Q & A: ARTS FOR ALL

Audio Described Aotearoa

Putting blind people in the picture is what Auckland audio describer Nicola Owen does for a living. She talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about touch tours and audio description of arts and cultural events.

1. Background: about Audio Described Aotearoa

My own audio description training was via Auckland Live's SIGNAL programme back in 2011. I set up Audio Described Aotearoa in 2014 with my partner, Paul Brown, who is blind. This was in response to the growing demand for audio description in New Zealand. We wanted to make it easier for organisations and venues to provide audio description for blind and vision impaired people.

We provide training for staff, advice on applying for funding, and how to market to the blind community about audio description and touch tours. We’re passionate about quality control and ensuring that blind and vision impaired people across New Zealand can access a variety of arts and cultural events.

You can watch Arts Access Aotearoa’s audio described video called Access For All, where Paul and I talk about the benefits of audio description.

2. Tell us about the range of arts and cultural events you audio describe.

The range of arts and cultural events that are audio described is increasing rapidly as awareness of audio description grows. So far, we’ve used it in theatres, chamber music, award ceremonies, opera, contemporary dance, photography and art exhibitions, conference presentations, local festivals and events, children’s theatre, museums and galleries, sculpture and botanical gardens.

3. Does each artform bring its own set of challenges? If so, describe some of them.

Each artform is different, and we adapt our audio description accordingly to ensure high-quality delivery. However, the principles are the same. The most important thing is to describe what is seen in an objective way so that patrons can draw their own conclusions and opinions about the performance, exhibition or presentation.

For some events, such as tours, patrons can ask questions along the way and so audio description needs to allow time for this to happen.

For other events, audio description needs to be developed sensitively. For theatre productions, it’s important not to give away the plot; for example, when a character is “in disguise” and the disguise is removed later on during the show. This sensitivity to the essence of each production is crucial.
The audience listens to the description of a play through headsets and hears words that describe the action. The whole process of preparing audio description—from marking up the script and allowing silence where there’s dialogue or important gaps in the action on stage to finding the right words to describe what is seen—takes about 25 hours of preparation for each hour of the show.

Dance is the most recent artform we’ve worked with and it’s got particular challenges. Blind or vision impaired people may not have had previous access to dance and so dance vocabulary also needs to be made accessible.

This is where touch tours and workshops can be particularly useful: for example, an acrobat might allow a blind person to feel the position their body will be in during a contortion, or a blind person could be shown how to move their arm in a particular way so they can physically experience the meaning of dance terminology.

For dance, the combination of audio descriptions, workshops and touch tours can mediate people’s understanding.

In audio describing children’s theatre shows, an age-appropriate vocabulary needs to be used and the tone of voice needs to vary. It’s hugely important that blind and vision impaired children are able to access the arts, so they can experience creativity as fully as possible and also continue to expect to be able to participate in the arts.

4. What’s the point in audio describing music? Isn’t it about listening?

There’s a huge range of musical instruments involved in musical performances, and some of them are historic or from other cultures. Touch tours can illuminate the difference between, say, a cello and a rare baroque viol with seven strings.

Some music performances involve the performers interacting with the audience or each other in a variety of ways... For blind or vision impaired patrons, these connections and interplay are missed without audio description. If a violinist steps away from a music stand and plays without reading the music, showing their mastery of their instrument, the whole audience needs to experience that moment.

5. When do touch tours add value to an audio described event?

Touch tours add great value whenever there’s visual or sensory material included as part of the event. With opera productions, for example, touch tours are a particularly important part of the experience. These companies invest huge energy and resources into costumes, set design, props and so on. During touch tours, the set, props and costumes can be experienced using touch. Some opera productions have hugely elaborate costumes made of velvet or lace; others have masks and head-dresses made from cardboard and all kinds of materials.

Touch tours are also particularly effective when the actors or singers participate. If their voices can be heard in advance of the show, patrons can identify who is speaking or singing.

Touch tours also work well for art and sculpture exhibitions, garden tours and gallery visits. Really, anything that involves tactile objects or materials being part of the whole experience.
6. Is there a growing demand for audio described arts and cultural events?

Definitely. People are starting to ask for audio description and expect it to be available. More arts organisations than ever before are incorporating audio descriptions and touch tours into their programmes. This means greater accessibility and participation, as well as more diverse audiences of arts events.

