not only benefit blind and partially sighted people but offer all visitors a new perspective.

As a person with 'sight loss', I challenge the notion of the 'visual' as the only means to connect with art. For centuries, art has been interpreted and explored through other means: words, language, stories, scents and immersive experiences. It is only in more modern times that the visual has over overpowered 'the experience' and has in doing so forced sighted people to be the ones who face a 'loss' of missing

what's in front of you. I would argue blind and partially sighted people 'see' more than sighted people as they connect with the immediate environment around us in a more sensitive and informed way. The notion of 'seeing' is complex and misunderstood. Since losing my sight I have observed and gained more from visual images than when I had sight. I think I took seeing for granted and never actually reflected on what I had seen or observed. In many ways, I was lazy and not in touch with my inner self and the connection or meaning in what I had seen. When you lose your sight, everything becomes an adventure. We hope that these articles provide a snapshot of our intentions to being a catalyst to further debate and experimentation on the journey to 'opening up' art, culture and heritage to all audiences – and that it begins to demystify audio description and its power to embrace and explore what is really in front of us.

1 What is Audio Description?

Zoe Partington

Audio Description is spoken language, either recorded or spoken live, describing visual images or objects for enabling blind and partially sighted audiences to engage and pursue their own journey in theatre and film, and in relation to visual art and sculpture.

Audio Description has been developed over a long period, at least the last 30 years, to a professional level. I'm a keen advocate for audio description ensuring that the development and creative art form doesn't stop – that it continues to develop creatively and in partnership with blind and partially sighted people and professional describers.

Having experienced sight loss I'm concerned primarily about the way I perceive the world around me, and make art work that questions and challenges the stereotypical perspective surrounding the portrayal of disabled people. My own art work and installations are often developed and explored through my experience of sight loss and creative development. I invite the viewer to move into a space of speculation with the pieces I create. I experiment with conventions for viewing and engaging with artworks in my own practice. Such as with my series of photographs capturing portraits of people I've met on my international travels (e.g. through Arts Council England and British Council's Artists' International Development Fund 2015).

I began to engage with the framing of the image and overlaying text with sound and audio files immersed into this. This is a snippet of one of the scripts developed in partnership with audio describer Louise Fryer:

> "Framed as if peeping through a letter box, this colour photo shows a woman's brown eyes gazing to the left. Her dark brows are neat, just below the brim of her slate grey felt hat – presumably the fedora of the title. Its expansive brim fills the upper left quarter of the photo, obscuring a blurred background beyond. From just her eyes it is hard to gauge this white woman's age but she's probably in her 30's. There are fine lines between her brows and on the thin skin below each eye. Our eyes are drawn to hers, as pinpricks of light fleck the black pupils. Fine red blood vessels creep across the whites."

This piece was commissioned as part of an international photography festival called Diffusion Festival, which took place across Cardiff throughout October 2015. My project was entitled, 'Turning It On Its Head', which took the form of text and audio files embedded in the images.

I think that blind and partially sighted artists can provide a slightly different perspective on the visual and dispel myths about 'seeing'. Recently, in a museum in Kawasaki City, Japan, I explained that blind people are fascinated by the visual world – after all, it is around us in our language and everyday interactions and difficult to ignore. The project looked to foreground the perspectives of disabled people in the context of the festival theme, and looked at audio description as an integral part of the work rather than something that was bolted on to aid access.

That is what I, as a disabled person, am constantly campaigning to make – interpretation that is fundamentally creative and can be integrated from the outset rather than becoming an afterthought, and which aids sighted as well as blind and partially sighted audiences. Research has shown that descriptions trigger a memory in the brain that enables you to remember an experience for longer, which must be beneficial. In my experience of

teaching audio description to individuals, it connects the viewer to the visual in a more meaningful way and encourages the viewer to spend a lot more time seeing and engaging with the art work.

The problem with audio description, if you have no experience, is that it can be complex. Visual words are everywhere in our everyday language. This is a problem when delivering audio description– we are so used to using visual terminology to reference everything. It can be quite frustrating when you have sight loss. Particularly with phrases such as, 'you can see in the foreground'. You don't need to exclude words that reference sight, but be careful how you select them. For example, rather than saying, 'as you can see over there', just use, 'in the centre' or 'in the image'.

I feel that a foolish person doesn't listen, and working in this field I can't begin to tell you how many times I've observed professionals in art and culture presume they know 'best' and neglect to involve a blind person in a central role and listen to their perspective. It's wise to listen: you discover more and there is always a time to promote your own interpretation. I'd say leave with an open mind and enter with the intention to listen; don't make assumptions about how blind and partially sighted people approach and experience art. One size does not fit all is the message I give repeatedly.

Often, I do feel it's the messenger who gets the brunt of this in a training or new meeting context, and we must work quite hard sometimes to engage professionals. Disabled people have opinions and perspectives, and these can clash with a sighted person's perspective or a gallery's rules, but often compromise can be made and collaboration take place if each side understands the other's needs. It shouldn't feel like a battle, but at times it can feel like being on the front line.

