


## Increased Subjectivity in Audio Description of Visual Art: A Focus Group Reception Study of Content Minimalism and Interpretive Voicing

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### Abstract

This article discusses a focus group reception study of visual art audio description (AD) that focuses on the standard style as described in previous corpus-based studies, along with one of the less frequent approaches also found among current practices, namely the “gist” style. The results from the qualitative analysis of the focus group discussions show that user experience of the gist AD style varies among participants, with some reporting positive impressions thereof. In addition, users’ experience of AD has several layers, since the discussions progressed from specific aspects to broader questions dealing with the very definition of AD and user preferences regarding visual arts.

**Key words:** audio description, visual art, subjectivity, reception, focus group.

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## Introduction

This article discusses a focus group reception study of visual art AD that is part of the Emancipatory and Creative Approaches to Audio Description (ECREA) project, which investigates blind and partially sighted (BPS) people's reception of different AD styles, as well as their role and visibility in the creation of these accessibility tools. This reception study addresses a standard AD approach, as described in corpus-based studies into visual art AD (Soler Gallego, 2018; Perego, 2019), which we refer to as the "objective" style, along with less frequent or "minority" styles and features also identified through corpus-based studies (Lima & Magalhães, 2013; Soler Gallego, 2019, 2021, 2023; Luque Colmenero, 2020, 2021; Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, 2020). The reception study investigated a number of minority approaches or styles that we have termed poetic, narrative-immersive, universal design, and gist, and various minority features we refer to as interpretive voicing, synaesthetic metaphor, and contextual music. This reception study is an ongoing project and we plan to continue our investigation of the same styles and features, as well as other alternative approaches, in additional focus groups with users in the future. We hope this article encourages other researchers to join us on this path.

The focus-group discussions completed so far were held in two phases, each comprising a series of meetings, in June–July of 2021 and January–February of 2022. Each meeting focused on one or two alternative styles and features, some of which were discussed progressively over more than one encounter. Most participants attended both series, with a few exceptions. The analysis of the focus-group discussions is carried out thematically rather than chronologically. Thus, the first results of the study deal with the poetic style and the synaesthetic metaphor feature, discussed during two meetings in the first stage, and were published in a previous article (Soler Gallego & Luque Colmenero, 2022). The current article is the second publication dealing with this reception study, and discusses a different minority approach, namely the "gist" style, which was discussed over four meetings in the first and second stages of the study. An important methodological difference between these two publications and their corresponding analysis of the focus-group discussions is that while text processing software was used for the first, the second was carried out with Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis tool. Nevertheless, they share the same research questions, theoretical framework, and other aspects of the method followed.

Our focus is on standard versus non-standard practices in visual art AD, which is the reason why we use "majority" and "minority" as the main distinguishing criteria. In the fields of film, television, and theatre audio description (AD), a number of reception studies (Bardini, 2020; Fryer & Freeman, 2012; Ramos Caro, 2016; Szarkowska, 2013; Walczak & Fryer, 2017) have dealt with AD styles that offer an alternative to the objective style. In the field of visual art AD, one study (Neves, 2016) analysed how the objective style is received, with special focus on cultural references. In addition, two studies have investigated the reception of visual art AD by both sighted and blind and partially sighted (BPS) people in the context of an alternative, universal-design, or inclusive approach to creating audio guides for people with and without a visual impairment. One study (Szarkowska et al., 2016) focused on users' preferences regarding information quantity and interpretation, while the other study

(Hutchinson & Eardley, 2022) dealt with the impact of AD and sound effects on the construction of a memorable experience in sighted and BPS users, respectively. Users' experience was measured through questions about their preference and engagement, and memorability tests with fixed and free responses. Similar methods were used in a study (Barnés Castaño & Jiménez Hurtado, 2020) that investigated the impact of concreteness on the reception of visual art AD in a group of BPS people, assessing the level of detail in their mental image and remembrance of the work, as well as their preferences. These studies have shown the potential of interpretive, sound-enriched, and less concrete AD as an inclusive access tool for the visual arts, although congenitally blind and sighted users seem to prefer shorter descriptions as compared to other BPS users.

The emergence of this kind of study in the AD research field is connected to the second of three shifts identified by Greco (2018) within the disciplines that deal with accessibility. The first one is the shift from particularist accounts to a universalist account of accessibility where access is "understood to concern all human beings" (p. 211, [emphasis in the original]). The second shift is the movement from a maker to a user-centred approach, which has led to the proliferation of reception studies in media accessibility (Di Giovanni & Gambier, 2018). The third one is the shift from reactive to proactive approaches where makers, users, and experts alike are involved in the design process right from the conception stage. According to Romero Fresco (2021), these three shifts are at the root of accessible filmmaking, where a focus on user heterogeneity and experience, and collaboration between filmmakers and accessibility experts is leading to increased creativity and deviations from standard practices.

