

# Close Your Eyes and Open Your Mind: A Practice-Based Experiment in Cultural Mediation for People with Visual Impairment

Dr. Claire Dubois<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Julien Moreau<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sophie Lambert<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Antoine Girard<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Camille Renault<sup>3</sup>, Dr. Luc Martin<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sorbonne University, Department of Cultural Studies and Inclusive Arts, Paris, France

## Introduction

In the past decade, UNESCO recommendations (2005) and the UN convention (2006) have officially set the link between disability and museums access, asserting the right to all people to fully participate to the cultural life<sup>1</sup>. Museum studies, by claiming the important role of the museum as a mediator in the society and reflecting on the changing meaning of the “public”<sup>2</sup>, stress the importance to experiment (and integrate) participatory and inclusive methods to provide equal opportunities to all people and, therefore, to contribute to social inclusion<sup>3 4 5 6</sup>.

However, for people with visual impairments, full accessibility to museums is in most cases severely restricted, if not completely precluded. The European Blind Union found that according to 82,5% of its national member organisations, the cultural rights of blind and partially sighted people are being poorly or very poorly implemented<sup>7</sup>.

The problem is even more acute among museums active in the conservation and enhancement of the visual arts, whose heritage has traditionally intrinsic specificities such that the immediacy of their use is impossible or extremely difficult for the blind and visually

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006, United Nation approved the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with the aim “to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”. Article 30 of that convention explicitly refers to the commitment and measures that Member States must take to promote equal participation for people with a disability in social and cultural life.

<sup>2</sup> Scarpati, Dario. The democratic museum – accessibility as a stimulus for social inclusion, in: Proceedings of the COME-IN!-Thematic Conferences. Presented at the The inclusive museum - Challenges and Solutions, State of the Art and Perspectives, Erfurt, Germany, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Bowler, Shaun, Todd Donovan and Robert Hanneman. Art for Democracy’s Sake? Group Membership and Political Engagement in Europe, in *Journal of Politics*, 65(4), 2003, pp. 1111–1129.

<sup>4</sup> Matarasso, François. USE OR ORNAMENT? The social impact of participation in the arts. 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Milano, Cristina Da. Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion. 6. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Moroni, Isabelle and Gaëlle Bianco. *Les espaces de la participation culturelle. Enjeux et perspectives d’action*. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> EBU, European Blind Union. *Access to Culture Survey 2012 ‘Mapping Current Levels of Accessibility to Cultural Venues and Activities in Europe.’* Summary Report, 2012, p.5.

impaired. There are many museums that offer a certain degree of accessibility to their structures (information, orientation), but very few are able to make their assets available in a complete form (artistic experience) even to people with visual disabilities.

The project “Museum Culture Inclusion. Art museums and visual disabilities: equal opportunities in the cultural life of Southern Switzerland” was initiated in 2015 by the Laboratory of Visual Culture (SUPSI) and the Association for the blind and visually impaired of the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland (Unitas) with the goal to identify scalable solutions, capable of making cultural institutions accessible to people with visual disabilities, thus promoting free access to the world of culture and art. During its first 4 years the project has involved all 9 art museums of Southern Switzerland and has conceived, organized and assessed 10 inclusive activities of cultural mediation in order to better convey the meaning of the museums’ collections to people with visual impairment.

This article presents the results of an inclusive participatory workshop hosted at the Vincenzo Vela Museum (Ligornetto, Switzerland), which aims at making the collection of 19th century sculptures and paintings accessible to all. The workshop was guided by the following questions:

1. Can blind and partially sighted people exploit other sensory resources such as hearing to create mental images, even without any visual references?
2. Is it possible to make a work of art “visible” to people with visual impairments through the use of language and narrative descriptions?
3. If the answer is yes, which works are most accessible through language?
4. What information and content should be favored in constructing the account?
5. Which aids should be used to effectively convey descriptions to people with visual impairments?

After exploring the accessibility of the collection from a museological perspective and from existing practices and studies related to the adoption of inclusive design models toward people with visual impairments, this article adopts a socio-psychological perspective to stress the importance of having access to practical indications as a fundamental mechanism for successfully promoting the accessibility of art collections, and therefore fulfilling the museum’s wider mission.

The Construal Level Theory<sup>8</sup> is used to frame the discussion on how the fruition of artworks could be practically enhanced and, therefore implemented, by the institution. If the link between the accessibility of the collection and social inclusion in more abstract terms is needed, a changing organizational and practice-based perspective make it possible to achieve the expected results.

## State of the art

### Museum accessibility

In line with recent international recommendation, museums are required to evolve in their role of mediators, extending their tasks and activities in order to make their collection accessible to a wider public and to guarantee equal opportunities to all people<sup>9 10</sup>.

Making one's collection available to humanity and future generations is a key notion in the very definition of museum itself<sup>11 12</sup>. What has changed instead and determined a renegotiation of the meaning of museum is the concept of the *public*. For years the “cultural audience” has been categorized as a dominant, wealthy and well-educated class<sup>13</sup>, and said view, albeit outdated from a conceptual point of view, is still rooted in contemporary Swiss society<sup>14</sup>. Nowadays when we talk of “the public” of culture we refer to the pool of actual and potential visitors the museum addresses<sup>15</sup>. It would therefore seem more appropriate that the term should be used in its plural form, and encompass multiple types of visitors with specific needs (children, students, adults, the disabled, foreigners, etc. among them) who are an integral part of society but who may not necessarily take part in museum life. In more

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<sup>8</sup> Trope, Yaacov and Nira Liberman. Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance. *Psychological Review*, 117(2), 2010, pp. 440–463.