It's crucial to provide a framework for blind and partially sighted people to have the chance to speak, and for arts professionals to accept that ways of interacting and connecting with art may be different. I hope that the articles in this publication, and the Tate Exchange 'Ways of Seeing Art' events led by Shape Arts provide a forum for blind and partially sighted people to be able to speak, and that we begin to provide an environment where no one has to hide their sight loss. It should not be seen as a person lacking in something, more like having an opportunity to engage differently.

In my work, I have been fortunate to meet many curators and professionals in heritage and contemporary art. Craig Ashley is one of these professionals (currently Director of New Art West Midlands, the contemporary Visual Arts Network for the region). He has said:

> "The barriers for me are around capacity – particularly time and expertise and resources – the affordability of expertise and the means to enable change and adopt new practices/technologies."

Craig is an advocate for creative audio description, and both Craig and I feel that partnerships are the most important part of change happening – and that the facilitating and mediating of this, supporting progress and change, is in the hands of us all.

2 Audio Description: Art or Access?

Louise Fryer

Audio description (AD) is a commentary designed to make images accessible to people who cannot perceive those images themselves, usually because of a visual impairment. It is used in a variety of contexts: theatres, cinemas, broadcast media and also in museums and galleries. The art of description has been likened to poetry as it seeks to replicate the emotional and sensory impact of the original in words, but is AD simply an interpretation or a translation? Can it claim to be an art form in its own right?

This raises many questions, not least "what is art?" alongside "who decides what art is?" Added to this, describers have to grapple with Dr Hannah Thompson's problematic irony that AD is designed to help give blind users independence, yet "blind cinemagoers [or gallery visitors] are reliant on choices made by sighted describers."

In this short contribution, I would like to explore the claim that AD is itself art by probing some of the links between the two.

Grayson Perry (2015) says that what is judged to be "good art" changes over time.

Ernst Gombrich[1] (1995) suggests that the conclusion also depends on the audience. He claims that "what newcomers to art like best are paintings which look real." This emphasis on accuracy and fidelity was also true of description in its early days but in my view it is problematic as no two sighted people will view an artwork in the same way. We are all subject to our own sighted biases. When watching Alfred Hitchcock's film 'Psycho' and its famous shower scene

Tom Sutcliffe [2] (2000) points out: there is always someone looking at the shower fittings. The writer and academic Georgina Kleege [3] (2008), who is herself blind, says: "In medieval art – the untrained eye will see multiple figures in identical poses. The trained eye will see many representations of a single figure at different moments in time." Eye-tracking shows this to be true: the trained eye scans for pattern and form, the untrained eye dwells on recognisable objects.

It is easier for a describer to concentrate on recognisable things because these are things we have words for rather than the aptly-named inexpressible – a movement, a look a gesture for which we lack terminology. This is perhaps why AD started out prioritising fidelity. Yet just as art has moved on, so too has AD. I like to think that the History of AD tracks the History of Art, so, just as Art moved from an emphasis on fidelity and realism – such as Albrecht Durer's hare, to the renaissance interest in rendering an accurate perspective shown by Giotto & Brunelleschi to History painting, Biblical scenes and Victorian narrative painting, AD more recently has come to emphasise the narrative questions: Who? What? Where? When?

But movements in Art are cyclical: the impressionists returned to painting what they saw: Cubists all the more so. Picasso's faces look "wrong" but are an attempt to convey multiple viewpoints simultaneously. This has also been proposed for AD as a way of escaping Hannah's dilemma. Description from multiple viewpoints could be said to lead to greater authenticity because it dilutes subjectivity. If one of those viewpoints belongs to the artist, the curator, or any member of the creative team, it may be deemed more "authentic". Like an artwork created by the hand of the artist rather than one manufactured by an apprentice in his workshop.

Narrative painting is no longer fashionable in art and I think that while narrative questions can be useful in AD, they are not the only element of interest to AD users who are as subject to their own particular interests, fascinations and obsessions as any group of sighted visitors. It is not sufficient just to know what is going on. Prioritising the story means that a description is liable to leave out how that story is expressed. Colours, composition, humour and impact all need either to be conveyed or reflected in the AD.

Art moved on again. The American scholar Arnold Berleant[4] tells us that "Developments in the arts associated with modernism began in the latter part of the nineteenth century … followed by a succession of stylistic innovations that came to a head in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and '70s, a proliferation of artistic practices emerged that trespassed conventional boundaries. Innovative practices gave rise to new perceptual features in the arts, breaking out of the frame of the canvas and extruding from its flat surface, and other such modifications of appreciative experience that discarded the traditional separation of audience and art object. Not only did the arts incorporate new materials and practices; they reached out to incorporate surprising subject-matters. All the arts began to intrude on the formerly safe space of the spectator by demanding active involvement in the appreciative process. Audience participation became overt and necessary for the fulfilment of the arts… The traditional separation between the sequestered, contemplative experience of art and the world of ordinary experience was deliberately breached."