This study draws on art education and museum theories and methods that highlight the importance of experience and interpretation, and dialogical methods where art educators have a facilitating and guiding role. Eisner (2002) proposed that the fundamental goal of education should be for learners to be exposed to a wide variety of meanings that humans can create and to deepen their knowledge thereof, while fostering their willingness and capacity to experience the world from those different frames of mind. Burnham and Kai-Kee (2011a), drawing on visitor studies and learning theories, advance a model for art museum teaching where the goal is to help visitors have rich, transformative experiences. This in turn requires visitor engagement with and understanding of artworks through ideas and feelings, by means of sensual exposure to the artwork and dialogical, forever open interpretation of its meaning. According to these authors:

The deepest and most affective experiences visitors have in art museums are those in which they share in the unfolding, unravelling, and translation of the meaning of artworks... Museums are first and foremost for people; they are public spaces where people can express their understandings of the meanings of artworks through their own thoughts, emotions, and voices. We ask museums to be not only places where people can participate in their own acts of constructing meaning but also places where we redefine the visitors themselves, from information seekers to seekers of experience, of reflection, of imagination. (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011b, pp. 151–152)

Visual art AD typically occurs in a museum, exhibition, or classroom and a percentage of the audio describers in these settings are educators (Soler Gallego, 2012). Therefore, we believe that the study of this AD modality should be informed by the various disciplines that deal with museums and art education. These theories and methods inform the main goal set for this study, as it seeks to shed light on the overall experience of users. Given the current debate on what the goal of visual art AD should be (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019, 2020), we aim to gain a deeper knowledge of and collective reflection on the different types of experience of visual art and AD that BPS may seek and to help them reflect on this matter, rather than to focus on one or a set of predetermined types of experience. In addition, the aforementioned theories and methods inform the method that we follow, which puts individual experience, interpretation, and dialogue at the centre of the study. This work uses a focus group discussion method that mitigates researcher authority (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014) while users “negotiate their reception experience and interpretation with each other... and the data is enriched by agreements, disagreements, clarifications, and challenges presented in the course of the discussions” (Tuominen, 2018, p. 82).

In the next section, the gist style is described in detail along with the objective style. For this purpose, we draw on cognitive linguistic theories that allow for a deeper understanding and comparison of these AD styles and their underlying cognitive operations. Next, the method and materials of the reception study are explained, followed by the results of the qualitative analysis and their discussion, to end with the conclusions of our study.

## **1. Visual Art AD Through the Lens of Cognitive Linguistics**

In the next section, the gist style is described in detail along with the objective style. For this purpose, we draw on cognitive linguistic theories that allow for a deeper understanding and comparison of these AD styles and their underlying cognitive operations. Next, the method and materials of the reception study are explained, followed by the results of the qualitative analysis and their discussion, to end with the conclusions of our study.

This reception study draws on Cognitive Grammar to offer a detailed description of the visual art AD styles and features investigated. From this perspective, language is a system of symbolic structures that give access to a conventionalised semantic value consisting of conceptual content and a “construal” or interpretation thereof (Langacker, 1987/2008). Based on the cognitive operations involved in this interpretation, Croft and Cruse (2004) proposed four dimensions of construal, namely Attention/salience, Judgement/comparison, Perspective/situatedness, and Constitution/Gestalt.

In previous corpus-based studies of AD in art museums, we focused on the identification of the most frequent styles and features (Soler Gallego, 2018). The results coincide with the findings of another corpus-based study of visual art AD (Perego, 2019). One conclusion we may draw from these investigations is that, in the predominant style in visual art AD, the artwork is described as a static product; the focus is on the states of the visual components described with great detail or specificity

(Attention/salience), avoiding subjective content (Judgement/comparison), and using the external point of view of a museum visitor (Perspective/situatedness). The AD progresses from a general description to a more specific and detailed one, and the limits and location of the visual components are clearly indicated through language, thus conceptualising the artwork as a bounded entity (Constitution/Gestalt). These features come together to create what we refer to as “objective” style.

The term “objective” has been used to refer to AD that uses language describing what can be seen without interpreting it, “a form of surface reading where the emphasis is on what’s manifest” (Kleege, 2016, p. 96) or AD with a major referential function, where the goal is to inform or describe (Bartolini & Manfredi, 2022). The objective style as defined in this article is the one recommended by existing guidelines for creating visual art AD (Audio Description Coalition, n.d.; Neves, 2014; Salzhauer Axel et al., 2003; Snyder, 2010). Among these, Neves (2014) identifies three possible styles, namely objective, narrative, and interpretive, but only elaborates on the first one. Moreover, the objective style was identified by users as their preferred AD style in a study carried out by the RNIB and VocalEyes, prior to creating their set of guidelines (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003). More recently, a context and process-oriented study conducted by Hutchinson and Eardley (2020) showed that this style matches the approach proposed and followed by professional audio describers. However, corpus-based studies of visual art AD have also revealed alternative, less frequent styles and features (Lima & Magalhães, 2013; Soler Gallego, 2019, 2021, 2023; Luque Colmenero, 2020, 2021; Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, 2020) that may be valuable assets for enhancing accessibility in the visual arts.

This article focuses on one of these minority approaches that we have termed the “gist” style, found in two ADs within the corpus (Soler Gallego, 2021). These ADs were created by Claire Bartoli, a writer and actress who is blind and audio describes for art museums in Paris. This is a minority AD style when it comes to the selection and quantity of information (Attention/salience), as well as the structure and connections (Constitution/Gestalt) built in the AD. We define gist AD as an enunciation of a limited number of the visual components that make up the work, with little or no conceptual connection between them. In addition to this feature, Bartoli’s gist ADs use voice to complement language in a creative way.

