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THE MUSEUM ACCESSIBILITY SPECTRUM

Recognising the multidimensional access needs of all museum audiences

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As editors of this book, it is important to acknowledge our own positionalities and privileges, and the influences that these will have on this volume. Alison is neurodiverse, with developmental auditory dyslexia, and Vanessa is a wheelchair user. We are both white, heterosexual, cis-gender women, who grew up in middle-class homes in wealthy countries with no lived experience of conflict or war. We have higher level degrees and have had access to museums throughout our lifetimes. We are passionate about museums, inclusion and broadening participation. We work with museum professionals to explore and unpick individual and systemic biases that can mean that practitioners' good intentions may not have the desired outcomes. We seek to co-create new ways of thinking and working that deconstruct the embedded system of othering that dominates museums and society more broadly. Alison is an interdisciplinary researcher, trained in cognitive psychology (and employed in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Westminster, London, UK). Building on her previous work on imagery, imagination, and spatial processing in congenitally totally blind people and the sighted, Alison's work is now focused on access, inclusion, interpretation, and evaluation within the museum sector. With a background in art history and museum education, Vanessa has extensive expertise in access and inclusion. As the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's Access Programs Manager since 2015, she has advocated for accessibility and led the development of programs and initiatives to enhance the experience of all visitors, including those with disabilities.

Central to the practice of the modern museum sector are the principles of access, inclusion, diversity, sustainability, and community participation (ICOM, 2022). As the curators of our cultural and social histories, the heritage sector is morally and legally required to provide reasonable adjustments to ensure equitable access

for all people. The dictionary definition of access is the means or opportunity to approach or enter a place. However, in relation to our cultural heritage, within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948), the concept of access was broadened to include physical, sensory, and cognitive. The human right to take part in cultural life was re-asserted and enshrined in Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 and has been signed by 99 countries. In the following years, these rights have been increasingly ratified within law across the globe.

The museum sector has a strong desire to improve access and inclusion. However, access initiatives still tend to take place through limited programming and/or a small number of museum exhibits. As such, the majority of disabled audiences are granted access to only small, and potentially token areas of the collection, compared to those that are available to the majority 'abled' audiences. Although the rights to culture are universal, and access provisions have slowly increased in many places around the world, arguably one of the significant barriers that hinders progress is the implicit bias that underpins society's understanding of access. Specifically, this edited volume argues that the current concept of access is ableist and fundamentally flawed. The concept of 'access' sets up a binary distinction between the nondisabled majority, and the disabled minority. This creates an othering of disabled individuals by positing them as different to the normative majority (see Jensen, 2011). Central to the concept of othering is the subordination of a societal group (disabled) in relation to a dominant group (abled). This dichotomy sets up those who have access (the assumed normative majority) against those who do not have access (the disabled minority). From a practical perspective within museums, this can risk providing a justification for a lesser amount of resources being spent on the assumed (disabled) minority of visitors, relative to the assumed (abled) majority. However, this simple dichotomy also denies the fact that probably at least half of the global population, the majority of which are nondisabled, do not engage with museums (e.g. Mendoza, 2017). It also ignores other barriers to potential museum audiences, including, but not limited to, physical, sensory, cognitive, social, and cultural. Further, by assuming this 'abled' majority does have full access, this bias denies the fact that provisions created by and for the disabled community have been shown to enhance the experience of nondisabled visitors (e.g. Eardley et al., 2022; Hutchinson and Eardley, 2021, 2023; Chottin and Thompson, 2021). We use 'abled' in our chapters, and not 'able-bodied' because 'abled' can stand in contrast to all forms of disability, including but not only physical disability. We are also using 'abled' and not nondisabled in order to highlight the problematic othering of disabled communities and the implicit assumption of the lack of access and inclusion requirements for the assumed 'abled' majority. We consider 'abled' to be a fictional and biased assumption that there is some sort of normative elite (we will explore these concepts more in Chapter 2). We talk about access and inclusion as interrelated but distinct concepts. Access has both physical and conceptual

dimensions. Access most commonly describes the provisions provided by organisations or businesses to adapt their ‘normative’ offer for people excluded by core provision. Inclusion is about ensuring that all people feel they are an equal part of something, and that they are able to be themselves within any situation. Inclusion is sometimes used to describe provision for groups who are excluded from standard provision (often for social or cultural reasons), but who are not recognised as being disabled. Inclusion is not possible without access. However, implicit within both current definitions is the assumption that there is a majority who have access and who are included. The museum accessibility spectrum challenges this.