If we're thinking about AD as Art we need to prioritise the "how" over the "what". Describers need to leave fidelity & representationalism behind as we jump forwards on our artistic journey to abstract expressionism. With

Macular degeneration Georgina Kleege gets very close to a painting so "every painting even the most representational becomes an abstraction." "Paint is paint," she says, "But paint is also the point. Looking at a work of art is seldom simply a matter of identifying the objects or people depicted there."[5] (1999:94)

Grayson Perry says "Our job as artists is discriminating, whether between colours and forms and materials, or ideas, artists and eras."[6]

The job of describers is very similar, our tools are words, syntax and vocal expression. We should guard against being 'indifferent to the distinction between things. AD is about choosing and juxtaposing words. Anne Rooney, Professor of Creative Writing at Reading University put it this way: "it's not clever to choose an unusual word. It's clever to use ordinary words in a new way". She also talks about impact, describing it as "an emergent property. It comes from making words spark off each other, producing more than the sum of their parts by drawing on all they have going for them – associations, connotations, their sound, the way they feel as you say them" It is this, I believe that makes AD more than information, that gives it the potential to be art.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary online, the definition of art has changed overtime. From the 1300s it was considered to be "skill; its display application or expression". By the 1600s it had become "The expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. I advocate that AD, too should focus on conveying beauty and emotional power to convey a sense of wonder and

awe. Psychologists Keltner and Haidt[7] (2003) argue that awe-eliciting stimuli are characterised by two features: perceptual vastness and the need for accommodation. What is critical is that the stimulus dramatically expands the observer's usual frame of reference in some dimension or domain"

Artist and designer, Olafur Eliasson, claims that Art has the power to change the world: "One of the great challenges today is that we often feel untouched by the problems of others and by global issues like climate change, even when we could easily do something to help. We do not feel strongly enough that we are part of a global community, part of a larger we. Giving people access to data most often leaves them feeling overwhelmed and disconnected, not empowered and poised for action. This is where art can make a difference. Art does not show people what to do, yet engaging with a good work of art can connect you to your senses, body, and mind. It can make the world felt."[8]

Surely it is the work of audio describers to help our audience connect, to feel part of the larger "we"?

Finally, Grayson Perry proposes that artists are always questioning and worrying about what they are doing. In my experience, so too are describers. Here if nowhere else is where the parallel between Art and AD is to be found.

Notes:

1 Gombrich, Ernst Hans, and E. H. Gombrich. The story of art. Vol. 12. London: Phaidon, 1995.

2 Sutcliffe, Tom. Watching. Faber & Faber, 2000.

3 Kleege, Georgina. (2008) "Blind Imagination: Pictures into Words." Southwest Review 93.2 227-239.

4 Berleant, Arnold. "What is Aesthetic Engagement?" Contemporary Aesthetics 11.1 (2013): 5.

5 Kleege, Georgina. Sight unseen. Yale University Press, 1999.

6 Perry, Grayson. Playing to the Gallery: Helping Contemporary Art in Its Struggle to be Understood. Penguin, 2015.

7 Keltner, Dacher, and Jonathan Haidt. "Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion." Cognition & emotion 17.2 (2003): 297-314.

8 Eliasson, Olafur (2016 http://olafureliasson.net/archive/read/MDA117961/why-art-has-the-power-to-change-the-world [Accessed 23 January 2017]

3 Creative Audio Description

Lynn Cox

Creative artistic audio description is key to bringing either old masters or contemporary installations to life for visually impaired visitors.

How often, as a visually impaired artist, business woman, runner and mother (who is juggling half a dozen tasks), have I gone to a specific descriptive tour of an exhibition and wasted half a day because the audio describer doesn't know anything about the 'Why' of the composition, or the processes behind the creation of the work. Often poor artistic audio describers will concentrate on the historical context, the artist's biography and how the artwork appears on a superficial level – most of this information I can now get from the internet without going into the gallery.

What I want from an audio describer is the initial sense of the artwork, the overall composition, how the eye is drawn towards different elements, how the brush strokes were applied and the effect from using that technique, which materials were used and how that affects the understanding of the artwork, etc.

So what can artists, galleries and museums do to invigorate the imagination of their visually impaired visitors?

Less is More!

One of the worst examples of artistic audio description I've come across was at a major British gallery about 15 years ago. There was an exhibition of Mondrian paintings, which were abstract, consisting of different coloured blocks and diagonal intervening stripes. Accepted that these types of

artworks are hard to describe, but you don't spend 20 minutes describing top right down to bottom left, without first saying what the initial impression of the artwork is on the senses. And to be honest, after 20 minutes you don't want to hear another description of an artwork again.

Lesson to be learnt: that sometimes a shorter more energised description from someone that isn't trying to be precise about the description, but is trying to convey the feelings of the artwork are more appropriate. This is where audio description of artworks may vary from audio description of theatre and TV. I believe that some audio interpretation can be used in this context.

Choose Your Describer Carefully

Whilst on the Board and as Vice Chair of the Audio Description Association (ADA), I discovered that most describers come from a theatre background. Some have gone into describing artistic and museum objects with varying degrees of descriptive artistic success.

I've often trained curators, artists and arts enthusiasts in descriptive and touch techniques, and know that you can usually tell within 30 seconds if someone can make a good describer of artworks. It is hard to define the qualities – like a good wine, you know when you have hit the jackpot. It partly consists of having a overall view, an ability to use interesting language, noticing the minute subtle elements and always conveying the why and how and not concentrating solely on the what.

