

00:06 Douglas Connor: Hello, and welcome to *Choice and Control*, a podcast celebrating the contribution that people with disabilities make to our communities. In this series we are talking all things disability, social inclusion, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Throughout this series, you will also be hearing some great practical advice for making the most of your NDIS plan from local people accessing the Scheme. This podcast series is brought to you by the team at Carers Queensland, NDIS Local Area Coordination Partner in the Community. I'm your host Douglas Connor, thank you for tuning in.

My guest on the show today is Geoff Munck, a Brisbane-based art enthusiast who has devised a technique for making visual arts more accessible to all. I was lucky enough to catch up with Geoff at the Queensland Art Gallery a couple of months ago, and experience his technique firsthand. Geoff has a vision impairment and while his technique does indeed help people who are blind or vision impaired to experience art in a different way, it also helped a complete art novice like me develop a far greater understanding of what it was that I was looking at. It was an incredibly interesting experience, and I'm so excited to share Geoff's knowledge and his passion for art with you today.

So Geoff, you have a vision impairment and a huge passion for the visual arts. Some people might find that concept somewhat difficult to comprehend. Can you tell me where that passion for the arts originated from?

1:40 Geoff Munck: Yes, Doug. People do find that a little bit a little bit odd, someone who can't see who is passionate about visual experiences, but of course I like to say to folks, well, I'm a human being like you, I have the same passion, the same desires and the same interests. That it may be visual experience just means that I

seek to find out about how to engage with it and enjoy it and appreciated it in a different way.

My background professionally was as a forensic accountant, and I guess I've always had a bit of an analytical and inquiring mind. I found that I had a wonder of how visual arts, in particular paintings, photography, sculpture, came to be and, and form the expression of artists about the world in which we occupy. So I applied my analytical skills, I guess, to understanding what art is and how art is, because I felt that all artwork, being just a representation of materials in a medium, were telling a story. What I had to uncover so that I could appreciate it and enjoy it was how to reveal the story.

3:15 Doug: It was through that passion, Geoff, for art that you came to start Vislan or visual translation language. Can you explain to me how that process works?

3:22 Geoff: Yes. Visual translation language was the solution to the problem that I just spoke about. And that is, that as a person who cannot see visual culture that is so rich in our world, I needed to understand how it existed, what made it up.

What I discovered through approaching this probably over 10, 15 years ago now, was that the answer to appreciating visual experiences was to understand that visual experiences are made up of phenomena. Phenomena being in the case of the creative arts, paints and shapes and various elements that artists use to create visual illusions that trigger our memories, or trick our memories into thinking that we're looking at something other than just a collection of paint or stone.

And so the process works basically as a question and answer process in which the blind person leads a sighted colleague or friend, who incidentally doesn't have to be an art expert, in a dissection or an analysis of the elements that exist in the object of the artwork rather than get caught up in the art history and the science, the wizardry of

the artistry. What my system does is it simply reveals the objective evidence of what the artist has created or put in place to create the visual illusion that all people respond to. And I have found that by leading with a series of broad questions and then reducing those questions down into a more detailed set of questions, more and more of how the artwork exists and how it is being, what it appears to be, is revealed.

That process is easily learned. It is specific, and it is wonderful for both the blind person and the sighted person.

5:43 Doug: You started Vislan somewhat out of the frustrations at the limited nature of your own art gallery experiences in the past. Firstly, how does Vislan differ from some of the art experiences available to people with vision impairment? And secondly, how does it alter the experience of art for someone with a vision impairment?

6:02 Geoff: Currently particularly institutional art galleries and museums are endeavouring to grapple with the problem of blind and vision impaired and people who are visually remote. And I use the term 'visually remote' to refer to people who may have poorer sight or may not have direct line of sight or may not have clear line of sight to the object that they are trying to appreciate. So it can in fact encompass a good many of the sighted community as well.

