

Increasing Access in Art Education

Best practices around art and accessibility

- Image descriptions are a practice in translation.
 - Don't forget to state the obvious.
 - Provide written and audio descriptions;
 - Try things in your use of sounds that make the piece more memorable.
 - Don't forget to share the affective impact of the piece on you.
- Detailed image descriptions feature some or all of the following:
 - 1. Standard Information (when providing size do so comparatively: "Relative size is particularly useful because everyone can identify with the size of a familiar object. For instance, Jackson Pollock's painting One, which measures 8 ft. 10 in. x 17 ft. 5 in., can be compared to the size of six single mattresses placed side by side.")
 - 2. General Overview: Subject, Form, and Color
 - 3. Orient the Viewer with Directions
 - 4. Describe the Importance of the Technique or Medium
 - 5. Focus on the Style
 - 6. Use Specific Words
 - 7. Provide Vivid Details
 - 8. Indicate Where the Curators Have Installed a Work
 - 9. Refer to Other Senses as Analogues for Vision
 - 10. Explain Intangible Concepts with Analogies
 - 11. Encourage Understanding through Reenactment
 - 12. Provide Information on the Historical and Social Context
 - 13. Incorporate Sound in Creative Ways
 - 14. Explain the art's impact on you: its wow factor/how it makes you feel.
- Incorporate access from the outset when designing the course
- Make room for subjectivity: consider trying an assignment where multiple students create image descriptions of the same piece not just as an exercise for blind and low vision students, but as a way to have students practice talking about art with specificity. The rest of the class can compare/contrast the differences between what each student noticed and experienced about the piece.
- Use very high resolution images so low vision users can zoom

What is out there around improving the experience of art engagement for blind and low-vision people?

- [Galleries of image descriptions](#)

- Academic pushback against stigma around blind/low vision students participation in art classes
- Galleries of art replicas that can be touched
- Special exhibits of multi-sensorial art

What does it mean to teach art online?

- Very little information on accessible art instruction online for blind and low vision students.
- In online courses, it is important for all students that content is repeated across multiple formats for students to interact with. Image descriptions when provided in written and audio formats allow this repetition for all students.
- Suggested practices include self-directed learning.
- Online art courses require more attention to pedagogy and outcomes:
- Attentiveness to student needs in terms of both time and access.

Context and Expanded Resources

Best practices around art and accessibility

- [This guide](#), produced by Art Beyond Sight has an extensive set of tactics for describing and verbally engaging with art. Such suggestions and extensive image descriptive practices would create more access for blind and low-vision students as well as model language for discussing art terms/concepts for all students.
 - Thirteen of the sixteen suggestions are as follows (the last three are focused on touch which is a difficult experience to provide in an online setting). The guide provides detailed methods, suggestions, and examples such as: “Relative size is particularly useful because everyone can identify with the size of a familiar object. For instance, Jackson Pollock’s painting One, which measures 8 ft. 10 in. x 17 ft. 5 in., can be compared to the size of six single mattresses placed side by side.”
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What is out there around improving the experience of art engagement for blind and low-vision people?

- Academic article on blindness and the museum space: “[Talking Blind: Disability, Access, and the Discursive Turn](#)” This article argues that the space of the museum (and to that end, curation) acts as a threshold, both a barrier and an opening. “Conferences, websites, audio guides and blind walks are just the start.”
 - The piece links to useful online materials that linger from projects designed to create multiple forms of engagement.
 - [What Can a Body Do?](#) The What Can A Body Do Exhibition generated far more than just artwork (or, arguably, it generated artwork that was radically accessible via use of braille, audio descriptions, transcripts, essays, and more). Ultimately, the pieces and the ways in which they were made accessible “offer the profound capacity for change, evolution, transformation and movement, both literal and metaphoric, and ultimately, reap new form and restabilization.”
 - Particularly of interest, a [gallery of images](#) in audio description. These descriptions, meant to be listened to without looking at images of what is described, model a gallery that is accessible and provides the scaffolding for conversation without relying on information that is only available to sighted individuals. Among this gallery of images, there are also transcripts from Carmen Papalia’s “Blind Field Shuttle” performance.
 - What would it mean for the entire class to engage with a description of a work of art rather than the image of that work of art? How could something like this teach all students how they made improve their own ability to describe and discuss works of art?
- [The Vision and Art Project](#) is engaged with established artists who later experience Age-related Macular Degeneration. The website discusses a gallery showing in Cincinnati of pre- and post-diagnosis work. Much of the content is geared towards sighted consumers of art, however it does offer links to texts that may be beneficial for teaching about blindness and low-vision as social experienced from an artist’s perspective.
 - Among these, [Sight Unseen](#) by Georgina Kleege offers insight into the social structures the create stigma around the practice of engaging with art as a low vision artist.
 - How might artists’ own experiences with low vision and blindness inform conversations about art works, their production, and their reception?