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO. *Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society*. Presented at the General Conference at its 38th Session, Paris, France, 2016

<sup>10</sup> ICOM. ICOM announces the alternative museum definition that will be subject to a vote. 2019.

<sup>11</sup> ICOM Statutes. Vienna, 2007. <http://archives.icom.museum/statutes.html#2>

<sup>12</sup> ICOM (as fn. 13)

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*, 1979

<sup>14</sup> In 2008, the Federal Statistical Office reported on how the public visiting museums in Switzerland is clearly elitist, made up of individuals under the age of 30, with a high level of education and income and whose parents greatly influence their own cultural practices (Moeschler/Vanhooydonck 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Desvallées, André, and François Mairesse. *Key Concepts of Museology*. ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), 2010, <https://icom.museum/en/ressource/key-concepts-of-museology/>.

extreme instances, when referring e.g. to ecomuseums, the concept of the public refers to the entire population covering the area they refer to<sup>16</sup>.

The trouble faced by museums nowadays lies precisely in extending their services to the entire community encompassing society, with no exceptions, in accordance with the principle of fairness and equal opportunities<sup>17</sup> in order to support intercultural dialogue among peoples, social cohesion, and sustainable development<sup>18</sup>. But how can you turn all this into practice for disabled people? What emerges from the literature as being the essential ingredient of the inclusive museum is the ability to actively interact with one's public focusing one's activities, methods and approaches on said attendance. In particular, a changing perspective is suggested at three different levels:

1. The role of the museum as a mediator. Communicating and exhibiting past heritage to contemporary society implies an actual mediation activity in itself. The museum as mediator<sup>19</sup> is committed to adapting the message of its own collection depending on the public it faces, recalibrating its interpretation and favouring greater interaction. Interacting with one's visitors is an essential process both as a gateway to understanding the artwork<sup>20</sup>, but also so that the visitors may finally find answers to their unending "so, what?", feeling satisfied as individuals with the experience they've gone through and emerging enriched from it. "Access", "representation" and "participation" are therefore the three fundamental issues to consider to avoid the museum becoming an agent of social exclusion<sup>21</sup>.
2. From universal design to inclusive design methods. Making one's museum accessible through the removal of architectural barriers is certainly a first step towards meeting the needs of the public, welcoming it and putting it at ease. This recalls the idea of Universal Design defined by Holmes as "the design of an environment so that it might be accessed and used in the widest possible range of situations without the need for adaptation"<sup>22</sup>. Despite the considerable financial burden which this decision implies, it

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>17</sup> United Nation (as fn. 4).

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO, (as fn. 12).

<sup>19</sup> Weiß, Gisela. "Inclusive Museum – a Critical View from a Museological Perspective." *Proceedings of the COME-IN!-Thematic Conferences*, Jörn Berding Matthias Gather, 2018

<sup>20</sup> Viollet, Marion. *Between cultural democratization and the preservation of artistic integrity: Constructing cultural mediation for contemporary art* [Billet]. 2015

<sup>21</sup> Milano, (as fn. 8), n.d..

<sup>22</sup> In Kat Holmes (2018). *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*. MIT Press, p. 55

is important to stress how architectural accessibility is only one step of the way, as this does not necessarily lead to greater interaction with one's public, this being an implicit trait of social inclusion. The term "inclusive design" seems instead more appropriate as it refers to a methodology that the museum intends to pursue. The definition given by the outdoor play designer Susan Goldman well explain this point of view: "Inclusive design doesn't mean you're designing one thing for all people. You're designing a diversity of ways to participate so that everyone has a sense of belonging"<sup>23</sup>. Opting to adapt one's collection in accordance with the needs of the public, means observing, assessing and designing solutions on the basis of specific needs. A blind person needs to use a certain kind of design which is manifestly different from that arranged for people with physical disabilities, or even more with cognitive ones.

3. The cultural participation approach. The decision to undertake an inclusive design methodology, often goes hand in hand with activities of cultural participation, which see the active involvement of the people such efforts are aimed at, in the process of co-construction of knowledge, and therefore of a legitimate culture<sup>24</sup>. The level of public involvement may be shaped according to the intentionality and willingness of the institution through contributive, collaborative, co-created and hosted projects<sup>25</sup>. In Switzerland, e.g. the distinction between participation and cultural mediation projects in art museums is subtle. Participation projects are part of the museum's mediation activities, and the mediator often acts as interface with the public, both for the implementation of specific projects, and in leading inclusive guided visits.

### Museums and visual impairments

The European Blind Union reports that according to 82,5% of its national member organisations, the cultural rights of blind and partially sighted people are being poorly or very poorly implemented. In Switzerland visually impaired people represent around 4% of the population, i.e. a potential public for museums of around 320'000 people (UCBC).

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Goldman is an outdoor play designer. Her words have been quoted by Kat Holmes in her book *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Moroni/Bianco (as fn. 9).

<sup>25</sup> Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0, 2010.

