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Is it Art? Or is it Audio Description?

Experiments on the boundaries of media accessibility

Presenter:

Dr. Brett Oppegaard (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa)



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Overview (and Provocations)

Ekphrasis — discussed in Homer’s Iliad, and in Plato’s recreation of a dialogue by Socrates — refers to the ways in which one form of art can illuminate and accentuate another. Most often, it refers to a visual medium being described in words, such as when poetry is used to describe a painting or sculpture but *in dialogue with that original artifact*, adding artistic and rhetorical value, not aiming to “objectively” transfer or translate meaning (Hadley & Reiger, 2021).

Neves (2012) “if the blind person cannot have direct access to the work itself, might it not be better to be given an ‘alternative work of art’ to look at through the other senses?”

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The Spire

Auteur Placemaking

Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, three sound artists (Andy Graydon, Ernst Karel, and Eden Girma) were commissioned to create a new Proof of Concept, which was based in The Presidio, around public art by Andy Goldsworthy

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Auteur Placemaking

1. An aesthetic form of Audio Description
2. This AD would be locative-first in design concerns but also accessible remotely via smartphones
3. User-tested by people who are blind or who have low-vision

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This Proof of Concept test, included:

1. The NPS-created version in multiple voices (synthetic open-source, Alexa, and human performed)

Example [A](#), [B](#), [C](#)

2. The NEA-funded script in multiple voices (synthetic open-source, Alexa, human performed), and full sound-art version

[Example D](#)

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This Proof of Concept test, prompted these topics for discussion:

1. Locative design can be invigorating/disorienting
2. When a person really just wants to know what it “looks like”? Is that enough?
3. Emphasizing information over interactions?
4. Pragmatics of the information design in real contexts (usability / UX)
5. Fuzzy boundaries of Audio Description, as a term and a concept

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This Proof of Concept test, funneled audience interest to this question:
Was this really Audio Description? Or not?

In a 10-person focus group, post-listening, the issue of whether the prototype should be called “audio description” organically was raised. Comments included:

“This really muddies the water. It’s a work of art, but a painting is not a sculpture. It’s not audio description. Or it’s really bad audio description.”

“It’s more an experiential thing, not a here’s what’s in front of me.”

“It wasn’t really audio description. ... I’d call it a soundscape.”

The prototype “was exquisite. But the futurescape (it presented) was not there. The fire (that damaged the Spire) was not there. So how was that audio description?”

No one in the focus group argued that it should have the Audio Description label



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Auteur Placemaking

This Proof of Concept test, included this findings:

Quote from one of the participants, who participated in two of these field visits:

“Art changes us. And this is an audio art also. And the audio art ... changed my ability to play, to understand, and to participate. I said, I think I’ll leave my old shoes at the door here, and see what happens.”

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- **Email:** Brett Oppegaard, brett.oppegaard@hawaii.edu

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References

- Bree Hadley, and Janice Rieger, "Co-designing Choice: Objectivity, Aesthetics and Agency in Audio-Description." *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 36, no. 2, (2021): 189-203.
- Joselia Neves, "Multi-Sensory Approaches to (Audio) Describing the Visual Arts." *MonTI. Monografías de Traducción e Interpretación*, 4, (2012): 277-293.

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Questions? Comments?

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