

Beyond the Visual

Multisensory modes of beholding art

Edited by
Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake

 **UCLPRESS**

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xv
<i>Foreword</i>	xxi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii

Introduction: a contribution to the emerging field of ‘blindness arts’ <i>Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake</i>	1
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Part I: Critical reflections on blindness arts

1 Modes of touch: modelling haptic engagement <i>Georgina Kleege</i>	13
2 Blindness gain and the arts: from blindness arts to critical blindness studies and back again <i>Hannah Thompson, Vanessa Warne and Marion Chottin</i>	21
3 Blindness as the creative liberation of curatorial practice <i>Fayen d’Evie</i>	49

Part II: Towards inclusivity

4 Extant: provoking, disrupting and redefining expectations of the blind and visually impaired presence in theatre <i>Maria Oshodi</i>	71
5 Architecture Beyond Sight: working with blind and partially sighted people to co-develop design methods beyond the visual <i>Jos Boys, Poppy Levison, Duncan Meerding, Zoe Partington and Mandy Redvers-Rowe</i>	95
6 Philosophical and pedagogical theories on the creative play of children with visual impairments <i>Simon Hayhoe</i>	109

Part III: Access as praxis

- 7 Moving towards touch: the ambulatory aesthetics of description 125
Amanda Cachia
- 8 Shaping collective access: community and interdependence in Carmen Papalia's praxis 139
Àger Pérez Casanovas
- 9 Cross-sensory translation of light in the pyrotechnic arts 159
Collin van Uchelen

Part IV: Multisensory environments

- 10 The art of getting lost 171
Simon Ungar
- 11 *Blue House*: the intangible space 193
Lydia Ya Chu Chang
- 12 *Circumstantes*: a site-specific performance installation and film 215
Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake

Part V: Touch, sound, smell, taste

- 13 Holding Eva Hesse [treatment] 239
Fayen d'Evie
- 14 Sound as vibration: a method of making and a mode of reception in contemporary arts practice 249
Aaron McPeake
- 15 To be sniffed at: the role of smell in contemporary art 275
Clare O'Dowd
- 16 The mouth in between the eyes: food art and material, social, sensorial relations 289
Rain Wu

Part VI: Words, translations, descriptions

- 17 Extracts from *Black Cane Diary* 307
Joseph Rizzo Naudi

18	A film you can feel: sensory deception, translation and confluence <i>Jo Bannon</i>	321
19	Reimagining inclusive museum audio description: what is it, who creates it, and who is it for? <i>Rachel Hutchinson and Alison Eardley</i>	333
20	Describing anarchy <i>Matthew Cock and Hannah Thompson</i>	349
Part VII: Towards a blind aesthetics		
21	Blind aesthetics: complexity, contingency and conflict <i>David Johnson</i>	357
22	Gravity: the great big weight of the (visual) world <i>David Mollin and Salomé Voegelin</i>	373
23	'Touch-space', 'blindness gain' and the ontology of sculpture <i>Ken Wilder</i>	391
	<i>Index</i>	415

List of figures

4.1	Amelia Cavallo as Miss Stagmus in <i>Sheer</i> (2012).	82
4.2	Sarah Caltieri as Squint in <i>Sheer</i> (2012).	84
4.3	Heather Gilmore as Bifuckular in <i>Sheer</i> (2012).	85
4.4	Tim Gebbles as Cataracto in <i>Sheer</i> (2012).	85
5.1	A blind participant at one of the Architecture Beyond Sight workshops experimenting with Lego for 3D modelling.	97
5.2	Blind creative Mandy Redvers-Rowe (left) and sighted architect Shade Abdul (right) discuss an exploratory design project for a shared working space using performance and audio description. Architecture Beyond Sight development workshop.	97
5.3	Blind architect Carlos Pereira (foreground centre) and Professor Alan Penn (foreground right) talk and share objects. Architecture Beyond Sight development workshop.	99
5.4	A student's exploratory model of an interior design with external ramp, constructed from drinking straws and pipe cleaners. Architecture Beyond Sight development workshop.	99
5.5	Architecture Beyond Sight exploratory drawing exercise, led by partially sighted artist Rachel Gadsden.	100
5.6	Blind architect and guest studio tutor Chris Downey talking to one of the course participants. Architecture Beyond Sight study week.	101
5.7	Course participants working on their studio projects, supported by Chris Downey (background centre) and Mandy Redvers-Rowe (standing, far right). Architecture Beyond Sight study week.	101
5.8	Blind furniture designer and guest tutor Duncan Meerding (left), working with a student in the B-made workshop. Architecture Beyond Sight study week.	102
5.9	Participant Poppy Levison's end-of-course display. Architecture Beyond Sight study week.	103
5.10	Student Mohammad Razlan developing his design, incorporating a prototype moving element – a kind of gate. Architecture Beyond Sight study week.	105

5.11	Student Althea Smith developing a textile design for a kite. Architecture Beyond Sight study week.	105
8.1	Carmen Papalia with a model of the architectural design of <i>Provisional Structures 1</i> (2021).	149
8.2	Carmen Papalia, <i>Provisional Structures 1</i> (2021). Model of the structure.	149
8.3	Carmen Papalia, <i>Provisional Structures 2</i> (2022–3). The entrance.	152
8.4	Carmen Papalia, <i>Provisional Structures 2</i> (2022–3). Inside the domed tent.	153
9.1	Collin van Uchelen, <i>Project Fire Flower</i> (2021). Tactile panels.	162
9.2	Collin van Uchelen, <i>Project Fire Flower</i> (2021). Designer Collin van Uchelen touches the <i>Chrysanthemum</i> tactile panel.	163
9.3	Collin van Uchelen, <i>Project Fire Flower</i> (2021). Artist Carmen Papalia touches the <i>Dahlia</i> tactile panel.	164
9.4	Collin van Uchelen, <i>Project Fire Flower</i> (2021). Pyrotechnical tableau, with steel and polyethylene mortar racks and silk plants.	165
10.1	Plan of the labyrinth at Knossos taken from a silver coin, c. 400 BCE.	176
10.2	Plan of the labyrinth laid into the floor of Chartres Cathedral.	176
10.3	Plan of the multicursal maze at Hampton Court Palace.	177
10.4	Ralph Selby, <i>Labyrinth</i> (1971). 3D model.	183
10.5	Ralph Selby, <i>Labyrinth</i> (1971). Ralph Selby in the magical, dazzling mirror maze.	184
10.6	Ralph Selby, <i>Labyrinth</i> (1971). The baffling visual environment.	184
10.7	Ralph Selby, <i>Labyrinth</i> (1971). Stroud Cornock using a ‘survival kit’ to negotiate the dark upper floor.	185
10.8	Mike Nelson, <i>The Coral Reef</i> (2000). Installation views, Matt’s Gallery, London, 2000.	187
11.1	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House</i> (2022). Various viewpoints: (a) exterior view; (b) the hidden entrance; (c) interior view; (d) skylights in the roof.	195
11.2	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). <i>Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters</i> , part one, ‘Hundun: Entering the Dream’: (a) dancer Chen Chen	

	begins her performance under a sheet; (b) Chen Chen moves with the music; (c) Chen Chen engages audience members.	201
11.3	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). <i>Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters</i> , part two, 'Nü Ba: Dark Night': (a) Chen Chen performing the role of Nü Ba; (b) audience members wearing theatrical masks interact within a zone drawn by sand; (c) the whole audience participate in the performance.	202
11.4	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). <i>Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters</i> , part three, 'Di Jiang: Celebration': (a) Di Jiang, the faceless god of song and dance; (b) the audience sing and dance.	204
11.5	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang discuss <i>Blue House</i> with Seng-Hong, utilising a 1:25 model of <i>Blue House</i> prior to its construction.	205
11.6	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). Participants explore <i>Blue House</i> without sight.	207
11.7	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). Participants' sketches of an imagined <i>Blue House</i> by Song Jia Jen (left) and Chen Jun Han (right).	208
11.8	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). Contact improvisation before overnight sleeping in <i>Blue House</i> .	209
11.9	Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, <i>Blue House Study</i> (2022). Participants sleeping in <i>Blue House</i> .	211
12.1	The vaulted roof structure, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6.	216
12.2	The baptismal font and trough, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6.	218
12.3	Uncut bricks, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6.	219
12.4	The altar, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6.	219
12.5	Ken Wilder, <i>Skylights</i> (2016). Exterior view of girls' and boys' mortuaries, Coram Campus, London.	222
12.6	Ken Wilder, <i>Skylights</i> (2016). Reflection of room aperture in girls' mortuary, Coram Campus, London.	223
12.7	Ken Wilder, <i>Skylights</i> (2016). Light effects in boys' mortuary, Coram Campus, London.	224
12.8	Ken Wilder, detail of the score for <i>Circumstantes</i> (2017).	228–9
12.9	Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake, <i>Circumstantes</i> (2017). Performance installation.	230

12.10	Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake, <i>Circumstantes</i> (2017). Film stills: (a) the baptismal font; (b) the altar; (c) the church interior; (d) view from the baptismal trough; (e) dappled sunlight; (f) the west façade; (g) Sankt Petri's bells.	232–3
13.1	Georgina Kleege be-holds Eva Hesse's <i>Sans II</i> (1968) during Fayen d'Evie's sensorial research at SFMOMA, 2017.	239
14.1	Aaron McPeake, <i>Once I Saw it All</i> (2022).	251
14.2	Marcus Vergette, <i>Trinity Buoy Wharf Bell</i> (2010). Installation view, Trinity Buoy Wharf, London.	259
14.3	Lina Lapelytė, <i>Copper Lick</i> (2024). Public Art München.	260
14.4	David Escalona and Álvaro Escalona, <i>Nada 1</i> (2023). Installation view, Palacio de la Madraza.	261
14.5	Aaron McPeake, <i>Spun Lead Crystal Plate</i> (1997).	263
14.6	<i>A kyī zee</i> – a gift from Derek Lawrenson to the author.	263
14.7	Certificate of provenance, Whitechapel Bell Foundry.	264
14.8	Pouring bell bronze into an open mould made by Aaron McPeake, 2009.	265
14.9	Aaron McPeake, <i>Toll</i> (2013). Installation view, Camden Art Centre, London.	266
14.10	Aaron McPeake, <i>The Sound of their Deaths in Australia</i> (2015). Installation view, Henry Moore Plinth, Millbank, London.	267
14.11	Aaron McPeake, <i>Sensing Naples and Vesuvius</i> (2023). Installation view, Compton Verney, Warwickshire.	269
14.12	Aaron McPeake, <i>Singing Bowls and Iceland Paintings</i> (2012). Installation view, Chelsea College of Arts, London.	270
16.1	Rain Wu, Shikai Tseng, chef Chung-Ho Tsai, <i>Eataipei</i> (2015). A five-course food performance.	292
16.2	<i>Eataipei</i> menu, designed by Kellenberger-White, with illustrations by Rain Wu.	293
16.3	<i>Eataipei</i> menu.	294
16.4	Rain Wu, Shikai Tseng, chef Chung-Ho Tsai, <i>Eataipei</i> (2015). The five dishes: (a) 'Mixture of the Past'; (b) 'The Land Surrounded by the Mountains and the Sea'; (c) 'Taipeian'; (d) 'Sing'; (e) 'Towards a Sweet Future'.	295–6
16.5	Rain Wu, <i>The Tea Set</i> (2016).	298
16.6	Rain Wu, <i>The Tea Set</i> (2016). Objects within the set: (a) tea caddy; (b) tea scoop; (c) sugar stand; (d) teacups; (e) milk jug.	300–1

16.7	Rain Wu, <i>Bread</i> (2018–). Two views: (a) installation view; (b) detail.	302
21.1	David Johnson, <i>Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles</i> .	358
21.2	David Johnson, <i>Sanctuary Café</i> (2021). Sistah Stella Headley is seated next to the artist.	369
22.1	One of a series of tweets produced by the artists as part of the sound work <i>During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)</i> (2015). Kunstraum Riehen, Switzerland.	373
23.1	Henry Moore, <i>Oval with Points</i> (1968–70). Installed at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2007.	397
23.2	Barbara Hepworth, <i>Pendour</i> (1947). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.	399
23.3	Anthony Caro, <i>Prairie</i> (1967).	399
23.4	Ken Wilder, <i>Monochrome Passage</i> (2008). Various viewpoints: (a) installation view, with the blind artist Aaron McPeake interacting with the work; (b) left-hand space; (c) right-hand space; (d) the stepped passage; (e) the blind artist Aaron McPeake places his head within the work.	410

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Poppy Levison is a designer, researcher and disability activist working across the creative industries, including as an Architectural Assistant at London architect firm DSDHA and most recently as a Master's student at the Royal College of Art, London. As a blind woman, Poppy has valuable expertise in the politics of inclusive design and accessibility, including a concern with architecture's tendency to fixate on the visual rather than the experiential, and in improving the accessibility of architecture education. She has been a tutor on the Architecture Beyond Sight foundation programme, and works with the DisOrdinary Architecture Project to develop this area of work.

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Mandy Redvers-Rowe is a blind theatre director, actor and writer who also works as an accessibility consultant. She has had plays broadcast on TV and radio, and has made a number of videos for Northern Broadsides that create 'word-pictures' – expressing a poetic engagement with the world that evokes beauty, centred not on the visual but on the qualities of tactile surfaces, sounds, smells and emotion. Mandy has co-developed course content for Architecture Beyond Sight and has been a study week tutor.

Joseph Rizzo Naudi is a writer who has been supported by Arts Council England, Spread the Word's London Writers Award programme and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. He is currently researching fiction, artwork description and the creative potential of blindness as part of a practice-based PhD project at Royal Holloway, University of London.

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Foreword

Beyond the Visual: Multisensory modes of beholding art seeks to redefine our understanding of art and exhibitions through the lens of blindness. By centring the voices of blind and visually impaired artists, scholars and advocates, and those working in the field of disability studies, these essays capture the profound ways in which blindness informs creativity, perception and engagement with art.

This publication brings together a breadth of perspectives that enriched the *Beyond the Visual* symposium that was hosted at Wellcome Collection in London in 2022. The symposium coincided with an exhibition called *In Plain Sight* that explored the different ways we see and are seen, and the tools that shape how we perceive the world. It invited visitors to consider the subjectivities of vision and blindness, and to question the central place sight holds in society.

During the process of researching for the exhibition, Aaron McPeake and Ken Wilder invited me to take part in the *Beyond the Visual* network and a workshop series. As a participant I was struck, as I am now reading this publication, by the range of voices that have been brought together: from academics and artists writing about what blindness brings to art, to psychologists and neuroscientists researching non-visual orientation, and designers enriching the museum experience through audio description and tactile design. A central thread runs through all these, which asks: what happens when we open ourselves up to seeing in different ways?

The workshops were exciting spaces to be with others from different disciplines, all working at the intersection of this question, but at times it was difficult to find the common ground. I am deeply grateful to have been part of this process – one that ultimately encouraged all the participants to open up and go beyond their individual edges and find the in-betweens.

Working as a Senior Curator at Wellcome Collection, an institution with a medical collection at its centre, I have increasingly sought to embed a social model of disability into our curatorial practice, and to present different forms of learnt and lived expertise side by side with equity. However, our work has largely focused on representation and the development of different accessible interpretation tools. Many of the

contributors here have helped me to think deeply and rethink what it means to experience an exhibition – and how to shape three-dimensional stories in ways that communicate better to all the senses.

Beyond the Visual seeks to go beyond questions of access into ideas about what blindness brings to art, and the encounter with art for everyone; *for all beholders*. It challenges readers to reconsider their perceptions of what it is to see, and invites us all to embrace a more sensory understanding of creativity – one that better honours the multitude of ways in which we experience and interpret the world around us.

Laurie Britton Newell
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Introduction: a contribution to the emerging field of 'blindness arts'

Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake

This multidisciplinary volume seeks to broaden the discussion of multi-sensory modes of beholding contemporary art, with a particular emphasis on modes that transcend a dependency upon sight. It is both informed by, and in turn has informed, a parallel research project, with two iterations, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which has built up an impressive network of researchers and research material engaged with what has come to be called 'blindness arts'.¹

The book, and the two projects that have enriched it, emerge from a frustration. On the one hand, new intermedial forms of contemporary art, such as installation, performance and sound art, have opened up new modes of engagement for blind and partially blind audiences: modes of engagement that might also be said to oblige us to rethink more traditional three-dimensional media such as sculpture. On the other hand, the art establishment still seems to be stuck in a way of thinking about the plastic arts that continues to preserve normative notions of the 'visual' arts. Allied to this refusal to adequately acknowledge art where the primary engagement is through senses beyond the visual, discussions surrounding 'access' concentrate on compliance rather than fully embracing its creative potential. And even when aspects such as touch provision are offered by museums and galleries, the role of touch is still too often considered as 'compensatory' rather than a form of knowledge in its own right. And yet, as Georgina Kleege, the foremost theorist of blindness arts and a contributor to this volume, writes: 'True inclusion of previously marginalised groups requires abandoning mere accommodation of difference; it means fostering collaboration with different kinds of knowledge and expertise.'² In seeking to foster such a collaboration, many chapters in this book aim to shift the discussion

on access and inclusivity reconceiving access as integral to the creative process while arguing that this has the potential to enrich the experience of art for *all* beholders, moving beyond an often unexamined reliance on vision.

Aspects of the above have been addressed in the existing literature. Rod Michalko's 1998 *The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness*, for instance, draws upon his own experience of being a blind person to reject the characterisation of blindness as a 'loss', with assumptions that people who are blind must adapt to a world dominated by sightedness; rather, Michalko offers blindness (or, more accurately, many 'blindnesses') as a legitimate way of being in the world.³ Kleege's seminal 2017 book *More than Meets the Eye: What blindness brings to art*, referenced multiple times in this volume, applies her own notion of 'gaining' blindness to the practice of art. In so doing, she reverses the one-way trajectory of blind beholders passively receiving touch provision, and instead asserts 'the value of a two-directional flow of knowledge between, on the one hand, blind people and, on the other, museums and galleries and their nonblind administrators and users'.⁴ Asking explicitly what blindness brings to art, Kleege opens up new kinds of knowledge that not only increase accessibility, but challenge established norms about how we engage with art. In *Art, Museums and Touch* (2010), Fiona Candlin likewise confronts approaches to access for blind and partially blind people that have decontextualised sight loss, such that touch provision is conceived within a dominant visual paradigm. Hannah Thompson and Vanessa Warne's 'Blindness arts: An introduction', in a 2018 special edition of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, develops the notion of 'blindness gain', implicit in Kleege's account, as a means to 'explore the creative potential of blindness and offer new perspectives on the relationship between blindness, creativity, performance and access'.⁵ It is a theme the authors develop further in this volume, with Marion Chottin added to the authorial team. Amanda Cachia's edited volume *Curating Access: Disability art activism and creative accommodation* includes chapters from prominent blind artists addressing access as praxis, including Fayen d'Evie, Jennifer Justice and Carmen Papalia.⁶

So, what does this book add to the existing discussion? Well, it brings together important contributions from some of those already mentioned, such as Kleege, Thompson, Cachia and d'Evie. But it goes further. What this volume attempts to do, which hasn't been done before, is to gather the disparate multidisciplinary approaches the book addresses into a single coherent volume. In so doing, *Beyond the Visual: Multisensory modes of beholding art* brings together an impressive range of

contributions from: leading international authors on blindness/disability arts and the creative potential of audio description; blind and partially blind artists embedding access within their practice; advocates for inclusive education; research psychologists and educationists addressing blindness and museum access; and theorists and practitioners of installation, performance and sound art. Just over half of the contributors to this volume are blind or partially blind. Whilst drawing upon internationally recognised writers and artists in the field of 'blindness' and 'disability arts', the volume also offers opportunities for new voices to emerge from early career researchers drawn from a wide range of disciplines, lending the volume a contemporary currency.

The book thus aims to be a founding text in the emerging field of blindness arts, such that it will constitute essential reading within the intersecting fields of critical disability studies, museology, curating and arts practice. It proposes that a consideration of how blind and partially blind people behold art should make us question what kind of entities artworks are and expand the kinds of knowledges involved in art appreciation. Moreover, we believe that the considerations, perspectives and practices gathered here can – and should – inform the wider arts sector, extending beyond blindness or disability arts. The book is therefore aimed not only at 'specialist' audiences but also at a wider public, including both blind and nonblind readers. This aim has been greatly facilitated by UCL Press, the UK's first fully Open Access university press, which makes digital books available to read and download free of charge, integrating alternative text descriptions for all images. This provision of maximum accessibility was a crucial aspect of our first approaching UCL Press as a potential publisher. Associated costs have been met by an AHRC block grant awarded to the University of the Arts London for publications emerging from AHRC-funded projects, and we are extremely grateful for this financial support.

The AHRC-funded *Beyond the Visual* projects

Much of the material in this volume has been informed by two iterations of the AHRC-funded project *Beyond the Visual*: a Network Award, *Beyond the Visual: Non-sighted modes of beholding art*, and the inaugural AHRC Exhibition Fund, *Beyond the Visual: Blindness and expanded sculpture*. As Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator, Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake have consistently foregrounded the role of practice in bringing about changes in attitude, with the project culminating in a major

exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute (HMI) in Leeds (November 2025 to March 2026), which this book accompanies. The exhibition will foreground blind and partially blind artists, as well as nonblind artists making multisensory sculpture. Every work in the exhibition will be designed to be engaged with through senses other than just the visual. Some of the contributors to this volume will also be included in that exhibition, but the book is not a catalogue; rather it is an accompanying volume that deepens the discussion around blindness arts, generating a discursiveness between the theoretical and the practical. The exhibition is curated by HMI research curator Clare O’Dowd in collaboration with the two volume editors.

We are proud to say that the project has already impacted curatorial policies at the HMI and the Henry Moore Foundation, prompting additional training and changes to curatorial procedures. This is consistent with the volume’s goals of challenging and transforming restrictive curatorial practices that all too often exclude blind and partially blind people, and offering exemplars of multisensory practices, and the design and curation of inclusive exhibitions and associated gallery spaces. The earlier iteration of *Beyond the Visual*, which culminated in a symposium at Wellcome Collection, fostered an extremely positive dialogue with Wellcome Collection around accessibility for blind and partially blind audiences, the timing of the *Beyond the Visual* symposium coinciding with the opening of Wellcome Collection’s critically acclaimed exhibition *In Plain Sight*, curated by Laurie Britton Newell (who participated in the *Beyond the Visual* network) and Ligaya Salazar. *In Plain Sight* included work by a number of artists featured in this volume: Jo Bannon, Fayen d’Eve, Georgina Kleege, Aaron McPeake and Carmen Papalia.

Theoretical premises and provocations

The book proposes that, unlike traditional notions of touch provision (couched in educational terms), the engagement afforded to someone who is blind or partially blind should be recognised as being every bit as complex and challenging as the engagement afforded to the nonblind beholder; this acknowledges that contemporary art practice often seeks to problematise or disorientate the beholder in order to challenge preconceptions. How might artworks appreciated primarily through non-visual means also disorientate the beholder? Of course, many blind beholders have some vision; the issue is not to denigrate visual engagement, but

rather to challenge ocularcentric approaches that disregard other senses while negating language and the creative role of audio description. Here, 'access' is recast not as an institutional obligation or an 'accommodation' of needs, but as a creative process (or praxis) integrated into the way we engage with multisensory art – a theme recently developed by contributor Amanda Cachia in her aforementioned edited volume *Curating Access*.⁷ The contention is that blind and partially blind artists are at the forefront of rethinking this relation between artwork and beholder, in a way which forces us to readdress fundamental questions about assumptions underlying conventional ways of framing art appreciation.

As inferred earlier, the volume is also based on the premise that a shift in the aesthetic engagement afforded by hybrid forms of contemporary art has the potential to open up new sensory and cognitive engagements for blind and partially blind people. Touch, smell, temperature and, occasionally, even taste have become contributory factors in installation art, while sound arts have expanded the spatial reception of the auditory. At the same time, the continuing relevance of conceptual, performance and participatory aspects of art practice has enriched the role of language, the bodily and the social/political in such a way as to open up new opportunities for art to engage audiences with low vision. Such an approach challenges default notions of touch tours as the only way blind people engage with contemporary art. Some blind and partially blind artists have confronted traditional notions of 'objective' audio description by integrating levels of description into the creative process itself; others have adopted performance as a way to highlight issues of access; yet others have invited blind and nonblind audiences to participate in sensorial wayfinding. This has aesthetic and political implications, even raising ontological questions as to 'what kind of entity' an artwork is.

One aspect of current practice that challenges sight-dependent 'visual' art is a move away from the modernist notion of the 'autonomous' work of art towards what might be termed the situational. Situated art offers the potential to draw multisensory aspects of the situated encounter into a work's meaning in a way that is sensitive to the diverse perceptual capacities that beholders bring to the work. As various contributions to the volume make clear, this has spatial and temporal consequences. Engaging artworks through touch, for instance, requires space around the work and for us to slow down and stay longer with a piece of art. This not only makes art more 'inclusive' for an audience often excluded by curatorial conventions (driven by conservation imperatives) but affords what Hannah Thompson has termed 'blindness gain': an enhancement

of non-visual perceptual and ideational capacities with benefits for all audiences.⁸ As such, the volume aims to develop a deeper understanding of the spatial and curatorial possibilities of such forms of engagement, while drawing upon exemplars from beyond the world of contemporary art (such as architecture, literature and the performing arts).

A note on language

There are many ways of referring to persons registered blind but with some usable sight: people who are partially blind, partially sighted, visually impaired, or have low vision. Meanwhile, some artists who are blind, such as Carmen Papalia, self-describe as non-visual learners. As editors, rather than try to impose consistent terms throughout the volume, we reflect a range of views on these matters. Some authors avoid using 'see' to refer to a book or article, preferring 'consult'; others are happy to use 'see' in the sense of 'attend to'. The term 'blind' is uncapitalised, whereas 'Deaf' has been capitalised consistent with the distinction commonly drawn between those that culturally identify with Deaf culture and the medical condition.

Structuring the volume

The volume is divided into seven parts based on distinct themes, though inevitably these overlap. Consistent with a multidisciplinary approach that transcends divides between theory and practice, some of the chapters are more academic and objective in tone, with extensive endnotes and references, while others are more informal and personal (written from the perspective of the author). Other chapters foreground practice. Some chapters are accompanied by audio-described images, and some authors have made a deliberate decision not to include images. Despite organising the chapters into loose themes, they can be read in any order. Each of the following themes, however, offers different insights into the many facets of blindness arts.

I: Critical reflections on blindness arts

The opening part addresses key questions in relation to the creative potential of blindness arts. Three chapters by leading international theorists and practitioners of blindness arts set a context for the remainder

of the book. Georgina Kleege, in seeking to model haptic engagement, sets out an overview of research into different modes of touch and, while drawing upon many years of advocacy for blind beholders, an argument for the benefits of touch for everyone (Chapter 1). Hannah Thompson, Vanessa Warne and Marion Chottin develop a theory of blindness gain first proposed by Thompson, mapping a dialogue between blindness arts and critical blindness studies (Chapter 2). Fayen d'Evie offers a personal take on the creative liberation of curatorial practice, reclaiming the notion of 'blundering' in the making and experiencing of exhibitions (Chapter 3).

II: Towards inclusivity

Part II presents two exemplary projects that have expanded the way we think about inclusivity in relation to blindness and the arts: through performance, in an account of a theatre production by Maria Oshodi, Founding Director of the Extant Theatre Company, the UK's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired artists and theatre practitioners (Chapter 4); and through architecture, in an account of the co-designed working methods of Architecture Beyond Sight, a project initiated by DisOrdinary Architecture and written by those contributing to the project, co-ordinated by Jos Boys, along with Poppy Levison, Duncan Meerding, Zoe Partington and Mandy Redvers-Rowe (Chapter 5). Part II also includes a reflection on theories of blind and visually impaired children's creative play by Simon Hayhoe, who has, in many monographs, chronicled different aspects of sensory impairment and visual culture (Chapter 6).

III: Access as praxis

Building upon Amanda Cachia's volume *Curating Access*, which shifts 'access' from accommodation to creative practice, Part III offers a theoretical reframing of access as praxis, presenting exemplars of such practices by leading international blind and partially blind artists. Cachia's own chapter reflects on a series of exhibitions over the course of a decade that document her own curatorial foray into creative access (Chapter 7). Àger Pérez Casanovas' chapter discusses the work of Canadian non-visual artist Carmen Papalia and presents how Papalia's interest in the Disability Justice principle of collective access has become the touchstone of his practice (Chapter 8). The blind pyrotechnics designer Collin van Uchelen translates the light of pyrotechnical arts into

non-visual forms, using verbal description, tactile representation, and a combination of words, sound and moving touch (Chapter 9).

IV: Multisensory environments

Part IV addresses installations and environments that engage sensory engagements beyond the visual, examining how these are unified as an experience which includes an awareness of the beholder's position in space. It comprises: cognitive psychologist Simon Ungar's chapter on the art of getting lost within installations, which uses examples of disorienting immersive installation art such as Mike Nelson's *Coral Reef* (Chapter 10); Taiwanese artist/architect Lydia Ya Chu Chang's account of *Blue House*, a temporary architectural structure released from its functional obligations as an interactive, immersive space (Chapter 11); and Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake's collaborative work *Circumstantes*, a site-specific performance installation and film within Sigurd Lewerentz's Sankt Petri in Sweden – a meditation on the interrelationship between light and darkness, seeing and not seeing (Chapter 12).

V: Touch, sound, smell, taste

Each chapter in Part V focuses on artworks engaging a different non-visual sense. The aim is not to artificially separate out the senses (that is, replicating ocularcentric approaches), but rather to present exemplars of works highlighting the role of touch, sound (and vibration), smell and taste. Reprinted from its first publication in *un Magazine*, Fayen d'Evie offers an audio essay that recounts an opportunity to touch *Sans II* (1968), a sculptural work by Eva Hesse in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Chapter 13). Using examples drawn from his own practice utilising sound sculpture in bell bronze, Aaron McPeake examines how a rigorous consideration of sound as vibration can inform a 'visual' arts practice for both the maker and the beholder (Chapter 14). The research curator Clare O'Dowd investigates the ways in which smell emerges – accidentally or by design – as a key component in contemporary installation art (Chapter 15). The architect/artist Rain Wu discusses gallery works as a food artist using taste, drawing upon her own relational practice engaging storytelling through food (Chapter 16).

VI: Words, translations, descriptions

Part VI examines the use of words as practice. The section will demonstrate the value of words as integral to the encounter we have with art – as part of the practice itself. Joseph Rizzo Naudi's *Black Cane Diary* is a collection of short fiction and narrative non-fiction texts that can be read privately, but take on a particular resonance when performed, conjuring a vivid multisensory experience that allows the listener to engage with a particular aspect of the blind life experience (Chapter 17). Jo Bannon discusses her audio-described film *Passing*, a hybrid between artist moving image and documentary (Chapter 18). Rachel Hutchinson and Alison Eardley reimagine inclusive museum audio description, asking what it is, who creates it and who it is for (Chapter 19). Matthew Cock and Hannah Thompson's chapter takes the form of a written audio description exploring two paintings by the Danish-French artist Camille Pissarro, conceived as a creative enterprise in its own right (Chapter 20).

VII: Towards a blind aesthetics

The final section of the book presents distinct notions of what we are referring to as 'blind aesthetics', a term coined by David Johnson. Johnson presents the proposition that the blind life experience affords a blind person distinctive access to key aspects of the human condition (Chapter 21). David Mollin and Salomé Voegelin discuss the relationship between what is not there in an artwork and the habitual or wilful 'blindness' inherent in the production of knowledge (Chapter 22). Ken Wilder rethinks Herbert Read's notion of 'touch-space' through the remit of blindness gain, arguing that blindness forces us to rethink entrenched aspects of the ontology of sculpture (Chapter 23).

Notes

- 1 Thompson and Warne 2018.
- 2 Kleege 2022.
- 3 Michalko 1998.
- 4 Kleege 2017.
- 5 Thompson and Warne 2018.
- 6 Cachia 2022.
- 7 Cachia 2022.
- 8 Thompson and Warne 2018.

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Part I

**Critical reflections
on blindness arts**

1

Modes of touch: modelling haptic engagement

Georgina Kleege

In this chapter, I will critique typical museum touch tours and offer an alternative protocol in describing the *Let's Stay in Touch* project, a collaboration involving Fayen d'Evie, Carmen Papalia, Whitney Mashburn, Katie West and myself, which was on display at the *In Plain Sight* exhibit at Wellcome Collection, London, in 2022–3.

Although the topic I am most identified with is blindness, I think of my work as primarily preoccupied with sightedness. For several decades now, I have studied and written about the behaviours and customs of sighted people from the perspective of someone with non-normative vision. I have lived around sighted people all my life; most of my family members were and are sighted people – or to use the more sensitive term, people living with visual dependence. In my work on museum access I regularly interact with people whose visual dependence is quite severe.

My effort to understand and help visually dependent people has shaped my modes of presentation. For example, in public lectures I regularly use PowerPoint even though it is not accessible to myself and other blind people. I think of it as assistive technology for my visually dependent friends, students and colleagues. When I am speaking to an audience made up entirely of people who are blind and visually impaired, I do not bother with PowerPoint. Generally speaking, blind and visually impaired people have developed good oral comprehension skills, and so can follow what I'm saying with no need for such visual aids. One thing I know about sighted people is that they need always to be looking at something. In a lecture hall, if all they have to look at is the speaker, they rapidly lose focus, and cannot retain words spoken. Hence PowerPoint. Hence smart phones and other portable devices with screens where they can quell the anxiety they often feel when deprived of images for more

than a minute or two, and so feel comforted by the lights and colours of visual displays.

I recognise that the way I produce a PowerPoint presentation is somewhat atypical. I google images for a name, word or phrase. I then ask a sighted person to describe the images that show up. When my sighted assistant expresses some qualms about an image, saying, 'I don't know, Georgina. That one is a little ...', that's the one I want, because I anticipate that the sighted audience will appreciate the opportunity to puzzle out what the image is doing there. For example, recently I was looking for images to accompany something I was saying about cognitive science. I came across numerous images representing a human head with a stylised brain inside it. There was a recurring trope where the brain featured cogs and gears, making a metaphor between brains and old-fashioned clockworks. I would have expected a linkage to contemporary computer technology, silicon chips and so forth, but I gather these objects might not be as readily recognisable. I leave aside the fact that brains are wet and squishy while the objects depicted as analogous are hard and dry. And I store this information away as yet more evidence of the inscrutability of visually dependent thinking.

Lately, in my advocacy for blind access in museums, live theatre, film and video, I have begun to advocate that services such as audio description and touch tours – originally designed for blind and visually impaired people – have the potential to benefit everyone, including the visually dependent community. It saddens me to acknowledge that when these accommodations are understood to aid a single minority group, the results are likely to be inadequate. Audio description of film and theatre has existed for at least 40 years, and touch access in museums has been around much longer, and while recent activism from blind consumers has prompted some innovations, on average these services remain relatively unchanged.

For these reasons, I have shifted my rhetoric in the hopes of persuading institutions and producers that services previously understood as aiding blind people in fact offer new modes to experience art that even the visually dependent can appreciate.

There is evidence that the visually dependent have already made this move on their own. For example, now that audio description is available on popular streaming platforms such as Netflix, visually dependent people are using it. Sometimes it's because they want to experience films and TV shows eyes-free while doing something else, such as driving. Sometimes it's because they appreciate the way the descriptive track directs their attention to details they might otherwise miss.

When I meet sighted people who use audio description, I encourage them to send feedback to the producers. I do this even though I know that the producers, if they respond at all, will say something to the effect of, 'The audio description is there for blind people. WE don't care what sighted people think.' But it is my hope that if enough people submit comments, the word will eventually trickle up to media producers. When filmmakers actually review the audio description of their work, they are often perturbed. In the past this may have led them to refrain from sending their work to the audio description services, thinking that they can ignore the interests and rights of such a small percentage of the viewing public. If they recognise that the audience for audio description is growing and includes both the blind and non-blind, they might take charge of the production themselves. It might even prompt them to think about how dialogue and sound design can be used to convey visual details, allowing the audio description to provide different information. For example, if a character is scripted to say, 'What are you smiling about?' it will be unnecessary for the describer to mention the other character's expression, leaving room to describe something else. If the sound design conveys the setting – a dance club versus a bowling alley – the audio describer can focus on some other visual detail. As in architectural and product design, when producers have access features in mind from the outset, rather than thinking about them only in post-production, it is likely to work better.

While I encourage sighted people to advocate for themselves to producers of audio description, they may need more help when it comes to touch opportunities in museums. When sighted people witness a touch tour for blind people, or hear us describe the experience of touching art, they express such envy and longing to enjoy the same privilege that it is impossible not to be stirred to help. Opening up these opportunities to include the non-blind alongside the blind will require alterations in the standard practices. Touch tours for the blind, as they have existed at least since the nineteenth century, have their shortcomings. For one thing, they are usually designed and led by sighted people, who may have the same tactile acuity as blind people, but only a limited and often naive understanding about the meanings that can be derived from touch. Sighted people too often make a simple analogy between the two eyes of sighted people and the two hands of the blind. In their naiveté, they assume that merely laying a finger on an object will somehow produce an image of the object in the blind person's mind's eye. In other words, touch is understood as a sorry substitute for sight. For visually dependent people touching art would therefore be at best redundant, providing

no more information than what they have already derived from sight. This misguided approach means that many blind beholders feel rushed and unsatisfied. And sighted beholders – who are even more victimised by a lifetime of hands-off policies – would be even less likely to derive anything from these tours. In other words, both blind and non-blind people who want to get their hands on art may not know how they're supposed to do it, and what they might expect to get out of it.