There are also trained audio describers available with an arts background who would have the knowledge and understanding to describe artworks both

from a clear descriptive practice and from the arts side. However, not many of these audio describers seem to be acknowledged; often organisations stay with who they know rather than thinking about the quality of the service they are offering to their visually impaired visitors.

Lesson to be learnt: get a variety of audio describers for different artistic styles; get some new blood in there!

Visually Impaired Artists Doing it Themselves

A number of visually impaired artists use audio description within their own practice. They absolutely understand the necessity of making the artworks accessible; understanding the process, use of materials, composition etc and can articulate this to their audience.

Whilst constructing my own large wall drawings (made with pinned ropes, tapes and other materials), I create them as a performance piece where audio description is part of the process. This means the creation of the drawings is the actual artwork and the remnant is the wall drawing itself. The audio description I perform whilst pinning/taping images of movement (e.g. runners or cyclists), concentrates on how and why I'm creating the artwork. How I try to get the most movement with the minimum of lines/pins on the rope. Why movement is important to the drawings and my practice. Why I've chosen certain materials. Why my construction process is unusual because of my sight loss. How I calculate the angles, length of lines to make the drawings. Why I don't make realistic interpretations but strive to capture the essense of the artwork.

Collaboration is Key!

In 2009 I worked with an artist who was a trained audio describer on the Natural History Museum's World Wildlife Photographer of the Year audio description. This consisted of a gallery description and 30 of the photographs being described. We collaborated on all elements of the description; this involved us navigating together around the gallery and created the description, then my collaborator worked on draft descriptions of the photographs and I contributed to these final descriptions in a small way, maybe just bringing them into focus, or using a few more dymanic words, asking for some assumptions to be explained in the description. This was a very rewarding project as I felt as if the visually impaired visitors were being represented with the creation of the description rather than having something created as a 'fait accompli'.

I also worked with an autistic artist in Brighton in 2011, where we created the audio description between us. Again, she was extremely aware of her artwork, but the description was born of our dialogue: I came in to question, sometimes to simplify or expand points and create a cohesive overall impression.

Lesson to be learnt: more profound descriptions are created with the diversity of the people working together. Create it with us and not for us!

Creative Audio Description, Interpretation and Narration

Within the visual arts, we are lucky that creative approaches can be utilised. When describing for theatre or TV, it is essential that the pure audio description is used; however, when describing artworks (especially contemporary work) a creative approach that also utilises elements of audio interpretation and narration can be welcomed.

We all interpret art: that is its purpose. So, by removing audio interpretation the whole understanding of the artwork is lost. Audio interpretation (suggestions, questions and feelings) can all help the visually impaired visitor to have a more interactive experience and bring them out of the role of passive listener.

Audio narration can also bring the artworks to life for visually impaired visitors by giving some of the context behind the artworks. This is especially useful when it is the artist themselves giving the audience the privilege of observing their own thought patterns.

Why Not be Creative with Audio Description?

As the population ages and more people become visually impaired, it is up to galleries/museums and artists to offer exciting new ways of audio describing their artworks. Thinking of what they are offering, why, who to, by whom, how it can be different; can touch be utilised, can artworks be commissioned that have audio description intrinsic to the artwork itself, etc.

Many questions to be had. Let's watch this space.

4 The Art of Exploring

Liz Porter

Whenever I walk into an art gallery or a museum, or go around a castle or a sculpture trail, I always get the urge to play. If an exhibition has been described or I've had a chance to touch objects that's great – of course I'm interested in the artistic or historic perspective, but the urge to play is usually bigger. My mind races thinking about how I might engage, either alone or in a group. I start dreaming about the kind of things I might do:

What if you could bring statues or objects to life through imagined conversations? What if you could recreate their shapes with your body, even become them for a day? What do they sound like? And so on.

What if a creative response is used to back an artistic intention, or woven into the fabric of a historic trail as part of an audio description guide? It's rare for this to happen … but when it does, I'm hooked.

How does your life story influence how you respond? At the "Audio Description: Art of Access" conference held at Royal Holloway University in October 2016, acclaimed audio describer Louise Fryer said in her keynote speech, "It's not enough to just say what you see, we are all different" – an accurate statement that is subject to artistic scrutiny and real consideration when choosing the language of audio description in the art of painting with words, across all art forms.

But what if we turn the sentence around in the art of exploring from a creative response? I would suggest it's totally acceptable and relevant to say what you see; say what you feel or hear; to engage through touch and smell;

to interact with art forms from a purely subjective and open ended multi-sensory creative response.

We are, indeed, all different and that's where it becomes incredibly exciting. Whether we are sighted, blind or partially sighted, D/deaf, disabled or non-disabled; whatever our gender, age, cultural background, faith or sexual orientation, our life experience defines our identity and presents us with infinite opportunities to creatively play and engage with art, exploring each 'story' from our own perspective. I say 'story' because I think each piece of art, object, sculpture or building has its own story. We enable those stories to be unlocked through our creativity. Our life experience influences this process.

Nothing I've said here is new. None of us needs to reinvent the wheel. Over the years there have been many excellent leading practitioners within our sector developing quality projects and learning resources, such as, "Every object tells a story"[1] or "Every picture tells a story"[2].

