

Research on the Art Needs of Blindness in China: A Case Study

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Abstract. People with blindness constitute a significant proportion of the population both in China as well as worldwide. However, the artistic needs of people with blindness are often overlooked, and existing exhibitions are often constrained by “visualism”. To address this gap, this paper utilizes qualitative research methods to explore the real experiences and needs of five people in China, with no other sensory impairments besides blindness, through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The results of this paper show that the common artistic needs of people with blindness can be summarized into four primary areas: the need for multisensory engagement, the need for narratives and resonance with life experiences, the need for interaction and participation, and the need for social equality. This paper suggests that art institutions should go beyond providing accessibility at the technical level and further strive to create inclusive art spaces that treat people with blindness as collaborators and participants in art. This paper provides a theoretical basis for promoting more accessible and equitable practices in art for people with blindness in China.

Keywords: Blindness, Art needs, Social Equality, Multisensory Engagement

1. Introduction

“Blindness is a general term that includes people with low vision and those who are completely blind.” [1]. Globally and in China, the number of people with blindness is substantial. According to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) 2019 World Report on Vision, at least 2.2 billion people worldwide are affected by some form of visual impairment or blindness [2]. Between 1990 and 2019, the prevalence of moderate and severe visual impairments in China increased more rapidly than in other G20 countries [3]. Such a large population undoubtedly constitutes a social group that requires attention.

In Leo Tolstoy's opinion, art is a human activity through which people convey their emotions to others through certain external symbols, enabling viewers to experience these emotions [4]. Although people with blindness cannot “see” art through their eyes, their needs and desires for emotional experiences are no different from those of sighted individuals. Previous researchers, Del Tufo and Bruno, have studied the perception of art by people with blindness. They found that people with blindness can form their own aesthetic judgments through multisensory interactions. Even without visual input, they can still develop their own aesthetic systems and perceptions of “beauty.” Furthermore, the loss of sight may encourage mental engagement. After losing one’s sight, one’s

imagination is no longer constrained by the physical world, which can serve as a unique perceptive advantage in the creation of art [5]. Of course, some blind individuals actively engage in artistic practices, but significant accessibility barriers remain. For example, Lucas Livingston, Senior Project Assistant for Museum Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has stated that touch is an important way for humans to understand the world; thus, the school has established a "touch gallery" for visually impaired individuals, enabling them to feel works of art so as to comprehend them. However, an article by the school mentions that sometimes staff members are reluctant to involve blind or visually impaired individuals in the planning of accessibility programs, as they may lack backgrounds in community education and may be unfamiliar with the process of developing museum facilities and exhibitions [6]. In addition, most traditional exhibitions prohibit the touching of sculptures and paintings, limiting art to visual enjoyment. Lilian Korner pointed out that art museums, "as places of viewing, highlight the invisible discrimination against blind and visually impaired people." As a result of this "visualism", people with blindness can only passively listen to others' descriptions of works, unable to participate personally and finding it difficult to partake in any complete artistic experiences [7]. China faces the same problem. Scholars Zhang Xiaotong et al. found that China's cultural education system for museums and art galleries is mainly aimed at the general public, neglecting the artistic needs of special groups [8].

There are still many limitations in current research on the artistic experiences of people with blindness. For instance, most existing studies remain at the level of external observation and speculation, lacking an in-depth understanding of the real experiences and specific needs of people with blindness. Therefore, this paper incorporates the interviews of five blind respondents to explore their actual feelings regarding their artistic needs as well as their engagement in artistic processes, offering a viable research foundation for more inclusive, equitable, and accessible exhibitions for the visually impaired in the future. This is not only a sign of respect for the artistic rights of people with blindness, but also a necessary step in promoting diversity in the art world.

2. Methodology

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the real experiences and needs of people with blindness in China in terms of their engagement with art, this paper incorporates semi-structured in-depth interviews, a qualitative research method. One-on-one interviews are chosen because the interview process may involve sensitive personal experiences, preserving individuals' authentic narratives and emotional nuances, thereby yielding more detailed information about their experiences. A total of five participants were recruited for this study. All are Chinese citizens with blindness classified as having level 1 or level 2 visual impairment according to China's visual impairment classification system and no other sensory impairments. This selection criterion was adopted to more accurately illustrate the role of multisensory experiences in the perception of art. The participants vary in age, gender, and occupation, including artists, massage therapists, and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners, all who currently reside within China. All interviews were recorded with consent and organized through textual analysis.

