

# Scenes of Silence

## An Exhibition to Break Down Mental Prejudices

Orna Cohen and Andreas Heinecke

### INTRODUCTION

“Accessibility” usually refers to removing obstacles for people with physical disabilities, or providing additional information, such as Braille labels or guided tours in sign language, for visitors who are deaf (AAM, 1998). No doubt, these efforts are important and needed. But the question still remains—what other methods can museums employ to increase accessibility and provide rich experiences for all visitors?

Usually people with and without disabilities do not meet despite the universal recognition that personal encounters are beneficial for promoting understanding between diverse groups (Cresas, 1987). Following Buber’s advice, “The only way to learn is by encounter” (Buber, 1986), we designed *Scenes de Silence/Scenes of Silence* as a platform where deaf and hearing people share time, risk a new experience and struggle to overcome constraints to communication.

### WHAT IS SCENES OF SILENCE?

The exhibition *Scenes of Silence* is designed to enable hearing people to gain access to the world of the deaf. Visitors enter a world of silence and are expected to communicate non-verbally. People who are deaf, the experts for non-verbal communication in this environment, do the mediation.

*Scenes of Silence* consists of a series of circular rooms dedicated to different aspects of non-verbal communication: signing, facial expression, body language, and gesture. The visitors are fitted with highly effective individual sound proofing systems and taken through the exhibition in groups of 12. The final space in the exhibition is a bar, where the newly acquired skills are used. Visitors are encouraged to use their full repertoire of non-verbal expression to creatively communicate with one another.

*Scenes of Silence* is based on the great success of *Dialogue in the Dark*, an installation where blind co-workers lead sighted visitors through pitch dark spaces designed to simulate common, everyday environments.

*Scenes of Silence* does not present deaf people as show objects or exotic creatures, nor is *Scenes of Silence* an installation simulating deafness. It is a platform where hearing and non-hearing people meet to show their readiness to think about social clichés and overcome prejudices. The main goal of the exhibition is to break down mental and social barriers.

The exhibition took place at la Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie in Paris from December 9, 2003 through April 25, 2004. During the 4+ months it was open, 25,000 people visited

*Scenes of Silence* and were led through the experience by 22 deaf guides, 12 of whom did not have prior professional experience.

Visitors filled 8 guest books with 5,087 entries, only one of which was irrelevant. The exhibition generated 34 press articles, 5 television segments and 8 radio reports (Cohen, 2004). Results from the winter 2004 visitor survey of la Cité des Science et de l’Industrie informed us that 64% of the visitors had heard of the exhibition before they visited, and 37% came specially to visit it. Forty-eight percent rated this exhibition as 10 (on a scale of 10); 31% rated it a 9; no one judged it under 8.

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### IMPACT ON VISITORS

To understand the impact we were guided by the following questions:

- Which kind of inspiration and reflection did the exhibition engender?
- Does the visitors' perception of deafness change?
- How do visitors who are deaf react to this exhibition?
- Is the impact different on adults than on teenagers?

This work was carried out with the help of students from two different universities (Mme Sophie Pité DESS de psychologie à l'université Saint-Denis Paris VIII and Mlle Géraldine Attié Licence [Métiers des Arts et de la communication] Université Panthéon - Sorbonne Paris I). To measure the impact of the experience one hundred visitors (49 adults, 51 teenagers) were asked identical questions about their perception of deafness before and after the visit. In addition, the contents of 5 guest books (3,870 entries) were analyzed.

Generally, visitors' comments were strongly positive. The visitors thanked the guides, appreciated the exhibition design, the mediation and emphasized the importance of the initiative.

Analysis of the results from the pre- and post-visitor interviews and the guest books revealed four main kinds of visitor responses to the experience. As the original comments were received in French, the comments listed below have been translated to English with an effort to maintain the integrity of the thoughts and emotions expressed by the visitors.

### "A Transformation"

For 35% of the visitors, *Scenes of Silence* was an "emotional, powerful, meaningful, profound, sensitive, surprising" and especially "an unforgettable" experience. A lot of people spoke about "happiness, joy, wellbeing, fresh air." Some of them expressed their difficulties in the beginning of the visit when they started diving into the silence. The word they used, "challenge" shows how important the experience was to them: "Challenge to be successful, challenge to hold my tongue, not to speak, challenge to overcome my shyness or the uncomfortable feeling while talking with the body and face."

