Transcript: A Conversation with Siddhant Shah and Natalie Kane on Accessibility, Art and Culture.

Webinar recorded on January 21st 2025.

Note: This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Emma:

Just giving a couple of minutes for everyone to join us. On the screen currently is a holding image with the Tilting the Lens logo, on a yellow background. Beneath it: “A conversation with Siddhant Shah and Natalie Kane, this conversation will begin soon.” OK. Hello everyone, and a very warm welcome to today's webinar on Accessibility, Art and Culture. My name is Emma Shaw, I lead on Community and Impact at Tilting the Lens. I have been at Tilting the Lens now since 2021, and I'm so excited to start 2025’s event series with you all. If this is the first webinar you are joining, welcome. If you have joined us before, welcome back, and thank you for supporting us.

I'm genuinely thrilled to be here with two fantastic guests: Natalie Kane, the Curator for Digital Design at the V&A, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Siddhant Shah, the Founder of Access for All, based in India.

Today we are going to dive into an important, intersectional conversation - not just a timely topic, but a vital topic - ensuring the future of arts and culture truly belongs to everyone. Today my primary role is to guide us through the conversation, ensuring everyone feels included, heard and engaged. We want this space to be as welcoming as possible, so before we start I want to provide a brief visual description of myself for accessibility purposes: I'm a white, cisgender woman, in her, let's say mid-30s, wearing a grey wool jumper with long, brown hair and a gold “D” pendant around my neck.

We have also put into place some other access accommodations for today's session. Live captions are available and details of how to use these will be shared in the chatbox. Our brilliant BSL interpreter, Andrea is also shown on screen. If you encounter any issues or need further support, please use the chatbox and a member of our Tilting the Lens team will be on hand to help. Additionally we engage you to engage in the chat throughout the session. Feel free to share your thoughts, ask questions or raise technical concerns. For questions directed to the speakers, please use the Q&A box and we will do our best to address as many of them during the session.

Before I hand it over to our brilliant guests, I want to share a brief personal story as to why this topic means so much to me. I have always loved visiting galleries and museums, much like I'm sure many of you, some [of my] treasured memories are walking around places like the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum or finding random little exhibitions on little walks through London. But during my maternity leave, about a year ago, I engaged with these spaces in a different way. As a woman who is Disabled, living with a mental health condition, I found myself feeling low, quite isolated, and lonely during that time. And going to these spaces provided me a different outlook, sometimes it was about taking a breath, sometimes it was about just looking at beautiful things. But it also formed a different bond between me and my daughter, who now loves going to galleries herself and we regularly spend some weekends at the Young V&A in London. It made me realise how vital these spaces are for connection, healing and personal growth. They allow people to pause, reflect, and gain perspectives. This experience really strengthened my commitment to ensuring that arts and culture spaces can truly belong to everyone and be enjoyed by everyone.

Today's conversation will take a global and intersectional approach. Accessibility is not a conversation limited to Western context, it is a universal need that transcends borders and cultures. We are here to highlight perspectives from different parts of the world, showcasing how institutions in different regions can lead the way in creating truly inclusive experiences.

Now, it is my absolute pleasure to introduce our speakers - Natalie Kane brings her experience from the V&A, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and her curation of digital design, where she explores the intersection of technology, art, and accessibility. Natalie is also the lead curator of a new exhibition coming to the V&A in South Kensington this summer, *Design and Disability*. Siddhant Shah is founder of Access for All, and is a trailblazer in India and globally, working tirelessly to make cultural and heritage spaces more inclusive and accessible. Both bring unique experiences and wealth of knowledge to this conversation, so let's get started.

Natalie, firstly, I'd love to ask if you can share a bit about your experience of disability and how this has shaped your role as a curator.

Natalie:

Sure, I'll just do a quick visual description for everyone. So, I'm a white, non-binary person with sort of brown hair - it's quite neater today than usual - in a top knot, clear glasses and a black cardigan with a sort of blurred, seamed background. Occasionally a cat does wander in the background as well.

So, I'm a curator who comes to design through the lens of design and society. A lot of the focus of my collecting work within my department is looking at social and political histories, and the interactions with the design world. Obviously as a Disabled person, this intersects in terms of thinking about who has been historically erased and left out. And this has really come - and it is

hard not to think here about my own personal experience - because of the way I interact with the world and the many communities that I belong to, it is a part of that. And so, my identity as a Disabled person clashes so much with these factors. Even when I experience gallery spaces, but also just the design world in general, I really invest in the ways in which the creativity of Disabled people and disabled perspectives comes into this. And I really invest in that, so it's really, deeply tied into my curatorial work. So, the way that I've approached collections and work as a curator has really moved me thinking towards design injustice, how design has ended up how it has. Whose perspective has not been acknowledged in the disability community, but also intersectionally and globally.

