

## Aesthetics and Participation in Accessible Art Experiences: Reflections on an Action Research Project of an Audio Guide

 Nina Revers 

University of Antwerp

Sabien Hanouille 

University of Antwerp

---

### Abstract

The action research project titled A Touch of Museum to Scale aims to improve the accessibility of the Museum to Scale art collection at the University of Antwerp. This project collaborates with various stakeholders to prototype tactile objects and an inclusive art guide for five artworks. It seeks to engage users of diverse abilities, investigate universal access services, and promote the integration of accessibility and artistic creation. The audio guide integrates visual descriptions and information for people with and without a visual impairment and integrates the artistic contributions of artists with and without disabilities. Artists also create tactile objects, which are an artistic and tactile translation of original artwork and a piece of art in their own right. The authors discuss project activities, such as personal observations, interviews, questionnaires, brainstorming sessions, and theoretical considerations based on literature and experience. The research is exploratory and invites both researchers and practitioners to reflect on participation and the aesthetics of access.

**Key words:** media accessibility, audio description, audio guide, museum accessibility, collaborative translation, participatory action research.

Citation: Revers, N. & Hanouille, S. (2021). Aesthetics and Participation in Accessible Art Experiences: Reflections on an Action Research Project of an Audio Guide. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 6(2), 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v6i2.2023.277>

**Editor(s):** E. Schaeffer-Lacroix, N. Revers & E. di Giovanni

**Received:** May 29, 2023

**Accepted:** September 11, 2023

**Published:** December 27, 2023


**Copyright:** ©2023 Revers & Hanouille. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This allows for unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### Acknowledgments:

*A Touch of Museum to Scale* was funded by the council for service provision (Raad Dienstverlening) of the University of Antwerp and supported by the University of Antwerp's cultural Team of Rubi The Cultural Factory.

---

 nina.revers@uantwerpen.be, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0271-6662>

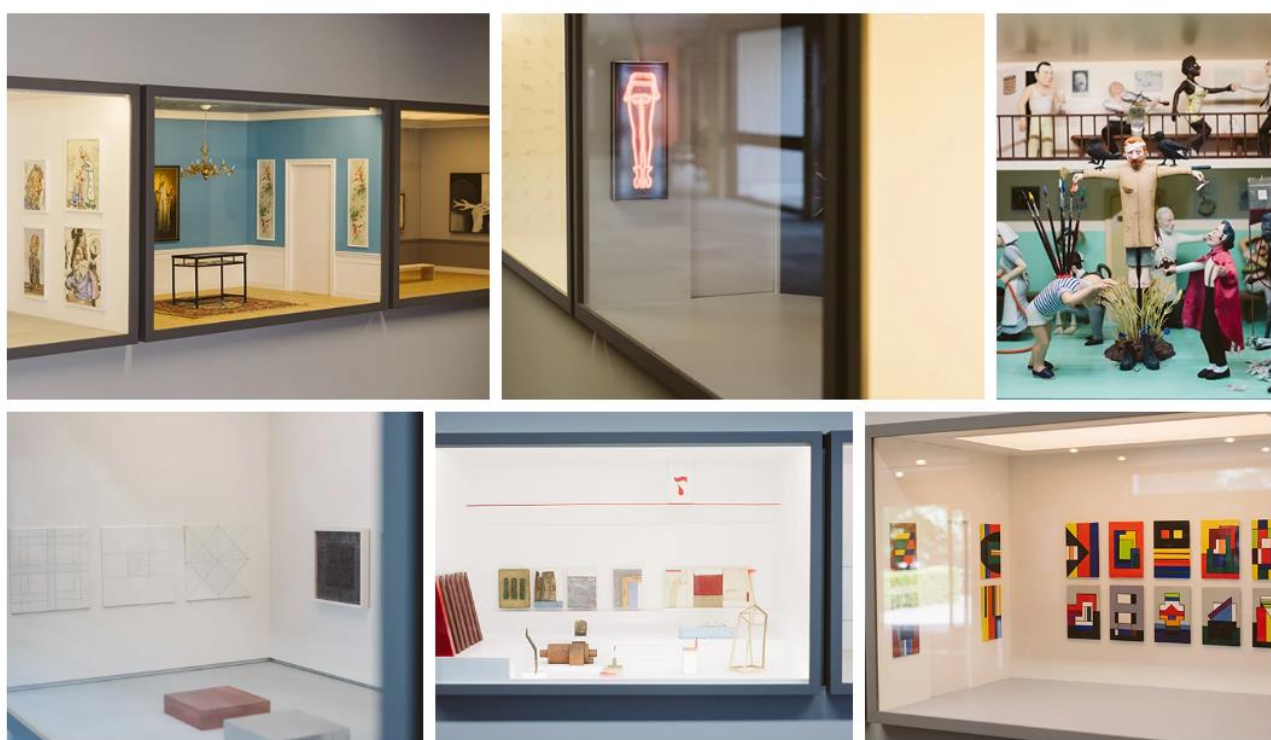
 sabien.hanouille@uantwerpen.be

## Introduction

In 2018, the OPEN Expertise Centre for Accessible Media and Culture and Rubi, the culture team of the University of Antwerp, decided to join forces to increase the accessibility of the permanent exhibition *Museum to Scale 1/7*. This exhibition features 105 miniature galleries built into the wall as display cabinets, displaying original artworks created by Belgian artists since 1945, in various forms, including paintings, photography, video, sculptures, and installations.

### Figure 1

*Museum to Scale 1/7*



Source: Image reproduced with permission from UAntwerp.

The OPEN Expertise Centre is developing a prototype of an inclusive audio guide for a selection of artworks from the collection: *Salle Cobra* by Pierre Alechnisky, *There is no chaos, only structure* by Arne Quinze, Fik Van Gestel's *Nightingales*, Frank Mahieu's *L'Art Belge*, Marie-Jo Lafontaine's *Dance the World* and Nadia Naveau's *Le Salon du Plaisir*. This accessibility initiative, entitled *A Touch of Museum to Scale*, aims to enhance the accessibility of the art collection in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders. The team is prototyping two objects for tactile exploration and a multisensory guide for the six artworks mentioned above that can be listened to, read, and available in Flemish Sign Language, English, and Dutch.