Nowadays there are remarkable experiences around the world that make their own collections accessible to visually impaired people. London's Victoria & Albert Museum is one of those instances that has best been able to translate the abstract concept of inclusive museum into an actual organizational strategy based on an assessment of the needs of the visually impaired public, intended to improve the visitor's tangible experience from a multiple point of view: *multi-sensory experience of the artworks* (by providing touch objects and tactile books, soundtracks and audio descriptions), *orientation* (by removing architectural barriers), staff training and the employment of a visually impaired *Access Officer* to provide assistance and guidance to persons with disabilities in accessing its services<sup>26</sup>. The standards and the specific procedures that have enabled the implementation of these activities are however not shared. Always in Europe, the National Museum of Prague has experimented the use of Virtual Reality through the development of 3D models of the museum's most famous sculptures in order to provide an immersive and tactile experience to visually impaired people<sup>27</sup>. In the US, the project "America InSight tours" at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. has bet on the capacity of teachers to provide vivid description of American history, training them to lead small groups of blind and visually impaired visitors: the meaning of the artwork is mediated and interpreted by the cognitive and emotional skills of an expert; an interactive experience takes place (visitors can stop, ask questions and clarify points), and the learning process of visitors is enhanced through the memorability of the experience<sup>28</sup>.

From an academic point of view, studies on the multimodality of access that enhances the aesthetic experience of people with visual disability can be divided in two groups: those focused on the *tactile experiences* and those focused on the *audio experiences*. The first group is explored within the field of museum studies, specifically addressing the theme of cultural participation and inclusive design models<sup>29 30 31</sup>. The second group of research refers

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<sup>26</sup> Ginley, Barry. Museums: A whole new world for visually impaired people, in: *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 33(3), 2013

<sup>27</sup> Touching Masterpieces. <https://touchingmasterpieces.com/>

<sup>28</sup> America InSight: Verbal Description Tours. Smithsonian American Art Museum website: <https://americanart.si.edu/education/adult/verbal-description-tours>

<sup>29</sup> Candlin, Fiona. (2006). The Dubious Inheritance of Touch: Art History and Museum Access, in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5(2), 2006, pp. 137–154.

<sup>30</sup> Lehn, Dirk vom. Discovering 'Experience-ables': Socially including visually impaired people in art museums, in: *Journal of Marketing Management*, 26(7–8), 2010, pp. 749–769.

<sup>31</sup> Shah, Siddhant. *Power of Touch*. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugK0tauYv18>

instead to the field of linguistic and translation studies<sup>32 33</sup>. Audio Description is defined as a specific form of translation of images into words for people with visual disabilities, which received most attention in the field of audiovisual translation studies<sup>34 35</sup>. Bittner, by comparing the audiovisual description guidelines from Australia, France, Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, points out that in general the narrative perspective is not a central issue and that the “style of audio description should be factual, not interpretive”<sup>36</sup>. In relation to the proper use of the language instead – lexis, syntax, style, and tense – there is a general agreement between guidelines, the major concern lies in the details provided, as recently argued also by Barnés Castaño<sup>37</sup>.

Only recently ADs have been used also to the description of visual art within museums, but research on that is very limited<sup>38 39 40</sup>). Gallego points out that “existing audio descriptions of art museum exhibits were shown to comply with existing guidelines regarding the type of visual information conveyed, the level of detail offered, and the point of view used”<sup>41</sup>. The limit of the exclusive use of this technique for artwork description is that it does not consider all the interpretative aspects of the work, the story behind it, and the mediation needed in order to convey not only objective information about the work but also leave a memorable experience to the visitors. Narrative writing therefore is the technique here recommended and discussed, as it includes in the process of writing interpretative features, responding to the visitors’ social interaction need. Unlike audio descriptions, which are mostly used for portable technological audio guides and technologies<sup>42</sup>, narrative description is intended also

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<sup>32</sup> Braun, Sabine. Audiodescription research: State of the art and beyond, in: *Translation Studies in the New Millennium*, 6, 2008, pp. 14–30.

<sup>33</sup> Hurtado, Catalina Jimenez and Silvia Soler Gallego. Multimodality, translation and accessibility: A corpus-based study of audio description, in: *Perspectives*, 21(4), 2013, pp. 577–594.

<sup>34</sup> Bittner, Hansjörg. Audio description guidelines: A comparison, in: *New Perspectives in Translation*, 20, 2012, pp. 41–61.

<sup>35</sup> Braun, (as fn. 35)

<sup>36</sup> Bittner (as fn 37), p. 5

<sup>37</sup> Barnés Castaño, Cecile. *Audiodescribir con detalle o abstraer, esa es la cuestión*. Presented at the The Museum for All People: Art, Accessibility and Social Inclusion, 2019

<sup>38</sup> Gallego, Silvia Soler (2018). Audio descriptive guides in art museums. Translation and Interpreting Studies, in: *The Journal of the American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association*, 13(2), 2018, pp. 230–249.

