

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Excellence in Arts Access

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Chicago, IL

Contact

Peter Taub

ptaub@mcatchicago.org

312-397-3893

TTY: 312-397-4006

www.mcatchicago.org

www.mcatchicago.org/accessibility

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Take Note

- Artists with disabilities train museum staff from key departments.
- The MCA staff ask key contact people in constituent communities to be ambassadors, and give them the necessary marketing materials and information.
- The MCA engages the community primarily by presenting performances that feature artists with disabilities.
- People with disabilities conducted an accessibility audit of the museum.

- Evaluation mechanisms are designed to answer the question: “Is our work making a difference?”

Overview

The mission of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) is to be an innovative and compelling center of contemporary art where the public can directly experience the work and ideas of living artists, and understand the historical, social and cultural context of the art of our time. The museum interweaves exhibitions, performances, collections and educational programs to excite, challenge and illuminate our visitors and to provide insight into the creative process. The MCA aspires to engage a broad and diverse audience, create a sense of community and be a place for contemplation, stimulation and discussion about contemporary art and culture.

The MCA produces a full range of performances, artist-audience encounters and support for the field in its 300-seat theatre built as part of the institution’s new construction in the mid-1990s. Out of the \$14 million budget for the museum, approximately \$800,000 is allocated annually to direct expenses for the performing arts. Theatre attendance is approximately 20,000/year.

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

In addition to its mission statement that references engaging a “broad and diverse audience,” the MCA’s performance department strives to integrate performance programs featuring artists with disabilities into its season, accompanied by significant educational and audience development initiatives.

Professional Development

Artists with disabilities present regular training and orientation workshops to museum staff from facilities engineering, education and visitor services departments.

Leadership in the Community

The MCA initiated an on-going dialogue about city-wide arts access through the [League of Chicago Theaters \(LCT\)](#), a group of professionals dedicated to enhancing the art of theater in the Chicago area through audience development and support services for theaters and theater professionals. The MCA staff helped to organize an Arts Access committee at LCT, the first committee in the country dedicated to promoting accessibility to performance programs across a wide range of venues.

The MCA also convened a consortium of over 50 cultural, academic and rehabilitation organizations to showcase the disability arts movement through [Bodies of Work: the Chicago Festival of Disability Arts](#).

Bodies of Work, the first festival of its kind in the United States, took place April 2006, with a second festival planned for 2009.

Effective Practices

Community Engagement

The MCA engages the community primarily by presenting performances that feature artists with disabilities. This focus broadens the museum's commitment to increasing arts access to include access not just for audience members with disabilities but also for the artists themselves.

Partnerships are another mechanism for engaging the community. The performance department does not rent out the theatre; instead it co-produces, which expands the knowledge pool; cross-fertilizes audiences; and leverages the existing resources and expertise to increase the production's impact. Approximately one-third of the performance programs are realized in partnership with various organizations, including [Court Theatre](#), the [Illinois Humanities Council](#), [Jane Addams Hull-House Museum](#), [Young Chicago Authors](#) and [Little Black Pearl](#). As noted above, the MCA collaborated with over 50 cultural, academic and rehabilitation organizations to produce [*Bodies of Work: the Chicago Festival of Disability Arts*](#).

Partnerships and other networks are important for the MCA's marketing efforts. Staff ask key contact people in constituent communities to be ambassadors, and give them the necessary materials and information.

Implementation

The MCA is accessible to visitors, audience members and artists. In addition to the aforementioned basics, services include:

- Loaner wheelchairs.
- Low ticket prices to make theater-going accessible to audience members with budget restraints.

The MCA presents artists with disabilities such as [Bill Shannon](#), [AXIS Dance Company](#) and [Lynn Manning](#).

Evaluation

The MCA engages people with disabilities in the on-going evaluation of the museum's physical facilities and its services for audience members with disabilities. Several years ago, the museum completed an exhaustive accessibility audit facilitated by artists, volunteers and audience members with disabilities. In addition, the MCA staff conduct audience surveys; meet twice a year to review access services; and

assess services and performances by talking informally to audience members. The key evaluation question is, “Is our work making a difference?”

Challenges

- Encouraging audience members without disabilities that an artist with a disability explores universally-relevant issues.
- Having a limited schedule of performances and, therefore, rejecting quality artists with disabilities and disability-related projects.

Advice

- Seek advice from artists with disabilities and people with disabilities who live in your community.
- Understand that the disability community—just like any other community—is often politicized, and there are divergent opinions about how to do what needs to be done.



Association of Performing Arts Presenters

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