
GOOD PRACTICES OF MAKING ART AND CULTURE ACCESSIBLE TO THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING AT THE DEAFLAND EXHIBITION IN THE SILESIAN MUSEUM IN KATOWICE

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Biographical note

Born in 1976, the author is a deaf person and a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź and the University of Łódź. She received a scholarship from the Norwegian government (2003/2004) at Kunsthøgskolen in Bergen. She is a PhD candidate in the Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Lodz, administrative coordinator of projects in the field of social economy at the “Ja-Ty-My” Social Support Association in Łódź, and co-founder of the Deaf Artists Group and the MEOK Gallery. She co-curated the Deafland [Głusza] exhibition at the Silesian Museum in Katowice. She is passionate about painting, writing icons, poetry, drawing and collage.

ABSTRACT: gAccessibility of culture and art to the deaf and hard of hearing is the topic of the doctoral dissertation prepared by the author under the supervision of Professor Aneta Pawłowska in the Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Łódź and the “Ja-Ty-My” Social Support Association, entitled “The Problem of Accessibility of Information in Public Institutions and Social Economy Entities in the Field of Culture and Art for People with Hearing Loss and Disabilities in Poland. Recommendations and standards.” This chapter adopts the insider perspective of a deaf researcher to examine the issue of broadly understood accessibility basing on the *Deafland* [Głusza] exhibition at the Silesian Museum in Katowice. It is a breakthrough show in Poland in terms of the subject matter and the use of available technical solutions for people with special needs.

KEYWORDS: accessibility; deafness; deaf culture; sign language; deaf art; *Deafland*; *Głusza*.

1. Introduction

Adapting monuments to the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing is not simple given the economic situation of cultural institutions in Poland as well as stereotypes and ignorance about the deaf and hard of hearing.

Discussions of accessibility to monuments usually involve the ubiquitous narrative of accessibility, especially for people who have special difficulties with navigating architectural objects, i.e. people with visual and mobility impairments.

When viewing a historical monument, one does not only look at the walls but also discover the historical past manifested in the form of preserved archival materials, maps, texts as well as multimedia documents discussing the historical monument itself.

Historical monuments usually house museums devoted to the history of a particular historic building, employing staff and creating historical documents in multimedia form, which familiarize visitors with the specificity and history of the site.

In this way, museums become cultural institution which, in order to popularize their activities, often create a cultural offer in the form of temporary shows that enrich permanent exhibitions, and are usually subject to the legal regulations on accessibility in public institutions.

Enriching the permanent offer also means attracting an audience and creating a permanent group of supporters of the facility, who will regularly visit temporary and cyclical historical and cultural events.

Therefore, adapting monuments to the needs of people with special needs is not limited to the perspective of architectural accessibility for people with mobility or visual impairments.

This is just the beginning of the road to full accessibility of historic buildings in the context where one should not forget the basic fact that institutions are run by people and for people.

The issue of accessibility to culture and art for deaf and hard of hearing is the main topic of the doctoral dissertation prepared by the author under the supervision of Professor Aneta Pawłowska in the Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Łódź and the “Ja-Ty-My” Social Support Association, entitled “The Problem of Accessibility of Information in Public Institutions and Social Economy Entities in the Field of Culture and Art for People with Hearing Loss and Disabilities in Poland. Recommendations and Standards.”

Its main goal is to answer the question about the universal formula for deaf and hard of hearing visitors at cultural institutions such as museums, cultural centres and theatres. It also attempts to indicate necessary aspects of their message – one that would not only have informational or educational functions, but also, through its structure and method of communication, support cultural and social inclusion as well as implement the postulates of universal design.

The development of complementary methodology for increasing the availability of information in the field of culture and art is important not only from the point of view of effective implementation of statutory objectives realized by specific educational or social institutions, but above all from the standpoints of cultural and visual education as well as social support. These tasks form a response to one contemporary challenge: objective presentation and sharing of historical and artistic content along with associated educational values. Prepared using

appropriate methodology, such a message may not only carry a cognitive value but also become one of the tools supporting the acquisition of additional competences by recipients of cultural offer in Poland.

At the outset, it should be strongly emphasized that observations and research used in the dissertation were not conducted from the perspective of people with disabilities but from the point of view of a deaf researcher who knows sign language, emphasizing the cultural and linguistic position of the deaf community who use sign language. The deaf community is not recognized in Poland as a cultural and linguistic minority, but in fact meets such criteria because it has its own culture, language, history and art. This aspect is a novelty in the area of accessibility and strengthens the practical dimension of the dissertation, which develops further recommendations and standards.