The project developed against the backdrop of a universalist account of accessibility, a stance that is rapidly gaining ground in Media Accessibility (MA). As Greco (2018) argues, MA has developed in the wake of a theoretical and social revolution in society sparked by accessibility more generally, which

has marked the beginning of shifts in the way society conceives accessibility (Greco, 2018, 2016). Firstly, the focus is moving from overcoming disability to empowering audiences based on their abilities. This view sees disability as emerging from the environment, not being adapted to diverse people's needs, and arising primarily in interaction with others. Disability often results from the unequal relationships between people with and without disabilities (Reviere & Devos, 2023). From this perspective, MA no longer concerns people with disabilities alone but society at large: "The prevailing narrow consideration of MA as concerning only persons with sensory disabilities poses a series of epistemological and terminological issues and limits the potential of MA to instigate social change." (Romero-Fresco, 2018, p. 187). Secondly, MA is moving from a maker to a user-centred approach, emphasizing the importance of giving people with disabilities not only access to content through access services but also access to creation. Finally, a universalist approach also leads to a move from reactive to proactive approaches, in which the need to consider accessibility within the design process from the start is acknowledged. In a proactive approach, access services are not added after the completion of the source text, but their creation is integrated into it from the start (Greco, 2018, 2016; Romero-Fresco, 2018).

This revolution also impacts (media) access services, giving rise to a growing range of access phenomena that move beyond translation alone, of which *A Touch of Museum to Scale* is one of a growing body of examples in the context of art accessibility. While art and museum accessibility, and more in particular, Audio Description (AD) of art, is on the rise, its scholarly exploration has only grown in the last few years. Hirvonen and Saari (2022) provide an overview of the current state of the art and conclude that museum AD and general principles of good practice exist. However, "a comprehensive overview of the linguistic and textual patterns characterizing this text type is missing (...)" (Perego, 2019, p. 334). A particular evolution in practice that deserves more scholarly inquiry and is the focus of the present article is universalist approaches to museum access, which develop access services to be used by audiences of diverse abilities together.

Through a series of practice-based actions with various stakeholders, *A Touch of Museum to Scale* has provided an opportunity for reflection on the role of aesthetics and participation in MA and the impact of a universalist approach on the creation process of art access services. The present article aims to reflect on how we have instrumentalized the universalist approach and the lessons we have learned along the way. Our account reflects the perspective of the authors, who are the initiators of the project and who are actively involved in the practice under study in their function as "curators" of *A Touch of Museum to Scale*. Nina Reviere specialises in Audio Description, with a passion for accessibility for the (performing) arts. She has worked as an audio describer herself for many years. As a non-blind scholar and practitioner, she tries to foster close collaboration with various stakeholders in the field, including users and artists. Sabien Hanouille is a non-blind translation teacher with a Ph.D. in Audiovisual Translation (AVT). She has a personal passion for art and inclusion which she combines in her work as coordinator for the OPEN Expertise Centre. The present article is an exploratory study that aims to invite both researchers and practitioners to reflect on the role of participation and aesthetics in their accessibility work. This is realized by pairing analyses of interviews, questionnaires, and brainstorming sessions, with more theoretical considerations based

on literature. As an action research project, the project values experiential knowledge and includes personal reflections of the authors on the process as well.

## 1. Methodology

*A Touch of Museum to Scale* is an action research project. Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) describe action research aims as follows:

[Action research] is at its heart about changing and improving practice and understanding of practice through a combination of systematic reflection and strategic innovation. It requires that participants be empowered and stresses the importance of leading social change. In most cases, action research also contains a knowledge creation element so that understanding and theory are created through practice. (p. 24)

In addition, the project adopts a participatory approach following its universalist stance towards access, as described in the introduction. This approach aims to introduce new interventions within a given community to “examine the issue systematically from the perspectives and experience of the community members most affected by that issue.” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 248). Key to this approach is the idea that “knowledge that is unique is as valuable as that which is generalizable” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 261). Our project follows in the footsteps of previous MA scholars who have implemented participation in access, and in AD in particular, such as Di Giovanni (2018; 2022) and Fryer (2018), to name just a few.

We set out three objectives as the framework for the project: (a) Participation: involve users with varying abilities in access creation, (b) Universal Design: explore universal access services that are not designed exclusively for one specific target group, and (c) Creation: discover how we can bring accessibility and artistic creation closer together. In dialogue with a dynamic group of collaborators, these objectives guided the research design, following Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1982) action research spiral in which planning, action, observation, and reflection are repeated in consecutive cycles (Townsend, 2013, p. 13). The time and location map below (Figure 2) illustrates the activities undertaken between 2018 and 2023. Between 2018 and 2019, non-funded activities were undertaken by the OPEN Expertise Centre’s core team. From 2020 onwards, the project was financed by the University of Antwerp’s *Raad Dienstverlening* (Service provision council).

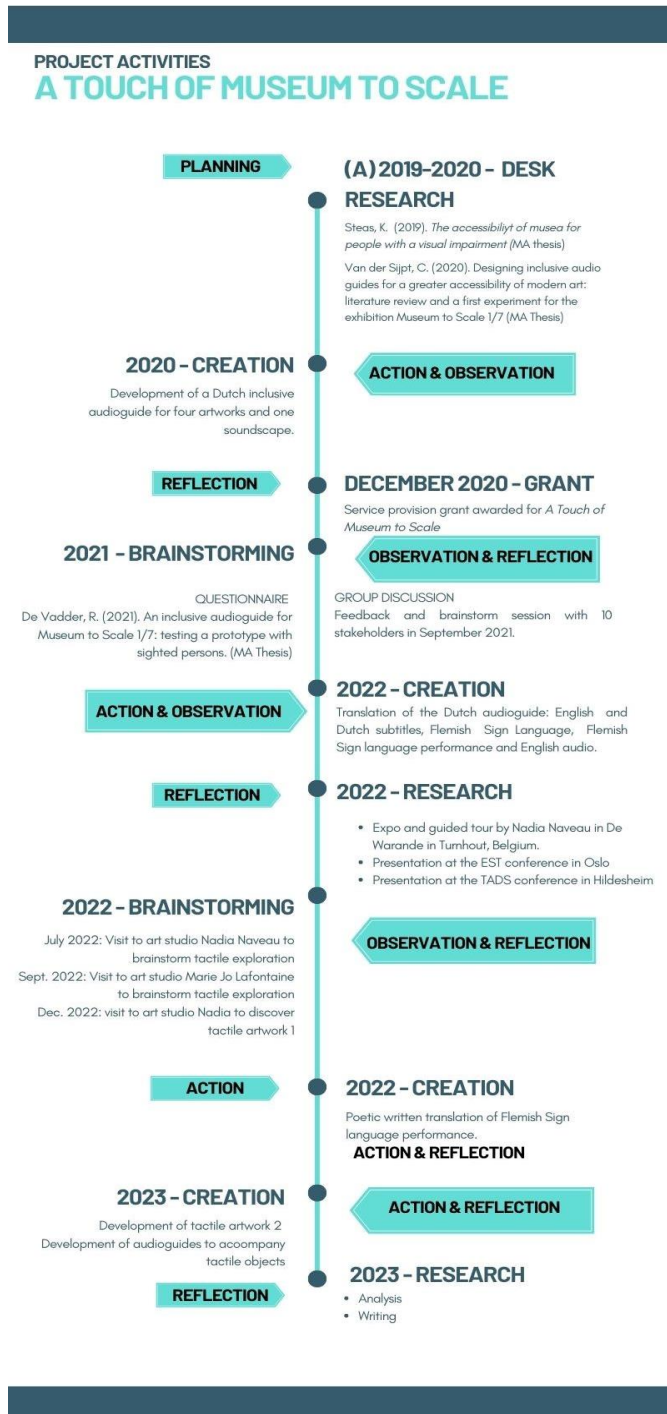
Figure 2 summarises the types of activities undertaken, following Torbert’s four dimensions of inquiry in collaborative research, namely framing (desk research and literature review), advocacy (analysis of best practices), illustration (creation and translation), and inquiry (questionnaires, brainstorm sessions, and observations) (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 261).

