Talking Art with Emily and Anne

Responding to individual enquirers is an important part of ADA’s role. Here is a recent exchange of emails between art student Emily Beaney and ADA trainer Anne Hornsby on audio describing works of art:

My name is Emily Beaney, a final year student at Edinburgh University carrying out research for my dissertation on the art of audio description. I am particularly interested in how works of art are interpreted and described.

The challenge is to create for the listener a close approximation of the experience of the sighted viewer. This includes factual details such as size, format, shapes, genre and materials. In addition, you need a description of the subject, the colours, the composition, the dynamics, the energy, the emotion, the style, perspective and orientation.

The ideal is to give your listeners enough information for them to form their own impression. There is a difference between saying a painting is "sad", for example, and talking about the lack of light and the hunched body language. In the same way, I avoid talking about art being "beautiful". I try to give listeners the clues from what I see without telling them what to think.

I am interested in examples of how audio describers tackle the more subjective challenges, e.g. abstract and conceptual pieces. I would appreciate any transcripts you may have on the subject of describing art.
Abstract art can certainly be a challenge, but if you explain that it is about a combination of colours, shapes, harmonies, and energies, then listeners will have some idea even if they cannot reproduce it.

Conceptual art is often easier to get your head around: “This is a vacuum cleaner in a display case. It's new, it's shiny, it's blue, it's an upright model, it’s positioned at … height”, etc. Everyone can visualise that and then move on to tackle why it is there and what the artist is trying to say.

For transcripts, Anne originally recommended the Altered Images website which featured audio descriptions and the artists' descriptions of works in this 2011 exhibition drawn from three Irish collections. Altered Images aimed to stimulate engagement with the visual arts, particularly by disabled people. Unfortunately, its website disappeared, apparently forever, while this article was in draft.

Anne’s additional suggestions include the audio guides for visually impaired visitors written for the Warhol and the Diva exhibition at the Lowry in 2011, which are available on the venue’s website at:

www.thelowry.com/events/andy-warhol-divas/audio/

and Tate’s i-Map, a digital resource for blind and partially sighted people (see endnote).

Manchester Museum’s website also features downloadable recordings of audio guides for selected exhibits, plus a transcript of the audio tour. Staff and visually impaired service users from Henshaw’s Society for Blind People were closely involved in developing the guides.

www.museum.manchester.ac.uk

I would also be grateful if you could give me an idea of how scripts are composed; who makes decisions about the content, choice of language, etc. and if you follow any guidelines on how objective the description should be.

I always work with curators or education staff, so that I give the description and they give the context. If I am recording a description, the script is sent for their approval before it is recorded. Sometimes I work with the actual artists and they will also have an input into the recorded or live description.

Description of works of art can never be totally objective – every describer works through the filters of their own personality, gender, age, background, education and culture – but we try to be as true to the work as possible in order to give listeners some sense of what the sighted viewer is seeing and enable them to engage with the work.

I would like your opinion on the idea, and the potential value to visually impaired people of extending the sensory experiences of audio description and touch to include smell and taste.

I think it is useful to add smell and taste elements. Whenever there is a smell involved, I point it out on the tour. There was a painting at Gallery Oldham recently in an exhibition of work by Jack Chesterman called Boat Stories. He had used tar mixed with paint and when you got close to the painting, the smell of tar took you immediately to a boat yard or ship.

When we run handling sessions at the Imperial War Museum North we always invite visitors to smell the objects – bits of shrapnel, shells, uniform fabrics, and so on. I would say this heightens the experience of touching and visualising. Workshops for blind and partially sighted visitors there have also included
tasting sessions of cakes made with dried eggs and other war time foods.

Marcus Dickey Horley who is Curator of Special Projects at the Tate, has done some great work in finding appropriate smells to accompany the works of art he is describing.

Similarly, when we were describing an exhibition of contrasting seascapes by L. S. Lowry and Maggie Hambling at the Lowry, the gallery assistant found pieces of music which he felt fitted the rhythms of the sea as depicted by the two different artists. On another occasion, at Manchester Art Gallery, the described tour was accompanied by a musician who had chosen specific songs and music for the paintings I described.