Books like James Mayhew's "Katie and the Impressionists" (part of the author's 'Katie' series), in which a little girl jumps inside a Claude Monet painting, allow the reader's imagination to run wild.

There are many leading visually impaired practitioners instigating adaptive descriptive techniques; for example, Rebecca McGuinness, whose work developing verbal imaging tours with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York opened up a whole plethora of wonderful initiatives after her presentation at the 'In Touch with Art' conference, and Marcus Weisen, a respected, passionate advocate who has contributed so much to museum

access through his support of the involvement of blind and partially sighted professionals and the valuable contribution they bring to the table.

In our busy work lives, it's easy to forget these fabulous resources that are there to inspire us. Instead, we think we need to try something different. But we don't need to work that hard, we just need to have a go; we need to play and put our own twist on things; we need to encourage colleagues and audiences to go beyond the literal experience to the imagined one. You don't have to lose the integrity behind the art or the history. This can be incorporated or explored either in different sessions or alongside. We must not be afraid to take risks or make mistakes and involve blind and partially sighted people as equal partners within this process.

So what have I done? My background is in performance storytelling and drama. In recent years I've also been working as a project manager in heritage settings. I understand the importance of combining practical access with interpretation or creative interventions. I enjoy weaving traditional stories and songs into object handling sessions, encouraging others to make their own stories in response – an object can be anything! I try to find stories that I can use to highlight relevant information. Drama and life experience will often find their way into my sessions too. I'm experienced in helping others to develop creative trails and to 'play'.

I've been fortunate to work on some great projects. One favourite a few years ago was with Pallant House in Chichester when I worked with an illustrator providing interactive verbal imaging and interactive story making sessions in response to a Mervyn Peake exhibition. Oh joy! A room filled with a world of Grimm fairytales all waiting to be explored. One of the pictures was an

interpretation of the classic story "One Eyes, Two Eyes and Three Eyes". Not only did this present an opportunity to tell the story and encourage any kind of creative response (visual or verbal), but it also encouraged the Hans Frobisher group from Outside In [3] to think about any disability messages within the exhibition. Some fantastic poetry and creative writing emerged.

Another memorable moment was working at The Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne with audio describer Lonny Evans, staff, and an inclusive group of young people to develop audio descriptions for four pieces from their Eric Ravillious collection. Two of the participants were visually impaired and staff worked collaboratively with each young person to write descriptions that included creative responses. It was important for me that visually impaired young people took part. I knew the descriptive writing would be different but just as engaging. I was not surprised that one visually impaired person wanted sound to convey a moving train in the background and this led to a discussion about where the train was going and who was on it. It was an empowering experience for everyone involved.

One partially sighted participant said, "Taking part in the Towner's audio description project suddenly made the visual arts accessible to me in a way that I never thought would be possible. It's one thing to have someone you trust patiently describe what they see to the best of their ability, and a much better thing entirely to be able to sit down with an organised, comprehensive description and listen to it as many times as you wish. The Towner audio description project has done so much for my confidence! Talking about my barriers to the visual arts and actively working to overcome them has made me so much more comfortable in artistic environments now."

I'm most proud of the work I have done with Lewes Castle. My relationship began several years ago when I was a storyteller in residence. I worked with four local schools and group of adults with learning difficulties and visual impairments. Amongst other material I used the story of the 'Blacksmith and the Tailor', with artefact handling. We created our own stories, imagining what it was like to have one of the jobs in the story. This moved on to a bit of forum-style work, imagining what the characters might say and feel, using drama improvisations.

Each school produced a promenade performance. The children made incredible models of the castle and took the work back to their own sites. On introducing them to our site I had incorporated an element of verbal imaging and touch. The group worked together to describe their journey around the site from their own experience. I then worked with castle staff to create some 'story boxes'.

A few years on, we are now in the middle of a major RNIB project "Sensing Culture", developing character-driven descriptive tours in which historical figures from the past will guide our visitors around the site. Sound artist Joseph Young will create a soundscape to bring the castle to life through story, song, sound re-enactment and interviews. A dedicated group of volunteers have made beautiful objects to go with the stories I selected. Alongside this we have developed access hours and multi-sensory activities. Through focus groups, blind and partially sighted people are an active voice in this project and I'm quite certain that the education team will find ways to encourage all visitors to contribute their own creative response.

Key to the success of this project is co-curation and a longstanding relationship. This has built excellent trust between us all. In developing new initiatives we are able to take risks and try out new things. Weaving historical information creatively into the audio guide has been a learning curve for all and it has given us room to try something a bit different.

I encourage you to let your imaginations run wild; what if we all worked together? Bring it on!

Notes:

1 www.everyobjecttellsastory.org.uk/teachers/teachers.php

2 www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/teachers/school-tours/every-picture-tells-a-story.html

3 Founded by Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, in 2006, Outside In provides a platform for artists who see themselves as facing barriers to the art world due to health, disability, social circumstance or isolation.

5 Why I Don't Visit Museums

Mel Griffiths

Imagine the scenario: you're on holiday or spending time with friends or family and are looking for something to do. Someone then says, "I know, let's go to a museum". Great idea, a chance to see something interesting, to learn something, to be shocked or amazed, the possibilities are endless. Not for me though. Personally, with very few exceptions, I would give the museum a swerve in favour of just about anything else. I've even been known to sit in a café and people watch whilst others in my party visit a museum!