One practical implementation was the preparation of the exhibition *Deafland [Głusza]*¹ at the Silesian Museum, discussed further in this chapter, which has a chance to become a model of accessibility for cultural events in Polish museums.

2. Issues faced by the deaf and hard of hearing in Poland

This chapter assumes the point of view of a deaf insider researcher to examine the issue of broadly understood accessibility and significance of the *Deafland [Głusza]* exhibition at the Silesian Museum in Katowice (a breakthrough event in Poland in terms of its subject matter and solutions for people with special needs) and in the area of solutions improving the accessibility of cultural institutions to deaf and hard of hearing.

Deaf people are understood here as a specific subculture or, in fact, a linguistic and cultural minority isolated from the phonic Polish culture, using the Polish sign language (PJM) as their first language. The hearing impaired are those who use phonic Polish in communication, reading or listening with the support of electronic devices or lip movement.

At the outset of analysis, the first question that arises concerns the identity of deaf people and their relation with the group of people with disabilities.

The deaf community is treated by the Polish legislative system as a group of people with disabilities who require support from the state in communicating with the rest of society. In the light of international law, deaf people are perceived as a group of disabled people and not as a minority using a different language and having its own culture. Although people with disabilities are treated as the largest minority, the criterion is anti-discriminatory, which in the case of deaf people does not correspond to their sense of identity as well as needs and expectations.

This approach does not present a complete and authentic picture of this social group, and does not reflect all the values it brings to society. The needs of deaf people are different from those of people with other disabilities. Therefore, deaf people want to be perceived differently, because they have created their own social identity and demand its recognition in the face of the law. For these reasons, deaf people should be perceived by the legislator in two ways: as people with disabilities and as members of a cultural and linguistic minority with the right to education in their own

1 <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/glusza-2/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

language. An important concept emphasizing the uniqueness of the analysed community, as compared to other disability groups, is the concept of the d/Deaf culture. The term is positive and expresses pride in being d/Deaf and joy of being a member of a cultural and linguistic minority. Barbara Kannapell, deaf professor of sociology at the Gallaudet University and founder of the Deaf Pride organization strongly emphasizes the importance of this concept in the world of deaf people. According to her, Deaf culture comprises a set of acquired behaviours and perceptions that shape the values and norms of deaf people on the basis of their similar or shared experiences (Kannapell, 1989).

The beginning of Deaf culture goes back to the establishment of special boarding schools for the deaf. There, for the first time in history, the deaf community gathered in large numbers. The specificity of this culture results partly from the very nature of deafness, from the visual perception of the world, and partly from communal life – first in a boarding school and then in the larger community outside it. It suffices to mention the history of the deaf community on Martha's Vineyard Island in New York (Groce, 1988), elements of deaf urbanism in the creation of spaces around important deaf education centres (Gallaudet University in the United States²), and the ambitions of many deaf activists to create deaf cities or islands (e.g. the dream of the Swedish activist Lars Åke Wikström to turn Gotland into Deaf Island³).

Sign language is especially important and valuable here. The ability to tell a colourful and clear story in sign language is highly appreciated, as evidenced by rich sign-language folklore: stories, poetry, humour and puns. For a long time, there was no way of writing sign languages, and their legacy was passed on through direct contact, as was the case with many non-European traditions. Do d/Deaf people want to be recognized as people with disabilities at all? Two approaches dominate. Some of the Deaf, especially the elderly, grew up in a world where they were referred to as disabled. These people are used to this and consider their situation through the prism of benefits. The status of a disabled person entitles one, for example, to certain discounts. At the same time, however, this affects self-perception.

In turn, among young people the position that deafness is not a disability is popular. They say that disability is defined from the perspective of the majority, which sees the disabled as people who do not meet certain health standards. In the eyes of these younger people, it is the majority that creates a harmful construct.⁴

Features of group identity in the deaf community include its relatively homogeneous nature; being a minority in relation to the rest of the population in Poland; being a Polish citizen; having your own culture, tradition, language; and finally, striving to preserve cultural uniqueness.

The spiritual and material achievements of the Deaf community include: rejection of oralism;

2 <https://ggwash.org/view/66281/deaf-urbanism-and-the-importance-of-building-accessible-cities> (accessed 30 May 2022)

<https://ggwash.org/view/66282/why-we-all-need-deaf-urbanism> (accessed 30 May 2022)

3 <https://dovastidning.se/nyhet/ett-ar-efter-laws-bortgang/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

4 <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/kowalik-lis-glusi-to-niepelnbezpieczni-czy-moze-arzenia-kulturowa/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

a specific social code (*savoir-vivre*), visual arts (fine arts, film, theatre, and especially deaf-art⁵); social life (clubs, political and cultural organizations, sports organizations, events, Deaflympics, International Days of the Deaf); a history of fighting discrimination and breaking free from dependence on the hearing majority; and finally, respect for the hand as the most important part of the body and a means of communication in sign language.