Many of the offerings now tend towards guided tours in which the gallery may provide a specialist tour you have to book with a group of a large number of people and so many weeks in advance. But then the guide will give their best attention to telling you what they think you can see in the painting. Now that's a lecture style presentation and whilst it's a good attempt and thoughtful I always found it a little bit demeaning to be told what somebody else thinks is there to see. I would much rather, and many of my colleagues who are blind and vision impaired much prefer, to be able to understand things from source information so we can make up our own mind.

Other options that are out there at the moment include the digital version of the guided tour, where the art gallery simply provides you with a digital player and says 'there you are, off you go that'll, that'll give you your art gallery experience'. And of course it's the same thing, it's a lecture style, generally a commentary about the art history that leaves you wondering what the hell was it that I was actually looking at as well? The third thing that's starting to creep in, which I find very interesting, and a good try but leaves me rather cold, is the topographical development of say 3D printers providing raised edges tracing the outlines of lines and what have you, or even objects, in a particular painting. And whilst that's very interesting myself and colleagues agree that it creates a totally different object, which captures nothing of the emotion, of the other elements of light, dark, shade, warmth, et cetera, that are so vital in paintings and photography.

They may give you a traced outline, but essentially unless you see the original and understand what the original is, the following tracing line a little difficult too. We tested that with the Queensland Art Gallery who thought that we should be very pleased about this and my suggestion to the art guide was if they had closed their eyes when that three dimensional sketch was provided, and they had not seen the original work, would they have been able to tell what it was either? And the guide had to admit that that would seem a little difficult. So there are some good intentions. There are some well-intentioned people. But they're still approaching it from a sighted person's point of view.

The Vislan experience on the other hand is one in which the person can attend a gallery or a museum with friends, or with gallery or museum staff if they wish at any time, they don't have to prearrange it. They can just turn up like any other member of the public and not be made into a special isolated group that has to be accommodated on a particular day at a particular time. And using this technique,

using this inquiry system, they develop a conversation about understanding what the object is and how it is being what it appears to be. The wonderful thing about this, as I say, is it provides a comparable experience. We can as an art lover go to a gallery at any time with anyone, anywhere, just the same as any other sighted person. And we can enjoy and understand what the object of our interest is, and then embark on the same sort of conversations that everyone else would have about the likes, the dislikes, the reasons why, the cultural aspects, the history, et cetera, once we know what the object is.

And so the experience is a much richer experience I think, and not only do I think, but also the feedback from my colleagues and the sighted people, the guides, the gallery officials, the friends and the families who come with us. They take longer over giving us the information that we ask about. So they have to pick their words. They have to look more closely. They have to slow down, in the vernacular of today. They become aware and mindful and begin to appreciate so much more about what it is they are seeing as well. And so we end up with this rather wonderful experience of the blind person leading the sighted person through the activity and both of them being able to sit there and they will have conversations might go 30 or 40 minutes or more, and I'll turn to my sighted friend and say, 'hey, look at that, a blind person and a sighted person had a 30 or 40 minute conversation about this artwork and one of us can't even see it!'

11:31 Doug: It really is an unreal perspective to have for a sighted person, to be able to go into the art gallery and to actually take a lot more from the gallery experience than they otherwise would have. You're a big advocate, Geoff, for making public spaces fully accessible to people with disability, you don't believe that making a space physically accessible is necessarily going far enough. You spoke

before about creating a comparable experience for people with disabilities. Can you expand a little bit on what you mean by that?

12:02 Geoff: Yes. Thanks Doug. Disabled people don't want to be special, they don't want a special experience, they just want the similar experience, as similar as they can get within the constraints of their ability. So I like to think that we are not disabled by our conditions, whatever those conditions are, we are disabled by the design of the world about it. And in that regard, we come to the point of physical access, which is very, very important. It is basic safety, and also I think it helps protect people's insurance policy.