<sup>39</sup> Nunes Martins, Claudia Susana and Ingrid Freitas. *Imagination Wide Open: Accessibility project in Bragança’s contemporary museum*. Presented at the The Museum for All: Art, Accessibility and Social Inclusion, Madrid, April 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Rodríguez Posadas, Gala, Silvia Soler Gallego and Olalla Luque. Words to see: On the intersemiotic translation of composition in paintings, in: *Interdisciplinarity in Translation Studies Theoretical Models, Creative Approaches and Applied Methods*, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Gallego, Silvia Soler (as fn. 41), p. 230

<sup>42</sup> Gallego, Silvia Soler and Antonio Chica. Museos para todos: Evaluación de una guía audiodescriptiva para personas con discapacidad visual en el museo de ciencias, in: *Revista Española de Discapacidad*, 2(2), 2014, 145–167.

to support the mediation work of a guide, a professional or an artist guiding people through museums spaces.

### Research gap and contribution

Despite the existence of policies stressing the importance of providing equal opportunities in accessing culture, and the growing attention of museums toward blind and visually impaired people, measuring progress on cultural accessibility issues is still not possible neither at national, nor at international level and nowadays, and many cultural accessibility projects still rely on the personal initiative of dedicated individuals and on short-term funding<sup>43</sup>.

A more restricted focus on the ways museums can implement inclusive activities is therefore needed. Museums can learn from other experiences by adapting general indications to their own cultural participation experiments. However, to convey efficiently the meaning of artworks to people with visual impairment, museums need to integrate the concept of accessibility and inclusion within their own values and organizational strategy. As a support of that, there is a gap of practical indications and structured tools guiding their decision-making process on how to develop and implement concretely inclusive activities, so that they can enhance the way to relate, listen to and approach the public.

By considering the accessibility of the museum's collection for people with visual impairments as a central construct, this article frames the accessibility of the works in its high-level construct as accessibility of the (whole) museum and social inclusion, as well as in the museum organizational setting (mid-level construct) and in the "here and now" practice (low-level construct). The main contribution of this research is to provide concrete, specific and practice-based indications guiding the museum decision-making process related to the use of the narrative description technique to enhance the fruition of their collection.

### The case study

This paper presents the case study of the Vincenzo Vela Museum (Ligornetto) as representative of how the construct of accessibility in a museum can be conceived both

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<sup>43</sup> Weisen, Marcus. International perspectives on the cultural accessibility of people with disabilities in: *Proceedings of the COME-IN!-Thematic Conferences*. Presented at the The inclusive museum - Challenges and Solutions, State of the Art and Perspectives, Erfurt, Germany, 2018

abstractly and concretely if we look at the accessibility from different psychological distances.

### The Vincenzo Vela Museum

The Vincenzo Vela Museum is a federal institution located in Ligornetto, an Italian-speaking Swiss municipality in the district of Mendrisio. It is one of the most important Swiss artists' houses of the nineteenth century, where the sculptor Vincenzo Vela (1820-91) lived and who bequeathed it to the Swiss Confederation in 1892 to become a museum open to the public. The museum, surrounded by a panoramic park, holds a monumental plaster casket of over 5'000 pieces by the artist Vincenzo Vela (1820-91), including the bequests of his sculptor brother Lorenzo Vela (1812-97). There is also a nineteenth-century picture gallery of Lombard and Piedmontese paintings, in which the works of his son, Spartaco Vela (1854-95), stand out; a graphic collection of drawings by Vincenzo and Spartaco Vela; a photographic collection among the oldest private photographic collections in Switzerland, and finally a historical and specialist library.

And it is precisely by starting from the residential nature of the museum, that the Vincenzo Vela Museum has centred its philosophy on inclusion since 2001. Said philosophy, based on the value of meeting, listening and engaging in dialogue, reflects the issue of museum accessibility in holistic terms. Since 2003 the Vela Museum has started a direct dialogue with disabled people aimed at better understanding their needs and at putting forward interventions intended to satisfy different types and needs of museum visitors, so that its heritage may be enjoyed in equal terms by society as a whole. The principle of museum accessibility has been translated into a real organizational strategy intended to offer a quality welcome by providing a number of different services: a cultural mediation service among the most innovative ones in Ticino; access to indoor and outdoor areas, accessibility of contents pertaining to the museum and its collections based on different types of visitors; and finally, a readiness to host in its spaces meetings and training for operators and professionals working in a number of fields, including those of the arts and social sectors.

### The workshop: Close your eyes and open your mind

This is the context which saw the experimental workshop "Close your eyes and open your mind" take place in the museum rooms on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016. The experiment aimed to

make the collection of 19th century sculptures and paintings accessible to all. The workshop was designed around a series of research questions centred on the fruition of the museum works by visitors with a very specific disability: blind and partially-sighted visitors.

The workshop which was part of the larger “Mediation Culture Inclusion” project, as well as testing the effectiveness of a participatory and inclusive methodology, has on the one hand provided the opportunity to develop and experiment the effectiveness of the work produced and on the other to supply Swiss museums with actual indications and instructions on how to act to ensure that their own artworks may be rendered communicable also for those who are unable to use sight to access them.

## Methodology

The workshop involved visually impaired people working together with undergraduate students to experiment the technique of narrative writing and to co-produce content specifically tailored to allow artwork accessibility and enjoyment through the sole sense of hearing. Participants included 8 blind and partially sighted people, 3 researchers, 2 university lecturers and 75 Bachelor's students in Social Work.

The process of the workshop can be summarized in four phases. During the first phase, students were divided into 5 groups, so that each group was constituted by 15 students. Each group was then assigned to a different room of the museum, where one single artwork was selected to be described. Each person in the group produced a detailed description of the same work aimed at making "visible" a work of art in the collection (fig. 1). A total of 75 descriptions were created for a series of 5 artworks.

