

However, no matter how good a project is, the question of whether it can earn money still comes up from time to time. “Money is not the most important thing. People with disabilities are already burdened, so we don’t want to charge them tuition fees.” Without income from the project, everyone on the team has to work full-time, and they only meet up once every two weeks. “We don’t want to rush. We’d like to take it slow since quality really matters, and there are different things to consider when filming videos for different levels.” Wing Yin admitted that the target audience is exclusively people with disabilities, but she hopes that everyone would stop taking things for granted and start thinking from a different perspective.

“There are a lot of misconceptions about people with disabilities. I really hope that the public will know that people with disabilities are not worthless. They’re unique in their own ways, just like ordinary folks. I hope everyone can treat them like any other people and get to know them, and after that, you’ll understand them better.”

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EVERYONE IS EQUAL
BEFORE ART:

“SEEING”
THROUGH
TACTILE
TECHNOLOGY

BEYOND VISION PROJECTS -
CHAN MENG KHEONG RICO

TOUCH AND HEAR: FULFILLING EVERYDAY NEEDS FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Ten years ago, Rico was very much surprised when he saw some photos taken by visually impaired people in an exhibition. The quality of the photos was exceptional. After that, he started to pay attention to the needs of the visually impaired. He noticed that a lot of people thought that visually impaired people were not interested in art, but the fact was that most art venues neglected their needs. It was the lack of accessible facilities that deterred them. That was why Rico set out to write his doctoral dissertation on the Tactile Audio Interaction System, combining his interest and skills in design and art. He put a lot of effort into developing the technology needed, and later realised the need to bring his theories to life to bridge the gap, which would allow visually impaired people to appreciate works of art through touching and hearing. He then founded the social enterprise “Beyond Vision Projects”.

The Tactile Audio Interaction System turns 2D images into 3D art that can be felt and touched. Take the Mona Lisa as an example. The first step is to outline the portrait, demarcate different areas with lines and dots, and then print it on a special kind of heat-sensitive paper. When ink is heated, it expands to create texture on the paper, resulting in a tactile painting. Apart from feeling the painting with their hands, the audience can press a button on the painting to listen to an audio description that gives them more information about the painting. This puts visually impaired people back in charge in art appreciation. They can feel and understand the works at their own pace and of their own volition.

The project has already been running for a while. Rico said that even though he had never seen it as a business, he had no choice but to accept the rules of society over the past 18 months. “It turned out doing good and doing business are

“ To a lot of Hong Kong people, art is something they can easily do without — they seldom crave for it. Still, art has the power to move and inspire. It breaks the boundaries of time, place, and culture; it nourishes our lives.

To the visually impaired, however, they do not even have a chance to experience the inspiration brought by works of art. Therefore, Rico developed the Tactile Audio Interaction System during his five years of doctoral studies to let the visually impaired “see” masterpieces like the Mona Lisa and the scenery of Hong Kong.

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inextricably linked. After all, you have to make a living.” As a result, he spends a lot of time socialising, meeting new friends, and expanding his social circle. Rico told us that he had been actively trying to get in touch with local art museums and explain his vision to others. A lot of people would praise his ideas, but very few would take action. He attributed this inaction to Hong Kong people’s fear of failure, which makes them unwilling to be the first person to make an attempt, but nor do they want to be the last. By chance, he got in touch with people from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and was invited to design Tactile Audio Interaction System versions of their exhibits. He was surprised. “Local investors don’t believe in influence. They only see numbers.” Maybe investors focus only on the number

of beneficiaries and the volume of usage, so they have different demands. This situation sometimes makes Rico want to give up.

“But giving up is way too easy. In fact, no matter what you do, you will always come across challenges and difficulties. So, even if only 1% of people will benefit from it, I still think it’s worth doing.”

Rico later added that even if only one person will benefit from it, it is still a worthwhile cause and a good deed. “Once, a 16-year-old boy with acquired visual impairment came to an exhibition. After feeling a painting of the Tian Tan Buddha, he drew a picture himself, which included a lot of tourists. After asking him about it, I found out that the experience reminded him of his visit to the Tian Tan Buddha

“ As long as it continues to exist, it will impact lives. ”

when he was a child.” Therefore, Rico believes that the system does not only convey information and images, but also help people rediscover long-lost emotions and memories. This project does not only promote a technology, but it also promotes a vision — accessibility in society.

Our society belongs to each and every one of us, and everyone has different needs. Why should a particular group be ignored? Rico once travelled to a small island in Japan. No one spoke English there, so he could not ask for directions verbally. He had to resort to drawings to communicate with the locals. This inspired him to create some simple symbols to help visually impaired people to make sense of images. For instance, he created symbols of leaves to represent forests and trees, so that when people touch them, they recall images of natural sceneries. These techniques and symbols can be used in printing the map of Hong Kong and pictures of tourist attractions, such as the Victoria Harbour. Rico believes that a lot of visually impaired people do not know what Hong Kong, their

home, looks like. “They have the right to get to know their own city.”

It has been a bumpy road. Oftentimes, Rico wonders if it would have been easier if he had not started the project in Hong Kong. Joining Good Seed indeed helped him take a step forward in founding a social enterprise. He was able to build a stronger social network and learn from others’ experience and stories. Now, he stands on his own and wastes no chances to explore more possibilities. “If they don’t come my way, I’ll go to them.” Facing rejections and refusal, Rico believes that rather than waiting for art museums to make use of the technology, organising an exhibition himself is a better approach. While people may find the community of the visually impaired small, Rico continues to look for other ways to apply the technology. For example, he has discovered that tactile paintings can spark the interest of students with special educational needs, which helps them concentrate and learn new words.