During their experience the visitors describe a transformation process: "It is not the same any more"; "It opens another world"; "it gives me wings"; "It pushes me to reflect"; "I feel enriched"; "This show is changing my life"; "I understood something completely new that was totally impossible one hour ago..."

### "Cheers to non-verbal communication"

For 33% of the visitors the experience of silence was "pleasant, attracting, beautiful, disorientating, enriching, joyful, magic, marvellous, enthralling, very rich, completely expressive." Their awareness of our usual noisy environment was very strong after they took off their headsets: "It is almost stressing to return to the noise"; "We would like to leave with the headsets"; "It's hurting to take off the headsets and we miss the peace of silence."

Seventeen percent of the visitors discovered in a significant way their capability to express themselves non-verbally. "Thanks to you I

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*succeeded in expressing myself without any words"; "I did not know that my hands could be so talkative"; "I discovered a hidden part of myself"; "We are hearing but our bodies are dumb"; "It is the discovery of the day! My eyes spoke, it's true"; "What a pleasure to talk differently and what a richness!"*

### "Beautiful lesson of tolerance"

Thirteen percent of the visitors had the feeling that they shared an important moment with the one other. "I shared a pleasant moment with sympathetic people who were strangers to me"; "It gives me a good feeling in this rough world!" The sharing moments are "tender, intense and joyful"; "Scenes of Silence: scenes of sharing, scenes of life." Many visitors were enchanted by the discovery of the other through our differences. "It opens the desire to meet deaf people and to become a friend"; "Deaf and hearing people should meet more often. It makes us more talkative."

Some visitors go further in their reflection and point out that this exhibition is a "lesson in tolerance." Their comments include considerable reflection about stereotypes and prejudice that shows that *Scenes of Silence* helped to raise respect for people who are different. "We should be more open to each other"; "a great lesson of humility"; "that helped us overcome the prejudices of the hearing people"; "I will understand better human kind after leaving this place."

### "Never see your life in the same way"

Before the exhibition 81% of the visitors defined deafness as a disability. The words visitors associated with deafness were: *silence, ears, sign language, handicap, loneliness, difficulty, exclusion, and emptiness*. After the participating in the exhibition only 39% continued to define deafness as a disability. The percentage that defined deafness as a difference grew 29% and the idea that disability can be an asset went from 4% to 18%. The words visitors associated with deafness after the exhibition still included *silence* and *sign language*, but *handicap, loneliness, difficulty* and *emptiness* are mentioned only about half as often. And, reference to "communication," "expression," "observation," "an other world" increased.

Looking at the entries of the visitors in the guest book, 32% are about the world of silence, sign language and deafness. The world of the deaf is described as: "The world of silence is not a world of loneliness but a world of encounters"; "It's a special world, serene and soothing, and unbelievably voluble"; "Who said world of silence? I say world of expression"; "Finally to be deaf is another way of seeing the world"; "All the time I was taught there is only one world. I just discovered there is another one."

Numerous comments spoke about a better understanding of the daily life of people who are deaf and their difficulty connecting within a hearing society: "This helps us to see the conditions under which a deaf persons lives"; "This handicap must be hard to bear in our society."

Some expressed a strong will to fight for the rights of the deaf or to start learning sign language. "Everyone should experience this encounter with this unknown world that is finally not so different"; "The deaf people deserve more consideration and the deaf culture needs to be more widespread"; "It is really necessary to continue to open the eyes of the hearing person if we want to live in harmony"; "We should all learn sign language"; "I discovered sign language at 80 years. I will take advantage of the winter to learn this language."; "Here is finally the universal language! That will allow deaf persons to feel themselves less excluded"; "It is a very beautiful language, marvellous enthralling, splendid..."

