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## On Audio Tours

An unknown quantity

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If told in January 2005, I wouldn't have believed that after eleven months researching the fifty-year evolution of audio tours, my bibliography would read so short. Through investigative research I had tasked myself with identifying the events, personalities and decisions that have shaped the audio tour's contemporary museum role. Audio tours are today the inseparable companion of the modern museum. Annual global distribution is estimated at some thirty-five million tours, and it is not uncommon for take-up rates at art exhibitions to top 50% of visitors. <sup>1</sup> Surveys strongly suggest – and I say 'suggest' because I have not seen enough surveys for it to be 'stated' – that audioguide users credit the medium with improving their visit, that they would take an audio tour again, and would recommend one to a friend.

But despite this apparent museum and visitor endorsement of the medium, and whilst gallery educators and, after gentle persuasion, audioguide companies are happy to discuss their individual experiences, there exists no expansive discourse on audio tours. Indeed, the literature on audioguides, or at least the externally accessible literature on audioguides, is remarkably small. So small in fact that there is no agreement as to whether audioguide is one word or two. For a visitor tool so integral to many visitors' museum experience this is surprising. By not actively engaging with audio tours,

museums are disadvantaging themselves. For without a body of research, a documented history and the external circulation of user evaluations, lessons learnt are lost. The root cause of this is the museum and gallery community's perception of audio tours.

### **A valuable arts education tool?**

The journalist Alfred Hickling bemoans: 'It is almost impossible to visit a major art exhibition these days without encountering the evils of the audioguide: a ruse to squeeze an extra few quid from gullible patrons happy to amble around like zombies while a disembodied academic voice tells them what to think.'<sup>2</sup> Though rarely expressed with such panache, similar views are held by many and are further perpetuated by an audioguide industry that actively promotes financial incentives and behaviour management features as among the benefits of installing an audio tour. Education is no longer perceived as integral to their role.

This has not always been the case. At their launch at the National Portrait Gallery in 1997, the gallery asserted that audio tours 'further the gallery's aim to provide access to the collections through a variety of media to suit different learning styles, including text, gallery talks, lectures, and temporary exhibitions with hands-on exhibits and workshop activities.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, despite fears that the system would not be a commercial success, at the National Gallery audio tours were installed in the belief that they offered 'sufficient educational advantages to the gallery and to our visitors to merit the necessary investment of time and money.'<sup>4</sup>

Audio tours share characteristics with the typical range of museum education services. If a list of these services were compiled in order of function and use, audio tours would appear somewhere between an exhibit label or wall text and a human-led tour or lecture. Like a label, audio tours operate in the gallery and do not oblige a specific time-commitment on the part of the user. And, as with a human-led activity, the attendees/users demonstrate a motivation to learn (or else they wouldn't have turned up to the event/hired an audioguide) and the range of information is more detailed and in-depth. This unique combination of qualities underscores the audio tour's powerful educational potential.

### **Engaging with contemporary visiting habits**

High among visitors' reasons for visiting a gallery is to have an intellectually engaging experience. However, the idea of subjecting a museum visit to external time-constraints, an obligatory feature of human-led educational activities, is often unappealing and impractical for a majority of visitors for whom gallery-going is a leisure-time activity. Thus, simply on a practical level, audio tours are sometimes better suited to addressing the demands of the contemporary museum visitor. This does not mean that audio tours are better than human-led activities: standardised content orated by a disembodied voice is no match for a personable educator who tailors their approach to their audience. However, in light of contemporary visiting habits, is it not important to ask: are audio tours better than nothing?

'Leisure learners'<sup>5</sup> are reliant on informal teaching methods including exhibit

labels, wall texts, gallery guides and audio tours. The audio tour's particular strength over other informal learning teaching methods is that since they are offered as an optional extra, by deciding to take, and usually pay for, an audioguide, their users demonstrate a motivation to learn – a prerequisite for learning to take place. As an educational service, audio tours thus serve, or have the potential to serve, a large and motivated target audience.