For this reason, over the past decade I have collaborated with Australia-based visually impaired artist Fayen d'Evie in a number of projects intended to theorise and systematise tactile and haptic aesthetics. Our most recent collaboration was on display at the *In Plain Sight* exhibit at Wellcome Collection, curated by Laurie Britton Newell and Ligaya Salazar in 2022–3. The exhibition as a whole offered multiple opportunities for visitors to handle objects and artworks. Our contribution afforded a sequenced and sustained interaction meant to contribute to the piece's meaning.

The piece consisted of a small cork-lined room in a corner of one of the galleries. In the centre of the room was a custom-built cabinet, designed to resemble display cabinetry from an earlier period in museum history. The top had an appealing subtle texture and the apron and legs were carved and finished to suggest fine furniture. In the front of the cabinet there were three drawers. Inside there were acrylic cases that could be opened with a key. Inside the cases were three sculptural objects, each wrapped in light cloth. One was an oblong-shaped piece of honed marble. The other two were bronze works: a rectangular piece with braille text on one side, and a heavier, irregularly shaped form, created by casting the space between Fayen's and my clasped hands, which we called a fossilised handshake. Together, the three pieces challenge traditional museum conventions of authorship, handling and care. The selection of pieces and fabric cloths are credited to the Museum Incognita, a collaborative project by Fayen and Yindjibarndi artist Katie West. Two of the cloths were embroidered by Fayen's grandmother, and steeped in the materiality of the place where Fayen lives. Following an instructional score from Katie, Fayen sunk the fabrics for several months in the muddy waters near a dam where she lives on unceded land of the Dja Dja Wurrung, and then dyed them with botanicals gathered from around the dam. While the mode of selection and display is credited to the Museum Incognita, the sculptural objects acknowledge other authors, including the anonymous Jurassic creatures whose bodies formed the marble oblong, and artist Sophie Takách who cast the bronze handshake.

Visitors were allowed to remove the objects from the drawers, unwrap the cloths, and take the time to handle and examine them haptically. To aid in this exploration, Fayen, Katie and I wrote and recorded readings of what we called handling scores. These were a sequence of not so much instructions as recommendations, a suggested choreography meant to provide help to inexperienced beholders. These scores played on a loop in the gallery, the sound activated as beholders approached the cabinet.

For example, here's my handling score for the fossilised handshake:

Take its weight in your palm.

Invert and rotate. Try new orientations until it feels most at home.

Try it in the other hand.

Carefully trace its outlines with your index and third finger.

Watch out for the sharper protrusions.

Marvel at the regular beading along one edge, and now the other.

How did that happen?

As you ponder this, worry the ridges with the pad of your thumb.

Try counting the creases with your fingernail.

With the lightest possible touch, feel for the shallow pores and divots.

What do you make of that hole in the upper right (if it is upper or right)?

Note how thin the metal is there, as fragile as shell, pressed to the point it almost ceases to be metal.

How did that happen? Reconstruct the positions of the two hands that made this shape.

My thumb was here, your thumb was ...

Isn't it funny that we say 'press the flesh' when in fact it's the muscles yearning to press bone to bone?

As you ponder this, lift it to your face and press it gently against your cheek.

Now rest it against your jawline.

Sandwich it between your two palms.

Slowly, mindful of the sharper protrusions, press your palms together.

Interlace your fingers to make a neat parcel.

Wait for it to take your heat. Wait for the moisture to rise to the surface of your skin.

Now, lift your two hands to your face as you incline your head to meet them.

Slowly, deeply, inhale its scent.
Repeat.

One of our earliest observations about touching art was that the work of art itself encourages, even dictates, a particular kind of touching. Large objects require a full-bodied engagement – stretching, reaching, circumnavigating; while smaller, more delicate objects incite a gentler examination – nestling the object in the palm and tracing contours and textures with the fingertips. The three sculptures on display were all small, encouraging a deliberately careful touching. In addition, the ritual of opening the cabinet, pulling out the drawers and unwrapping the sculptures all signalled a ‘handle with care’ attentiveness. The slow pace of the handling score recordings was intended to foster the rise of thoughts and feelings associated with the actions. The three pieces felt mysterious and fragmentary, as if removed from some larger construction. The handkerchiefs were recognisably antique cloth, suggesting that the objects had been cherished and carefully preserved for a long time. Together, all these elements were meant to suggest something about Western museums’ practices of appropriation of artefacts from other cultures without acknowledgment of the artists and artisans who made them or the specifics of their original cultural context.

What conservators worry about when museum visitors are granted touch access is that touching will alter the materiality of the artwork. The piece described above countered this concern by encouraging material shifts. Handling the marble produces a fine, powdery dust. Bronze emits a distinctive fragrance which stays on the fingers after prolonged contact. In this way, beholders were literally taking something away from their museum experience. At the same time, handling, especially of the bronze, alters the patterns of oxygenation, polishing sections that were touched most often, while leaving other areas matt and dull. Thus, each beholder contributed something to the piece, changing its appearance and potentially even its texture from what it was when it first arrived in the museum. Thus, each beholder became a co-author of each piece as it evolved over the time of the exhibit.

Although we would have liked to have the keys to the cabinet available at all times, to give visitors free access to the piece, the exhibition curators and museum conservators worried about damage to or possible theft of the objects. So access to the keys was limited to docent-led tours offered every day the museum was open. Still, we hope that the piece offered a model for haptic engagement with artwork, that goes beyond the simple pat and poke of the typical touch tour.

In advocating for touch access for all, I am not calling for completely unsupervised access to every piece in an exhibit or collection. Some artwork may be too fragile to be handled by multiple beholders. Even blind people don't get to touch everything at a museum. And while restrictions about what can and cannot stand up to touching could be re-examined, some artwork may offer only minimal rewards for haptic engagement. The piece at the *In Plain Sight* exhibit gave visitors, blind and non-blind alike, the opportunity to touch a work of art, but in a deliberate and controlled way meant to contribute something to the piece's commentary on colonialist museum practices of appropriation and display. Different display protocols and handling choreographies would need to be developed for different kinds of artworks. Artists who produce work meant to be touched, such as Aaron McPeake and Emilie Louise Gossiaux, who also contributed pieces to the *In Plain Sight* exhibit, should be invited to suggest optimal display practices for their work. Museums would need to solicit insights of people accustomed to handling art such as conservators, but also exhibit installers and custodial staff. Exhibition designers and architects would have to consider the temporal and spatial requirements for artwork meant to be touched. Scholars, critics, art educators and docents would need to learn new ways to think and talk about art.

The benefit of all this change would be to give museum visitors a memorable and novel experience. Haptic art invites, even requires, a more fully embodied engagement with the artwork, transforming the museum visitor from a detached observer into a participant in a kind of performance, a slowly evolving choreography of discovery: a wordless dialogue between artist, artwork and beholder that can prompt both intellectual and emotional response.

2

Blindness gain and the arts: from blindness arts to critical blindness studies and back again

Hannah Thompson, Vanessa Warne
and Marion Chottin

What might practising artists gain from the application of the notion of ‘blindness gain’ to their creative work? How, in other words, might the creative work of both blind and nonblind artists be enriched by the replacement of the conventional notion of ‘vision loss’ with a recognition of the ways in which blindness benefits both blind and nonblind people? How, more generally, might artistic practice be energised by current debates in the field of critical disability studies and, similarly, how might artists be inspired by ongoing projects that draw on critical blindness studies to improve the accessibility of artworks?

This chapter builds on previous work, including a 2018 *Disability Studies Quarterly* special issue dedicated to the topic of ‘Blindness Arts’. In that special issue, two of the authors of this essay, Hannah Thompson and Vanessa Warne, were guided by the notion of ‘blindness gain’ to ‘explore the creative potential of blindness and offer new perspectives on the relationship between blindness, creativity, performance and access’.¹ Now, seven years on, Marion Chottin joins us to consider how current debates in critical blindness studies are supporting the emergence of an array of initiatives aimed at improving the accessibility of art. Together, we argue for the value of findings from critical blindness studies, including the notion of blindness gain, for practising artists. By blindness gain, we mean what blindness brings – sensorially, aesthetically and culturally – to both blind and nonblind people.²

We begin by offering an introduction to the field of critical blindness studies, an interdisciplinary and emergent field of study premised on the rejection of medical understandings of blindness. We turn next to

a discussion of current debates in the field of critical blindness studies. As readers will discover, our survey of this field draws on conversations that took place at a 2022 conference we convened: the inaugural Critical Blindness Studies conference (CBS). We dedicate the second half of this chapter to an exploration of recent and ongoing blindness gain-informed projects in art galleries and museums in France, the UK and the US. Pairing discussion of accessibility with analysis of works of art that engage blindness gain, we map ways in which conversations in critical blindness studies are shaping not only curatorial practices but also artmaking. Our overriding goal is to support the creation of art that embraces the notion of blindness gain: work that will, we hope, allow creators and consumers of art, both blind people and nonblind people, to better appreciate the multifaceted realities of blindness.

Introducing critical blindness studies

Before we can analyse current debates in critical blindness studies, we need to situate the subfield of critical blindness studies in the context of the broader discipline of critical disability studies. The first, and broadest, definition of the field characterises critical disability studies as any engagement with questions of disability that enacts a ‘critical’ distancing from those medical or scientific disciplines that reduce physical and psychological otherness to biological defects or deficiencies. In other words, critical disability studies rejects the ‘individual’, ‘tragedy’, ‘charity’ and ‘medical’ models of disability and refuses to reduce ‘disability’ to ‘impairment’. Instead, critical disability studies sees disability, very broadly speaking, as a social construct analogous to gender. For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson,

critical disability studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that expands the understanding of disability from a health science perspective to consider it as a civil and human rights issue, a minority identity, a sociological formation, a historical community, a diversity group, and a category of critical analysis in culture and the arts.³

In this context, critical blindness studies encompasses everything that has been written about blindness since the emergence of disability studies in the 1980s that distinguishes between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’, and includes the influential ‘social model’ of disability. According to

the social model, an impairment is a condition or injury that causes a physiological deficit; a person is disabled not by their impairment, but by society's refusal to take account of physiological impairments, which leads to barriers to inclusion. A blind person is disabled not by their visual impairment but instead by the ocularcentric society in which they are obliged to exist. Sally French's pioneering work on blindness belongs to this broadest definition of critical blindness studies.⁴

According to a second conception, articulated, for instance, in the work of Helen Meekosha and Russell Shuttleworth, critical disability studies refers to disability studies work that has emancipated itself from the original social model of disability while also retaining some of its key ideas, such as the existence of disabling social barriers.⁵ Understood in this way, critical disability studies emerged in the 1990s and encompasses everything that does not fall within an approach to disability based on the strict distinction between disability and impairment. This strand emerged when critics of the social model were rejecting the opposition between the two terms. This is particularly true of some works of Snyder and Mitchell, although they were also critical of the expression 'critical disability studies'.⁶ Thus, in *Cultural Locations of Disability*, they oppose the idea of impairment and prefer to discuss all the 'variations' characteristic of 'biological elasticity', indissociable from the oppressive cultural sites in which people find themselves, but capable of subverting and transforming them.⁷ In this context, critical blindness studies refers to the body of work that not only studies the social barriers faced by blind people, but also considers the embodied experience of blindness that is inseparable from its cultural representations. Here, blindness becomes an indissociable bodily and cultural particularity, with the potential for social transformation. This conception of blindness is powerfully expressed by the seminal work of Georgina Kleege.⁸

According to a third, more recent and narrower conception, critical disability studies constitutes a third wave within disability studies. Here, critical disability studies is conceived in a more intersectional way as a 'location populated by people who advocate building upon the foundational perspectives of disability studies whilst integrating new and transformative agendas associated with postcolonial, queer and feminist theories'.⁹ This is not so much a rupture with previous models as it is a deepening and broadening of the first two waves of disability studies. In this context, critical blindness studies refers to work that studies blindness in relation to the most recent postcolonial, queer, crip and feminist studies. This is the case, for example, in the work of Arseli Dokumaci.¹⁰

In this chapter, we understand critical blindness studies in the broad sense of the first conception, insofar as it also encompasses the second and the third conceptions. Our broad approach reflects the diversity of voices who are engaging with this emerging field of research.¹¹ The same is, we hope, true of our exploration of current conversations in critical blindness studies, to which we now turn.

Current conversations in critical blindness studies

What kind of theoretical framework can new thinking about blindness provide for practitioners who are exploring the potential of ‘blindness gain’ in art? It is our contention that recent findings in the field of critical blindness studies can offer not just guidance but inspiration to artists whose work engages experiences or theorisations of blindness. We hope in this section to demonstrate the value to practising artists of findings related to blindness and blind perception from disciplines that include but are not limited to philosophy, literary studies and history. Emergent ways of thinking about blindness from these and other disciplines can, we propose, provide artists with a theoretical framework for exploring blindness in ways that are progressive, generative and enriching. What is more, new ways of thinking about blindness have the potential not only to inform the creative process but, as we will explore in the second half of this chapter, to transform both blind and nonblind people’s encounters with works of art.

Critical Blindness Studies (CBS), a four-day gathering of scholars, activists and accessibility experts, exemplified the richness of recent and in-progress efforts to propose new understandings of blind perception and blind experience. The event hosted presentations by 39 speakers, both blind and nonblind people. Asked by us, the organisers, to offer definitions of blindness that have been important to their lived experience, research and/or creative work, speakers shared contributions that explored connections between blindness and topics as varied as ecological activism, feminist philosophy, the history of education, popular music, and the influence of universal design on architecture.

Because speakers’ contributions (shared in English or French with simultaneous translation) were recorded and are now archived as Open Access audio files and transcripts,¹² we do not attempt a comprehensive summary of participants’ contributions here. Instead, we hope to draw attention to findings of special relevance to artists. We also extend our reach beyond CBS to engage publications by both established figures

and emerging voices. By sharing a 'state of the field' statement on critical blindness studies, we hope to provide support and inspiration for new creative work. We also hope to encourage and facilitate the two-way flow of knowledge about blind ways of being between, on the one hand, blind people, including scholars and social commentators, and on the other, artists, both blind and nonblind.

In both presentations at CBS and the conversations that followed, three noteworthy threads emerged: the desire for the development of a vocabulary better suited to blind perception and blind ways of being; the proposal and assessment of new methods for the study of blindness; and the recognition of the importance of continued resistance to the ongoing harms of the medical model of disability.

New ways of articulating blindness

A thread that connected the thinking of contributors to CBS was the limited capacity of existing language. Eager to establish a vocabulary that might better articulate experiences of blindness, speakers rejected the definition of blindness as visual impairment. As commentators such as David Bolt have noted in recent decades, the vocabulary of sight and sightlessness is loaded with disparaging myths that identify blindness with powerlessness, dependency, absence and lack.¹³ Speakers at CBS proposed new words and, with them, new ways to not only name but also value blindness.

Consider, for example, the offerings of journalist and memoirist Selina Mills and of creative writer Kishor Alam. Following the example of Georgina Kleege and her powerful rephrasing of 'losing sight' as 'gaining blindness', influenced also by Hannah Thompson's strategic rephrasing of 'vision loss' as 'blindness gain' and of 'partially sighted' as 'partially blind', Mills and Alam proposed additional enrichments to the language of blindness. They include Alam's word 'blindless', to mean being deprived of blindness, and Mills' term 'blindish', to suggest the diversity of experiences of blindness.¹⁴ Alam also proposed the value of the word 'endarkened', an alternative to 'enlightened', to indicate the enriching dimensions of blind experience.¹⁵

By coining new terms, these and other commentators on blindness are finding ways both to more accurately articulate experiences of blindness and to resist the ableist values warehoused in English and French words. A choice as simple as calling oneself when one sees 'nonblind' instead of 'sighted' can have radical consequences for how blindness is perceived, represented and, vitally, experienced. As author

Bertrand Verine reminded CBS participants, progress toward a better vocabulary for blindness might also be made by digging into existing terms and expressions to unearth or exhume a nonvisual vocabulary that resists the ocularcentrism of current vocabularies of disablement or impairment.¹⁶

An especially generative facet of the search for a new vocabulary for blindness and blind perception concerns metaphor. The coexistence of a range of metaphors to describe blind experience has been a defining characteristic of commentary on blind experience for centuries but, as Bolt shows throughout his 2014 book *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, these metaphors have tended to privilege nonblind perspectives and to perpetuate harmful and inaccurate ideas about blindness and blind people. We find in the recent and ongoing proposals for new metaphors for blind experience a prompt or invitation to artists to contribute to the proliferation of metaphors and to participate in the identification of especially resonant or productive ways of articulating blind forms of perception. We hope that the work of artists might help with the task of proliferation of metaphors and more generally with the enrichment of a new vocabulary of blindness.

The work of academic and CBS participant Devon Healey is representative of the kinds of generative metaphorisation we seek both to share and to support. Healey mobilises the metaphor of performance to articulate and theorise her lived experiences of blindness. This metaphor is the starting point of her 2021 book *Dramatizing Blindness: Disability studies as critical creative narrative*. Supported by disability studies methods and drawing on the scholarship of established commentators on blindness, Healey's project is a hybrid: part memoir and part scholarly monograph. In five acts, or chapters, each of them staging scenes in the life of a fictional character, Erin, a blind person and graduate student living in Toronto, Healey maps Erin's changing understanding of blindness. Interacting with, among others, medical professionals, her sighted mother and a blind mentor, Erin shares first-person reflections which are framed by stage directions, including detailed notes on lighting and stage props. These scenes are interspersed with 'Theoretical Intermissions' – sections of the book that shift away from the dramatisation of Erin's life to offer commentary in the voice of Healey as academic. This is one example of the way in which this unconventional memoir is shaped by its canny and playful engagement with the conventions of theatre and theatrical writing. Mining the richness of her metaphor of blindness as performance, Healey's project dramatises both experiences of blindness and their theorisation. In this sense, her work is a compelling

demonstration of the value of creative approaches to blindness: to its study, its representation and its embodiment.

In her contributions to conversations at CBS, Healey argued for a redefinition of blindness as an alternative form of perception. She proposed: 'Blind is a life. Blindness is a culmination of the conceptions, understandings and attitudes that exist in our culture regarding what it is to live blind.'¹⁷ Of particular importance to Healey is the sensory reclamation of blindness and the value of what she describes as 'blind perception'.¹⁸ Healey proposed that 'blind perception' is 'the act of not always accepting the world as it looks. In its most radical and critical sense, blind perception is an outright rejection of seeing the world only as it appears to sight.'¹⁹ Here and elsewhere, Healey explores the 'manyness of blindness', a concept which builds on Rod Michalko's influential idea of 'many blindnesses' – a term Michalko uses to express the diversity of blindness experiences.²⁰ Echoing Michalko, several CBS participants employed the word 'blindnesses' to better signal the complexity, fluidity and variety of lived experiences of blindness and to signal their power of subversion and creativity.

The metaphorisation of blind experience is also a feature of recent work by Bolt. He proposes in his introduction to a 2022 collection of essays titled *Cultural Stations of Blindness: From ignorance to understandings* that different blindnesses can be understood as different stations along the route of a journey toward blindness. Bolt explains:

When blindness is found to be a destination rather than a dead end (i.e. conceived of as understandings instead of ignorance), it proves productive to consider our journey, the cultural stations we have visited or passed along the way. While always formative, these cultural stations of blindness take many forms, overtly but not exclusively textual or social, historical or contemporary, local or global, unique or universal, positive or negative, and so on. The salient point is that the cultural stations are always impactful on understandings of blindness; on blindness as understanding.²¹

Noting the diversity of topics and approaches in this collection, Bolt explains of its contributors that:

all endorse the reframing of blindness as understandings rather than ignorance. That is to say, each chapter engages with critical concepts that depart from sighted supremacy, such as ocularnormativism, assumed authority, the metanarrative of blindness, the

tripartite model of disability, autocritical discourse analysis, and the volume's central concept, cultural stations of blindness.²²

Both the diversity of approaches and the shared commitment to 'reframing blindness' constitute common ground between Bolt's collection and findings shared at CBS.

Having explored two examples of recently proposed metaphors for blindness, we might ask: what is gained by the development of a new language for blind experiences and what might we make of the proliferation of metaphors to describe those experiences? While metaphors are a measure of both the richness and complexity of blind experience, the proposals for new metaphors to theorise blindness signal the limitations of current language about blindness as well as the need for new understandings of blindness. While metaphors necessarily move us away from the literal, they also articulate facets of blindness that resist the medicalisation of blindness and challenge the identification of blindness with lack, tragedy or dependency. New language about blindness makes space for new ideas; we hope some of the language shared here resonates with artists and supports their investigation of new ideas about blindness or blindnesses.

Shared goals, varied methods

Like the language of blind experience, methods used to explore blindness are being actively reimagined by critical blindness studies. Interested in both the shortcomings and the untapped potential of existing methods of study, CBS speakers, like the wider community of contributors to critical blindness studies, employ a range of methods in their work. They include memoir, ethnography, archival work, literature review, research creation and curation. Regarding memoir, numerous contributors to CBS explored ways in which the genre of memoir has mattered and continues to matter to critical blindness studies. Memoir has had, and continues to have, value as a forum for self-expression, an object of study, and a form of resistance to stereotypes of blindness that circulate among members of the nonblind majority. Indebted to the work of, among others, Hull, Michalko, Kuuisisto, and Kleege, emerging voices such as Mills and Alam (as well as Joseph Rizzo Naudi, whose work is featured in the current volume) emphasise the importance of memoir as a method for better understanding and better articulating blindness. Also of note is Céline Roussel's cogent observation that autobiographical work by blind writers can facilitate the deconstruction – the disassembling and rebuilding – of

ideas about blindness.²³ Again, as with other forms of historical records, conversations between participants emphasised the need for action to be taken to ensure the availability of memoirs of blindness, like other primary sources, to an international, multilingual community of would-be readers, especially blind readers.

CBS participants also emphasised the importance of digitisation and Open Access as tools for liberation and self-determination. Several participants reflected on the importance of public-facing work and the communication of scholarly findings to general audiences. Bruno Liesen argued, for example, for commentators on blindness to pay more attention to how and where they share their work on blindness. Maria Romeiras shared her commitment to the development of a fully accessible mapping and digitisation project that documents important cross-regional and international historical exchanges between individuals and institutions.²⁴ While she noted the value of a cartographic approach to the study of the history of blindness, she emphasised the need for the development of a fully accessible platform for the sharing of these findings. Questions of access extend, of course, beyond textual culture to include material culture and material practices. How, we might ask, can the material history of blind people be preserved in, for example, museum settings, and how can artefacts of that history feature in blind culture as well as in the education of the nonblind majority? How, in other words, might not just words but things be actualised and made accessible so that they can participate in the broader rejection of stereotypes about blindness?

While all methods benefit from periodic reconsideration and re-evaluation, an especially generative set of conversations concerning methodology centred on methods of audio description and accessible design, to which we will dedicate the second half of this chapter. Speakers on a roundtable dedicated to 'Blindness arts: From art-making to access' shared insights regarding access to culture: from the performing arts, to artworks, to architecture.²⁵ Speakers reflected, for example, on accessible design – on how, in other words, we might not only create a more accessible culture but also build more accessible spaces. Louise Fryer shared her experiences with integrated audio description; Rachel Hutchinson described the enrichment of sensory experience made possible by layered audio recordings in museum settings; and Sabine Gadrat explored the gap between how, on the one hand, a built space is accessed and how, on the other, a built space becomes accessible. Though working in different realms, accessibility experts, both blind and nonblind, can offer artists strategies and encouragement to explore the relationship between physical accessibility and access to culture.

Continued resistance: against the medical model

For more than three decades, commentators, including scholars and memoirists, have challenged the medical model of blindness, rejecting its conception of blindness as a tragedy, a catastrophe, and a condition in need of reversal or cure. This work was continued by CBS participants, many of whom reaffirmed their rejection of the methods and values of the medical model. That being said, the importance of continued scrutiny of the medical model was demonstrated at CBS by a surprising development. A speaker in Roundtable 9 whose research focuses on blind people's experiences of state-funded incarceration chose to express precisely the kinds of perceptions of blindness that activists and scholars have been arguing against for decades. This speaker's equation of blindness with dependency, with ineptitude and with vulnerability did more than offend participants; it demonstrated the tenacity of the medical model of disability and the ways in which the perception of blindness as a tragedy continues to shape ideas about blindness. Participants were moved by this presentation to reaffirm their commitment to develop and promote understandings of blindness that prioritise the voices and lived experience of blind people, to reject ableism, and to honour the value and the power of blindness as a way of being.

Work shared by historian Corinne Doria at CBS demonstrated the value of research both about and against medical definitions of blindness.²⁶ In her presentation, Doria reflected on the history of ophthalmology and the development of ways to measure and label visual acuity. Doria's analysis of the cultural and medical history of, among other tools, eye charts revealed the paucity of medical definitions of blindness and of understandings of blindness that privilege or are limited to measures of visual impairment. Doria's contributions demonstrate the power of the critical study of the history of blindness to seize upon medical discourse in order to show both its fragility and its dangerous consequences: the construction of a falsely normal vision, the reduction of blindness to a disease to be eradicated, and the erroneous association between one's visual acuity and one's intellectual aptitude.

Having outlined current concerns for critical blindness studies, we close this section by sharing a phrase that participants in CBS took up as a guiding description of the gathering. It is a phrase whose relevance extends, we believe, to all work, critical and creative, about blindness. Bertrand Verine asserted the value of work on blindness that constitutes an 'exercise in decentering vision'.²⁷ His words offer guidance to those

who seek to explore the creative power of blindness and to develop new ways of thinking about, through and with blindness.

From theory to practice

We turn now to how creative practice might both mobilise and interrogate the theoretical reflections on blindness outlined above. We do not assume that the practitioners we discuss below are necessarily familiar with the theoretical landscapes of critical blindness studies. Rather we investigate how artistic and curatorial awareness of the creative potential of blindness can transform the creation, display and interpretation of art and artefacts. We are guided in our move from theory to practice by the work of both Arseli Dokumaci and Georgina Kleege.

In her 2018 article 'Disability as method: Interventions in the habitus of ableism through media-creation', Dokumaci shows how disability can become 'a method of creative media practice'. For Dokumaci, when artists choose to incorporate into their artistic practices techniques or processes traditionally used to improve accessibility for minority audiences, they are expanding the boundaries of the visual arts by exploring how visual media might include 'possibilities that go beyond what is ossified in ocularcentric and ableist uses'. In what follows, we will argue, following Dokumaci, that the inclusion of what we might call the 'affordances of blindness' in the production and curation of the so-called visual arts opens up new creative possibilities for both blind and nonblind artists and beholders.

We are similarly indebted to Georgina Kleege's assertion of the value of a two-directional flow of knowledge between, on the one hand, blind people and, on the other, museums and galleries and their nonblind administrators and users. Insights shared by Kleege at CBS, and explored in her 2017 book *More than Meets the Eye: What blindness brings to art*, demonstrate the value of collaboration, including collaboration between blind and nonblind individuals and between blind people and institutions who can learn from blind people and blind culture. Arguing for the value of collaboration between blind and nonblind people, Kleege's work rejects a status quo in which blind people are too often understood as passive and grateful recipients of the nonblind majority's gifts rather than as active producers of potent forms of knowledge and culture. Notably, at CBS, Kleege expressed her preference both for a very capacious understanding of blindness and for

increased appreciation of commonalities between blind and nonblind experience, such as the role of touch in both cultural life and education.

Of particular relevance to readers of this chapter is Kleege's work on what we might term collaboration between beholder and artwork. Over the course of her career, Kleege has explored a multitude of nonvisual ways of engaging with works of art. Kleege has shared not only her experiences of touching works of art but also, importantly, her mission to communicate to visual culture what she has learned from touching art. With regard to both artworks and art institutions, Kleege has shared her appreciation of what is not visible to nonblind people – or, to quote Kleege, 'what is not apparent to eyes alone'.²⁸ Kleege's attention to material culture, to materiality, and to what is lost when material culture, such as sculptural installation, is reduced to visual culture offers both scholars and creators valuable direction. Kleege's work moves us to ask: what is lost when an object that could be touched or listened to or experienced through movement is reduced to an object to be looked at?

The publication of *More than Meets the Eye* in 2017 coincided with a proliferation of artistic productions and practices that have engaged creatively and critically with nonvisual ways of being in the world. We group the discussion of this proliferation that follows into three interrelated areas: creative access, curatorial practices, and artistic productions.

Creative access

We use the term 'creative access' to refer to projects whose creative engagement with blindness transforms standard access provision into a creative practice that benefits both blind and nonblind people. As Chottin and Thompson have demonstrated, in most museums, blind people still do not have access to works of art on an equal footing with nonblind people: audio descriptions are very few in number, objective in purpose (and therefore not aesthetic), difficult to access independently, made only by nonblind people, covered in historical information, and designed to 'make blind people see differently'. In short, traditional audio descriptions are part of the 'medical model of blindness'.²⁹ In an effort to disentangle audio description from the medical model and its values, a series of inclusive, co-created audio-description workshops have been organised in France. They have been developed in partnership with the PERCEVOIR charity and hosted by the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, the Musée de Bayeux and, most recently, the Château d'Angers.³⁰

Necessarily both theoretical and practical, this research work, carried out by teams of academics and participants made up of blind, nonblind and partially blind people, is based on the rejection of the values and limitations of traditional audio descriptions.

Breaking with established approaches, these workshops produced audio descriptions that have six key characteristics:

- (1) They are universal in terms of both their creation and their reception. Only audio descriptions (ADs) co-created by nonblind, partially blind and blind people can be relevant to the latter; only ADs that are aimed at everyone (and not just blind or partially blind people) can escape the medical model of blindness.
- (2) They are subjective. ADs embrace the subjectivity they cannot dispense with, because there is always at least one culturally situated viewpoint behind a description, and there are as many descriptions as there are viewpoints. For instance, in one of the ADs of the painting 'Rangga' by the Aboriginal painter Tom Djawa, the describers note: 'We saw neither the beehive with its three entrances, nor the honey, but we did notice a honey-yellow colour.'³¹
- (3) They are multisensory in that they pay attention to the nonvisual modalities (such as tactile, auditory, kinaesthetic, etc.) that are also present, in order to combat the primacy of sight and the devaluation of other senses. Consider, for example, the phrases: 'Different shades: terracotta; copper; saffron. An impression of warmth ...'³²
- (4) They reject an intellectualist conception of art and instead engage the body of the descriptors. Consider, in this case: 'We move as close as we can. In places, we can make out the bark's fibres underneath the paint.'³³
- (5) They are holistic. They consider the works in their relationship to each other and to the museum space as a whole, taking into account the notions of 'exhibition' and 'collection' that are key to curatorial understanding but often forgotten in traditional AD.
- (6) They are made up of two layers: a brief initial description by a partially blind person and a detailed description based on a dialogue between blind, partially blind and nonblind people, in which the latter do not impose anything but are content essentially to answer the questions of the former.

These characteristics of critical disability studies-informed audio description are based on the critical concept of blindness gain in three senses: (1) partial blindness offers an original visual point of view on

works of art; (2) blindness in all its forms benefits the visual experience of nonblind people (who, thanks to the questions of blind people, see what they had not seen); and (3) access to a 'visual' work of art without seeing it, through audio description alone, enriches the aesthetic experience of nonblind people.³⁴

Like the collaborative work discussed by Kleege, these workshops demonstrate how aesthetic perception thus emerges as a collective act. As partially blind researcher Marion Ink writes: 'The perception of a situation necessarily integrates the perception of individuals who themselves perceive the situation. It is therefore collective and affective from the outset.' Ink adds: '[Individuals] sometimes even develop a perceiving body together by synchronising and complementing their practical-sensory skills.'³⁵ It is this kind of collective 'perceiving body' that is created by and in collaborative audio description.

The approach developed by Chottin and Thompson, where a partially blind person describes the work, and then the group uses questions and answers to build a composite description which is both inclusive and co-created, has been further refined by Eardley, Jones, Bywood, Thompson, and Husbands in the W-ICAD (Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description) process.³⁶ This is a process for creating audio description that has been developed and evaluated at various museum and gallery settings in the UK and the US.

These projects are designed to create additional content related to pre-existing displays. They acknowledge a lack of audio description (be it 'standard' or 'creative') and seek to respond to this gap in accessible content by co-creating descriptions that capture a plurality of authentic responses to the object. An unintended consequence of these participatory workshops has been the workshop participants' own enjoyment of the event itself. As well as creating inclusive conversations that can be edited and recorded into creative audio descriptions available for all visitors (usually via QR code or link), the workshops are also valuable and fulfilling events in their own right. They provide a relaxed and welcoming space for blind, partially blind and nonblind members of the museum community to spend time together engaging with the museum collections in new and unexpected ways.

These projects thus exemplify the hope expressed by Kleege that blind people can bring a perspective that has not been articulated before. If we can abandon the notion that blindness can only diminish, damage or destroy identity, and adopt instead the idea that the experience of blindness, in all its varieties, can in fact shape and inform other facets of personality and personal history, we will move toward a more genuinely

inclusive society. The integration of blind perceptions and experiences will change the foundational assumptions of the culture; it will change how the human condition is defined.³⁷

Kleege's work on touch in art galleries is another kind of creative access that celebrates the privileged access to tactile experience that is sometimes granted to blind museum visitors. Like standard audio description, the touch tour has traditionally been offered by nonblind docents, educators or curators to blind and partially blind visitors. In *More than Meets the Eye*, Kleege argues convincingly that 'blind people who are granted this exceptional access could join with the professionals who regularly handle artworks – conservator, exhibit installers, not to mention artists themselves – to add another category of aesthetic value'.³⁸ Kleege's work with Fayen d'Evie,³⁹ as well as her *Haptic Encounters* project with the Contemporary Jewish Museum,⁴⁰ demonstrates how a blind person's touching of an art object can uncover elements of the work that are not accessible via sight. In the video accompanying the *Haptic Encounters* project, Kleege explains:

The figures are made up of a lot of different materials. So, there are scraps of cloth, there's cardboard, there's paper, there's ribbon, there's twine and string, there are pins that are holding things together. And it's all sort of piled up, it's many, many layers. So, when I explore underneath some of these layers and try to find what's holding it together, it's not that easy to do, because each layer reveals another layer underneath. In the story, there's a detail about the piece of paper that's in the golem's mouth that has written on it the name of God. And so, naturally, I wanted to reach inside the figure and see if I could find that piece of paper. But it's not there. But it does allow me to explore the tongue, here, which has a very sand-papery, unexpected, sand-papery texture. And then the bull figure, when I reach inside its mouth, and this is even a little scarier, there's a kind of webby, sort of crochet, slightly rubbery texture, feeling in there. And if I go further back, there's some strings and card, almost as if I'm feeling the vocal cords of the animal.⁴¹

This extract demonstrates, though the intricacy of the details captured by Kleege, not only how touch can reveal features that are not visible even to sighted visitors, but also how the experience of hearing touch described in this way generates a more holistic and memorable account of the artwork than that available to a beholder in the gallery.

When touch becomes a means of describing 3D objects, we come close to experiencing something of the sculptor's own experience as they made the object. This shared sensation brings a depth to Kleege's version of creative access which is rarely offered to either blind or nonblind beholders. Kleege puts the power of tactile exploration into words with reference to another experience:

As I understand it, one of the many pleasures of looking at art is the sensation that in standing before the painting or sculpture one assumes the exact position where the artist must have stood in making the work. One has the illusion of viewing the work, as it were, through the artist's eyes. Here, I had the analogous pleasure of feeling a distant relative of the artist's haptic sensation as he molded the forms. This is why I wish everyone could do this. I felt I was not only in touch with the artist but also feeling something that probably is not apparent to the eyes alone.⁴²

The travelling exhibition *Prière de toucher! Art and Matter*, launched in 2016–17 by the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, in partnership with the Musée du Louvre, is a significant example of blindness gain in a curatorial context. As if responding to Kleege's call, this exhibition puts the tactile expertise of blind people at the heart of its interpretation.

As its name suggests, the exhibition invites visitors to discover reproductions of sculptures from Antiquity to the twentieth century belonging to seven French museums. These include the *Koré* (Greek Antiquity) from the Musée de Lyon, several masterpieces by Jean-Antoine Houdon (*L'Été*, *L'Hiver*, *Voltaire assis*) from the Musée Fabre, and the more abstract, mobile sculpture *Balance en deux* by Marta Pan from the Musée d'arts de Nantes. The exhibition's intention is 'to show how the experience of touch offers a variety of sensations that enrich our understanding of the works, revealing them in all their dimensions and minute details'.⁴³

Significantly, the sculpture replicas are made using materials that are the same as or very similar to the original materials. This is rare in access provision, where 2D representations are printed on swell paper and tactile models are often 3D printed; this kind of access tends to focus on communicating information about the object itself rather than replicating the experience of touching it. *Prière de toucher*, on the other hand, encourages visitors to focus on the aesthetic experience of touch. To help them concentrate on their tactile experiences, visitors are encouraged to explore the sculptures blindfolded or with closed eyes.

An audio recording in which blind people describe touching the works helps guide visitors around the sculptures.

In a number of ways, this exhibition breaks with the medical model of blindness to take its place in the critical framework initiated by Georgina Kleege and continued by the French and British projects we discuss above.