During the second phase, blind and visually impaired people passed through each group to listen to the work of each student and give individual advice on how the descriptions could be improved (Fig. 2).

During the third phase, each group of students chose together the best description produced. During the fourth phase, everyone met up in the museum hall and, in turn, the 5 selected descriptions were read out aloud. All the participants were blindfolded during the descriptions' reading (Fig. 3).

Data were collected through participant observation and a focus group at the end of the workshop. The focus group aimed at unveiling participants' appreciation of the inclusive workshop, arousing critical aspects, personal experiences and general suggestions. The findings of the workshops have subsequently been analyzed and used to create guidelines and specific directions useful to those museums wishing to employ the narrative writing method to have their artworks enjoyed by a blind and partially sighted audience.

## Discussions

The construal level theory and the central construct for museums: the accessibility of the collection

The Construal Level Theory<sup>44</sup> is used to frame the results and to show the importance of low level construct as a fundamental mechanism for the accessibility of the collection, and therefore for museums.

Construal Level Theory (CLT) has it that the psychological distance from a construct is directly proportional to the way in which objects or events are conceptually represented. Psychological distance is taken to mean the distance perceived mentally in terms of space, time, social distance, or hypotheticality. The more distant an object or event is from a psychological point of view, the more it will be conceptualized in the abstract (high level construct) to be able to answer “why” such construct is important. Conversely, the closer we get to an object or event, the more essential it will be to activate specific measures, real and detailed that will answer as to “how” to translate it into practice (low-level construct), i.e. which people, tools, skills we need to contribute, albeit minimally, to the central aim.

The psychological distance from a construct is a subjective and egocentric experience of something the museum perceives as near or far<sup>45</sup>. This does not only depend on when and where the construct (an object or an event) will take place, but also on the social distance the museum perceives on the theme and on the hypothesis we build.

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<sup>44</sup> Trope, Yaacov and Nira Liberman (as fn, 11), pp. 440–463.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

So far this theory has mostly been applied to the study of individuals' behaviour and only recently has its use been explored also from the point of view of organizations, as rigorous conceptual model for exploring how mental representations shape organization behaviours<sup>46</sup>. The subject on which this article intends to apply this theory is that of the “museum as mediator”. In the field of art, few researches have experimented with the CLT, observing the changing attitudes of visitors towards artworks considered "unconventional"<sup>47</sup> or the changing people's predictions of emotional rewards for prosocial actions<sup>48</sup> when the abstract representation of objects is stimulated.

For the Vincenzo Vela Museum making its own collection accessible is a topic connected with the abstract and general objectives of museum accessibility and social inclusion that make it possible to identify alternative and cross-sectional areas of intervention (e.g. mediation, research, training). At organizational level, which is set half-way between abstraction and practice (mid-level construct), this means defining within an area of intervention (e.g. mediation) a strategy for action which includes activities (e.g. guided visits, workshops), methods (inclusive design) and approaches (cultural participation) to pursue. On a concrete level, this means having at one's disposal indications that are specific for each kind of public (in our case visually impaired people) and linked to alternative types of fruition (i.e. the use of narrative writing technique), which tell the museum how to intervene in the “here and now” practice (how to select work, how to describe items, how to use the language), to meet in an effective and timely manner the objectives set out at organizational level and, more generally, the museum's aims (Fig. 4).

High level accessibility of the collection: accessible and inclusive museum

According to the CLT for a concept to take place in the present it must be linked to an aim which is abstract, wished for and as yet unrealized, far from the present, but equally central,

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46 Wiesenfeld, Batia M., Jean-Nicolas Reyt, Joel Brockner and Yaacov Trope. Construal Level Theory in Organizational Research, in: *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4(1), 2017, pp. 367–400.

47 Schimmel, Katrin and Jens Förster. How temporal distance changes novices' attitudes towards unconventional arts, in: *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 2(1), 2008, p.53.

48 Aknin, Lara B., Leaf Van Boven and Laura Johnson-Graham. Abstract construals make the emotional rewards of prosocial behavior more salient, in: *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 10(5), 2015, pp. 458–462.

essential, decontextualized and which determines and justifies the steps to be followed in order for the object/event (construct) to come to fruition<sup>49</sup>.

For the Vincenzo Vela Museum reflecting on the accessibility to its collection implies focusing on its abstract representation of social inclusion and the overall accessibility of the organization (“museum for all”, “access for all”). The highest level of abstract construct is found in the social inclusion philosophy espoused by the museum. Social inclusion is in itself a very different outcome from that of museum accessibility.

Each individual behaviour aimed at social inclusion put in motion by the museum is stretched towards an abstract model of society that cannot be quantified, nor made up of a set of strategies, practices and details. The outcome of the puzzle of all the efforts made, which answer to the principle of “social inclusion”, although contributing to define accessibility to the museum, do not determine its meaning (which is made up of multiple interwoven factors of a social, economic, cultural and political nature).

The puzzle pieces, in this case the small, individual actions undertaken by museums, portray a different “bigger picture”, i.e. an organized, strategic and quantifiable system which determines greater and better accessibility of the organization. Social inclusion, from where the concept of “museum for all” stems, may in any event be regarded as an abstract construct to pursue, the ultimate “reason why” of the actions performed daily, but its essence refers to multiple variables, whose sum would however not make up a concrete and measurable reality.