7. Looking ahead, what do you see as key challenges in developing audio description and its audiences?

The biggest work we’ve still to do is in developing new audiences. We particularly need to reach out to older people who are losing their sight to let them know audio description is available so they can continue to enjoy the arts.

We’re continuing to reach out to children and their teachers, and engage with communities to find out what blind and partially sighted people want. Unfortunately, when we’ve found out what kinds of shows people would like to be audio described, organisations haven’t always been interested in offering it.

We’ve been doing a huge amount of training over the past two years, but there’s still much to be done. It’s important to continue training staff in accessible venues so that other organisations will see their confidence and consider the many benefits of increasing their own accessibility.

8. And finally, where do you want Audio Described Aotearoa to be in 2020?

It would be great to see a strong network of audio describers all around New Zealand, making it possible for blind and partially sighted people to go anywhere and at any time.

The STQRY app is a mobile storytelling platform that helps visitors engage with museums and galleries in their own time and at their own pace. We’d like to see audio description become this flexible.

Over time, audio descriptions will need to reflect the cultural diversity of the New Zealand population, and be available in a variety of languages.

We’d like there to be a “democratisation of description” so cultural event organisers can confidently produce high-quality audio descriptions for themselves.

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Q & A: ARTS FOR ALL

Gallery’s Insightful Tours for blind visitors

Lynda Cullen, Visitor Programmes Officer, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, talks to Arts Access Aotearoa about the gallery’s commitment to accessibility and its Insightful Tours for blind and vision impaired visitors.

1. Background: about us

The Dunedin Public Art Gallery is the oldest public art gallery in New Zealand and the only gallery in the country with a painting by Claude Monet in its collection. We also have some of the earliest religious works in a public collection as well as paintings by many European old masters.

Inclusion is a focus of our strategic plan and so a key function of the gallery is making the world of art accessible to the widest possible range of people. One way we do this is through events and activities that interpret and complement our exhibitions programme, providing insight into artworks and artists’ practice. We’re also a member of the Arts For All Otago Network, facilitated by Arts Access Aotearoa.

Educational and school holiday programmes, guided tours, floor talks, lectures, film and video presentations, seminars and workshops all help to achieve this aim. My role is to implement these various programmes and events.

Visitors can choose to extend their knowledge and experience by taking part in the various visitor programmes. My aim is to empower both the regular and new visitors, enriching their learning experience. I also want to encourage non-visitors to start coming into the gallery.

2. What does access mean to the gallery?

Access is about being physically, psychologically and virtually (via the Internet) accessible to everyone in the local community and beyond – people of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds, including people with intellectual, physical and sensory impairments.

The gallery aims to make access easy for everyone. All areas of the gallery are wheelchair accessible, and we’re continuing to increase our services to disabled visitors. One of the key ways we do this is through our visitor programmes. There is also front-of-house awareness about the importance of welcoming everyone into the gallery.

3. What motivated the gallery to develop its tours for blind and vision impaired people, and where did you start?

The gallery has a public programmes strategy and part of this is about being accessible to all groups. Our tours for people with sensory impairments began with hesitant steps on Deaf Awareness Week 2010 after a meeting with John Ken, a member of the Deaf Association in Dunedin.
We undertook a signed tour of our exhibition Beloved: works from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery collection, using sign language interpreter Bridget Brown to conduct the tour. John suggested that the signed tour could be advertised on the Deaf Association website, which we did. Around ten people took part in the tour and for most of them, it was the first time they’d been to the gallery. I remember there was a middle-aged woman who asked a lot of questions and had a lovely sense of humour. It made the group feel more relaxed.

In 2011, Beloved still had a freshness to it and so for Deaf Awareness Week 2011, we used another of our tour guides who had theatre training to look at some of the more modern works in the exhibition. Bridget Brown wasn’t available this time and so we used Bryde Jenkin Strang’s expertise as an interpreter.

These two tours were a stepping stone to the notion that we could offer tours to people with other sensory impairments. The idea of offering tours for blind and vision impaired visitors had been sitting in my mind for some time. Then I discovered Online Accessibility Training, an online programme from Art Education for the Blind (www.artheoyondsight.org) and connected this up with programmes for blind people at the Museum of Modern Art (www.moma.org) in New York – particularly the descriptions on their audio.

