# Rights\_reporting\_episode\_2\_Arts.mp3

**Speaker1:** [00:00:00] This podcast is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.

**Neven:** [00:00:17] Welcome to the right's reporting podcast. This is a show aiming to improve the rights of blind and partially sighted citizens in Europe. And my name is Neven Milivojevic and I will be hosting today's episode. Today, we will focus on the important right of having equal access to culture. Well, access to culture, both as a cultural worker as well as a consumer of culture, is highly challenging amongst blind and partially sighted citizens in Europe. And this, despite ambitious political visionary documents by, for instance, the European Commission or rights stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities. Well, today we will meet experts and culture workers from both Netherlands and Belgium, and we will hear more about barriers and challenges, but also impressive commitment and tools for solutions. Let's first listen to Rafael Arias from Spain. He's a blind artist painter, and he studied at the Art Academy in Madrid and specialized in graphic design and photography. Apart from painting, he had his own ad company, which he lost when he became totally blind at the age of 40. Nevertheless, he decided to continue painting. His oeuvre consists of around 300 paintings, and he exhibited in over 10 countries.

**Rafael:** [00:02:09] My name is Rafael Arias Fernandez. I'm completely blind. At 16, I first lost my sight in one eye due to glaucoma and lost my vision completely in both eyes at the age of 40. I am an artist painter,

**Rafael :** [00:02:31] I studied fine art, graphic design and photography in Madrid, Spain, after which I worked with several advertising companies, later I created my own ad design studio, also in Madrid.

**Rafael:** [00:02:50] When I became blind, I had to give up my work in advertising and turned to painting again. Another passion of mine.

**Rafael:** [00:03:04] While going back to painting, I reflected on how to make a painting without seeing. After a lot of thinking and studying, I created my own method and technique, which enables me to do just that.

**Rafael:** [00:03:27] Although this technique allows me to create oil paintings in a variety of themes and styles, all from memory. Themes are still life, landscape, nude, etc. the most figurative work in a realistic, impressionist style.

**Rafael:** [00:03:52] The problems, difficulties that we as artists with disabilities face. Well, really are many complicated as it already is for non-disabled artists. Imagine the barriers that those of us who can't see are up against,

**Rafael:** [00:04:13] Age. But apart from mobility and information, society is quite reluctant to believe that a blind person can paint. And this is something I find really frustrating.

**Rafael:** [00:04:33] I was rejected once from an exhibition. The lady in charge simply didn't believe that I had made those paintings of that quality myself, when in fact, I always paint alone and without help. Anyway, they made me leave and I was excluded as if I was a liar and not a professional artist.

**Rafael:** [00:05:03] Society has to be made aware that artists with disabilities are very capable of more than what people think. Luckily, I've had my exhibitions also abroad with my work. I wish to convey that one can achieve more than we, ourselves and others may think. That is also my message to society.

**Neven:** [00:05:24] I would like to welcome our three guests for today's podcast. From Belgium, we have Caroline Daemon. She's visually impaired herself, and she is an experienced museum guide and teacher at training program for guides specialized in verbal description. Caroline is also a member of the EBU cultural network. Hi, Caroline.

**Caroline:** [00:05:49] Hello.

**Neven:** [00:05:51] Welcome. We have also from Belgium, Dr. Tamara Ingels. She's an art historian, independent heritage consultant and also teacher at the training program for Guides. Hi, Tamara.

**Tamara:** [00:06:06] Hello, Neven.

**Neven:** [00:06:08] Welcome to today's show! And lastly, but not least important from the Netherlands, we have Birgitta Blockland. She has for more than 20 years been active in different roles within the European Blind Union. She is herself having a visual impairment, and she's currently coordinating the EBU Cultural Network. She is an artist and an art and culture inclusion consultant. Welcome, Birgitta.