But we see a lot about access and I can give you the example of going to the Queensland cultural precinct to the galleries, the libraries, museums. We have Braille trails crisscrossing the courtyard so that you can get there by public transport, hop onto a Braille trail and follow the Braille trail to any of the access points for any of those buildings. Which is wonderful. So they're anticipating, for example, the blind people might like to come there and independently travel to and from the galleries. The moment you get to the glass door, of course, the Braille trail ends.

And the next question is, now what do I do? So they're anticipating that the blind person or vision impaired person will be able to have autonomous access to the buildings, and that's inclusive. But they don't have autonomous access to the content. You've got to have someone with you for that. So I believe that it's not just having physical access to an environment, but it's also having the ability to have comprehension of the content of that environment. So access plus comprehension gives inclusion.

13:55 Doug: Geoff we've spoken a little bit about accessibility so far, and creating those comparable experiences for people with disability. On this show we talk a lot about social inclusion. For you, what does that phrase mean?

14:09 Geoff: Social inclusion to me is about being able to operate in the community. To go about my business in the community without being made an exception of. I don't think most people with disability would disagree. Fundamentally we just want to be people included in the activities of the day to day community, to be able to go and enjoy and participate with as much comfort as anybody else can. Rather than have special experiences made for us, where organisations are often very fond of saying 'Oh, we've got a Blind exhibition on here or vision impaired or tactile exhibition'. On that point, I'd say, when you go to an art gallery, they'd often say 'yes, we've got a tour for the Blind, come and touch all of these statues.' And I'll say, 'well probably the artist wasn't intending to touch the statues in the first place and secondly, there's a painting on the wall over there I'd like to see what can you tell me about that?' and they have no answer to it.

There is a prejudice within the community about how people with various conditions and disablement are to be accommodated. But for me, social inclusion is about seeking a comparable experience of the world about us by providing tools and assistance as required, not creating special groups which simply highlights our point of difference rather than keeps us included. In the case of the art world, when I'm giving talks to people about how Vislan works and running workshops, generally speaking they are well attended by the sighted, with the most common comment at the end of it being 'I'll never look at the world the same again'.

The thing that I like to leave people with there is that as a blind person or a vision impaired person I have a much richer experience of the visual world, or the visible world, than perhaps do many sighted people, because people use their sight as shorthand and move around blithely not paying attention. But as a blind person, I have a much richer experience, and I like to think that I invite sighted people to be included in my world. So I like the idea that social

inclusion is about me saying 'yes, it's great over here in the world of the vision impaired, if you know the things that I know, and I'd really like to share it with you so come and be included in my world - free of charge.'

16:54 Doug: That's a really interesting perspective, Geoff.

You receive support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme; in your words, can you explain the opportunities that the NDIS can afford to people to really empower the lives of people with disability?

17:12 Geoff: Yeah. The NDIS has been a marvellous enhancement to my life. It took a little while to get my head around what it actually could do for me. But now that I understand that the proper role and use of NDIS support is to facilitate having these comparable experiences of life, I find that I don't need so much of the care, but I need the facilitation of a life.

It is very unsafe in a visual world for Blind people to get around, to do the sorts of things they like to do. For example, I love kayaking. I love bush walking. I am actually cursed with enjoying all the outdoor activities a normal, healthy, sighted life might give to participate and fulfil my ambitions in those areas. The NDIS has come along and provides me with the sighted companion to make all of those things doable. Previously, they were frustrations, but now I'm able to kayak with a normal or able bodied kayaking club and compete. I go bushwalking with family and friends or by myself. I have goals and ambitions to cover certain overland tracks in Tasmania. Art experience is rich and valuable as it is to anybody.

So I find that the NDIS, thinking about it as the supplier of tools and resources that I need to have a good, comparable experience of life, that has made me a happier, a more engaged and socially orientated person. And I think that this is something which perhaps people miss. So much of the NDIS speak is about home care and maintenance and

cleaning, and what have you, when in fact I invite people to think beyond that, think about what they would like to do what they would do if only they didn't have the conditions that they had. What are the things I would like to do, those things that other people can do easily.