To protect the interviewees' privacy, they are referred to anonymously as "Interviewee 1," "Interviewee 2," and so on. This article focuses on common artistic needs while also attempting to preserve individual emotions and stories, providing a realistic basis for building more equitable, visually impaired-centered artistic practices in the future.

3. Interview case study

3.1. Interview 1

In the interview with interviewee 1, it is evident that in the absence of sight, sound becomes the primary way for people with blindness to understand the world and participate in the arts. The interviewee mentions, “I never knew the charm of dance. So even live stand-up comedy or comedy performances, I can only hear the sounds, so most of the time I have to rely on radios or transistor radios to access them,” and that “the same sentence spoken with different intonations or pitches can make us very sensitive.” This demonstrates that they establish an understanding of emotions through precise capture of intonation and rhythm.

Sound is an important medium in the way people with blindness perceive art. However, as is evident from this interviewee's words, sound itself is not everything. Rather, the “silence between sounds” is more important— that is, the pauses and gaps between sounds constitute a particularly unique artistic experience for him. The interviewee stated, “There may be half a second, a second, or two seconds of silence between two lines of dialogue, and that is my empty time, when I may be expressing my emotions.” This shows that he regards the pauses between sounds as a highly expressive space. In communication between people without visual impairments, pauses may be just a small part of normal intonation, as they will still be receiving visual feedback. However, from the perspective of people with blindness, this empty time is quite lengthy and serves as a window for imagination and emotional projection. He further explained, “That period is when there is no sound, so for us blind people, there is more time for deep thinking.” This shows that they do not wait passively for sounds to reach, but instead use the silence to stimulate deeper imagination and creativity.

What is even more remarkable is that the interviewee mentions, “We are afraid of the absence of sound, because when sound appears, I feel secure.” The “fear” mentioned here is not an instinctive fear of silence, but rather anxiety and unease arising from an interruption in the flow of information. This emotion associates the return of sound with safety and inclusivity. For the interviewee, the focus of the artistic experience is not on the quality of the sound itself, but rather the psychological fluctuations triggered by its absence and reappearance. The absence of sound is a period for them to explore their imagination and exercise creativity. It is a unique artistic dimension that even sighted individuals struggle to experience. Unlike visual art, which pursues the continuity of lines and images, people with blindness construct meaning and unique experiences through their perception of absence. This is not only essential for understanding the artistic needs of blind people, but also provides profound inspiration for the design, creation, and dissemination of non-visual art. Therefore, for people with blindness, auditory participation involves not only attention to the sound itself, but also the spaces between sounds, pauses, and rhythmic changes, as these elements convey rich emotions.

In addition to listening, touching is also an important way for them to understand art. “How I wish I could touch the sculpture of Wenger at the Asno Arena,” and “I touched Chairman Mao's hand at the Yan'an Memorial Hall... I was deeply impressed by this,”— these examples provided by the interviewee indicate that touch can evoke emotional memories. As the interviewee emphasized, “I have shaken hands with General Secretary Xi Jinping twice. It's like shaking hands with your mother. Even if you don't say anything, I know who it is.” People with blindness establish intuitive and profound connections with works of art through touch. Touch is an important way for people with blindness to experience art, and it is essential to incorporate tactile perception into art settings.

While many forms of artistic expression remain visually centered in practice, people with blindness yearn for the same experiences with art as people without visual impairments. “It’s the same as with healthy children. There are many things that children have never seen before, so when they go to the zoo, everything is new to them. But if they have a cute pet, they can pet it and have a tactile experience with it.” In the interview, interviewee 1 cited this example to explain that although people with blindness have long been excluded from a visual-dominated environment, they are not alienated from art. Instead, they are eager to engage with art through more inclusive and participatory forms to satisfy their inner curiosity about the art perceived by sighted individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the needs of people with blindness not only in the way art is presented, but also in the selection of works that meet the artistic tastes of the general public, especially in terms of visual elements. Only then can people with blindness experience true artistic expression. The interviewee stated plainly, “Art without interaction is not art.” This statement clearly expresses that people with blindness need interactive art rather than passive reception. Art should be a process of participation. For the visually impaired, this is completely different from “looking at a painting” or “watching a performance.” People without visual impairments often associate “appreciation” with sight. But for people with blindness, if they cannot interact with art, they cannot truly connect with it.