The authors functioned as organisers of the project, researchers, and curators of the access services and, therefore, approached fieldwork and data collection from an insider perspective. They invited various external people to contribute to the project’s activities. Rubi, the University of Antwerp’s

cultural department, and the university’s Art on Campus council which manages the Museum to Scale exhibition supported the project. Art experts from the council, for instance, contributed to the selection of artworks for the prototype, contacting some of the artists involved, and contributing to voicing the Dutch and English audio guides.

Figure 2

Methodology



Source: author’s own work

In addition, practitioners contributed to developing the access services: an experienced Dutch audio describer, one of the artists of the Museum to Scale collection, an artist with a visual impairment, a sound designer with a visual impairment, deaf sign language interpreters, a deaf performer, and a non-blind performer and poet. Finally, several project-external collaborators contributed to the brainstorming and feedback sessions, including users with and without a visual impairment, art teachers for people with visual impairments, a collaborator of Rubi, and blind and non-blind artists.

The activities mentioned in Figure 2 stimulated a wider theoretical reflection on key MA concepts, which the authors recorded in the form of reports, field notes, and research diaries. Bachelor and master students contributed to literature reviews, detailed analyses of best practice examples (Staes, 2019; Van der Sijpt, 2020), and the analysis of an online questionnaire that investigated non-blind users' perception of the Dutch audio guide (De Vadder, 2021). The full guide can be consulted via this webpage: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/projecten/a-touch-of-museum-to-scale/>

## **2. Discussion**

Hutchinson and Eardley (2021) noted that there has been little (empirical) study of AD for the arts and museums, and that most existing ideas are based on practitioner reports. With this article, we add a new practice-led dataset that supports existing understandings and encourages further discussion on art and accessibility. The specific focus of this project lies in the instrumentalization of an inclusive approach in which access services are developed with all audiences in mind. Our reflections are illustrated with a discussion of two main features of the project that focused on access to the visual dimensions of the artworks: the inclusive audio guide and the objects for tactile exploration.

### **2.1. From Participation to Disability Gain**

MA scholars highlight the growing role of users in investigating accessibility processes and phenomena, as well as designing accessibility solutions and artefacts (Greco, 2018, p. 212). Users have played a central role in the practice and research of AD since its inception, but it is typically limited to an advisory one. The majority of work in the field of media accessibility centres around enabling individuals with disabilities to access content created by those without disabilities, which can be seen to “promote a paternalistic and self-serving approach that perpetuates the agency of the able and the passive role of the disabled” (Romero-Fresco, 2018, p. 190). Fryer (2018, p. 172) argues that the traditional approach to AD is exclusive as it only presents information from a sighted perspective. In conventional AD methods, the responsibility for determining what to depict and how to do so is typically held by the describer(s), who are often sighted (Fryer, 2018; Reviere & Devos, 2023).

Such observations have resulted in “collaborative accessibility”, which involves makers and experts working together to create access. Additional concepts in the field of MA literature that align with this methodology include “Accessible filmmaking” (Romero-Fresco, 2019), “Integrated accessibility” (Fryer, 2018), and “Participatory accessibility” (Di Giovanni, 2018). Collaborative trends are also present in art and museum AD, as evidenced by scholars such as Neves (2016), Soler Gallego (2021), and Eardley et al. (2022), to name just a few. A truly inclusive approach, however, requires collaborative inquiry, integrating the perspectives of “stakeholders from all levels of the organizational structure of the social process under study” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 258). *A Touch of Museum to Scale* aimed to incorporate diverse perspectives into the creation process of accessible art experiences that reflect multiple interpretations and experiences rather than just one viewpoint – the describer’s or the author’s, for instance. Below, we discuss how the collaborative approach contributed to shaping the access service development process.

### 2.1.1. Participation

In 2020, the funded part of the project began with a brainstorming session involving ten stakeholders from diverse backgrounds: persons with visual impairments with a keen interest in art, representatives of user organisations for people with a visual impairment, companions of people with disabilities, artists with and without disabilities, professional describers, art teachers for individuals with visual impairments, art experts from the cultural team of UAntwerp, and researchers in the fields of Accessibility. The brainstorming was designed to operationalize our chief objectives into concrete actions (Townsend, 2013) and, therefore, we deliberately focused on stakeholders with a pre-existing affinity to art and several years of experience with accessibility as AD users, creators or companions, with the aim to integrate their expert views. The objective of the session was to assess and deliberate on the Dutch guide prototype for four artefacts and examine the significance of tactile exploration, which was identified as a crucial element in earlier project stages but was not yet developed at that point. The session involved group discussions, a visit to five selected works in the collection with the audio guide, and a tactile exercise that serves as an icebreaker, where participants touched a work of art without any guidance and shared their haptic experiences.

The initial audio guide reflects a more traditional describer-led method. A Dutch describer was hired to write the guide, and a scripting strategy was developed based on desk research and literature review (Van der Sijpt, 2020; Staes, 2019) to create an audio guide suitable for both blind and non-blind audiences (a discussion of some of the strategies is part of the next section). During the writing process, the writer collaborated with a visually impaired consultant, who has experience as an artist herself and with organizing and conducting guided art tours for people with a visual impairment. The initial version of the guide received positive feedback from participants of the kick-off brainstorm, who also agreed that tactile exploration would enhance its value.

The brainstorming sessions revealed that although tactile exploration is beneficial, determining the most effective way to implement it for audiences of all abilities remains unclear. Various tactile

objects serve distinct purposes, such as relief drawings for shape and size, everyday objects for texture and shape, and 3D prints for dimensions. The group discussed the value of “haptic beholding” for both blind and non-blind audiences (Kleege & d’Evie, 2018). Kleege (2018, p. 60) highlights the value of touch in providing access to aspects of artwork “that may not be apparent to the eyes alone” and emphasizes its potential relevance for everyone even though a certain experience with haptic beholding is required.