Firstly, by placing the sense of touch at its centre, the exhibition explicitly breaks with traditional ocularcentrism and gives this sense a genuine aesthetic dimension, capable of being learned in the same way as sight.⁴⁴ Consider the experiences of two of the authors of this chapter. Chottin's experience at the exhibition demonstrates the need for nonblind people to learn the skills of touch. When Thompson showed Chottin the exhibition on 5 April 2022 at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, Chottin, who is not blind and was wearing a blindfold, thought she recognised a statue of a young girl when she touched it. In fact, it was Jean-Antoine Houdon's (elderly) *Voltaire assis* (1781). On the other hand, Hoëlle Corvest, a specialist in relief drawing who is blind, went so far as to identify the philosopher's ironic smile perfectly by touch when she explored the same sculpture.⁴⁵

Secondly, the exhibition places the body, and its unmediated relationship with the work, at the heart of the aesthetic experience, in a particularly inclusive and 'multigenerational' approach that moves 'from sensation to knowledge' rather than the other way round.⁴⁶ Thirdly, it invites the public to have blind access to works of art (in a particularly paradoxical and critical way, it proposes to 'restitute the conditions of blindness'). Fourthly, thanks to an approach that aims to be 'inclusive and collaborative',⁴⁷ it is universal from the point of view of both its creation (blind people have been involved from the outset) and its reception (it is aimed at blind and nonblind people alike). Finally, it emphasises that sculpture is a creative and material process and thus encourages beholders to reject purely intellectual conceptions of creation.⁴⁸

It is unfortunate that the language used to discuss and promote this exhibition often unwittingly undermines the exhibition's intentions. The titles of displays like 'Voir avec son corps' (Seeing with your body) and 'Voir autrement' (Seeing differently) reinforce the problematic association between sight and knowledge that the more inventive language choices of theorists such as Kleege and Healey seek to deconstruct. There is, in other words, an unfortunate disconnect between the concepts of blindness gain expressed in this revolutionary exhibition and the way the event is promoted. The language used in press releases retains the primacy of sight at a metaphorical level. The same

holds true for the words of Juliette Barthélémy, the person in charge of developing outreach activities at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, when she says in a video: ‘You’ll be wearing a mask, but it will open your eyes to art.’⁴⁹ In such comments, the benefits of blindness are reversed in favour of the traditional, ocularcentric idea of access to a higher vision – that of the mind.⁵⁰ Finally, some of the partner museums, such as the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, continued to offer the traditional tactile tours reserved for blind people – another remnant of the medical model of blindness.

Curatorial practices

In the winter of 2022–3, two exhibitions in London embraced the kinds of accessible museum interpretation discussed above. Despite its regrettably ocularcentric title, *Layers of Vision* at King’s College London was a showcase of the work of 10 blind and partially blind artists. Each work was accompanied by a range of access options, including large print and braille labels, and audio descriptions created by the artists themselves. *In Plain Sight*, presented by Wellcome Collection, was a major exhibition about the role of sight in society. Large parts of it were devoted to non-normative sight and it included collaborations with leading critical blindness studies voices such as Georgina Kleege, Carmen Papalia and Fayen d’Eve. Importantly, it engaged critically with the ways in which sight and blindness have been thought about and theorised historically, culturally and artistically. By refuting the familiar ‘tragedy’ narratives of sight loss and instead celebrating non-normative ways of (not) seeing, the exhibition provided an illustration of how recent developments in critical blindness studies are beginning to influence mainstream representations of blindness.

The significance of *In Plain Sight* for critical blindness studies also lies in the way its interest in blindness was articulated in both the exhibition’s content and the ways in which this content was interpreted and displayed. Too often there is a mismatch in museum and gallery interpretation between form and content in the exhibition. We have all encountered exhibits about the history of blindness which do not include audio description or where tactile artefacts are enclosed in glass cases. Blind people urgently need access to the documents and objects that make up their history and culture.

Whilst remaining attractive and engaging to the nonblind visitor accustomed to the traditional ‘look and learn’ approach that still prevails in museums and galleries worldwide, *In Plain Sight* also provided a set of

alternative modes of engagement that provided blind, partially blind and nonblind visitors with an alternative means of exploring the exhibition. The curators embraced collaboration by involving a group of blind and partially blind consultants in the project from its inception. This led to significant changes to traditional design and conservation practices. Importantly, the audio description content was offered to both blind and nonblind visitors via the 'digital guide'. In this guide, audio-descriptive content was combined with the kind of interpretative, explanatory content usually included in the standard 'audio guide'.

For example, at Stop 10, the exhibition's lighting designer, Satu Streatfield, provides a description of an image from Johann Zahn's 1702 work *Oculus Artificialis Teledioptricus Sive Telescopium* (*The Long-Distance Artificial Eye, or Telescope*):

The work in front of you, by the 18th century monk Johann Zahn is a page printed in black with two detailed woodcut images. The first image shows four men, two seated and two standing, in a landscape. Their heads are all tilted up towards a dragon with scaly body and wings, floating above them in the sky. Dozens of straight lines stream out from the men's eyes towards the dragon's body, diverging to form triangular areas of shading that overlap but are not identical, suggesting the men's different viewpoints. The extremes of the dragon's head and tail are labelled A and B, and the viewers C, D, E and F. The image below represents several viewpoints, marked at different heights on a vertical tree trunk to the left, with lines streaming out across the landscape, criss-crossing to form diamond-shaped patterns. An inset circular diagram shows lines crossing. As someone who works with and thinks about light every day, Zahn's illustration is, at first glance, very familiar to me. On a closer look, however, something fundamental is missing – where are the lines of light reflecting off the dragon's underbelly, onto the ground and back up towards their source, the sun? My design drawings for this exhibition include sketches that look a bit like Zahn's, although far less beautiful and intricate, and with the fundamental difference that the beams of light originate not from your eyes but from the light sources above your head.⁵¹

Streatfield's text may not speak accurately to historical theories of vision, but it remains noteworthy for several reasons. Whilst it begins with a traditional audio description, it quickly moves into a personal interpretation of what this artefact means to this particular speaker, and

thus provides a fascinating link between an understanding of the way eyes work and the beholder's own engagement with the exhibition, as mediated by the work of the lighting designer. Importantly, the nonblind viewer of the digital guide cannot escape the audio description. Audio description is baked into the exhibition's interpretation for all visitors; visitors who listen as well as or instead of looking are rewarded by content that is not made available to those engaging through sight alone.

This inclusion of audio description within mainstream provision normalises the provision of audio description as standard. By incorporating creative audio description into their standard audio guide, Wellcome Collection demonstrates the value of audio description for all audiences. The role audio description plays in enhancing the museum experience for all has been demonstrated in research by Hutchinson and Eardley.⁵² It is significant that Wellcome Collection has continued this practice of including audio description, often delivered by a range of voices, in their subsequent exhibitions. In *The Cult of Beauty*, for example, classicist and art historian Caroline Vout provides an audio guide to the *Esquiline Venus* and *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* statues that combines evocative audio descriptions with information about the cultural and historical significance of these statues' versions of beauty.

She has symmetrical features: almond-shaped eyes, a straight, narrow nose and delicate lips. She stands with her weight on her straight right leg, her left knee bent, tipping her pelvis slightly to one side. Her arms are broken off (though the raised left shoulder and remnants of a hand on her hair show that both arms were originally lifted as she tied her headdress). She casts a thoughtful gaze down towards the floor. Something about her expression draws you in. Her breasts are small and high, the plaster blown around her left nipple. A groove runs from just below the centre of her breasts down towards her belly button, which is deeply indented, her belly swelling gently over her pubic area. She is completely free of body hair. Viewed from the rear, an indentation marking her spine runs from the nape of her neck to her buttocks that are full and fleshy. Her shoulder blades appear to press just a little through the sculpture's surface. The surface of the marble statue that she copies would have originally been delicately painted.⁵³

This description combines detailed references to physical features with a personal response to the statue. We are drawn into this description just as the speaker is drawn towards the statue. Adjectives like 'fleshy'

and 'firm' combined with references to 'breasts', 'nipples' and 'buttocks' imbue this description with the same kind of desire that this statue inspired in its beholders. Not only does this track describe the statue, it also importantly replicates in words the experience of looking at or touching it. In this example, audio description, a key 'affordance of blindness', to quote Dokumaci, becomes a means to create a more profound experience for all beholders.⁵⁴ The *Cult of Beauty* audio guide is also significant because it was created for an exhibition not overtly concerned with the topic of blindness. This demonstrates that this kind of creative access is beginning to be taken seriously as a standard element of curatorial practice rather than as a niche provision only included in exhibitions that museums and galleries decide are likely to be relevant to blind and partially blind visitors.

Artistic productions

As well as providing engaging and creative audio access, both *In Plain Sight* and *Layers of Vision* celebrate creative work by a range of blind and partially blind artists whilst simultaneously inviting beholders to engage with the work via creative audio description often written by the artists themselves. This approach is significant for its rejection of negative stereotypes of blindness, including the medical model, as well as for its creative use of the paraphernalia of blindness to find new ways of articulating blindness and its celebration of access as an artistic practice.

Braille is perhaps the most well-known paraphernalia of blindness. As Vanessa Warne has proposed, images of enlarged braille have proliferated in the twenty-first century, and are almost always 'emblematic of a cultural appropriation of braille by sighted creators who address sighted audiences and who are interested neither in blind people's reading and writing experiences nor in the perceived inscrutability of braille for sighted people but, instead, in a temporary obfuscation of written communication'.⁵⁵

Blind artist Clarke Reynolds challenges this sighted appropriation of braille in his work *FAB Too Touch* displayed at *Layers of Vision*. This work uses hundreds of 2-centimetre braille dots 'to create a multi-sensory work, arranged in the form of a large FAB ice lolly measuring the size of a door'.⁵⁶ Beholders are invited to touch the work and nonblind people can thus both see a playful and appealing image of an iconic holiday treat and enjoy the touch of the coloured dots, which are made of painted wood and mounted on a plywood board. Braille-literate beholders are also invited to discover the message written in the braille dots; because

as well as reminding us of the late nineteenth-century pointillism used by Pissarro and others (consult [Chapter 20](#) in this volume), where images change depending on the position of the beholder, these dots also contain a message. According to the artist, the braille discs act ‘as a linguistic code whose meaning will be known only to braille users’.⁵⁷ But, we would note, like the examples discussed by Warne, these dots are much larger than standard braille and thus not easy for anyone to decipher. Here, this oversized braille reminds all beholders that visits to the art gallery can remain inaccessible even when attention has been paid to the incorporation of apparently inclusive features such as braille. Everyone who beholds this work is dependent on the audio description, on the artist’s commentary, or on both to make sense of this artwork. Reynolds’ work not only celebrates the artistic and creative potential of blindness, represented here by braille, but it also encourages all audiences to embrace the kind of dependency on access provision that blind beholders take for granted.

The artist’s voice is also central to an engagement with David Johnson’s multi-sensory installation *I As Object-Unseen*. In his description, Johnson invites the beholder to break gallery conventions by venturing into the artwork:

Steel, resin and wood are the materials that make this installation. Please move around this installation if you can, and touch it as you move. Feel the cool hard, smooth scaffolding tubes held together by the rougher cast iron clamps. Reach in through the complex tubular framework and gently touch the highly detailed figures of the cane carrying artist as he walks, sits down, puts on a hat and then moves on. These resin figures provide me with an arresting objectified self image. This is a rare and moving experience. Because with the onset of total blindness over 30 years ago, I have been deprived of access to mirrors, photographs, and other images of myself. The layers of scaffolding that enclose the figures provide timeframes through which the figures move. They also provide an absurd parody of gallery casements where the glass has been removed to allow visitors to reach in and touch the art. Something rarely provided for in galleries and museums.⁵⁸

Here, it is another example of the paraphernalia of blindness – the white cane – which represents blindness. As the figure of the artist progresses through the piece, he becomes an emblem for the powerful metaphor of blindness as journey formulated by Healey, Michalko, and Bolt,

amongst others. In addition, by inviting visitor engagement with the installation, this description acts as both a guide to the beholder who is present in the gallery space and an experiential account of the work for those unable to visit in person. By foregrounding the experience of touch (either actual or imagined) in their art, Reynolds and Johnson both enact a kind of decentring of vision similar to that evoked by Bernard Verine.

As well as using the paraphernalia of blindness as the central creative focus of their work, Johnson and Reynolds also draw heavily on their own experience in their artistic practice. As such their work demonstrates that the link between blindness and autobiography extends beyond the written or spoken word to also find a place in art. Emilie Gossiaux's autobiographical 2022 work *Excerpts from Color Journal (In Plain Sight)* crystallises critical blindness studies' interest in the lived experience of blindness. Each page in Gossiaux's journal features a different colour or colour combination from her collection of 120 Crayola crayons. Gossiaux replaces the 'official' colour name with a description that associates each colour with a pre-blindness memory. 'Scarlet' becomes 'Bad Sunburn 1999'; 'Chestnut' becomes 'my sister's eyes, her hair, her freckles'; 'Tan' and 'Sunglow' become 'Whiskey shots Tuesdays; 20th birthday, 2009'.⁵⁹ By rejecting standard colour names in favour of something at once more personal and more multi-sensory (we feel the sunburn, we taste the whiskey), Gossiaux creates a new language for her blind relationship with colour. Like the writers who are forced to invent new words to capture experiences of blindness not yet recognised in our ocularcentric vocabulary language, Gossiaux's work celebrates the creativity, inventiveness and aesthetic potential of blindness.

Aaron McPeake's sculptural work is an important example of work that combines autobiography with the kind of sustained interrogation of the medical model of blindness that we find throughout critical blindness studies. McPeake's work *Once I Saw It All* is a bell-bronze casting of a Snellen chart. McPeake's creative audio description of the work is one of the tracks on *In Plain Sight's* digital guide:

The sculpture is a flat bronze plate about half a metre high and about 18cm wide and a few millimetres thick. At the top of the chart the letters are largest with the first letter [H] being around 9cm high and these decrease in size in steps until the bottom line is reached where the letters are around 5mm high. The letters are recessed into the plate and beholders may touch the work, feeling the text as well as sounding the plate, which also functions as a type of gong being made from the same metal as bells. As you touch the

work, you may notice some imperfections in the surface. Rather than welding or filling, I like to keep minor flaws in the work as they go some way to illustrate my limitations as well as adding an individual character to the piece. As I cannot see any of the Snellen Chart from the set viewing distance, my approach to this work was slightly though not entirely comedic in nature. The idea of a visual test is related only to the sense of sight but here I have added the sensory elements of touch, sound and smell. Beholders can touch and feel the letters, strike the plate to generate a sound but also the metal will leave a very particular [but not disturbing] trace of smell on the hands of those who engage with it.⁶⁰

Here McPeake invites us to think critically about the history of eye charts—objects which might seem neutral or benign, but which materialise a network of ableist values that include the reification of blindness and the natural authority of nonblind medical practitioners. Indeed, the Snellen eye chart, a powerful symbol of the valuation of visual acuity and the medical model, also features in Antonia Hirsch's 2008 installation *Double Blind*. Hirsch's work, on permanent display at Vancouver Community College, is a massive metal Snellen eye chart that replaces roman letters with braille. In this work, Hirsch raises questions about blind people as objects of medical scrutiny and intervention. This is work that Corinne Doria also does as a historian in the field of critical blindness studies. While methodologically different, these projects are connected by shared goals, among them the desire to think critically about the history of ophthalmology and its methods, values and tools; like Doria, both sculptors engage the history of the eye chart to deepen knowledge of blindness and they do so, in common with all the artists we discuss here, with the goal of radically shifting our understanding and appreciation of blindness.

Our hopes for the future

We were motivated to write this chapter by our belief that information about debates in the field of critical blindness studies and about recent audio description initiatives might enrich artists' work. Our hope is that artistic work nourished by the same ideas we survey here will contribute to the development of the methods and findings of critical disability studies. We would note, in closing, that it is striking that most of the examples of curatorial and creative practice discussed above relate to

temporary exhibitions. Without accessible record-keeping, cataloguing and archiving, these instances of blindness gain will become lost. How can we record these creative blindness-centred practices and make sure they keep happening? How does this important work become part of permanent museum thinking? How can we build on what we know so far to ensure that it becomes the norm rather than the exception? In the wake of the work discussed here, ongoing projects such as *Beyond the Visual*, *The Sensational Museum* and *Curating for Change*⁶¹ are seeking answers but they are more likely to secure those answers in an environment characterised by a proliferation of works of art that engage the findings of critical blindness studies, not least among them the notion of blindness gain.

Notes

- 1 Thompson and Warne 2018.
- 2 For more information see Thompson 2018. There she argues: “The theory of “blindness gain” is a reimagining of the notion of “deaf gain” theorized by Bauman and Murray [2013]. “Deaf gain” is a critical position and methodology showing how deaf people’s “highly visual, spatial, and kinetic structures of thought and language may shed light into the blindspots of hearing ways of knowing” (239). Despite their ocularcentric use of the imagery of blindness in this definition, Bauman and Murray’s approach encourages us to propose an analogous critical position for Blindness Studies. Instead of subscribing to dominant conceptions of blindness as a problem, deficit or lack, we choose to position blindness as a solution, benefit or “gain”. In certain situations, blind and partially blind people can benefit from access to a multisensory way of being that celebrates inventiveness, imagination, and creativity.”
- 3 Garland-Thomson 2019, 12.
- 4 Consult, for example, French 2004.
- 5 Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, 50.
- 6 Snyder and Mitchell 2015, n. 3, 224–5.
- 7 Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 70.
- 8 Consult, for example, Kleege 1999 and 2017.
- 9 Goodley 2016, 190–1.
- 10 Consult, for example, Dokumaci 2023.
- 11 The Open Access bibliography we curated for the Critical Blindness Studies conference provides a sense of the breadth and diversity of approaches we explore. See <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6bb56ac5-c8f4-459a-b636-a80c0182d158> (accessed February 2025).
- 12 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025).
- 13 Consult, for example, Bolt 2014.
- 14 Mills 2023.
- 15 CBS conference. <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 1.
- 16 Verine 2021.
- 17 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 3 (transcript).
- 18 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 3 (transcript).
- 19 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 3 (transcript).

- 20 Healey 2021, 163.
- 21 Bolt 2022, 1.
- 22 Bolt 2022, 4.
- 23 Roussel 2021.
- 24 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 7.
- 25 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 5.
- 26 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Keynote Speaker 1 (transcript).
- 27 <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/6b2954cf-78cc-4f64-9b04-9e334c787e3a> (accessed February 2025), Roundtable 2 (transcript).
- 28 Kleege 2013.
- 29 Chottin and Thompson 2021.
- 30 These workshops are part of the *TETMOST* project (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 2017–19), the *Museum Guide* project (Normandy Region and European Union, 2019–22) and the *Inclusive Museum Guide* project (Agence nationale de la recherche, 2021–4).
- 31 https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/1-Edito/1-Informations-pratiques/6-Outils-de-visite/Audio/Hannah_s-Group_4_New-Impression.mp3 (accessed February 2025).
- 32 https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/1-Edito/1-Informations-pratiques/6-Outils-de-visite/Audio/Hannah_s-Group_1_First-Impression.mp3 (accessed February 2025).
- 33 https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/1-Edito/1-Informations-pratiques/6-Outils-de-visite/Audio/Hannah_s-Group_2_Description.mp3 (accessed February 2025).
- 34 French artist Sophie Calle also suggests the potential of blindness for nonblind people in her photography projects with blind people, documented in Calle 2011.
- 35 Ink 2023, 594.
- 36 Eardley et al. 2025; see also <https://w-icad.org> (accessed February 2025).
- 37 Kleege 2017, 13.
- 38 Kleege 2017, 73.
- 39 d'Evie and Kleege 2018.
- 40 https://thecjm.org/learn_resources/369 (accessed February 2025).
- 41 https://thecjm.org/learn_resources/369 (accessed February 2025), 2:08–4:51.
- 42 Kleege 2017, 63–4.
- 43 <https://www.mba-lyon.fr/fr/fiche-programmation/exposition-lart-et-la-matiere> (accessed February 2025).
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3

Blindness as the creative liberation of curatorial practice

Fayen d'Évie

Approaching blindness

I cannot recall a time when the larger world was in focus. My earliest memories of childhood were softened by a blurriness that erased expressive and scenic detail, except at very close range. On picnics in the gardens of Ōtautahi (Christchurch) in Aotearoa (New Zealand), my attention gravitated to the spotted ladybugs, clambering over the fuzzy hairs of marigold leaves. At home, I closed the curtains to keep the harsh sunlight at bay, and lay on the floor drawing insects with eyelashes, colour blocking the foliage around them as swathes of green or orange or brown. In the comfortable darkness of my room, I conjured detail amidst approximations.

I taught myself to read at a young age. Held within the physical intimacy of extreme myopia, typography was sculptural and painterly. Reading was as much about the textural possibilities as the meaning of words. I lingered over the curls of serifs, and in-filled the negative space of each italicised *o*. My favourite was the exuberant tail of the *y*, the middle letter of my first name. I practised signatures, the tail of each *y* twisting and curling in a cascade of spiral loops. I felt the ink of my pen carve glossy indents across the grain of the page. I identify strongly with Helene Cixous, who declared:

I owe some of the most fantastical hallucinatory experiences of my childhood to my extreme nearsightedness: vanishing streets, substitutions, metaphorization and metonymization of the world and of people. And above all the need – indissociable from my very nature, from my way of seeing and thus of thinking – to go see everything very, very, close up, so as to see.¹

In my 30s, I enrolled in art school in Naarm (Melbourne) on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin nation. In the confines of my student cubicle, my peculiar visual filtering of the world grounded my artmaking. Deploying an array of magnifying devices, I huddled over small rectangles of stainless steel, a diamond-tipped Dremel in hand, engraving intentional scratches. I spent months hovering close to the steel surfaces. As I layered whispery, directional strokes with my Dremel, I accumulated hundreds, sometimes thousands, of ultra-fine lines. En masse, the directional lines created planes that shimmered. The affect was fugitive, by which I mean that the compositional elements appeared or disappeared, depending on the position of the viewer, the tilt of the steel or the angle of overhead light. I exploited this instability of vision through spatial installations that revealed and retreated as the viewer walked amongst the glinting surfaces.

However, it is only in retrospect that I appreciate my indebtedness to myopia in shaping my artmaking. I confess that during my years at art school I was enmeshed in ocularcentric norms that girded the making and reception of art. Despite my unusual family history, with my stepfather receiving acclaim for inventing software and hardware for blind clients, and with many close family friends and mentors being blind, I somehow still created work for sighted audiences: installations of paintings that both presumed and privileged 20:20 vision.

The source of this disconnect, I suggest, lies in a tangled web of cultural and personal experiences. First, the educational systems I had trained in, and the ecology of art institutions I had been exposed to, were resolutely visual. They re-enacted and re-inscribed ocularcentric norms and an ethic of visual supremacy, imported to the Southern Hemisphere during colonialism. My art school, the Victorian College of the Arts, had begun life as the National Gallery Art School in 1867, in anticipation of the formal creation of the National Gallery of Victoria in 1869, a move accomplished by renaming the Picture Gallery collection of the Public Library of Victoria. These bureaucratic rearrangements are not tangential to understanding visuality and blindness.

During the early years of the colony of Victoria, a network of public organisations was established to foster an informed citizenry. The National Gallery, Public Library, National Museum and Industrial and Technological Museum, collectively known as 'The Institution', together with the Botanic Gardens and Zoological Gardens, were legislated as mutually reinforcing tools of civic culture. For example, protocols of visual display in the National Gallery and National Museum, and policies restricting tactile access to approved professionals, were supplemented

by models of cultivated land within the Botanic Gardens, which reasserted the ideal of the civilised touch. As Kathleen Fennessy traces, the intention of the colonial authority was to develop a self-managing and self-directed public, who would absorb codes of behaviour and ideals of aesthetic and technical excellence, and devote their leisure time to self-education, so that they could contribute to the settler colony's cultural and economic development.² In unpublished research, I have traced the ways that these foundational codes of behaviour, and concepts of the ideal citizen, became intertwined with the logic of eugenics, and with the establishment of a network of prisons throughout Victoria, replicating discredited transatlantic models, which reinforced sensory segregation.³

Macro histories of the colonial control of bodies – and associated legacies of discrimination amongst the senses – are part of the cultural fabric that shaped my more personal, formative experiences with ocularcentrism. Since childhood, I had habituated to thick spectacles, and regular visits to eye doctors who tested the 'degeneration' of my 'low vision' and compared me unfavourably to 'normal' charts. I had listened as successive doctors recounted to my mother the 'complications' that would emerge over time due to my 'pathological myopia'. The language used by these authority figures within the medical establishment repeatedly emphasised that my specific perceptual experience was degenerative, lesser, abnormal and complicated. The descriptor 'low vision' was somewhat confusing to me, and only made sense if I accepted that the magical micro-detail of my tiny insects and beloved letterforms, and the imaginative dreamscapes of my blurred surroundings, were invalid. By the time I was six years old, I had internalised the wisdom that my visual experience could not be anything other than pathological. In private, I still found joy in the ways I filtered my surroundings, and would regularly discard my glasses while alone, but I learned to guard this as a solitary comfort. I owe the eventual rupture in my perceptual complacency, and the emancipation of my creative practice, to blindness.

In my late 30s, I experienced a sudden degeneration in my functional vision. Perspectival lines interlaced, so that it became difficult to locate steps in space. Empty zones infiltrated my peripheral vision. Wavering filaments disrupted my visual field, populated with spider-like forms that scurried away when I flicked my focus towards them. Pin lights on appliances flooded my sleeping hours with bursts of fireworks in brilliant green and orange and red. In hotel rooms, I developed a practice of draping televisions, air conditioning units and clock radios, to lessen the disturbance. Most disconcerting for my professional practice, when I entered a gallery or classroom with overhead fluorescent lights,

or incandescent spotlights, the centre of my visual field would dim, obliterating any objects or people that I might otherwise be focusing on. Out of this spreading darkness, zigzags of light formed, like cartoon renditions of lightning bolts, and within these shapes kaleidoscopic fractals whirled.

The cumulative diagnosis of a team of ophthalmologists, retinologists and neurologists was that interactions between early onset cataracts and extreme myopia were intensifying light distortions and triggering ocular migraines, which were presenting as visual hallucinations. I was advised that cataract operations would eventually be necessary, but only as a last resort, due to my elevated risk of retinal detachment. With my consent, a decision was made to allow the cataracts to progress until the scale of loss of vision, or the severity of migraine hallucinations, was such that the risk of retinal detachment was irrelevant. As I stumbled (metaphorically and literally) into the ocularnormative structures that permeate the art world, I was gifted the opportunity to question my habitual ways of working.

To blunder is to stumble blindly. In previous writing, I have described how I evolved 'blundering' as a performative method: first for movement improvisation as I travelled with my cane through spatial installations; later for the navigation of any uncertain terrain, whether conceptual or spatial. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, the etymological root of blunder is uncertain, evolving from the Middle English *blondren*, to mingle, the Icelandic *blonda*, to doze, or the Swedish *blunda*, to close the eyes. Regardless of its origin story, by the fourteenth century, in step with pejorative metaphors of blindness, blundering had become synonymous (consistent with ocularcentric rhetoric) with acting with carelessness or thoughtlessness, mismanagement through inept behaviour, or floundering.⁴ In a 2017 paper for the journal *Performance Paradigms*, I have offered my concept of blundering as a contribution to the groundswell of blind and blind-ish voices countering the societal prejudices that have rhetorically cast blindness as ignorance, absence, lack or neglect:

To blunder is to stumble blindly, a method I deploy to structure (or unstructure) writing, thinking and corporeal improvisation. Via a useful semantic doubling, stumbling may refer to a staggering or pitching movement with lurching shifts in perceptual perspective, or an unanticipated discovery. A method for grappling with the intangible, the unknown and the invisible, blundering allows for uncertainty, tenuous threads, and peripheral distractions, while also affirming wayfinding through blindness.⁵

Proceeding from and through blundering, I stumbled through iterative exhibition experiments, slowly coalescing a constellation of methods oriented through blindness, including be-holding, myopic reading, ekphrastic audio description and intersensorial translations. I will return to these methods later in this chapter, but to introduce one briefly, as I described in 2017:

I insert a hyphen in 'be-holding' to announce a reclaiming of the etymological root of 'beholding', before the term's co-option as ocular observance. In Old English, *bihalden* denoted deep regard or to keep hold, the conjoining of *bi-* 'thoroughly' and *-halden* 'to guard, to preserve, to maintain, to take care'. As performed within my practice, be-holding implies close attention, by thoroughly regarding, handling, holding.⁶

Practising a form of be-holding, this essay, more intimate in tone, is a companion piece to my earlier (and future) academic writing. My intent is to explain the emergence of blindness in my practice as a framework for liberatory curatorial practice. The narrative takes inspiration from the etymology for the word *emerge*, which combines the Latin *ex-* 'out of' and *merger* 'to dip, to sink, to immerse, or to plunge into'. By the mid-1700s, the original sense of 'sinking into' had become obsolete, while in parallel, a new sense of emerge as 'coming to light' had flourished. As part of the movement to dismantle the metaphorical clamping of light to understanding, this chapter reclaims 'emerge' as 'plunging into'. Although I revisit some experiences and exhibitions discussed elsewhere, my intent is to dwell on the texture of those moments, to handle contextual details that have not surfaced elsewhere within my writing.

It is important to pause to credit the reflections, speculations and critiques of scholar Georgina Kleege, resistance leader Jacques Lusseyran, mathematician Bernard Morin, artists Jennifer Justice, Aaron McPeake and Carmen Papalia, poet Stephen Kuusisto, technologist Joshua Miele, actors Janaleen Wolfe and Ben Phillips, xenolinguist Sherri Wells Jenkins, dancer Alex Craig, performer Leona Godin, critic Tara Heffernan, and many other blind and blind-ish thinkers and writers.⁷ Their published, voiced or performed texts have provided ethical, conceptual and methodological bearings to guide the unfolding path of the research. Their provocations are woven into my realisations and propositions. Through their influence, I have gained confidence in blindness as a force of refusal, which inherently disassembles ocularcentric habits that shackle normative artistic and curatorial practice.

Tactile apprehension

When describing my first foray into blindness as artistic territory, I often begin with an installation of tactile paintings that I constructed in the foyer space of West Space, an artist-run gallery in Naarm (Melbourne) in 2015. In 2017, I wrote:

On a freestanding architecture of reinforced plywood walls, I mounted five framed paintings; abstract compositions that referenced systems of perception and language, created from collaged layers of painted and embossed paper stocks. Four paintings of another kind were built into the walls; powder-coated steel grates – some solid, others porous mesh – with raw canvas collaged over top. The installation architecture was the setting for oratory performances of two fictional stories dealing with visual assumptions of value, one set in a museum of holograms, the other in an art fair. I had drafted the stories in dialogue with two actors from the Theatre of the Blind, Janaleen Wolfe and Ben Phillips, who I subsequently performed alongside. After the opening performance, our scripts in large print and Braille were left on a sculptural lectern, intended as a cue for future audiences to handle the paintings and architecture through touch.

Informed by readings in tactile aesthetics, from F. T. Marinetti's tactilism to Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer's tactile objects and Yoko Ono's tactile poems, I had evolved the composition of the paintings with touch in mind. I established tactile connections across the surface of the work, painting disparate forms with similar grained, pumice-laden paint. I introduced rhythms of touch through the juxtaposition of paper stocks, in textured shades of white and off-white. I assumed that over the course of the exhibition, fingerprint grease would smear the surfaces of the paintings, and tactile agitation would fray vulnerable edges. However, by the exhibition end, the paintings were barely different to their opening state. Sufficient images of the works were posted online for me to determine that lack of attendance was not the issue. Yet evidently, most people had resisted handling the works, or had touched in a cursory fashion.

I wondered whether inviting a tactile encounter through fictional and sculptural cues had been too obscure or too passive to surmount visual norms of encounter.⁸

My musings did not transpire in a conversational vacuum. Throughout the exhibition, I spent many hours with Tamsen Hopkinson, a Māori curator and artist of Ngāti Kahungunu and Ngāti Pāhauwera descent, who was then working as curator of programmes at West Space. Hopkinson talked of a general unfamiliarity amongst contemporary curators as to how to deal with blind audiences. She also described the difficulty of communicating the different codes of touch invited by my foyer installation, versus the conventional hands-off behaviour required throughout the rest of the gallery. Beyond the foyer, the first exhibition that audiences encountered in the interior galleries was a transgenerational pairing, which placed paintings by a revered, established artist, Helen Maudsley, in dialogue with works by a more emerging artist, Nick Austin. Tactile agitation of these paintings' surfaces was clearly antithetical to the gallery's responsibilities for care and conservation. Hopkinson's personal painting and installation practice is an expression of Tino Rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty.) As we talked about touch in the gallery, she spoke of the distancing conventions of Eurocentric protocols that privilege white cube galleries as abstract, visual containers for object art, while devaluing the subjective body, whanau (family), and Indigenous understandings of our relationship with the land.

In the months after the West Space exhibition, I reached out to blind scholar and writer Georgina Kleege, who had been recommended to me by Devon Bella, a San Francisco curator who had admired Kleege's involvement with the 2004 *Blind at the Museum* exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.⁹ We began working closely on tactile dialogue and haptic aesthetics, developing a project that positioned Kleege as a blind docent for an exhibition curated from the collection of Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco.¹⁰ During this period, I immersed myself in readings on the history of touch and aesthetics, especially Constance Classen's and Fiona Candlin's analyses of the entanglement of codes of behaviour in British public museums with nineteenth-century politics of gender, race and class control.¹¹ I also travelled to Moscow, to collaborate with deaf-blind poet Irina Povolotskaya on an exhibition at the State Museum of Vadim Sidur, which introduced public audiences to touch encounters with artworks through participatory performances.

Throughout, I found moments for intermittent conversation with Hopkinson, who was exploring approaches to painting that inherently troubled Eurocentric protocols of making and exhibiting artworks. She mixed sand collected from Aotearoa with painting mediums, and

constructed flags that displaced national symbology with black voids. She invited her sibling to join her in co-creating an expansive painting work that acknowledged her distance (physically not spiritually) from Aotearoa, and her maternal lineage.

In early 2016, Hopkinson recommended that I visit a solo exhibition, *Decolonist*, that Yindjibarndi woman and artist Katie West was installing at West Space, as part of the Next Wave festival for emerging artists. I signed up to attend a touch tour that was advertised amongst the festival's accessibility offerings. Entering a crowded yet hushed room, I was greeted by West, who handed me a needle and thread, and quietly motioned me to gather flowers and leaves to sew as she talked. The plants were strewn on the gallery floor in a circle, underneath a hanging sculptural work – the outline of a flag-shaped form, also crafted from thread and twigs and leaves. West spoke of her childhood, and her mother, who had been one of the stolen generations. She described working for an Aboriginal reunification service, and teaching health in a university setting. She introduced her concept of meditation as a process of decolonising the self. As West shared her stories, we sewed the flowers and stems of country, listening. The touch tour departed fundamentally from the museum convention of a guided tactile investigation of sculptural objects (or secondary casts of those objects). West's invitations reconfigured the touch tour as a sensorial encounter. Interweaving the personal and the collective, West shepherded our co-created, embodied reading of materials and histories.

I invited West and Hopkinson to Djaara country, where I was living off-grid on bushlands, to develop and share works alongside a performance that Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña was presenting on the banks of the dam. All of the works shared a relationship to decolonisation. On a concrete wall outdoors, Hopkinson painted a black rectangle edged in red, which she encouraged attending women to draw over using charcoal retrieved from the detritus of a bonfire, the remnants of our annual clearing of wood in preparation for the fire season. She arranged mirrors on the dirt in front of the wall, so that they reflected the sky and the women's collective painting. On the bare ground in front of the wall, Hopkinson set fire to a flag, returning the material fibres of colonisation to the earth as ash.

West gathered us, including the children, around a large silk cloth, alongside fallen branches, leaves, sticks, flowers and quartz that she and my young son had gathered from around the property that morning. Together, we laid the botanicals over the cloth, which West rolled into a bundle, secured with a string, and immersed in a pot filled

with dam water, which she boiled on the fire for the length of Vicuña's performance, a vocal keening to the frogs of the dam.

Afterwards, West and I talked about how this offered sensorial documentation of an ephemeral performance; once unbundled, the textile could now be understood as a descriptive, tactile work, steeped in the scents of country. Throughout this day, sound artist Bryan Phillips recorded the conversations and performances, composing a sound collage that would be one of our first experiments in audio description as a creative medium. I have discussed each of these works and relationships during public talks in exhibition settings, but I have not yet published writing that details the watershed this day represents in shaping the ethical, conceptual and liberatory grounds for my creative research into blindness.

In particular, my collaboration and friendship with West grew into a shared project, the Museum Incognita, bringing blindness together with a custodial ethic, to activate collective readings of neglected and obscured histories through sensory meditations, performative encounters, walking country and weaving threads of story.

We launched the Museum Incognita in 2017 in Serbia, for an exhibition at the Cultural Centre, inviting the public to a guided tour of artworks sited in the landscapes surrounding Belgrade.¹² Our tour group mingled local and international artists and curators, and several blind women and their sighted companions. At each site we read aloud what we described as a sensory score, a prompt for embodied engagement with the site and artwork, following the choreographic concept of a score as an instructional framework shaping an ephemeral performance. In a private garden of stone sculptures by Olga Jancic, a contemporary of Henry Moore, we proposed crawling fingertips across the surface of a sculpture, then leaning a cheek to sense the temperature, and shifts in temperature, over time. We suggested leaning the length of one's body into a brutalist monument on the top of Mt Kosmaj and thinking of histories beyond the reach of the body. In an abandoned monastic ruin we smelled the scent of wild jasmine and strawberries, and felt together along the walls for impressions of fossilised sea creatures. After each meditation we passed around a Zoom recorder, gathering polyphonic audio descriptions of the artworks, which we later presented as co-authored, audio descriptive texts in the gallery.

As we co-developed successive exhibitions and residencies, I introduced West to perspectives oriented through blindness, and methods and theories of access theorists and activists. In conversation, West drew my attention to readings by Indigenous writers,

including Kerry Arabena's 2006 model of Indigenous-led citizenship as 'a synthesis of knowledges and interventions with "place" and "space" [that] has potentially revolutionary implications in restoring quality of life and ecological justice'.¹³ As well as co-developing performative and participatory exhibition works, we collaborated on pedagogical projects, including a studio for an interior architecture cohort, 'Re-writing the Reading Room'. Over a semester, students explored the ethical, political and perceptual assumptions embedded in the design of conventional libraries, archives and reading rooms. They were tasked with designing speculative reading rooms that could challenge normative biases and value Indigenous ways of knowing and reading.