In terms of exhibition making, I spend a lot of time thinking about overstimulation and processing information, and actually, to your point, Emma, about rest. Because for me, it is always about who feels welcome in the space and who doesn't. The amount of times I have been to exhibitions and the only bench you get is for a film that is an hour-long... and no one thinks about pace. And who do you really want to be in there? Like, I care so much about benches - I think I've chewed everyone's ear off about benches because it is the expectations of what it means to be with culture and what we understand a public space to be.

We don't think about the idea of wanting to prolong being with other people in the space. And sometimes you want to be by yourself, and that's fine. Sometimes it is nice to just be there. And this always leads to the idea about productivity, in general. There is so much when it comes to design in general with that. I think sometimes, we want the preservation of our cultural spaces and creative space to be as open as possible, and that has developed a lot of my thinking. And that is where, I guess, the point of the show has landed and my own experience as a disabled, neurodivergent person. Anyway that is a long answer to your question, but we got there in the end!

Emma:

No, that is brilliant. What you highlighted around the idea rest and the idea of taking a breath. I have done that at various times at exhibitions, for various reasons - sometimes it is access and sometimes I just want to sit down for a minute and maybe do something on my phone. Then you can revisit a piece or revisit a section and see it in a whole different way, if you are not rushing and not being made to feel like you are rushing through. So, I completely agree - it benefits everyone, really.

Natalie:

100%. I think we really have to think about what we want the experience of culture to be like. One of the pieces that really got me into art and culture years and years ago was Janet Cardiff's Forty Part Motet. It's a piece where there are loads of speakers in the room and it is like different voices channeling a choral piece. That was in Brighton, probably about 15 years ago - I was working as

an exhibition attendant there - and that was a piece that encouraged you to lie on the floor, spend as long as you wanted with it. It was a real credit to that space and the people in it to not rush you through it. Maybe that was the work that encouraged me to some degree. But I love Fabrica in Brighton - pro-tip for anyone who goes to that space - but their idea of the space... it has benches and open spaces and I think it even had beanbags and things. Although I do hate beanbags - but we can talk about that later. But the idea of encouraging people to let their body do what it needed and what it wanted, I think we have sometimes lost a bit of that. The idea of needing to rush people through at a certain pace and getting people through in a certain way. I think it doesn't allow for what bodies need to do in public.

Emma:

Thank you so much for sharing that. And Siddhant, welcoming you from India. Thank you for joining us so late in the day. We really appreciate it. **A question that I would really like to ask you is around the conversation around accessibility and inclusion, how it is evolving in India. Particularly in arts and culture spaces and thinking about, you know, if there is not certain compliance laws, is it coming directly from organisations like yourselves?**

Siddhant:

Hi Emma. Thank you so much. A pleasure to be here. I'll give a brief visual description of myself. I am wearing a white t-shirt, I am 30 years old, I have spectacles, I have dusky skin and am wearing a small badge, right out of a Coldplay event, which we were working on the accessibility for. It says "love".

As you said, I'll just put some things into perspective and then answer the question. So, if you Google "Population of India", it shows one billion plus. Like, it just shows, the plus sign tells you a lot. A lot of it is undocumented. We had our last census in 2011. We were supposed to have one in 2021 but we could not have it, due to COVID. And what has transitioned between that and now is the fact that in 2016, there was the "Rights for Persons with Disability Act" that was passed and that increased the numbers of disability that were recognised by the government from 7 to 21. Now when you talk about all these additional factors together and when we look at what is the scope and how is the landscape in the space evolving, I think it is changing but slightly more fragmented. It does not have one holistic appeal and approach. I have been working with some of the entities in the UK, like with the British Museum and the British Council. I even had some time at the TATE, where I had done a fellowship there. So, just to look at and understand it is seen as for the Equalities Act of 2010 [UK], everything comes under one umbrella, but here things are still fragmented and it is only after 2016 that things have been made more inclusive and accessible. There has been a change in which the government is trying to look at this as a space, where it is growing. The identification of understanding the need is growing. And as I'm talking, I'm still talking about the basic existential things, I'm talking about the basic stuff that needs to be

made more accessible, the infrastructure. And when you look at how art and culture sadly comes towards the end, let's see how to make it more inclusive and accessible.