Bartoli’s AD of *Murs de Peintures* (Walls of Paintings) by Daniel Buren for the audio descriptive guide in the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris is an enumeration of shapes, directions, and colours. It conveys the composition without using any lexis related to space and location. Instead, these formal components are implicitly indicated by means of the sequence in which they are enunciated through language. The describer modulates the vocal tempo (speed) and tone (pitch) to “imitate” or convey the repetition of vertical lines in alternate colours on multiple rectangular canvases that constitute this installation of paintings, as well as the varying size of the canvases. By doing so, the describer also translates the visual impression caused by this composition into a paralinguistic, aural semiotic mode. Besides, there is no mention of the dimensions and overall shape of the work, which also contributes to blurring its boundaries, making them undefined, like “foliage” as opposed to

“leaves”. The art piece is thus described as an unbounded entity. Below is our English translation of the original French AD<sup>1</sup>.

Black, white, black, white, black square.

Small red, white, red, white, red square.

Black square.

Large orange, white, orange, white orange, white, orange square.

Small blue, white, blue, white, blue rectangle.

Grey square.

Red rectangle.

Horizontal red rectangle.

Vertical orange, white, orange, white, orange.

Large horizontal red, white, red, white, red rectangle.

Vertical black, white, black, white, black.

Large red square.

Small grey rectangle.

Horizontal long grey, white, grey, white, grey, white, grey.

Small orange rectangle.

Small blue, white, blue, white, blue rectangle.

Vertical grey.

Red.

Large green, white, green, white, green, white, green square.

Large vertical red, white, red, white, red, white, red.

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<sup>1</sup> The recorded AD may be accessed at: [soundcloud.com/mamvp-le-profil/mam-elucubration-bartolienne](https://soundcloud.com/mamvp-le-profil/mam-elucubration-bartolienne);  
the work may be seen at: [www.mam.paris.fr/fr/oeuvre/murs-de-peintures](http://www.mam.paris.fr/fr/oeuvre/murs-de-peintures).

The same style was used by Bartoli in her AD for a large sculpture entitled L'Ivrogne (The Drunkard), by the artist Gilles Barbier, during the tour she guided at the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC / VAL). Below is our English translation of an excerpt from the live AD included in a video for the guided tour (the video may be accessed at: [vimeo.com/38136237](https://vimeo.com/38136237); the work may be seen at: [www.macval.fr/Gilles-Barbier](http://www.macval.fr/Gilles-Barbier)).

up in the sss... tars

up in the sss... hey!

sssss.... snake

earthworm, worm, worm, worm... earthworm!

spi... spi... respi... spiraaaaaal!

oh, ooh, up there!

Once again, the AD is an enumeration of visual components. The sequence used in the description, as well as variations of the vocal tempo, tone, and intensity (volume) are used to translate the composition, although in this case the author includes some location words (up in, up there). In addition, the describer goes further to use voice to translate ideas, feelings, or sensations triggered by the visual qualities of the work and the elements from reality depicted in it. Bartoli uses a high tone and decreasing intensity and tempo (long consonants and vowels) to convey the idea that the stars in the upper part of the sculpture are up in the air, far from the viewer, as well as repeating syllables, long vowels, and rising intensity to convey the large size of the spiral; she lengthens the initial "s" sound in "snake" to mimic this reptile's hissing; and she quickly repeats the second syllable in "earthworm", maybe to mimic this animal's stripes or their repetitive, wriggling movements. The changing tempo, marked tone modulations, and lack of logical connectors help to convey the visual impression when contemplating this eclectic and massive sculpture, as well as the confusion and hyperactivity of the intoxicated human mind, which is the concept behind this work.

Overall, Bartoli creates minimalist descriptions made of a limited number of visual components with blurry boundaries and almost no explicit connections among them. The composition, associated concepts, and sensations evoked by the work are covertly translated by means of the text structure and modulations of vocal tempo, tone, and intensity, which we refer to as "interpretive voicing". Thus, subjectivity levels are higher in terms of visual content selection, inclusion of subjective associations and feelings, and their translation through interpretive voicing. This modality, or gist style, may be considered a type of "transcreation" (Neves, 2012). As stated by Eardley et al. (2017), based on cognitive psychology studies, congenitally blind people may prioritise nonvisual imagery when accessing visual art as compared to a blind person who has visual memory. Under these circumstances, "the aim of AD for visual art may be to facilitate for the audience an experience of the artwork... to offer a kind of transcreation, the creation of a new artwork, rather than a translation"



(p. 201). This transcreation is “consciously subjective and interpretative and can draw upon various modalities for an immersive, multisensory experience” (p. 201).