In summary, people with blindness need art that can be experienced through their dominant senses, such as hearing and touch. They hope for interactive participation and experiences in art, rather than passive, second-hand observations.

3.2. Interview 2

For the interviewee, art is an important tool for triggering memories and emotional connections. Interviewee 2 recounted an experience in which, upon hearing the music used in a jump rope competition she had participated in, she immediately recalled her for that a competition. This shows that music can evoke clear memories of specific scenes, particularly moments closely tied to one’s emotions. At the same time, the interviewee also mentioned that she would develop a preference for the music in a TV series because she liked the series itself, indicating that her acceptance of music is often closely linked to the story behind it. Her experience of art is not an isolated event, but a holistic feeling constructed through her life experiences. When it comes to choosing TV dramas, she prefers to watch familiar content she has seen before, as these familiar narratives enable her to imagine specific scenes based on her experiences, which in turn provide her with emotional pleasure and psychological security. This is her way of actively seeking artistic experiences. Therefore, people with blindness require art that is narrative and relatable to their life experiences. Only then can they attain an authentic artistic experience through familiarity and resonance.

The interviewee also emphasised the importance of “explanations” and “touch” in experiencing art, particularly when visiting exhibitions, as she believes these elements facilitate her understanding of art. Explanations and tactile cues can evoke emotions and memories in the absence of visual information, thereby enabling more meaningful perceptions of art. Therefore, people with blindness have a strong desire for multi-sensory guidance in their art experiences.

Additionally, auditory perceptions plays a key role in their artistic experiences. The interviewee specifically mentions that she is “sensitive to tones.” Her keen response to the tones in music reflects her auditory perception; this sensitivity may enhance emotions and memories evoked by music. Her acute perception of tonal changes is an important way for her to experience and understand art. Therefore, people with blindness require art that can be understood with multiple

senses, such as hearing and touch, and such art can be connected to their own life experiences. Only in this way can they truly engage with art.

3.3. Interview 3

According to the interviewee 3, art serves as a medium for emotional resonance.

The interviewee clearly points out, “If you talk about so many musical instruments or art forms, why do you feel something for one in particular or like it? I think it's still a resonance.” Appreciation of art is not accidental but rooted in emotional resonance and personal experiences. He further explains, “Many of these are traditional folk instruments... His style is something I find more accessible or resonates with me more...I feel that the musical style itself, the nature of the instruments, because their nature represents the style of the instruments.” It is evident that the individual style conveyed through art resonates with people, and the beauty of art lies in this resonance.

The interviewee also noted that he has a highly nuanced perception of tone and can form concrete associative images through sound. The interviewee used personified language to describe the tone of the Chinese three-stringed instrument: “The tone is moderate... It's not particularly lively. It's not completely like that. It's more like a middle-aged man who is relatively moderate.” This indicates that he can transform abstract sounds into specific images with his auditory experience, thereby developing a more emotional understanding of art.

This sensitivity in perception results in a different artistic response from people with blindness.

The interviewee also emphasized that cultural context is a key component of his artistic experience. The interviewee said, “In terms of stand-up comedy, the first issue is cultural background. As you mentioned earlier, the cultural background is important. Where they perform and the language they use are key factors. Generally, they use the colloquial language of the local area... The way of thinking is different. How can you say it clearly, even though we are all speaking Chinese? Or even Mandarin, but it can still be different. How can we have the same sense of humor?” This shows that different cultural backgrounds lead to different interpretations of art, whether expressed through language or and musical instruments. Therefore, if artworks with diverse cultural context are presented in an accessible manner, they will better arouse the interest and resonance of people with blindness.