A number of academic papers explore the benefits of self-directed learning with portable interpretation devices in cultural sites.<sup>6</sup> Always prominent among these benefits are the user's control over the pace and depth of their learning, and the device's capacity to not only provide interpretive material, but to develop a user's confidence in making independent critical judgements. Important too is that audio tours can cater to the learning requirements of particular visitor groups. Foreign language tours for non-English speakers are a widespread and obvious example, but equally important are initiatives such as the Wallace Collection's under-publicised Basic English tour for visitors with learning difficulties, or the screen-based sign language tours at Tate Modern for the deaf. These programmes have revolutionised the museum visit for their users, making a learning experience freely and independently accessible for the first time.

Using only the traditional gallery education performance indicator – time spent in the gallery – literally every evaluation confirms the audio tour's educational success. Adding this to an already significant body of evidence, one has to conclude that audio tours have the potential to be a powerful educational resource. Currently the museum and gallery sector are not exploiting this potential.

### **The need for research**

Almost all large, and the majority of medium-sized, museums offer audio tours. First employed in Britain in 1964 at the British Museum, the audio tour's history runs parallel to that of the Blockbuster exhibition, an exhibition format consciously constructed to appeal to a wide audience with a range of arts experience. For many, their first museum visit involved an audio tour and this has made the audio tour something of a visitor expectation.

It took, however, the arrival of digital technologies in 1995 for audio tours to be widely accepted by British museums. Allowing direct access, popularly referred to as 'random access', this new generation of audioguides overcame the unpopular constrictions of linear tours. The typical 'flagship' institutions – British Museum, Tate, National Gallery and Royal Academy – drawing on their experience with linear audiocassette based tours, adopted this new technology quickly. Many other museums followed suit, but their decision to install an audioguide system was often based on the audio tour's popularity with visitors and their availability in other museums and galleries. Many institutions appear to offer audio tours less as an educational service, than to be able to answer positively if a visitor asks for them. This attitude inevitably affects the quality of the audio tour; today a large number of them are unimaginative and mediocre.

Over the past twelve months I have listened to audio tours that are boring, distracting, ill-conceived, repeat label information or prescriptive to the point of coercing the viewer toward a particular viewpoint. Just as a good audio tour will improve a visit, a bad one will ruin it, transforming the audioguide from a positive educational tool into a deadweight hanging uncomfortably around the visitor's neck. Only through external research-sharing and the creation of best practice recommendations can this situation be addressed.

In all likelihood internally circulated research probably exists, but little appears to be shared externally (this has much to do with the fact that the production of audio tours is contracted out to audioguide companies, a scenario explored below). Two of the most compelling audio tour evaluations I have encountered are internal documents acquired only by chance, persistence and professional goodwill.<sup>7</sup> With only a limited body of externally accessible research, the creation of best practice is all but impossible. When compared with exhibit labels and wall panels, whose writers can draw upon numerous published guidelines – the Fog Index, the Fry or Cloze tests and the Ekary Method – it becomes clear that the audio tour's educational potential greatly outweighs the body of research devoted to it.

### **Why the lack of research?**

The most obvious reason for the lack of research is the audio tour's perceived status by many sections of the art community, a community who are, at best, guarded about the audio tour's merits. Although as a literal embodiment of the museum's new relevance, audio tours deserve credit for an active participation in the reinvention of the museum over the second half of the twentieth century, they have suffered in museums due to, what the Art Gallery of Ontario identified as, 'a long-standing ideological divide within museums.'<sup>8</sup> This is born of a 'discomfort with the non-traditional approach.'<sup>9</sup>