Previously, it was mostly hearing people who wrote about the deaf, and usually from a medical and pedagogical perspective. Such historical gaps rooted in lack of research access are shared by other minorities, e.g. the Roma. Due to the illiteracy of many Roma, for many years no one described their customs, documented their development and attached importance to historical materials. This comparison is justified because, in the social model, the Deaf constitute a cultural group and not a group of people with hearing disabilities. Toward the end of the 1940s, in order to understand the Roma culture, Jerzy Ficowski learned the Romani language to learn about this community and describe it from an ethnographic perspective, thereby taming it. This loose comparison is intended only to draw attention to how little attention has been paid to the complex phenomenon of deaf culture in Poland. In every country, culture has a national dimension but thanks to new technologies it also functions globally, as is evidenced by the development of International Sign, Art Deaf and the social life of the Deaf. The point of reference may be the activity of the Gallaudet University in the United States, thanks to which the deaf can study and develop in a bilingual model, with the American Sign Language being the language of instruction (Justycki, 2022).

The above-mentioned aspects perhaps even hinder the realization of exhibitions depicting the deaf community in public cultural venues such as museums or other institutions of great historical importance.

3. The concept and subject matter of the Deafland exhibition

This section attempts to show the unique concept and accessibility model of the exhibition Deafland [Głusza] at the Silesian Museum in Katowice, which is also an ambitious project in terms of comprehensive availability of events organized in cultural institutions and historic buildings for the deaf and hard of hearing in Poland.

The show is an example of an exhibition regarding a social group classified as disabled, namely the deaf community. Deafland is a pioneering show at the Silesian Museum in Katowice, unique on a European scale, illustrating the history of the deaf community in Poland, including events from the history of the deaf community around the world.

On a European scale, the first yet small exhibition on the culture and history of the deaf was *L'histoire silencieuse des sourds*, organized in Paris in the Panthéon between 19 June and 6 October 2019 under the curatorial and scientific supervision of Yann Cantin, a deaf doctor of history from the University Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis. The exhibition was held thanks to the support of the Centre des Monuments Nationaux, the National Institute of Deaf Youth, the International Visual Theatre and the Association of the Friends of the Abbot de L'Épée. The exhibition became a milestone due to the fact that the culture and history of the French deaf was

5 <https://deaf-art.org/> (accessed 30 May 2022); <https://deaf-art.org/articles/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

presented in one of the most prestigious historical venues in France, i.e. in the Panthéon, a place of history and memory about the most famous French personalities.⁶ It should be emphasized that the Panthéon is one of the most important historical French monuments, a must-see for anyone staying in Paris. Tourists visit there to admire the interiors, tomb crypts and sarcophagi of the most famous figures in French history. As a rule, no exhibitions are held there. In this context, *L'histoire silencieuse des sourds* brought an unexpected historical and accessibility element to the Panthéon.

The audience learned about the history of the deaf in France, the great figures of deaf activists, the history of the first association of deaf people in Paris, founded by Ferdinand Berthier in 1836, the forced sterilization and the prohibition of sign language along with compulsory oral education, and the awakening of the deaf community in the 1960s and 1970s alongside the recognition of international sign languages.

The exhibition has also become a challenge not only in terms of content, but also in terms of logistics and accessibility. Communication was handled in four languages: French, French Sign Language, English and International Sign Language (IS), with English and French subtitles. Next to each historical section, a tablet was placed on the wall with the option of showing a film with translation into French or international sign language. In this way, the exhibition became accessible to everyone, both deaf and hard of hearing.

Deafland is a pioneering exhibition at the Silesian Museum in Katowice on a European scale, broadly developing and significantly modifying the concept of the French show. In the introduction to the catalogue, Dagmara Stanosz, the lead curator and coordinator of Deafland, writes that it is a scientific, educational and artistic project, which has facilitated not only meeting Deaf artists from around the world, but also carrying out many educational and popularizing projects. Knowing that we cannot change the defective system, we wanted to initiate activities that would direct attention to the linguistic and cultural minority of the Deaf in the local and global dimension, opening them to sign language as an intangible cultural heritage, as well as fostering understanding and initiating changes for the better. Working on the linguistic borderland, we have never talked about disability, emphasizing the need for equal rights for both languages – the phonic and the spatial-visual (Stanosz, 2022).