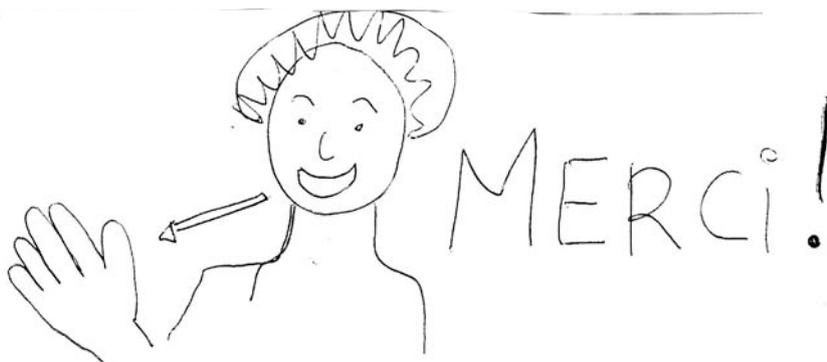


Eight percent of the visitors' comments in the guest book were based on images. This non-verbal representation shows the will of the hearing visitors to become engaged with the world of the deaf and to continue to communicate with them. For instance, key words learned in the bar were drawn by visitors and included in their comments. These words included thank you, bravo, hello, bye-bye, and I love... While messages today are frequently visualized, this result is noteworthy as generally it takes much more effort to draw.

Some of the visitors were very satisfied and felt lucky to overcome their fears. "This experiment helped me to dare to meet deaf persons and to communicate with less of apprehension"; "That helped us, the hearing, to understand you better and not to be afraid of the world of silence any more."

For some, the experience changed their view of the world: "I believe that this experience that we just lived will change the way we see the world of silence." For those who were related to deaf people, their visit to *Scenes of Silence* was highly emotional: "Thanks for having allowed us to discover what our daughter lives every day";

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*“Jeanne (6 months) brought us here. As storyteller, I’ll explore stories without words with her. Thank you for this fabulous sharing moment... the way is open.”*

It is interesting to note that visitors who have a deaf person in their family or among their friends had a more negative vision of deafness before starting the visit. For them, deafness was associated with difficulty: difficulty to find a job, difficulty to integrate into the world of the hearing people. Nevertheless, after the experience, their vision on deafness evolved. The words they used to

describe deafness were more similar to the ones used by people who didn’t have contacts with people who are deaf before their visit.

**Change of perspective for youth**

We compared the evolution of the answers of adults and teenagers (12 to 19 years old) to the question, “What, according to you, is deafness?” The many possible answers were lumped into three main categories.

As shown in Figure 1, the teenagers’ description of deafness as a disability decreased by 14% after visiting the

exhibition, whereas that of adults decreased only by 5%. Also, after the experience, teenagers credit deaf people with more assets (increase of 9%) than the adults (increase of 5%). However, both groups showed a similar increase in defining deafness in terms of diversity.

**IMPACT ON DEAF GUIDES**

*“It was a very enriching experiment and I feel stronger now in front of the hearing majority. I know better now how to be, to talk to communicate with them. Finally it is not so difficult to be different.”* This comment by Noemie, one of the guides for the exhibition, perfectly summarizes the impact of the exhibition on the deaf guides.



**Figure 1.** Teenager and adult perspectives on deafness before and after *Scenes of Silence*



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Open-ended interviews with each of them after the exhibition showed that this exhibition gave them:

- a greater self-confidence
- a proudness to be deaf
- a better knowledge of hearing persons
- a discovery of the non-verbal communication.

What they really liked was the teamwork, the morning staff meetings and the free access to all the information. In their own words, they enjoyed “to make happy, the time of the visit, for the hearing people.”

## CONCLUSION

To conclude we can say that the exhibition *Scenes of Silence* moved the visitors and raised awareness about deafness and disability. This exhibition engendered a wish to be open to the other, and to have a better communication between deaf and hearing people. For the teenagers, *Scenes of Silence*, brought a change in their perception of deafness. We believe that the possibility of using an exhibition as a medium for presenting hearing loss or hearing impairment has never been considered. So we are entering into an unknown territory and had a chance to create a unique project. We are building a social laboratory, using new media and methods to educate the public about the needs and the situation of people with disabilities, thereby offering new cultural and educational possibilities in our environment.

As a social engagement, *Scenes of Silence* represents an important contribution to the advancement of tolerance towards minorities—an exhibition to break down prejudices.

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*Dialogue in the Dark* website:  
[www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com](http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com)

*Scenes of Silence* website: [www.cite-sciences.fr/english/ala\\_cite/expo/tempo/silence/](http://www.cite-sciences.fr/english/ala_cite/expo/tempo/silence/)

## THE AUTHORS

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