Although it seems to be waning, there exists an overt prejudice against the use of technology in art galleries. Being so widely available, audio tours are a popular target for this criticism. Art critics dismiss audio tours as 'beneath their high aesthetic judgement,'<sup>10</sup> art historians perceive them as a tool for the uninitiated, and the museum industry can be dubious of the art interaction an audio tour mediates. Audioguide users are accused of being antisocial, of 'clogging-up' a gallery, of only being interested in artworks if they are discussed on the audio tour and of only engaging superficially with artworks. New screen-based multimedia tours are even accused of distracting the visitor from looking at the artwork (do visitors look at the artwork when reading a label?!). This criticism personifies the audioguide as a master rather than a tool. With this range of arguments in mind, it is perhaps no coincidence that two key phases of the audioguide's development – during the 1970s at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and over the past five years at Tate Modern – coincided with the tenure of museum directors recognised for their innovative approach towards appealing to new audiences, namely Thomas Hoving and Nicolas Serota.

Almost all intelligent criticism of audio tours relates to the nature of the viewer-artwork interaction it promotes. Qualifying this interaction is an ideological enterprise informed by a series of assumptions regarding how

someone should interact with an artwork. Within contemporary gallery education discourses, a key question is whether or not audio tours allow the viewer to be active, and for more than one interpretation to be valid.

In this context music is perceived as a distracting secondary art form that elicits its own emotional response separate from the artwork. A director or curator as narrator is perceived as an authoritative voice which the viewer might accept without questioning, and a celebrity narrator is regarded as a superficial distraction. For audio tour users, however, these same features provide absorbing and enjoyable texture to the narrative. An ideological divide is thus evident between an audio tour that is 'academically correct' and one that is popular with visitors.

For such issues to be addressed, it is imperative that the art and museum community experience and engage with audio tours so as to develop an informed understanding of their role. But whereas an informed opinion about labelling techniques can be easily developed through museum visits, one has to proactively decide to take, and probably pay for, an audioguide in order to gain a similar level of exposure. Only the most conscientious individuals appear ready to do this, and thus the intellectual bank of knowledge and experience about audio tours suffers.

That audio tours are rarely produced by the museum or gallery itself perpetuates this situation. Since the 1990s, two companies have dominated the audioguide industry: Acoustiguide (who were acquired by Espro in April 2005 to form the Espro Acoustiguide Group) and Antenna Audio. This scenario has generated an intense commercial rivalry as both companies submit competing bids for any major museum tender. Like all commercial companies operating in a competitive market, their knowledge of the product is their trading commodity. To publish and share that knowledge or expertise, is to dilute their competitive edge, and benefit their competitors. Inevitably, therefore, what research an audio company does is rarely distributed, and the companies resist involvement in independent research endeavours.

Furthermore the copyright of an audio tour is rarely owned by the museum alone, but is shared with the company that produced it. This in turn weakens the museum's ability to make audio tours available to researchers. The audioguide company's wide experience and knowledge position them strongly to contribute to audio tour debates, but what external publications these companies produce, though informative, are measured by self-interests.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst secrecy of information is understandable within commercial practice, it runs contrary to the research ethics of the museum industry. The Museums Association Code of Ethics states: 'Make information publicly accessible. Conduct research with the intention of making it public. Publish research promptly and make it widely available.'<sup>12</sup> The existence of audioguide companies, and the refinement of their expertise, is in complete partnership with museums. So does this tangible link between audio tours and museums not necessitate a level of informed, open dialogue between the audioguide

companies and museum professionals at large? A Freedom of Information request I submitted to a museum regarding the relationship between themselves, their audioguide provider and their visitors, was denied due to a Section 43 exemption: 'The Gallery or its contractors' commercial interests may be prejudiced where disclosure would be likely to: ... weaken their position in a competitive environment by revealing market sensitive information or information of potential usefulness to competitors.'

### **Future prospects**

Prejudice against audio tours combined with a lack of informed opinions are the main reasons why so little research of audio tours exists. This forms a catch-22: without research, preconceptions cannot be challenged nor informed opinions developed. And whilst this is perpetuated by the commercially motivated companies which produce and operate the audio tours, it is a museum's responsibility to inform itself. Logistics and finances mean the production of audio tours has to be outsourced, but it is the responsibility of the museum or gallery as client to continually access the role and benefits of the product.