It may be unexpected that in an essay devoted to blindness, I have devoted so much space to Indigenous artists who do not identify as blind. To be explicit, my growing understanding of the radical potential of blindness did not develop prior to, or even in parallel with, a deepening appreciation for Indigenous leadership, ethics and ways of knowing. Instead, Indigenous elders, artists, curators, writers, activists and communities shared models of relating that provided me with a fabric of support, bolstering my confidence in the possibility for blundering interventions that might disrupt habits of exhibition making, inherited from colonial politics and protocols. I was able to reconsider tactile encounters with artworks – and to value aesthetic and critical contributions of blindness – in the context of a broader questioning of norms of exhibition making that constrain perception, attention, movement, communication and access. It is from this ground that I began to understand the radical potential of blindness. As I shared in a performative text, published in 2018 in *Art Journal*, and intended to be read aloud:

Blindness is not an essentialist binary of dark and light, but instead announces the complexity of non-normative vision: a dissolution of boundaries or an agglomeration, an intensity of contrast or a dissipation, perpetual shimmering or ultramassive stars brought to intimate orbit, nebulae, clouds of dust and gas, darkness sculpting in fragments, peripheral or central shrouding, a yellow cast, a gray cast, a favoring of high key blue, interior vision, forehead sight. See, then, that blindness does not enforce an absence of vision, but makes tangible the limits of visual cognition, and calls to attention the plurality of perspectives and refracted observations, the conspiracy of visual stability, the pervasiveness of 20/20 conformity. Blindness offers a radicality (finally, finally!) to agitate

the ocular-centric norms that insist upon our artistic and curatorial practices, upon our exhibition making, upon our bodies, upon our relationships, despite the abundant weight of philosophical critique. Blindness retrieves beholding and valorizes blundering. Through touch and intersensory translations, blindness may disturb systems of valuation and conventions of authorship, but in so doing, blindness acknowledges the inevitability of shifts in materiality, in meaning, in what matters, in form, over lifetimes. Expanding our horizons beyond the 20/20, we become attuned to the micro and the macro, to exophiles and extraterrestrials, to perceptual systems we cannot understand or even imagine yet. A methodology for our political time indeed, through blindness, we can handle ephemerality and difference, we can listen to variations in the barely visible and the precarious, and yes, yes, we can navigate the invisible, the obscured, the concealed.¹⁴

Terms of blindness

When I refer to blind authors and artists who have guided my work, I use the descriptors 'authors' and 'artists' as expansive terms, encompassing a plethora of disciplines and professions, and – crucially – non-professional contributions too. The ethic of valuing non-professional contributions stems from my recognition of enduring barriers experienced by many blind people to entering professional art practice, including support services and policies that prioritise art as therapy or social activity, but not as a legitimate and plausible career. Early in my creative research into blundering, I privileged publications by blind authors, but as my research progressed, and I welcomed more hobbyist artists as co-conspirators, I began to handle conversational utterances more closely. For example, I developed methods of inviting and recording perceptual impressions during the creation of polyphonic, audio descriptive tours of exhibitions. As my enquiry has unfurled, I recognise (and leverage) the potential of blindness to disrupt hierarchies normally reinforced between exhibiting artists and observing publics, and to refigure concepts of who are conceived and valued as active collaborators.

One of the earliest principles I developed as I felt my way into the radical potential of blindness was terminological eversion, influenced by blind mathematician Bernard Morin, celebrated amongst topologists as the first person to visualise the eversion of a sphere. Eversion means to turn an object inside out with continuous deformation, without disruption

of the surface. To evert the definition of blindness, I explored how I could turn the metaphorical association with loss or impairment inside out, and bring forth the generative and critical potential of blindness. The definition I landed on was blindness as a mode of perceiving that makes tangible the limits of normative constructs of vision, impairs ocularcentrism, and destabilises cultural paradigms that assume 20:20 vision.

This working definition created a pathway for me to read texts by, or invite collaborations from, people whose ways of perceiving, moving and relating have been filtered through beyond-normative vision, irrespective of their identification with legal blindness. Some of the artists I work with identify as non-visual rather than blind. Some protect their journey into blindness as a private experience. Some operate in contexts where stigmas of blindness are entrenched, and must navigate disclosure carefully for social or professional reasons. Some have diagnoses that do not fit neatly into the legal categorisations of low vision or blindness, including fluctuating and temporary blindness. Distancing my creative research from legal definitions of blindness is thus significant ethically, practically and conceptually, since such definitions are products of the ocularnormative structures of power that my project aims to disrupt. More recently, I have revisited my definition of blindness, in favour of a new working definition that proposes blindness as an epistemological and perceptual orientation that transcends a semantic tethering to normative sight.

In her memoir *Sight Unseen*, Kleege recalls that she did not use the word blind as a child: 'That was not how I saw myself.' Determined not to 'make a spectacle of myself', Kleege writes of strategies that she improvised and honed to sustain a charade of normal sight: 'I learned to read the blackboard from the motion of the teacher's hand while writing. If I suspected that I would read aloud in class, I'd memorise pages of text, predicting with reasonable accuracy which paragraphs would fall to me.'¹⁵ Kleege ultimately decided to claim blindness, but in situations where collaborators do not identify as blind, I faced a quandary. How could I welcome these collaborators, but avoid inadvertent disclosure of their blindness, given the nature of my research? How could I honour their requests for invisibility? Two parallel principles shaped my response. Firstly, each artmaking event would be grounded in blindness, realised by inviting a quorum of people with non-normative vision. Secondly, I would reach outwards, engaging a larger body of contributors into the collaborative dynamic, which was simultaneously a strategy to validate blindness amongst and alongside

other perspectives, rather than limiting blindness as a separate and segregated position.

The latter principle came into play as I moved beyond blindness, for example exploring gestural poetics in collaboration with Deaf choreographer and performer Anna Seymour. The resulting work constituted a performative form of writing grounded in Seymour's native Auslan¹⁶ but with universalised gestures. I have described our work together in a 2022 chapter for the *Routledge Companion to Audiences and Performing Arts*,¹⁷ detailing a series of exhibition experiments in gestural, vibrational and tactile poetics which pose questions about (and propositional answers to) how we might communicate with post-human audiences. As I note in that chapter, this conceit is a device to untether assumptions about the assumed normative embodiment of audiences. Astrophysicists and xenolinguists who research extraterrestrial communication advocate embracing communicative redundancy:

[R]ather than fixing on a singular mode of expression, we must endeavour to communicate similar content in multiple ways. This requires ... offering a complex array of sensory access points that expand the potential for post-human readership ... I propose that we can draw from radical access principles and disability-led creative practice, to guide the crafting of parallel texts that convey similar expressive content with perceptual variations.¹⁸

This connects to arguments I made in an essay published in 2020, which is reprinted in this publication ([Chapter 13](#)): '[R]eacting against contemporary habits of publishing that remain fixed to a narrow idea of a normative perceiving body, I have agitated for a turn towards blind, Deaf, autistic and non-verbal authors and artists to expand the perceptual and sensorial space of writing and publishing.'¹⁹ Disability here is a conduit for liberation of expressive communication from ableist constructs of the reading body.²⁰ I have brought blind and Deaf artists, sound artists and choreographers together in multiple exhibitions, not only to explore parallel texts, but also to unleash possibilities for intersensorial improvisations, translations and conversations.²¹

The exhaustion of accommodation

In a chapter for a 2025 book exploring the expansion of accessibility within museums, I propose that museum professionals reimagine their

workplace 'as a site that welcomes public and staff alike to blunder into a dustcloud of sensorial improvisations, translations, and conversation'. I encourage museum staff to explore unfamiliar, sensorial ways of experiencing sites and artworks: 'This could involve subtle listening based on echolocation training; myopically close looking using conservators' magnification equipment; choreographies of movement; taste, touch, and more.' I explain the term 'sensorial translations' in terms of 'how we might describe a perceptual encounter, through creative mediation, such that the translated form can be experienced through another sensory reading'.

Distinguishing my approach from common models of public programming in museums that segregate access audiences, I note my ambition 'to develop structures for programming that invite people with varied perceptual experiences of exhibitions and artworks to share thoughts and sensory responses with one another, through contributing to a collective, inclusive conversation'. I also clarify my approach to access as a platform for generosity and welcome, which can be responsive to fluctuating contexts and deliver an expansion in public engagement through participatory methods. I close by suggesting that 'access as intersensorial creative practice has the potential to radically expand the experiential and interpretive potential of artworks, exhibitions, and sites'.²²

My tone throughout the chapter is encouraging and invitational. I offer methods and principles, grounded in blindness, as prompts to spark conversation, and imagination, about the possibilities for an expansion in welcome in specific museum contexts and communities. However, absent from the text is any discussion of the tensions, limits and frustrations that can arise from temporary or sporadic interventions in resolutely ocularcentric institutions.

To be clear, I remain convinced that ekphrastic audio description, performative touch tours and other ad hoc interventions oriented through blindness can open new spaces of discovery in any setting.²³ However, in my experience, when curators incorporate a single work grounded conceptually and methodologically in blindness as part of a larger ocularnormative group exhibition, the scale of negotiation and compromise severely limits the impact of the work. The more profound, liberatory potential of blundering occurs when institutions are courageous enough to step back from their established protocols and hand over space and time to blindness. As a consequence, I now prefer solo exhibitions or performances, which offer greater scope to introduce new ways of thinking, sharing, sensing and moving in a gallery.

Blundering as wayfinding through uncertainty

In 2019, I was invited by the director of West Space in Naarm (Melbourne) to develop a solo exhibition to be presented the following year. This was the same artist-run gallery that had debuted my original tactile installation, albeit in a different location as the gallery had moved in the intervening years. This time, I would be supported pragmatically and financially to mount a major hybrid artist-curatorial project throughout the gallery. I conceived of the exhibition as the culmination of six years of exploration of blindness through a hybrid artist-curatorial approach. Among the initial works I identified for the exhibition was a trio of resonant bronze bells by blind sculptor Aaron McPeake, installed over the reception desk to signal the location of attending gallery staff, who would host handling sessions of a selection of sculptural objects. The objects would be bundled in cloths that I had dyed in the dam water of Djaara country, following a score from West. They included a bronze fragment of braille poetry; a bronze cast of the negative space between our clasped palms as Kleege and I pressed our hands together; and a small oblong of dusty Jurassic marble.

Around the walls I planned framed screenprints of gestural poetics typography, and a shelf with tactile acrylic prints of the same images, separated into foreground and background. In the centre of the gallery I imagined two key works. At one end, I invited Lizzie Boon to install a tactile vitrine engaging with the kinaesthetics of touch.²⁴ The vitrine was open on the sides, with a sheet of paper rolling out, such that embossed text could be felt; the wooden frame of the vitrine also featured engraved text: 'A shadow of the body of the reader, now absent.' At the other end, I proposed to install a low wooden platform in the shape of the Pleiades dustcloud, with springs inside that lightly vibrated with percussive steps by performers. I envisaged the platform surrounded by chalk markings that visitors would be encouraged to add to, and move through, dispersing dust throughout the gallery and beyond when they left, carrying traces of the exhibition with them. The platform was also intended as a stage for improvised performances, including intermittent readings by gallery staff from a list of instructions on care for the exhibition, which I planned to draft, inviting staff to annotate as the exhibition unfolded.

The exhibition would also premiere a captioned video work that I had commissioned from Hillary Goidell, *To Catch a Thing in Flight*, the final element of an ekphrastic chain of works which had started with *Hauntings HM Castlemaine*, a sound work by blind sound artist Andy

Slater, composed from field recordings of the Old Castlemaine Gaol, a historic prison designed for sensory segregation and deprivation. I collaborated with Deaf dancer Anna Seymour and videographer Pippa Samaya to develop a video work, *Shape of an Echo*, presenting a gestural poetics translation by Seymour of Slater's sound work, placing blindness and Deafness in conversation. I commissioned Goidell to develop a poetic audio description of Seymour's gestures and movements, which I presented as a narrated and captioned video, accessible to both blind and Deaf audiences.

A few months prior to the scheduled exhibition opening, Victoria entered its first Covid lockdown. As the world shifted online, I moved my exhibition preparations into virtual space. I invited West Space's director, curators and gallery attendants to join my collaborating artists for a Zoom talk I had commissioned from non-visual artist Carmen Papalia. My intention was to introduce Papalia's concept of Open Access, which frames access as a temporary, collectively held space. As the talk progressed, Papalia invited participants to share in the labour of describing imagery, and read aloud texts which he had supplied. Listening to the Zoom recording later on, I was moved by the extent to which it operated as a polyvocal manifestation of Open Access. With permission from those who had participated, I edited the recording to form a captioned audiovideo work, which I planned to project in the foyer of the gallery to offer audiences a multisensorial introduction to the ethics of the exhibition from the moment they entered.

I also arranged online 'Introduction to Auslan' lessons for gallery staff, led by Deaf artist Luke King. The aim was for staff to learn sufficient basic Auslan to perform two text works, which I had asked them to simultaneously vocalise and sign. My subtext was the encouragement of an expansion of Auslan amongst artists and arts workers, to seed more conversational opportunities with Deaf audiences. One of the performed texts was a version of Papalia's manifesto: 'Interdependence is central to the radical restructuring of power.' The other was a Russian quote, which formed the basis of a video work in the exhibition, spoken aloud by deaf-blind poet and actress Irina Povolotskaya and captioned in Cyrillic. The quote refers to an experimental pedagogical project, in which deaf-blind children learned language through tactile encounters with sculptures in the studio of Avant Garde artist Vadim Sidur.²⁵ It translates in English as: 'Shared action over objects may be the tiny cell from which sprouts the whole of humanity.'

Over the following year, as Melbourne endured successive lockdowns, the show was repeatedly postponed. In mid-2021, when the

fourth lockdown lifted, I was finally able to begin installing. In the week before the exhibition opened, I invited an eclectic group to gather in the gallery to experience the works and create a collective, conversational audio description. Two children, including my son, were my co-hosts, guiding the visitors in sensory explorations. However, as it transpired, the exhibition was open for only four days, before Melbourne's fifth lockdown required a sudden closure. I was devastated by this turn of events, as it seemed likely that an exhibition I had been developing for several years might never open to the public. However, once again, blindness provided the methods for wayfinding through this precarity.

First, I asked for the conversational audio description to be posted online; an experience of the absent exhibition oriented through blindness. This inspired one of my artistic collaborators to create a second audio description, from her memories of the exhibition during install, layered with speculative imaginings of the exhibition by her partner, a sound artist. These two audio descriptive sound works were joined by a suite of other improvised digital offerings, including a conversation with Goidell, Kleege and Craig about dance and description; poetic scores for handling the sculptural objects authored by varied collaborators; and a poetic guide to ekphrastic image description by blind artist and writer Jennifer Justice. As the lockdown progressed, I invited Craig to narrate a score for moving in and around objects in space, which was performed over Zoom by two dancers in their lockdown apartments. This recording was turned into another video work to add to the online exhibition offerings.

Throughout the months of closure, two gallery staff continued to meet online with myself and Deaf artist Luke King, finessing their performances. Although none of us were certain that the gallery would open, they diligently practised and refined their spoken and Auslan texts: 'Interdependence is central to the radical restructuring of power.' 'Shared action over objects may be the tiny cell from which sprouts the whole of humanity.' I edited our Zoom practice sessions into short videos, which I added to the curatorial offering on the website platform provided by West Space. At a time when no one was allowed to be in physical proximity, the action of showing up together seemed deeply poignant. I titled the exhibition *We get in touch with things at the point they break down // Even in the absence of spectators and audiences, dust scatters ...* In the absence of the physical spectacle of the exhibition, blindness provided strategies to agitate, disassemble and scatter ocular-normative habits of exhibition making, and to refigure space and time for unanticipated sensorial improvisations and translations.

During a temporary respite between the beleaguered city's fifth and sixth lockdowns, the gallery reopened briefly, for seven days, before accelerating cases of the Delta variant required sudden closure again. As Melbourne's weeks of lockdown lengthened, the exhibition duration was extended several times. In the future public record, it will seem as if the exhibition expanded from six to seventeen weeks, but throughout this temporal drag the gallery remained closed. It finally reopened for a short run in late 2021. At the closing, continued restrictions prevented me from participating in person. I had originally planned to give an oratory performance. Instead, I emailed an audio text that I had drafted and narrated, and I asked the gallery to play the sound work aloud in the gallery, with an Auslan interpreter acting as my body proxy. The performed text closes with these fragments:

A dustcloud as a transformative space, that disassembles the rudiments and lines and habits of normative spoken and written language.

A dustcloud as an animated sensory exchange between inscriptive bodies and peripheral events.

A dustcloud continually, actively, recycling meaning, through sensorial improvisations and translations, collecting, dispersing, billowing, reconfiguring propositions and conversations beyond the confines of the visible exhibition. For even in the absence of spectators and audiences, dust circulates ...

Open conclusion

In this chapter I have not textured the theory of the dustcloud: for example, the ways that this concept integrates writings by Diderot on vibrational translation, museum conservation understanding of the composition and behaviour of dust, and astrophysics research into interstellar dustclouds (which cannot be seen by ocularnormative viewers, only detected as an absence of light amongst the stars). I have not detailed my propositions for conceiving of documentation as hallucinatory recall, nor how blindness can prompt encounters outside normative temporal opening hours of a gallery, in the unseen margins. Let me close by pointing to these temporal disturbances that blindness can introduce when approached via the curatorial method of blundering into a dustcloud of sensorial improvisations, translations and conversations. To paraphrase Umberto Eco's 1989 writings on the poetics of the 'open work' in visual arts, he described a viewer who can

choose their own points of view, connections and directions, and who ‘can detect, behind each individual configuration, other possible forms that coexist ... The “reader” is excited by the new freedom of the work, by its infinite potential for proliferation, by its inner wealth and the unconscious projections that it inspires ... an exchange rich in unforeseeable discoveries.’²⁶ Substituting ‘viewer’ for ‘perceiver’, I suggest that orienting exhibition making through blindness liberates agency in resonant ways, radically expanding the potential for perceptual and sensual discovery.

Notes

- 1 Cixous 1997, 89. Metonymisation is a construal that operates between senses.
- 2 Fennessy 2007.
- 3 The University of Melbourne in Victoria was an intellectual epicentre for the global eugenics movement, led by professor of anatomy Richard Berry in the 1910s and professor of biology Wilfred Agar in the 1930s. The cadre of eugenicists in Victoria included leading doctors, feminists and educators, including the first director of education, Frank Tate. The model of eugenics in Victoria promoted the strengthening of a citizenry of white Australians, selectively bred to be fit; the ideal citizen must aspire to be superior in social efficiency and intelligence, as well as physically robust. The eugenicists influenced the introduction in Victoria of a system of trade schools for the working class, separate private schools and university education for white elites, and segregated camps or institutions for the ‘feble-minded’ and ‘physically debilitated’, explicitly noting that the Blind should not be allowed to socially intermix or interbreed. The latter, along with the insane, the mentally defective, the criminal and the inefficient, were likened to ‘ill-shapen, cracked or crazed pots’ that would be rejected by a Master Potter and sent to the refuse heap. See Jones 1999, 324.
- 4 Consult, for example, Bolt 2014 on the metanarrative of blindness.
- 5 d’Evie 2017, 42–3.
- 6 d’Evie 2017, 43.
- 7 Kleege 2017; Kleege 2013; Lusseyran [1963] 2014; Jackson 2002; Kuusisto 1988.
- 8 d’Evie 2017, 44–5.
- 9 <https://cstms.berkeley.edu/current-events/blind-at-the-museum> (accessed February 2025).
- 10 d’Evie and Kleege 2018.
- 11 Classen 2012; Candlin 2004; Candlin 2010.
- 12 d’Evie 2019b.
- 13 Arabena 2006, 36.
- 14 d’Evie 2018, 51.
- 15 Kleege 1999, 17.
- 16 Australian Sign Language.
- 17 d’Evie 2022a.
- 18 d’Evie 2022a, 485.
- 19 d’Evie 2020.
- 20 d’Evie and Boon 2021.
- 21 d’Evie 2022b.
- 22 d’Evie 2025, 90, 101.
- 23 For example, d’Evie 2019a.
- 24 d’Evie and Boon 2021.
- 25 Meshcheryakov 1979; Skorohodova 2016.
- 26 Eco 1989, 68, 91, 13.

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Part II

Towards inclusivity

4

Extant: provoking, disrupting and redefining expectations of the blind and visually impaired presence in theatre

Maria Oshodi

I am the founder artistic director and CEO of Extant, Britain's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired artists. Conceiving the idea in 1997, I brought a group of visually impaired performers together to discuss the lack, in our experience, of opportunities to work, or to attempt to work, in mainstream and disability-led theatre at the time. I had acquired my visual impairment in my teenage years and had gone on to work as a published playwright, as a disability project manager, and for mainstream media. However, having just finished touring as an actor in a production by one of the country's leading disability theatre companies, the experience of which was incredibly humiliating as a visually impaired performer, I vowed to act, and hence called for an informal summit of fellow visually impaired theatre practitioners.

Out of this dialogue emerged a self-determined space which we called Extant – meaning the opposite of extinct – where we redressed the 'invisibility' of 'blind' artists and explored new creative territories. Extant was politically aligned to the disability arts movement of the 1980 and '90s, which was propelled by the social model of disability;¹ the company also echoed the growth of Deaf Theatre at the time (such as Graeae Theatre Company, where Jenny Sealey has been artistic director since 1997) and was influenced by other impairment-led theatre companies such as Deafinitely Theatre, New Breed, The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company and Birds of Paradise Theatre Company.

Since its inception, Extant has evolved new artistic experiences throughout the UK and internationally, exploring creative processes and

theatrical experiences from a non-sighted starting point, and integrating access into the creative direction of the work. Extant's productions push boundaries and challenge perceptions and traditional methodologies, presenting across multiple formats – from traditional stage settings to outdoor arts and high-tech installations.

This chapter will explore a case study, *Sheer* (2012), taken from a formative phase of Extant's 25-year plus history of experimental work, demonstrating how we have worked collaboratively with interdisciplinary, mixed, visually impaired and sighted creative, production and technical teams. It is an example of how we have challenged the status quo on received notions of presenting 'blindness' and 'blind performers' in theatre, as well as redefining the expectation of access for visually impaired audiences. Using this exemplar, the chapter will unpack the dynamics within the visually impaired and sighted teams that were brought together to create the production. The chapter will describe and examine the aims, execution and audience reaction, and the resulting short- and long-term impact on collaborating team relationships when working on such an ambitious experimental and inclusive art production; it will also examine what it means to maintain a visually impaired artistic lead within such projects.

Mounted to celebrate the company's 15th anniversary, *Sheer* toured venues in the spring of 2012, including the Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton, and the artsdepot and Stratford Circus in London. *Sheer* explored the experience of visual impairment, sexuality and the body; it aimed to do this by interrogating the relationship between dark and light, interfering with 'the gaze' and playing with what is revealed or concealed through the performance styles of burlesque, whilst using comedy and horror to disrupt the audience's sensory expectations. As a research-led production, *Sheer* drew upon 'experimental theatre', understood as an innovative approach that develops new concepts and techniques, and I will conclude the chapter by explaining how *Sheer* laid the foundations for later groundbreaking experimental work by Extant.

Background to *Sheer*

In 2007, following an experience of an Ann Summers party held for a group of visually impaired women, I speculated that burlesque and comedy might be informative performance styles to use as tools to investigate sensitive areas of visual impairment such as the body and sexuality. As Casely E. Coan writes: 'Burlesque is a genre of performance

in which the performer, accompanied by music, advances the arc of their act by progressively removing articles of clothing to culminate in a (typically) nearly nude reveal.² We wanted to interrogate this idea of a 'typical' performance through an embodied approach to the research. As Anna Griffiths notes:

[E]mbodied creativity includes creative expressions and processes that emphasize or are generated by the physical body. It is a view of creativity that highlights physical responses within creative practice and is attentive to the influences of space, environment, materials, and the individual's relationships to other bodies.³

Extant conducted six days of Arts Council-funded research and development (R/D) with four visually impaired female performers, a visually impaired director, assistant director and writer, and sighted burlesque consultant Genevieve I. Chang. As Genevieve stated in her project evaluation, 'the practice of burlesque is very useful for expressing subjective marginalities in confrontational ways, but with creativity, humour and a reclaiming of the body', and therefore 'is a topical area to be explored with repercussive elements of social and cultural relevance'.

At the time, neo-burlesque was at the height of its revival, with many marginalised performers using Victorian 'erotica' and 'comedic' forms of performance to reframe normative social identities and hierarchies. An example is the prominent disabled performer Mat Frazer, who has foreshortened arms due to Thalidomide; Frazer has extensively explored the history of the 'Freak Show' by subverting its negative relationship with disability through contemporary performance reworkings. He promoted burlesque as a reframing device for the disabled body with his *Criptease* cabaret at the South Bank Centre, London (2012), followed by *The Freak and the Show-Girl* burlesque comedy cabaret with partner Julie Atlas Muz (2015). As Coan notes, 'embodied rhetorics are critical to understanding the ways in which performance can communicate and re/produce knowledge and, thereby, speak back to systems of power as well as create spaces to imagine alternatives to oppressive narratives'.⁴

One of Extant's blind performers recalled in the R/D evaluation:

By placing an emphasis on clothing and what is revealed when that clothing is removed, we can begin to explore the exposure one can feel when one is visually impaired. Once I came to this conclusion the work began to make a lot of sense to me. Walking back to my bed-sit one day after rehearsals, it occurred to me that with just

one casual glance a sighted person can see me, read me, recognize me or not. In just a few seconds they can know me in a way I will never know myself. For even if I were to spend hours, days, weeks, concentrating excessively, I would never see myself. They will look and forget, but I will never know. Therefore, fully clothed, or unclothed, I am equally exposed.⁵

The collective R/D included using bubble wrap as braille clothing, white canes as vaudeville props, and traditional scarves for 'tease and reveal'. Amelia Cavallo has written about developing their act during this research stage of the project in their paper 'Seeing the word, hearing the image':

The main theme of the performance is visual beauty and how that interacts with visual impairment. It was created after I stated multiple times throughout the original workshop that I found it difficult to know when I looked beautiful without receiving validation from someone who could see me.⁶

In the performance Amelia is initially covered by a scarf, and gradually they tease the audience by showing different parts of their body: their eyes; their elbow; their toes and so on. Then they lose their scarf. They are revealed. They no longer have any control over what people see. They drop to the floor in panic to find the scarf, but find instead a mirror. They explore their body with the mirror, reflecting images they cannot see, and then they turn the mirror on the audience. They ask them directly: 'What do I look like? Do I look normal?'

This was a deliberate provocation, directed at the audience, regarding the concept of 'normal'. 'The word "normal" in itself is problematic in relation to disability as it can reinforce social hierarchy and stigma. It labels those who are not disabled as "normal" and everyone else as defective.'⁷ Amelia, in raising this question, invited the audience to reflect on their own notions of 'normality' around the intersection of disability and feminism. In a call for submissions for a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Feminism and Psychology* on the subject of 'Disability as a Feminist Issue', the editors Rebecca Lawthom, Tracy Morison and Kirsty Liddiard likewise state: 'Disability is profoundly gendered, and important feminist issues are intricately interwoven with disability', including issues such as 'the construction of the ideal subject' and 'embodied difference'.⁸

Creative audio description

Intrinsic to the six allocated days of research was experimentation with live audio description: initially as a necessity of access for the visually impaired artists in the room, in order that they could keep track of what was being developed, but eventually for the invited audience (some of whom would be blind or partially sighted). Extant, as a company, has avoided the use of audio description (AD) – a commentary providing visual information across various recorded media, including live settings such as theatres, galleries and museums.

AD developed in the late 1980s and '90s, initially provided by untrained volunteers associated with regional theatre venues such as the Theatre Royal Windsor. Amelia Cavallo and Louise Fryer, in their Extant-commissioned report *Is It Working?* (2018), the precursor to their later publication *Integrated Access in Live Performance*,⁹ describe technical audio description as usually being facilitated by an external source, rather than from the performer on stage. They characterise this as a traditional audio description (TAD) model that 'involves a trained, sighted describer (or describers) writing and delivering a description, once the production (play, dance etc.) is complete. TAD may be thought of as closed (not available to the whole audience) and *post hoc* (written after the event).'¹⁰

Cavallo and Fryer contend that 'AD, at its most traditional, adopts a "neutral" stance in terms of content and delivery in an attempt to avoid subjectivity'.¹¹ This form of AD is delivered by describers (usually live) in the theatre's lighting box during a show for visually impaired members of the audience, who wear headsets over or in the ears to receive the commentary. As Fryer notes: 'There are pros and cons. Listening to the show sound on the headset means that it can be heard at an enhanced volume, if required; however, the AD user can feel cut off from the rest of the audience.'¹²

None of Extant's productions have had this style of TAD applied to them, except for our first production in 2002, *Zeros and Nils* by Croatia's theatre company of blind and visually impaired artists Novi Zivot (New Life). Uniquely, this show – performed in Croatian on its UK tour – required sighted and visually impaired audience members to receive the simultaneous AD and English translation through headsets: a first in the history of theatre. Since then, Extant has always explored 'integrated', or (as some prefer) 'inclusive', or more latterly 'creative' AD; this is to disencumber visually impaired audiences from the 'interference' of wearing headphones that isolate the user, acting as a barrier to fully

engaging in the live environment and singling them out as ‘different’ from other audience members.

Such an approach is contrasted with that of the leading pan-disabled UK theatre company Graeae: ‘The use of headphones and projections specifically aims to facilitate connection, highlighting a relationship between performer and audience. With technological support and the presence of integrated access conventions, each Graeae production connects identity, story and access.’¹³ Here, the authors conflate the audience’s use of headphones with integrated AD, which they claim to have initiated in Graeae’s 2001 production *Into the Mystic* by Peter Wolfe. Possibly this confusion emanates from the lack of involvement of visually impaired people at the heart of their integrated AD process at the time.

Writing about the politics of access in 2018, blind Vancouver artist and activist Carmen Papalia states: ‘It’s not just about the built environment, but about ideas of agency and power.’¹⁴ From its very beginnings, Extant has attempted to democratise the production of AD by transferring the process of delivery from sighted TAD audio describers (whether disabled or not) to blind artists involved in the creation of their performance, affording them the opportunity to become ‘producers’ rather than merely ‘receivers’. We believe in the lived experience of being theatre makers as well as being audiences; having the lived experience of visual impairment – working collaboratively with that shared experience and having it available *in the room* during the creative process – is a powerful contributory tool in the creation of our own access. In this way, we have decentralised the inherent power relationships present in traditional forms of AD, and transferred the control of AD to typically marginalised visually impaired people, thereby radicalising normative values in the relationship of access delivery, and in so doing renegotiating the aesthetics of disability performance.

Our 2007 burlesque research therefore explored an embodied process of embedding AD within the creative process, serving the visually impaired blind performers and those who would be our eventual audience. This included describing each other and ‘self-description’, which we first began to explore in our early performance labs (The Stage Language Laboratory 1998 and Next Stage 2003). Cavallo reflects on the act they developed during Extant’s burlesque R/D, noting: ‘[B]ecause I describe parts of my body with sensual movement and music, the AD gives the piece a quality of self-voyeurism that, according to various feedback, sounds confident and comical. This would have been difficult to achieve and potentially uncomfortable to listen to in a standard

AD setting.¹⁵ This approach thus subverted standardised AD by shifting control of the image from performer to audience: 'I begin to ask questions about what can be seen instead of making statements. In the world of AD, this is a big shift. No standard AD narrative that I have ever experienced asks questions, because it is meant to function as a translation of information.'¹⁶

This explorative use of performer-based AD has the great benefit of providing artistic direction to developing work. Cavallo explains:

Presenting myself as a blind woman and asking these questions may well mean I do not know the answer. Even though on the surface the dialogue feels akin to a phone sex style question such as, 'what are you wearing?' the necessity for an answer becomes more than a tease. Through this exchange, I am telling the audience that this is information I cannot discover myself [such that] the act of questioning and presenting uncertainty functions as an invitation for the audience to take control.¹⁷

As a visually impaired theatre company, this question of 'control' – and who has it at any given point – is something we are in constant dialogue with, formally or informally. With regard to Cavallo's 'The Scarf Act', which they went on to perform for years after the initial R/D as a stand-alone piece in different public settings, the performance, through its intrinsic dialogue structure, transferred the control of the description to whatever audience was gathered at the time, increasing the risk factor and therefore the 'cabaret value'. This underpinned the inherent vulnerability and exposure of the act, as it relied on whatever the audience cared to give back to it (perhaps one reason it won an Erotic award in 2010).

Theatre in the dark

Simultaneous to the burlesque R/D, in 2007 Extant created a cabaret 'in the dark' for the popular restaurant Dans le Noir in Farringdon, London. The restaurant, where diners eat in total darkness and are served by blind waiters, was at the time part of an international network of successful similar establishments in Paris, Cologne, Berlin, Switzerland, Barcelona and Moscow. After an experience of dining at the London franchise, Adam Alston, co-editor of the volume *Theatre in the Dark*, wrote: '[T]hese restaurants build on a tension between ethics and aesthetics, juggling social responsibility and the profitable desire for sensorial exploration

among neophile consumers.¹⁸ He went on to assert that Dans le Noir reinforces social norms while fetishising and commodifying the 'dark'.

However, I suggest that a further outcome can be attributed to the performances in these establishments: an artistic imperative that a blind theatre company can specifically exploit. Extant presented four shows 'in the dark' at London's Dans le Noir, titled *The Effing and Blinding Cabaret*, and over the next two years adapted these comedy sketch and song revues, touring them throughout the UK and internationally to Zagreb, Berlin and Helsinki. As Cavallo and I described in our chapter for *Theatre in the Dark*, through these cabarets 'the company cut its teeth on basic techniques, tricks and possibilities of working in intimate dark performance spaces'.¹⁹ We proposed the following principles:

- Audiences lose their inhibitions in the dark. They tend to be more comfortable interacting with actors, singing, shouting and heckling, most likely because they cannot be seen, creating a sense of anonymity.
- Live and pre-recorded sound can be spatialised to create the illusion of an environment. A performance space that surrounds an audience can expand, contract and transform perceptions of space through sound.
- Surrounding an audience with moving performers in pitch-black space using Foley sound effects, which sometimes are in very close proximity, together with materials that occasionally touch them, creates a haptic interactivity that is not experienced in lit performance styles. Moreover, this would be difficult to re-create in lit space as the element of surprise would be lost if the audience could see the performers.²⁰

As blind artists (in contrast to the blind waiters working at the restaurant), we challenged the status quo Alston refers to, in the process re-ordering social relationships by using the experience to gain artistic knowledge, which we then used to control the creative output that later became a transactional commodity that *we* owned.

Importantly, we were not utilising 'darkness' as a simulation of blindness, as some preceding 'dark' events involving blind people had done (such as various iterations of *Dialogue in the Dark*),²¹ where everyday locations are explored with white canes in the dark. This invariably offered a misleading perception of blindness as total darkness, whereas only 4 per cent of visually impaired people experience absolutely no sight (which, in any case, is not akin to darkness). Such examples

were informed by the ‘medical model’ of blindness, where the focus rested on the impairment rather than social barriers and elicited ideas of the ‘respectable freak’ who historicises the freak show.²² Conversely, we sought to reverse this through ‘the creation of a non-visual, interactive performance that sought to change perceptions of how performance might be constructed without a predominance of visual content’, thereby challenging ocularcentrism.²³ We found that ‘under the control of visually impaired practitioners, darkness can present blindness as an empowered identity while antagonizing and deconstructing normative, hierarchical values of ocularcentrism, and creating a communal need for access and inclusion, regardless of sensory make-up’.²⁴ It is these values associated with ocularcentrism that we endeavoured to unpack as part of our next creative venture.

Researching burlesque and our experience of creating cabaret in the dark suggested the potential of combining these two styles. *Sheer* emerged from this juxtaposition, and was intended to be a potent, interactive theatre experience based on the perspective of visual impairment that explored the darker and lighter sides of disability and sexuality, challenging taboos by employing immersive experiences that offered new perspectives to a diverse audience. In so doing, the challenge was to transfer learned knowledge from the safe space of R/D – and a portable cabaret which we literally carried around on the road (much as a band of medieval ‘strolling players’ might have done) – into a professional production, while retaining artistic and political integrity.

Directing *Sheer*

As the director of *Sheer*, I brought considerable experience (as Extant’s artistic director) of working with blind performers, gained from directing a range of other Extant productions, both outdoors and in conventional spaces. We quickly learnt that *Sheer*’s highly experimental process would demand a strong symbiosis between the writing, directing and dramaturgy (with additional input from external cabaret, burlesque and magic consultants). It was my role to supervise the cast, designers and crew, to ensure that all aspects synthesised into a successful artistic whole.

From the outset, my aim was to include as many visually impaired artists on the creative team as possible. The initial writer, Liam O’Carroll, and dramaturge, Alex Bulmer, were also totally blind, as was the sound designer, Peter Boshier. We cast four professional visually impaired

actors who experienced a range of visual impairment: Sarah Caltieri, Amelia Cavallo, Tim Gebbles and Heather Gilmore. All four had worked on previous Extant productions, and Heather and Amelia had been part of the burlesque R/D project. Amelia performed in most of the *Effing and Blinding* cabarets, and, being trained as a circus performer with Cirque Nova, we harnessed their skills to present a combination of aerial work and burlesque. The rest of the company were fully sighted: the external consultants, producer, production manager, set designer, lighting designer, two stage managers and one access worker.