For me, going around a museum is a very passive experience if there is nothing on display which can be handled. I'm not very good at being read to for long periods of time and I often find my mind wandering to other things, particularly when there are other people around me having different conversations. I'm just too nosy! When I was a child, my father used to take time to meticulously describe everything we saw, which was fantastic of him, but without anything to refer to that I could relate to, it was difficult to maintain an enthusiastic and interested face! Having never had good sight, it is difficult to listen to descriptions and relate to things that I have seen, so often descriptions hold very little relevance for me.

I even struggle sometimes at those museums where there is an audio commentary to listen to whilst walking around, if there is nothing that I can directly experience myself. Don't get me wrong, audio description is a wonderful addition and should only be applauded, but it's still a passive experience. Sometimes I feel, however, that having a nice quiet place to sit and listen to it would be preferable to traipsing round an exhibition and standing in front of things that might as well be in another room.

Everything is not lost though, and as well as some very negative experiences I have had some positive ones too. Three stand out in my mind and I will describe them briefly.

In 2007 I visited Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. I went mainly to tour the gardens, which I enjoy, but decided to tag along with the rest of my group and walk round the house. Each room had a volunteer whose job was to tell you about the contents and history of that room. They were very knowledgeable people who were more than happy to answer questions. The real deal breaker for me, though, was the fact that most of the furniture, and even the tableware and soft furnishings were replicas, which meant that they could be touched. This meant that I could get a real feel for the size and splendour of the rooms. There was plenty of written information as well which was read to me, but along with the experiences I had, this served, as it would for any other visitor, to teach me more about the house in its heyday when Queen Victoria lived there.

In the early eighties, I visited the Natural History Museum in London, as they had an exhibition for blind and partially sighted people. This was excellent as everything was there to be touched. I left that exhibition with the lasting memory of what a mole hill is like as they had re-constructed a cross-section of one, which I found fascinating, even down to the moles that could be found in its tunnels. I also learnt that day how large a full grown badger is: they're a lot bigger than I imagined they would be! I also left, however, with the knowledge that this exhibition had barely even scratched the surface of what is available in the museum as a whole.

In the mid-nineties, I visited Lincoln and whilst we were there, we went to the cathedral to have a look. At the time, they were carrying out some renovations and we stumbled upon a small exhibition about these renovations, with examples of the materials, stonework, glass, wood etc. that they were using. These were all laid out on a large table and each one, as well as the printed information, had the same information in Braille. I was fascinated and loved the fact that I could walk around the table independently, taking as much or as little time with each exhibit as I wished, while my friends enjoyed the cathedral and the exhibition in their own time. That to me was a very empowering experience which has stayed with me, even though the exhibition itself was comparatively small.

In the future, I would hope that 3D printing might be a way for blind and partially sighted people to get a real feel for what exhibits are like. I am hoping that this technology will be more widely used as surely the price can only come down as it becomes more available. Some would argue that a replica should look and feel exactly like the original item, which has often been the reason why such replicas are not reproduced. I would dispute this to a certain extent. A replica item merely serves as a starting point, a bit like a template from which the detail can be attached by way of the descriptions which are available for all exhibits.

Another argument against using replicas is that they must be the same size as the original, and would therefore be far too difficult to house in museums with limited space. Once again, I disagree with this. Scale models can be very useful, particularly for something that is too large to feel around in terms of how easy it is to reach. Once the shape of an object has been discovered, it is easy to relate this to a larger size.

In conclusion, the thing that will draw me into a museum over everything else is a more hands-on or interactive experience. Audio description and Braille are fantastic but they are only part of the experience. Not providing anything that can be touched, for a blind person is akin to having a room full of information without any exhibits for a sighted person to look at.

6 Using Audio and Technology for Access

Shelley Boden

I am passionate about access and about museums and galleries, and have worked with disabled people to explore and audit exhibitions, websites and apps for the last 25 years. It's been a time of massive change and technology has finally caught up with what users need – magnifiers and screen readers are now built into smart phones and tablets, so we all have the potential to view content in formats that suit our own needs. Technology should work for blind and partially sighted (BPS) visitors in an easy, logical and enjoyable way.

Museums are developing a better understanding of the need for access, but could still do more for the BPS audience – we just need to experiment some more. Over the years I've tried out lots of ideas for increasing access – some have been successful and others haven't worked at all – but I've learnt a lot from both and want to share the benefits of trying things out. You just need an inclusive approach and understanding of what your BPS audience wants.

Technologically we are in the best position we have ever been to inspire BPS visitors with text, touch and sound. Museums are more open to creative ways of connecting people to their objects and stories. BPS audiences are creating content and advising organisations of what does/not work for them.

So how can you use audio and technology to improve your project and to reach your BPS visitors?

Listen to your audience

Understand what your BPS audience wants and who the audience is. Find out what they like and what they want by talking to them. Link up with local

BPS groups and involve them in your plans – they could become your best advocates and advisors.

Talk to the venue

Museums will vary in their experience of using audio and technology, and in their budgets. Some are using apps and iBeacons to create trails for visitors to serve up content on their devices when near certain objects, or introducing touch tables and immersive soundscapes to change what we expect from a museum visit. Others haven't started yet.

