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Universal Design in Museum Mediation: Inclusive Communicative Label Proposal

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Abstract. Despite the commitment of museums to inclusion and the engagement of professionals, universal design in mediation seems underdeveloped. Sometimes, a limited number of sensory tables could offer insight into few select exhibits, without always consider the needs of all publics. In most cases, an accessible mediation is provided for specific categories of publics, apart from the general public, and within the context of specially adapted programs. In order to ensure inclusion, it is essential to consider the diverse communication ways of all publics, every time and everywhere. I postulate that the wealth of access programs could be generalize and share with all publics. I focus on label, this essential and first level of mediation near each exhibit. From example of the "Meet Me at MoMA" program for people with dementia, I analyze MoMA textual mediation and create a proposition of label for all, including: sign language, Braille, Easy to Read, and Meet Me methodology. In an exploratory phase, this preliminary work share ideas gleaned outside of museums.

Keywords. Universal Design, Museum, Inclusion, Mediation, Label, Dementia.

1. Introduction

My approach to inclusion is grounded in the principles of universal design (UD), which was initially developed by Ronald Mace [1] for application in the fields of architecture and design. Since 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [2] has promoted UD as a general obligation. In contrast to accessibility, which adapts a general public device, UD creates a single device for all users, anticipating potential disability situations from the design stage and combining all accessibility features in a single device. Inclusion thus necessitates a genuine comprehension of individuals' requirements, with this question serving as a central tenet of daily professional conduct [3]. However, it seems to me that UD, when applied to the museum, could also consider all other medical and social issues (and therefore more minority situations) in what I have proposed to call a "universal transversal mediation" [4]. From this perspective of device for all conception, could we rely on the wealth of museum programs that are currently developed in a mostly "specific" way for segments of the public? Could this social work of museums [5] be shared with all?

To develop this proposition, I question inclusion through museum labels, in continuity with my current work on universal mediation. Beyond disabilities, I take the example of the famous method developed by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York for visitors with dementia: the "Meet Me at MoMA" program. This

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methodology encourages the liberation of speech, even without knowledge, because it is not based on the visitor's memory but on what they are currently seeing [6]. In an applied research of an exploratory phase, I experiment with the creation of a label inspiring by this program and based on an inclusive and communicative writing [10;16]. We will focus on Vincent van Gogh's masterpiece *The Starry Night* exhibited at MoMA.

2. Background: Inclusive Mediation on Labels

By distinguishing between discourse as the communication of a subject and narrative as the mental construction of what is perceived, the label represents the initial discursive element of mediation [15]: it offers a voice to the exhibits [11]. Nevertheless, the exhibition is merely a proposition of speech that the visitor reformulates to constitute a story [12]: in this context, the visitor could be regarded as a narrator [9]. In light of the revised International Council of Museums (ICOM) 2022 definition of the museum, which encompasses the terms accessible and inclusive, it is timely to contemplate the possibility of incorporating this aspect on all labels. Does the museum could rely on the immediate understanding provided by the communicative dimension of accessibility [7]? Does it need to extend the UD approach beyond its current focus on wheelchair and visually impaired users [8]? If one of the first touch tour for visually impaired visitors was initiated at MoMA in 1972, it was not until 1995 that the first exhibition incorporating Braille and touch object was also held at MoMA. Currently, these accessibility devices are frequently observed in permanent exhibitions, with a few exhibits featuring 3D tactile models: I designated it "partially accessible label" [9; 10], as all forms of accessibility (such as sign language) are not incorporate.

Because universal mediation seems focused on including needs related to impairments, I thought a "universal transverse mediation" [4] which combines in a single device the needs of all publics with disabilities, illnesses or disadvantages: they are truly included among the general public and all together constitute a "universal public" [4]. With this syntactic inclusion, all the publics are part of the main target and their needs become functioning of the universal public. Wouldn't the recipe for inclusive mediation be to bring together at the same place each mediation (program or device) developed whatever the public and then make visible and usable by all? Through universal transverse mediation, the museum could open up the exceptional to everyone, bringing the opportunity of improving information for all with multiple ways to discover. I consider that Easy to Read is an example of transversality because it addresses many people beyond those with disabilities. Easy to Read is a simple illustrated writing method with a clear layout that has been made or at least validated by intellectually disabled people [13]. We utilize only the spirit of Easy to Read if the text has not been validated by the persons concerned. In this example, I try to export the "Meet Me" program to open it to all and thus make the whole museum inclusive all the time for public with dementia.

3. Methods: Focus on MoMA's Written Mediation on *The Starry Night*

In an explorative approach, my methodology consists to analyze the conception of mediation. Through a document review, I studied three types of written mediation around van Gogh's masterpiece. During my Ph.D. research in May 2018, I studied the methodology of the "Meet Me" program for visitors with dementia of which this famous

painting is an example [6]. I also conducted a participatory observation of this program. During my visit in April 2022, I observed the current label: it contains some information and refers to the website for more. I was surprised by the gap between innovative mediation for visitors with dementia and classical mediation.