I approached the team at the gallery, knowing that it was always part of our strategic plan to be inclusive, and that the project would be supported.

4. Outline the steps you took from the beginning through to the introduction of the tours.

Once I had the gallery’s confirmed support to proceed, I set about developing tours for blind and vision impaired visitors. Here are some of the key steps I took in implementing tours as a regular inclusion in our public programmes.

- Research was vital and included online sites such as Art Education for the Blind and Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- I spent several weeks considering how to tailor some of these programmes and ideas to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
- I built a relationship with the Dunedin branch of the Blind Foundation and asked advice on the text for our first tour.
- Our first planned tour for 24 July 2010, the Dane Mitchell; Radiant Matter II exhibition, had a “perfume” component. Unfortunately, the tour had to be cancelled because of snow. I had spent a lot of time putting the tour together but it couldn’t be rescheduled because the exhibition was due to close. However, it still provided a valuable learning experience.
- The first tour to go ahead was in November 2011 – this time it was a tour of Gymnasium, a hands-on, tongue-in-cheek look at gymnastics. The Blind Foundation’s Tuesday Walking Group came and there was also a young blind student and his guide dog. We had excellent feedback.
- In the same month, we advertised a weekend tour of Beloved. I now call these “insightful tours” because the term “touch tours” doesn’t really apply; people can’t touch the artworks. I had a brainwave – to use samples that could be touched. For example, samples of tempera or acrylic or oil paint on small boards; or vinyl adhered to Perspex to emulate a particular artwork. Two guide dogs were in attendance.
In March 2012, I ran an insightful tour as part of the Haunts of Dickens exhibition. I provided samples of watercolour paper the same size as the exhibition watercolours, plus a sample mat board with a rectangle cut into it to receive the print. The tour finished off with a reading from Bleak House in Braille by Dave Allen, who is blind. There was great support for the gallery and for Louis Braille! In feedback about the tour, one blind participant wrote: “Thank you for the tour of Dickens. It was brilliant.”

I’ve made a practice of sending the text for the tours to the Blind Foundation to look over, and also to the gallery team for their information.

5. What were key challenges and how did you overcome them?

A key challenge was working out how to explain size to the tour participants. I overcome this by comparing the artwork or object to everyday household objects; for example, the Machiavelli painting is the size of a pillowcase.

Other challenges:

- How to engage blind/visually impaired people when they can’t touch the works. Where possible, we make samples available. I take time to hand a sample to each person and wait until they’ve finished touching it before taking it to the next person and placing their hands on the item. Other ideas are to ask people to put their bodies into particular poses: for example, “arms akimbo”, as in the Robin White painting Sam Hunt at the Portobello Pub; or running their fingers over their face when describing the tattoos on the Goldie painting of Te Aho.

- How to describe buildings: Describing people is much easier than describing something structural that’s made of fairly inert material. Haunts of Dickens was a difficult show to describe as it was almost solely buildings and one or two small figures in shadow. I still feel unsure about how to best describe buildings. One of the tour participants told me to be bold and not to be hesitant: in other words, take it until you make it! I will keep experimenting with varying degrees of uncertainty/certainty until I have a mix that feels right.

6. What are your three top tips for galleries and museums wishing to introduce tours for blind and low vision patrons?

- The first thing you should do is get in touch with your local branch of the Blind Foundation and/or other local vision impaired groups for support and advice. It’s important to start with the people you’re offering the service to. What do they want? It’s also good for marketing your tours: they have the networks.
- Always be welcoming. Sometimes, a group can be hesitant but each time they come, they bring more confidence with them.
- Take your time. Describe two or three works rather than ten – and always ask the tour group for constructive criticism. This is really helpful.
7. How important is staff commitment to accessibility initiatives such as the tours?

Staff commitment is absolutely top of the list – from the Director through to the visitor host, who welcomes the group, to the tour guide and the marketing and events team. And for our samples, our conservator and designer have been involved. We work as a team, supporting and drawing on each other’s areas of expertise. Without that, the insightful tours would be less enriching for the guide – and therefore for the participants.