The museum accessibility spectrum

This edited volume is a collection of works by practitioners, artists, and academics who are re-imagining museums in an equitable and inclusive way. By challenging the ableist bias, our aim is to transform thinking in order to develop practice within the museum sector. We propose that access needs should be understood as a multidimensional accessibility spectrum that recognises all barriers to potential audiences, including, but not limited to, physical, sensory, emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural (Eardley et al., 2022). All people sit in different places on the different dimensions of this multistrand spectrum. Like a rainbow with multiple colour bands, or a length of string made up of its individual strands entwined together, the accessibility spectrum proposes that museum access and inclusion be re-imagined as a multifaceted spectrum of access needs. It also recognises the inter-relatedness of access, inclusion, diversity, and broadening participation. For each strand or band of needs (each of which will be an individual spectrum), individuals will sit at different points. As an example, a curator with a physical disability will sit at different points on a spectrum for physical access needs and on another for social access. Social access needs will be extremely low, because working as a curator will likely give them a facility and sense of ownership of all museums across the sector. Where a curator sits on a scale of conceptual access will depend on the type of collections – if their expertise was 19th-century art, they would sit at a different place for an exhibition on that period, compared to modern abstract art, and again on a different place for an exhibition on palaeontology in a natural history museum. Similarly, an adult with a bad back and a familiarity with museum settings but with no knowledge of fine art would sit at different points on a range of spectrums of access needs compared to a physically fit young adult visiting an art museum, who had never set foot in a museum previously. These two art museum visitors are likely to need different support within the museum setting. They may share some similar needs on a spectrum of conceptual access, but their needs in relation to feelings of belonging, ownership, and representation within the museum environment are likely to be different.

We are using audience to describe each member of society, whether they have visited a museum or not. We also use museums as a shorthand for the museum sector, including museums, galleries, and historic sites. Although all members

of the global population have the potential to be an audience member for any museum, from a practical perspective, most museums are likely to imagine their audiences within a smaller scale. We are explicitly moving away from the notion of target audiences, and core museum visitors (see Chapter 2 for more detail). Within our framework, each audience member, or individual, sits within the museum accessibility spectrum. Everyone has different places within the multiple strands that make up the museum accessibility spectrum. Each strand is an individual spectrum in its own right. It is not necessary to name each of the individual strands, but it is important to acknowledge that there are multiple strands, and people how those strands interact with each other will be different for everyone.

This inclusive approach does not suggest that all aspects of a museum can be all things to all people. Rather, this edited volume argues that we need a different approach to museum audiences because the current concept of access is ableist and fundamentally flawed in two keyways. First, by setting up a binary distinction between the ‘abled’ majority and the ‘disabled’ minority, there is an assumption that this ‘majority’ has access to collections as a result of their ‘abled’ status. This denies the fact that broad sectors of society do not engage with museum environments. Second, by assuming that the ‘abled’ majority already has full access to museums, it denies the fact that provisions created by and for the disabled community have also been shown to enhance the experience of ‘abled’ visitors.

Where an individual will sit on the different strands of the museum accessibility spectrum will partly be informed by identities. We have multiple identities, including both protected identities (such as age, race, gender, disability) and non-protected identities (which could include things such as museum goer, musician, pet lover). This multifaceted approach recognises the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Cooper, 2016). Intersectionality, a theory developed by black feminist theorists acknowledges that neither our identities nor our lived experiences can be understood on a single axis. Central to this theory is an acknowledgement of the potential culminations of systemic imbalances of power, and the oppressions that results. Disabled people are not simply disabled. For example, they have differing gender identities, ages, races, economic statuses, and interests. They also have different social and cultural contexts. Similarly, ‘abled’ people are not simply nondisabled.