3.1. The Starry Night in the "Meet Me" Methodology

The methodology employed by the MoMA for creating tours for visitors with Alzheimer's and dementia, is a discussion-based program centered around factual information: "storytelling and socializing become central to the program" [6] order to gain a deeper understanding of this program, it is essential to consider several key pieces of information. First, it is important to recognize the relationship between the program and art. The works of art on display stimulate both the intellect and emotions of the participants. In fact, confronting works of art does not present a challenge for people with dementia because it does not require short-term memory. Thus, visitors are able to engage their imagination, which is not affected by dementia. Second, participatory engagement: "Everyone has a story to share" [6]. Equality between visitors in this group, namely visitors with the disease and their caregivers, is promoted by this narrative aspect. Consequently, in order to facilitate participation, the guide must be attentive and alert to all verbal and nonverbal cues. Thirdly, socialization: the program encourages exchanges between people and aims to combat the isolation that people with illnesses can feel, as their ability to express themselves is often diminished. Indeed, the social aspect is strengthened (as the title of the program aptly indicates) and it is important to describe these objectives to the whole group at the beginning of the visit.

In conjunction with the methodological tool, a set of art modules has been developed for a selection of the museum's works. The method employs straightforward questioning to facilitate both fundamental and advanced approaches to art history. The initial step involves defining a theme, which serves as the foundation for subsequent reflection. Subsequently, for each selected work, three discussion questions direct attention towards details, thereby facilitating the interpretation of the work. Finally, a paragraph provides detailed art-historical information, including the particularity of the work, the technique, and the artist, always in relation to the theme. The example of *The Starry Night* serves as a case study in two thematic fields: in module one, "Tradition and Innovation in Modern Painting," and module three, "Modern Portraits" [6]. Moreover, despite the sky occupying two-thirds of the painting and the masterpiece's title referencing it directly, I notice that the accompanying commentary does not provide an explanation of the particularity of the sky. The comments only evoke the "bright yellow stars in the sky", suggesting that the description is somewhat disconnected from the questions posed.

3.2. The Starry Night Exhibited at MoMA

Upon visiting the MoMA in April 2022, I observed that van Gogh's masterpiece was a highly sought-after attraction. The majority of visitors spent only a few minutes at the painting, taking pictures or selfies. It was quite difficult to get close to the painting due



Figure 1. Visitor reading *The Starry Night's* label, MoMA, New York, photo by author, April 2022

to the crowd and the distance post (figure 1). I noted that the label was situated at a distance from the painting, possibly to prevent readers from disturbing viewers or photographers. Despite this limitation, back and forth still allows between the painting and the label.

Upon examination of the label (figure 2), I observe two parts. The first box contains limited amount of information including artist's name, nationality, dates, title of the work, date, material. The names of the individuals and entities responsible for facilitating the exhibition of the artwork are presented below. This information is placed before the explanations of the artwork, which are presented in the line of the visitor's gaze in search of information. The next section encourages visitors to use the audio playlist, which is followed by pictograms and audio track numbers for adults and children. These six lines of non-essential information (which I have added a frame to make visible) appear to me to increase the discouragement of reading the explanations of the artwork, which occupy all the space in the following box: here, I find a denser layout, aligned on the left, with sentences that follow each other, without line breaks or line spacing differences. Finally, I can observe that the comments on the label are approximately the same as those mentioned in "Meet Me" methodology.

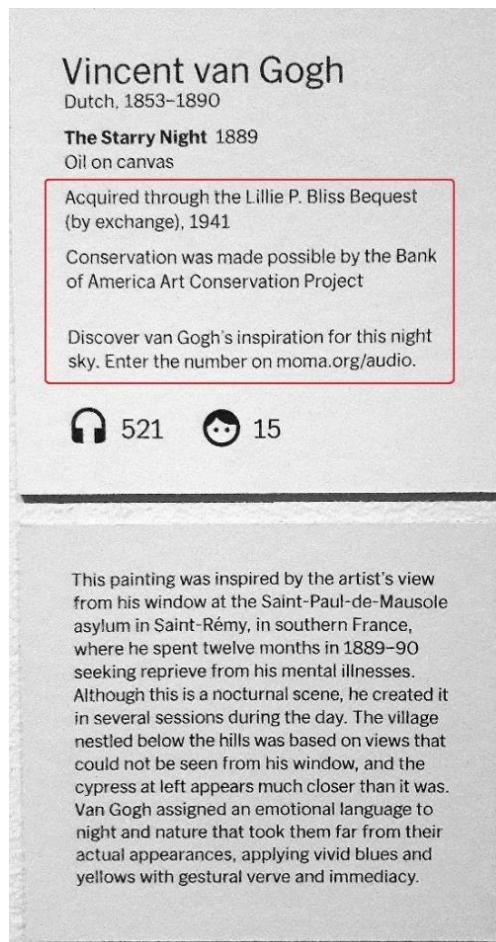


Figure 2. Label of *The Starry Night* (red frame added by author), MoMA, NY, photo by author, April 2022.