From the beginning, we knew we wanted to combine various elements: burlesque and the grotesque; comedy and cabaret; magic and horror; the 'dark' (to evoke fear, suspense and tension) and the 'light' (to evoke exposure and trickery). We set up an immersive environment in the dark, into which we would guide and seat the audience before the show started. Our four blind performers would move in, around and above the audience, creating scenes that oscillated between cabaret, fantasy and naturalistic settings. Atmosphere was evoked through live sound effects, with a rich pre-recorded spatialised sound design surrounding the audience. Tactile special effects were used in the dark to stimulate a palpable sense of place and narrative, designed to be experienced by the audience as a type of intermittent, collectively 'felt' set. When the show moved 'into the light' at strategic moments, the set would revert to a more traditional visual representation. Finally, we wanted to construct a relationship between the audience and actors through moments of improvised call and response: to harness this relationship and involve the sighted audience in describing visual elements for the blind and partially sighted audience.

Sheer heightened this play between light and dark through the character of Dr Ray, a corrupt scientist who has invented a light beam that illuminates people's sexual fantasies. As will become clear later, the invention is a metaphor for the worst aspects of our ocularcentric society. The idea came from a chance demonstration I had previously encountered whereby infra-red material, though it could not be seen by the human eye, could be viewed through the camera of a mobile phone. This triggered the notion of the 'Sheer Ray' device, utilised by Ray who lures blind victims to a place where they are exposed in front of an audience of disguised, fellow scientists (invited to witness the workings of his new invention). Meetings between dramaturge Alex and I, midway through the writing of the first draft, shifted the function of the ray from being a device that exposed the blind characters' inner lives to one that projected perceptions onto the people it illuminated. This felt stronger

politically, providing a means to exploit the comedic and extreme aspects of the characters' burlesque-style fantasies.

Early in the process, I had to drive the ideas for the structure of the set, the form of the tactile effects, the concept for lighting, style of music, sound effects and way the sound was to work spatially in the production, while the designers worked on how best to realise these ideas in the short lead-up to rehearsals (a process that continued into the rehearsal period itself).

Going into just a four-week rehearsal period with such an experimental piece – based on a new script combining dialogue scenes, cabaret, burlesque routines, aerial work, creative audio description, surround-sound and special lighting and tactile effects – meant that we had to prepare the cast and crew for the flexibility needed to deal with ongoing changes throughout rehearsals. The dramaturge was in regular attendance and offered helpful suggestions for edits to the script while I directed the actors. Though we celebrated the unique nature of this situation (being the first time a blind writer/director, dramaturge and cast had worked together in a professional context with such diverse performance styles), we needed to acknowledge tensions arising from scripts not being practically accessible between us – exacerbated by the fact that we all used different devices and formats, from large print, to enlarged text on screens, to braille, to screen readers. This meant that literally being on the same page took major coordination.

By the end of the second week of rehearsals, I had blocked the whole play with the actors, and had them use as their playing area both a front-end performance space and the circumference of what would become the auditorium space, knowing that working in the dark favoured this type of format. Week three was devoted to the creation and writing of the monologues for the burlesque fantasy routines: pieces of dialogue designed to be accessible for visually impaired audiences which included descriptions of action and appearance of character.

Jo King, our burlesque consultant on the production, joined us during this rehearsal week, polishing the ideas for routines outlined in the script; we then worked collectively to construct the descriptive dialogue that would be delivered by each actor and resolved how they would look while performing their routines, through a form of *Ekphrasis* – 'generally understood to be a rhetorical device that creates a graphic and often dramatic description of a visual work of art'.²⁵ We drew upon the earlier burlesque R/D, utilising comedy, exaggeration and reversal description; however, it was only during rehearsals that we evolved the invention of combining aerial work on a silk with live

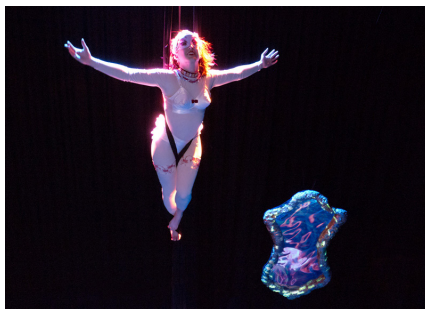


Figure 4.1 Amelia Cavallo as Miss Stagmus in *Sheer* (2012). Source: Terry Braun, © Extant.

description delivered by the performer, incorporating Amelia Cavallo's circus skills into the character of Miss Stagmus. During our burlesque R/D, Amelia had developed an act based on their personal experience using a long scarf and a mirror performed on the ground; we transposed this into the air for *Sheer*, with the scarf replaced by the aerial silk and the set designer creating a huge ornate mirror that hung high up near the silk (Figure 4.1).

I asked Amelia to incorporate the audio description developed for their original act, but to deliver it as a descriptive monologue which relayed their actions in a more poetic style. This was for two reasons: first, to avoid the use of technical language to describe Amelia's movements on the silk, which would eventually sound laborious; and secondly, as with all the burlesque acts in *Sheer* (but especially Amelia's which involved height), so that the delivery of the AD could precisely locate the performer's voice and body for a visually impaired audience (rather than having it emanate from a remote source such as a speaker). This was the first time anything like this had been attempted with aerial work.

We brought in three consultants to help enhance certain elements. Paul Leacy, who had run a magic workshop for Extant in the summer of 2011, helped to convert tricks for use in the dark, which proved useful in our development of this aspect of the show. As mentioned above, Jo King, of the London Burlesque Academy, spent three days working intensively with the four actors to develop short routines based on the script. These, in different ways, depicted visual impairment and sexuality which had either a comedic or a dance style. Petra Massey, from Spymonkey, worked with us for a day during our development week in advance of rehearsals, leading physical exercises and creating comedic storytelling and soundscapes with the cast; later, we would work with this technique

in the writing of a complex scene where all the characters' personal histories (and how each one had been stalked by 'Ray') were combined. I then directed the actors to deliver this live soundscape while moving around the audience in the dark, which created a particularly impactful scene. Petra returned for a day during rehearsals to help with the actors' delivery of their cabaret scenes and contributed to the burlesque comedy routines developed by Jo.

Summary of *Sheer* and its techniques

As the house opens, the audience are led in, row by row into the pitch-dark auditorium, and seated by our sighted stage managers using infra-red monitors and communication devices, so that the dimensions of the theatre are obscured to the sighted.

At the start, the three visually impaired characters, playing the role of trainers hired by Ray to deliver training to a gathering of social workers, enter in the dark from different directions. They call his name, wondering where he is, as they congregate on stage. They are unaware that the space is pitch dark. As they hear that the audience are present, they decide to continue without him. In succession the trainers present in a direct fashion at first, with each becoming more animated and cabaret-like, as a very dim light begins to pick them out, accompanied by an eerie sound. The first trainer transforms into Bifuckular, who flamboyantly sings the rest of her presentation, reflecting a supposed need for attention under the scars of many surgical interventions.

The next trainer's presentation on assistive products for the visually impaired opens up from the mundane when the Sheer Ray vaguely illuminates Cataracto, whose demonstrations take on the tone of magic tricks, expressing his supposed need for control – such as releasing a flock of birds, the feathers of which fly across the heads of the audience while a sound effect of beating wings plays loudly.

The third trainer enters and begins her serious presentation on equality and discrimination law, but, falling prey to the dim Sheer Ray, Miss Stagmus's mocking inner alter-ego of shame (played by another actor) breaks free to disrupt her training, and this new character, Squint (Figure 4.2), tells scurrilous blind jokes which cut across the serious equality training until she is chased in the dark, caught by Miss Stagmus, and locked in a timber box. The trainers learn from the audience that the space is dark and invite them to call out if they see anything, and then exit in search of Ray. Moving off in different directions, their voices and

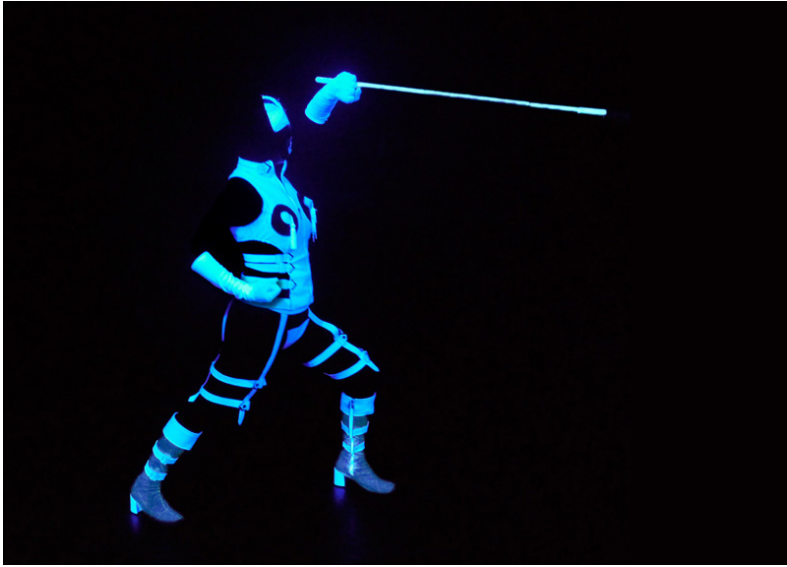


Figure 4.2 Sarah Caltieri as Squint in *Sheer* (2012). Source: Terry Braun, © Extant.

the tapping of canes reach beyond the confines of the playing space, as a pre-record of these sounds is picked up through positional speakers, allowing their voices and tapping to extend far into the distance, creating an audio illusion in the dark that the space extends much further than it does.

Using the same technique, the trainers come full circle and re-enter the performance space, and together they share with each other how they first met Ray, as they move around the circumference of the auditorium in ensemble, delivering a live soundscape in the dark, with overlapping dialogue and sound effects. They recollect how he had stalked each of them in various everyday situations and in doing so discovered their total lack of sight and something about each of their backgrounds. This moment is suddenly broken by three brief, sharp flashes of bright light at different locations around the space that starkly illuminate one character after another in a hideous aspect. One, Bifuckular, stands in an open green surgical gown with bold vagina and huge distorted hanging breasts (Figure 4.3), wearing a grotesque mask of horrific eye and cosmetic surgeries, screaming 'Look at me!'. Another (Cataracto) is shown in a suit bound in a mass of coloured electrical cables and leather gimp mask, screaming 'Unlock me!' (Figure 4.4). The last (Miss Stagmus) falls upside down from a great height, wearing a body suit and mask of two faces



Figure 4.3 Heather Gilmore as Bifuckular in *Sheer* (2012). Source: Terry Braun, © Extant.



Figure 4.4 Tim Gebbles as Cataracto in *Sheer* (2012). Source: Terry Braun, © Extant.

crushed together, pierced by smashed shards of mirror, crying ‘Which one am I?’.

The darkness returns and the audience, ruffled, are quizzed by the three trainers who are oblivious to the shocking images just witnessed, and they ask for descriptions. Confused on hearing what is relayed by the audience, they all exit the performance space. In the dark, loud (live) knocking sounds are heard from inside a wooden box together with loud breathing and footsteps, approaching closer from a directional speaker. Accompanied by the sound of splintering wood, the box bursts open, spraying splinters over the audience. Ray has helped Squint escape and gets into a dialogue with her, the voice of this character formed by a combination of the other three actors using a mic, their voices treated

through an effects unit. He explains what is really going on and bribes her to help him continue experimenting with his new invention of the Sheer Ray. She enlists the audience to call out for the trainers to return to deliver more training, and when they do return, a roving beam of bright light picks them out one by one, their presentations morphing into full burlesque acts.

The final part of *Sheer* is taken up with the trainers discovering Ray and Squint, confronting them, and deducing the flaw in Ray's belief that his invention shows the truth, when in actuality it reveals his own distorted ableist notions about them, and that these beliefs can begin to seep into their general reality. Ray then uses the device to project Squint's demise and she is destroyed, so the trainers overpower him, using his own invention to dispose of him before turning their attention to the audience, moving through the auditorium with drills, chains and sharpened knives.

The use of audio description in *Sheer*

Samples of the different styles of auto-AD that were developed in the R/D and rehearsal process are given below, taken from the script of *Sheer* and elucidating the point that some 'integrated strategies are multisensory, meaning they can remove the emphasis on the visual if required'.²⁶ Although the following examples display highly visual content for narrative purposes, using auto-AD through the texture of the actor's voice and the energy of their performance makes it a multisensory experience and thereby more supportive of an immersive theatrical experience.

Bifuckular's AD is integrated into the narrative delivered by the character:

Bifuckular:

I cock my luscious leg around a red fleshy curtain.

I stroke it. Oh a bandage!

My enlarged breast pushes through a rip in the curtain. I caress.

My rejuvenated face peeps round.

Oh are these bumper botoxed lips the right way round?

What about this way up? Oh forget it! I drop them.

I strut, wobble, flail.

Where's the stool?

Pity surgery didn't work on my eyes, eh?

Cataracto's AD examples a reverse strip, where the character's description is juxtaposed with an alternative AD voice, in this instance that of JAWS, which is the electronic synthesised voice used for assistive technology:

Cataracto: I stand stroking the midnight blue lapels of my slim line Dior-Om suit.

JAWS: Cataracto stands in a white string vest, white baggy Y-fronts and grey holey socks.

Cataracto: I'm so cool I'm hot. Wanna chill with me?

JAWS: Cataracto holds a strong man pose, arms up at right angles, with fists framing his gormless face.

Cataracto: Undoing my suit jacket with one hand, I shift my powerful shoulders and the jacket slips off.

JAWS: Cataracto finds a tennis-ball size balloon, presents it in front of him, then stuffs one in either arm of a stocking body top.

Miss Stagmus's AD is in a non-technical pictorial style, supporting the character's fluid and fantastical aerial movement:

Miss Stagmus:

I sit, suspended in the air in peach satin underwear.

An infinite length of vertical cloth

Wraps around and holds my limbs

I reach out under an apricot light, find my white wand

Near a huge fairy tale golden mirror hanging by me

With a kiss, my white cane gives me the power to move [she kisses and lets go of it]

I unwrap, flick and limbs stretch into a star.

Squint's AD, which is intercut with that of Miss Stagmus (who is the other side of herself), is more direct and technical, to reflect the difference between them:

Squint:

This light can only pick out parts of me

In brilliant white against the black

All there is, is mask, gloves, boots, knickers and a cut away basque

I stand ready

Cross gloves, punch

Cross gloves, punch

Cross gloves then caress
Wiggle my arse
Boots march, knees high, hand to opposite thigh.²⁷

As Cavallo and I describe elsewhere:

The Sheer Ray is a metaphor for our ocularcentric society and symbolizes visual dominance. Exposure to the light reveals needs and addictions to pornography, advertising or consumerism, all of which are at home in ocularcentric societies. Dr Ray lurks in the bowels of the subconscious like a twisted representation of the worst of visual culture, and has invented the Sheer Ray as a beam of light that has revelatory properties, but works only in the dark and if its victim has no idea that the light is present (hence the need for blind testers). He believes it can uncover layers of the social mask. The three trainers are confident at the start in their respective areas of visual impairment, disability and equality, but according to Dr Ray this is undercut by their sexual/emotional insecurities which he believes the Sheer Ray can reveal.

The ray itself is temperamental and hard to control, revealing too little at first and then too much, before settling at the right level to uncover the characters' true fantasies. These are couched in burlesque styles as a reflection of the indoctrination into visual culture which Dr Ray believes influences the way the trainers think they ought to appear. Their fantasies therefore take on a parody of visual sexual expression. The light works on a subject as if it is undressing them without their knowing.²⁸

Importantly, we were allowing space for each audience member to create the world around them inside their imagination, utilising darkness and tactile and sound effects. This extended into the light moments when AD was necessary, and we elicited participation from the sighted members of the audience through a 'pantomime' or 'cabaret heckling' method, encouraging questioning and debate between the sighted and visually impaired audience after visual moments had taken place. Moreover, by making the AD interactive, improvisational and spontaneous, we 'troubled or disrupted the "truth" behind an image, because in this format what was seen could be contradicted and debated by everyone watching, even those who couldn't see'.²⁹

Critical response

Extant commissioned an external evaluation of *Sheer* from Miriam Kybird, which in 2012 earned the company a commendation from Arts Council England's theatre department, with the evaluation process subsequently being recommended to other theatre companies as an example of best practice. An Arts Council assessor commented: '[W]here this work was particularly successful was in going beyond the level of advocacy and education to create a set of characters full of human complexity with whom I could build an empathetic engagement that moved beyond the functional level of their disability.' A review from *Disability Arts Online* in March 2012 stated: 'With references to the social model of disability, and the light-bulb jokes, the whole show is a series of splendid role reversal moments, putting blind people in charge of the language, imagery and discourse about them.' While critical of the development of the narrative, *Exeunt Magazine* noted:

The performers control the atmosphere with pitch-perfect, nuanced character work and comedic and raucous cabaret turns; the piece encompasses elements of circus and stage illusion too. The experience of sitting in the pitch-black is surprising and engaging: a whisper or a touch is enough to give you a jolt, your imagination is allowed to wildly interpret the unfolding narrative. *Sheer's* strength lies in its ability to embody the experience of a visually-impaired person, to allow the audience to understand its particularities while also relating it to a wider context.³⁰

General assessment and fracture points

Overall, Extant achieved the best artistic execution possible in the limited time available, developing an innovative production that soldered together so many performance styles into a new form. Committing to the best draft we could create by the start of rehearsals, we tested form against the writing. We had a compromised rehearsal space: we were unable to rehearse in the dark, there was no set, most of the props and costumes were still being made, and we lacked proper lighting and the surround-sound system. This all meant that the intended show remained an imagined approximation in our minds until the tech days just before we opened. It was only when all the pieces of this jigsaw were put together at the first venue that we could start to get a real feel for

what the show was. And only when the audience (a character in their own right) were brought into the mix could we really understand what worked and what didn't work in the production.

As Josephine Machon writes:

Immersive theatre is inherently interdisciplinary. An immersive form has evolved from the innovators of performance practice across generations. A range of practice has actively sought to create total, communal experiences for an audience.³¹

However, attempting this interdisciplinary practice is problematised by real-world constraints, especially when disability is an additional element. Touring a show like *Sheer* requires a much longer get-in time than we had, typically afforded to more traditional shows (usually eight hours on the first performance day). Our goal was to transfer the set layout, with all its tactile floor markings for the actors and stage managers, from one venue to another to make them standard for access purposes, but invariably each venue presented many differences. According to the schedule, the actors would come into a new venue on the day after get-in and do two dress rehearsals followed by a performance in the evening; this proved to be too stressful for a visually impaired cast. I had to insist that the production manager allow us access during get-in day at the final venue to alleviate stress on the cast. As Petra Kupperts notes, 'navigating any kind of space is hard for many disabled people, as well as for others excluded from the public'³²

Achieving total blackout in an ordinary venue is extremely time consuming, and getting it right takes levels of fine tuning as more and more light leaks are inevitably discovered. It was an achievement to get venues to agree to a total blackout in the first place, and this was down to the negotiation skills of the producer and production manager.

As a visually impaired director in need of constant visual feedback from an overstretched team, the process called for careful management, compromise, and painful retractions along the way to achieve the outcomes and valuable learnings that we did. Unfortunately, in spite of this, a disconnect emerged between the director and the production manager, which filtered down to the cast and crew, and which resulted in a divide that ironically ran along an existing disabled/non-disabled fault line in the company, making the on-stage message of *Sheer* (about reclaiming equality in an oppressive situation) disenfranchised from the backstage reality. Carmen Papalia describes an alternative approach to working accessibly, which was no doubt called for:

Accessibility often refers to the disability community and these considerations are engaged through policies and enforcement. This creates dynamics between people – like recipients of support and providers – that don't lead to long-term mutual relationships, which I think are a key part of support that works, and support that can change and evolve over time.³³

It is almost impossible to unpick whether the fractures the company experienced were down to the ambitious nature of the production, the amalgam of a blind and sighted creative team, or the particular personalities and levels of experience of the team involved, which made *Sheer* an immensely problematic show to direct. A combination of all these factors played a part to some extent, and no doubt my intersectional identity as a Black, disabled, working-class woman leading an all-White, half male, half non-disabled team catalysed some reaction. My presence as a visually impaired person in such a critical role, where so many visual decisions need to be made, creates a seeming paradox. However, it can also be said to reflect a 'dismisognoir' in my case: my term for a mix of race-, gender- and disability-based prejudice, influenced by and expanding beyond Moya Bailey's more commonly conceived 'misognoir', which is a term for combining anti-black misogyny.³⁴

Having said this, the key component to emerge from *Sheer* was trust. First, the writer and dramaturge had to trust that they had enough skill to combine the different styles to create something unique and innovative. The venues had to trust Extant as there was no script to use as a basis for booking the show. Extant had to trust that the funding would come through, despite having already begun developing the show. The cast had to trust that a workable script would be delivered in time, that the delivery of all the theatrical forms that were being asked of them would work, and that they could perform it all in this experimental environment with their access requirements met. The stage management and crew had to trust in something other than their eyes, given that they were not able to see the stage. Finally, the front-of-house teams at the venues had to trust Extant to replace their usual audience management procedures with alternative ones for guiding people into the dark.

Beyond *Sheer*

Historically, *Sheer* was a landmark production for Extant, both in terms of its successes and its failures. While the production was not revived,

we did learn from it for future work. We built upon our experience by creating immersive productions that strengthened the company's position in experimental arts practice. Initially we began work with the dark to both liberate visually impaired performers and provide audiences with access to a more visceral theatrical experience. Starting with the cabarets and continuing through *Sheer*, we later expanded this concept into our R/D project *The Question* (2010), which tested a new piece of haptic technology that navigated audiences through a dark theatrical set. This, in turn, informed Extant's acclaimed 2015 production *Flatland*.

A lesser understood development resulting from *Sheer* at the time was the juxtaposition of aerial work and AD; the significance of this pioneering merger of circus with access went on to provide the basis for a whole practice methodology between Extant and contemporary circus company Upswing. This work, and the material it generated, resulted in Extant's landmark 2019 touring production *Flight Paths* and its digital legacy. Additionally, it has offered inspiration for the cabaret performance content of the new performance company Quiplash, set up in 2019 by Amelia Cavallo and Al Lander, and serving the intersection of disability and LGBTQI+.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Oliver and Barnes 1999; Finkelstein 1993.
- 2 Coan 2019, 9.
- 3 Griffiths 2021.
- 4 Coan 2019, 21.
- 5 Extant 2007.
- 6 Cavallo 2015, 127.
- 7 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 172. The authors reference Davis 1995, Garland-Thomson 2009, and McRuer 2006.
- 8 Lawthom et al. 2023.
- 9 Fryer and Cavallo 2022.
- 10 Cavallo and Fryer 2018, 5.
- 11 Cavallo and Fryer 2018, 5.
- 12 Fryer 2016, 17.
- 13 Sealey and Hope Lynch 2012, 62.
- 14 Papalia 2018.
- 15 Cavallo 2015, 128.
- 16 Cavallo 2015, 128.
- 17 Cavallo 2015, 128.
- 18 Alston 2017, 65.
- 19 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 171.
- 20 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 171–2.
- 21 <https://www.dialogue-se.com/what-we-do/dialogue-in-the-dark> (accessed February 2025).
- 22 Bogdan 1988.
- 23 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 174.
- 24 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 170.
- 25 Cavallo 2015, 131.

- 26 Fryer and Cavallo 2022, 91.
 27 Oshodi 2012.
 28 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 180–1.
 29 Cavallo and Oshodi 2017, 182.
 30 Martin 2012.
 31 Machon 2013, 28.
 32 Kupperts 2014, 30.
 33 Papalia 2018.
 34 Bailey 2021.

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5

Architecture Beyond Sight: working with blind and partially sighted people to co-develop design methods beyond the visual

Jos Boys, Poppy Levison, Duncan Meerding,
Zoe Partington and Mandy Redvers-Rowe

Architecture Beyond Sight is a long-term project that aims to challenge architecture's tendency to prioritise the visual over other senses. By enabling blind and partially sighted¹ people to study architecture through an intensive residential short course, we co-explore art and design methods that incorporate other ways of experiencing, imagining and creating architectural space – both to build the expertise and confidence of participants and, ultimately, for the benefit of everyone.

Architecture Beyond Sight is a collaboration between the Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL) and the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, a platform that brings disabled artists together with architectural students, educators and professionals to rethink access and inclusion in creative and innovative ways. The course has been developed and led by blind and partially sighted artists and architects, and in this chapter some of the tutors and participants share their experiences and explore the lessons that are being learnt. These include considering how to create truly accessible study spaces and how designing through multiple modes beyond the visual – such as spoken rather than drawn descriptions, sewing and folding, model-making and performance – brings new insights into how conventional architecture might be taught and practised differently.

Initiating the project

Architecture Beyond Sight is a week-long residential foundation course for blind and partially sighted people interested in architecture. Initiated in London, UK in 2018, it grew out of a collaboration between the then dean of the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment at UCL, Professor Alan Penn (who commissioned and funded the first two iterations) and the DisOrdinary Architecture Project. Rather than seeing access as an add-on to built environment design, DisOrdinary Architecture explores disability and difference as a creative generator, and as a means to critique conventional architectural design practices. Penn was worried that a lot of architecture education is very focused on the visual. Drawings and plans centre on the formal, compositional aspects of built space, so that more sensory and embodied experiences of sound, atmosphere and smell can easily be forgotten. At architectural school the emphasis on visual representations, based on orthographic techniques, also ends up being incomprehensible to anyone who is outside the discipline. By enabling more blind and visually impaired people to enter into architecture and related subjects, these normative practices can be challenged.

In this chapter we will outline how the course was developed and taught across two iterations, consider feedback from its blind and partially sighted students, and review next steps.

Development process

Architecture Beyond Sight's overall goal was to change the culture in architecture schools that excludes blind people and non-visual forms of learning. We wanted to parallel existing art foundation courses by offering strong ideas-led and project-based study; furthermore, we also wanted to explore techniques created by vision-impaired and blind artists and architects to develop and communicate design ideas beyond those normally used in architecture schools (Figures 5.1, 5.2). The aims for our participants were to:

- introduce students to the basics of design, giving them relevant foundational knowledge and skills, as well as becoming versed in 'architectural' language about space, so as to be able to operate more equally;
- teach architecture and design in a way that makes non-visual methods central;



Figure 5.1 A blind participant at one of the Architecture Beyond Sight workshops experimenting with Lego for 3D modelling. *Source:* Jos Boys.



Figure 5.2 Blind creative Mandy Redvers-Rowe (left) and sighted architect Shade Abdul (right) discuss an exploratory design project for a shared working space using performance and audio description. Architecture Beyond Sight development workshop. *Source:* Jos Boys.

- enable blind and vision-impaired people to share their knowledge and creative techniques for engaging with built space and its improvement;
- build blind and partially sighted people's confidence in their abilities to make and to design;
- enable students to develop a portfolio of work relevant to their needs;
- support course participants in their next steps for personal and career development.

We also wanted to reach both the professionals who give blind students careers advice and sighted educators in built environment education, to demonstrate the possibilities of architectural study and employment and to dispel myths that blind and vision-impaired people are not capable of doing architecture, art or design.

An initial team was formed by the co-directors of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, bringing together blind and partially sighted creatives to contribute to different aspects of development and delivery. The team included Mandy Redvers-Rowe, Rachel Gadsden, Lynn Cox and Liz Porter. We spent three intensive days scoping the issues and co-creating the course design with blind and partially sighted creatives, and sighted architecture and design tutors, with guest blind architect Carlos Mourao Pereira (Figure 5.3) joining us from Portugal. We undertook an exploratory mini-design project, asking blind and sighted pairs to co-create a shared working space. We also explored alternative modes of designing, from physical modelling (Figure 5.4) to full-size body sketching (Figure 5.5), to performative audio descriptions, to drawing on paper placed on a rubber mat to create a visual line on one side and a raised edge on the other.

At the same time, the Bartlett's making workshop team, B-made, joined us to co-explore how to make their workshop, machinery and tools more accessible. Whilst some of this was about enabling functional accessibility, it was also about attitudes. Because health and safety is often used as a reason to exclude blind and partially sighted people from making environments, blind designer-maker Duncan Meerding, alongside Zoe Partington, worked with workshop technicians to help change their thinking, dispelling myths around the creative capabilities of the vision impaired.



Figure 5.3 Blind architect Carlos Mourao Pereira (foreground centre) and Professor Alan Penn (foreground right) talk and share objects. Architecture Beyond Sight development workshop. *Source:* Jos Boys.



Figure 5.4 A student's exploratory model of an interior design with external ramp, constructed from drinking straws and pipe cleaners. Architecture Beyond Sight development workshop. *Source:* Rachel Tyler.



Figure 5.5 Architecture Beyond Sight exploratory drawing exercise, led by partially sighted artist Rachel Gadsden. *Source:* Tim Haydon.

Testing the course

Following on from this, the team created and ran the first Architecture Beyond Sight foundation study week in July 2019, led by blind American architect Chris Downey (Figures 5.6, 5.7) and designer-maker Duncan Meerding, together with blind and partially sighted tutors Zoe Partington, Mandy Redvers-Rowe and Rachel Gadsden. Blind and vision-impaired student participants were split into two groups: one focused on a workshop-based design project called ‘A Box of Feelings’, and the other engaged in studio-based design work titled ‘The Minimum Conditions for Creativity’. The programme included introductory skills-based activities, visits to the British Library and UCL’s Institute of Making,² and a talk by David Serlin on Helen Keller.³ Students developed a wide variety of creative responses to the design briefs they had been given and presented their work formally at the end of the week, to be reviewed by a range of blind and sighted guest tutors.

Both the course and the residential accommodation in nearby student housing were provided free of charge, and sighted architectural students as paid volunteers operated as a support team and provided guiding as and when required.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not possible to run the course safely again until the summer of 2022. With reduced funding,



Figure 5.6 Blind architect and guest studio tutor Chris Downey talking to one of the course participants. Architecture Beyond Sight study week. *Source: Jos Boys.*



Figure 5.7 Course participants working on their studio projects, supported by Chris Downey (background centre) and Mandy Redvers-Rowe (standing, far right). Architecture Beyond Sight study week. *Source: Jos Boys.*



Figure 5.8 Blind furniture designer and guest tutor Duncan Meerding (left), working with a student in the B-made workshop. Architecture Beyond Sight study week. *Source:* Jos Boys.

we had 11 blind and partially sighted students: five working with Duncan Meerding in the B-made workshop (Figure 5.8), and five working with Zoe Partington and Mandy Redvers-Rowe in the studio. This time Duncan was supported by Poppy Levison, a former student on the initial course who by then had almost completed her undergraduate studies in architecture at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. The course followed a similar pattern, with the only change being the addition of provided lunches, so that everyone could eat together and have some time for informal conversation.

Learning lessons

With each iteration we asked for informal feedback from the participants, and commissioned films and podcasts to document their experiences. At the end of the week the participants were asked to display their project work (Figure 5.9), and in a final review session they discussed their design projects with guest tutors.⁴ The clearest feedback from both iterations was how participants found the course to

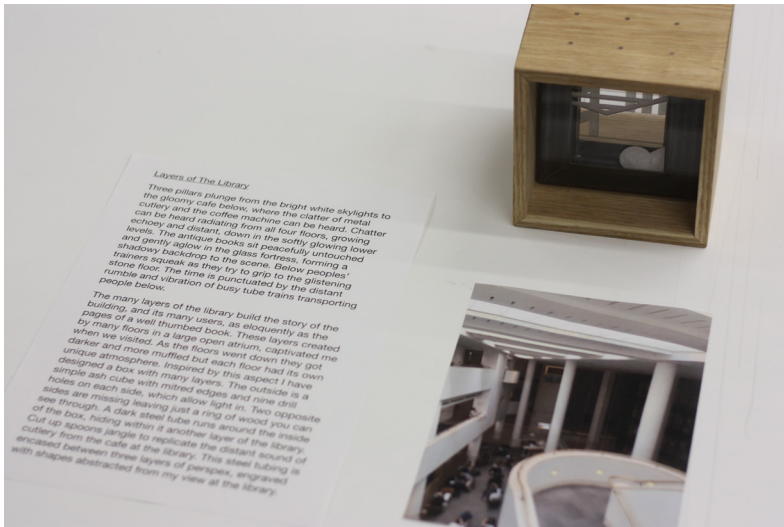


Figure 5.9 Participant Poppy Levison's end-of-course display. Architecture Beyond Sight study week. Poppy made a box based on her experiences of space, sound and atmosphere during the British Library visit. When the box is shaken, cut-up spoons within it jangle to capture the distant sounds of the café. Source: James Green.

be far more accessible than nearly any other learning experience they had encountered, and what that meant in terms of building confidence, a sense of achievement and future possibilities:

Thank you so much for this incredible experience. I honestly can't describe how transformative it has been for my confidence and self-belief, which has been faltering with anxiety about starting university. (Poppy Levison, 2019 participant)

Such a fantastic week full of laughter and fun learning. A week which has served fresh innovative thoughts to my professional mindset, thanks to you for coaching and teaching us. Really looking forward to the next developments in this unique frontier! (Miracle Madurforo, 2019 participant)

Everyone has been amazing, from the helpers to the people we visited at the library and making institute ... [T]he people on the course have made this week more enjoyable than my whole three years doing my degree. It's giving me a purpose this week almost like a job in a creative industry which I missed doing. (Clarke Reynolds, 2019 participant)

I never thought I would have been able to do what I achieved this week but meeting and listening, taking in what Chris, Duncan and Mandy, along with others said, showed me otherwise. (Gavin Griffiths, 2019 participant)

[W]hat transpired exceeded all my expectations. (David Johnson, 2022 participant)

Two of the 2019 students wrote blogs, which give more detailed feedback about their experiences.⁵ Fae Kilburn wrote:

If I'm completely honest and open, I've gone from being nervous, excited to emotional all because I was on my first truly accessible course. I wouldn't normally be this open but I thought it was important that people understand what this course has done for me.

If two days in a workshop can increase my confidence in a workshop environment, imagine what a lifetime of accessibility could do for generations to come. I really hope this course is the start of things becoming accessible and attitudes changing.

This was possible because the course was led by blind and partially sighted creatives, with both lived experience of potential barriers to effective and enjoyable learning, and the crucial professional knowledge and skills to solve problems and come up with innovative ways of doing things. Architecture Beyond Sight is a great example of the important disability principle of 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (Figures 5.10, 5.11).⁶

The project also aimed to improve the accessibility of the Bartlett's and UCL's buildings more generally. Duncan Meerding, Zoe Partington and the B-made workshop team collaborated on improving the workshops to better support blind and partially sighted students, in ways that will benefit their usability and safety for everyone. The B-made team was incredibly helpful, and went on to support another DisOrdinary Architecture accessibility project in 2023, building on the knowledge and expertise gained from Architecture Beyond Sight.⁷

While there was some interest in fostering a more multisensory appreciation of architecture among many Bartlett students and staff, and a popular audio-described tour and a sign-language tour of the degree show in 2019, embedding the course into the architecture school has been difficult. There is little sign that a more inclusive institutional culture will develop, despite some very committed and supportive individuals.



Figure 5.10 Student Mohammad Razlan developing his design, incorporating a prototype moving element – a kind of gate. Architecture Beyond Sight study week. *Source: Jos Boys.*



Figure 5.11 Student Althea Smith developing a textile design for a kite. Architecture Beyond Sight study week. *Source: Jos Boys.*

This also seems true for other parts of UCL, as we struggled to provide suitable accessible accommodation, and a lack of understanding remains about what this should involve.

Moving forward

With a changing institutional context at the Bartlett, we have so far been unable to find further funding for Architecture Beyond Sight. We are taking the opportunity to review the course in terms of sponsorship, recruitment, course content, course organisation, social and learning context, and support resources. Longer term, there is potential for the course to be run in different locations, and in different ways.⁸

To date, Architecture Beyond Sight has been promoted informally through DisOrdinary Architecture networks, social media, and visually impaired-focused media such as BBC Radio 4's *In Touch* and RNIB Connect Radio. The application process has been deliberately lightweight, asking applicants to explain why they would like to take the course (and making it clear that this is not an access consultancy programme, but creatively driven). This approach has been successful in attracting enough interested applicants, whom it is wonderful to have engaged with, but in moving forward we are considering whether such a course should be aimed more deliberately at specific groups, such as blind and visually impaired school leavers. There is also an issue about the variety of people who attend – not because this is a problem, but because such an intensive residential programme needs to support everyone, both in learning and in socialising. This includes the obvious fact that blind and vision-impaired people are not defined by their impairments, and that people's lived experiences, personal preferences and sheer variety of impairments (both within partial sightedness and beyond it) add a richness and complexity that the course does not yet properly explore.

[What I enjoyed was] the people themselves; the variety of backgrounds and life experiences that everyone brought to the table, into the shared space. (Daniel Cartin, 2019 participant)

Given that we were all invited because of our common experience of life with visual impairment, our differences in how we managed both the physical and the social space were dramatic and noteworthy. (David Johnson, 2022 participant)

It is also important to remember that, in general, disabled people are more likely to struggle financially than non-disabled people. Some applicants were unable to attend, despite the course and accommodation being free, because they could not afford train fares or the cost of food during their stay.

We are also discussing the optimum length and timing of the course, as well as its division into workshop- and studio-based routes. For the workshop element, induction into handling machinery and equipment needs time, and the design/making process must not be rushed if it is to be done properly and beautifully. Fitting this into three days (with a day dedicated to introductory visits and another for project reviews) has been very hard. In addition, some participants felt that being asked to choose between learning workshop tools and studio design techniques was an artificial dichotomy, and that they would have liked to have done both.