So to start with, establish what the budget is and what they are trying to achieve. What are they already doing with technology and other material that you could re-use? You could rethink and adapt what they're currently doing so that it is better for BPS visitors. Crucially, how will the organisation make your BPS project obvious to your audience? There's no point in producing amazing accessible material unless people know what you've got.

Get started

For an audio project, plot out all the elements you want to produce and work out how they can be supported by more 'traditional' BPS interpretation such as Braille, large format handouts and handling objects – combining elements will have the most impact, and mean that the visitor can choose what suits them, or just dip in and out of a few.

Get inspired

Get inspired by what other people are doing for general as well as BPS audiences, and work out how can you adapt ideas to fit your own project (where there might be smaller audiences, reach and budget) e.g.:

Sonic Paintings http://sonicpaintings.com – a Dutch company who produce "installations that create interactive soundscapes to bring to life a story in a painting", using multiple layers of audio: music, conversation, information about the painter and events.

Soundscapes https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/whats-on/soundscapes – a past exhibition at the National Gallery who "commissioned musicians and sound artists to select a painting and compose a new piece of music or sound art in response". Not specifically for BPS visitors, but I liked that visitors might 'feel' the paintings and 'see' the sound.

Simple audio ideas

I've tried to increase access using audio in different ways. I think of audio description as combining sound effects, audio, description, music and points of view to bring stories to life, e.g. I've used audio:

Within an exhibition – the use of the RNIB PenFriend to play sound effects and audio description within the 'Into the Blue' exhibition at Hove Museum.

As part of creative sessions for BPS families – sharing audio descriptions and music during gallery tours for BPS children at the Wallace Collection.

Combined with tablets and smart phones in photography session for BPS youngsters – running a 'Sensory Photography' session at Hove Museum and Art Gallery, where BPS young people used tablets and digital cameras to capture and share their experience of being in the galleries.

Using Audio in an Exhibition

I used the RNIB PenFriend (an audio recording/labelling tool) as a way of playing audio within the temporary 'Into the Blue' exhibition. Although its intended use is as a labelling tool for BPS personal use, it is increasingly being used within the sector as an audio recording and playback device as it is relatively cheap, reusable, and doesn't rely on suppliers to make any changes (you can re-record audio yourselves).

We renamed the PenFriends as 'sound explorers' and gave exhibition visitors a sound explorer and card with dots on that played sound effects when touched by the PenFriend. Within the exhibition there were more dots on posts which played sound effects and revealed more information about the objects – so visitors could play an audio 'pairs' matching game. The sound effects were very popular, bringing objects to life for BPS children:

"It's brilliant! I love it Mum!" – Louisha; playing the rumble of a volcano for the first time.

Handling objects were used to enhance the audio (and vice versa), and we created large format and Braille handouts. We used large banners to advertise the sound explorers, and trained staff in how to use them, hand out and recharge batteries.

As audio designer for the exhibition I was involved in planning meetings from start to finish – the overall schedule for the narrative, supplementary material, script writing, recording and placement in galleries was 8 weeks. The budget for creating the audio, promoting it within the museum and creating handouts broke down as follows:

Overall co-ordination (including liaison with access groups, planning, management)	£1,500
Project support (managing print)	£500
Handling objects	£500
Braille x 5 (instructions card; handout, in posts)	£500
Audio, recording, script etc.	£500
Marketing / board in reception (£120 design; materials £50; printing £150)	£320
Instructions card x 10 (£120 design; materials, shapes, £180)	£300
Logo	£150
Large format handouts x 5 (£120 design; £50 materials)	£170
Post redesign	£100
Total	£4540

I love museums and galleries and all their stories and objects, and we can open them up for BPS visitors if we take some risks. Just try out your ideas – they don't have to be perfect but you will have started something. You never know, you might inspire a life-long love of museums in one of your BPS visitors – I can't think of a better reason for trying.

7 Thoughts on Description and Art

Aaron McPeake

Georgina Kleege defined audio description as, "… the process of translating visual information into words for people who are blind or have low vision."[1] This access provision has become commonplace in recent years in cinemas, television broadcasts, theatres and museums. However, there has been an ongoing debate surrounding the nature of what description is, or should be. In most museums the convention of description techniques is one where the describer (writer) and narrator (speaker) attempt to deliver a measure of objectivity, neutrality delivered with a self-effacing voice about an artwork or production.[2] In the context of artworks the idea of objectivity and describing 'what is observed' is particularly problematic, as many artists and scholars would argue that there could never be actual objectivity in such subjective situations.[3]

I have come to take the view that we might become better informed if we were to consider the subject of description in light of what an artwork does, rather what it is. Having been only an occasional user of description services in museums and galleries, preferring to ask questions and discuss works with friends who accompany me, my thinking about this issue has developed over through a project that made artworks through the use of spoken and gestured description.