3.3. The Starry Night on the MoMA's Website²

To provide a comprehensive analysis, I have examined the transcriptions of the audio playlists available on the website: the adult audio track³, two out of three paragraphs describe the representation of the sky, while the children's audio track⁴ is exclusively focused on this theme. As only MoMA website mentioned the sky and focused on its details, I wished to read the webpage about the artwork⁵: the initial words of the page also pertained to the sky, and the topic was developed throughout the commentary.

² Online MoMA accessibility in 2024: 18 verbal description, social guide, sensory map.

³ Adult audio playlist #521, MoMA's website, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/296/44>.

⁴ Children audio playlist #15, MoMA's website, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/289/340>.

⁵ *MoMA Highlights: 375 Works from The Museum of Modern Art*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79802>.

Nevertheless, the astronomical representation of the sky is absent instead of the art historian Albert Boime [14] identifies to a recurrence of the theme of the starry sky in van Gogh's work, with an exact representation of the constellations. In the case of *The Starry Night*, as reconstructed by Boime [14], the depicted sky is that of June 19, 1889, at 4 a.m., with the position of the stars accurately represented. The moon appears to have been modified, yet an additional element has been introduced: a spiral nebula or a comet tail. While the luminescence of the stars appears to be intensified, the indications of nebula or comet resemble the pioneering scientific 1880s photographs of these phenomena. This is one of the reasons why Daniel Jacobi⁶ posits that van Gogh's work serves a scientific vulgarization of astronomy through his paintings [15].

4. Results: Thinking about the Transversality of Mediation

Before attempting to combine the previous mediation into a unified label, I present my current inquiries regarding an inclusive and communicative writing style (which I will utilize) and my approach to transversality in universal mediation.

4.1. Inclusive and Communicative Writing on Label

In a previous study, I conducted a reflection on universal design principles in museum labels, with a particular focus on the exhibit title [10;16]. Indeed, aspects of auditory and visual impairments are generally not considered on the simple paper label. Consequently, visitors require the use of supplementary devices to access information conveyed through sign language or Braille [17]. For this reason, I developed a proposal for the use of these communication methods, which I designated as "inclusive and communicative writing" [9]. Inclusive in that, in the UD spirit, I sought to regroup responses to specific needs into a single proposition, rather than merely juxtaposing them; communicative in that it explains and teaches how citizens perceived as having disabilities communicate.

In order to include sign language on the label, I selected images of signs that would be found in a sign language dictionary: these images serve to separate the different hand positions, thereby illustrating how to form signs. Incorporating signs on the label could prove interesting for all publics. For the deaf public, it would serve to enrich the language (by promote local signs) and expand it (for example, a masterpiece like the Mona Lisa has a dedicated sign [10] but it is possible to create new ones); to go beyond the lack of accessibility with only a few selections of explained exhibits; to make sign language visible in the world of hearing people and oralization. For the general public, it would provide a pictorial representation and de-center from written language; facilitating familiarity with sign language; promoting a "cultural sharing" [18].

In consideration of the visually impaired public, two fonts were selected. Firstly, for the title of the artwork, I employ a font that links Braille and Latin alphabets: this enables Braille readers to discover each exhibit's title, while other visitors (visually impaired or sighted) can learn Braille gradually and use it regularly. Secondly, the remainder of the text is presented in the Luciole font⁷, which was designed in 2019 by researchers for optimal readability, with large spaces between letters and lines (suitable with dyslexia).

⁶ We warmly thank Daniel Jacobi for his advice on reading Albert Boime.

⁷ Luciole font, <https://luciole-vision.com/luciole-en.html>

In the body of the text, I employ Easy to Read. This method is also helpful for people who have reading difficulties, are learning a language or come from other countries. It is useful for adults and children alike as a starting point for explanations.

By incorporating communication means for citizens perceived as having disabilities, I aim to illustrate that we are part of the same society. We feel that making them visible and learnable would promote interaction and break down barriers. If this inclusive and communicative writing can initiate and encourage communication, visitor-narrator [12] will become visitor-narrator-communicators. Furthermore, this UD writing on the label's titles could be applied to all artworks in and out the museum. In this manner, I could add an essential function to labels, beyond providing voice to the exhibits [11], enabling them to address all publics and affording them equal importance.