So it is fair to say there is some innovative work going on in developing a multi-sensory approach. You might be interested too in the work of Naomi Kendrick, who encourages the viewer to explore art through all the senses. Her website is at:

www.naomikendrick.co.uk

Visit the Mind’s Eye website for a video clip of Anne describing a Lowry painting, with comments by blind and partially sighted visitors to the gallery:

www.mindseyedescription.co.uk

Emily’s portrait entitled The Dowager Duchess was among the winning entries for the 2012 Derbyshire Open Art Competition, when she was awarded the Munro Trophy for young artists for the second year running:

www.derbyshire.gov.uk/leisure/buxton_museum/derbyshire_open/default.asp

Tate’s i-Map is “an online art resource designed for visually impaired people with a general interest in art, and art teachers and their visually impaired pupils. It incorporates text, audio, image enhancement and deconstruction, animation and raised images. Rather than examining the entire artwork at once, i-Map introduces detail in a carefully planned sequence, gradually building towards an understanding of the work as a whole.

The initial phase of i-Map launched in 2002 focused on four pairs of works by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. It explored their artistic innovations, influences and motivations, as well as some of the key concepts in modern art.

The second phase, The Everyday Transformed, focuses on six new works from Tate’s collection by artists who all share an interest in the material reality of everyday life and includes an exploration of movements such as Surrealism, Dada, Futurism, Pop Art and Rayonism.”

www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/imap-creative-access

**Update: Relaxed Performances**

- Our editorial comment on Edinburgh Festival Theatre’s relaxed performance of The Snowman implied there was no take up for the audio description which was specially written for the occasion. Bridget Stevens puts the record straight:

“Apologies if I gave you that impression. In fact, there were hundreds of children in our audience which meant there was no way we could check how many of them were visually impaired. Looking down at the audience from our box there were certainly plenty of children plugged into headsets and we were told afterwards about one little boy in particular, so physically disabled that he spends his life lying on his back on a special trolley, looking up at the ceiling. The message which came back about him was that listening to our description had transformed his experience of the show.
We describers were in on the project from the very beginning. The Kings and Festival Theatres are very keen on access and we had several meetings with their Learning & Participation Manager to discuss our input. We also had extremely positive feedback afterwards from theatre management.”

bridgetstevens@freeuk.com

- The report produced by the Relaxed Performance Project for its final conference last September can be downloaded from the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) website at: www.solt.co.uk

Intended as a guide for theatres planning a relaxed performance, the report includes an executive summary (featuring 10 tips for putting on a relaxed performance), case studies of the venues involved in the project, and an evaluation of the project’s findings.

For further information, venues should email: enquiries@soltukt.co.uk with the heading Relaxed Performances.

- Matthew Piper, Front of House Director at Norwich Theatre Royal and one of the resident describers, writes:

“I agreed to do an article for the ADA Newsletter about audio describing the relaxed performance of our pantomime Cinderella last January. Unfortunately it will be a short article as no-one took up the option. I had written to all bookers for this performance and included the fact that it was audio described, emphasising that, as well as being of use to those with sight loss, it might also help reinforce the story for listeners. Despite this, there was no take up on the day.

We were offering audio description on two other performances during the run so it may have been that people looking specifically for this opted for those shows instead.

We have already scheduled a relaxed performance for next year’s pantomime and will offer this as audio described as well as signed again, and perhaps make even more of it in advance publicity.

The relaxed performance was amazing, by the way. The audience was hugely responsive and attentive to the storyline and there was a great atmosphere throughout.

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- Jonathan Nash from Sightlines reports his experience of describing last season’s relaxed performance at Birmingham Hippodrome:

This year I was delighted to be a part of my first relaxed performance - Snow White at Birmingham Hippodrome. It was a first for the Hippodrome too and they really went for it.

The ratio of staff to guests was one to ten with nearly one hundred staff drafted in for the event, not only ushers and admin staff but also local social workers and specialists who work alongside many of the groups attending. All the staff (including me) were issued with sparkling sequinned hats to make us easily identifiable.

Nationally recognised signage for the auditorium, toilets, bars and food area was plentiful with clear directional arrows, and areas were set aside as chill out rooms or activity rooms for people who wanted or needed a break from the show. The script was trimmed to cut out any jokes which might be deemed offensive, all stage smoke, pyrotechnics and strobe lights were removed, and the house lights remained at a low level throughout.

A local disability drama group made a DVD about the whole theatre-going experience, which was sent out in advance to attendees as well as being available on the internet.
The DVD introduced the characters, and explained what to expect when you arrived at the theatre, who to ask for help, and how to make your way into the auditorium. It proceeded to talk everyone through the audience participation, what happens at the interval, when to clap, as well as setting up the pantomime tradition of men playing women and vice versa.

Adapted captioning was on offer as well as the audio description, for which I had one school which specialises in children with visual impairment and two other users who had sight loss as well as other disabilities. Both the description and introduction were simplified to avoid complex vocabulary or phrases.

Due to the huge undertaking involved, no touch tours were offered, although with hindsight these would not only have proved useful for the visually impaired audience, but also those on the autistic spectrum and others with limited learning difficulties such as ADD.