A particularly relevant point of discussion concerned how to operationalize the project’s initial idea of creating *artistic* objects for tactile exploration. This was an idea that was inspired by earlier best practice examples conducted at the Charlier Museum in Brussels, where art students were asked to create a creative 3D interpretation of a work of art in the museum, or the “Blind date” project in the S.M.A.K in Ghent, where blind and non-blind artists and students entered into a dialogue by exchanging small (haptic) sculptures, each sculpture constituting a response to the one received.<sup>1</sup> In this approach, the development of tactile objects is conceived as a subjective and artistic response to a work of art. The personal embodied experience of the artist making the tactile object is foregrounded (d’Evie & Kleege, 2018).

A second motivation for artist-led tactile objects was the desire to shift our focus from comprehension to experience (Romero-Fresco, 2022). In the initial plan of our project and the kick-off brainstorming session, we wanted to foreground the aesthetic experience of art in addition to comprehension. The idea was to explore the “notion of an aesthetic experience in response to art, or the sensory-emotional impact of a work of art” (see Thompson’s approach in Eardley et al., 2022).

In this context, we learned that a direct experience is crucial: “Most of the time, blind and partially sighted people experience the museum with and via other people and agents.” (Hirvonen & Saari, 2022, p. 4). Visitors with a visual impairment “are arguably not given the opportunity for a purely personal aesthetic engagement because their experience is always mediated by other people’s choices” (Eardley et al., 2022).

Before the brainstorming session, one of the original artists of the Museum to Scale collection had been approached by the culture team Rubi with the question as to whether she would be willing to contribute to the creation of a tactile artistic interpretation of her own work, *Le Salon du Plaisir* which was part of the original Museum to Scale collection. During the brainstorming session, the group discussed how the artist in question, who had no prior experience with (tactile) accessibility, could approach this challenging task.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Blind Date, S.M.A.K. can be consulted here: <https://smak.be/nl/tentoonstellingen/blind-date-sculpture-exchange>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ronnyvandevelde.com/artist-detail-page/240819/nadia-naveau>



**Figure 3**

*Le Salon du Plaisir*



Source: Image reproduced with permission from UAntwerp.

The brainstorming session involved a discussion of the artist's habitual creative process behind her existing work *Le Salon du Plaisir*. She usually combines materials of different colours and textures and uses them as sources of inspiration or interacts with them as 3D collages or assemblages. In turn, the creation process of the white ceramic figures, as shown in Figure 3, originated from a single material: clay. However, these original figures are haptically complex, so how could they be translated into a haptic experience? The concept arose to produce a tactile object that would mirror the artist's creative process rather than duplicate the Ceramic figures from the existing artwork. This would provide an additional level of engagement for all viewers, aligning with the inclusive design objective of the project. The aim, in brief, was to foreground the use of tactile traces of haptic artmaking. This approach echoes one of Kleege's (2018) descriptions of one of her haptic experiences with art and the value this can bring:

I had the sensation that my hands were resting more or less where the artist's hands had once rested, in the clay versions that preceded the cast bronze (...) One has the illusion of viewing the work, as it were, through the artist's eyes. Here, I had the analogous pleasure of feeling a distant relative of the artist's haptic sensation as he moulded the forms. (p. 63)

A second artist was contacted to design a tactile object. She is a visually impaired artist who creates sculptures, organises accessible art tours, and offers consultancy to organisations about accessibility and experiencing art through all senses. The commissioned sculptor was tasked with producing an artistic rendition of one of the collection's original works. The artwork chosen for translation into tactile form was determined during the collaborative brainstorming session: *Dance the World* by Marie-Jo Lafontaine. The mini museum gallery of *Dance the World* comprises three panels, each displaying a video of women dancing. Nonetheless, they are not played in unison. There is a slight time difference in the display of the film between the two screens. Together with mirrors and backward-sloping walls, all of this gives the audience a composite image.

#### Figure 4

*Dance the World*



Source: Image reproduced with permission from UAntwerp.

The brainstorming participants observed that the initial verbal descriptions of the guide for *Dance the World* lacked a full aesthetic experience and therefore considered it a good candidate for an added tactile experience. The conversation focused on the potential constraints of intersemiotic translation, specifically in expressing the “aesthetic essence” of a piece of art through language. This comment agrees with, for instance, Kleege’s (2018) view on standardized approaches to AD. This researcher challenges the notion that describing a work of art to a visually impaired person enables them to independently form aesthetic judgments about it. A sentiment that is echoed by various

researchers in the field (such as De Coster & Mülleis, 2007; Neves, 2012; 2018; Soler Gallego, 2021; Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021). The team also concluded that, in this case, a tactile experience could really enhance the value of the artwork. The artwork's noteworthy aspects, such as the dancers' sensual movements, the texture and motion of their dresses, and the recurring loop of the videos, were deemed compelling elements to convey through tactile means. Moreover, an artistic interpretation could enhance the value of this work for diverse audiences by making intangible meanings more concrete and emphasizing artistic meaning beyond what can be seen. As Kleege (2018) says: "It is precisely the aspects of the work that are not available to the eyes alone that I believe can enhance a sighted viewer's appreciation." (p. 3).

### 2.1.2. Disability Gain

The project also addressed an ongoing discussion about ableist assumptions in traditional AD practices. Kleege (as cited in Eardley et al., 2022) argues that "despite their best efforts, museums and galleries struggle to move beyond a way of thinking and working that unquestioningly places sight at the top of the hierarchy of the senses." This applies to museums, exhibitions, and AD provisions in various sectors, as noted by Fryer (2018) and Margolies (2015). Reviere and Devos (2023) contend that traditional AD aligns mostly with the medical model of disability, which views disability primarily as a physical or mental impairment, one that requires medical or technological tools to "fix" the problem. Kleege (2018) argues that access should, however, not be viewed as a one-sided act of generosity or charity: "The presence of those formerly excluded people must be understood to invite a wholesale scrutiny of what the culture takes for granted about itself. (...) The hope is that blind people can bring a perspective that has not been articulated before." Similarly, Thompson has argued that "non-sighted living is an art" rather than a problem to be solved (Eardley et al., 2022). This idea which she refers to as "blindness gain" is based on three principles: blind individuals benefit from a multisensory experience that fosters creativity and imagination, living without sight is an art form, and methods designed for and by blind individuals can be useful for those without visual impairments (Eardley et al., 2022). The argument that the lived experience and perceptions of people with (visual) impairments can benefit all is also formulated by Kleege:

(...) if we can (...) adopt (...) the idea that that the experience of blindness, in all its varieties, can in fact shape and inform other facets of personality and personal history, we will move toward a more genuinely inclusive society. The integration of blind perceptions and experiences will change the foundational assumptions of the culture; change how the human condition is defined. And I believe this is a goal worth working toward. (2018).