Unfortunately, any developments require funding. Architecture Beyond Sight is a truly radical approach to thinking and creating beyond the visual, and it will be a real pity if we are unable to continue.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 There are many different terms used to describe people with varying degrees of sight, such as partially sighted, visually impaired and vision impaired. In this chapter we have chosen to move between terms to reflect the various preferences of the different authors.
- 2 With thanks to Sarah Wilkes and Zoe Laughlin at the Institute of Making, UCL, and Ria Bartlett and Richard Warren at the British Library.
- 3 See Serlin 2006; 2025.
- 4 Griffiths 2018; Copsey 2018; Anderson 2019; Levison and Boys 2022; Johnson 2022. See also Hall 2019.
- 5 Reynolds 2019; Kilburn 2019.
- 6 'Nothing About Us Without Us' is a slogan that came into use in the UK through 1990s disability activism, expressing the principle that no policies or other initiatives around disability should be decided without the full and direct participation of disabled people themselves.
- 7 B-made technicians supported a DisOrdinary Architecture competition-winning collaboration with ReFabricate entitled *Seats at the Table* for the London Festival of Architecture in June 2023. Find more details at <https://disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk/archive/seats-at-the-table-2023> (accessed February 2025).
- 8 The course has also had 'spin-offs', including a prototype week-long foundation course for disabled young people in 2023 at ROM for art and architecture in Oslo, Norway, led by Anna Ulrikke Andersen: <https://disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk/archive/rom-workshop-oslo-2023> (accessed February 2025). Additionally, there are ongoing discussions about developing a 'sister' course for Deaf and partially deaf people, title 'Vibrant Spaces', in collaboration with Gallaudet University, Washington, DC.

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6

Philosophical and pedagogical theories on the creative play of children with visual impairments

Simon Hayhoe

This chapter discusses the early phase of a study on the epistemology of creative play pursued by children with visual impairments (CVI) and the development of pedagogies of creative activities related to play. It follows on from previous work on the development of creative art education for CVI, which focused on the development of creative artefacts and the comprehension of artworks and art history.¹

Like the previous model of research, this study concentrated on analytical themes, with these themes being adapted from the literature related to creative play. They included:

- (1) The role of creative play in developing an understanding of the immediate environment and its objects by pretending to be someone else or by creating alternative, imaginative objects as substitutes for real-world objects.
- (2) Cognitive study of the design of toys for CVI to develop a concrete understanding of the world through miniature versions of real-world objects or people (such as dolls or trains to represent real people and trains), analogues of real-world objects (such as anthropomorphised animals or fictional creatures, including teddy bears and Pokémon, which themselves can be physical objects or objects accessed through a computer interface), or the use of deliberately ambiguous building toys to construct alternative real-world or wholly imaginative environments (such as the use of Lego bricks to build houses, space stations, cars and space ships).
- (3) The use of performative creative play to rehearse social or cultural roles, or to understand cultural or social worlds via role play (such

as playing doctors and nurses to understand the role of health care, or playing soldiers to understand war).

An initial examination of the literature revealed that different articles and books saw creative play, blindness and visual impairment in different ways according to their academic discipline or the historical period in which they were written. For example, much of the historical literature suggested that there was no conceptualisation of visual impairment prior to the later years of the twentieth century, with academics and educators only discussing blindness or the imagined notion of being a blind person. Consequently, in order to provide a less ambiguous focus for the study, the following definitions were developed to provide a filter for the selection and interpretation of the literature:

Creative play: This is an activity that leads to some form of learning that has not been prescribed by an educational system, or a form of play that does not merely lead to the reproduction of an object, thought or action. For example, creative play might be a child building a sandcastle in a unique way by hand and after experimentation, and then using a bucket to produce many sandcastles in a unique pattern. By contrast, non-creative play might be simply using a sandcastle bucket to create a single sandcastle while being instructed by someone else on how to fill and turn the bucket. Note that non-creative play may lead eventually to creative play, and thus non-creative play may have a role in developing later creative activity.

Blindness: This is a state of living without sight, or rather living with minimal visual perception. For example, a person may be able to tell whether the room they are in is lit or without light, as they can perceive its presence or absence. However, the person cannot tell from their visual input alone the size of the room, its details, whether other people are present in the room, or features such as the colour or shape of the room, wall hangings, etc. Blindness in this chapter can also refer to a state of having no awareness of visual concepts that have not previously been taught or experienced. For instance, a person may not have experienced colour or the concept that objects in the distance look smaller than those close to.

Visual impairment: This is an umbrella term referring to any form of permanent impaired vision that cannot simply be corrected by

glasses, ranging from partial vision (such as lacking peripheral or central vision, patches where vision is lacking or loss of experience of colour) to complete blindness, where an individual has no experience of sight.

The study used grounded methodology to develop its data collection and analysis simultaneously. Data was collected through literature searches using keywords related to blindness, visual impairment and creative play, and Boolean searches were conducted in three phases of analysis: open, axial and selective. This process was styled on the model of previous grounded methodology used in parallel historical and present-day systematic reviews.² This literature was sorted into two different forms of data:

- (a) Primary source historical literature, which included early philosophical essays, historical school reports, early philosophical discourses via correspondence (where they existed), and historical newspaper or magazine articles reporting first-hand accounts of creative play by CVI.
- (b) Secondary source academic literature, such as academic articles and books that reviewed or analysed the work of others, textbooks that described or discussed the application of theories of creative play and specialised in the education of CVI, research reports evaluating creative projects featuring CVI, and websites of major organisations or non-governmental organisations supporting the education or development of CVI.

Throughout the study, data was analysed through the epistemological model of disability, which features the notion of passive and active exclusion from cultural activities through institutional policy and practice.³ This epistemological model is based on three core ideas regarding the causes of exclusion of people with visual impairments from activities that are thought to be based on vision:

- (1) Exclusion is founded on the processes of knowledge creation about people with visual impairments, and this knowledge often does not account for or reflect the lived experiences of people with all forms of visual impairment.
- (2) Academics and intellectuals theorising people with visual impairment tend to stereotype people's impairments and behaviour, or if they have a visual impairment themselves they tend to expect

the experience of all people with visual impairments to be similar to their own.

- (3) The knowledge that is created by academics and intellectuals is also influenced by external social and cultural biases, such as religious or political beliefs or economic necessity.

These three factors lead to a social and cultural unevenness in theories of visual impairment and blindness; that is, there is no cohesive understanding of blindness that all people have agreed on at all times. Thus, as stated above, different philosophical and academic eras have developed unique paradigms of theory that have affected the support of people with visual impairments at large and the willingness of service providers to develop inclusive pedagogies or ways of providing knowledge that will advance the needs of people with visual impairments.

According to the epistemological model of blindness, the exclusion of people with visual impairments as a result of this unevenness in knowledge is of two types: passive exclusion and active exclusion. Within this framework, active exclusion can be seen as having three observable forms: violent and aggressive acts, such as eugenics or segregation;⁴ acts of oppression based on race, class or gender;⁵ and marginalisation that is observed in openly expressed beliefs about the inferiority of people with visual impairments or other forms of disability that are felt to be distasteful and deviate from social norms.⁶ By contrast, passive exclusion is felt to be a subtle, less overtly aggressive and often almost socially acceptable form of exclusion (although arguably as dangerous as active exclusion in many circumstances), as it is seen to be common sense to many who think it. Consequently, passive exclusion is observable in academic attitudes to disability, and it homogenises the notion of a range of diverse and unique impairments as a single form of disability. Thus, the knowledge that is said to lead ‘scientific’ and ‘philosophical’ thinking is often based on forms of knowledge that started out as the bigotry of earlier eras.⁷

What now follows are the three stages of analysis of grounded methodology, discussed in discrete sections. The chapter ends with a conclusion and recommendations for the future.

Open coding findings: anomalies in the theories of blindness

Observations of the anomalies in creative play and the development of pedagogies show that there are epistemological anomalies in the

development of a philosophy of blindness and visual impairment in the modern era as it relates to the traditional sightless theories of creative play for CVI. For example, a recent survey of visual impairment in the United Kingdom suggests that most people registered as having any form of visual impairment still have significant visual experience, with only 13 per cent of those registered being diagnosed as having a ‘severe impairment’ (that is, an impairment that makes vision less important than any other sense).⁸ In addition, research in the UK and the United States has observed that museum visitors with visual impairments like to exercise their vision and often show a preference for viewing visually striking artefacts over tactile objects during visits.⁹

By contrast, and in common with the characterisation of passive exclusion, early theories on the abilities of CVI often utilised various national and religious categories and assumed that CVI had no visual experience at all. These theories often related to what would later be known as politically and religiously motivated Enlightenment philosophies. They were said to be particularly influenced by the writings of those who stood against the mainstream orthodox religion of the time, and radically discussed the nature of tactile and audible perception as an analogue of sight in order to stand in opposition to mainstream theology and its related political ideology.¹⁰

For instance, arguably the most discussed philosophy of blindness of the Enlightenment (generally taken to be the period from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century) started with a speculative question posed by the Irish philosopher William Molyneux to the English philosopher John Locke, with this question appearing in the second edition of Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*.¹¹ Molyneux asked whether a person’s perception was learnt or inherent, and if it was inherent – a major tenet of the Catholic faith – whether a person born blind would immediately recognise something they had previously touched as soon as they were given sight and when the object was placed at a distance. This question provoked a debate on all perception and thought, with Locke and others such as Berkeley and Hume arguing that perception was learnt and that the imagined man born blind would not be able to understand the visual world upon gaining sight – a theory that would subsequently lead to a belief in the material deficit of blindness.¹² As Molyneux wrote in his letter:

A man being born blind and having a globe and a cube, nigh of the same bigness, committed into his hand, and being taught or

told, which is called the globe and which the cube, so as easily to distinguish them by touch or feeling; then both things taken from him, and laid on a table. Let us suppose his sight restored to him; whether he could, by his sight, and before he touch them, know which is the globe and which the cube? So whether he could not reach them though they were removed 20 or 1000 feet from him?¹³

Axial coding findings: the translation of early philosophies into practice

Although these early philosophies did not feel that CVI experienced – let alone understood – vision or visual concepts, there were also positive aspects in Enlightenment thought regarding the capacity of non-visual perceptions. In particular, Descartes and Diderot suggested that touch and sound could successfully substitute for sight, a theory that buoyed the founders of the earliest educational institutions in the eighteenth century to introduce elements of non-visual play into their curricula.¹⁴

These theorists, who were notable writers and philosophers in their own right, proposed that if CVI had the ability to comprehend through touch and sound in a manner even similar to those with sight, then intellectual ideas, literacy and performing music were equally possible. Subsequently, these early educational theorists proposed a curriculum that would open up the world of literature, music and vocational crafts to CVI as well as sighted children, and could lift poor CVI off the streets of major European cities, where they were often found begging.¹⁵ One of the earliest theorists on education and play for the blind was Demodocus, a visually impaired philosopher who named himself after the blind poet in Homer's *Odyssey*. He wrote about the capacity of other people with visual impairments:

There are few sciences in which the blind have not distinguished themselves. Even those whose acquisitions seem essentially to depend upon vision, have at last yielded to genius and industry, though deprived of that advantage. Mr. Saunderson¹⁶ ... has left behind him the most striking [evidence] of astonishing proficiency in those retired and abstract branches of mathematics which appeared least accessible to persons of his infirmity.¹⁷

Unfortunately, despite the positive views of these early Enlightenment theorists, literature on the development of early institutions suggests

that others in these institutions not only treated the perception of CVI as non-visual but also often saw touch perception in particular as a lesser form of sensory perception. Literature produced by many of these institutions cast doubt on the intellectual and moral equality of CVI, and questioned their moral and intellectual worth to the outside world. Much like institutions for those with sight that educated the so-called ‘underclasses’, such as beggars, these institutions emphasised the need for morally inspired hard work to achieve redemption, with no space for creative play (or indeed active encouragement of participating in play). Instead, the focus was on vocational handwork, bible readings, rote learning of literature and religious music. For instance, as this excerpt from the annual report of the Bristol Asylum for the Blind at the beginning of the nineteenth century suggests (curiously written in verse), the darkness of blindness that excluded CVI from knowing the beauty of the natural world and the work of God could be substituted through the hard moral work practised in the institution:

Hard is their lot,– with poverty they stoop,
The shades of darkness on their eyelids dwell,
They know not how to chase the mystic spell.

View nature’s soul! doth not that god of day
Pour in delight upon the visual ray?
View flora’s beauties in their gay attire,
Say, do not these a secret joy inspire?

The charms of nature, and the works of art,
To different minds their various joys impart;
Save where the darken’d optics ne’er could learn,
Objects of arts, or nature to discern.

This night of nature striving to illumine
By their honest toil, to cheer this visual gloom.¹⁸

The first institution to actively promote creative play for CVI in Europe was the Royal Institute for the Blind in Vienna, founded by Johan Wilhelm Klein in the early nineteenth century. Klein, a pioneer of the Austrian movement for moral creative handwork, argued that a creative form of handwork and physical exercise was needed to encourage moral behaviour, prevent what was felt to be sexually deviant behaviour (which he felt the blind were particularly susceptible to), and stimulate

what was felt to be positive emotional development. As Klein stated on this issue:

Wooden animals and similar play things he [the child with CVI] will enjoy no less than any other children and at the same time he will exercise his hands while playing with them ... Once a blind child can walk, he will soon point out by himself what needs to be done to cultivate his mind. He will observe by touch all objects in his environment and like seeing children will ask many questions about them.¹⁹

Klein's theory of creative play gained growing international respect during the middle years of the nineteenth century and was eventually incorporated into curricula in other parts of Europe and in North America. It was introduced into the United States by S. G. Howe, the first principal of the school that would later become the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, following his early visit to Vienna.²⁰ Similarly, in England Klein's theories of creative play were introduced into the Normal College and Academy of Music (in Norwood, now in South London) by its headteacher, Francis Joseph Campbell, formerly a teacher at Perkins, and its founder, Thomas Rhodes Armitage – a British surgeon who visited Vienna as a surgeon and later founded the British and Foreign Society for Improving the Embossed Literature of the Blind (now the Royal National Institute of Blind People). While all these institutions – including the Viennese institution – engaged in vocational handwork and music to prepare CVI for careers following their education, children were also increasingly given opportunities to play, both at a very young age and as respite from their academic and vocational studies.²¹

I have known a blind child who constructed mountain ranges, mud forts, cottages – in fact, a whole village, with a church, shops, and ordinary houses; even modelled men and women, invited them to a party, and then to mud pie and cakes.²²

Klein's theory of creative play continued to develop through the nineteenth century, and appeared to become an element not only in the new wave of schools for the blind founded around the mid-nineteenth century, but in also the more traditional schools, including those founded in the eighteenth century.²³ In the early years of the twentieth century, English and US museum courses extended this idea by introducing object-based creative play through touch, although they continued to

exclude visual references such as colour or two-dimensional imagery in toys and the mode of play.²⁴

As the twentieth century progressed, the development of tactile-based creative play gained momentum, becoming part of the general curriculum in many schools in Europe and North America. This shift was supported by unions and associations of teachers of the blind, as well as the development of national reports and handbooks.²⁵ For instance, as the UK College of Teachers of the Blind proposed in its 1936 report: '[Handcrafts] should take the form of the expression of the child's own ideas. If handwork is the outcome of a project such as "the home", "the garden", "Christmas", the child's work will be a purposive fulfilment of his felt needs.'²⁶

These findings raised the following question in the axial phase of analysis: *Because blind students had a separate pedagogy based on an assumption of their perceptual and cognitive inferiority, did the development of later theories of creative play continue to lack visual references such as colour and two-dimensional images, and a greater belief in the ability of CVI?*

Selective coding findings: the continuation of passive exclusion?

In answer to this question, literature on the development of the theory of creative play up to the early years of the new millennium reveals elements of passive exclusion in both its focus and assumptions. Principally, although I observed that the literature on pedagogies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries was more sophisticated and multi-faceted – moving beyond treating CVI as a single group of children – it suggested that CVI were still being excluded from mainstream creative play environments and pedagogies. Furthermore, academic authors suggested that this exclusion was having a negative effect on their learning development.

For instance, studies in this era showed that CVI only tended to be behind in their play development before equitable educational interventions or when they had regulated or poor developmental support, speculatively related to a lack of intervention or stimulation from outside sources or being treated as cognitively different.²⁷ As Warren observed in his 1994 book *Blindness and Children: An individual differences approach*, many subjective studies claiming that CVI were incapable of creative play were based on observations of these children in controlled or residential

conditions. However, as he also suggested, objective empirical studies had a more representative understanding of the positive capacity of CVI in creative play:

The studies that have used objective evaluations of play have, in contrast to the subjective reports, tended to find negligible differences between blind and sighted children. On the other hand, while there are typically dramatic differences within groups of children with visual impairments, there has been little success in identifying variables associated with greater or lesser creativity in play.²⁸

However, although the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries produced research that theorised CVI as individuals whose cognitive and emotional development was largely dependent on their individual backgrounds, there were still object-based theories that focused on the assumption that all CVI were sightless or devoid of visual experience. For example, findings on the structure of research showed that numerous researchers, most of whom were writing prior to the twenty-first century, made similar assumptions to those of the early theorists featured above, and focused on total blindness alone.²⁹ Similarly, literature on contemporary toy design often assumed that CVI responded only to touch and auditory inputs and needed only relatively basic sensory inputs in their creative play – and in the case of deaf-blind children, there was an assumption about a total absence of vision and sound, and that all children thus needed was basic touch perception.³⁰ Likewise, digital games designed specifically for CVI focused almost entirely on auditory inputs, and again many technologists assumed that all visual references and symbolic communication should be removed from digital interfaces assigned to CVI.³¹

Concluding arguments on the nature of creative play and CVI

There can be little doubting the benefits of multi-modal creative play that utilises all a child's senses, whether they are sighted or visually impaired. Beyond the obvious social value of playing with others, creative play that engages multiple modalities is a well-established instrument of emotional, linguistic and cognitive development. It helps children develop physical skills, such as balance and spatial awareness, and enhances perceptual awareness of local objects and environments.

Without these skills, any child can feel excluded within their school environment and will find it harder to develop meaningful relationships with their outer world in adulthood, whether these skills help them navigate their working lives or make them feel part of a community.

Creative play that engages multiple modalities has a particularly important function for CVI. It helps to develop an awareness, comprehension and practice of aesthetics that makes all humans value their own production and engage with ubiquitous elements of their cultural environment. Importantly, multi-modal creative play not only stimulates the imagination of CVI but also helps to stimulate conscious and sub-conscious imagery that engages the processing of mental concepts and encourages and motivates CVI to innovate, think visually and non-visually, and feel a sense of independence. These are often overlooked principles of human development that are taken for granted by people with sight.

With this need for multi-modal creative play in mind, it is important to understand that theories of creative play have undergone generations of evolution, with their foundations in the history of philosophy and with their most influential intellectual axioms coming from the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These philosophies and the theories of creative play that they generated, however, were often influenced by unobjective external influences such as political and religious biases, and the stereotyping of CVI as a homogenous group who were sightless and had no experience of vision.

Furthermore, it has also been assumed that the development of CVI was impacted more by their visual impairment than by their individual personal and social development. While many contemporary researchers have moved beyond these assumptions, many others (particularly those in the field of technology) continue to cling to them. As a result, passive exclusion from personal and emotional development continues to affect many CVI, in contrast to their sighted counterparts.

So, what is now needed to reduce passive exclusion caused by inaccurate and stereotypical theories? First, the development of practice in creative play should place less reliance on object-based play with sightless stimulation alone, which assumes that all CVI have no visual experience. Instead, we need more multi-modal and multi-sensory forms of creative play that encompass and utilise all the senses in concert, not only for CVI but for all children. Secondly, we need to develop theories of CVI and creative play that recognise a child's individual needs as a member of a family or as a part of a unique community based on many facets of their background, not an all-consuming visual

impairment. Finally, research on creative play and CVI needs to balance individual physical, social and cultural needs in order to consider CVI as children first and foremost, with infinite complexity and personalities and needs formed from lives that are only partly influenced by their visual impairments.

Notes

- 1 Hayhoe 2008.
- 2 Hayhoe 2020.
- 3 Hayhoe 2016.
- 4 Barnes and Mercer 2003; Pfeiffer 2002; Reinders 2008; Tilley et al. 2012.
- 5 Oliver 2001; 2013.
- 6 Hehir 2002.
- 7 Ferretti and Glenney 2021; Ravenscroft 2019.
- 8 RNIB 2021.
- 9 Hayhoe 2013; 2017.
- 10 Jay 1994; Paulson 1987.
- 11 Locke [1694] 2008.
- 12 Ravenscroft 2019.
- 13 MS Locke, c16 ff. 92–3. Letter from Molyneux (William) to the authors of the *Bibliothèque Universelle*, 7 July 1688. Reproduced from the Correspondence of John Locke, John Locke Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
- 14 See, for instance, Descartes 1988; Diderot 1916.
- 15 Demodocus 1774; Haüy 1889.
- 16 Professor Nicholas Saunderson was blind from early childhood, and later became the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at the University of Cambridge.
- 17 Demodocus 1774, 681.
- 18 Bristol Asylum for the Blind 1800, 1.
- 19 Klein 1981, 157–8.
- 20 Koestler 2004.
- 21 See, for example, Farrell 1956; Koestler 2004; Normal College 1883.
- 22 Normal College 1883, 55.
- 23 See, for example, Bristol Asylum 1887; Illingworth 1910.
- 24 Charlton Deas 1913; Coon 1941; Bartlett 1955.
- 25 See, for example, College of Teachers for the Blind 1936 and 1956; Jones 1970.
- 26 College of Teachers for the Blind 1936, 107.
- 27 Rogow 1983; Pérez-Pereira and Conti-Ramsden 2013; Lieberman and Mac Vicar 2003; Recchia 1997; Celeste 2006; 2007; Zanandrea 1998; Skellenger and Hill 1994; Warren 1994.
- 28 Warren 1994, 191–2.
- 29 Wills 1968; Sandler and Wills 1965; Tröster and Brambring 1994; Adelson and Fraiberg 1974; Finn and Fewell 1994; Skellenger et al. 1997.
- 30 See, for example, Capozzi et al. 2012; O'Bryan et al. 2012.
- 31 See, for example, Carvalho et al. 2012.

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Part III

Access *as* praxis

7

Moving towards touch: the ambulatory aesthetics of description

Amanda Cachia

Creative access is an important tool to deploy within a critical disability curatorial practice because it elevates and complicates our rudimentary, though important, understanding of access in the museum. It embodies both conceptual and physical possibilities: the very idea of access can be discovered in an artist's work, and can be fruitfully curated into exhibitions; at the same time it can be incorporated into projects under the leadership and imagination of the curator. Creative access therefore calls for curators to weave a new aspect into their practice, one that demands consideration for a greater diversity of bodies – represented not only through the complex embodiment and consequently the objects of the artists with whom they work, but also by the audience themselves who visit the museum and consume their ideas.

I use the term 'creative access' interchangeably with other terms, such as 'access-as-praxis' and 'access aesthetics'. All these terms have the same meaning. The notion of 'the aesthetics of access' was first coined by Deaf theatre director Jenny Sealey in the late 1990s.¹ Sealey, the CEO and artistic director of Graeae Theatre Company, a disability-led company based in the UK, sought to incorporate audio description and sign language interpretation into the overall dramatic language of theatrical productions. I'm pleased that her innovation has now trickled across numerous platforms, including the visual arts, music, dance and writing.

In this chapter, I reflect on a series of exhibitions over the last decade that offer my foray into creative access, which has influenced new generations of practitioners in profound and exciting ways. I argue that my work in creative access has played an important role in helping to spawn a new artistic genre and movement of disability art, and

that creative access must be embraced by galleries and museums as a sustained means to engage with disabled artists, disabled audiences and the general public at large. This is because I believe that creative access works as a way to thoroughly activate museum workers, artists and audiences. I focus particularly on how I have incorporated audio and image descriptions and haptic activism into my projects. The chapter attempts to show what creative access has been and what the possibilities have been so far, based on my own curatorial experiences and observations. Museums are largely missing out on creative access, and this chapter makes this reality vivid.

Creative access extends from the generally understood meaning of 'access', which is the ability to approach and use something. According to media studies scholar Elizabeth Ellcessor, access typically encompasses qualities of ease, which might involve, for example, 'user-friendliness of a system, or financial affordability'.² In the context of a critical curatorial practice, where curators are understood as providing access to an audience in terms of an exhibition's content through objects, ideas and text, adding the word 'creative' to curatorial access has a political agenda. First, the idea of creative access is manifold. On the one hand, the goal of creative access is to advance a more complex curatorial model for contemporary art exhibitions that can be made accessible to an array of complex embodiments, where, for example, sign language, captioning, and written and audio translations of sound and image are embedded into the material, structural and conceptual aspects of an exhibition. On the other hand, creative access also means an active curatorial engagement with artists who use this notion of access as a conceptual framework in their practice, so that a curator's notion of access and an artist's interpretation of access are conflated and juxtaposed in an exhibition, providing a dynamic dialogic exchange between the physical and the conceptual, or the praxis and the theory.

Creative approaches to audio description

In this section, I will share how I have incorporated audio description into my curatorial praxis to give the reader an institutional perspective on how this can be done. To my mind, the process of developing audio descriptions for the numerous exhibitions I have curated has expanded ideas of what audio description can or should be. While industry templates or models exist for 'good' audio description, I also believe that audio description can become a collective process, with crowd sourcing,

exchange, networking and multisensorial narratives commingling to produce a more participatory effect. To this end, in, for example, *What Can a Body Do?* (2012), *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* (2013) and *Script/Rescript* (2022), I invited artists, students and other stakeholders to develop audio descriptions of the works. The students used a free online voice recorder (vocaroo.com) to create flexible MP3 files of their descriptions.

I believe audio descriptions can be independent works of art in themselves, carrying their own weight and space and serving as extensions of the artist's work, with each party in the process increasing awareness of thinking critically about a fuller spectrum of audiences and how they might access their art beyond the ocular. This is especially true for artists who might identify with a particular disability, but who neglect to think beyond the implications and challenges of their own embodiment.

One might mistakenly assume that artists with disabilities form one large, homogenised and unified group, but, as with any other minority group, silos and divisions occur within various disabilities too. Recording audio description might also offer the artist, student and curator a richer and more complex means of thinking about their artmaking process, adding new dialogical layers to a work that is predominantly visual or aural. I have always invited artists to be a part of the audio description process as a means to titillate their thinking towards access and how it might form a productive dialogue with their artmaking process, now and in the future. In some instances, some of the artists commented that they had never thought about audio description for their work before, and found the process interesting and useful.

Whenever I invite artists to participate in audio descriptions of their own work, they react with anxiety or trepidation, even nervousness. They remain sceptical and hesitant, and their reactions are evidently bound up with worrying about the so-called right way to execute it. They might be asking themselves: How much description should I provide for each image or frame in a video? How do I describe colour? What are the most important pieces of information about an image that need to be conveyed verbally for a blind person? How should the temporal aspects of a video be communicated if a video is collaged and cut up in a complicated form? Is there a right or wrong way of communicating with the pace of my voice? For example, the now-deceased artist Katherine Araniello, who had never created an audio description before, initially expressed concern about developing one, but ended up thoroughly engaged in the process. She said she found it stimulating because it was different from describing her art in a conceptual way. This is indicative

of how I encourage artists through this way of thinking about audio description as integral to the creative process.

As I worked on *What Can a Body Do?* at Haverford College, Pennsylvania in 2012, the gallery's student staff and exhibition interns, led by Aubree Penney and Michael Rushmore, also wrote and recorded audio descriptions of each piece. Kristin Lindgren says of this experience:

Most students brought to this task a strong interest in visual art but no previous engagement with disability studies. Indeed, some were skeptical that an exhibition focused on disability would be aesthetically and conceptually compelling. Producing an audio description, however, enabled each student to engage intimately with the work of one of the artists and to envision its place in the exhibition.³

Naturally, then, incorporating the voices of the curator, the artists and the students as part of this audio description exercise really meant that the audio description, and consequently the exhibit website, began to function akin to a television, where various channels will instantaneously give you access to a multiplicity of styles, techniques, opinions and sensibilities. Similarly, the website and the various audio tracks and written audio transcriptions gave the museum visitor to *What Can a Body Do?* a plethora of means to engage with the work, through various perspectives.

In 2016, I curated *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* for San Diego Art Institute. This was a multisensory exhibition that aimed to break with ocularcentrism by embracing myriad modes of perception. The project aspired to activate the multisensorial qualities of objects to seek alternative narratives regarding access, place and space for the benefit of a more diverse audience, particularly for people with blindness and low vision. I discuss this exhibition in more detail in the next section for its incorporation of tactile components, but here I will briefly mention how I pushed the creative access of audio descriptions even further than in past projects by asking my artists not only to describe the visual aspects of the image, but also, in instances where it was relevant, to describe the sounds.

One example I'm particularly fond of was an installation by Wendy Jacob, entitled *Three threads an a thrum (for D.B.)* (2016), which was a very personal response to a friend's death. This was a piece where a visitor could feel the vibrations of a cat purring if one was to place their hands on the wall at the entrance to the exhibition. In an accompanying label, Jacob did a wonderful job of describing the sound from this experience, using it as a poetic exercise in tactility and language expression:

A cat purrs at a frequency of 20–30 Hz. The threshold of human audition is 20 Hz, so the cat’s purring hovers just above what we can hear with our ears. The human tactile range, however, is lower, starting at 5 Hz. At 20 Hz it is hard to know if you are feeling or hearing sound, so I would say the sensation is the same. In terms of describing the sound itself, I will refer you to an (old) Scots language expression describing a cat purring. ‘Three threads in a thrum, three threads in a thrum ...’

In the case of a piece of collaborative work by Brian Goeltzenleuchter and Anna van Suchtelen, *Let’s call it grass* (2015), which consisted of a poem, an offset print and an artist-made fragrance, the artists pointed out to me that the fragrance of grass should also be described given that some visitors in attendance might have a reduced sense of smell, or even anosmia, more commonly known as smell blindness. Given the artists’ expertise in olfactory installations, I imagined that they would have a highly attuned ability to describe smells. Brian and Anna did a great job with this and approached the task as if writing poetry. I installed their work on a pedestal, with a braille label appearing to the left of the pedestal and a typed label to the right that offered conventional image description and an outline of how to engage or interact with the work: ‘To begin, find the perfume testing strip on the back of the folded card. Dip the narrow end of the strip into the fragrance. Smell the strip. Open the card and read part 1 of the poem. This work unfolds over the course of one hour.’ Following this was the artists’ description of the smell in italics: ‘*A sharp synthetic green note fades over the course of 15 minutes into an airy, grassy note, which, after 45 minutes, becomes a burnt brown-orange note.*’ I enjoyed this tri-partite classification of a label that pushes and extends what labels can be for the museum, and the fact that this exercise resulted in a fruitful collaboration between the artists and myself as curator.

In the Fall semester of 2022, I worked with a class of students on audio descriptions once again, this time for a project I was curating for the University Art Gallery at San Diego State University. *Script/Rescript* featured the work of 10 artists who use historical and contemporary medicalising scripts of their own bodies to colourfully rescript – or rewrite – visual language attributed to individual conditions of disability. An X-ray, a prosthesis, a cane, a crutch, a pill, a wheelchair tyre and a syringe were among the foundations on which new creative layers of empowered self-described embodiment were built. The work in this exhibition conveyed disabled identity via new mapping, through-lines

and mark-making, wherein the artists rejected pathological archives by injecting their medical histories with memories, lived experiences and sensorial attributes. As part of the coursework for the class I taught in conjunction with the curation of this show, I asked the students to develop image descriptions for each work in the exhibition, along with label copy about the works, which required them to liaise directly with the participating artists. Similar to my approach with audio descriptions and captions in *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, I asked the students to consider more multisensory styles to describe the work. The following is a strong example, by student Crystal Choi:

In the video [*Does This Feel Normal?*], shot from an above view perspective, you see a hand repeatedly banging on a round gray stone with a reflex hammer that doctors would use to hit someone's kneecap to test their reflexes. Every time the stone is struck, it moves to the side just a little bit during the process. The sound reverberates because the table is on top of concrete flooring. The repetition seems to deliver a movement of back and forth of tension and tranquility. The handle of the hammer is metallic, and the head of the hammer is rubber. There is a design of a medical gown on top of the table that extends all over the background. There is an antiseptic smell, somewhat bitter, and hints of the artificial scent found in soaps and cleaners. The video is a minute long and continues on a loop; the short film emphasizes the movement's mechanical repetition. (Audio description for Jillian Crochet)

Choi's description of the video incorporates an account of the visual aspects alongside the movement, in addition to imagined sounds and smells. Her multisensory approach really brings the video to life and animates it well beyond what vision alone can offer, benefiting a diversity of visitors both disabled and non-disabled. My work with the students for *Script/Rescript* was so successful that the gallery decided to make audio descriptions a permanent feature of its exhibitions, accessible to the public through QR codes.

From my powerful experiences in the audio description arena over the past decade, I have learned that translation is personal, subjective and performative, and that information can be lost or gained within each step. Audio description sheds light on the full spectrum of what it means to be human; it is a transformative technology. Artists and curators can and should continue to collaborate with audiences regularly to develop deep innovation within the medium. I'm very pleased that it has become

more and more common for museums to integrate audio descriptions as critical companions to their artwork (the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection database is a good one). However, while a creative access approach has been taken up at a pace I hadn't witnessed previously, museums are still at quite different stages of progress in making this transition.

Next, I address how haptic activism has been an element in several of my exhibitions as another modality of creative access.

Curating haptic activism

In this section, I share my experience of conducting several curatorial experiments where touch was encouraged as I began to build a more multisensory curatorial practice. When I curated *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* for the San Diego Art Institute in 2016, I was especially interested in challenging the ocularcentric modality of curating exhibitions, and the tendency to rely on the convention that objects must be exclusively experienced through vision alone. It was my attempt at curatorial haptic activism, a term introduced to me by the artist and writer Fayen d'Evie (see [Chapters 3](#) and [13](#)). I aimed to allow the visitor to directly touch all works in the exhibition as far as was practicable. The challenge I posed throughout this exhibition centred on the role of the sensorium: imagine learning new information about a body, a material or a place through the sweet taste of ice cream, the gong of a sculpture or a vibration in a wall.

Sweet Gongs Vibrating included the work of 20 local, national and international artists, including one collaborative piece. The artists explored the multi-modal possibilities of sculpture, site-specific installation, video and works on paper, constituting an exciting and accessible template for how one might glean untold accounts of everyday surroundings. Each artist was invited to either contribute extant work or create new site-specific work. Each piece encouraged multisensorial engagement to greater or lesser extents (touching, hearing, smelling, looking), provoking thoughtful critique on the methods by which the sensorium can be activated through modes of creative and conceptual access.

In *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, I wanted to exhibit critical works showing their full range of sensorial and experimental possibilities as they pertain to material, affective and physical engagement with a wide variety of bodies. In doing so, I aimed to persuade institutions to avoid reproducing biases about bodies. My idea was to move beyond the usual

understandings of access and rethink what the phrase ‘visual culture’ means in our society, and how our museums and galleries are arbiters of this culture. In this exhibition I posed the question: what would happen if the museum began to rethink itself as an institution for sensorial culture rather than purely visual culture?

The *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* exhibition is worthy of mention for two important reasons. First, I was able to engage in directing bodies through curatorial activism and design in conversation and collaboration with artists. Second, the exhibition brought up a complex politics of sensorial access that led me to develop a manifesto for how this lexicon of touch needs to be considered and theorised in order to continue this work in a serious and consistent way as part of sensory expansion work within museums and galleries.

To begin my work as a curatorial activist in designing and re-designing art installations to expand sensory experiences, I first engaged with Canadian artist Raphaëlle de Groot and her video installation *Study 5: A new place* (2015). In order to achieve the activation of the modality of touch for audiences that I was seeking in de Groot’s work, I asked her if I could include the original found materials that she had used to create a makeshift head-mask seen in the video. The artist allowed me to place the materials as a disorderly bundle on top of a pedestal, in front of a projection of an accompanying video. This disrupted the flat, two-dimensional visual representation on the wall so that the viewer could not only see the physical detritus of what the artist was experimenting with on her face and head, but could also, importantly, touch it. I wanted the gallery visitor to engage with touching the bundle of scraps – to explore the varied surfaces of de Groot’s papers, ropes, roughly formed pieces of charcoal, plastic and other materials. If the visitor was able to hear and/or see, they could visually observe how their touching actions mirrored de Groot’s touching of the same materials in the video as she covered her head, and/or hear how the crinkle, crinkle, crunch, crunch as their hands touched crumpled paper were echoed in the sounds emanating from de Groot’s same haptics. Extending de Groot’s work in this way was a bid to achieve a heightened level of tactile engagement, and I argue that it is these types of creative access interventions that need to be encouraged as we consider the expansion of the sensorium and haptic activism within our museums and galleries.

I negotiated for the same method of creative access and sensory expansion with another artist in the exhibition. San Francisco-based artist Darrin Martin included a video entitled *Objects Unknown: Sounds Familiar* (2016), where fragmented, layered abstract forms were

projected onto a wall, moving up and down in a long, thin vertical strip similar in shape and function to a film strip. I asked the artist to produce three-dimensional versions of these abstract shapes, so that they could be accessible through touch. The artist decided to use 3D printing technology to create tangible prints of the objects using foam packing material. These objects were animated digitally by the projections, while the accompanying audio track was derived from the same electronic frequencies that had been used to manipulate the objects via analogue processing. Mounted on pedestals that also served as speakers, the printed objects vibrated with the same sounds emanating from their projected counterparts.

Sweet Gongs Vibrating also presented the creative outcomes of a series of workshops convened by artist Aren Skalman in the month prior to the exhibition. In preparation for *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, the San Diego Art Institute had opened its Horton Plaza Project Space to Skalman to use as an open studio/laboratory and weekly workshop space. His experimental workshops encouraged artists and non-artists, members of the Blind Community Center of San Diego and mall window-shoppers to create multimedia, multisensory artworks. The works evoked the myriad experiences of navigating Horton Plaza through the combined use of aural, tactile and visual forms.