- In the introduction to his work [Disability Aesthetics](#), Tobin Siebers argues that art and appreciation relies on multiple sensory, emotional, and cultural inputs. Situating disability in the conversation of artistic appreciation, Siebers notes “it is worth asking how the presence of disability requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation” (67).
 - *Disability Aesthetics* makes an effort to make the art experience one that is embodied through multiple sensorial and perceptive methods. Siebers argues that art appreciation via aesthetic engagement “participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about the way that some bodies make other bodies feel” (20).
 - To that end, engagement with art, specifically considering disability “is not, therefore, one subject among others. It is not merely a theme... it is not solely a political act. It is all of these things, but it is more” (20). Siebers argues that engagement with art is inherently political, draws on social knowledge, and is informed by more than solely what is on the canvas. What would it mean to engage students in conversation that locates art within systems of sociocultural pressure? How/does a conversation about accessible art inherently exist as part of political discourse?

- John Derby’s “[Art Education and Disability Studies](#)” lays out some preliminary pedagogical suggestions for an intersection between Disability Studies and the Visual arts.
 - Attentiveness to the ways in which art is used to shape identity.
 - Derby is particularly interested in the turn in art following postmodernism “shift[ing] the question of knowledge away from what we know to who we are”
 - Locating artistic conversation within social, cultural, and critical frameworks.
 - Derby emphasizes how “critical art making strategies encourage learners to actively and consciously respond to the visual culture in which we are immersed”
 - Engaging visual culture as a creating force of narrative.
 - Within these engagements it is equally important to focus on what is *not* represented as much as what is.
 - Performative/Public Interaction
 - Derby suggests that “By interacting with each other and the public through interventionist tactics, students could expand their understanding of ableism in human-designed environments.”
 - Given the broad element of the “public” in an online classroom, what performative and cultural engagements can occur? What form would these engagements take when evaluating public online artwork?

- There’s room for subjectivity: In disabled artist and activist Carmen Papalia’s 2013 piece “[A New Model for Access in the Museum](#)” he explains museum spaces inaccessibility across many fronts (from price to alienating language found next to images to lack of immersion for blind and low vision attendees like himself). When he describes positive experiences he has had with accessing museums, they are relational and specific:

- “When I walk through an art museum, a friend will describe art objects, architectural details and other museum visitors to me, and will offer information that informs my art experience. The things that a particular guide will focus on vary based on the guide's interests, his or her own personal experiences, and, simply, on the way that the guide is feeling at the time. My friend Elliott for example, who is thirty and works as a doorman at a dance club, might interpret a gallery space (and the things in it) differently from my sister Veronica, who is twenty one and a pastry chef. Each guide is drawn to details that are unique to their expertise, which makes the museum experience, for me, a wonderfully subjective one.”
 - What does it mean to allow room for this kind of textured experience with art in an online classroom space?
 - Instead of all the image descriptions coming from the professor, assign multiple students the task of describing the same image in audio files. Compare and contrast what details they focus on.
- This conversation on [Art and Audio Description](#) hosted at Tate Modern brings together audio description experts and users to talk about best practices. Speakers emphasized the importance of audio descriptions for sighted people and blind & low vision people alike. Audio descriptions can make a piece more memorable for any listener and in creating audio descriptions people gain confidence discussing art in its particulars. Louise Fryer who teaches audio description as part of translation studies emphasized that good audio descriptions require “learning to state the obvious.” She also described ways of making audio descriptions more immersive; she has worked with describers who tried “adding a soundtrack...clinking as the wind blows through the moss” which made the descriptions affective and memorable. Finally, she pointed out that it is important for the describer to “convey the impact of the art...the wow factor...” how it makes them feel.

Current Museum Practices

- The Guggenheim runs a monthly “[Mind’s Eye Program](#)” to create multi-sensory access to artworks. The layout of the site, however, lacks meaningful alt text for images and is designed largely for sighted visitors.
- Similarly, the Louvre runs a “[Tactile Gallery](#)” in order to promote access, though there is no literature on what the gallery contains on its website, and little mention other than “The Tactile Gallery is the only space in the museum where visitors are allowed and encouraged to touch sculptures.” Which is buried in language that operates within the Medical Model of Disability which places the burden of accessibility on the individual: “Check in advance which activities will be accessible for you, depending on your disability.”

What does it mean to teach art online?

Finding articles that directly addressed the practice of A. teaching B. online, C. art, D. in an accessible manner (for blind and low vision students; some articles addressed the accessibility of language) was not possible. The following articles address teaching art online in a broader sense.

- Renee McGary provides [this editorial engagement](#) with navigating a switch between in-person Art education and online. It links to several resources for teaching art online. It is largely focused on making discussion and self-directed learning central.
- MoMA has designed [several art courses](#) that are available free and online through Oxford Art Online. Largely designed for in-classroom engagement, there might be some potential to dissect what the lessons do and how they might be translated into solely online engagements.
- Section Three of [*Teaching Art History with New Technologies: Reflections and Case Studies*](#) has 4 chapters of work delineating successes and providing cautionary case studies surrounding teaching art online.