## 2. Methods and Materials

A focus group reception study was designed to discuss the experience of BPS with visual artworks and different AD styles and features. The participants were recruited online and they met online. Spanish was the language used for both the materials and the group discussions. The participants in the study are members of the ONCE (Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles [National Organization of Spanish Blind People]) in the Basque Country who attended an informative online meeting on the project and decided to participate. In the meeting, we explained our goal, the methodology we were going to implement, and the type of materials we were going to use. We did not carry out any selection of participants, as our goal was to give everyone interested the opportunity to participate. They are BPS adults with various levels of sight (none of them is congenitally blind) and experience of visual art AD. The variety of expertise and comments during the reception study has continuously been a rich and fulfilling experience in the two series of meetings we have completed so far. The first series was held with a group of seven participants that met for one hour once a week over a period of five weeks in June and July of 2021. Upon its completion, we asked the participants for feedback on the focus group organisation, and they proposed to have longer meetings. Thus, the second and latest series was held with a group of six participants that met for two hours a week over a period of six weeks in January and February of 2022. Five of them participated in both series, while three participated in one series only (two in the first series and one in the second series).

Regarding the procedure, one week prior to each meeting, participants are emailed a set of materials and are asked to explore them on their own before the meeting. The materials for each meeting include one objective and one alternative AD based on the minority style or feature being investigated, for the same work of art along with its images. The objective AD, following the standard practices and guidelines mentioned above, includes a short section of contextual information on the work after its description. The audio descriptions are sent to participants in audio format, along with the AD scripts in large fonts. In our weekly email with the materials, we give participants instructions on how to use them. During the guided tour led by Bartoli, the AD is preceded by an introduction made by an educator she collaborates with and, therefore, visitors are already familiar with the work. However, in the focus group reception study, we propose that participants initially listen to the alternative AD to limit the impact of the objective AD on their reception of the minority style or feature. Our goal is to study both the complementarity of the objective and the minority styles, and the experience of using the minority style only. One exception to this was the session devoted to Walls of Paintings. Given the difficulties one collaborator had experienced in the previous session (further explained in the results section), participants were free to choose the order. In addition, we suggest that they can use the script if they find it useful to revise some aspect of the AD after listening



to the recording, and to watch the images of the work during or after listening to the AD depending on their personal preference.

We divide each meeting into two parts: (1) experience of the piece of art, and (2) experience of the AD, and we use one guiding question for each part: “What was your experience of the work?” and “What was your experience of the ADs?” The authors of this article function as facilitators. Furthermore, Rubén Rámila González, being blind and having experience as a consultant and reviewer in projects related to accessible visual art, actively functions as a collaborator. He was invited to take part in the focus group sessions, where he contributes as both a participant and a facilitator.

This article focuses on the gist style, which has so far been investigated over two meetings of the first series and two more meetings in the second series. The sequence of the meetings within the study and the works of art used for each of them are as follows:

1. De schilder zelf, schilderend in een weidelandschap met vee (The Artist Painting a Cow in a Meadow), by Hendrikus van de Sande Bakhuyzen.
2. Zoco (Souk), by José Guerrero.
3. L'ivrogne (The Drunkard), by George Barbier.
4. Murs de Peintures (Walls of Paintings), by Daniel Buren.

Regarding the materials, for the first meeting we created an AD based on Bartoli's gist style (described in detail in the previous section), but excluding the interpretive voicing, for a romantic figurative painting (The Artist). The goal was to study the effect of overall length, information selection, specificity, and objectivity with a short and straightforward AD of the painting. The selection of limited information may imply somewhat higher subjectivity, but the content and language used are objective. For the second meeting, we presented a gist AD with minimal interpretive voicing for an abstract expressionist work (Souk). The abstract nature of the painting was useful to better investigate the role of interpretive voicing for this artistic style. In this case, mimicking Bartoli's creations, the vowels were lengthened in the colour names (reeeeed, for example) to translate the horizontal and long shape of each colour on the canvas. Although a few location phrases were used, they are minimal compared to the objective style. We decided to progress from these simpler ADs to the more complex ones to facilitate the discussion of the different features of the gist style.

For the third and fourth meetings, Bartoli's descriptions were recreated in Spanish with the help of an actress-voice talent and a sound engineer. In addition, we created a second gist AD for Walls of Paintings with a further subjective interpretive voicing in which each colour was assigned a different intonation through synaesthetic associations, also found as a minority feature in our corpus studies (Luque Colmenero & Soler Gallego, 2020). The difference is that, while in the corpus synaesthesia is

conveyed through language, here it is conveyed through paralanguage. The actress responsible for the voicing proposed an intonation for each colour based on subjective sensations they provoked in her, and these were later discussed and agreed upon with one of the researchers (please refer to the recorded AD for a better understanding of this element). A neutral or middle tone is used for white, while the lowest tone is used for black. The tone used for green is higher than the one used for white. Blue and (light) grey are conveyed with an even higher and ascending tone and faster tempo. In contrast, red and orange use a lower tone and slower tempo. As to *The Drunkard*, since we were only able to access an excerpt from the AD created and performed by Claire Bartoli, we analysed and followed her style to create a full AD of the work, including the excerpt at the end. All the recorded Spanish ADs and their English transcriptions can be found on our YouTube channel, Kaleidoscope Access (n.d.).