Finally, from the interviewee's remarks, it is evident that blind individuals are often neglected in society. He frankly stated, “People with blindness are easily overlooked.” At the same time, he emphasised, “Apart from their visual impairment, people with blindness are very similar to us.” This shows that there are no significant differences between people with blindness and those who are not in their daily lives, especially when they participate in public activities, where any differences are further diminished. As he says, “When I participate in activities with able-bodied people, they forget about my eyes after a while.” From the perspective of artistic experiences, this state of neglect also reflects that their artistic needs should not be singled out, but rather integrated with existing artistic activities so that art can be equally enjoyed by all. They hope to gain the same emotional experiences and social connections as able-bodied people through artistic activities, rather than being viewed as a “special group.” Therefore, the artistic needs of people with blindness are experiences that can strengthen their sense of equality. We must provide them with a cultural space where they can achieve authentic art experiences as well as and emotional identification.

In summary, people with blindness require art that can evoke emotional resonance, arousing deep emotional responses through different art styles; expressions that are rich in sensory characteristics

and can be transformed into concrete associations; art content that takes cultural context into account; and art experiences that promote social participation and equality.

3.4. Interview 4

In the interview with interviewee 4, we found that art is an important way for him to regulate his emotions and establish his identity. The interviewee mentions, “For example, listening to talk shows definitely makes me feel happier and temporarily forget that I am blind, as do concerts.” Therefore, when artistic activities are not visual, it allows him to escape the label of “blind” and enter a more relaxed and free state of mind. In addition, he also pointed out, “Then we can use this form to better integrate into the group of normal people.” This shows that art is a tool for socialisation, and the connection that blind people establish with non-blind people through artistic activities alleviates social barriers. Art plays a very important role in the lives of blind people and they hope to partake in more art experiences that appeal to their existing senses— like hearing or touch— to effectively satisfy their desires for social participation.

Due to their limited vision, people with blindness pay close attention to how language is used to convey information. They do not reject visual art; rather, they have specific and clear requirements for the communication of information. Interviewee 4 said, “When describing a painting, you have to be very specific so that we can get a better picture in our minds.” This shows that, compared to vague expressions, they desire detailed, vivid and clear language to help them construct images in their minds. He clearly expressed a preference for easily perceptible forms of art expression, suggesting that greater attention should be paid to details in language and the ability to recreate context when conveying artistic content.

People with blindness also hope to establish an emotional connections with artworks and artists. The interviewee mentions, “For example, if he is a person with bipolar disorder, then when he created this painting, I think I can empathise with some of his inner psychological activities and the story he is telling.” This indicates that blind viewers are interested not only artworks themselves but also in the emotions and creative processes behind them. In particular, when an artwork carries a background similar to the viewer’s own experiences, it is more likely to evoke emotional resonance and deepen their understanding of the artwork. Therefore, art created in relation to the identity of being a person with blindness are more likely to resonate with them, thereby providing a more complete artistic experience.

In summary, people with blindness can obtain emotional adjustment through non-visual means in order to experience art and better integrate into society. When explaining visual art, they require specific and vivid verbal descriptions to better understand the artwork. Finally, they value the emotions and stories behind artworks, and content that is closely aligned with the lives of blind individuals is better suited to fostering their psychological resonance and facilitating their attainment of artistic experiences.

3.5. Interview 5

Interviewee 5 mentions that people with blindness have rich emotional needs and fluctuations just like ordinary people, and in some cases, their emotional experiences are even more intense. The interviewee spoke about an art experience; “When the elderly man who was doing the voice over finally started, he said, I have been learning to play the drum for more than 60 years. At that moment, I couldn’t hold back my emotions and started crying loudly. In the end, I felt quite silly because no one else was crying and I was the only one.” At that moment, the emotional power of art

resonated with him. This shows that people with blindness can capture emotional details in auditory art as well as— or even with more sensitivity— than others, and should not be ignored or have their emotional experiences discredited.

At the same time, the interviewee also mentioned the importance of storytelling in their artistic experiences. The interviewee said, “Seeing the ceremonial guard march out at Tiananmen Square, or watching the military parade, or looking back on history, and then seeing how the new China has progressed step by step to the present, is like witnessing it all.” This experience evokes a deep resonance with history and reality through a narrative context. This leads to the conclusion that people with blindness are easily moved by content with a narrative in their art experiences, from which they obtain emotional identification and a sense of participation.