Making the collection accessible means enabling all the visitors to enjoy it on fair and equal terms. This is for the Vela Museum an overriding concept and linked to that of a welcome typical for the residential nature of homes turned museums. The motto itself “meeting, engaging in dialogue and listening”<sup>50</sup> encompasses the key values of the organization, guiding it in future predictions, in short-to-medium term decision making, in the process of evaluation of pros and cons and in identifying alternative interpretations aimed at social inclusion. At this stage details do not matter, and it has been shown how in this process of abstraction, pros appear more significant and thus drive activities, as compared to the

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<sup>49</sup> Trope, Yaacov and Nira Liberman (as fn. 11), pp. 440–463.

<sup>50</sup> This is a literal translation of the Italian claim : « Incontro, Dialogo, Ascolto »

difficulties gradually emerging as you get closer to the practical implementation of a specific event and concept.

Reducing the psychological distance: mediation, participation and inclusive design

Reducing the physical, temporal, social and hypothetical distance from the abstract representation means developing a clear organizational strategy taking into account alternative interpretations of the abstract representation. Alternative interpretations correspond to the areas of intervention that the museum intends to implement. The Vincenzo Vela Museum has identified four areas of interventions making the museum more accessible to all: cultural mediation, universal design of spaces, content and communication, and the professional training of educators.

The “Close your eyes and open your mind” workshop finds its place among the cultural mediation activities offered by the museum, experimenting a participatory approach which offers organizations the chance to reflect on the strategies to follow should they wish to make artworks accessible to visually impaired people.

Making the collection accessible implies the museum’s willingness and need to create strong mental representations linked to an object. The creation of the mental representation of an artwork is a complex process if you are working with people with visual impairments. Its complexity stems from the difference in perceiving reality based on experience and cognitive memories that are different among people who have been blind since birth and those whose impairment appeared later. By relying on solutions of an interlinguistic and intersemiotic nature, which entailed an interpretative mediation by a group of sighted people, it was possible to translate the visual artworks into a complete experience also for those who are deprived of sight (Fig. 5).

The suggestions that came out of the qualitative survey by sighted, blind and partially sighted people that took place at the end of the workshop, find themselves in the medium distance of the “accessibility of the collection” construct, as they encompass general indications which are useful in the framework of cultural mediation activities. They are suggestions connected with the participatory approach and the inclusive method which may encompass different kinds of interpretation and implementation depending on the museums, and which have led to

the subsequent shaping of concrete and specific procedures. These suggestions depend mainly on the human experience undergone by the participants, which establishes itself as a key to reading for an efficient mediation work between the object and the beholder.

With reference to the participatory approach and the inclusive method tested by the workshop, the blind and partially sighted participants greatly appreciated the “community” dimension that was built up in the event. In particular, they appreciated the role of “experts” they were allocated in guiding the students towards the best options so as to create texts that would allow access to the works, from the various formal and emotional angles. Great appreciation was shown to the final moment of readings “in the dark”, where participants, students and researchers took an imaginary walk among the museum artworks, listening to the selection of the best texts created. The activity was viewed favourably also by the students, who were able to grasp some of the problems faced by the blind and partially sighted, and understood how one can create “inclusive” environments guided not by the limitations of individuals but by the abilities of all. As stated by a student “It is always very difficult to be close to the other, to try to empathize for being resourceful and of support. But the experience of becoming an instrument for others, of reinventing one's own eyes, has really been special”<sup>51</sup>.

Starting from this experience, the study conducted enabled one to assess and report the elements that appear of greater importance in the course of a visit by blind and partially sighted visitors<sup>52</sup>:

- 1) the existence of an accomplished, passionate and competent cultural companion, be this a museum guide, cultural mediator or an artist;
- 2) the availability of information of a descriptive-objectual nature on the artwork (size, materials, shape, etc), enhanced with information of a cultural and historical kind.
- 3) the chance to go through a multisensorial experience of artworks mediation is important but not essential. What is crucial for the visitor is to understand the perceptive-mental process in the event of a tactile support (duration, sequences, relationship to the descriptive narration), be this when there are artworks or support tools that foster understanding (i.e. tactile diagrams)

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<sup>51</sup> Candeloro, Jean-Pierre, Valeria Donnarumma, Luca Morici and Claudio Mustacchi. *Rapporto di valutazioneâIndagine svolta nell'ambito del progetto “Mediazione Cultura Inclusione”* [Report], 2017.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19

- 4) a visit that takes place in an atmosphere with no distractions or disruptions;
- 5) the chance to implement inclusive events where the skills of blind or partially sighted people contribute to social and cultural occasions for sighted people, too.

Low Level construct: narrative writing

It is not merely a matter of defining the importance of working on museum accessibility, but to focus on “how” to act, by identifying actual and timely measures that “preserve the object in minute details from immediate use”<sup>53</sup>. To cut the psychological distance of a construct right down enables one to define the complexity of actions to undergo. What emerged from the “Close your eyes and open your mind” workshop is that the most effective solutions that art museums can implement to facilitate access to works of art for people with visual impairments is the creation of specific descriptions that facilitate the creation of mental images using sensory resources such as hearing. To stimulate this process, it is essential that sighted people (a guide, a mediator, an artist) take into account specific narrative supports and exploit the communicative and evocative potential of spoken language<sup>54</sup>.