**Birgitta:** [00:06:40] Thank you so much for the invitation. Great to be here, Neven. Thank you.

**Neven:** [00:06:44] Ok, so we can start with you, Birgitta. What are your reflections about Rafael's story we just heard?

**Birgitta:** [00:06:51] Well, Rafael said important things, and he said recognizable things, things that we hear a lot from artists with visual impairments that they come across. And I think the three main issues he mentioned was the accessibility issues, on the one hand, access to information and mobility related issues, but mainly and most importantly, the attitudes,

**Birgitta:** [00:07:20] Way that people perceive artists with disabilities, the professional city versus someone with disabilities being able or not to be a professional. Of course, we are professionals. But the perception of society often is not like that. And what he says about access to information and mobility all derives from the lack of awareness of people working. In this case, today's topic is access to culture and the cultural sector. The information is not there. People are not aware of are not informed about the possibilities of artists with disabilities. I don't know if we have time to elaborate a little bit on the different aspects that Rafael mentioned acoustically. He mentions access to information, which is, of course, very important for all types of work that one does. And as an artist, you need to know what's going on and where the action is. If you can participate in an exhibition somewhere, you need to know what kind of places you could write to or send information to or visit. Perhaps also, if websites are not accessible, then the information is not there for you, and it's difficult to find the information that's on the one hand, and I could elaborate on this a lot more. But to go to the next one, mobility is also for people with disabilities, a very big issue for people who are blind or partially sighted and artists who are blind or partially sighted. When you want a practical example again, for example, when you have an exhibition, you need to take your artwork to places, to an art studio or a museum. If you are a sighted artist well and you have a driver's license, perhaps you can rent a car and go places, and when you have a visual impairment this is really a big issue, and this means that you need support by sighted people. And this brings me to a third issue which is a financial issue. Obviously, you depend on volunteers who can help you, but when you are blind or partially sighted artists, you need more support and you cannot pay for all the support that you need. And that is a big, big back set compared to artists without disabilities.

**Neven:** [00:10:08] Well, we will come back to you if it's okay because I want to introduce our second culture worker who also has vision impairment, but who actually worked very hard not to let barriers stop her. Let's see if we have Caroline with us.

**Caroline:** [00:10:27] Yes, I am here. In 2004, I lost most of my sight. And at that time I worked as an employee at the University of Leuven, and they did not have another opportunity for me, a modified work. So I came to sit home with no challenges in life. And in 2008, I started to follow the education of museum guide, and this year was very tough for me there. The teachers did not have the opportunities to give me the digital tools I needed, and they did not believe in an almost blind guide. They told me that I would not have the right connection with my group as a partially sighted. And I followed. all the models I had to follow, I did my exam twice. The other students had only to give one guided tour. I had to give two. And at the end I never got my diploma and I did not get the recognition of guide. But I had the opportunity to start as a guide for blind and partially sighted in the New Museum at that time in Leuven. And I could start in Brussels at the Museum of Fine Arts, too. But in 2010, I was still afraid to go on the way by train and on foot alone to Brussels. So I did not do the museum in Brussels, but only Leuven. I started as an interim guide, but that was not a good solution because for a guided tour, I earned €30 and my disability income was much more. But they gave when I gave a tour, I lost a whole day of disability income and I had to take holidays on the few worked hours too, so I went to work as a volunteer. But there I lost all the credits of respect of my colleagues, and I felt I was not no more one of them. And after some time, they told to me at a museum that sighted people or sighted guides could do my job even better than I did. So I quit the museum in Leuven and I turned into a severe depression.

**Neven:** [00:14:10] Well, I can understand that because I mean, they have in many ways failed here to have any understanding of your situation. And actually, as I understand you correctly, the structures have actually made it impossible for you to work with this.