These concepts go beyond mere participation and highlight the importance of embracing the value that comes from the first-hand experience of individuals who are visually impaired. The artwork produced by our artist in residence who is visually impaired embodies this methodology. The aim was to celebrate the haptic beholding of art as an aesthetic experience in its own right and to foreground touch over visual aesthetics and challenge all audiences, in this way, to step out of the familiar boundaries of their experiences of art. Collaborating with a visually impaired artist highlighted the

artistic and contemplative possibilities of “blindness gain” in disrupting conventional approaches to art appreciation. A research area that warrants further academic investigation.

## 2.2. From Universal to Multisensory Design

According to some, the conventional MA approach “reiterates an approach where access is seen to concern exclusively groups of people with a perceived impairment” (Fryer, 2018). Greco (2018) agrees, even going as far as to say that “media access services have often been instruments of social segregation”, while being frequently marketed as tools for social inclusion. Part of the literature has emphasized a proactive approach to access, one that acknowledges the necessity of taking accessibility into account from the beginning of the design process. AD practises are also noticing this change. Fryer (2018) claims that we are currently experiencing a shift from describer-led to artist-led description, or what she refers to as Integrated AD (IAD). IAD is a sort of AD that is created from the very beginning with the full backing and participation of the creative team. Such an approach leads to a wide range of “strategies of integration” that can include narrating in the first person rather than the neutral third person, descriptions that are sung as part of a musical piece rather than just voiced, the describer-as-character being present on stage, descriptions that are integrally part of a performance’s dialogue, or the creation of a custom soundscape that eliminates the need for verbalisations (Fryer, 2018; Soler Gallego, 2022; Neves, 2010).

In AD, inclusive design means removing the need for “special” provisions by including visual descriptions in regular audio guides; a practice sometimes called “inclusive audio description”, “inclusive audio descriptive guide” or “interpretative AD” (Eardley et al., 2022; RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003; Hutchinson, 2019). The premise is that “visuo-centric bias (in museums) can prove challenging for people both with and without sight.” (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021, p. 427) Some visitors may find it challenging to know where or how to focus their attention, and many visitors may want assistance in making the connection between abstract meanings and concrete items.

In a museum atmosphere, which often presents a variety of visual stimuli and threatens to overwhelm the visitor, knowing where to direct one’s visual attention is tough. This frequently results in what can be called browsing behaviour, as visitors only briefly stop in front of each exhibit or piece of art. (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021).

During the brainstorming session, one of our participants offered the following observation in this respect:

“Sometimes I see things that a sighted person doesn’t see. However, with AD, I do get a lot or too much information to digest. When you are sighted, you also experience a lot of impulses, sometimes to the point where you are unable to see things clearly. Thus, we occasionally ‘see’ more.” (Our translation from Dutch).

Compelling arguments from cognitive psychology, for instance, suggest that visual interpretation is to be part of museum interpretation for all audiences, as it is thought to stimulate “guided looking”

or “guided seeing”, which “enables viewers to look for longer, guides visual attention, and enriches the sensory experience with factual (semantic) narrative.” (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021). Even though (empirical) research is limited, this hypothesis is based on practitioners’ reports mostly (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021). Below, we discuss how our project hopes to contribute another practice report that strengthens this hypothesis and responds to Kleege and d’Evies’ (2018) call for AD as a “curatorial and ekphrastic medium”.

### 2.2.1. Universal Design in the Audio Guide

The accessible audio guide created for *A Touch of Museum to Scale* displays features akin to “interpretative AD” (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2021). In addition, a questionnaire about the audio guide of *A Touch of Museum to Scale* completed in 2021 by thirty-four non-blind users confirmed the stated potential benefits for a diverse audience (De Vadder, 2021). Example 1 is an excerpt from the audio guide and illustrates the idea of “guided looking.”

Example 1:

Arne Quinze’s miniature museum gallery is called: *There is no chaos only structure*. It features an installation dating from 2011. At first glance, it seems as if a truck has unloaded brightly coloured orange planks, which have then fallen to the ground haphazardly. It appears that nobody has arranged the random pile of wood. As with all other cabinets, the museum gallery has a glass panel at the front, but the back panel and the side panels are mirrors, except for where the suggestion of a doorway is integrated between the galleries to the right and left of Quinze’s cabinet. The mirrored panels make the pile of wood seem bigger than it is. The title of the artwork, *There is no chaos, only structure*, has been handwritten across the mirrored panel at the back of the cabinet in light beige-colored paint.

(from the audio guide of Arne Quinze’s *There is no chaos, only structure*).

Non-blind users who participated in the project’s questionnaire (De Vadder, 2021) emphasized various advantages of visual descriptions like the one above, including how they made it easier to comprehend the artist’s methods and the intended effect of the piece. Respondents said it made them notice things they otherwise might have missed, and they remembered more visual details as a result. Contrarily, other respondents stated that they did not value spatial descriptions of the artwork that highlighted the size of the miniature boxes and described the placement of the pieces of art within the box.

Example 1 also illustrates the narrative scripting strategy adopted in the guide, aiming to weave visual descriptions into a story by creating the visual image of a truck unloading the wooden planks. Such a narrative strategy in inclusive audio guide writing is also mentioned by Hutchinson and Eardley (2021) as a tool to provoke emotional and cognitive responses and help recall content.

Another strategy illustrated by example 2 below is the integration of other senses in the audio guide. It illustrates how word choice can stimulate sound or touch. Indeed, “multisensory experience

through its use of rich sensory imagery” increases “movability in sighted and blind people alike” (Eardley & Pring, 2006).

Example 2:

It’s as if Van Gestel depicts the warbling, chattering, and chirping as bright bulbs that light up the night.

(from the audio guide of Fik van Gestel’s *Nightingales*).

The addition of soundscapes helped to realize the multisensory design as well. These included both functional sounds (like the nightingale chirping in example 2 above) and aesthetic sounds, like an artistic interpretation of a soundscape created by a blind sound artist with Arne Quinze’s Museum to Scale work. While most consumers and academics support the use of sound (Neves, 2010), some survey respondents cautioned that soundscapes can be distracting, especially when they are incorporated beneath and between the spoken word.

Finally, examples 3 and 4, illustrate the use of emotional language and personal perspectives to raise user engagement.

Example 3:

The gloomy forest has become a fairy-tale forest.

(from the audio guide of Fik van Gerstel’s’ *Nightingales*).

Example 4:

Maybe that’s how we experience reality, which comes at us at a dizzying speed nowadays, but in which we can nevertheless discern structure? It also reminds us of the tiniest microparticles in the world around us. And of the large, incomprehensible structures in the universe. (...)

