

Case Study 2

Experiencing arts through touch

The Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) in partnership with Vision Australia and Sculpture by the Sea.

For vision-impaired people, touch is the main way to acquire information or access a work of art. By feeling the shape of a piece and its textures, you are able to imagine the work. If also assisted by a guide who can fill in the missing gaps of information, a person with vision impairments is then able to experience and appreciate art in a similar way to a person with full vision.

AGWA had been conducting successful touch tours of specific works at the Gallery for some time, but as part of the DAII Pilot Program the Art Gallery was able to expand on these tours and integrate the program with the annual **Sculpture by the Sea** exhibition.

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“As a part of a family day in 2001, we had our first touch tour for people who were sight impaired and their families, which was incredibly successful,” says Lesley Goodman, educator at AGWA. “People were able to touch the sculptures; it was quite unique as not a lot of other galleries do it.

“After that we had Sensational Art days where we trawled through the gallery stores downstairs with a conservator and looked for artworks which were sturdy enough for touch tours. We selected works from our collection – about eight of them – and set up a special exhibition. We worked closely with a conservator to see what was suitable, because obviously you can’t have works that are too fragile, have pointy edges, or are badly positioned.”

The idea to branch out the touch tours beyond the confines of the Gallery came about from Pam Barras, a consumer representative on the Disability Services Planning Committee at the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) and coordinator of Vizhelp, a support group for parents of the blind or vision-impaired.

“Pam came to one of the touch tours and was blown away by the whole experience,” Ms Goodman says. “She had also been to the **Sculpture by the Sea** exhibition in 2008 and was struck by the thought that it would make a lot of sense to have touch tours there. There was an obvious connection because we had the skills and guides, and funding from the DAII project provided the money to train people and the resources to organise it.”

The training

In order to prepare for the touch tours, 28 of the Art Gallery’s staff and volunteer guides participated in training with Caroline Lewis of Vision Australia.

“Caroline came into the Gallery twice because it’s better to have smaller groups and some of the training was theoretical about the various impairments,” Goodman says. “She has glasses that you can put on to simulate vision-impairments, so you get to see what it’s like for someone with cataracts, for example. A lot of it was hands-on, just walking around with these glasses on and going up to the Gallery and doing touch tours – it was an experiential training program.”

Gallery guide, Fay Thurling, who has been a volunteer guide at the Gallery for over

12 years, agreed the training was an integral part of the process.

“You have to be aware that just because there’s a vision-impairment it doesn’t mean they’re completely blind,” Ms Thurling says. “You need to keep the person you’re guiding fully aware of what you’re doing and be aware yourself of any possible snags. Getting to try out various visual impairments in the training, some of them were quite scary. For example, you couldn’t see very much coming down stairs and you became aware of just how dependent you are of the person leading you.”

Once the **Sculpture by the Sea** exhibition was in place at Cottesloe Beach in March 2009, Lesley Goodman, Pam Barras and Caroline Lewis went to the beach to select the work for the touch tours.

“Not every work is suitable for a touch tour, so we looked at the works together with the curator of **Sculpture by the Sea**,” Ms Goodman says. “Things like access and how close the beach is are important, and a few people had seeing-eye dogs, so we had to make sure that the sculptures we chose were suitable.”



Photo courtesy of Art Gallery of WA

The Art Gallery's relationships with partners such as Vision Australia were instrumental to the success of the project.

"The partnerships are something we need to build upon if we're going to be involved in **Sculpture by the Sea** in the future. I think it takes time to build up relationships for a program to get going. There are quite a few organisations in Perth who support people with visual impairments, so it's a matter of building up relationships with them too."

The tour

The **Sculpture by the Sea** touch tours began with a meeting on the beach with the curator about the artworks followed by a 45-minute tour with a guide, which would either involve the participant and their carer, or just the participant with a seeing-eye dog. Eight sight-impaired people participated in the program.

For the first time in Australia, sight-impaired visitors to the **Sculpture by the Sea** exhibition were able to fully appreciate and interact with the sculptures on display at the beach.

"The participants were absolutely blown away by the experience," Ms Goodman says. "The feedback was extremely positive. Most of them had never done anything like that before. Pam Barras brought two of her friends who didn't know much about art, but they were really quite moved by the whole experience."