Therefore, this interview demonstrates the importance of an art experience that resonates emotionally, tells a story, and features a more profound narrative and emotional tension.

4. Result

Based on the specific needs raised by the five interviewees, the core artistic needs of people with blindness can be divided into four categories: the need for multisensory engagement, the need for narratives and resonance with life experiences, the need for interaction and participation, and the need for social equality. These four categories reveal commonalities within the group and also demonstrate diversity through individualised descriptions.

4.1. The need for multisensory engagement

The interviewees repeatedly emphasized that artistic experiences must incorporate hearing and touch. For instance the “gaps between sounds and changes in rhythm” mentioned in Interview 1 and the emotional memory connections brought about by touch mentioned in Interviews 1, 2, and 3 are key elements. This is highly consistent with neuroscientific research, which indicates that blind individuals, in the absence of visual stimuli, exhibit intermodal plasticity and enhanced mental processing of hearing and touch. Additionally, the level of this compensatory plasticity is directly related to the age at which visual sensory deprivation begins [9].

4.2. The need for narrative and resonance with life experiences

Moreover, Interviews 2, 3, 4, and 5 generally expressed a preference for artworks with strong narratives and relevance to life experiences. This preference reflects the psychological needs of people with blindness for artistic experiences as a form of narrative construction. Jerome Bruner proposed in his research that humans organise experiences and memories through narratives, an important tool for constructing meaning as well as understanding the world [10]. Interview 3 also emphasises the importance of consistency between artworks and their cultural context, as such works are more likely to evoke personal memories and cultural identity through narratives, thereby providing a deeper emotional experience. For individuals with blindness, the lack of visual art experiences means they often rely more on language-constructed narratives to fill the gaps in visual perception.

4.3. The need for interaction and participation

Interview 1 clearly stated that increasing diverse forms of interaction should be the most basic need of people with blindness when participating in art. This reveals the important position of people with

blindness themselves in the art experience. People with blindness are often in a passive position in art spaces, but interactions can give them more control, transforming them into active participants. In this regard, Ross Edelstein's theory of inclusive art participation provides important support. Artistic creation should provide diverse channels of participation for audiences from different backgrounds, enabling individuals to achieve a multidimensional understanding of art through communication and interaction. Furthermore, in the future, art research and practice should emphasise co-creation by people with disabilities, so that people with blindness are no longer merely audiences for art, but become participants in the co-creation of art [11].

4.4. The need for social equality

The artistic needs of people with blindness also reflect deeper social and cultural demands. In the interviews, many interviewees clearly expressed a strong desire for a 'sense of equality.' Interview 3 and 5 pointed out that people with blindness do not want to be treated differently; they want the same spaces and opportunities to experience art as sighted audiences, and to participate in society without being labeled as 'blind'.

In Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's research, it is stated that traditional thinking often stigmatises people with disabilities and lowers their social status. This limits the possibility of people with disabilities participating in society [12]. Garland-Thomson also mentions Rachel Adams' book *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* in her article. Garland-Thomson states that Adams removes the interpretation of people with disabilities as 'freaks' and instead views disability as a subject of cultural representation and identity politics.

Therefore, people with disabilities should be seen and heard same as everyone else. Art spaces should recognise them as equal audiences and creators with their own aesthetic judgements and logical expressions.

5. Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews with five Chinese people with blindness, this paper explores their real needs for art. Finally, the paper finds that the artistic needs of people with blindness includes multisensory engagement, narratives and resonance with life experiences, interaction and participation with art, and social equality. These needs reflect their sensory advantages and artistic preferences in art, while also highlighting the inequalities present in the current environment.

These findings challenge existing visual-centric exhibition models and prompt reassessments of the definition of artistic inclusivity. Only by allowing people with blindness to meaningfully participate as art creators can the art world break down social barriers and incorporate more diverse forms of expression into artistic creation itself. Through the multisensory advantages and narrative abilities of people with blindness, artistic creation expand beyond the visual component in new and innovative ways, which in turn will promote the emergence of new artistic experiences characterised by multisensory and multinarrative experiences.

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