For blind and visually impaired people visiting an exhibition can be very tiring: the effort of attention and concentration is high because in addition to listening, the visitor must process the descriptions and transform them into mental images, drawing on their own system of sensory perception and personal processing and for those who have the opportunity, their own visual memory.<sup>55</sup>

The inclusive “Close your eyes and open your mind” workshop has allowed the drawing up of accurate guidelines to describe artworks to blind and partially sighted people. Such guidelines do not just refer to the type of information to be conveyed, but support the museum in its decision-making process, which includes the choice of works to be described, the linguistic register, and of how to chronologically report the information so as to foster a better understanding of the work.

#### 1. How to select the work

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<sup>53</sup> Trope, Yaacov and Nira Liberman (as fn. 11), pp. 448

<sup>54</sup> Mediazione Cultura Inclusion website: <http://www.mci.supsi.ch>

<sup>55</sup> Idid, n.d.

Although potentially every work of art can be linguistically described, making a selection of a limited series of particularly significant artworks is imperative for a more sustainable and effective process, benefitting not only those who elaborate the descriptions but especially those whom the descriptions are intended for.

The decision making process of the museum can be facilitated by considering the following criteria:

1. *Select the works from the museum's permanent collection.* This allows to capitalize the efforts of the museum by promoting access to the artistic and cultural heritage of the territory, by describing an original work which is physically available, by reusing the work done along the years and enjoying greater freedom in reusing the descriptions elaborated.
2. *Select representative works,* especially for temporary exhibitions, which take into account their overall relevance for the museum identity.
3. *Select works that can be explored with other senses,* which can be touched, for example, during multisensory mediation activities that include a direct encounter with the artworks.
4. *Select works by living artists* (if they are present within the collection) that the public could potentially meet in person during specific cultural mediation activities.
5. *Select interpretable works for a multisensory fruition,* those able to offer the public an emotionally enriching experience consistent with the aesthetic and emotional effects that can arise from the artwork.
6. *Consider the artwork location in space.* The artwork should be surrounded by free space, both on the wall (to promote the visibility of the artwork and orientation) and in the space in front of it, dedicated to visitors' contemplation of the artwork (to promote the stationing and mobility). In addition, chairs could also be arranged to accommodate visitors, as well as other supports (tables, lecterns, etc.) to arrange the different materials in the case of multisensory activities.

## 2. How to use the language

The narrative of an artwork addressed to people with visual impairments requires a complex analysis of the artwork as well as an articulated description of its setting in order to facilitate the mental construction of the image. Amit, Trope and Alogom demonstrate that “people better process pictures that represent proximal objects and words that represent distal objects

than pictures that represent distal objects and words that represent proximal objects”<sup>56</sup>. This means that the memory of an object increases when we increase the proximity to it. Narrow specific categories promote a sense of psychological proximity. At the same time too many details or particularly long and complex sentences, make the operation more complicated.

Some aspects to be taken into account for a proper use of the language are:

1. *Language register and terminology*. The use of a colloquial register is always preferred and whether specific and technical terms are required they should always be followed by an explanation of the meaning. It is therefore better to mention the element in question first and afterward to mention its correct definition (e.g. it is better to state "... yellow, red and blue, which in the theory of colors are defined as primary colors" rather than "... the primary colors, i.e. yellow, red and blue").
2. *Taboo words*. Do not avoid common used words, like terms "to see", "to look" or "to observe", as such an attitude can be counterproductive, generating a feeling of inadequacy in the audience. Even the definitions of "blind" and "visually impaired" are preferred to the cautious "non-sighted": the "non" immediately refers to a negative dimension. It should be noted that these linguistic issues are very fluid, depending from personal subjectivity and from geographical-cultural differences.
3. *Rhetorical figures*. Similarities, metaphors and antitheses are effective tools in promoting the construction of mental images, especially when associated with everyday life, the body and sensory perception. However, they are particularly indicated in symbolic and evocative commentary, but they can lead to confusion if associated to the technical description of the artwork (technique, form and composition).
4. *Adjectives*. Adjectives are useful and effective to characterize what is described: they reduce the polysemy of the object and qualify the artistic character of the artwork. However, they should be used sparingly to leave space to the construction of the image in the mind of the audience.
5. *Orientation*. The method of the clock to orient oneself in physical spaces is effective in describing the position of the elements inside the artwork's space (e.g. "at 12.00 you will find...") rather than the use of the indications "right" and "left", which requires to specify with respect to who and what.

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<sup>56</sup> Amit, Elinor, Daniel Algom, and Yaacov Trope. Distance-dependent processing of pictures and words, in: *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 138 (3), 2009, p. 400.

6. *The use of voice.* The adaptation of the narrator's voice is not required, however it is possible to make listening more understandable and enjoyable by clearly marking the words and adjusting the tone of voice to the situation.
7. *Rhythm of reading.* It is advisable not to speak or read more slowly than usual, but to extend by a few seconds the normal breaks within the speech, distancing the topics or paragraphs as well as the subject from the rest of the sentence.

### 3. How to select items

As it has been reported in Audio Description (AD) guidelines and studies, even for the description of a work of art it is important to limit the information to be transmitted.