This is our 10th year. We entered our 10th year on the 15th of December last year. And to be in this space, for the last 10 years, pioneering in this area of looking at art, culture, accessibility, it was a very conscious choice. It came from personal experience. I am a trained architect and while I was in architecture my mother acquired visual impairment. We were in one of the galleries - I come from a very typical Gujarati family, where it's about business, you go for a family trip like once a year and suddenly everything stopped for us - there was no form of recreation, there was no form of just being around things. The only things we were focussing on, it was just making how she goes through her day-by-day things.

That was one of the triggers and the point that pushed me into the space of art and culture is because we would shooed out of an art gallery. One of the curators in a gallery in Mumbai thought that my mother would touch something, and they were very uncomfortable with our presence, and they politely shooed us out. That really changed my perspective and triggered me to understand that India is a world capital for visual impairment and for somebody, for this particular group, where touch is an important medium of learning and understanding something. You are kind of putting them behind the barrier and not even giving them access to it and that is where the journey of Access for ALL started, in making art galleries and museums accessible with visual art. And now it has grown into working with events, governments, and working with different corporate spaces. But for us the journey started with art.

Emma:

Thank you so much for sharing that. I think a little bit later we would like to get back into where you are at today and the access around gigs for instance and how it has evolved. **Natalie, we touched upon this briefly in the intros around "Design and Disability", the new exhibition that is coming to the V&A in Summer. Would you just share a bit about what it is aiming to communicate and an overview of what you can share, even though it is still very much under wraps, just to give the audience a bit of an idea?**

NATALIE:

Yeah sure, I'm pretty sure I can't do the whole spiel because I have my press people saying things.

EMMA:

Absolutely not.

NATALIE:

But I want to as I'm really excited about it. But it is really aiming to prioritise Disabled, Deaf and neurodiverse production in all of its forms. So it's expanded in the way you think about it in terms of fashion and design, in graphic design and the built environment. It aims to be a call to action and a celebration. We are really trying to veer away from tropes and inspiration porn, which is very much about saying, despite the disability, this person is able to design. Because we really want to centre and honour specific design cultures that emerge from disabled perspectives, and what are the unique strategies of design that are emerging from disabled communities. That have always been there, due to narratives that have been historically or systematically erased. So, we really want to see where, due to inaccessibility, design injustices have existed but people have pushed back and have broken or reanimated or reinvented design in interesting ways. And there are loads of interesting, political histories existing in this [the exhibition]. And although it is not a historical show, It is very much a contemporary show but we want to make sure the political origins are represented in interesting ways.

There are so many interesting stories of people who have done incredible work to get us where we are now. And we wanted it to pull out really interesting themes and conversations and methodologies and those kinds of things. So, we really want to arrive at a place of joy and power and reinvention.

There is a quote that has really guided us through from the incredible work called, "Crip Technoscience Manifesto" by Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, that says "Disabled people are designers and experts of everyday life." I think that is really fundamentally interesting and for me, it is a mantra in terms of like, the idea - it is not just setting aside a thing - it is interwoven. The disabled perspective on design is interwoven in everything. We are bringing it to the surface, hopefully in the show.

EMMA:

It is really exciting. Like you say, getting to see and experience those different perspectives, the political histories that people might not know and have access to before, yeah, it's really wonderful.

Siddhant, to go back to you for a second. You touched upon the initiatives like with the British Council's project and I think there was an artist residency which happened in Cardiff and India. It would be interesting to hear a bit more about how that reflects a growing commitment in India to arts and culture, having those two perspectives brought together.

Can you tell us more about that project?

SIDDHANT:

Sure. While we were working in this space, one of the things we realised was the fact that the level of representation and also artists with diverse needs in India, are largely seen as artists who would do crafts – like making soaps and candles. In order to elevate that, we have been working extensively with different arts festivals and art fairs in India in order to provide a platform for representation.

During COVID we were looking at different projects where we could still continue the relationship that we had with our artists, to have a relationship with the community we were working with. And we were grateful for the grant that we received from the British Council. It was a CTC grant, which is "Connect Through Culture". We had a partner in Cardiff, Jonny Cotsen, he's a Deaf performer. And together, both of us worked on putting together an artists' residency programme with three artists in India and three in the UK, that would meet over a couple of months online. Have access to different workshops and sessions together and then eventually they would work on our project, which was - and the residency was called "Manifesto for Accessible Arts Festival". Together with the artists and people in the industry, we put together a 10-point manifesto which we wanted to share with the community in India. There were points like simple things like normalising non-participation - Or, you know, looking at the importance of rest when we talk about how we rest - as Natalie was talking about.