(from the audioguide of Arne Quinze’s *There is no chaos, only structure*).

Such interpretive methods of AD writing are nothing new in the field of art AD. This illustration is consistent with subjective methods, such as those addressed by Soler Gallego (2022, 2021) and Luque and Soler Gallego (2018), among others. For instance, according to Kleege (2018), “the imperative about neutrality means that often audio description withholds information in a way that can draw undue attention to it.” (p. 104). Kleege (2018) and Thompson (in Eardley et al., 2022) both take issue with the idea that ultimate objectivity is either conceivable or desirable. “Creative and more subjective AD privileges each viewer’s subjective response to art and rejects the notion of a single interpretative voice, thus interrogating the traditional focus on objectivity in museum AD” (Thompsons in Eardley et al., 2022). According to Kleege (2018), AD should “abandon the pretext of objectivity (...) The blind listener knows that there is some interpretation involved in even the most basic description.”

However, it is important to note that several respondents claimed that the more subjective interpretations demonstrated by the examples hampered their ability to form their own personal associations. This appears to be true, particularly for seasoned museum visitors, although further study and replication are required (see also RNIB & Vocaleyes, 2003; Szarkowska et al., 2016).

### 2.2.2. Haptic Beholding for All

The importance of tactile exploration in creating accessible art experiences for blind viewers has been emphasized. Research, however, highlights that tactile experiences are valuable for audiences of all abilities as they enhance empathy and engagement (Staes, 2019). Visitors can better absorb the information provided by multisensory experiences, and tactile opportunities can also give visitors a sense of closeness to the artist, enhancing their emotional connection to the museum (Eardley et al., 2016).

Participants in the kick-off brainstorming session not only explored ways to create tactile artworks that might be useful for all audiences (see earlier), but they also cautioned against audiences who are not accustomed to touching art, being reluctant to do so (Soler Gallego, 2022; Hayhoe, 2017). Kleege and d'Evie (2018, p. 7) go into detail about this issue: "Audiences have internalized touch as transgressive, and she [Georgina Kleege] raised her frustration that occularcentric dominance over cultural encounters had stifled public discussion of tactile qualities." Kleege and d'Evie discovered—as we did—that it can be difficult to come up with strategies for inviting non-blind audiences to engage in tactile inquiry. As also suggested by the literature (e.g., De Coster & Mühleis, 2007; Neves, 2012), the brainstorming session team strongly suggested that audio guides should accompany the tactile objects in our project.

Particularly those not literate in haptic beholding require vocal instruction during tactile exploration, via a live guide or audio guide, as it is a skill that is gained with time and experience (Staes, 2019). A tactile object is more difficult to explore independently, and interaction with description and/or a dialogue with a sighted companion or guide can transform the tactile exploration into a deep and meaningful experience (Kleege, 2018).

Example 5 illustrates how the audio guide of one of the tactile artworks tries to guide audiences' haptic beholding. The strategy was developed by the describer in consultation with the project team:

#### Example 5:

In this display cabinet, Nadia Naveau constructed a landscape. She started with a red wire, an electrical cord that she placed inside the cabinet like a walkway. Around it, she placed all kinds of materials that you can explore with your hands. White plaster and plasticine feel smooth and soft. There are found objects such as rough stones and smooth plastic ribbon. Can you feel the soft mousse, hard terracotta, the mound of velvety fabric behind some smooth boulders in front? At the back left, the curling wire for tying up plants wiggles. In front, plastic pins wind backward, and at the back is a pole around which a spiral winds upward like a rope.

This artwork wants you to travel through tactile experiences. Do you feel the different textures? Do you go over them gently or do you want to feel more firmly, including the fragile materials, including the grainy textures.

(from the audioguide for Nadia Naveau's *Let's Play it by Ear*).

This example also serves to highlight a problem that was raised during discussions with the participating artists and the audio describer, namely, how to handle the pieces of art. Haptic exploration of the *Le Salon du Plaisir* tactile work proved difficult due to the complexity of the piece (see later). This topic was also brought up earlier during the brainstorming session when the group discussed the various purposes for tactile exploration, including understanding the physical characteristics of the work (shape/texture), mentally imagining the work, understanding the meaning behind the work, and having an expressive or aesthetic experience of the work of art. Kleege and d'Evie (2018, p. 9) emphasize that each piece of art requires or even dictates a different kind of haptic engagement.

Therefore, an accompanying audio guide is faced with the difficult task of "guided touching" – leading haptic exploration, which, as Kleege (2018, pp. 61–72) explains, involves a type of "reading", discerning tactile qualities, using various touching techniques, and encouraging audiences to make cross-sensory analogies between the various senses they choose to employ, triggering tactile eloquence.

#### Example 6:

For both artist and art lover, this is an experiment, an adventure. An exploration both for the sighted and the non-sighted person. It is somewhat chaotic and ambiguous for everyone. (...) This artwork by Nadia Naveau is touching for the advanced. Play along and feel free to search for the thread of life.

(from the audioguide for Nadia Naveau's *Let's Play it by Ear*).

At the time of writing, the audio guide for the tactile work created for *Dance the World* by the team's visually impaired artist was still in the process of being created. However, it is obvious that this work will dictate its own haptic type of engagement and is likely to give a distinct kind of multisensory experience. This second piece is particularly intriguing since the artist pays equal attention to haptic as well as visual beholding, reflecting her actual experience of art via all the senses and her artistic process as a blind artist. This is, however, beyond the scope of the present article and will be discussed in more detail in future publications.

### 2.3. From Translation to Artistic Creation

Creativity in Media Accessibility (MA) has gained attention and focuses on enhancing the user experience in imaginative and artistic ways. Such artistic approaches often arise from participatory



practices and collaborations with artists. The literature identifies two main types of creativity in MA, namely creativity in access and access as creative inspiration, which will be further discussed below.

### 2.3.1. Creativity in Media Access

The audio guide strategies discussed earlier are examples of approaches that allow for more creative freedom and see access less as “(...) a neutral way of conveying the source text and more as a creative tool.” (Fryer, 2018). However, these were often still describer-led strategies. The audio guide also contains examples of creativity borne out of a closer collaboration with artists, trying to close the maker-user gap (Greco, 2018). The artist’s perspective was integrated in different ways in *A Touch of Museum to Scale*. While the audio guides were written by a single describer in consultation with an experienced art AD user, the team decided to add expert voices to the guide in an interview style akin to podcasting. The content and style of the art experts were complementary to the guide’s voice and offered a more personal perspective.