### **3. Qualitative Analysis of the Focus Group Data**

The focus group sessions are video-recorded, transcribed, and analysed qualitatively through inductive coding. In qualitative data analysis methods, a code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 95). When this coding process is carried out inductively, the researchers analyse and categorise the data through a reasoning process that goes from “the level of specific units to broader concepts” (Carey & Asbury, 2016, p. 91). Thus, the coding system for our research was created through an extensive analysis of focus group discussions. From the observation and analysis of their impressions, we created a set of categories and subcategories. This process was first carried out for the poetic style and the synaesthetic metaphor feature using a text processing software (Soler Gallego & Luque Colmenero, 2022). However, given the larger amount of data related to the gist style, we finally decided to turn to a qualitative data analysis software for the analysis and export functions, as well as the visualisation and project sharing options. Consequently, for this second stage of the analysis we decided to use the Atlas.ti software package, a tool that supports the organisation, analysis, and interpretation of information in qualitative research. The package helps researchers to work with and organise large amounts of information, as well as to contrast and compare it, making the most of the data and teamwork through the use of a coding system. We used the set of codes we had implemented in the first stage, which we revised and adapted following an inductive approach to create a final categorisation (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Final Categorisation*

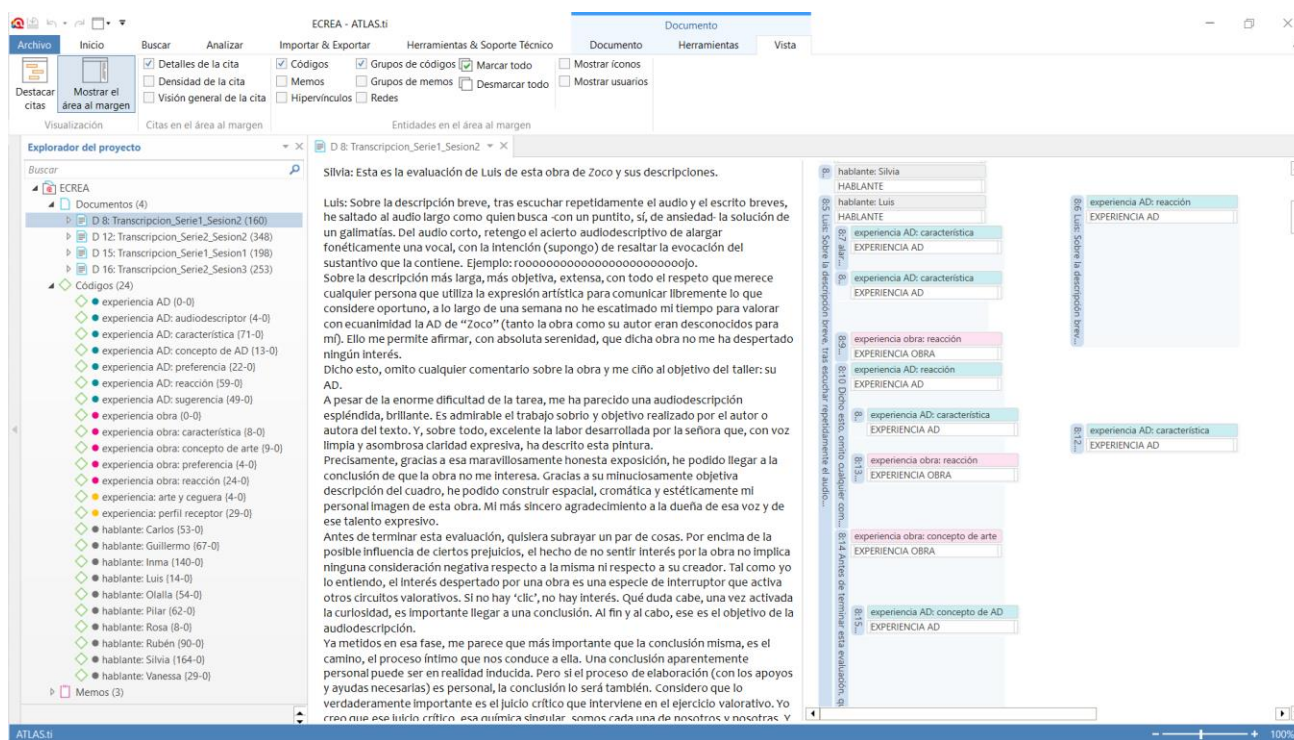
Experience of the AD	Experience of the artwork
preference	preference
reaction	reaction
characteristic of the AD	characteristic of the artwork
concept of AD	concept of art
audio describer profile	
suggestion	
	art and blindness
	recipient profile

*Source: author's own elaboration*

There are two main categories: experience of the AD and experience of the artwork, each with a set of subcategories. The two main categories share a set of subcategories: preference, reaction, characteristic, and concept (of art/AD, depending on the category). Besides, there are two subcategories that affect the experience of both the AD and the artwork, namely art and blindness, and recipient profile. The coding method was useful for marking the different themes we were able to frame within the discussions. The annotation of the transcription in the Atlas.ti software (Figure 1) allows us to observe the codes (on the right) before extracting data through the functions and options in order to explore and analyse the interactions and evolution of the discussions. The most useful tool we have worked with is the Quotation Manager, which makes it easy to visualise and explore all the quotations (text segments selected for coding) in the project. Codes are associated with the quotations to organise and index the data, and thanks to the Excel Export function, we are able to retrieve segments with the same coding in all the transcriptions to carry out a detailed analysis and observe the progression of the different categories throughout the sessions.