We had a similar idea. When somebody gives you a grant, it is seen that, you know, you are obliged to do more than you could do and when you are working with artists with diverse needs we had to work around the flexibility of time, the ability for them to be able to do it in the format that they were able to do it. It was fantastic learning for us, it was the first time ever in India that grant, the callout was put into Indian and British Sign Language, there was an audio format. You could also share the grant... You could apply for it by sending just a simple Word Doc. You could use any accessible format to use it. And we are very happy to see that now, a lot of interesting grants in India are using the template, you know, working with people with diverse needs. So, a grant that was put out for one of the organisations like UNDP, who uses a format that is more inclusive and accessible. I think that the grant became a catalyst for a change in India, in different ways.

In the UK it was something that was accepted, and they have seen it in Unlimited and other grants where these formats were there. But for us in India, we had to adapt it to our needs. And the thing I will also say, this was also one of the first grants where you could use your own Indian language that you were more comfortable with. But all this was again possible, because there was funding to do that. So, I think funding has a very important role to play and that is what we are constantly working on and trying to stay afloat in. When we are able to utilise and have these ideas, when we have that in-person support, which comes through funding.

EMMA:

Absolutely. It is integral. I might have a follow-up question on how to find some of these artists or see some of their work. Having spoken to you before the webinar about this, it is such a fascinating and really brilliant project and initiative.

Natalie, talking about the Design & Disability exhibition and bringing that together, **how important it was to bring in different perspectives into an advisory role when you were putting it together - I know it is still obviously ongoing – but bringing together different disabled people as experts to help shape that exhibition. How important is that?**

NATALIE:

I know we will talk later about advisory. There was a two-stage advisory group. I can talk about the design one. I'm really lucky that we have an internal design team within V&A, who are Sam Brown and Jo and Kirsten, who are 2D and 3D designers. I cannot credit enough how incredible their research and taking on this task was. They took on, following our initiatives, and we will talk about that later. They created their own advisory group and we worked with them as well but they contracted DisOrdinary Architecture, who are a consultancy firm, formed of entirely disabled, and guest experts, Zoe Partington and Jos Boys. And it was an interesting process. I think it was like five two-hour sessions, it was really testing the paces of the V&A. I really recommend them and I really recommend anyone going through any consultative process where you do an access audit of your building or of your space. And the people who we worked with, Jos Boys, Mandy Redvers-Rowe, Chris Laing, Helen Stratford, Abbi Palmer and Natasha Trotman. I want to give credit to everyone who worked on everything. And they supported the development by essentially going through to the V&A and going - "This is why it is a nightmare" or why it is great or why it doesn't work. And I think that transparency and honesty helped us to go - "OK, this is what works and what doesn't".

I think there is definitely a process that you go through. And we went through, where we were really clear in what we can and can't fix when you have a 150-year-old building. And that was a really interesting process for us – in what we can change in the short-term and long-term, in what you could do in an exhibition space and in the wider museum. That was an interesting process.

The design team we work with uses things like prototype, cardboard tactile maps, in order for us to map out the space. There is really great spatial design that happened. It means that it led to good decisions. We do not talk too much about the exhibition design itself, but we can definitely talk about some of the things that were designed, for instance, DeafSpace principles. Which is ensuring that sightlines and certain things have been considered. And there are also some really interesting ways to think about seating. Loads of seats. And not just for the films, which is great. And we thought about rest and we wanted people to relax across the show.

I'm really excited by the process. A lot has come because we have taken the time and made it a priority in the budget around access and time consideration. And I really think it'll benefit, because that training has happened, and it will continue to happen. I think it'll benefit future shows we do. I want to emphasise that in terms of - I guess we will come to this later - but what impact that kind of work does on the future exhibitions that we make and for it not just to be seen as a stopgap, or “we have to do it because this show is about disability”. But how do you expand and build that knowledge within your team, so you can continue that work everywhere else. That has really been the opportunity for this exhibition and part of me has been going - it would be nice if it happened elsewhere, but, actually, we are looking, particularly for channelling disabled expertise within this show and it has been a really great opportunity for us to do that.

EMMA:

I think this is so interesting. The conversation around the V&A, obviously a historic building, there will be certain limitations and you have to think about creative solutions but also, we have seen a real trend in arts spaces and cultural spaces that have included more information on their website about accessibility, for instance, so people can plan their journey and understand if it is a space they can engage with and how best to do that. To your point about seating, there was an exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum a couple of months ago. It might still be going. They had a wonderful way of introducing more seating so people could engage with different pieces at different sightlines, but also take a rest, take a break. So, yeah, I think this is, it is just a wonderful learning opportunity and hopefully something that continues to stay with the museum.