Example 7:

Geert, does Quinze always create installations? – Well, no, he does create artwork that can be installed within rooms, of course, but he’s become well-known for his work as an installation artist. That’s his greatest accomplishment, and that’s what he’ll go down in art history for. Think of the installations that are outside in Oostende, for example, his name will be renowned for those works.

(from the audioguide of Arne Quinze’s *There is no chaos, only structure*).

### 2.3.2. Access as Creative Inspiration

Romero-Fresco suggests that access can serve as “a generative site for poetic, humorous and critical perspective” (2021), particularly in artist-led approaches to access, where the artistic contribution in its own right is foregrounded. The project’s audio guide offers examples of access as artistic inspiration, including Sign language poetry and the creation of soundscapes. The most notable instances, though, are the artistic objects designed for tactile exploration. While the team initially still thought of the tactile artworks as a type of intersemiotic translation with access at the forefront with an extra artistic injection, it quickly became apparent that access planted seeds of new creative inspiration that resulted in artworks in their own right. The audio guide prompts viewers to consider the interplay between the original artwork and its tactile interpretation. However, the pieces of art can also be appreciated independently and are displayed alongside other pieces of art in the collection.

The tactile objects embrace “radical subjectivity” (Romero-Fresco, 2021) by translating between senses and deviating from standardized audio description. This leads to a new aesthetic that challenges the visual function of art. While it is beyond the scope of the current article to carefully

evaluate this topic, the examples below indicate how access as a creative inspiration can lead to quite varied artistic processes that lead to different access products.

### Figure 5

*Let's play it by Ear*



Source: Image reproduced with permission from UAntwerp.

The tactile interpretation of *Le Salon du Plaisir* titled *Let's play it by ear* emphasizes the tactile experience (for the original work, see Figure 3 above). The artwork provides a complex tactile experience that presents difficulties for the viewer in navigating the disorderly tactile landscape. The artwork lacks visual resemblance to the original sculptures in favour of triggering a similar tactile encounter. As the artist herself remarked, the original piece may visually appear disorganized at first glance, an eclectic mix of murky, white shapes. Visitors may visually identify various figures, such as a Mickey Mouse-like head, a deer's body with a human head, or a nude female, only upon closer examination of the artwork. The tactile interpretation of *Let's play it by ear* offers a similar but tactile experience that may feel complex at first touch and requires time to identify shapes and textures through detailed exploration with the hands. This process hopes to provide insights into the artist's work process, background, and experience.

The tactile work of *Dance the World*, while still in the finish stages at the time of writing, will offer a very different experience. The idea behind this second work is to make intangible meanings of *Dance*

*the World* – such as sensuality, movement, repetition, and femininity – tangible through both touch and vision, establishing a closer relation to the original work it was inspired by, and offering a deeper experience of the artwork by inspiring reflection on multisensory ways of experiencing aesthetic meaning and dance.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

Our study on participation and accessibility has been both enriching and challenging, as we have tried to incorporate diverse viewpoints that have also raised some concerns. Even though polyphonic inquiry is enriching, finding a consensus can be challenging. While there is no doubt about the value of participatory approaches to access, the team found it challenging to incorporate participation into our research methods, giving due value to experiential knowledge alongside academic insights. It requires attention to research design and an awareness of the roles and needs of the various participants. The current project has not only been a valuable step towards the development of access services for the University of Antwerp's art collection, but it has also pushed the involved researchers to deliberate on their own position in the project, on the accessibility of and level of participation in research. Below we highlight a few of the lessons learned.

Fryer (2018), for instance, cautions against prioritizing art over access, emphasizing the need to find a balance that accommodates diverse audiences. The project also raised concerns about displaying access services, as scholars warn against using disability as a spectacle for non-disabled people. As Kleege and d'Evie (2018) have remarked, blindness has been used in art and museums in the past as an artistic tool in such a way that it no longer benefits blind users but draws attention to disability as a curiosity. These uses result in oversimplified interpretations of visually impaired artists' creations, perpetuating the categorization and marginalization of artists with disabilities. As Kleege and d'Evie (2018) have formulated it, this "risks enacting a freak show of otherness." Our team hopes to have explored non-normative body-minds in an empowering way and aims to promote an aesthetic of difference.

Another transformation in the present approach to AD for the arts is that access is seen not (only) as a product but as a social process, shifting the focus to access, emerging out of interactions between people of varied abilities, conceiving it as a joint or shared experience, a dialogue. The creation of access services and their shared use in the exhibition space is conceived as a dialogue that can be facilitated by, for instance, an inclusive audioguide or a shared tactile experience. *A Touch of Museum to Scale* has a significant drawback in this regard. Our guide is intended to assist self-guided visits. It assumes self-sufficient mobility within the exhibition areas or necessitates the presence of a companion to navigate the premises and recognize the artworks. Further research should address the impact on social interaction of audio guides, and the value of human guides should not be underestimated. Hirvonen and Saari (2022) discovered that live AD improves various aspects of museum visits, including individual learning and collective experiences. Kleege (2018) also

highlighted the importance of a personal guide in tailoring tours and improving the experience for blind and non-blind individuals.

Finally, scholars in the field of MA have studied the effects of participatory and collaborative accessibility approaches, demonstrating their potential to foster innovative and creative outcomes. The interest in creativity is also rising in Translation Studies more widely (Rizzo, 2022). Romero-Fresco (2021) notes that despite the growing prevalence of new types of creative and artistic practises, such as the one discussed in this article, they lack coherence and continuity. Research has yet to define the nature of this type of “creativity” in MA or identify commonalities among artistic practices in MA. Artistic approaches do seem to share shifts in the way they approach access, including a move from comprehension to experience, translation to artistic creation, standardization to diverse approaches, authoritative to subjective perspectives, describer-led to collaborative practises, and neutrality to “radical subjectivity” (Romero-Fresco, 2021). What is more, such initiatives hint at a new type of aesthetic. This aesthetic values diversity and investigates various embodied art experiences. Kleege (2018) proposes an aesthetic that views disability as a normal aspect of the human experience, affecting how individuals navigate their surroundings, communicate, and exist in the world.