**Caroline:** [00:14:25] I wanted to do something. I wanted to do something for the for the people of, yeah, my disability, but it was impossible. And since more than 10 years, I met Tamara and we became good friends. And last year I followed due to Corona, several online art sessions, mostly given by Tamara. And for me, it was very good to follow her sessions. She knows my needs. But my needs she is giving also to the sighted people. So it was nice. But I always also followed some guided online sessions for visually impaired people. And these sessions were not OK. So Tamara and myself started the Argus Association. And each month, we give an adapted art session for visually impaired people and sighted people also may follow. For them, it is slow art. But even there, I like to do it. I like to give these sessions and Birgitta followed already some of our sessions. But due to my invalidity income, I may not earn anything. I had to write a note that I do not get any money for all the guiding work I do. My part of everything stays on the account

**Neven:** [00:16:18] And really sad in a way I have to say.

**Caroline:** [00:16:20] And then I like to say too that. Since last year, I joined the EBU Culture Network, where I work together, also with Birgitta. That's my story.

**Neven:** [00:16:35] Oh, that's a fantastic story. Well, we will come back to you. Caroline, let's hear. We have the privilege of also having Tamara with us here who have experience doing this new project with you. So Tamara, could you tell us this about your perspective on the issue?

**Tamara:** [00:16:56] Hi, Neven. Yes, I'm glad to have this invitation. Indeed, I'm a teacher in an adult education program for guides, so we train city and museum guides in a school in Brussels called Ceville Brussels Campus COVI. And we have a program that is also open for the sighted and visually impaired people. We try to work on our idea of inclusion within culture and the access to culture. But we do experience that there are several problems to find this access into culture and into the cultural field, unfortunately. And thanks to my friendship with Caroline, I did realize that there is much more to it than just a few little problems. She was a student of mine, as she also already said, and I must say, she taught me a lot about looking at art in very different ways. I am an art historian. But she learned me to look at art in a very different way, and in fact, I did learn that we can in fact learn a lot from the visually impaired in looking at art. So that is why from our friendship and from all the frustrations that Caroline just mentioned, we started Argus. We started to collaborate to see, can we work with this idea of inclusion, the sighted and the visually impaired, working together in looking at art and talking about art? And yes, it works, and it works wonderful because of course we have for once a very accessible program.

**Tamara:** [00:18:47] But we also have this idea of looking at art can go very slow, can go very fast, but in a way, we have all got to learn to look at art in a very different way. Now what disturbs me most in the whole thing is that in fact, we are both equals. We work as equals, but I can get paid as a sighted person. But Caroline still cannot get paid. How crazy is this? In fact, and we also see the same problem in the teacher education program. We also see the same problem in the guide training program, where the visually impaired people can in fact have access to education. But the question is do they have access to the working fields? And that's why we wanted to share this story of Caroline, because if you can follow the training and if you even after the story of Caroline, you can get a diploma. Is it possible to find a job as a visually impaired guide within our structures in Belgium, but also in Europe? And I think we have a lot of work to do there to get this thing going and to show people that, yes, this is possible as long as we work together, as long as we realize that being equal is so much more important, as long as we can work from the idea of inclusion and with the two of us, we just get stronger.

**Tamara:** [00:20:27] That's the whole point of it. But I'm very thankful to Caroline because she really taught me that looking at art is a lifelong process, and it happens a lot that she asks me questions about an artwork, and I have to answer her. Hmm. I didn't see that. It's due to your question that I get to look at this artwork much better. And I also heard Birgitta and Rafael saying that there are problems for artists as well to get this recognition. And this is horrible. This is the same problem. We have to do something about this. We have to realize that it's not that you are visually impaired, that you cannot be a guide or you cannot be an artist. No, you have so much more to say than the sighted artist and the sighted guide. You have a different way of looking at the world, which is interesting for everyone. So let's share it.

**Neven:** [00:21:35] But for instance, I put the question to Caroline, would you say that it would be possible to do this project, which you have done together with Tamara in other countries in Europe?

**Caroline:** [00:21:55] Yes, it could be.

**Neven:** [00:21:56] Yeah. Do you have any recommendations to people, how could they start? How could they do? How could they find the same ways forward as you have done?