The mission of the Blind Community Center is to enrich the lives of blind and visually impaired adults and children, preparing them for a normal, active life in a society that is principally sighted. It provides an environment for personal growth, social integration and interaction, and the development of individual skills and talents. Through tolerance and respect, participants develop a sense of family and community. During the workshops the participants created rubbed drawings, textured sculptures and audio recordings, which were then exhibited as *Horton Plaza Serenade* (2016). The participants included Kristynn Bennett, Lucy Dolan, Cecil Eckart, Malina Gomez, Jane Granby, Lisa Irving, Meegan Nolan, Sharlene Ornelas, Kat Schmitt and Belgin Taboglu.

Despite the success of these newly revamped and now multisensory installations, the politics of tactile access and engagement presented themselves to me and the museum staff very quickly. Just a week after the show's opening, the objects had already been placed under a great deal of stress due to some rough handling. It seemed that once we had given the public permission to touch, they were overzealous in their eagerness to engage. It was not too long before serious damage occurred. In the first major incident, a group of teenagers had come into the gallery during the first week, when admission was free. As one would expect, the

gallery experiences much higher attendance when there is no admission charge, making it more accessible to a diverse public from various socio-economic backgrounds. This increase in attendance means that gallery staff might not always be able to spend time with each visitor, nor are they able to keep a close watch on each individual.

During a particularly busy period, the teenagers entered the gallery and were immediately drawn to the tactile objects in the show, especially the gongs. One individual decided to try swinging from the gongs in Tarzan-like fashion, gripping onto the bronze for support as the thin black rope suspended from the ceiling swayed back and forth. While bronze is a strong material, it wasn't quite strong enough to support the weight of an adult, and within minutes of this activity a bronze gong had snapped in half. The gallery notified me of the damage and I informed the artist of the unfortunate news. The gallery took action by placing signs on the walls instructing visitors on how to engage with the work.

These mixed outcomes from *Sweet Gongs Vibrating* gave me the opportunity to develop a working list of criteria and guidelines that I could implement for future exhibitions of this nature. To begin with, clearly it is important for the curator, artist(s) and venue to work collaboratively on all access components from the ground up. Other criteria include the importance of timing: for instance, all accessible components should be implemented well in advance of an exhibition opening – three months is ideal. Museums and galleries should also allocate sufficient funds in the budget for all appropriate access components as a critical part of the overall enterprise, including funds for education through tactile engagement, even if that means setting up a panel to question what so-called 'appropriate' engagement means in each and every context. These funds might go towards paying invigilators, or, if funds are sparse, then perhaps touch tours can be arranged at a designated time each day under staff supervision. The curator should also have in-depth conversations with the artist(s) about the desired level of tactile engagement in the exhibition and ensure that these specifics are laid out in contract form.

In 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, I was invited to curate a show at the Art Gallery of Windsor (now known as Art Windsor-Essex) in Ontario, Canada. I developed *Crip Ecologies* partly as a response to how the Covid-19 crisis was unfolding, with particular emphasis on how it was impacting disabled populations. It had been several years since I last curated an exhibition, due to the birth of my daughter in 2018. As I began researching this topic, I found that there were many new contemporary disabled artists to discover and meet on Zoom.

Two artists I found to be particularly interesting were Ezra Benus and Yo-Yo Lin, who are both based in New York. I decided to include their work in *Crip Ecologies* because both had taken up creative access approaches in their praxis (and both, I'm flattered to say, were familiar with my writing and my activism on the topic). Both Benus and Lin recognised the limitations of experiencing works of art through vision alone, and as a consequence they had developed further iterations of single artworks – such as paintings or drawings – and created tactile versions for audience members to engage with. Audience members could engage directly with Lin's work, gliding their fingers across the indentations of wood, and explore the thick synthetic wools in Benus's piece. While not all the works in *Crip Ecologies* offered the audience this opportunity to touch, I felt that the representation of tactility was nonetheless important to include, even if on a minimal, though not tokenistic, level.

Tactile engagement was also offered in my most recent project, *Script/Rescript*, at the San Diego State University Art Gallery in 2022. While the level of tactility on offer was not fully satisfactory, it was nonetheless there as an experience for visitors as they navigated the exhibition. It's also a reminder to myself, the museum world and the public that this is an avenue that needs to be further explored – both literally and metaphorically. Sugandha Gupta, Bhavna Mehta and Sandie (Chun-Shan) Yi contributed material samples, which were placed on pedestals or shelves beside their works with instructional signage, offering visitors a micro-sensation of the materials the artists had used.

In the installation *Transformers* (2021) by Dominic Quaglioizzi, visitors were encouraged to touch the actual works of art, using gloves provided by the gallery. These 'transformers' were constructed by stretching used hospital gowns over wooden frames, akin to canvas mounted on a frame. To the left and right of each frame, the artist had attached insect-like arms wrapped in the same hospital gown material using hinges, which could bend and fold back and forth across the breadth of the 'torso' and to its sides. The idea was that the transformer could literally transform, much like the children's toy of the same name. The hang-height of the *Transformers* installation had been adjusted to encourage comfortable engagement for people of various heights – this enabled my five-year-old nephew to enjoy engaging with the work, moving the arms with the gloves on. I look forward to curating more exhibitions in the future where I can centre tactility even further and in a more meaningful way.

Engaging in an encounter of tactility in a museum gives both disabled and non-disabled visitors an opening, and a new advantageous position, where they are empowered through haptic aesthetics and need not rely on discursive or representational regimes in art history to validate or sanction their experience. What is especially important to note is that the tactile realm, while empowering and benefiting a disabled audience, is also equally accessible to non-disabled visitors, including those from various socio-economic backgrounds and class categories. In sum, touch has the potential to become a powerful egalitarian modality if museums provide the resources to educate their public on how tactility can be utilised effectively.

Despite the temporary disappointment that emerged as a result of poor planning and unanticipated reactions from the audience that led to restrictions on tactile engagement during *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, this experience proved to be generative in terms of how to consider intersectional axes of difference within a multisensorial contemporary gallery environment. Museums and their staff can do much to develop these lines of inquiry further, helping ultimately to shift the sensorial regime once again in this century and beyond. If both artist and curator are prepared to engage imaginatively with the work of access, then not only will conditions of narrow standardisation eventually be disrupted as they transform curatorial practice and the museum and gallery experience for the visitor, but vital new approaches to artmaking and thinking will thrive.

Describing and touching new accessible futures

Creative access has both material and ideological components that are meant to stimulate physical, cognitive and sensory functions of the human body. Access is not as one-dimensional as people might think – it can incorporate other sensorial experiences, including tactile elements, sound, captions, audio description and more, as discussed in other chapters of this volume. In the execution of my work, I have found artists to be both responsive and receptive to my ideas, as much as I have been inspired by theirs. The spirit of creative access suggests that it is a fluid process that takes place between curator, artist(s) and exhibition designer so that each party reaches a consensus on what it should mean in a particular time and place for a particular exhibition and audience. In part, this also means that creative access is advocating for a politics within the ordinary curator–artist–exhibition designer dialogical

exchange and beyond, where each party might consider it a necessity to discuss how it will be seen, felt and heard for the benefit of a complex embodied audience. Creative access is not monolithic or uniform, much like the general definition of access itself, which is always going to be variable and dependent on a number of conditions.

The practice of deploying creative access has become a tour de force, to such an extent that this chapter offers merely a snapshot of the innovation that is taking place. The work of creative access continues to grow and is now entering the mainstream at pace. In 2022, as I was beginning work on this chapter, the staff at the Tangled Art + Disability gallery in Toronto, Canada had just co-authored a new issue of the *PUBLIC* journal focusing on 'Access aesthetics'.⁴ *Leonardo* journal released a call for papers for a new peer-reviewed special issue titled 'CripTech and the art of access', which aims to expand the existing scholarship, activism and design practices that centre the aesthetics of access. It will showcase crip innovation and creativity in the fields of art, science and technology.

Creative access now also permeates other art worlds, including dance and theatre, ranging from Dark Room Ballet (a dance curriculum where blind and visually impaired dancers use a range of tools to explore boundaries and patterns of movement) to Kinetic Light (a disability arts ensemble). In October 2022, *Art in America* published its first ever issue dedicated entirely to disability arts and culture, which included a number of artists featured in this volume. In February 2023, I co-chaired with Constantina Zavitsanos the first major series of panels around the topic of gender and the aesthetics of access for the College Art Association conference in New York in collaboration with the Feminist Art Project, a programme run by Rutgers University's Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities. There are multiple concentrations of scholars and contemporary disabled artists around the world who are organising, thinking and collaborating to generate new ways of crafting and instigating creative access. All of this is to say, in Emily Watlington's words, that 'our work is working, and there's a lot more to be done'.⁵

Notes

1 Cockburn 2017.

2 Ellcessor 2016.

3 Lindgren et al. 2014.

4 Bunch et al. 2022, 12.

5 Watlington 2022.

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8

Shaping collective access: community and interdependence in Carmen Papalia's praxis

Àger Pérez Casanovas

Carmen Papalia is a Vancouver-based nonvisual artist. For more than 20 years, he has been developing social practice experiments and curating spaces around his experience as a self-described nonvisual learner¹ that challenge social constructions around 'bodyminds'² by establishing different relationships to sight and visual learning. This chapter shows how Papalia's invitations to occupy the position of a nonvisual learner are materialised in exercises that are never individual, since the artist values 'learning exchanges that are mutual, interdependent and collective', and which take place within 'a strong community of allies and mentors'.³

First, the significance of community will be traced back to Papalia's early work, characterised by a reflection on and critique of social markers of disability and blindness, with a special focus on his first foray into Disability Justice activism via institutional critique, which he made explicit in his statement on Open Access in the arts and culture.⁴

Secondly, the chapter will present how Papalia's interest in the Disability Justice principle of collective access and interdependence has gradually become the touchstone of his most recent productions (2021–3). Papalia's latest project *Provisional Structures* (2022–3) and its two iterations – at the MacKenzie Art Gallery (Regina, Saskatchewan) and at the Vancouver Art Gallery (British Columbia) – will be assessed as a mature configuration in space and time of access art as collective access. In *Provisional Structures*, Papalia draws on scaffolding and falsework to develop a project with shared authorship that enables him to weave a relationship with the staff and communities that are part of the gallery's environment, through emergent strategies that can lead to more critical policymaking and curatorship in cultural institutions.

Uncovering the realm of the nonvisual

In his collection of poems *Visual Inspection*, Matthew Rader writes: “To be sensitive is to perceive finely. A sensitive instrument. To be sensitive is to overreact. One description of electrons is as particles at the edge of a mostly empty atom, hypersensitive to touch.”⁵ Trying to name the unnameable, Rader’s verses convey how sensitivity to the tactile is not an ability that needs to be created or discovered. Rather, it is a reaction we share with many living beings and even inert bodies, down to the level of the microphysical. However, to be fine-grained these reactions need to be trained and cultivated – we need to learn to pay attention to the tactile. Those who have become experts in this training of our sense of touch, such as nonvisual artists or access facilitators, have argued that we require this training because we have been raised in a very specific Western culture that revolves around visual culture – what Levin calls ocularcentrism⁶ – that has led us to a *tactile amnesia*.

For more than 20 years, Papalia has been designing and performing exercises that precisely redirect our attention to our nonvisual senses, arguing that attending to the often dismissed senses of touch and smell should not be conceived of as a loss. On the contrary, it constitutes a unique opportunity to create other kinds of epistemologies: knowledges that are consciously situated, provisional, agreed collectively and, most of all, that take into account and honour how the subjects of knowledge are not distanced, ethereal thinking entities, but rather bodyminds embedded in an environment and intrinsically vulnerable. And we call these knowledges ‘other’ because they are an Other to the epistemology that grounds, and is grounded by, the same framework of values that sustains ocularcentrism as a structure that distributes power and knowledge: the epistemology of sameness, eternity, unity, hegemony, permanence.

The question arises as to why artists like Papalia might want to challenge this epistemology, which has served us well for many centuries. Why should we resist closed systems of knowledge and truth? Why sacrifice a stable ‘tower’ in favour of knowledges that are fragile – mere provisional structures that can be taken down in a single blow? The answer, from the standpoint of otherness, is loud and clear: because the epistemology that has privileged the visual is intimately attached to a subject of knowledge, the so-called ideal, which claims to be disembodied – a pure *res cogitans* (‘thinking thing’) – but, quite on the contrary, envisions a very corporal normate (Garland-Thomson’s term for a fantasy image of bodily health and functioning).⁷ But most importantly, because the only way an

epistemology can be closed and protect its permanence is by espousing death.⁸ And here Disability Justice artists and activists invite us to think whether, if we are to build sustainable futures for living beings, we even want an epistemology of death. It is in the pursuit of lived and enlivening epistemologies that Papalia has designed exercises of social practice that cultivate our sense of touch, contingently leading to structural changes in cultural institutions that can make them more able to sustain life. The artist's commitment to institutional critique can be traced back to his first interventions into museum policy: the process of the unasked-for collective audit of the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2015, and the publication of his Open Access statement in 2018.

The New Access Consortium Presents: A collective audit of the Vancouver Art Gallery was an intervention and exhibition emerging from an uninvited institutional critique, curated by Papalia with Gallery Gachet and Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery. For our purposes, the exhibition and the parallel programming that accompanied it – a symposium entitled *For a New Accessibility* and a series of workshops – marks a turning point in the trajectory of the artist, mainly concerning the guiding question of his practice and the creative tactics employed in the process he employs. If, in Papalia's 'cane-centred period' (with works such as *Long Cane*, *Loud Cane* and *Mobility Device*),⁹ we can identify a core concern about self-advocacy and identity, from the audit onwards there emerges a concern for building a new reality, for dreaming of 'Disabled Futures'.¹⁰ Métis artist and University of Regina visual arts professor David Garneau expresses it poignantly in his review of the exhibition and activities at Gallery Gachet: 'What I witnessed during these three days renewed my faith in the power of art to build and bridge communities, and to subtly reshape the world.'¹¹

The exhibition at Gallery Gachet was the result of a three-month process, during which Papalia had weekly meetings with Arlene Bowman, aly de la cruz yip, romham pádraig gallacher, Taryn Goodwin, Jotika and Myah Catherine Rose Wallace to discuss the different dimensions that made the Vancouver Art Gallery inaccessible for many communities. Collective access, collective liberation and intersectionality can be pinpointed as the central Disability Justice principles of the project, since the tactics were directed by a common goal towards self-liberation from the multiple oppressions enacted by the institutional authority of the Vancouver Art Gallery on bodies which are intersected by many identities – queer, trans, disabled, black and indigenous people of colour. These bodies were disabled in a museum shaped by able-bodied imagination, and the aim of the audit was to imagine conditions where

the access needs of these bodyminds could be met, in such a way that there was room for agency and pleasure.

In Garneau's chronicle, it becomes palpable that in the audit Papalia had assumed both the role of artist and the role of a medium or facilitator for a community of what he calls 'co-conspirators'. In this case, it was a pre-existing community: local artists who were already connected with Gallery Gachet, which is located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. While Papalia's Open Access tenets were used as the framework for the community's meetings, the most striking outcome of the audit was the process itself: Papalia, working alongside the Gachet community, developed a working methodology for assessing the state of institutional access and 'publicness'. The results of the audit were shared with the public in an exhibition at Gallery Gachet, which opened in November 2015 and ran for some five weeks. The exhibition drew on the aesthetics of protest, barricades and demonstrations. It used documentation and archival elements to develop precarious installations that denounced misrepresentations of subjects with disability, as well as the capitalist and colonial agendas and disciplinary structures manifested by existing displays at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The intersectional framework of Open Access was captured by the scope of the audit. As Garneau explains when considering the proposals made by the New Access Consortium:

Some of the responses articulate specific dissatisfactions and their practical remedies include more audio and other aids, scent-free spaces, tolerance for non-typical behaviour, more chairs, free entrance, collect work by living disabled artists. Other works critique hegemonic curatorial and artistic practices ... [that] perpetuate colonial habits, especially if they do not engage Indigenous curators and knowledge keepers. The instructive deconstruction examines the institutional designs that discourage access not only to disabled people but to anyone who is incomprehensible or incidental to its imaginary. A few works transcend complaint and remedy and become remarkable aesthetic experiences as well as critical engagements with the art gallery.¹²

As Garneau notes, the institutional critique performed by Papalia and the New Access Consortium deployed creative tactics that resulted in not only devices for critical thinking and reflection but also 'remarkable aesthetic experiences'. The collective's work went beyond institutional critique; it embraced accessibility as a creative medium, and a practice

centred around a solidarity among bodyminds that had been historically marginalised or barred from museum spaces and galleries.

The framework for assessing access in museum spaces developed by Papalia in conjunction with the Gallery Gachet community in 2015 found its most explicit expression three years later, when *Canadian Art* published Papalia's piece 'An accessibility manifesto for the arts'. The text had a manifesto-like tone, clearly stating its intentions and principles in five Open Access tenets. Papalia's development of Open Access at this point had already broadened the scope of standard top-down accessibility measures to create an all-encompassing intersectional process centred on agency and the capacity to express the access needs of each bodymind – and on the collective ability to understand and adapt to such needs.

If we go right back to the definition of 'manifesto' set out in the *Grand dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694), a manifesto is a piece of writing 'through which a prince, a state, a party, or a person of great standing accounts for his conduct regarding some business of great importance'. And although the purpose of the manifesto – and particularly its enunciative subject – has transformed since the appropriation of the form by artistic movements in Modernity, we could argue that Papalia's accessibility manifesto maintains the aim of accounting for an approach 'regarding some business of great importance' – in this case, collective access that is a necessary condition for collective liberation in the framework of Disability Justice. Salvatore Battaglia emphasises this dual public and political role of the manifesto, defining it as a text 'to divulge matters of interest to the collectivity and news of which the public must be informed'.¹³

In the text, Papalia focuses on the collective interest of Open Access when he frames it as a corrective to a political distribution of bodyminds which upholds disabling social, cultural and political conditions that obstruct agency in museum institutions for many bodyminds. To resist and counteract such disabling, Open Access entails the creation of a community centred on collective access and liberation that can dream of a future built around mutual aid and building capacity for support together, in solidarity. With this purpose of tracing alliances in solidarity, the manifesto serves as a tool of legitimation for Papalia's framework, clearly locating the standpoint of artists and activists working in access as social agents. As Luca Somigli has argued:

[I]f politicians and artists compete for visibility in the public sphere, clearly the legitimating rhetoric invoked by each group

is quite different. While politicians are legitimated in their public role by the electoral process itself, and therefore ultimately by their function as representatives of the ‘people’, for the intellectuals the problem of legitimation is much more complex. It is interesting, in this context, to see the emergence of a form of manifesto writing that, as with the manifestoes of princes and personages of great standing of the definition in the Grand dictionnaire de l’Académie française, is completely self-referential and serves only to legitimize the social role of its issuer(s).¹⁴

Since its publication, the ‘Accessibility manifesto for the arts’ has served as a touchstone for all the experiments Papalia has developed in his practice, and as a kind of collective agreement or clause that all participants avow when engaging in Disability Justice-informed creative access practices. In what follows, I will look more closely at how Open Access entails a rethreading of accessibility that centres interdependence and relationality. Having identified care for the community as the core of Open Access, I will present Papalia’s project *Provisional Structures* as a paradigmatic case study on how the social and agency-centred notion of access conceptualised by the artist can lead to co-creative access practices in museum environments that blur the lines between artist(s) and publics, and between creation and curation.

Interdependence and collective access in the epicentre

Embracing Open Access as a method entails a deep reconsideration of the social ontology we subscribe to, challenging the traditional conception of the individual as an autonomous, self-sufficient entity. Open Access radically centres interdependence – it acknowledges the constant potential or actual vulnerability that bodyminds have in both social and natural environments. It means understanding and valuing that any life form, human or non-human, needs to be sustained, and that in order to lead sustainable lives, we depend on others who care. In terms of social organisation and community building, this shift reshapes how we create bonds with other human and non-human agents and with the environment.

Performing this paradigm shift means rethinking how we construct our world, moving towards a care-centred society where dependency is not seen as inferior, marginal or exceptional, but instead is regarded as the rule of thumb. I insist on placing special weight on interdependence

because I believe that it embodies the central shift proposed by Disability Justice, namely a shift from Western colonial politics of disability towards a *relational conception of politics, knowledge and the constitution of selves*. In her contribution to *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, Eva Feder Kittay develops a position whereby interdependence is placed at the centre: it is an organisational premise which leads to a structure that:

begins with the fact of inevitable dependency and depends on an acknowledgment of our inextricable interdependency. We begin with the relationship that we have all found ourselves in, being fully dependent on a caring person. And that caring person is herself dependent on other individuals and social, economic, and political systems that she requires to sustain herself, her dependent, and the relatedness that dependency care demands ... Any adequate political/social/economic system will need to acknowledge that at the heart of all social organization is the care and protection of dependent people. All else is built around this.¹⁵

In Papalia's Open Access framework, the focus on interdependence constitutes an invitation to think of bodyminds as intimately interconnected living beings that cohabit an environment which they access in different ways. These bodyminds can form a community that gathers to explore their surroundings as *nonvisual learners*, who agree to share such experiences and who become co-creators of a knowledge about how to navigate the world. Therefore, practices within Open Access entail a conception of lived experience, low-level stimuli and high-level complex cognitive processes as a continuum. That is, interdependence aims to transform our understanding of bodyminds phenomenologically, ethically and epistemologically: how we sustain embodied and embedded lives, how we establish relationships with others, and how we make sense of our surroundings in order to develop strategies to navigate the world.

Cynthia Willet has noted how an interdependence-centred standpoint recognises that these strategies usually entail some level of resilience because they offer an alternative that resists the individualistic social constructs that usually shape our relationships with others, such as race, gender, class and sexuality prejudices. Interdependence, she argues, conceptualises 'what it is to be a person first and foremost from our immersions in relationships rather than as an individual apart from these relationships or as a position in a social structure'.¹⁶

Building Open Access spaces relies on a series of tactics, such as access check-ins and time flexibility, which are all sustained by a

basic premise of recognising interdependence as a primary structure of existence. This means that we are embedded in networks of care and sustainability that enable us to go about our daily activities and, down to the primary survival mode, to exist and thrive as both living organisms and bodyminds who take part in social structures and in communities – or, as Mia Mingus calls them, *Pods*.¹⁷ Interdependence in Open Access can be conceptually connected to a vindication of vulnerability that in Disability Justice is expressed with the notion of the *temporarily able-bodied* and *temporarily sane* condition of all bodyminds.

As Asun Pié Balaguer argues, embracing vulnerability constitutes a resistance to the premise of integrity and self-sufficiency upon which neoliberal conceptions of the human are built. It drives us towards a path shaped by ‘the centrality that care must take in our lives, the necessary politicization of pain (as an apology of vulnerability), the generation of interdependence webs, and the acceptance of our perishable bodies as a possibility of relation and resistance’.¹⁸ Embracing the perishable nature of our bodyminds, and the transitory time profile of any social position or phenomenological state we inhabit, is central to Disability Justice’s notion of being *temporarily able-bodied*, a term that highlights that ‘any position is situated, inconsistent, finite’,¹⁹ in that all bodyminds are exposed to disability, pain and illness as fundamental aspects of existence.²⁰

It is this temporary able-bodiedness and sanity – the universal experience of vulnerability – that makes the principle of interdependence, which underpins Open Access, both expansive and universally applicable, extending beyond those who politically self-identify as disabled. The building of intersectional communities that come together to curate, create and experiment from the standpoint of Open Access has been a central pillar in Papalia’s recent works. These works focus on how such communities generate a privileged foundation for designing and organising near futures that can sustain disability arts and culture in museum institutions and, extensively, disabled bodyminds in this world.

Scaffolding crip epistemologies in *Provisional Structures 1 and 2*

The most recent project to be analysed here is Papalia’s long-term collaboration with architect Michael Lis and with a growing community of co-conspirators, which so far has had two institutional iterations: *Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with Vo Vo and jes sachse* at

the MacKenzie Art Gallery (October 2021), and *Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with co-conspirators* at the Vancouver Art Gallery (December 2022–April 2023). I will present the agents and elements of each of these iterations and analyse the common factors that enable us to speak of a processual continuity that brings together the two exhibitions to conceptualise them as a single project.

The first iteration materialised in 2021, when the MacKenzie Art Gallery hosted *Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with Vo Vo and jes sachse*, curated by Nicolle Nugent and realised in collaboration with Vancouver-based architectural designer Michael Lis, who has been cocreating with Papalia since 2019.

At the exhibition's opening, Papalia emphasised that it represented merely the continuation of an ongoing, multi-year journey that had begun four years earlier at the MacKenzie. It signified a reciprocal commitment to shedding ableist and colonial biases – a sustained process rather than a checklist. Papalia articulates the significance of this enduring commitment:

I think my collaboration with the MacKenzie has been ... one of the more ideal experiences and being called in to work with an institution around accessibility since my approach to accessibility and ... the way I understand it is more of an ongoing process, it's something that requires you to have ongoing relationships with communities, and not a checklist, which is insufficient. It's more about responding to the needs in the room at any given time, questioning who's in the room and who's not, and what the social, cultural and political conditions are that are either supporting people to have agency or alienating them. The MacKenzie was a great opportunity to not just jump in and work with staff for a couple of days and then leave ... Over the last few years we've really been building on this conversation about accessibility, leading to this show, as well as the accessibility statement.²¹

As the passage notes, Papalia's collaboration with the MacKenzie enabled him to develop relationships with the gallery's staff and surrounding communities. It was out of these relationships that an accessibility statement considering the access needs of those involved could be developed – always taking into account that this statement was never meant to be a final document, but rather a provisional draft susceptible to modification by virtue of the ongoing temporary negotiation that access entails. In what follows, I will discuss how it bears witness to

a shift in Papalia's practice from institutional critique to dreaming disabled futures. Moreover, *Provisional Structures* performs the building of a community of artists that Papalia brings into institutional spaces as co-conspirators through what I call 'foot in the door' creative tactics.

A scaffold ramp occupies the majority of the gallery's largest exhibition space, winding in a spiral shape towards the ceiling [Figures 8.1, 8.2]. You're asked to move up a wooden ramp, supported by steel scaffolding, and experience the shape with your body. From the ceiling hangs a sound-reducing felt-lined dome that appears to be floating over the top of the entire structure. Under the ascending ramp is a hallway, and a red string connects you from didactic panels to the right of the entrance and leads you into the center of the structure. Upon arriving at the center of the installation, you'll find yourself surrounded by 11 freestanding mirrored columns. In the center of the columns just under 200 sandbags are assembled into curved benches, for you to rest and gather, each printed with the words 'open access'. While seated on the sandbag benches, you can listen to an audio piece about trauma-informed care and communities by artist Vo Vo. This recording was a keynote presentation that Vo gave for the Portland Disability Justice Collective online conference in 2020. The space is lit fairly dramatically with cool fluorescent lighting around the outer edges of the gallery ceiling, and then it's dimmed closer to the center of the sound dome. Running up the wall inside the left of the gallery entrance is an artwork by artist jes sachse titled *take all the time you need*. Over 1,300 small brass-plated metal plaques, each reading 'I need a minute', are installed in columns 10 ft high and 5 ft wide, resembling a donor wall. There is an old worn wooden bench in front of the piece, a place to sit and consider accessibility as a long unending process, one in which the time required is expressed by the person who needs support.²²

As described in the passage above, the two co-conspirators in this installation were jes sachse and Vo Vo. First, sachse's piece *take all the time you need* employs a creative strategy of repetition and appropriating the imagery of donor walls in order to subvert the time profile that governs bodies in museum spaces. As Georgina Kleege points out, museum spaces often demand from us that we spend the least amount of time possible in front of each artwork. In sharp contrast, sachse invites visitors to 'take time' and to consider this time as a precious resource when building



Figure 8.1 Carmen Papalia with a model of the architectural design of *Provisional Structures 1* (2021). Source: Goodweather Canada.

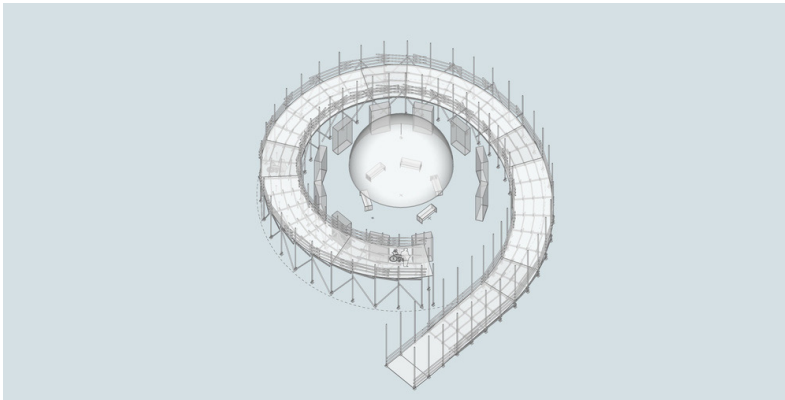


Figure 8.2 Carmen Papalia, *Provisional Structures 1* (2021). Model of the structure. Source: Goodweather Canada.

capacity for care and support with others. Secondly, the exhibition featured audio recordings of Vo Vo reflecting on trauma-informed care and access. For Vo Vo, a trauma-informed lens is:

the assumption that trauma is everywhere, that ableism and trauma intersect in almost every system that we exist in, what the automatic responses can look like, and that anything can be a trigger. So if we recognize that, then we can start to validate and acknowledge people's trauma responses even if they look a certain way, and we

start to understand why people are responding to threat or feeling unsafe in a number of different ways ... All of these are intrinsically linked: trauma-informed care, anti-racism, disability justice, anti-capitalism, abolition and harm reduction. And anti-racism includes dismantling and ending anti-blackness and post-colonial and decolonizing strategies ...²³

For trauma-informed care in a museum space, we must acknowledge different triggers concerning how we interact with each other, both inside and outside the exhibition. These include relational triggers, such as ‘resources being taken away, access being denied, lack of follow-through, lack of response, invasive questions, lack of privacy or confidentiality, touching without consent’, and environmental or physical triggers like the presence of ‘authority figures or authoritarianism, uniforms, atmosphere of a space, a tone, dominant culture norms, indicators of whiteness, ableism or the patriarchy’.²⁴ In contrast to such potentially retraumatizing institutionalised exhibition spaces, *Provisional Structures* aimed to be a gathering space of comfort and care. The mirrors, arranged in a circle around the seating area, are an allegory for reflection and invite visitors to confront their own privileges and the shared responsibilities we all have towards one another, creating an environment for acknowledging our role as members of a bigger community. The curatorial statement insists on the idea of interdependence as the key concept of the exhibition, and it argues that the use of scaffolding is a material tactic to convey the idea of building a more solid future based on the grounds of Disability Justice – a disabled future of collective access:

Provisional Structures encourages us to explore the possibilities that can emerge when we think about a *radically interdependent culture*. Audiences will be presented with the opportunity to build on their own embodied experiences and understanding of Disability Justice, a movement focusing on the need to build capacity within a community for care, without reliance on institutions ... Scaffolding is normally the first step in the construction of strong foundations; in this case, it supports *the transformative pursuit of equity and accessibility*, basic work that organizations must now undertake.²⁵

The *Provisional Structures* installation at the MacKenzie was a punctual materialisation of an ongoing, never-ending practice of access and care that requires a long-term commitment from both ends: the community

and the institution. Following Papalia's provision of a framework for Open Access, the MacKenzie continued to engage with this framework beyond the exhibition, and considered that creating more accessible museum spaces was a basic and urgent necessity for all institutions engaged in exhibiting art.

The second instalment of *Provisional Structures* was staged at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2022–3. *Provisional Structures: Carmen Papalia with co-conspirators* was curated by Mandy Ginson, Stephanie Bokenfohr and Papalia himself. On this occasion, the co-conspirators included Rebel Fayola Rose, founder of Disability Justice Dreaming; Sharona Franklin, Catherine Frazee and Gabrielle Peters from the Disability Filibuster Against Bill C-7; Heather Kai Smith; and Grant Miller and Jonathan Paradox Lee, the instigators of The Curiosity Paradox.

At the core of Papalia's community building is a demand for mutual aid, and that should come from institutions. Bringing a community of disability artists into a relationship network with museum institutions has the potential to unearth and make palpable the ways in which these institutions are currently unable to *hold* Disability Culture. With *Provisional Structures*, Papalia embraced accessibility as a creative medium and practice, which was the generative matrix for both establishing a relationship with his co-conspirators and questioning how the Vancouver Art Gallery could go beyond simply accommodating these artists to generate a safe, affirming and supportive context that could hold them with care.

This community of artists and activists showcased their work within the space of *Provisional Structures 2*, created with architectural designer Michael Lis. The installation space consists of a black, tent-like structure with an oculus at its apex. From this opening, six black balloons ascend, commemorating the daily victims of harm and overdose in British Columbia. Surrounding and 'holding' the tent is wooden scaffolding, resembling the backstage area of a theatre (Figure 8.3). The exhibition text emphasises how the material arrangements centre a notion of provisionality:

Suspension cables run from the wood scaffolds to an oculus in the roof of the tented room, to suggest that the structure has nimbly dropped into place, and consequently can be pulled up and disassembled. The tent form is constructed from custom-made acoustic panels covered in black fabric, to create a dark space where sound is the primary mode of perception, referencing Papalia's privileging of the non-visual senses within his own life.²⁶



Figure 8.3 Carmen Papalia, *Provisional Structures 2* (2022–3). The entrance.
Source: © Vancouver Art Gallery.

Inside the tent there is a seating space made of sandbags with the words ‘open access’ printed on them, arranged to form a circle (Figure 8.4). This space invites visitors to take time to listen to a recording of the virtual event Disability Filibuster Against Bill C-7. Bill C-7 is the medical



Figure 8.4 Carmen Papalia, *Provisional Structures 2* (2022–3). Inside the domed tent. *Source:* © Vancouver Art Gallery.

assistance and dying act; as Papalia explains, the Filibuster was a 24-hour stream made in opposition to this legislation:

[T]his legislation for medical assistance and dying brought in guidelines so that anyone with a disability diagnosis could qualify for or be recommended medical assistance and dying to ‘alleviate’ their condition or provide them relief. This was really devastating for many people but there was just this amazing moment of solidarity and this movement in opposition to this bill ... And there was a statement by Gabrielle [Peters] read on that stream expressing that the medical system is harmful to us as disabled people and it wants to erase us, and it wants to end our lives as a way to provide care or some compassion to us, which is just such a backwards idea. I really resonated with that idea that the medical system is harmful.²⁷

The incorporation of the Disability Filibuster highlights the justice-oriented lens of Papalia’s accessibility practices and connects this iteration of *Provisional Structures* with the trauma-informed care approach adopted in the MacKenzie installation. Care is centred by making accessibility a built-in principle of the whole exhibition instead of an afterthought. For instance, upon entering the gallery, visitors are greeted with an audio introduction to the installation, written and

recorded by Papalia himself. Access devices such as ‘a wheelchair, a cane, noise-cancelling headphones, and a navigational walking stick’²⁸ are provided at the entrance. These measures seek to address the access needs of visitors, making *Provisional Structures* a space of gentleness and comfort where everyone is welcomed in their wholeness, without having to leave any part of themselves behind.

The site-specific installation at Vancouver was accompanied by a dedicated programming space with a resource library. In this space was a small seating area also made from sandbags, with heating pads available. Above the seating area hung a white parachute, emblazoned with the statement ‘Open Access is a Temporary, Collectively Held Space’, a phrase that appears in Papalia’s Open Access tenets. This piece, co-created by Papalia and artist Heather Kai Smith, was first presented at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alberta, in 2019. Papalia also used this parachute during his ‘Open Access: Organizing Accessibility from the Grassroots’ training sessions at the BAK (basis voor actuele kunst) arts centre in Utrecht, as part of the *Trainings for the Not-Yet* series in October 2019. While it remained static in *Provisional Structures*, during the training sessions the group activated the parachute, manifesting how movement can be created through interdependence and collaboration.

In the programming space, monitors screened two videos from the 2020 As We Are: Disability Justice and Community Care Conference, organised by Rebel Fayola Rose: *DeafBlind Cultures* by artist and accessibility worker Korian ‘Koko’ Thomas; and *Black Lives Matter Memorial Garden* by queer Black writer Galadriel Mozee, focusing on their experience working in a community garden. During the exhibition, Rose took part in the parallel programming, leading a series of Disability Justice Dreaming Sessions with local community members in the Vancouver area.

The Curiosity Paradox’s contribution consisted of a reprinting of their 2022 text *Question Access* on small postcards, which visitors could take away with them. In the text, The Curiosity Paradox compares and contrasts two lenses for accessibility: standard access, which consists of compliance with a set of checkpoints; and Access Art, which understands access as an ongoing process of negotiation and improvisation, finding creative solutions to cover the access needs of those who are present. The cards were placed inside envelopes on which were printed shadows of plants from the artists’ garden studio – remembrances of the legacy of past disability activists. Each card was unique, having been printed using Risograph technology. The Curiosity Paradox artists Grant Miller and

Jonathan Paradox Lee stated that: ‘The cards are imagined as a tool for Disabled people to question how our existence actively transforms and contributes to the spaces we inhabit.’²⁹

Finally, the installation extended beyond the walls of the temporary exhibition rooms, colonising the windows of the Vancouver Art Gallery with 846 black balloons that could be seen from the exterior of the gallery on Georgia Street.³⁰ These balloons corresponded to the number of people expected to die from overdose during the four-month duration of the exhibition, according to statistics. The shocking invasion of the public landscape invited reflections on harm reduction and collective care in a moment of drug-use crisis in the Vancouver area.