And it's interesting that during the recent COVID lockdown I was amused to hear how many in the community seem to be suffering from being constrained by something outside of their control, locked up within their houses, unable to get out and about, share the world and do what they would like to do, how dreadful it was. Mental health was spiralling out of control. And all I could think of was 'welcome to the world of the disabled'.

20:06 Doug: And it seems like the NDIS, when you had that change in perspective, rather than thinking of what funds am I receiving and started thinking what can I use these funds for and in what sort of creative ways, that really unlocked the whole process for you?

20:32 Geoff: That's exactly right. As I said, the funds are a means to an end. And it's the community saying 'you know what? We get it. For you, who is a person with an impediment, it is reasonable and necessary that you enjoy a full life'. I'm often told that you can't have an exceptional life. And I have responded and dismissed, in respect to the art 'I'm sorry, I thought we had art galleries and museums for the general public to go to, I didn't realise that going to them was an exceptional experience, I consider that rather normal.'

What I encourage listeners to this podcast to understand, or at least consider, is that this is not just about keeping you safe and well. That's excellent stuff, but it's also about empowering you to dream about where your interests take you that you're constrained or unable to participate in without assistance, whether it's technical or human. Because the NDIS is about, in my view and in my experience,

facilitating that so that you can have a full and rich life as any other member of the community has the right to expect.

21:51 Doug: Geoff living where you live and being a keen water man, it must've been an absolutely fantastic feeling to get back on the Bay there in Morton Bay and get back on the kayak.

22:03 Geoff: The kayaking with my NDIS assistant, the kayaking and the fishing has been superb, because we were allowed to do that during the lockdown. The flathead have been running and the bream have been running, so thanks to the NDIS I have had some very good fish feeds. There have been plenty of opportunities to walk the foreshore, again with NDIS support. My companions, as I call them rather than carers, have been with me all the way. We've done some art work by looking through books, or at least they looked through the books and we asked the same questions: what is it that you are looking at, how is it being what it is?

So yes, the lockdown here by the Bayside has been as rigorous as anywhere else, in fact possibly a little more rigorous with the police walking along the foreshore, however my companions as I call them have facilitated still wonderful experiences. I think the worst story was losing three flathead from the kayak in one morning, because when you're blind and trying to land a 20 inch flathead when you've already got two on board is a little bit difficult.

23:19 Doug: Oh, it's a tragic loss, Geoff.

23:22 Geoff: Tragic loss! (laughs) Well, when you're fishing blind, sometimes you don't even know what's on the end of the line until it's in the boat.

23:32 Doug: It's very impressive, I'd love to see that in action one day.

23:37 Geoff: Come for a paddle with me.

23:38 Doug: Okay, awesome. Thank you very much. Well Geoff that's all I have to ask for today, but thank you so much for taking the time to have a chat to me.

23:46 Geoff: Pleasure Doug. Always happy to share experiences and encourage people to think beyond the boundaries that they might have and start putting in place through the NDIS the very reasonable expectations of living a good and happy life.

24:10 Doug: Thanks Geoff. For more info about Geoff's program Vislan, jump online to viserbal.com. There is some information up there about the process and how it all works. You can also check out a catalogue of artworks to which the Vislan technique has already been applied.

Thank you once again, for tuning into *Choice and Control*, the Carers Queensland podcast. For more information about Carers Queensland, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, or the Local Area Coordination Program, please connect with us online at carersqld.com.au. Or you can catch up with us on Facebook at facebook.com/CarersQueenslandNDIS. We hope this podcast can become a place for people with disability to share their experiences and their stories, so if you have a story that you think we should know about please contact us via the Carers Queensland enquiries line at 1300 999 636 or via email at cq.enquiries@ndis.gov.au.

Until next time, thanks for listening.