

## **STATEMENT**

We explored how to enhance the engagement and joyful experience in exhibitions for visually impaired people by interpreting the exhibits into sounds and tactile replicas.

We selected Gerhard Richter's six oil paintings, "Cage 1-6", exhibited at Tate Modern, as our experimental objects. We were drawn to these works because Richter immersed himself in John Cage's music during the painting process, aligning with our vision of establishing a connection between visual art and sound.

Our exploration went beyond "translating" basic elements, such as the paintings' composition, colours, and contrast. Since Richter's technique involves multiple layers of paint and distinctive scraped textures, we attempted to interpret brushstrokes and scraped lines into sound. For example, we associated different strokes and marks with sounds from nature and daily life, layering them in a music-editing program to mimic the paintings' complex textures.

Additionally, we explored how to convert the unique textures of the paintings into a tactile experience. Using lino cut, modelling paste, and tactile collage, we created a series of tactile objects.

However, our translations were highly subjective and experimental, making it uncertain whether visually impaired visitors could fully understand or enjoy them. I believe visually impaired individuals should be actively involved in the interpretation process, sharing their own ways of imagining and experiencing art. Collaborating with professional composers and providing contextual explanations in exhibitions, would enhance accessibility and enrich the experience for all audiences.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

**McLuhan, M. and Fiore, Q. (2001) *The medium is the message: an inventory of effects*. Berkeley: Gingko Press. [Originally published in 1967].**

We translated the composition, brushstrokes, colors, and scratches of Gerhard Richter's Cage series into sound and touch, aiming to break the visual dominance of art exhibitions and make art more inclusive through a multisensory experience.

In *The Medium is the Message*, McLuhan argues that media are not just passive carriers of information but actively shape how we perceive and understand it. Painting, as a visual medium, is traditionally experienced through sight. For visually impaired audiences, art is often conveyed through text-based descriptions—whether in braille or audio guides. But can Richter's highly abstract works truly be communicated through mere textual descriptions? Or can we create an equally artistic auditory and tactile experience that allows themselves to interpret the artwork?

This raises another critical question—does our translation genuinely enhance accessibility, or does it introduce new barriers to understanding? Once a painting is transformed into sound and touch, are viewers still engaging with Richter's original work, or are they experiencing a new interpretation shaped by our choices? If so, does this suggest that changing the medium not only alters the way we perceive but also inevitably reshapes the meaning of the artwork itself?

**Bolt, B. (2021) *Beneficence and contemporary art: when aesthetic judgment meets ethical judgment*. In: *The Meeting of Aesthetics and Ethics in the Academy: Challenges for Creative Practice Researchers in Higher Education*. London: Routledge, pp. 153–166.**

Bolt (2021) argues that the content, themes, and techniques used by artists should deliberately challenge viewers' perceptions, ethical beliefs, and emotional comfort zones to provoke deeper reflection and social dialogue. Rather than minimizing discomfort and controversy, as some regulations suggest, he calls for a reconsideration of the principle of beneficence. He advocates for art to confront and unsettle audiences to ensure that it continues to serve its critical function in society.

I interpret Bolt's concept of "comfort" as a state of pure aesthetic pleasure and safety—an approach that, while visually pleasing, may lack deeper social critique or engagement with broader ethical responsibilities. In our project, this "comfort" is reflected in the conventional, unquestioned prioritization of mainstream audiences' needs while overlooking accessibility for disabled individuals. However, such an approach is built upon structural inequalities and further reinforces them. Our responsibility, therefore, is not just to enhance accessibility but to critically reflect on the ethical responsibilities of art, reconsider its inclusivity, and challenge dominant societal perceptions of disability.

**Costanza-Chock, S. (2020) *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. Cambridge: MIT Press.**

In Chapter 2 of *Design Justice*, Costanza-Chock (2020) uses the Disability Rights Movement's slogan, "Nothing about us without us" to emphasise that true accessibility in design must be shaped by the direct participation of those affected, rather than by external designers' assumptions. This statement reminds us to reflect on whether we are merely simulating disability in our discussions on accessibility, while overlooking the fact that lived experience is non-transferable.

In our project, since we were unable to directly interview visually impaired individuals, we sought to gather authentic perspectives through secondary research. For example, we examined research papers on the barriers faced by visually impaired people in museums to gain first-hand insights and feedback.