Whilst far from being an expert on the whole range of disabilities represented, there were also other groups who I feel might may have benefited from listening to the description in order to focus their attention on certain important moments in the story, especially in the chorus scenes where there was often a lot going on. People with Down syndrome might be one such group, although I am aware that some of those on the autistic spectrum may not benefit from the spoken word as it often takes too much time and thought to process and so can become overwhelming.

Amazingly, nobody left the auditorium when the dragon and later on the witch flew out over the audience, and everyone present had a wonderful time, including all the staff.

After dipping my toe into such a fantastic experience, I think we should all draw on our expertise and look to how we can adapt our current AD services to support this wonderful initiative.

jonathan_sightlines@yahoo.co.uk

- Looking ahead to the 2014/15 winter season, **Norwich** and **Birmingham** will again offer audio description with their relaxed performances of **Peter Pan** and **Jack and the Beanstalk**, while the RSC will introduce adapted audio description at **Stratford-upon-Avon** for the relaxed performance of its new WW1-themed play **The Christmas Truce**.

Please send us dates of future RPs + AD when details are announced. Hopefully, the venues and describers involved will be able to add their experience to our growing pool of knowledge.

**Comment: Live Cinema Screenings of Stage Performances**

In the past five years, live broadcasts of stage performances have become a regular feature of the cultural scene. Audiences are highly appreciative of the opportunity to see shows which distance or cost would otherwise make impracticable, and thrilled by the close ups of costumes and faces that the camera gives.
But has access provision for blind and partially sighted audiences kept pace? It seems not - though we would be delighted to be proved wrong!

Skating over the question of responsibility for access provision (because the Equality Act is non-specific, and there has been no test case to establish the division of responsibility in such cases); and also the technological implications (because they are far-reaching and unlikely to be resolved in the immediate future) – here is an interim suggestion which builds on a resource that is already available and requires no new technical solutions.

Most, if not all, the UK theatres and opera houses whose productions are currently live streamed produce an audio introduction to the show, which is available as a sound file or transcript on the venue’s website, and on a CD sent free to blind and partially sighted patrons when they book.

Below are three possible approaches to making this audio introduction available to blind and partially sighted audiences for the live screening as well:

- Promote internet access to the audio introduction via the websites of the producing company and local cinemas,
- Provide listening facilities locally for blind and partially sighted patrons to hear to the CD of the audio introduction in advance,
- Supply copies of the CD direct to visually impaired patrons who book for the show, from central and/or local distribution points.

Additionally, explore local contacts, such as organisations for blind and partially sighted people, and enlist their help in promoting the audio introduction, and possibly arranging listening facilities and/or CD distribution if the cinema lacks the capacity to do this.

The first option – publicising internet access to the audio introduction – demands no more than liaison, a couple of lines of text and a link. Although it is no substitute for scene-by-scene description, it would be a step towards full access to live screenings for people with sight loss.

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Report: Talking Dress Workshop

South London was the location for ADA’s second Talking Dress Workshop which began in a studio under a railway arch in aptly-named Coldharbour Lane, and ended at the National Theatre’s Costume Store on Brixton Road.

After introducing the topic for the afternoon – costumes, characters and context – workshop leader Anne Hornsby handed over to Bristol-based theatre designer Mick Bearwish.

Pat Hayes continues: Mick explained that theatre designers in the UK are usually responsible for both costumes and set. He works to the text of the play and the author’s intention. Settings and costumes are designed to reflect period, location, character and genre.

The designer is one of the first people the director consults, as all the departments involved in a production have an input to the design. After extensive research into the
context of the play – period, place, season, historical and socio-political background – the designer produces initial sketches to discuss with the director. Other departments are then brought into the discussion and final designs are produced.

Budgetary considerations mean it is rare for all the costumes to be made specifically for a production, and they are usually a mix of stock, hired, made, and off the peg. There is also input from the cast when rehearsals start, and the designer tries to accommodate each actor’s comfort and preferences (within reason), and how the actor wants to play the character.

A designer has to make many decisions regarding the style of a costume and needs to take into account, for example, historical period; colour and its symbolism (red for anger, white for purity, etc); and texture (heavy leather and furs for villains, suedes and soft flowing materials for hero/ines). Other factors include how the clothes are worn (posture and movement); how lived in they look (stains etc); accessories such as wigs and footwear, which is extremely important for its effect on gait and movement; and personal props such as spectacles, purses, and jewellery. These are exactly the sort of points that a describer needs to pick up on, as they all give useful clues as to character.