4.2. An Inclusive and Communicative Label?

The present study proposes the transversality of the "Meet Me" method in a proposition of inclusive and communicative label (figure 3) using *The Starry Night* as an example.

THE STARRY NIGHT

Vincent van Gogh
(Dutch, 1853-1890)

Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (France)
1889
Oil on canvas

When you look at this painting...

- What is the first word that comes to your mind?
- How would you describe this place?
- How can we think of this work as a type of self-portrait?

Van Gogh spent 12 months at asylum in 1889-1890 because of mental illnesses. For this painting, he was inspired by the view from his window.

But not only, because van Gogh created the painting in several sessions:

- the village was based on views that could not be seen from his window;
- the cypress tree at left appears much closer than it was.

Although this is a scene by night, it was painted during the day.

Van Gogh assigned an emotional language to night and nature, that took them far from their actual appearances. He used vivid blues and yellows in a dynamic, expressive way.

Acquired in 1941 by exchange through: the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.
Conservation was made possible by: the Bank of America Art Conservation.

More about the sky: moma.org/audio

Figure 3. Proposition of inclusive and communicative label, created by the author.

The previously analyzed label was reorganized and augmented with new information. The title and audio track numbers were written in a font that links Braille and Latin alphabets or Arabic numerals, while the rest of the text was written in large Luciole font.

In the upper section, I begin by changing the order of the information, placing the title of the work in the first line. This allows me to work on the vocabulary contained in the title words and to translate them into Braille and sign language. I use a font that juxtaposes Braille and visual alphabets⁸: in this way it is possible for the Braille readers to discover the title of the work with their fingers and for the sighted public to read and understand the correspondence of letters, like a code to be cracked. Then, to the right of the title, I offer images in American Sign Language (ASL)⁹, which I have completed with arrows and numbers (corresponding to different placements of the hands), while adding words to facilitate understanding: thus to form the starry sky sign (existing sign closest to the title), you must first form the "star" sign in front of you, then position your hands in the sky as if we had placed this star in different areas of the sky (1 to 4). Finally, for the place of creation, I add the integral name of the Saint-Rémy-de-Provence village, complete with its country, according to the Louvre's charter of vulgarization [19].

In the central section, the principles of the Easy to Read approach are applied. The two groups of questions previously evoked in "Meet Me" at MoMA are taken up, framed and preceded by a question mark that draws attention and announces the originality of the interrogative format. The following block brings some answers by the initial label which is subjected to the principles of the Easy to Read approach [13]. This entails the use of a single sentence per line, the creation of spaced paragraphs, the introduction of lists with bullets, the reorganization and simplification of sentences, with the deletion of superfluous details (e.g., the name of the asylum) or the addition of familiar words (e.g., "tree" after "cypress"), accompanied by simple images to facilitate comprehension.

In the lower section, on the left, I simplify the sentences about partners (art collector and funding art project). In the middle, I add a Braille QRcode (white dots to avoid interfering) which it could supplement with sign language video (American, international, or others) and audio description of the remainder of the text (and about painting). On the right, in accordance with the a priori decision not to provide an explanation of the sky on the label, I propose a synthetic sentence indicating that supplementary information about the sky is available on audio tracks. This is followed by the URL to access them. Lastly, the pictograms are in relief, and the audio track numbers are in Braille font for adults and children. In this configuration of the label, Braille is readily discernible: title is positioned at the top left, QRcode and audio guide number is located at the bottom center and right.

5. Concluding discussion

For thinking about limits of this proposal, I apply the UD Principles grid [1]:

1. Equitable Use: label is partially readable by all publics.
2. Flexibility in Use: according to their abilities or preferences, publics could read or heard text, look pictures, learn signs, recognize braille, answer questions.
3. Simple and Intuitive Use: all information is notice and regrouped on one label.
4. Perceptible Information: signal of inclusion without pictograms of impairments.
5. Tolerance for Error: no risk with paper except being very close to the artwork.

⁸ Inspired by Braille Neue font wich combines both alphabets: <https://brailleneue.com/>

⁹ Inspiration in Penilla II AR, Taylor AL. American Sign Language for Dummies with Online Videos, For Dummies, 2016.

6. Low Physical Effort: basic paper labels are generally hanging on the wall. Labels need to be readable by wheelchair visitors, discovered by hand (vertical reading in Braille is not comfortable). The visually impaired public need to be very close. Fix sign language not easy to visualize.
7. Appropriate Size and Space for Approach and Use: plan the wheelchair route to be able to be close to the label then to the artwork.

This proposal attempts to move towards more UD on all labels. I tested to open specific program for all because I believe in the gain of accessible devices for others publics without specific needs, like an opportunity to discover different way of communication and be aware to our fellow citizen [20]. I plan to test this prototype label soon.

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