I'm just going to encourage everyone in the chat and everyone watching, if you have any questions, any Q&As, any thoughts, we are going to be getting to those in about 15 minutes. Please feel free to share them.

Siddhant. **You mentioned, you touched on funding and, you know, the great need for funding when it comes to these initiatives and obviously increasing budget constraints and accessibility inclusion initiatives is something we are always facing. What innovative strategies can organisations, and do you potentially use to make the most of limited resources, or make people really invest in this work?**

SIDDHANT:

I think that is a very interesting question. Because it is like a creative challenge everyday. With every grant. To understand, like, you know, how to get them interested in what we want to do, and align with their motive. Because a lot of grants that we get here in India come from a certain directive in terms of... They have a certain pre-set notion and idea and in order to work around that, you have to be smart to craft your ask which fits and aligns with their mission statement and their vision statement. I think that is one way of looking at it.

Another one, which we have learned over a period of time, like initially when we were starting, we would apply for any grant that would come our way. But now we have started to vet the grants and see whether or not it would be of use to us.

Now we are also trying to look at the quality of grants we are working with. That exposes us to a certain kind of network, certain kind of people. Like my interaction with Soho House was what got me introduced to you. Those kinds of channels and those kinds of networks play a very important role and they are not necessarily financial grants but sometimes those networks can even put you in touch with the right group of people, that can help you to just leap from one point to another, you know. Sometimes the grant is not always the money that comes in or the funding but it is also the human resource that connects you to the right person at the right place at the right time. I think that is also an important learning that we have inculcated over a period of time.

EMMA:

Yeah, that's a great point. The power of connection and you don't know where the right people might align and meet. Like you say we met through Soho House, and we had such an interesting conversation and had it not been from that introduction I would not have known necessarily about Access for ALL and learned about your wonderful work. It is a great point.

Natalie, just thinking about, not specific to the Design & Disability exhibition, but in general in your history, your background and experience, are there examples where the effort to make an object or a concept accessible has led to a more creative and impactful way of sharing it with wider audiences? Is there anything you can speak to specifically?

NATALIE:

I just mentioned before and I think the previous point I missed out on, we did a previous advisory group as well. I wanted to mention it. We did have a previous group of 11 people who advised on the curatorial process before that. I think it is important to say that we did a consultative process before that with 11 people, who are amazing. I thought I should just mention that.

EMMA:

No, thank you for sharing.

NATALIE:

But, in terms of access, in terms of the show, we did some research in terms of the idea of materiality for us is very important. We did a lot of research around 3D printing. I know it sounds left field, we cannot share things about the show but we did a lot of work about materiality and touch, and we were keen to make sure we were not going to give the second best thing to

people, in terms of Disabled audiences within the show. We wanted to make sure as many if not all the tactile objects in the show are the actual thing rather than 3D printed objects unless it specifically comes forward with the curatorial ask, if it's a 3D printed font for instance.

Because material sensory engagement is so important. I'm led by a lot of the work people like Georgina Kleege do, ensuring that you have that, it is not just about Blind and Low Vision audiences, it is also for Autistic and Neurodivergent audiences that use materials as a grounding technique. We thought to place that through the show in terms of its design. We want to ensure that people don't feel left out, and this approach is something we aim to carry throughout the museum as well. I think that is something that we have been thinking a lot about. And there is programming and things about that, that we are trying to extend.

In terms of objects in general. I'm a Digital Design curator, and so I think a lot about how we think beyond the objects. And I think we live in a very digital network world. The idea of thinking - like, beyond the museum, is one I'm constantly conscious of. So, it is just - we are thinking about how we connect to people beyond the exhibition but also the fact that we live in networks.

There is this really interesting work in the show that speaks to that and the idea that Disabled people, particularly because of the models that we have shown throughout, since the beginning of COVID to now, ongoing, the creativity that has sprung from that, that has constantly existed because of disabled people making community through design. It is on display at our show. So we need to look at that as museums and understand that, and see what we can learn from that.

EMMA:

I love the idea and would love to explore that more. I think it was on the Guggenheim website, they have some really wonderful audio-described versions of artworks. You get a real – another way of enjoying it and understanding it. You can be in your home and feel safe and secure and not go out if you can't, and still experience the work and enjoy it.