For more information

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How to Put On an Accessible Exhibition

We have created this short guide for curators, programmers and exhibition organisers to give an overview of how to ensure that the exhibition you’re putting on is accessible and inclusive of disabled people.

This guide forms part of our series of free resources on art, disability and access. It should be seen as an overview to support an approach that considers access and inclusion from the very beginning and at all stages of an organisation or individual’s work. Almost 20% of the UK population identify as disabled; Shape’s resources are designed to provide arts organisations and professionals with the knowledge and tools required to help build a more diverse, equal and inclusive cultural sector for disabled people as artists, audiences and workers.

Planning at the Beginning

- We encourage everyone working in the arts with a desire to be more inclusive of disabled people to commence by familiarising themselves with the Social Model of Disability. The Social Model frames disability as a social construct created by access barriers, rather than a medical ‘problem’, and provides a dynamic and positive model which identifies causes of exclusion and proposes constructive changes to remove barriers and increase access.
- Build in time and have a budget for providing access. Find out in advance exactly how long it will take to secure access – many people are surprised to find that Sign Language Interpreters need to be booked weeks, if not months, in advance.
- If you have a choice of locations for the exhibition, go for street level or ground floor – think step-free every time and, if not, ensure there is a lift or a regulation-standard ramp to any areas accessed by steps.
- Any areas that will be accessed by visitors should be fully wheelchair accessible, including toilets! Accessible toilets are more than meets the eye – they need to accommodate the wheelchair user, a portable hoist and a PA, with a red alarm cord working, reaching the floor, and next to the toilet.
- Remember that spaces that have an intercom for entry are inaccessible to deaf people.
- If you’re having a call-out for artists, ensure this information is presented in an accessible way and specify that the exhibition will be accessible so that disabled artists feel welcome to apply.

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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• Convey the theme or brief accessibly, remembering that disabled people are far less likely to have an institutional art education background owing to its inaccessibility
• Give artists the option of being able to get in touch with you via email or phone should they have questions about the theme or brief, or should they want the information in an alternate format
• Try not to be too rigid about how artists can make submissions – some may wish to do it by video/audio, over the phone or by post for access reasons
• Consider booking Disability Equality Training for yourself and your co-organisers / teams / staff / colleagues

Working with Disabled Artists

• Be open about access requirements – at the initial stages of opening up a dialogue with artists, ask them or give them the opportunity to let you know if they have any access requirements that they would like you to be aware of
• Don’t make assumptions about what access requirements artists have or what their preferred methods of working are – if they request that you do or present something in certain way, have an accommodating rather than unyielding attitude
• Ask artists how they prefer to communicate – email, phone, Skype, another way?
• When meeting with an artist, ensure the place you’re meeting them in meets any access requirements they have
• Ask artists how they’d like to be presented or written about – some artists don’t want to be referred to as ‘disabled’, some artists are keen to identify publicly as such, and it all depends on the context and situation
• Pay disabled artists fairly. It’s common for disabled artists to incur more costs than non-disabled artists in many aspects of their work and lives, yet disabled artists are less likely than non-disabled artists to be paid fairly for their labour. Remember too that disabled people are also far more likely than non-disabled people to experience unemployment, low income and poverty

Presenting Work Accessibly

• Subtitle any film work that includes speech, or make a transcript available if that’s not possible
• We recommend a hang height of 135cm (centre of work) to be accessible
• Consider plinth height too – around 80cm is normally best, unless the work itself is very tall in which case you’ll need a shorter plinth
- You may want to stick tactile strips on the floor around a plinth or floor-based work to illustrate its location non-Visually.
- It’s important to provide Audio Description – a vocal summary of the visual information a sighted viewer would receive from the work – for all the work included. Upload each work’s audio description as an individual sound file to Audioboom, which is a more accessible platform for visually impaired users than Soundcloud, and point visually impaired visitors to this. For more information, see our resource on art and audio description.
- Allow at least 1.3 metres between furniture, plinths and other objects for people who may be using mobility equipment to move around easily and safely.
- If you’re also showcasing the work included online, make sure you alt text any images of work, or provide a description of them – this would be roughly the same as Audio Description.

