

Beacon Round 7: Case Study 1 **'Sensing Sculpture' at Wolverhampton Art Gallery**

'Sensing Sculpture' is one of a number of exhibitions by Wolverhampton Museums and Galleries, which has helped to broaden its appeal to the difficult to reach groups, which make up a substantial proportion of the city's population. In the case of 'Sensing Sculpture' the aim was to reach visually impaired people, by working in partnership with them and bodies representing them. The resulting exhibition also formed part of the publication: 'Touching Audiences, designing for interpretation in the gallery'.

Approach

'Sensing Sculpture' began as a result of consultation with Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) Schools. Plans and bids were developed through discussion with The Clore Foundation, Esmee Fairburn trust, RNIB, RNIB Schools, West Midlands Arts Disability Arts Forum, Regional Arts Lottery Programme (RALP), and Wolverhampton University Sculpture Department. The exhibition was then developed through a multi-disciplinary team approach at the gallery involving the curation department, audience development and the education team.

Aims and processes

How could visual art be made accessible to audiences without sight? This was the main challenge of the project. It was decided to draw upon the way in which contemporary artists often like to use direct sensory response as a means of exploring art itself, new and traditional. In order to do this the gallery had to be prepared to make key works available for public to experience through touch. It would also need to investigate how the target audience could experience art; so, extensive consultation, evaluation, residences by artists in six schools and workshops were undertaken. Gallery staff also received important training on how to facilitate visits for the visually impaired.

The exhibition

Audiences experience 'Sensing Sculpture' through handling the exhibits, Artefacts consist of 3D pieces, large and small, rough and smooth, warm to the touch or cold like marble, abstracted forms and more traditional figurative forms. Light, sound and smell are also used to enhance visitor experience. An extensive audio guide featuring the artists talking about their work is available. Both Braille and large print removable explanations of work are at hand beside the exhibits. Through the exhibition both visual impaired and other visitors are able to understand the concept of form, texture, process, materials and technique. The design of the exhibition space was crucial to easy access by partially sighted visitors. Access by lift was essential, dark blue non-reflective flooring, white plinths, yellow walls, and a textured pathway in the carpet all helped ease of movement between the exhibits.

Key features

- a means by which the visually impaired are able to acquire a meaningful, stimulating and enjoyable experience of visual art
- collaboration with key groups to ensure the exhibition is really working and not just based on well meaning misconceptions about visual impairment
- an exhibition that also serves other gallery users well, stimulating and informing them about sculpture
- production of an influential study on gallery interpretation
- commissions for contemporary artists
- this exhibition was chanced upon by a visitor from the US, so impressed, he proceeded to present 'Sensing Sculpture' to a conference in New York. Much to the surprise of one of our staff also at the conference and also giving a talk on 'Sensing Sculpture'

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