NATALIE:

The idea of seeing it as a creative space. So many artists, like Bella Milroy. And Finnegan Shannon and Bojana Coklyat, who did Alt Text as Poetry, I consistently throw at my interpretations. It is the idea of seeing it as a poetic space, thinking beyond the literal description, or Bella Milroy, who does incredible stuff around captions, which is great. There is a great book called, Crip Authorship, which I always lean to, in how you see access as a creative vessel for things. And access is great but it should be a space for flourishing.

In the show we talk about themes flourishing, the idea that you go for access and then more and more and more and what do you see beyond that space? It's something that I have found immensely enriching in doing this show. It is like - how do we extend beyond that and ask

for more? We should always be asking for more. We always just get the minimum. Well minimum viable access, that is what I keep saying, but that is me being cynical sometimes. That is the interesting thing about it, about us centring on the design and seeing the creativity first and seeing what can we see from a disabled-led perspective.

EMMA:

I completely agree. You talked about Alt Text as Poetry. That may have been one of the key readings our CEO shared with me when I joined the company or just after, I saw her in the chat there, like “I love it.” We are all big fans of that as well, at Tilting the Lens.

I'm just looking at the time. We have time for a couple of more questions before we go to the Q&A. **Siddhant, you mentioned briefly when we connected before around a foundation you launched around 18 months ago, I think, setting up inclusive libraries in India. How has that impacted the community in terms of how that is helping people, disabled people, and people come together?**

SIDDHANT:

So, when we launched the library in India, the idea came from this concept of - a lot of times, with the funding, the grants we get, have been received in cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Bangalore. What happens to smaller cities where there is no access and when you are looking at access that people have to look at? If some teachers are able to do that, they will take the extra step, they will go to the closest Metropolitan city and have access to those resources that are available. And looking at those challenges that they faced we thought of working with existing schools and upgrading their libraries into resource centers.

So what we currently do is, we identify two kinds of schools, through our foundation which is called Nirant. Nirant Foundation. It aims at updating and adding value to the infrastructure that is there, in terms of making it more accessible, for intellectual access but also looking at the elements of social and physical access.

To give you an example: If we find a school that works with the groups that are identified as having intellectual disability. Then we set up a resource center, we set up a sensory room, we provide various sensory elements, all in a box that can be opened up and utilised.

It is more like a treasure chest that opens up with different things inside them, in the forms of different resources. We also go around conducting workshops, training the educators to use these resources that are integrated. Some of the resources are collected from different parts of our travels around the world and then we try to integrate that in an Indian context. In India, for example, there are sensory sandbags that we saw, we actually tried creating them with similar

food grains we found and in bags that we could use, which was safe but were not as expensive as the other resources available.

So we tried to engineer resources and solutions to that and similarly, if we find a blind school we upgrade the school with various different things like Braille books, of course, audio guides, and having tactile elements, tactile learning aids, they can use. So say, for example, we have created - we have gone beyond just the textbook but looking at things, creating books on menstrual hygiene for blind girls, looking at basics of banking for them. So trying to understand and break down taboo issues that are still prevalent in the country and then trying to go beyond that and addressing it to the community through our foundation.

EMMA:

That is fantastic. These are things that people need to learn, these are life lessons that people need to be equipped with, when they are growing up. So making sure that that information is accessible to people who are blind and low vision is so important. I didn't realise that. That is so brilliant and interesting. I'm conscious of time. We probably have two more minutes before I have to go to the Q&A. **One question I would like to share with you both, and Natalie I will pass to you first – for young disabled people that are wishing to follow a similar path of inclusive and accessible design, arts and culture, curation, is there any advice you would give them?**

NATALIE:

It is a really hard question. I don't know how to answer it, honestly. We live in a difficult time for Disabled people, I think. It is such an individual question. It is very hard for Disabled people to ask honest questions of their institution. I think the first thing I find is, if you join a cultural organisation and find other disabled people who work there.

First of all find a disabled network and find peers and go and talk to them about the honest issues that you - and try to find a community really quickly. I think that is really helpful. Often they will hold the knowledge of that institution and they will help you. But in terms of finding the community quickly and honestly, it always helps. And then it is holding the institution to account. These are my honest answers. I think it is really important for you to find out how to navigate this. That is where you start to go - OK, how can I change this? How can I hold the institution to be like, “this is the change we want to see”. This is where the people are and how we can make things work for us. I think we were talking earlier about how you make funding this stuff sexy. I know it sounds like an awful phrase, but in terms of getting a budget for accessibility and the budget for this, it is making it attractive as a goal and making this stuff happen.