**Caroline:** [00:22:06] I think first of all, you have a good connection between the visually impaired person and the sighted person. There has to be a click between the two. But then you can do. Everything I think I tried to explain, for example, art nouveau to the blind people in June, and that was far out of my comfort zone, but. It was OK, I could do it. So when I can do it, other people can do it all.

**Neven:** [00:22:50] Interesting. So actually, then it's about finding some commitment, some committed person, both the visually impaired and the sighted person.

**Caroline:** [00:23:02] Yeah, you have. You have to have two persons who come good together. Yeah.

**Neven:** [00:23:12] And you, Tamara, what do you think are the secrets of your success?

**Tamara:** [00:23:16] I think the secret of our success is the fact that we are having fun in doing this. And Caroline starts laughing, so that's a good sign for me. But that's the first part because due to this fact that we start from being equals and being inclusive towards one another and understanding one another. We enjoy so much more talking about art and sharing this with other people. So I think one of the most important things is to be enthusiastic about what you do and try to follow a very good methodology. Make sure you take in a lot of feedback and you can learn from what other people say. But mostly, I think people listen and come to our sessions because we just we have fun.

**Caroline:** [00:24:13] That's the click we have.

**Neven:** [00:24:15] Wonderful. Well, I have a last question to you regarding this case, but how do you manage to make this like a serious professional project and not kind of a charity where the sighted person feels sorry for the blind person? I mean, how do you ensure that this is really about professionalism?

**Tamara:** [00:24:40] That's a very difficult question. I think we created Argues, especially because we wanted to reach the professionalism, and it's the only way we can do it that we can do it professionally and that Caroline can collaborate. So I think that's the very first step to create a very good framework in which we can work. And I hope that in time, this framework can become something that will support Caroline as well, because that's absolutely necessary. She's wonderful and we just have to make sure that she's also protected and she can keep working in the way she's doing this because it's a very important message she's sending out to the world. Hey, I can do this.

**Neven:** [00:25:36] Wonderful. Thank you very much for that, Tamara and Caroline. So Birgitta, you are, as we know, also a blind artist. And I wondered, do you have any reflection about this successful example from the from Belgium?

**Birgitta:** [00:25:54] Absolutely. I think it's a great example how we can react to a situation that we want to see changed. And if the situation doesn't change, then we find an alternative. We blind and partially sighted people are trouble shooters. We are changers. We are solution seekers and this is an excellent example for that. And of course, what we really would like to see is that these kind of great initiatives go alongside initiatives by the cultural sector so that these sessions, for example, that Tamara and Caroline are organizing, are not the only ones, but that are also offered by museums, and that theatres and even movie, theatres and sports activities are inclusive of the wider public that they can serve. And the basis on which this can happen has already been explained so beautifully by Tamara, I think we need each other and it has to be inclusive and it's really wonderful to see this initiative and it makes me sad that these initiatives are needed. So I really hope that this is something that could be working alongside so the cultural sector taking this up. And I want also to mention that it's not always because people don't want to be inclusive, but there's this misperception that it's troublesome, that it's complicated, that it's expensive, that there is no one to turn to. People don't really,

**Birgitta:** [00:27:44] people I mean the cultural sector in general, they don't really know where to get the information, they get as you know the UN CRPD Article 30, but the UN CRPD has been ratified in in in Europe, and countries have to start implementing legislation with this. And you know, there's the Disability Act and all very good plans also on the on culture in the European Union. But how to implement the legislation? The cultural sector now is faced with the obligation to be inclusive, but nobody tells them how to do that and we can tell them how to do that. We have the knowledge and the experience, and we are the professionals that can help the cultural sector in this case, the cultural sector to implement not only legislation, but to be more inclusive and widen their audiences, which is also beneficial for the cultural sector in itself. So we are happy to lend them a hand and of course, which is also what the UNCRPD says. And Tamara also mentioned this. It's so important to include us blind and partially sighted people from the very beginning of the projects, and we are professional. We are experts, we know what we are talking about and we can talk on behalf of a large group of blind and partially sighted people. And that's what we do in EBU.