Mick concluded by showing us his designs for a forthcoming Bristol Old Vic Theatre School production of Georges Feydeau’s Sauce for the Goose, set in the 1890s, with a varied array of characters and costumes. Seeing these sketches gave us a greater insight into the complexity of costume design and its role in the telling and understanding of a story.

After Mick’s enlightening talk, we set off on a wet but entertaining tramp to the National Theatre’s Costume Store, where we were treated to another fascinating session by our very knowledgeable tour guide, Jessica Proudman. Jessica led us through a treasure trove of costumes covering eons of history, from the armoury of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans up to 21st century leisurewear; and not only costumes, but a cornucopia of accessories to complete each outfit – undergarments, gloves, hats, walking sticks, and masks.

Wardrobe essentials at the NT Costume Store captured by Stef Bell

After the tour, we split into groups to select and discuss individual costumes and how best to describe them in order to give a picture of the character. There were absorbing discussions about the difference between pantaloons and bloomers, when is a sheen a shimmer, and how lighting affects a costume’s appearance.

Unfortunately, with so much to see, we did not have time to share ideas but we will able to take them along to the next workshop. In the meantime, we have been given lots of food for thought about what costumes tell us about characters within the context of the production.

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Reviews: Audio Description Standards and Research

- ADA’s e-bulletin Note Pad reported recently that the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is on the brink of producing a new Technical Specification on audio description. This is part of a suite of published and draft recommendations on Information technology:


It covers audio description content and working practices,

Rory Heap, who coordinates the Disability Expert Reference Group at the British Standards Institution, and is himself an AD user, confirms that a Technical Specification is one level below a Standard. He plans to set up an informal consultative group of individuals with a working knowledge of AD to influence the Specification’s further development if and when it moves towards full Standard status.

The draft Specification cannot be made available for copyright reasons, but Rory is happy to talk or meet with anyone who is interested in its progress. His contact details are:

☎ 07889 496000
✉ rory.heap@gmail.com

- For anyone interested in earlier standards, RNIB produced a Comparative study of audio description guidelines prevalent in different countries, in September 2010. The report is not referenced on RNIB’s new website but is available as an email attachment from: office@audiodescription.co.uk

Written by Sonali Rai, with input from Joan Greening and Leen Petrie, it reviews guidelines for audio description of film and television programmes published in the UK, Greece, Germany, France, Spain and the United States. All the guidelines emphasise content rather than technology, and there is a significant overlap between the principles and practice they endorse for screen description, and those embedded in ADA’s accredited training course for stage describers.

The study’s conclusion that the guidelines agree on all but a few minor points is picked up in a review of AD and subtitling guidelines on eAccess+ Hub at:

www.eaccessplus.eu

The review is chiefly concerned with television. It includes links to all the documents cited, although in the case of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland’s guidelines, and possibly others, access may be denied at entry point.

- If you are curious about academia’s response to audio description, the hub also has a summary entitled Research on Audio Description: the state of the art. It covers university-based research to September 2011.

Project: Access AD via an App
Download Audio Description on Your Smartphone

Sonali Rai writes from RNIB: Despite its ubiquitous presence in our lives, most of the leading and very successful video on-demand service providers have failed to look into the delivery of audio description, with the exception of three (very committed) UK broadcaster led services, BBC iPlayer, 4oD and Sky Go.
In a study commissioned by YouView, the market research firm YouGov found that an average family in the UK spends around six hours in a typical week watching content on these on-demand services. With the demise of DVD and Blu-ray discs imminent, it is more important today than before that we focus on ensuring that online players become easier to use for people with sight loss, and AD becomes available across services.

Authority for Television On-Demand (ATVOD) has convened a working group that looks at the technical feasibility of building in the functionality to deliver audio description on such platforms.

At the same time, RNIB is investigating an alternative potential model for the delivery of AD, using a smartphone app. It is by no means a new idea; a number of such applications, using different technologies to deliver the same result, are currently in use across Europe. Such apps have found several uses in the past, to deliver alternate language tracks in cinemas, download and sync AD track to watch a film on VOD service at home, and even access AD in a theatre.

However, the implications of a launch such as this for AD users in the UK will need to be carefully reviewed. Over the coming few months, we hope to gather feedback from content and service providers who have lent their support to the development of AD over the years on the viability of such a development for the UK market, and as always, take into account the views of the target audience, the AD users.

To get more information on this piece of work or share your thoughts on the potential for this delivery model, please contact:

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This newsletter has been compiled by members of ADA’s Executive Committee. Readers’ contributions are warmly welcomed. Please send your news, views, comments and corrections to:

office@audiodescription.co.uk

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