Figure 1

Atlas.ti User Interface During the Coding Process



Source: Atlas.ti

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Among the comments of participants in all four focus group discussions, we find expressions of like and dislike, as well as descriptions of their reactions to the audio descriptions, suggestions, and discussions of broader related topics. Their reactions include ideas, feelings, and sensations triggered by the AD as a whole or by specific features of it. All participants had very positive experiences with the objective audio descriptions used in the four sessions because they were informative and clear, allowing them to create a mental image of the work or to complete their partial vision of it (all the quotes from the focus group discussions included in this article have been translated from Spanish by the authors):

Rosa (The Artist): ...I loved it, [it is] very, very thorough, very beautiful, looking at all the nuances, and I have seen the painting.

Inma (Souk): ...the second one seemed perfect to me. I saw the painting perfectly, I was able to place it, I could see it.

Carlos (The Drunkard): ...very quickly I got the idea,... in my head a cylinder of three by six was generated, which was divided inside into two parts, a smaller one below, the person, and

another one above with everything else, the spiral, and as we get to the end and the describer describes what he wanted to expose in that work, immediately everything makes sense.

Pilar: (Walls of Paintings): ...the formal audio description,... [was] perfect. I could finally see the wall with all the little squares hanging...

The following sections offer a detailed analysis and discussion of each of the focus group sessions with emphasis on participants' experience of the alternative AD styles.

#### **4.1. Gist AD With No Interpretive Voicing**

Some participants found this gist AD useful for obtaining a general idea of the work and deciding whether they would like to listen to a longer and more detailed description afterwards:

Luis: Maybe a short audio description like this one can allow you to dismiss or estimate the work... I imagine that I go with someone to the museum, and I need to choose what I am going to see... What I can say is that the subjective interest of the observer, us in this case, is fundamental. Audio-description has to allow the observer, with the greatest possible brevity and the greatest possible descriptive economy, to say "I am interested or not interested".

Inma: Even if I could see, I would give it a couple of minutes because it is not my style, I'm not saying that it is neither better nor worse, this type of landscape is not my style, it is not worth wasting time with it. Maybe that's why I have been so comfortable with the short description and maybe that's why the long one seems so heavy to me.

Here, the experience and preferences of the user regarding visual arts and museum experience in general seem to play a role in the reception of the alternative style. In fact, Inma is one of the participants with the widest knowledge of art history and most prior experience of visiting art museums and exhibitions. Others found it so bland they did not have any interest whatsoever in discovering more about the painting. As put by Carlos, "The first description needs something to encourage me to get on the train, it needs something else, a hook; it doesn't appeal to me, there's nothing that makes me want to know more". This statement is related to other comments that described the gist AD as lacking emotion, thus pointing to the importance given to subjectivity for accessing the experience of the piece of art:

Carlos: The first version seems to me too emotionless, almost even disappointing...

Rosa: ...the first audio did not move me, it even seemed poor to me, like... maybe rough is not the word, but a bit like "bam, bam, bam". It didn't encourage me to get into the work, either.

This is in line with some researchers in the visual art AD field, who have advanced the importance of sensory and emotional engagement and subjective interpretation to foster a personally relevant experience for users (Eardley et al., 2017; Kleege, 2018; Neves, 2012).

During the session, the conversation moved to issues that go beyond user experience and offer valuable insights into the present and future of AD. Participants commented on the potential benefits of the two types of AD for people who are neither blind nor have low vision. Rosa noted that the objective AD made her realise there are many details in a work of art that people may not notice when visiting a museum. Guillermo found the gist AD similar to easy language, pointing to the fact that this type may be more accessible not only for people with a psychological or cognitive diversity, but to people of all ages with a limited literacy level:

The first one is like a summary and also reminded me a little of the texts used for easy reading, very short sentences, without subordinates, without any kind of artistic jargon, very simple, so that the text would be understood.

#### **4.2. Gist AD With Minimal Interpretive Voicing**

Some participants found the gist AD useful for understanding the main visual features of the work, which is precisely the goal of gist AD with no or limited interpretive voicing, while other participants found it confusing in this regard, with type and level of vision not seeming to have an impact on these reactions:

Luis: So, both are useful. The first one is very good, it does something different, it can't say more in such a short time. So it is valid. What happens is that each of them has its limits. The first one is useful to me, but since I'm still hungry to know more, I go to the other one...

Rosa: It seems to me that with the short one you can get a very good idea of what appears in the work, but that's all.

Guillermo: The first one seems very brief, very generic, and it would not be very useful to me as a reference of the painting, it would not help me to know what appears on the painting.

Inma: With the short description I didn't understand anything, I got confused, I didn't understand anything, only a jumble of colours that I wasn't able to locate or memorise...