**Birgitta:** [00:29:20] EBU is a European organisation representing over 30 million people with sight loss in wider Europe. So even countries outside Europe, Geographical Europe and in all these countries, there are national organizations of blind and partially sighted people, and they can speak on behalf of a larger group so they know the needs of both blind and partially sighted people, and are the experts that can help out whether it is a government to make rules on how to implement legislation, but also the individual parts of cultural sector, from museums to theatres to sports events to all kinds of cultural aspects. And that is where it starts. It starts with collaboration and as we always say, nothing about us without us include us, and together we can reach much more and we can learn from each other. Don't include us at the very end when you have already spent the money and think with the best intentions. People who don't have the experience and the knowledge you know try to think of ways to make their museum more accessible for a blind and partially sighted audience. And then at the very end, when they have done all that, then they find a couple of blind and partially sighted people that can test it. And then often times it's not good enough.

**Neven:** [00:30:57] What would you say is the main problem then Birgitta, I mean, is it the knowledge within the cultural sector or is it as they think, sometimes themselves? Is it about money or what? What would you say is the main challenge in why this is not happening, what we are talking about?

**Birgitta:** [00:31:16] It's an attitude and attitude comes from knowledge. So it's the attitude, it's the perceptions people have that come from lack of knowledge. So what we as organizations and as individuals, but especially organizations, we have to raise awareness. It's what Rafael Arias started on in his presentation. Raise awareness so that people change the perception they have, that when someone has a disability, in our case, a visual impairment, both Rafael and Caroline mentioned this then all of a sudden you're not seen as a professional anymore. No. So this perception, we have to change that, and that's by raising awareness. So once people are aware we can give them the information to understand what the implication of a visual impairment is. I can be a professional. We all can be professional. But in order to execute our job, we need certain circumstances and those circumstances and maybe aids as well. And as I mentioned earlier, you know, a personal assistant to help us with mobility or with finding information or whatever. So there are certain circumstances and aids that we need in order to be able to perform that. And I think once that is understood, then people are willing. You create the commitment to make that change. But then the other very important part of information and lack of information that we still find now is that they don't know how.

**Birgitta:** [00:32:59] So once we made them understand why something is important, then we can tell them and that’s they don't find us. They don't know where to find us, apparently, or they don't search for us because they don't know. So we need to explain and say that we can help them. They don't have to find and spend a lot of time and money in trying to find solutions. They have to get in touch with us and include us from the very beginning of a project to see if the project is actually something that is useful for us or not. We may even say it's discarded, but we need other solutions and we can help them. There's legislation we can help. We have the knowledge, experience and professionalism to to make this happen. And it's not that expensive and it's not that difficult and we are here to aid the cultural sector. So if the audience of this podcast amongst them are, you know, legislators and decision makers and people from the cultural sector get in touch with the with the European Blind Union on our website, it's [www.euroblind.org](http://www.euroblind.org) and there you find all the member organizations and the countries that where you can find the information and the support to be more inclusive.

**Neven:** [00:34:23] Thank you very, very much, all of you. I think it has been a most interesting podcast today with both looking at the challenges we have, but also seeing some very impressive and interesting solutions. So thank you very much for listening to their rights reporting podcast. This show is a part of a European Parvis project, and it's led by European Blind Union, the Swedish Association of Visually Impaired and the Eye Association of the Netherlands. The project is supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of a European Union. Now, did you get more curious about us and would like to know more? Well, when you can find some contact details in the show notes, thank you also to our sound master Emiel Cornelisse. See you in the next podcast! Bye Bye!

**Speaker1:** [00:35:31] This podcast was supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.