Artistically inspired approaches in MA also share a commonality of going beyond mere translation, as demonstrated in the current project. As Greco states, we are: “stepping outside the safe, familiar boundaries of Translation Studies and treading upon broader ground, where translation is just one of the many factors at play, and often not the main one” (Greco, 2018, p. 217). *A Touch of Museum to Scale* echoes the work of the inspiring authors cited throughout this article and hopes to have contributed to setting a research agenda for the study of participatory and artistic approaches to access, fostering cross-fertilization between MA, Disability Studies, and the Arts.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the completion of *A Touch of Museum to Scale*, from participants to students, to all the artists and describers involved. Information about the project and its collaborators can be found on the project’s website: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/a-touch-of-museum-to-scale/about-the-project/>

## References

- d'Evie, F., & Kleege, G. (2018). The Gravity, The Levity: Let us speak of tactile encounters. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 38(3), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6483>
- Di Giovanni, E. (2018). Audio description for live performances and audience participation. *Jostrans: The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 29, pp. 189–211.
- Di Giovanni, E. (2022). Inclusive theatre-making: Participation, empowerment and well-being. *InTRAlinea: Online Translation Journal*, 24.
- De Coster, K., & Mühleis, V. (2007). Intersensorial translation: Visual art made up by words. In Díaz Cintas, J., Orero, P., & Remael, A. (Eds.), *Media for All: Subtitling for the Deaf, Audio Description, and Sign Language* (pp. 189-200). Rodopi, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209564>
- De Vadder, R. (2021). *An inclusive audioguide for Museum to Scale 1/7: Testing a prototype with sighted persons* [Master's thesis, University of Antwerp].
- Eardley, A. F., Mineiro, C., Neves, J., & Ride, P. (2016). Redefining access: Embracing multimodality, memorability and shared experience in Museums. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 59(3), 263–286. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12163>
- Eardley, A. F., Thompson, H., Fineman, A., Hutchinson, R., Bywood, L., & Cock, M. (2022). Devisualizing the museum: From access to inclusion. *Journal of Museum Education*, 47(2), 150–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2022.2077067>
- Eardley, A. F., & Pring, L. (2006). Remembering the past and imagining the future: A role for nonvisual imagery in the everyday cognition of blind and sighted people. *Memory*, 14(8), 925–936. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210600859582>
- Fryer, L. (2018). The independent audio describer is dead: Long live audio description! In *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 1(1), 170–186.
- Greco, G. M. (2016). On accessibility as a human right, with an application to media accessibility. In Orero, P. & Matamala, A. (Eds.), *Researching audio description* (pp. 11–33). Springer.
- Greco, G. M. (2018). The nature of accessibility studies. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 1(1), 205–232.
- Hayhoe, S. (2017). *Blind visitor experiences at art museums*. Rowman & Littlefield,.
- Hirvonen, M., & Saari, B. (2022). Scripted or spontaneous? Two approaches to audio describing visual art in museums. *Perspectives*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2022.2046816>
- Hutchinson, R. (2019). *Museums for all: Towards engaging, memorable museum experiences through inclusive audio description* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Westminster.
- Hutchinson, R., & Eardley, A. F. (2021). Inclusive Museum Audio Guides: 'Guided Looking' through Audio Description Enhances Memorability of Artworks for Sighted Audiences. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 36,(4), 427–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.1891563>
- Kleege, G. (2018). *More than meets the eye: What blindness brings to art*. Oxford University Press.

- Luque, M. O., & Soler Gallego, S. (2018). Paintings to my ears: A method of studying subjectivity in audio description for art museums. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series – Themes in Translation Studies*, 17. <https://doi.org/10.52034/lanstts.v17i0.472>
- Margolies, E. (2015). Going to hear a dance: On audio describing. *Performance Issues*, 20(6), 17–23.
- Neves, J. (2010). Soundpainting: audiodescription in another light [Paper presentation]. 8th International Conference & Exhibition on Language Transfer in the Audiovisual Media – Languages & The Media, Berlin, Germany, 2010.
- Neves, J. (2012). Multi-sensory approaches to (audio) describing the visual arts. *MonTI. Monografías de Traducción e Interpretación*, vol.No(issue No), pp. ??–??.
- Neves, J. (2016). Enriched Descriptive Guides: A case for collaborative meaning-making in museums. *Cultus: the Journal of intercultural mediation and communication* 2(9), pp. 137-154
- Neves, J. (2018). Cultures of accessibility: Translation making cultural heritage in museums accessible to people of all abilities. In Harding, S.-A., & Carbonell Cortés, O. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Culture* (pp. 415–430). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315670898>
- Perego, E. (2019). Into the language of museum audio descriptions: A corpus-based study. *Perspectives*, 27(3), 333–349.
- Reviere, N., & Devos, P. (2023). Een toegankelijkheidsrevolutie? De kracht van handicap in kunst, audiobeschrijving en onderzoek [An Accessibility Revolution? De power of disability in art and audio description research]. *Karakter: Tijdschrift Voor Wetenschap*, 81.
- Rizzo, A. (2022). Into the translation for museums, festivals, and the stage: Creativity and the transmedial turn. *Status Quaestionis*, 23, Article 23. <https://doi.org/10.13133/2239-1983/18213>
- RNIB, & Vocaleyes. (2003). Talking images. <https://vocaleyes.co.uk/research/talking-images-2003/>
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2018). In support of a wide notion of media accessibility: Access to content and access to creation. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 1(1), Article 1.  
<https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v1i1.53>
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2019). *Accessible filmmaking: Integrating translation and accessibility into the filmmaking process*. Routledge.
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2021). Creative Media Accessibility: Placing the Focus Back on the Individual. In M. Antona & C. Stephanidis (Eds.), *Universal Access in Human-Computer Interaction. Access to Media, Learning and Assistive Environments* (Vol. 12769, pp. 291–307). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78095-1\\_22](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78095-1_22)
- Romero-Fresco, P. (2022). Moving from accessible filmmaking toward creative media accessibility. *Leonardo*, 55(3), 304–309. [https://doi.org/10.1162/leon\\_a\\_02204](https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02204)
- Romero-Fresco, P., & Dangerfield, K. (2022). Accessibility as a conversation. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.47476/jat.v5i2.2022.228>
- Savin-Baden, M., & Howell Major, C. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge.

- Soler Gallego, S. (2021, July 24–29). The minority AD: Creativity in audio descriptions of visual art. *Universal Access in Human-Computer Interaction. 15th International Conference, UAHCI 2021, Held as Part of the 23rd HCI International Conference, , 2021, Proceedings, Part II*, 308–327. <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v42i1.7287>
- Staes, K. (2019). *The accessibility of musea for people with a visual impairment* [Unpublished Master's thesis]. University of Antwerp.
- Szarkowska, A., Jankowska, A., Krejtz, K., & Kowalski, J. (2016). Open art: Designing accessible content in a multimedia guide app for visitors with and without sensory impairments. In A. Matamala & P. Orero (Eds.). *Researching audio description: New approaches*, , 301–320. Palgrave Macmillan . [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56917-2\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56917-2_16)
- Townsend, A. (2013). *Action research: The challenges of understanding and changing practice*. Open University Press.
- Van der Sijpt, C. (2020). *Designing inclusive audio guides for a greater accessibility of modern art: Literature review and a first experiment for the exhibition Museum to Scale 1/7* [Unpublished Master's thesis]. University of Antwerp.