The perceived lack of information of the gist AD led to a discussion of the very concept of AD. Guillermo stated that in the visual arts, it is not just "an aid", unlike in film AD, but a substitute for the work, the only source of visual information for those who cannot see it. Thus, the characteristic of the AD that was most noticed and discussed was the amount of information provided. Only two participants noted the special, interpretive usage of the voice in this type of gist AD, which they clearly liked, although they interpreted it in different ways:

Luis: From the short audio, I appreciate the audio descriptive wisdom of phonetically lengthening a vowel, with the intention (I suppose) of highlighting the evocation of the noun that contains it.

Inma: I loved the “reeeeed”. Yes, because Impressionism, sorry, Abstract Expressionism, is one of its characteristics, isn't it? Those thick brushstrokes, so full of paint. So, that sensation of saying red, like this, “reeeeeeed”, is much better than saying “thick red” or, in a more vulgar way, “like a very heavy brush”, “like a roller”.

Pilar found the gist AD “refreshing”, as “it is not the same as always”, and Rubén stated, “it may be that you don’t physically understand what is in that painting, but I find the first description very evocative and very sensorial”. All this indicates that some people are open to and value innovative experiences when it comes to using AD to access the visual arts, particularly experiences that focus on the effects a given piece has on the senses. This is related to whether users having no experience with alternative AD styles is one reason why they find them lacking and unsatisfactory. Although the researchers’ role is that of facilitating the discussion, on occasions we pose a question on a topic that is relevant for the study. In this case, we asked if indicating at the beginning of the gist AD that it is brief and different would be useful for changing the expectations of users and helping them be more open to this less common approach to AD. Overall, participants thought it would not change or improve user reception of this type of gist AD. Nevertheless, in the next session we held on to the gist style, which follows below, the same participant emphasised the importance of announcing and explaining the type of resource or event that BPS people are going to be exposed to.

### 4.3. Gist AD With Interpretive Voicing

In contrast to the gist AD of Souk, the interpretive voicing for the gist AD of The Drunkard by Gilles Barbier was noted by all participants. This is understandable, given the greater emphasis on the interpretive voicing for this AD. Impressions ranged from very positive to very negative. Some participants really liked it, found it original, and were able to open up to a different experience of visual art AD, despite their initial surprise:

Rubén: ...the first one is amazing, I was enthusiastic... this is the first time this has happened to me. I think the first AD improves the work.

Carlos: I was a little or quite shocked at the beginning of audio 1, because I didn’t expect the theatricalisation at all. Gradually, I got into the context of what it might be... and I found it different...

Guillermo: I liked both audios. I liked them a lot, although as I said before, at the beginning, when I listened to the first one, like my colleagues, [I felt] surprised.

However, Inma felt distressed: “I put the AD number one on, and I was shocked, absolutely horrified. It squeaked, it hurt me, it seemed crazy to me...”. She had stated that she was not interested in the work nor in that type of art, in the same way that she doesn’t like contemporary music. However, the rest of the participants showed considerable to great interest in the sculpture. This may be another indicator of how individual preferences in the visual arts may be one of the factors that determine the experience of alternative AD styles.



Several participants commented on the order followed when listening to the ADs, as when Carlos stated that the gist AD “...makes sense once you get an idea of what the work is like and what it wants to represent, which is the madness of an alcoholic coma”. Later, the researchers asked about this topic, as it is a key question in the study of alternative AD styles. The participants stated that the gist AD should be listened to after the objective one, especially in the case of blind individuals. This led to the broader topic of art and blindness and user profile. However, according to Rubén, the order depends on the type of experience sought, and so those who prefer to initially have a sensory experience followed by a more factual, objective one, would choose to listen to the gist AD first. In line with this, Carlos emphasised the need to distinguish between congenitally blind people and those with visual memory, and stated that the former would probably be more open to listening to this type of gist AD first.

When asked by the researchers what this type of AD would contribute if it were one of the resources offered for accessing visual art, the participants stated that it adds sensations, a sensory experience of the work:

Carlos: It’s like putting sound to the whirlwind. You may or may not like it, that’s another appreciation, but I think it’s very appropriate. It’s one more nuance to contribute. ...it constantly sends some sensations, it’s the essence of what it wants to transmit.

Pilar: Inma said that the audio describer was overacting, but I think that’s the sense of the AD. That person is, like, flying, like a whirlwind, going up the spiral explaining everything that’s there, because it’s not a static work, it’s a work with movement and the AD provides that movement.

For Inma, this type of “theatrical” AD, as she calls it, does not help the work to be accessed. She defined it as a wholly different event or activity to be held in the art museum, which may be interesting and useful, but added that users must be clearly told about the nature of this experience, especially blind visitors.

#### **4.4. Gist AD With Synaesthetic Voicing**

Participants thought that both gist ADs created for this painting should be heard only after the objective AD, except for Rubén, who thought that the opposite order avoids the influence of contextual information on his interpretation of the voice qualities. That said, there was an interesting variety in their experiences. Guillermo felt rather indifferent towards the two gist ADs, but especially the one without synaesthetic voicing. Similarly, Rubén found this AD monotonous, while he appreciated the musicality of the synaesthetic one. Pilar, who has low vision and had seen the work very briefly before listening to the gist ADs, felt confused, as from the very first line the AD did not match what she had seen.