To encourage the creation of mental images of visual artworks, it is important to dwell on the most significant information in order to allow the display content with a precise order.

Content can be classified in the following categories and should be sorted chronologically:

1. *Spatial context.* The first information to provide refers to the space in which the artwork is located, and specify their exact location in the exhibition space.
2. *General information about the artwork:* the name of the author, the title of the artwork, the year of production, the origin, the place of preservation, the technique used and its dimensions.
3. *Biographical hints of the artist:* nationality, date of birth and possibly death, education, the artistic movement to which s/he belongs and its particular stylistic characteristics.
4. *Historical period and cultural context* to which the artwork belongs to.
5. *Primary subject.* The figurative or abstract subject should be firstly identified and then briefly described from top to bottom and from the left of the audience to its right. Alternatively, it is also possible to describe the object from outside to inside. To start the description, it is important to begin from the formal aspects (e.g. colors, style) and the physical limits of the artwork (e.g. the frame), followed by the details.
6. *Technique, form and composition.* Summarize the description of the compositional and technical aspects (unless they are particularly emphasized and relevant in the overall impact of the artwork), including shapes, light, colors, proportions, dimensions, space management (pictorial for two-dimensional figurative art), materiality and technique used.
7. *Symbolic and evocative commentary.* Subjective commentary of symbolic and evocative nature is recommended as it is able to convey to visitors the intentions of the artist, the

artistic character of the work and its uniqueness, as well as to stimulate possible psycho-emotional effects of the artwork on the audience.

## Conclusions

Full accessibility to museum collection for people with visual impairments is still very limited. Cultural mediation, participation, and inclusive design methods reveal to be effective ways to improve the artistic experience of a specific typology of audience, and therefore to foster social inclusion.

Through the case of a Swiss federal museum which has integrated cultural mediation into its organizational strategy, this article presents the results from a participatory workshop involving sighted, blind and visually impaired people to experiment an inclusive design method of narrative writing. The workshop allows to co-produce narrative descriptions and provides visually impaired visitors the opportunity to experience the artworks through the sense of hearing.

The presented practice-based experiment has made it possible to equip the museums participating in the project with a specific, scalable method for narrative writing production, and concrete professional practices guiding them to enhance and increase the accessibility of their collections toward people with visual impairment. The guidelines provide indications supporting the decision making process of art museums operators in the way artworks can be selected, described and communicated.

Artworks that are best suited to being accessible through language are those representative of the museums collections or museums values (in case of a temporary exhibition). Follows those that can be explored with other senses (a sculpture for example), that can be combined with different mediation activities (such as works by living artists), that are interpretable for a multi sensory fruition, and that are located in comfortable spaces.

In constructing the account of visual artworks and encouraging the creation of mental images, it is important to consider the attention time of visitors, calibrating the use of details, and dwelling on the most significant information in order to allow the display of content with a precise order, even chronological: from the definition of the spatial context to general

information about the artwork, biographical hints of the artist, historical period and cultural context, the identification and description of the primary subject (from the formal aspects to the physical limits of the artwork to the details) to the technical aspects (e.g. technique, form and composition) and finally a symbolic and evocative commentary.

The proper use of the language appears an effective support to effectively convey descriptions to people with visual impairments and to foster interactions. In particular, the indications suggest the adoption of a colloquial register and a spontaneous terminology; the use of rhetorical figures is indicated just to provide symbolic and evocative commentary, whilst the use of adjectives to qualify objectively the artistic character of the artwork; the method of the clock facilitates people to orientate artworks 's features in physical spaces; the adaptation of the tone of the voice and the rhythm of reading, marking words and scanning breaks, make the storytelling enjoyable and more understandable.

Finally, the participatory approach of the workshop played a main role in making all participants live an “inclusive experience” and in particular it influenced the learning process of students from blind and visually impaired people, rather than vice versa. The importance of the social interaction from visitors and the guide has also been stressed by people with visual impairment in the evaluation of the museum’s accessibility and in the identification of general suggestions that may be adopted by all museums. These considerations raise new questions about the potentiality of visual art of making new, multiple and richer interpretations and aesthetic experience possible. Future researches may be focused on observing and experimenting the potential role of museum' guide with visual disabilities as agent of social change that contributes to develop community awareness of equal opportunities and inclusion through a form of artistic exploration and interactive learning.

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## List of captions

Figure 1. Bottom-up view of a group of undergraduate students contemplating the artwork to be described and performing the first activity of the narrative writing (Phase 1). CC-BY-SA LCV-SUPSI 2016. → size ½ page

Figure 2. A student reading his narrative description to the whole group with a mentor of UNITAS intends to listen to it and to provide suggestions (Phase 2). CC-BY-SA LCV-SUPSI 2016. → size ½ page

Figure 3. A standing student who recounts his description, instead of reading it, to the entire group of students because he too has chosen to wear a mask over his eyes (Phase 4). → size ½ page

Figure 4. Visual representation of the abstract, organizational and concrete level of artworks' accessibility for visually impaired people at the Vincenzo Vela Museum. CC-BY-SA Marta Pucciarelli 2019. → size 1/4 page

Figure 5. Narrative description of the work by Vincenzo Vela “L'Italia riconoscente alla Francia” (1861-62) produced by a student during the workshop. CC-BY-SA LCV-SUPSI 2016. → size 1/4 page