Over the past few years I have been engaged in a collaborative painting project with the notable painter, Stephen Farthing RA. Due to an autoimmune illness I now have very low visual acuity, seeing in detail at two metres what an averagely sighted person sees at 60 metres and stopped painting over a decade ago as a result. With this is mind, Stephen asked me

if I would like to paint, and my response was that I would, but it was not possible as my vision prohibited me from executing accurate mark making. Stephen's proposition was, "If you like, I will paint the paintings that you want to paint, you describe the pictures and I will paint them. We can start on Tuesday". This work was of interest to him as he had been writing about the nature of drawing, making the case that drawings were actually examples of 'modelling thought'.

As I was taken by surprise, I had to quickly think of a subject for this series of paintings, something I could be confident about being able to describe. My choice was to refer to my memories, the kinds of memories that comprise of a clear image or picture that does not change over time. For example, childhood memories of a beach holiday where the landscape always fills the frame in a particular way and people always occupy the same position such as: your mother is in the lower right portion of the image. These are sometimes referred to as eidetic memories and in my case there seem to be rather a lot of them to draw upon.

The first painting we embarked upon was of a view of the sandy beach at Calais seen through the window of a small bungalow. Initially the descriptions began by framing the elements of the picture onto an imaginary grid, then these would be drawn onto paper. In the course of our conversations the details of the pictures were established through a series of statements, questions and answers. We found ourselves using a lot of similes that related to architectural objects, places, scenes from films and artworks or even weather conditions to describe the scene. "The window was salt-stained, like the residue left on the walls of a vase, only whiter" or, "although the sky was blue it was greyed out very slightly by a fine sea mist, like a Sugimoto

picture, where there is both sharpness and haze". Though the process was technical in nature in that it was concerned with making pictures with paint, our language was not instructive as would be used by technical teachers, e.g. for machine operation, driving or surgery. It was much more general, with the emphasis being on exchanges that could tease out and build equivalents of descriptions that resonated with us both. The exchange of similes I mentioned earlier was not about the art object, or it's making, but references to elements that would combine to form the picture. There was not a single voice describing things here but two voices, continually changing and offering nuanced alternatives to mediate description.

As a result of making this work I have come to the view that audio description does provide a useful service for those with low or no visual acuity. However, such descriptions are often monolithic accounts, missing the opportunity for alternative messages to be delivered and received. When we encounter an artwork, we quickly flash through a host of referents in our mind's eye in order to make sense of it, and when we discuss artworks with others we experience some aspects of their personal archives. As different mediums generate different responses might this not enhance the case for an option of a number of voices with different views, combining to generate descriptions?

Notes:

1 Kleege, G. (2013) Audio Description as a Pedagogical Tool. Disability Studies Quarterly, Volume 35, Number 2. [Internet] Available from: http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4622/3945 [Accessed 24 January 2017]

2 Clarke, J. (2001) Standard Techniques in Audio Description [Internet] Available from: http://joeclark.org/access/description/ad-principles.html [Accessed 25 January 2017]

3 Kleege cites the following examples: Andrew Holland, "Audio Description in the Theatre and the Visual Arts: Images into Words," in Audiovisual Translation: Language Transfer on Screen, edited by G. Andermann and J. Díaz-Cinta (Basingtoke: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2009), 170-185; Katie O'Reilly, "A Playwright Reflects on 'Alternative Dramaturgies'," Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance 14, no. 1 (2009): 31-35; John-Patrick Udo and Deborah I. Fels, "The Rogue Poster-Children of Universal Design: Closed Captioning and Audio Description," Journal of Engineering Design 21, no. 2-3 (2010): 207-221.

Notes on contributors

Shelley Boden has been an access consultant for 25 years, specialising in interpretation within the museum and gallery sector. She works with disabled people to explore the whole access journey, user testing websites, apps and exhibitions – and is especially keen on making technology work for blind and partially sighted visitors.

Lynn Cox is an interdisciplinary artist and recipient of the 2013 Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship. She is a mentor and artist. A recurring theme of 'The Power of Darkness' is the basis for her artistic and coaching/training explorations.

Dr Louise Fryer has been an audio describer since 1993 and teaches Audio Description at University College London. Her book "An introduction to Audio Description: A Practical Guide" is published by Routledge.

Mel Griffiths is passionate about equality and advocating on behalf of other blind and partially sighted people. She lives in Nottingham with her husband and guide dog.

Dr Aaron McPeake is an artist who works in a wide variety of media, from cast bell-bronze sound sculpture, to drawing, painting and filmmaking. He has practised and exhibited widely, both nationally and internationally. Questions surrounding sensory encounter have been central to his work.

Zoe Partington is an independent artist, as well as creative consultant and trainer for the cultural sector. She is an international advisor and trainer, working with museums and galleries to develop their skills and experience for meeting the needs of disabled visitors.

Liz Porter has worked in the creative industries for over 20 years. With a background in performance storytelling, arts and heritage management, and access consultancy, she is experienced in developing inclusive co-curated projects and encouraging creative interventions within interpretation.

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About Shape Arts

Shape is a disability-led arts organisation working to improve access to the arts for disabled people. For 40 years we have been working with cultural organisations, artists and audiences to develop disabled artists' careers, help organisations become more welcoming to disabled people, and enable more diverse groups of people to participate in the arts. Shape is based in Camden, London, and works nationally and internationally.

For enquires please contact:

020 724 7330

info@shapearts.org.uk

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