Carlos had a very interesting experience, which he defined as an “evolution” in his own experience of AD. He first listened to the gist AD with a synaesthetic intonation of the colour names and had to

stop after a few seconds because he felt overwhelmed. He then listened to the other gist AD and found it dull, uninteresting. Finally, he listened to the objective one. On a different day the participants listened to the first gist AD again and Carlos was surprised when a melody formed in his mind, a mix of repeating colours and tones, each colour with a different one. This is the same participant who in the previous session was able to open up to the alternative AD experience after his initial shock. Thus, we see how individual attitudes and ideas about AD may have an impact on user experiences of innovative AD styles.

Inma, who had found the interpreting voicing in the previous session distressing, overacted, and histrionic, found that the voice in the gist AD with synaesthetic intonation was piercing and harmful. She also stated that the problem might have been that the same actor and type of voice had been used for two sessions in a row, raising the question of how many different voices should be used in a guided tour or audio guide and for what purpose. Later, in the discussion, she stated that this particular voice could be useful and appropriate for works that convey joy and contempt but not for tragic ones, raising another relevant question, namely, how interpretive voicing should be used depending on the type of art piece. This participant had a more positive experience of the first gist AD, the one without the varying colour intonations. She found the voice appropriate and was able to understand the visual components this type of gist AD aimed to convey, that is the repetition of colours and shapes and the varying sizes of the canvases that comprise the work.

Some participants, both with low vision and blind with visual memory, interpreted the intonations assigned to colours in the synaesthetic example in a very specific way and even criticised the intonations because, to them, they did not match the colours found on the work:

Vanessa: “Reeeeed”... you figure it’s a... bloody red. The “greeeen”... It gave me the feeling that they were bright colours and then it turns out that they aren’t.

Inma: ...”reeeeed” had more of a wave-like, list-like movement, but the “bluuuuuuue”... gave me the impression that this “blue” could only be a bright blue. That’s not a light blue, no matter how you look at it. Certainly not in my brain.

Other participants stated that the intonations could be interpreted in different ways, but did not find this to be a problem, as they did not look for a very specific meaning. They rather assumed the intonations to be more of a general guidance. Carlos suggested, as in the previous session, that this type of interpretive voicing might be especially beneficial for congenitally blind people:

...I find it very interesting to use an intonation for each colour, not for us, who have a memory of colour, but for people who don’t... if supported by the first description, it seems to me that it can be very, very positive.

## 5. Conclusions

Overall, the results obtained from the study indicate that participants' experience of AD may be influenced by their preferences regarding artistic media and styles, as well as their knowledge and expectations regarding AD, their attitude towards the AD experience and ideas about blind people's access to the visual arts. The diversity of reactions observed in the reception of the gist ADs shows that a percentage of BPS users benefit from them. We believe that this should suffice to promote it as one of the AD styles to be offered for accessing the visual arts. However, this would imply adopting an overall approach to museum accessibility where different styles coexist, including a universal-design style; it would also imply that museums support it financially. Likewise, the gist style should be further investigated through different qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to deepen our understanding of it and inform current and future practices in this field.

To some, gist ADs with no or limited interpretive voicing like those for *The Artist and Souk* will serve as a synopsis for deciding whether to stop to contemplate the work, while for others, it will be a good first impression of the work that can be complemented with further AD, as well as music and soundscapes, olfactory, tactile, and even gustative resources. This is related to what Hutchinson and Eardley (2019) suggested some years ago, that the future of museum AD could be connected to a choice in AD styles, including "multiple shorter descriptions, or fleeting impressions... for those who want breadth, not depth" (p. 53).

The gist AD with no interpretive voicing was criticised for lacking emotion, while the one used for *The Drunkard* was received very positively because interpretive voicing helped participants have a sensory and emotional experience of the work. Thus, visual and conceptual information are relevant to BPS users of AD, but so is also having an experience of the work on a sensory and emotional level, and results from this study indicate that interpretive voicing is a valuable tool to achieve this goal. So far, research of voice in AD has focused on film AD and the usage of text-to-speech vs. human voices, with a few studies dealing with voice neutrality. However, interpretive voicing described in this article goes beyond those parameters to enter the realm of synaesthetic AD. This is also present in "soundpainting" (Neves, 2012), where AD is complemented with music and sound effects, and in the musical compositions of artworks commissioned by increasing numbers of museums in order to offer visitors a different aural resource for enriching their experience of art (Eardley et al., 2017).

The reception of the gist AD for *Wall of Paintings* was rather negative as compared to the one for *The Drunkard* when listened to in the first place, indicating that this type of interpretive voicing may be more useful if connected to non-visual human experiences users can relate to, such as the altered state of consciousness in the latter. If it conveys visual qualities and sensations caused by visual components, some users feel lost, confused, or bored. This may indicate that they find it more difficult to relate to the visual experience, even if they have a visual memory. Further studies are necessary on this topic especially in relation to congenitally blind users, as their experience of these styles may be considerably different, and it is essential that they are taken into account.

Human approaches to the arts are diverse. BPS individuals are diverse. Therefore, AD resources for accessing the visual arts should be diverse, breaking with the familiar in order to widen and enrich individual and collective perceptions and lives.

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