But it is getting people in the places and showing - “Here, this is why we want to make it happen”. It is often disabled people who are on that momentum. And it is about getting them supported. For young Disabled people who are there, find community quickly, find spaces where you can

talk about those problems and then get that momentum. The other thing is to know that, is to know that there are other people who have done it before, and to find mentors and elders. Find someone that you think is cool and write to them because they have probably done that, or write them a thing. No, they might not email back immediately because they are probably exhausted and tired. But try and just, you know, they might have done the same thing before. I don't know. You know I'm terrible at communication and messaging people back. Maybe in my head, it is like, you need to find someone that you can be like “This is really hard, how do I do this?”. It is a terrible answer.

EMMA:

It is not, it is honest and true, and you have given brilliant advice there. Had I not been hosting this webinar and listening to that as a younger disabled woman, I would have taken that advice. I appreciate that feedback. I hope that everyone else does, too. **Siddhant, same question for you.** As brief as you would like, given the time and the many Q&As.

SIDDHANT:

I’ll be very honest, coming from a country like India, on the cusp of development, we still like, for a person with disability in India, to work in art and culture, one it does not pay that much. I will be very honest. I will be very honest about the fact that people who are working currently in this space are struggling to look at this as a focus thing. Unless you know the right people and unless you know the curator or know somebody who is going to help you in the space, then it is OK, but if you are starting independently, like me - I was a complete outsider in this space and it has taken me ten years to do what we do right now. And then comes the lens of gender and then comes the lens of the disability. Then comes the lens of caste, various different things. Which part of the country you are coming from, so the intersectionality really makes it a difficult space.

I will be very honest and brutal about it, it is still a very elite space to be in and working in. Without connections you really struggle. I am seeing this one live example in front of me of a Deaf artist. She is trying extensively to find a university in India. Now she is looking at a university in the UK who would help her with the basics of studying conservation, but with Indian Sign Language in the UK. So just the challenge of figuring out the resources, it drains so much out of you.

Like Natalie says, you have to be constantly at it and being encouraged to be at it every day does get challenging. And for us personally, it takes a toll on your mental health and it takes a toll on different aspects. People will say - “Are you going to be able to support your family or not?” If one really wants to look at that, sadly in India we do two jobs to make sure we can do our job in the space of art. I can definitely say that if you stick at it, if you try to keep yourself afloat, of course it takes different ways of doing that but if you stay afloat, like ten years down the line I have been

able to now only focus on Access for ALL and not take up other odd jobs to make sure that Access for ALL stays afloat.

EMMA:

It's so true. It's so true, there is a lot of work to be done.

SIDDHANT:

Sorry, can I give a small example? We were doing this while we were running the residency. We had partners in the UK, artists in the UK, they had support from the Government, in terms of having a Sign Language Interpreter, having a scribe writer. But in India we had to pay for all these facilities and that went out from the grant money. So that just puts in perspective that of course, we are growing a day at a time but it is still, like very different when you answer the question on the two sides. And working in the UK, working in India, I do feel that.

EMMA:

Yeah and this is why these conversations are so important to get that different perspective of how things are evolving in different parts of the world. Thank you for sharing that.

I'm going to go to a couple of the Q&A questions. They are really filling up my inbox. So let's have a look here. A question for Natalie, **Considering your remit for digital, as well as this exhibition, is the museum considering using digital tools such as WelcoMe for the customer experience?**

NATALIE:

I have not heard of WelcoMe but in terms of digital tools, it is not really my remit in terms of those things, but I can talk about the online side of things.

EMMA:

That would be great.

NATALIE:

I mentioned beforehand, we want to make sure we do have some consideration, and we want to make sure we think about this. I can't confirm everything we are doing, because it is a really live conversation for us right now. But it is something that when we talk to our advisory group, many of whom experience culture at home. I encourage you to read the White Pube blog post about "Culture at Home". It is really good. And thinking about options for this at the moment and how

we experience it. Obviously we know at the V&A, our YouTube channel is wildly watched for all the in-depth things. And we want to try and see what we can do.

I would love to do things like the online curators talks, which are longer and more in-depth. But we have budgets. And I talked a bit about prioritisation, there are things that I'm looking to prioritise which benefit certain things and we are leaning on what Disabled people want. This is where I would be interested, if anyone out there, has anything they want, let us know on social media, that kind of thing. It is something that we want to hear from disabled people about. So, public pressure is always really useful. So we are planning, we are in planning, I can't confirm everything, but we are planning.

EMMA:

Thank you. Question for Siddhant. **What gives you joy through your disabled imagination in your design work? What gives you joy through your design work?**

SIDDHANT:

Wow, OK.