Beata Grochowska, coordinator of the project's educational program, raises important questions in the catalogue, which are highly accurate from the curatorial perspective: How to show the culture of the deaf to attract hearing people to the exhibition? How to talk about an exhibition so that it is not perceived as a niche show for a narrow group of deaf people? How to show the universality of problems concerning communication and the search for interpersonal contacts? Notably, healthy ears are not enough to hear each other. Such thoughts occur naturally

6 <https://www.offi.fr/expositions-musees/pantheon-2918/lhistoire-silencieuse-des-sourds-74335.html> (accessed 30 May 2022)

https://www.paris-pantheon.fr/var/cmn_inter/storage/original/application/906c84dee7dad87cd5ee3ab4d6792449.pdf (accessed 30 May 2022)

https://www.paris-pantheon.fr/var/cmn_inter/storage/original/application/906c84dee7dad87cd5ee3ab4d6792449.pdf (accessed 30 May 2022)

when one hears about plans to devote an exhibition to such difficult and complex problems as communication in general and communication without words in particular. These concerns are presented in an attractive, surprising and impressive way (Grochowska 2022).

Among curatorial preparations for the exhibition, the most important was the selection of historical and cultural objects preserved in public museums and private collections: videos, memorabilia and paintings created by the deaf and hard of hearing. The exhibition, which opened on 23 June 2022, attempts to bring the broad spectrum of the deaf community closer to the public (the curatorial team includes two deaf curators: the author and Michał Justycki, educator at the Silesian Museum). It also posed a logistical challenge due to the fact that descriptions, objects and the arrangement of the exhibition must take into account as many as four languages: Polish, Polish Sign Language, English, and International Sign Language. In addition, we strove to secure accessibility through audio description and typhlographic objects for the visually impaired.

The exhibition goes far beyond the framework of regular historical exhibitions because its concept was based on the intention to show not only the history of the deaf community and its language, but also culture, art and topics related to the medical perception of deafness. The main motto and inspiration was the title of Paul Gauguin's painting *Where do we come from? / Who are we? / Where are we going?*

The artistic work of the deaf and hard of hearing in Poland has become very important, including older artists (Franciszek Prek, Feliks Pęczarski, Kazimierz Wiszniewski) and contemporary ones (Marek Krzysztof Lasecki, Justyna Kieruzalska, Mirosław Śledź). Artistic output is not limited to paintings and drawings, but also includes installations by Daniel Kotowski and Przemysław Sławik, animations by Tomasz Grabowski, comics by Małgorzata Szok Ciechacka, the animation *Blue 52* by Klaudia Wyjadecka and the creative activities of the film section at the Polish Association of the Deaf, West Pomeranian Branch in Szczecin, and the Deaf Culture Centre in Wrocław. It is worth noting that during this year's Night of Museums, a mapping of ten animated portraits of deaf people by Tomasz Grabowski was displayed on the walls of the Silesian Museum. Deaf people who gained fame in the world through their social, scientific and cultural achievements are, for example: Douglas Tilden, Helena Keller, Laurent Clerc, Maria Schayer Gorska, Thomas Edison, and Nikifor.⁷ This mapping became a form of announcing the opening of Deafland and is also presented during the exhibition.

The exhibition itself has been divided into four parts to present various aspects and nuances of life in the deaf community, its culture and sign language.

The first part ("Language") goes beyond the historical narrative of sign languages, and offers a broader story about means of communication, featuring multimedia stands and installations that allow visitors to experience the emotions related to being deaf as well as learn about sign language and the history of languages in general.

The second part ("Deaf History") presents the most important events in the history of the deaf community in Poland, including the history of deaf education around the world.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/Portrety-GłuchychDeaf-Portraits-108520924776636> (accessed 30 May 2022; accessed: May 30, 2022)

This part includes the most important historical objects from the deaf society in Poland, including the collection of the Institute of Deaf History “Surplus Historicus” Foundation.⁸

The third part of the exhibition tries to answer the question: Deaf means who? The answer is ambiguous and a sum of the most important issues related to the perception of the community itself, its culture, code of behaviour, ways of perceiving the world, and problems of bilingual education. In fact, the answer to this question is left to the visitors, who can learn about the specifics of the deaf community, which is not homogeneous and very often passes between two worlds: the world of the deaf and the world of the hearing. Deaf people often feel like strangers in the hearing world, and fail to fully integrate.