Additionally, we visited a well-known museum to observe accessibility features and identified several shortcomings. Many of these features appeared to be symbolic gestures aimed at demonstrating social responsibility rather than genuinely improving accessibility. While some museums provide dedicated guided tours for visually impaired visitors, does this approach reinforce their exclusion from the general audience? Should we reconsider whether exhibition content and interactive formats truly embrace inclusivity?

These studies and observations gave us a clearer understanding of the current issues in accessible design while also prompting deeper reflection: true justice should not be about designing for people with disabilities but designing with them. Moving forward, as a designer, I aspire to implement Human-Centered Design, Participatory Design, and Co-Design to promote more inclusive and fair design practices—rather than unconsciously perpetuating structural inequalities.

**Bourriaud, N. (1998) *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.**

Bourriaud argues that art is not merely an image on canvas or a sculpture but rather the production of human relations (Bourriaud, 1998). The meaning of an artwork is not solely determined by the artist but is continuously generated and transformed through audience participation.

This concept of relational aesthetics challenges the conventional one-directional way of experiencing art through vision alone, expanding curatorial approaches to create more inclusive and accessible exhibitions, particularly for visually impaired audiences.

In our project, when audiences listen to the sounds translated from the paintings while simultaneously touching tactile representations, visually impaired individuals—who might otherwise struggle to engage with the original paintings—are given the opportunity to interact with the artwork through alternative sensory channels. Furthermore, our translation process itself introduces new relational dynamics:

- **Original artist → Sound & tactile translators:** The act of translating paintings into sound and touch involves subjective interpretation, making it a form of creative reimagining.

- **Sound & tactile translators → Visually impaired audiences:** The audiences are not merely passive receivers but active participants, engaging with the artwork through their own sensory perceptions.
- **Visually impaired audiences → The artwork:** Instead of relying on traditional audio guides or braille descriptions, audiences form their own understanding of the painting through **multisensory experiences**.

This multi layered interaction transforms art from a static object into a dynamic network of interpretations, interactions, and accessibility, making the artistic experience more inclusive while redefining the ways in which people can engage with visual art.

**ABC News (2018) ‘Listening to paintings: World-first project opens in Sydney’, *ABC News*, 6 October. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-06/listening-to-paintings-world-first-project-opens-in-sydney/10329102> (Accessed: 16 February 2025).**

This article introduces a project that converts visual art into sound, inspiring us to explore how sound can allow visually impaired individuals to "experience" art. The method described in the article involves translating visual elements such as colour, contrast, creation date, and artist information into different instruments, rhythms, and percussions. Visitors can hear the transformed sounds through a turn reel. This project made us realise that visual art does not have to be conveyed solely through verbal descriptions—it can also be expressed through sound, interaction, translation, and reinterpretation to communicate its structure and emotional depth.

At the start of our project, we considered focusing on an accessible way-finding system, but this article prompted us to address a more fundamental question: Can visually impaired individuals truly appreciate and enjoy art simply through traditional braille or audio guides? In response, we experimented with translating Gerhard Richter’s “Cage 1-6” into sound by extracting brushstrokes, layers, and scraped lines from the paintings and associating them with natural sounds. This approach aimed to create a more immersive and inclusive artistic experience.

**Flying Object (n.d.) ‘Tate Sensorium Exhibition’, *Flying Object*. Available at: <https://weareflyingobject.com/projects/tate-sensorium-exhibition> (Accessed: 25 February 2025).**

The *Tate Sensorium* exhibition, designed by the creative studio Flying Object for Tate Britain, explored how paintings could be experienced through senses beyond sight, including smell and sound. This concept aligns closely with our exploration of how to create a more enjoyable and immersive exhibition experience for visually impaired visitors. Must visually impaired people rely solely on Braille and audio guides to engage with art? Could the artwork itself “speak” instead?

One of the exhibits used ultrasound technology to create tactile feedback, allowing visitors to 'read' the black and white space of John Latham’s *Full Stop* (1961) through touch. This prompted us to consider whether we could translate paintings into sound, enabling visitors to trigger corresponding sounds through touch when interacting with a tactile replica of the artwork. While developing this technology within our project’s timeframe was not feasible, we aimed to experiment with translation—converting colours, brushstrokes, and composition into sound—allowing paintings to “speak” in a new way.