Gallery guide Fay Thurling agreed it was a successful project and one which highlighted that sight-impaired people could participate fully in a popular community event.



Photo courtesy of Art Gallery of WA

"It went very well. I was very comfortable with the man I was taking around," Ms Thurling says. "When you're doing it, you don't even think of the general public, but the general public were obviously very much aware of what was going on, and they reported back to the base tent that they were fascinated."

“I felt good, the participants felt good and the general public were impressed.”

"The man I took around was visually-impaired but he knew shapes and colours. He was quite interesting because he responded best to the sculptures that were very representative. The ones that were abstract were hard for him to comprehend because they were very large and he could only feel a part of it, so he couldn't get the whole effect."

Beryl Matthews, another participant in the **Sculpture by the Sea** touch tours program, said she really enjoyed and appreciated the day.

“It was beautiful,” she says. “I didn’t initially think much of it because I didn’t think I would be able to feel it or see it, but we were allowed to handle all of them and it fascinated me that my interpretation was nothing like the sculptures,” she laughs. “Each sculpture was differently designed and built – it was very exciting actually.

“I had been into the Art Gallery and handled a lot of the works in there, but this was entirely different. You had the chance to walk with a guide who would explain the sculptures. She let us put our own interpretation on it and it was interesting to see how the sculpture and I didn’t agree,” she laughs.

The challenges

According to the feedback received from participants, everybody enjoyed the tours and found it to be a worthwhile exercise, but the sight-impaired community did not support the event as much as the Gallery had hoped.

“Somebody booked in a big group and they didn’t come,” Ms Goodman says. “It was very disappointing because we had the guides ready to go and everything was set up, and then for some reason, they didn’t come. There are a lot of areas that we need to overcome if we do it again.”

Pam Barras who helped with the whole planning of the event and participated in the touch tours, said support from the sight-impaired community would come in time.

“It will happen, it’s just that it is something new and different,” Ms Barras explains. “Not the sort of thing that people with low vision

would be used to doing. Some people are a bit reluctant and they don’t quite have the confidence to go out and participate.

“But they know what it is and they’re told about it, or they listen to an article about it or hear verbal feedback and get a better appreciation. As it becomes a regular thing it will become more popular and the numbers will probably increase,” Ms Barras said.

The future

The Art Gallery of Western Australia has again provided free touch tours to vision impaired visitors at **Sculpture by the Sea** in 2010, and hopes to extend its participation in future years.

“It is important for people to see that people with vision-impairments can be out in the community and they can do the same things that everybody else can,” Ms Goodman says. “There are a lot of sight-impaired children in the school population, and **Sculpture by the Sea** runs a schools program as well, so we would like to combine the touch tours with school groups and their practical art workshops.”

“I would also like to start having ongoing relationships with participants and other people involved, like Blind Citizens WA. We now have a whole group of guides who are trained up in vision awareness and we also got a lot of outside publicity through local newspapers and radio, which is great visibility for the Gallery.”

Outline of project

The Art Gallery of Western Australia held tactile tours at the 2009 Sculpture by the Sea exhibition at Cottesloe Beach for people with vision impairments.

Partners

The **Art Gallery of Western Australia** aims to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the arts for the enjoyment and cultural, artistic, educational and intellectual enrichment of the people of WA and its visitors.

Vision Australia is a partnership between people who are blind, partially-sighted or have low vision. They are united by their passion that in the future people who are blind or have low vision will have access to, and fully participate in every part of life they choose.

Sculpture by the Sea in Western Australia is an annual event that features over 60 local, interstate and international artists who transform Perth's Cottesloe beach into a stunning sculpture park overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Outcomes

The Art Gallery of Western Australia received the Vision Australia **'Making a Difference'** Award for best practice for the **Sculpture by the Sea** Touch Tours project. Pam Barras was a finalist in the Disability Services Commission **'Count Us In'** Awards 2009.

Using the same training module developed in the DAII pilot project, the Art Gallery is working with the Alzheimer's Association on a tactile series for 80 to 100 participants.



Photos courtesy of Art Gallery of WA