According to Magdalena Dunaj, “[t]he axiological aspect of relating to the deaf as a stranger is related to comparing his hearing and speaking skills to the same skills in an average hearing person. On the basis of such comparisons, which are necessarily against the deaf, value judgments are made. Hearing and speaking are valued highest. The more a deaf person becomes deaf and the worse he or she speaks, the less value they have for the hearing community” (2015).

The central figure of the narrative in the fourth part of the exhibition, devoted to works by deaf people, is Nancy Rourke (1957-), an American artist and representative of deaf-art, which has developed intensely in the United States. Three paintings by the artist (Deaf Mona Lisa, Second Wave of Milan, Doris Fedrid and Rose Steinberg Feld) were purchased by the Silesian Museum in Katowice and became the main point of reference for other art objects in the fourth part of the exhibition, especially the Deaf Mona Lisa (Manen, 2014). The assumptions of deaf-art are one of the most important cultural determinants of creativity among deaf people owing to the use of symbols related to the culture of deaf people in opposition to the majority, i.e. the hearing world. Such artists’ works do not only present topics from the everyday life of deaf people, which determines their classification as deaf-art, but also show the artists’ personalities without overtly referring to their deafness, or even not gesturing towards it at all.

It is worth mentioning here the phenomenon of audism, which is widespread among people, regardless whether it is endorsed consciously or not. Since the hearing majority is stronger, “audism is the result of recognizing the culture of hearing as higher or better than the culture of the Deaf, which is perceived as subordinate and less valuable in relation to the former. Behaviour that discriminates against deaf people leads to the consolidation of negative stereotypes about them, which include the perception of hearing impairment as preventing effective participation in social life on many levels, including the job market. Moreover, audism can lead to the development of a paternalistic attitude towards deaf people, who are perceived as constantly needing help and support in managing their lives” (Pieniążek, Dankiewicz, 2018).

The above-mentioned problems with the perception of deaf people emerged while working on the exhibition owing to many stereotypes functioning in the museum environment. Sometimes, attempts to organize the show about the world of the deaf would be seen as inconsistent with the seriousness and prestige of the museum – an institution that is important for mainstream art and the art market as well as comprises a historical monument like the Panthéon.

8 <https://www.surdushistory.org.pl/> (accessed 30 May 2022)

4. The importance of Deafland in Polish art and accessibility

As Magdalena Dunaj argues, “there is a strong need for the deaf community to emphasize the distinctiveness, which – perhaps – is a prerequisite for future integration with the hearing: an integration of equal partners on equal terms. The development of the socio-cultural identity of the Deaf is needed so that people with hearing impairment can feel that they are valuable and enjoy agency, and also have a reference group that gives them the possibility of identification and security, which is a good starting point for shaping individual identity without neurotic anxiety” (Dunaj, 2015).

Deafland is a socio-cultural event that is unique on a European scale, emphasizing the distinctiveness of the deaf community on an equal basis, and taking into account the perspective of the d/Deaf and their creative expression.

Crucially, the word “disability” is missing from all substantive and technical aspects of the exhibition, which helps to avoid stigmatization and stereotyping.

In Poland, the basic problem is the clear labelling with the word “disability.” Using terms such as “handicapped” or “disabled” feels like a label to the Deaf and a form of ignoring their identity by the hearing, who are the main reference point in the process of identity formation. In effect, labelling is a form of linguistic violence (Zajkowska, 2013, 56).

The aforementioned problems can very often be perceived by deaf people as manifestations of audism, i.e. beliefs about superiority based on the ability to hear or behavioural characteristics of the hearing. Audism manifests in the form of people constantly assessing the intelligence of the deaf and their ability to succeed on the basis of their capacity to use the language of the hearing. However, we can also talk about unconscious audism, which would manifest as the lack of empathy towards deaf clients or applicants (Tomaszewski et al., 2018, 109-110).

In terms of implementing accessibility, Deafland is likely to become a model exhibition that takes into account broad accessibility concerns, offering translations into Polish and international sign languages, Polish and English subtitles, typhlographic objects, and audio description.

The implementation of this model is a challenge for every museum and historical facility from the point of view of the budget and the flexibility of staff.

The subject matter of the deaf community has become the leading topic and the reason to create this type of exhibition at the Silesian Museum.

Accessibility implemented at the exhibition should, in principle, become a model solution and source of inspiration for other exhibitions, perhaps all that are being assembled in Poland.

It should not be forgotten that accessibility does not only concern people with mobility or visual impairments. It is not only walls that are shown at famous venues and admired by visitors. A flexible approach among the cultural institution’s staff is key to implement real accessibility and ensure equal opportunities for all museum visitors in Poland.

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