Keeping the Space Itself Accessible

- Prop heavy doors open.
- If a ramp is needed to access any areas, like raised platforms, hire one in rather than building or improvising one – it’s more expensive but ensures it meets safety and usability regulations.
- Remember that even small steps or raised areas, for example in doorways, will require a ramp.
- Provide chairs or benches where people can sit to engage with the work.
- Have a comfortable quiet room or area where people can both sit and lay down (think sofa or floor cushions).
- Have water bowls available in the space or just outside for guide dogs to refresh themselves, and know where best to point those looking for a spot where guide dogs can relieve themselves.
- Make sure invigilators, front of house staff, security and other staff members who’ll be interacting with visitors have had Disability Equality Training if possible; if not make sure you brief them as best as you can.
- Allow visitors to make noise if they wish to, and let invigilators and staff know too.
- Brief staff on how to evacuate not just safely but accessibly in case of emergency.

Graphics, Hand-outs and Interpretation

- Have large print versions (with size 18 font) of all print material available on request.
• Providing **plain language** and **easy-read** versions of print material is also recommended – think multiple reading levels and methods
• Artwork interpretation labels should be placed at an accessible height (we recommend 1.1 metres) and should be at least size 14 font
• If there will be flash photography or flashing lights at the exhibition or an accompanying event, make this clear on a sign at the entrance to the space

**Marketing and Comms**

• Make it clear on your website and any Facebook events or other listings what the accessibility and access provisions will be, and be as specific as possible – don't just say “this event is accessible”
• Give both a phone number and an email address through which anyone with access-related questions can get in touch with you. Stuck for wording? Just say “If you have any access requirements you would like us to be aware of, please contact … and let us know”
• If your exhibition’s accessible, send it to us at marketing@shapearts.org.uk and we'll be happy to circulate it through our social media channels and e-newsletter
• If your Private View is ticketed or guest list only, make it clear that if someone needs to bring an access assistant or support worker they can do so
• Present print information like flyers accessibly – don't layer small text over busy images or patterns, for example
• Use language that is informed by the **Social Model of Disability**

**Setting up for the Private View**

• Have plenty of chairs available for those who would like to sit or rest
• High / ‘poseur’ tables and bar stools aren't accessible for many disabled people – use regular height tables and chairs instead
• The bar needs to be accessible too. Make sure it's not too high for wheelchair users or people of short stature (as many bars are) – no higher than 80cm
• Have multiple options available for glasses / drinking receptacles, and make sure you have straws available for anyone who requires one
• Book Sign Language Interpreters, not just if there will be a talk or speeches, but also just to be present in case they are needed, and book them well in advance. Try an organisation such as **Remark**
• Everyone wants their PV to be very busy, but it’s important to manage capacity – if the room is completely jam-packed with people and noise this will render it inaccessible for a high number of reasons. There are solutions: consider moving some seating or even the bar outside if this is a possibility so that guests can
congregate there, or stagger entry so that you have a relaxed / quiet / accessible viewing which starts just before things kicks off fully

- Because PVs can get overwhelming and stressful, if you have access to a separate area with comfortable seating, consider using it as a 'quiet area'

Additional Events

- Consider holding a BSL and/or lipspeaking tour (and remember that you’ll have to book interpreters well in advance) – a guided tour of the exhibition led by a curator or organiser talking about each of the works, interpreted by a Sign Language Interpreter and/or Lipspeaker, specifically for hearing impaired audiences.
- Consider holding a touch / Audio Description tour for visually impaired audiences – a guided tour of the exhibition led by a curator or organiser, incorporating touch of (some of) the works as well as live Audio Description of the works provided by an organisation such as VocalEyes, specifically for visually impaired audiences.
- If you’re organising any artist talks, discussions or ‘in conversation’ events, remember to provide access at these too – book BSL interpreters and a palantypist / live captioning (which also gives you the added bonus of being able to get a transcript of what was said afterwards). Stagetext provide a palantypist / live captioning service.
- If you’re holding an event with a seated audience, leave plenty of space for wheelchair users.
- If these events are paid, make it clear that disabled guests do not need to pay to bring a support worker or access assistant. Have an option available at the ticket booking stage for disabled guests to book a free place for a support worker or access assistant.

Shape offers access audits, consultancy and Disability Equality Training to the arts sector to engender diversity and inclusion as all levels of an organisation’s structure – click here for information.

If you would like to give feedback on this resource or if you have any questions please contact us.