Museums are seeking to become relevant and appealing to broader ranges of society. An important part of this is acknowledging and addressing the systemic oppressions in which museums have been complicit. Ng, Ware and Greenberg (2017: 143) mandate an anti-oppressive framework so that museums can ensure that they are not: ‘re-inscribing and perpetuating privilege by excluding or disempowering visitors with marginalized identities’. We argue that these processes and goals will be enhanced and accelerated by taking an intersectional, or multidimensional approach (see Chapter 2 for more detail).

Towards a radical museum model: the museum accessibility spectrum in practice

This edited volume is split into five sections. As part of the introduction to the museum accessibility spectrum, Chapter 2 delves more deeply into the history of museums, access, and disability, to demonstrate why museums need to shift their ways of working if they want to become truly inclusive. The three sections that follow acknowledge both the global nature of the museum sector and that the origins and development of thinking in relation to both museum practice and disability are different around the world. Although international, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of the contributions in this volume are drawn from the global north. A conversation with only the global north is only half of a conversation, with only half of the possible solutions. We hope that this volume will provide a starting point to grow conversations. To support this, these sections take a constructively critical approach, providing some insights into the amazing work that is being carried out. The contexts of the work may be specific to a particular country; however, in each chapter, there are experiences, practices, and insights that could be transferable to other countries and contexts.

The section entitled ‘Disability Gain’ includes chapters that explore ways in which museums can be enhanced for all visitors by considering how approaches to access can be applied and imagined inclusively. All of the chapters in this section are authored or co-authored by people with lived experience of disability, deafness or neurodivergence, and/or are based around a co-creation methodology. In the first chapter in this section, *Feeling our way: Anti-ableist provocations for the future of inclusive design in Museums*, William Renel, Jessica Thom, Solomon Szekir-Papasavva, and Chloe Trainor discuss a series of in-person and online events and creative encounters co-created by disabled-led organisation Touretteshero and the Wellcome Collection (London, UK) in 2022. This chapter provides important and informative examples of the ways in which anti-ableist thinking can be practically applied within a museum setting. Alicia Teng’s chapter, *Developing the Calm Room: A Journey of Creating an Accessible Space for Inclusion and Well-being* provides an example of the way in which co-creation was used to develop an inclusive calm room at the National Gallery Singapore. It also provides important insights into the support and training needed by both neurotypical staff and audience members, to ensure that such a space can function effectively and inclusively within a museum environment. Hannah Thompson’s chapter, *French Nineteenth-Century Art Writing as Audio Description: the case of Edouard Manet*, provides a consideration of the ways in which audio description was used in the 19th Century, often by leading writers of the day, as a print-based tool to share experiences of art with sighted audiences who were unable to attend an exhibition in person. It creates a case for the use of descriptions that include references to artistic techniques, personal opinion, and the various ways a beholder looks at and responds to a work of art. Meredith Peruzzi’s chapter, *Fostering a sense of*

belonging for deaf visitors through community partnership and deaf-gain, provides insights from a Deaf museum practitioner in the US on the ways in which museums can welcome D/deaf audiences. In Chapter 7, artist Fayen d'Evie describes the ways in which she is developing access into an art form. *Blundering into Sensorial Conversations* introduces blundering, a method for grappling with the intangible, the unknown, while also affirming wayfinding through blindness. She draws on this to provide examples of her practice that could support museum practitioners to take an access-as-welcome approach, which underpins her hybrid artist-curatorial practice.