I think the fact that people feel like art and art spaces are for them, too. That feeling that they face, when they come to the museum and we have been able to make the space more inclusive and accessible through design, I think that moment is quite joyful, being able to give people the confidence that the museum also belongs to them, that they are an equal stakeholder of the museum. And not only just someone's charity case or someone's CSR case or for a social media event that they are just coming in fill it in.

When they come on their own, for me it reminds me of this one situation where we had designed a gallery, and this was the first time that the father had – the father had a severe neck-down disability – and he was able to bring his daughter for the first time to the gallery, and take her around on a tour because his wheelchair could go through the exhibition. We didn't know that happened. They came in and we only knew when we read the feedback book, that he was able to do that. When you are able to enable people with a dignity of choice for them to do that on their own and do it through design, that gives us joy.

EMMA:

Brilliant! To build on that question, Siddhant, **are there any projects you can talk to or speak to that are happening in India at the moment that you are supporting or you would like people to speak about, you briefly mentioned Coldplay**...

SIDDHANT:

We work with different organisations, assisting them to be more inclusive and accessible. There is the India Art Fair that happens in February. We are working with them in terms of making it more inclusive and accessible. We set up Inclusion labs, inside an art fair where people with diverse needs can come. Also, it is a space for people to, you know, come and engage in inclusive workshops that are not for coming up with an outcome, but more process-driven, where everyone can take their own pace, create art, and take a pause space to decompress. We create tactile artworks in the space.

We love putting the signage that says "Please Touch". Because most art spaces have the sign "Please do not touch." A lot of people say “Oh, you have made a mistake, it should be "Do not touch."” Just to break that notional barrier, yes you can touch, feel, experience the artwork in a space like that. And we have been working with different corporate CSR projects. We have a couple of donors from Zurich who have supported us in setting up the public libraries that we are creating in an accessible format. So these are different kinds of projects that we keep on doing.

Along with that, we do work with various different kinds of corporates that help us, you know, largely because now corporates in India also have to follow the standards they have in their home country. We are initiating and working in the space of DEI and currently an ongoing project which has also been in Soho House and working as their inclusivity board member, to learn from different partners, around the world and, to integrate that into the Indian subcontinent has been a great learning. These are the things we have been doing. Along with that, of course, I also teach. I teach largely in the space of design and disability and also help set up curriculums around that in various different design colleges.

EMMA:

Brilliant. You are busy! And joining us at 11:00pm in the evening! We really appreciate it. We have time for one more question. Natalie: **In terms of “Design and Disability”, what does success look like for you, even before it opens?** Sorry, big question.

NATALIE:

Good question... I hope that everyone will have a nice time.

I think that is the really key thing for me, is that disabled people... In our small team, we can't claim to do everything and we can’t represent everyone - we know that disabled people aren’t a monolith. But we hope we go somewhere to starting a conversation. There are many people who have done great stuff before us, and we want to continue that trajectory and be somewhere on the journey for more people doing more work in this space. I want it to be somewhere on the way to more people doing more things. It is a terrible answer but I think, for us, it is people feeling

seen and wanting to continue the good work. I guess we want to be a part of an ongoing history that will continue to be bigger and better.

EMMA:

Brilliant. You know, we are so thrilled to be able to speak about it and we can't wait for it to open.

Unfortunately, we are now almost out of time. I want to say a big thank you to everyone for joining us and being part of this really interesting conversation. Massive thanks to our amazing speakers, Natalie and Siddhant for sharing your expertise and experience. You are truly creating a really inclusive arts and culture space globally. And it is so exciting to hear about the projects you have got ongoing. For those who would like to stay connected with Natalie and Siddhant's work, we are sharing links in the chatbox now. Check it out.

I would encourage everyone who was part of the conversation today, listening, to think about what stood out, what you can bring back to your teams, your organisations or your own creative practices, to ensure that inclusion and accessibility are at the front and centre.

For everyone who asked questions, thank you so much for your curiosity and engagement. If we didn't get to your question today don't worry, we will share more Q&A answers on the Tilting the Lens website in the coming days. The recording of today's session will also be available on our website, as will the transcript.

I just want to say a massive thank you to my colleagues at Tilting the Lens for all your behind the scenes work making this session as smooth and accessible as possible. Thank you to Andrea, our brilliant BSL interpreter who has kept up with some of my very fast speaking in parts. I apologise. Thank you everyone for your time and energy and your commitment to these vital conversations. We look forward to more collaborations and progress in creating art and culture experiences that will welcome everyone. Have a wonderful rest of your day wherever you are in the world and hope to see you again. Thank you. Thank you everyone.