Portable technologies are rapidly evolving. The annual International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting and Museums and the Web conference showcase innovative means for presenting and managing information for visitors in cultural sites. The expectations of the twenty-first century gallery visitor are increasingly shaped by the internet and mobile phones, tools that place a wealth of information at their fingertips. With the means and expectation there, it is for art educators to explore how these new technologies can serve the visitor's expectations as well as offer a meaningful learning experience. But for this to happen, a better understanding of the audio tour's role and potential in museums today is imperative. Evaluations of the Art Museum of Ontario's innovative 'Exercise in the Mind' or Tate Modern's pioneering multimedia tours highlight their potential, but further research is still needed so as to better understand how to harness that potential.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> At the 2004 Turner Prize Exhibition take-up was 63%, and for exhibitions at the Queen's Gallery, the average take-up is greater than 60%.

<sup>2</sup> Hickling, Alfred. (2004) 'Block Beuys,' in *The Guardian*, 29th November, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> 'NPG Launched Audio Guide' (1997) in *Museum Practice*, no. 6, Winter 1997, p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, Michael, (1993) *Sound Guides in the Collection* (Internal Memo), National Gallery Archive, ref. S4256.1.

<sup>5</sup> This term is borrowed from Eilean Hooper-Greenhill who calls this majority visitor group, the 'leisure learning.' See Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. (1999), *The Educational Role of the Museum*, 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge, p.21.

<sup>6</sup> Geddes, Simon. (2004) 'Mobile learning in the 21st century: benefit for learners' in *The Knowledge Tree: An e-Journal of Flexible Learning in VET*, no. 6, [www.flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition06/download/geddes.pdf](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition06/download/geddes.pdf)

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- <sup>7</sup> Among those that I have seen, the four audio tour evaluations that stand alone in terms of quality and scope are: (1) Smith, Jeffrey K., Izabella Waszkielewicz, Kathryn Potts & Benjamin K. Smith, (2004). 'Visitors and the Audio Program. An Investigation into the Impact of the Audio Guide Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art'. Unpublished. (2) Tate Modern & Antenna Audio, (2004) 'Tate Modern Multimedia Tour Pilot. Phase Two', October 2003 – May 2004. Unpublished. (3) Gottlieb, Halina, Eva Insulander & Helen Simonsson, (2004). 'Access in Mind: Enhancing the Relationship to Contemporary Art.' ICHIM Conference Proceedings, Berlin, August 2004. [www.ichim.org/ichim04/contenu/PDF/2061\\_Gottlieb.pdf](http://www.ichim.org/ichim04/contenu/PDF/2061_Gottlieb.pdf). (4) Clarkson, Austin & Douglas Worts, (2005) 'The Animated Muse: An interpretive Program for Creative Viewing' in *Curator*, no. 48/3, July 2005, pp.257-280.
- <sup>8</sup> Clarkson, A et al. (2005): p.262.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.262.
- <sup>10</sup> Hamilton, Adrian. (2005) 'Listen without prejudice' in *The Independent Review* 11th January 2005: p.14.
- <sup>11</sup> See Proctor, Nancy & Chris Tellis. (2003) 'The State of the Art in Museum Handhelds in 2003.' Museums and the Web Conference Proceedings, Charlotte, March 2003. [www.archimuse.com/mw2003/papers/proctor/proctor.html](http://www.archimuse.com/mw2003/papers/proctor/proctor.html) and Tellis, Chris. (2004) 'Multimedia Handhelds: One Device, Many Audiences.' Museum and the Web Conference Proceedings, Toronto, March 2004. [www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/tellis/tellis.html](http://www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/tellis/tellis.html) .
- <sup>12</sup> Museums Association. (2002) *Code of Ethics for Museums*, First Edition. London: Museums Association, p.18.