The section 'Social and Cultural Access' considers ways in which museums have considered communities and cultures that have not traditionally sat within the notion of the core museum visitor – and here we draw explicitly on the Withers' (2012) Radical Model of Disability, and his argument that, in reality, nondisabled has meant 'ideal': '...white, straight, productive, profitable and patriarchal' (2012: 6) (see Chapter 2, this volume, for further discussion). The first chapter in this section, *Social and cultural barriers to inclusion: class and race at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood* by Charlotte Slark, takes the V&A (Bethnal Green) Museum of Childhood in the UK (recently rebranded as The Young V&A) as a case study to consider the motivations and actions museums have taken towards building museum engagement in local strongly working-class communities. In Syrus Marcus Ware's chapter, *Going through the portal: permeable walls and immersive community engagements rooted in disability justice*, he describes the ways in which his artistic practice creates inclusive museum experiences that enable audiences to explore and engage with the intersections of aspects, including disability, race, gender, and sexual identity. In the following chapter, *What is a museum? Reframing the power dynamic between museums and audiences*, Amparo Leyman Pino considers the ways in which museums need to re-imagine their relationship with audiences, in order to become relevant and representative of all communities. She argues that museums need to move away from the deficit model, in which museums are there to fill a gap (in understanding/experience) in audiences. Instead, she advocates for museums to reframe value, to recognise the strengths of communities, and to become a service to the needs of communities. In the next chapter, *Stepping Aside: A reflection on how Museums can transfer power to communities, open up collections, and increase access through the creation of memory boxes*, Katie Cassels and Charlotte Paddock (National Maritime Museum, UK) discuss the development of memory boxes to benefit elders from the Windrush generation, who immigrated to the UK from the Caribbean. They discuss the shift in power that the collaborating communities demanded, as both sides sought to create contents that were relevant to a population who had different cultural influences and experiences to the white cultural majority in the UK at that time. In the final chapter in this section, *The Sacred Cave of Kamukuwaká: enabling digital futures for Indigenous knowledge in the Amazonian Xingu*, Thiago Jesus gives a powerful example of the ways in which museums and cultural heritage organisations can apply their

skills and understanding to serve the needs of indigenous communities, resulting in community-driven sustainable cultural heritage resources that not only can support and enrich the connectivity of the local community, but which can also serve to facilitate the ethical sharing of indigenous communities' lived experiences and heritage around the world.

The third section 'Agents of Social Change' considers ways in which museums or museum practitioners can implement or have implemented systemic change within their own practice. In the first chapter in this section, *No laughing matter? Reimagining the statuette of a 'comic' actor with dwarfism at the British Museum*, Isabelle Lawrence describes and discusses the ways in which co-creation, taking a 'contemporary lens' of disability activism, can support an ethical and relevant re-interpretation of disability-related objects in museum collections. The next chapter, *Curating for Change: How can D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent curators drive change in museums in terms of cultural representation and inclusive interpretation?*, provides details of a highly important project in the UK, which has been working to address the under-representation of D/deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people within curatorial practice in the UK through a programme of fellowships and placements. Esther Fox shares the details and voices of a selection of the curatorial fellows who have been working with the host museums to extend and expand interpretation of disability-related narratives within the museums' collections. In the next chapter, Corey Timpson, based in Canada, provides an insight into the development of his practice. His chapter, entitled *Inclusive design and accessibility: a methodology of perpetual evolution and innovation*, discusses how an inclusion design approach needs to be embedded into the conception of a museum or exhibition. In the next chapter, *Cultural Inclusion in Times of Crisis: Old and New Traumas*, Evgeniya Kiseleva-Afflerbach provides an insight into societal biases against disabled people in Russia, and the ways in which the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, have sought to become agents of social change through inclusive practices and representation. In her chapter, *Museums for Equality: Combating Prejudice, Promoting Human Rights and Practices of Social Inclusion in Egypt's Museums*, Nevine Nizar Zakaria discusses similar themes and the approach that Egyptian museums have taken to create inclusive accessible museum environments. She explores the ways in which Egyptian museums have sought to expand their provision and offerings beyond the tourists, to invite and support local communities. Wrapping up this section in, *Social inclusion, cultural participation and public ruptures at Iziko South African National Gallery: A close look at Our Lady and Art of Disruption*, Bongani Ndhlovu and Rooksana Omar examine the ways in which their museum has sought to expand relevance and engagement of communities related to issues of gender in South Africa. They discuss the controversies and challenges that arose from the museums' work, including the legal action which withheld their right as an institution, to freedom of speech.

In the final section, the final chapter, from the volume editors, considers the potential ways in which the museum accessibility spectrum, and the work discussed

within the examples in the book, might impact future practice. It acknowledges that while some of the thinking that underpins this book is familiar to museum access practitioners around the world, museums (and society more broadly) struggle to think beyond a dominance of vision, and access as an add-on to provision. The next chapter begins by exploring the roots of some of the systemic ableist biases that need to be changed.

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