Considering that both iterations of *Provisional Structures* overlapped in time due to the extensive processes of production, realisation and exhibition they entailed, I will conclude this section by commenting on the creative tactics deployed by Papalia in both of these projects. I argue that *Provisional Structures* belongs to a distinct stage in the artist’s practice, which we could call his ‘architectural period’. This phase is characterised by a focus on changing infrastructures, building communities of conspirators and dreaming of disabled futures. Papalia’s architectural work therefore revolves around the question, ‘What is to remain?’. This concern materialises in provisional instalments of installations that borrow strategies from the field of architecture, like scaffolding and falsework – creative tactics heavily inspired by Papalia’s collaboration with Michael Lis. In *Provisional Structures*, Papalia takes to a radical extreme the ethical theme of how to build collective responsibility around care and access needs, creating, in the present, a dreamlike scenario of what a disability-informed, gentle spacetime would be. The gathering spaces, created to reflect upon care and trauma, are imbued with tactics embedded within the Disability Justice principles: cross-movement organising (bringing together liberatory movements against whiteness, ableism and the patriarchy in the exhibition space), cross-disability solidarity (considering the needs of a diversity of experiences of disability and building capacity for mutual aid around them) and radical interdependence.

Building access: Papalia’s shift toward collective creation

Centring interdependence in creative access, from the standpoint of Papalia’s social practice, entails the building of ‘a strong community of allies and mentors’.³¹ This chapter has shown how the weight of

community, already present in Papalia's early work, informed his statement advocating Open Access in the arts and culture.³² Having reflected on the philosophical considerations of a social ontology that can account for Open Access as a practice that centres interdependence, we have explored how the Disability Justice principles of collective access and interdependence have come to occupy a central place in Papalia's most recent productions, *Provisional Structures* (2022–3). Scaffolding and falsework strengthen the temporality of a community – which includes the staff and the communities that are part of the gallery's environment – that agrees to a shared authorship through emergent strategies that can lead to more critical policymaking and curatorship in cultural institutions concerning access.

The multisensory experience facilitated by the installation invites visitors into nonvisual spaces, cultivating the other senses. But rather than following a didactic impulse to 'educate' able-bodied and able-minded visitors, Papalia's practice in his 'architectural period' seems to depart from an assumption that Disability Culture is epistemically valuable and makes space for more openly political themes. For this reason, Papalia's creative practice continues to disrupt the visual dominance of plastic art exhibitions, creating pleasurable nonvisual access by focusing on touch through the reorganisation of bodies in the gallery space. Within the political dimension of the artistic practices that inform *Provisional Structures*, the most notable shift in this latest period is how Papalia embodies cross-disability solidarity and interdependence through the creative tactic of recruiting co-conspirators, who he then brings into the museum space.

In what may appear to be a contradiction, having made his way into institutional settings and having gained recognition in the art world, Papalia has progressively renounced his role as an author by prioritising collective works. His practice has become increasingly communitarian, and in his most recent works he takes advantage of getting his foot in the door of museum spaces as a creative strategy to build in a space of resistance and collective advocacy, where he brings in a whole host of co-conspirators and demands an agreement between the artists and the institution, stating their desires, expectations and access needs in order to produce the work.

Notes

1 Papalia 2014, 357.

2 Throughout the chapter, the term 'bodymind' is used as a rejection of the Cartesian dualism that understands body and mind as two separate entities. 'Bodymind' is used in critical

disability studies in the sense indicated by Margaret Price: as an organic wholeness of human beings that entails ‘the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called “body” and “mind”’ (Price 2015, 270).

- 3 Papalia 2013.
- 4 Papalia 2018.
- 5 Rader 2019, 59.
- 6 Levin 1993; 1997.
- 7 ‘Normate’ is a term coined by Garland-Thomson (1997). For a definition and history of its usage in critical disability studies, see Reynolds 2019.
- 8 If we defend a dynamic paradigm of life, where we acknowledge the temporal reality we are immersed in as living and mortal beings in constant growth, then stability entails death. Although a photograph of an instant can be useful as an anchor point to make sense of reality, any system that rejects change and establishes itself as eternal and totalitarian rejects the reality of life. An epistemology of death remains oblivious to the instability of any organic system and ecosystem, and claims to be above the situated, embedded, vulnerable and temporary nature intrinsic to bodyminds’ existence, and therefore intrinsic to any social and cultural structure that organises such bodyminds.
- 9 These three works challenge the white cane as a social marker of disability. They transform and defamiliarise the object through creative strategies that replace it with uncommon navigational devices. *Long Cane* (2009) consists of an absurdly long cane that is too unwieldy to manoeuvre. In *Mobility Device* (2013), the cane is replaced by a marching band, imagining radical alternatives to the normative objects associated with blindness. For *Loud Cane 1.0* (2013), Papalia transforms the white cane into an instrument that translates textures into sound, bringing it closer to a musical instrument or a toy than a support device.
- 10 Disabled Futures is a notion that refers to the speculative capacity of dreaming of a future where people with disabilities thrive, avoiding the hegemonic dichotomy of a utopic/dystopian future where disability and illness are either erased (utopia) or generalised in a damned humanity (dystopia). See Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022.
- 11 Garneau 2016.
- 12 Garneau 2016.
- 13 Battaglia 1961.
- 14 Somigli 2003, 50.
- 15 Kittay 2021, 44.
- 16 Willett 2012, 167.
- 17 Mingus 2023.
- 18 Pié Balguer 2019, 19.
- 19 López Gil 2013.
- 20 In her address connecting Disability Justice and Radical Self Love, Sonya Renee Taylor explains how imaginary scenarios can unearth the vulnerability of all bodyminds to occupy the position of the most impacted: ‘If we could figure out how to make a world that worked for a fat, queer, trans, undocumented, disabled, ageing woman of color we could figure out how to make a world that works for everybody.’ Taylor 2019, 31:32–31:55.
- 21 MacKenzie Art Gallery 2021, 18:09–19:30; 20:08–20:32.
- 22 MacKenzie Art Gallery 2021, 9:12–11:40.
- 23 MacKenzie Art Gallery 2020, 19:55–21:47.
- 24 MacKenzie Art Gallery 2020, 18:35–19:36.
- 25 <https://mackenzie.art/exhibition/provisional-structures-carmen-papalia-with-vo-vo> (accessed February 2025). My emphasis.
- 26 Vancouver Art Gallery 2022.
- 27 MacKenzie Art Gallery 2021, 23:10–23:46; 26:05–26:40.
- 28 Kong 2023.
- 29 Vancouver Art Gallery 2022.
- 30 Kong 2023.
- 31 Papalia 2013.
- 32 Papalia 2018.

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Cross-sensory translation of light in the pyrotechnic arts

Collin van Uchelen

As a conceptual artist and pyrotechnics designer with sight loss, I am fascinated by approaches to representing light in non-visual forms. Light is the foundation of all visual perception; the incandescent light of pyrotechnics provides a compelling entry point for exploring how light can be translated across the senses to make it more accessible to those of us in the blind/low-vision community.

Personally, I believe that art is embodied in the trails of light created by the burning stars of precision-crafted fireworks and pyrotechnic effects. Composition, colour, luminescence, scintillation and movement are all tools that pyrotechnic designers deploy in their work – with the added challenge that all these characteristics are dynamic, changing over the phases of a firework's brief lifespan, which lasts mere seconds at most. Effects may appear as twinkling fireflies, long-tailed comets, weeping willow trees, glittering waterfalls, and sparkling jellyfish to name a few. Some shells burst into spherical and symmetrical patterns resembling petals of a flower: chrysanthemum, peony or dahlia. In combination, such effects become ephemeral bouquets crafted of moving light.

In my artistic practice, I use pyrotechnics as a focus to think about – and invite others to attend closely to – the characteristics of light. I also explore methods by which pyrotechnics – or indeed, other dynamic and ephemeral art forms – can be experienced in non-visual terms. What conditions need to be present for a person to connect deeply and emotionally with a work of visual art that they cannot see? The ideas and projects I describe in this chapter are grounded in my own artistic practice and my lived experience of creating access tools in an art form where few were readily available.

Resonance in the presence of art

A few years ago, I witnessed a particularly memorable pyro-musical display at the ‘Celebration of Light’ fireworks festival held in Vancouver, Canada. I was with my close friend and describer Brett Hulstrom, watching the firework display from the beach at English Bay. At one point in the show, the very large audience grew completely silent in response to the scene that was unfolding around us. In the silence, I could sense that something important was occurring and I yearned to see it. I leaned close to Brett and asked him what was happening. ‘Burning tears,’ he whispered. ‘It’s thousands of burning tears slowly dripping down from the sky.’

Even though I could not see the effect, with this description I felt its impact; its touch was visceral. I was mesmerised by the image and immersed in a rush of tingles cascading through my body. The phrase invited me into a moment of connection with the art itself and with others who shared the experience of witnessing this stunning pyrotechnical effect together with me.

I refer to the experience I have described above as *resonance*. I use this term because it refers to the nature of a relationship or connection between the beholder and the art which is being perceived. In my own experience of these moments, it feels like I am resonating with something outside of me that strikes a chord with something internal. I experience the physical sensation of goosebumps on my skin and tingles along my spine. Such moments of resonance have much to teach us regarding how art may be described and perceived.

The phenomenon I am exploring here is discussed within the psychological literature – albeit with differing labels. For example, Maruskin, Thrash and Elliot refer to this as the *chills*.¹ They found that goosebumps and tingles are associated with a positive emotional response, whereas cold shivers are associated with negative emotions, such as fear. Resonance is consistent with the positive goosebumps/tingles component of the chills concept. Alternatively, Keltner and colleagues use the term *awe* to refer to experiences that include tingling sensations in response to a wide variety of stimuli, especially those that are vast in scope.² For simplicity, in this chapter I use the term ‘resonance’ to refer to the goosebumps/tingles I have felt in response to art and its description.

Returning now to the phrase ‘burning tears’ that Brett used to describe the specific firework effect to me on the beach that summer evening, two questions arose. What makes his words so impactful? Why is the description so evocative? One salient feature of the phrase

is its ability to bridge across sensory modalities. It readily translates a visual phenomenon into terms that refer to physical sensations: the stinging in one's eyes after crying, the slow descent of tears moving down one's cheeks, and even the warmth of the tears on one's face. These are all relatable without reference to visual imagery. As such, the phrase exemplifies what I call cross-sensory translation: the process of translating from one sensory modality (for example, visual) into another (for example, tactile).

In my own experience, I have continually found cross-sensory translation to be the most effective way for me to 'see' the beautiful, ephemeral images that pyrotechnics create out of light. For example, in my training as a pyrotechnician, I found that hands-on exploration of the structure and internal components of pyrotechnic effects provided a tactile understanding of the shell design. Engaging my own sense of touch has provided one way for me to better imagine the patterns of light that the effects create. I have explored other concepts and methodologies relating to cross-sensory translation in several pyrotechnic arts projects, which are highlighted below.³

'Fingerworks for Fireworks'

One of my first artistic undertakings was to co-design (in collaboration with Steph Kirkland of the Vocal Eye Descriptive Arts Society in Canada) a tactile technique for describing pyrotechnic displays to viewers with sight loss. In this approach, called 'Fingerworks for Fireworks', trained describers translate the dynamic movement of fireworks by 'drawing' their shapes with fingertips onto the backs of viewers who are blind or partially sighted. The tactile gestures represent the trajectories and patterns of the moving stars emanating from aerial firework shell bursts and low-altitude emission effects. Verbal descriptions provide information about colour, composition and other highlights of the display in real time.

The project was a key early step in my ongoing artistic exploration of cross-sensory translation, combining touch and verbal commentary to convey the dynamic and complex movements of light. In my own experience of beholding fireworks described in this manner, I am continually amazed at how effective touch can be in representing light, in ways that are both elegant and engaging. The process provides a means for those of us in the blind community to be more meaningfully included in public events and celebrations featuring pyrotechnics.⁴

Project Fire Flower

My descriptive work with pyrotechnics resulted in an invitation from Vancouver-based non-visual artist Carmen Papalia to co-design an exhibition which represents light in tactile forms (Figure 9.1). *Project Fire Flower*, curated by Whitney Mashburn, invited viewers to perceive fireworks in terms of the transient structures of light created by the trajectories of their moving stars. I represented these pathways of light using illuminated tactile displays designed to be explored with touch by viewers with or without eyesight (Figure 9.2). Each panel was equipped with a hand-held speaker that, when removed from its mount, provided listeners with a description of the corresponding firework shell-burst pattern. This allowed viewers to trace out the trajectories of the stars while listening to the verbal description (Figure 9.3).

Another installation featured a variety of flowers, grasses and trailing plants, depicting a typical firework display scene, with effects visible at multiple levels in the sky (Figure 9.4). In addition, a ‘tactile toolkit’ displayed various blossoms and household objects to depict the differing pathways of light – such as helical spirals – that form the characteristic shapes of fireworks.⁵



Figure 9.1 Collin van Uchelen, *Project Fire Flower* (2021). Tactile panels. Artwork designed by Collin van Uchelen with assistance from Lianne Zannier. Source: Dennis Ha, courtesy of grunt gallery (Vancouver, Canada).

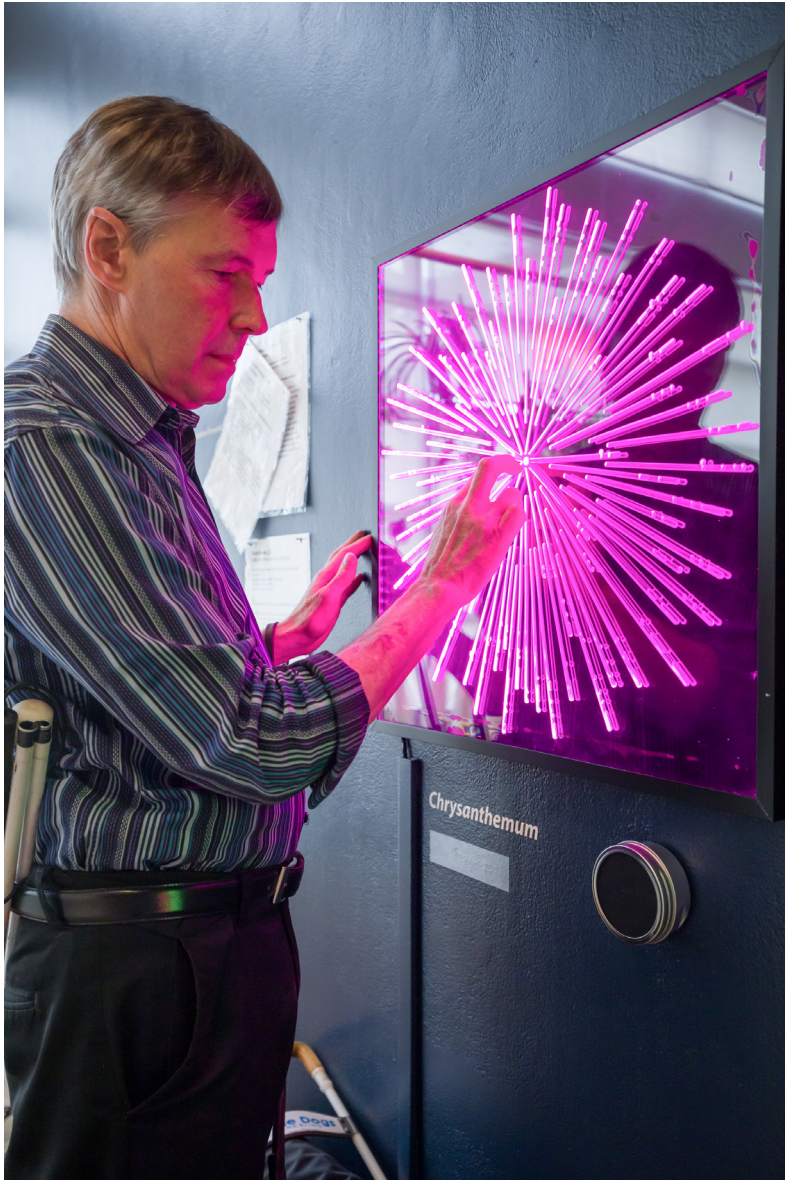


Figure 9.2 Collin van Uchelen, *Project Fire Flower* (2021). Designer Collin van Uchelen touches the *Chrysanthemum* tactile panel. Artwork designed by Collin van Uchelen with assistance from Lianne Zannier. Source: Dennis Ha, courtesy of grunt gallery (Vancouver, Canada).



Figure 9.3 Collin van Uchelen, *Project Fire Flower* (2021). Artist Carmen Papalia touches the *Dahlia* tactile panel. Artwork designed by Collin van Uchelen in collaboration with Lianne Zannier. Source: Dennis Ha, courtesy of grunt gallery (Vancouver, Canada).

Burning Tears

Burning Tears was inspired by my friend Brett’s evocative description of fireworks using this phrase. In this project, I worked in collaboration with Cyn Rozeboom and staff from Tangled Art + Disability in Toronto. We asked: how can we translate dynamic art such as pyrotechnics into words that engage blind and low-vision individuals with the same resonance-inducing impact that sighted viewers may enjoy? To explore this, we invited visual artists, writers, audio describers and pyrotechnicians with varied backgrounds and access needs to participate in a four-session workshop series designed to foster creative dialogue and experimentation.⁶

In the course of our explorations, the following ideas emerged:

- Resonance occurs not only in direct response to art, but also in response to descriptions of such art so that both describer and listener experience it together.
- Complex pyrotechnic art can be rendered using poetic and metaphorical language to translate visual phenomena across senses into non-visual forms.



Figure 9.4 Collin van Uchelen, *Project Fire Flower* (2021). Pyrotechnical tableau, with steel and polyethylene mortar racks and silk plants. Artwork designed by Collin van Uchelen with assistance from Kay Slater, Michael Lis and Neil Sedman. Racked mortars by Celebration Fireworks. Source: Dennis Ha, courtesy of grunt gallery (Vancouver, Canada).

- Descriptions can be layered in terms of the aspects of the art being described as well as in the voice(s) used.
- Dynamic movement can be described in terms of metaphors such as plants, flowing water or tears that suggest the changing trajectories and structures of light created by moving pyrotechnic stars.

Essentially, it was clear from the workshops that the use of metaphor and other poetic forms in audio description has potential to expand and deepen our experience of art by referring to non-visual senses to help us connect with the art being described.

My own experience with Brett, described above, exemplified this value of metaphoric and poetic language. His phrase ‘burning tears’ elicited a profound emotional reaction in part because, through his use of metaphor, I could relate to what he was describing (that is, the speed of tears descending down my cheeks). By contrast, if Brett had described the effect merely by referring to its colours in visual terms, I doubt whether it would have had the impact it did.

In my work as a consultant with audio describers in a variety of mediums (visual art, dance, fireworks), I encourage describers to use cross-sensory translation in order to avoid terms that could be unintentionally inaccessible, and instead describe art in terms of senses that are more relatable for those of us who are blind. I also encourage describers to use metaphorical and poetic terms in addition to precise description. Layering the two conveys subjective emotion as well as concrete details.

Awaken in Light

I am currently working on a major project called *Awaken in Light*: a design for a pyrotechnical art display choreographed and synchronised to the complex piece *Awaken* by the symphonic/progressive rock ensemble YES.⁷ Parts of the display depict my own progressive sight loss using the light of pyrotechnics to do so. I am collaborating with other blind/low-vision artists, who are informing how I represent blindness in this project. It is an innovative opportunity for us to expand on a narrative of what it might mean to be blind using the medium of pyrotechnics.

In this endeavour, the process of creation itself necessarily requires me to continue exploring and creating meaningful tools for access in my artistic practice. For example, I use all the types of cross-sensory translation described in this chapter to advance my pyro-musical display design. What I do, and the adaptations I create to do it, may be helpful

to other artists with sight loss who are also engaged in choreography or working with moving and changing light such as that emitted by fireworks. These access tools can be used to convey some of the visual aspects of the display to those for whom they may otherwise be invisible. For example, members of the blind/low-vision community will have audio and tactile description using the ‘Fingerworks for Fireworks’ technique I helped design. In addition, the effects I am using in the display provide multi-sensory access involving sound, warmth and high-contrast light. Perhaps most importantly, I am striving to design the display in ways that may create an experience of resonance in those who behold the work – whether they be sighted, partially sighted or blind.

Resonance as a form of access

In *Awaken in Light* and other pyrotechnic arts projects, I strive to create art that has an impact on the viewer in the same way that the ‘burning tears’ described by Brett affected me that night: a moment of comprehensive and deep connection to the work of art that induces goosebumps on our skin and tingles in our spines – the experience I call resonance.

Of course, not all descriptions induce resonance; neither does all artwork. Perhaps the variance here is attributable to one or more of the following: the perceiver, the description, the artwork, or a combination of these factors. But when I do feel it, the meaning I now ascribe to it is to take notice of that which I am witnessing – it is an internal indicator of the importance of the art in front of me. When I have this experience when listening to someone else describe an artwork, I interpret it as an indication of the describer’s success in establishing the connection between me as the beholder and the art that is being described. If the description gives me goosebumps, then I presume that the artwork itself would do so too if I could see it.

It is my belief that these experiences are heightened (and more likely to occur) in the context of a shared moment of resonance – the individual experience is also trans-personal. In these moments, non-sighted viewers can feel that they are part of the same experience as the sighted viewers; that we don’t feel we are ‘missing out’ on something integral.

These experiences occur when I find myself in a moment of communion with something outside of me – witnessing grace, courage, precision, strength and spirit – whether within or outside of the performing arts.

In such moments, I feel so closely connected with what I am hearing (or seeing, or touching) that I no longer feel like I am missing out on phenomena I cannot see. In fact, the experience is so immersive that I feel fully included and at one with the art itself. Resonance can serve as a means of access to art – whether it occurs directly or through description/cross-sensory translation. In this way, resonance has become a guiding light in my own artistic practice in the pyrotechnic arts. My hope is that description can induce resonance in the beholder as a means for access beyond what vision can provide.

Notes

- 1 Maruskin et al. 2012.
- 2 Keltner and Haidt 2003; Keltner 2023.
- 3 Davey 2022.
- 4 See Chan 2015.
- 5 Marsolais 2021.
- 6 See <https://burningtears.ca> (accessed February 2025).
- 7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98-iBpbEbNk> (accessed February 2025).

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Part IV

Multisensory environments

The art of getting lost

Simon Ungar

How do we find our way through the complex environments in which we live, maintaining our sense of direction as we go? How do we do this if our visual sense is reduced, different or absent altogether? How do we get lost, and what happens when we do? Why is the experience of being lost so unsettling or even terrifying, and why do we sometimes choose to get lost for fun? As a cognitive psychologist with special interests in spatial cognition and visual impairment, these are questions that have occupied me for many years. In this chapter, I will offer some answers to these questions before going on to apply this thinking in the context of a specific set of large-scale, immersive installation art pieces. I do this as a sighted consumer of art, not an artist or a blind person, and I am therefore aware that my conclusions and suggestions are necessarily tentative; however, I hope that they may be useful and thought-provoking for non-psychologist readers.

In its original form as a presentation at the *Beyond the Visual* symposium,¹ this piece began, as the present chapter does, with a brief overview of current thinking on the cognitive neuropsychology of spatial orientation in both sighted and blind people, before applying this to some examples of immersive installation artworks. I felt at the time that there was a large chunk missing in the middle, which I have now been able to develop and add. In keeping with my focus on artworks that are essentially forms of labyrinth, my narrative here will take a somewhat circuitous route to reach its goal and may at times feel (intentionally) disorienting. I will conclude by considering whether artworks that disrupt our orientation might offer novel and inclusive ways of engaging people with vision impairment, offering them opportunities for perceptual and cognitive challenge in a fully multisensory way.

Getting lost

Kevin Lynch, in his book *The Image of the City*, notes that people generally do not like the experience of being lost. He argues:

[T]o become completely lost is perhaps a rather rare experience for most people in the modern city ... But let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being. The very word 'lost' in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster.²

So, feeling lost evokes strong emotions of panic, fear, dread.

Anecdotes about becoming lost are plentiful. According to neuropsychologist Paul Dudchenko, these generally fall into two categories, which he refers to as 'misorientation' and 'disorientation'.³ Misorientation tends to occur when we lose our access to familiar landmarks. This happened to William Naismith, when one evening in 1900 he set off to climb Ben More in the Scottish Highlands and was plunged into a dense mist as he neared the summit.⁴ His mental map of his surroundings remained intact, but in the absence of any observable landmarks (near or distant) his internal representation was cut adrift from external reality. His mental map and sense of direction may have kept him right for a while, but gradually became unreliable and he ended up descending the wrong side of the mountain thinking he was on his way home. Similar stories are reported where people have become lost in relatively featureless environments such as deserts or forests. In such undifferentiated settings humans tend to veer off course without realising it, compounding the mismatch between mental representation and the actual layout on the ground. There are plenty of examples in literature which feature mist, desert, featureless tundra, blizzards or dense woods signifying impending peril for the protagonist – do not stray from the path, Little Red Riding Hood!

'Disorientation' occurs when we have access to landmarks but our representation does not match what we observe or experience. An example of this can be found in an anecdote recounted by Erik Jonsson about a journey he made to Cologne from the west by sleeper train.⁵ He had a good idea of the layout of the city, including the fact that the River Rhine flows from south to north through the centre of the town. Unfortunately, before reaching the train station, and while Jonsson

was asleep, the train crossed the river from the west, and swung round in a wide 180-degree loop before entering the station from the east. Jonsson woke up, walked out of the station and followed signs to the river, thinking that he was heading east. He described the immense and viscerally unpleasant sensation of disorientation he experienced when he reached the river to find that it appeared to be flowing the *wrong* way (from left to right instead of right to left as he had expected). He reported that it was practically impossible subsequently to shift this misaligned representation and the discomfort of disorientation clung to him. In a nutshell, ‘misorientation’ means ‘I don’t know where I am’ while disorientation means ‘I think I know where I am, but I’m wrong’.

So, what does it mean not to be lost? All mobile creatures need some way of remaining oriented in space, and a wide array of different systems and strategies have evolved to serve this purpose in different animals. In common with many other mobile animals, humans have our own ‘dead reckoning’ or ‘path integration’ system, which seems to be based on the vestibular system in our inner ear, registering movements and changes of direction as we walk, from which our brain can calculate a ‘running fix’ on our departure point and possibly also to our destination point. In other words, however far we travel and however many turns we make, our brain continuously calculates and keeps track of where we are in relation to where we started out. Although generally helpful, this system can become disrupted, for example when the route we take is very circuitous, when our attention is distracted, or when we are inebriated.

In addition, when learning about a new environment, we seem to realise automatically what is an appropriate *landmark* to help guide us. We are often not conscious that we are doing this, and over time we build up quite detailed knowledge of key landmarks in the environment we habitually visit. In some situations, we can use a landmark as a ‘beacon’ and head directly towards it: for example, using a spire to direct us to a church (or to another location which we know to be near to the church). In other cases, we use landmarks in a relational way: for example, I know that if I keep a particular building to my right as I cross my local park I will reach the café hidden in the trees. We can also register the *geometry* of an environment we are in (the wide end of the park versus the narrow end).

Finally, there is evidence that these different aspects are combined into a map-like mental representation where our brain registers where we currently are in three-dimensional space. All these systems overlap and support each other in 99 per cent of situations, but whenever there is a discrepancy, our brain tends to treat them hierarchically, with landmarks at the top of the pile; if I *see* that I am standing next to the post

office, I probably am, even if my vestibular system tells me otherwise. If we start to become misoriented, and then spot a familiar landmark, everything will usually snap back into place.

We need to bear in mind also that this all operates in the context of a human mind that is heavily guided by expectation and prediction,⁶ as well as by tendencies to try to simplify the information we need to process, which we refer to as 'heuristics'.⁷ Just to give two brief examples, we hold many expectations about how a city or town will be structured, for example with a busy town centre and relatively quiet suburbs, and we draw on this kind of information to help orient ourselves. On a more basic level, we tend to simplify our representations of the environment to make them less complicated to recall, for example to think of rivers as relatively straight. This can cause problems for newcomers to a place like London, who tend to imagine and represent the Thames as a relatively straight line flowing west to east, and who are often thrown by the many loops and meanders to the north and south, including sections where the flow is actually from east to west.

All this seems to presuppose that vision is necessary to find our way, and it was argued in the past that accurate spatial cognition depends on, or at least expects, visual information. However, it has become clear that the way we experience the world around us does not absolutely determine the way we represent space, although it does seem to lead to tendencies to form particular kinds of spatial representations.⁸ We know, for example, that people who have been blind from birth are more likely to represent the world around them based on their own bodies, landmarks and their movements between them than to situate themselves in a kind of two-dimensional representation, due to differences in the type and reliability of spatial information available via vision compared to the other senses (landmarks, spatial relationships between locations etc.), although this is not always necessarily the case.⁹ Conversely, some sighted people may make regular use of a map-like mental representation, while others may tend to use a more sequential strategy. These different ways of representing space have been described by Susanna Millar as 'optional strategies' (different ways of mentally representing spatial relations in the environment), implying that no one strategy type is essentially tied to any one way of experiencing the spatial world.¹⁰ It follows, then, that which kinds of situations are experienced as being disorienting or misorienting will differ depending on these tendencies and strategies.

For most of us, most of the time, all the intricate processes of spatial perception, cognition and action go unnoticed, partly because, in order

to move around efficiently and without anxiety, we tend to stick to relatively habitual patterns and avoid moving beyond our spatial comfort zones. However, despite our elaborate and multi-layered systems to support spatial orientation, we can become misoriented or disoriented, and we generally don't like it.

Labyrinthitis

But in some situations, we do like it, even to the extent that we actively seek out disorientation and create situations where we can experience feeling lost. Probably the archetypal example of this is the maze or labyrinth. Romedi Passini refers to the labyrinth as 'the natural symbol of disorientation'.¹¹ It is interesting to note that labyrinths and mazes seem to have appeared, in one form or another, from prehistoric times (at least 3000 BCE), and to have emerged and evolved relatively independently across cultures and geographic regions.¹² Ancient labyrinths seem to have been constructed with various purposes, including: ritual practices; to deter intruders, such as at the entrance to Egyptian pyramids; or as a prison, such as the famous labyrinth at Knossos, built to hold the minotaur (see [Figure 10.1](#)).

Images of labyrinths have been used symbolically in a number of cultures to deter evil spirits from entering a place, for instance in images painted at the threshold to a house, or to represent the complexities of our (spiritual) journey through life. In the Middle Ages, in the construction of the great European cathedrals, mazes were often incorporated in the design of floors and walls, such as the large circular maze in the centre of Chartres Cathedral (see [Figure 10.2](#)).

These labyrinths are thought to have been primarily allegorical, referring to the many twists, turns and false paths taken by the Christian pilgrim on the road to salvation. In labyrinths and labyrinth myths through the ages and across cultures, the stakes, and hence the associated levels of anxiety, are high, including monsters lurking in the corridors or seeking to get in, or the need to navigate safely through the paths to attain freedom or a peaceful afterlife. As Passini notes: 'If one agrees that a most evident and fundamental function of labyrinths is to disorient, one realizes the extent to which mankind has been preoccupied with the phenomena of spatial orientation and wayfinding.'¹³

Meanwhile, mazes seem to have been used for pleasure for centuries. Pliny the Elder, in praising the elegant complexity of Daedalus's labyrinth at Knossos, contrasts it favourably with the simple mazes used

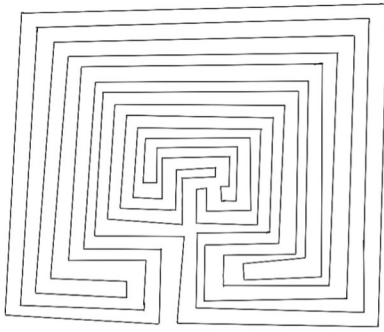


Figure 10.1 Plan of the labyrinth at Knossos taken from a silver coin, c. 400 BCE. *Source:* Moni Serneabat Ungar.



Figure 10.2 Plan of the labyrinth laid into the floor of Chartres Cathedral. *Source:* Moni Serneabat Ungar.

for enjoyment by Roman children of his time.¹⁴ Despite the weight of symbolism intended, mazes drawn on the floors of European churches and cathedrals were also used for pleasure, where bored children were reported to have disrupted solemn ceremonies by running their paths, shrieking with delight.¹⁵ Mazes built specifically for the pleasure of disorientation, and/or the challenge of navigating their intersecting paths, emerged during the post-Renaissance period in the gardens of palaces and in parks across Europe, such as the famous maze at Hampton Court Palace in London. These were often immersive, constructed with high, broad walls of hedge bordering the paths and obscuring views of the centre, of the outside and of the path; paths curve, intersect, switch back. The enjoyment gained by engaging with the maze demonstrates the sense of excitement, stimulation and curiosity that can be gained from embracing disorientation, albeit under certain conditions; namely, that we enter willingly in the knowledge that the duration of disorientation will be limited and the risks of becoming irremediably lost are low.

So how do mazes interact with our spatial cognition, our sense of orientation? In general, mazes ‘mess with us’ in both ways described by Paul Dudchenko – they disorient and misorient. Broadly speaking, immersive mazes provide us with no landmarks that we can use to track our progress or, when necessary, to reverse our route to regain the entrance; here, each passageway, turning and choice point is identical. Secondly, even the most experienced explorer is likely to have their dead reckoning system disrupted by the multiple and frequent changes of direction, so even if we have some prior idea about the external shape

and size of the maze, we will be unable to keep track of our current position and heading (a cognitive function that allows us to know which direction we are facing) relative to the outside.

Janet Bord identifies two types of maze – unicursal and multicursal – each carrying its own set of implications.¹⁶ The unicursal maze (like the depictions of the Knossos and Chartres labyrinths in [Figures 10.1](#) and [10.2](#)) consists of a single path with no choice points, which leads inevitably to the goal (a central point in the maze and/or the exit). In such a maze, we are temporarily spatially confused as we passively track its twists and turns, but we are never totally lost, as we can be assured of escape if we either keep going or retrace our steps. The multicursal maze (see [Figure 10.3](#)) consists of various paths each emanating from a choice point, only some or one of which will continue us on our journey to our goal, while the others lead to dead ends or loop us back to the same or another choice point. In these mazes, you *can* become truly lost, unless you have a strategy for navigating, or at least for finding your way back. As long as the maze is not too complex, and your dead reckoning system holds out, you might be able to build a mental map and keep track of your progress through it. Remembering the sequence of choices or turns you make as you walk will at least allow you to retrace your route, or you could follow Borges’s advice and always turn left at each choice point.¹⁷ It might help if your lover has a red thread to lend you.

Why, then, would we do this for fun? Social commentators have noted that through the twentieth century Western societies developed an increasing aversion to risk (other than, perhaps, among a few people gambling with large amounts of other people’s money).¹⁸ Risk taking became synonymous with hazard or danger, being viewed as a form of recklessness or stupidity; risk avoidance was seen as rational

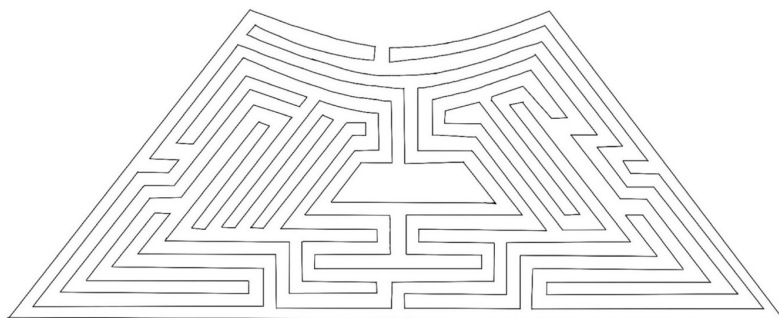


Figure 10.3 Plan of the multicursal maze at Hampton Court Palace.
Source: Moni Serneabat Ungar.

behaviour. Risky activities voluntarily engaged in, such as downhill skiing and hang-gliding, are explained away as hedonistic behaviour undertaken to achieve an endorphin hit, for example in theories that explain this phenomenon away as a personality trait such as 'sensation seeking'.¹⁹ However since the turn of this century, research focus has shifted to consider positive aspects of risk taking, with the reports of those who engage voluntarily in risky activities being foregrounded to highlight positive impacts, such as a sense of agency, self-actualisation, building courage, and facing and conquering fear, as well as the immediate pleasurable sense of thrill and excitement,²⁰ and with evidence of risk taking being linked to a wide range of psychological benefits.²¹

More recently, and more specifically, a field of study has emerged focusing on 'recreational fear' – an apparently paradoxical notion, defined as behaviours 'where people voluntarily seek out activities that elicit negative emotions and expect to derive pleasure from such emotions'.²² It seems that most people choose to engage in and enjoy at least some activities that are intended to induce fear, shock, horror or other related emotions, and that signs of this enjoyment emerge very early in life, for example in peek-a-boo games, scary stories and some pretend play scenarios. Crucial to this is a 'sweet spot of fear':²³ a level of scariness of an experience that is highly individual to each person, located at the apex of an inverted U-shaped curve relating level of scariness to level of pleasure – too lame and we feel nothing, too terrifying and we are overwhelmed.

Having found that sweet spot, what do we gain from these experiences of recreational fear? Researchers have suggested that fear-inducing recreational activities allow us to 'play with fear' in situations that provide 'opportunities to engage with moderately frightening experiences in a safe context'.²⁴ For some, this is an end in itself, while for many others it appears to be an opportunity to learn about themselves and develop strategies for coping with fear in everyday life. Indeed, the use of horror film has recently been evaluated as an intervention to counteract anxiety in children.²⁵

To date, no research has specifically sought to explain the paradoxical pleasure of getting lost in a maze; however, the motivations and effects are likely to be similar to the other documented ways in which recreational fear has been found to entertain and benefit those who choose to engage in it.

Rational derangement

So far, I have focused solely on the experience of being lost at the level of the individual, pitting their wits against the maze and tolerating the sense of disorientation for its own sake and for the pleasure of solving its riddle. As we move towards thinking about getting lost in art, we need to note that although some mazes are designed to be inherently aesthetically pleasing, this is often peripheral to the experience of navigating it (for example, the beauty of an aerial view of the maze). The use of spatial disorientation as an inherent part of art (in the broadest sense), where getting lost becomes integral to the concept as well as the experience of the work, can be traced to Surrealism as well as the many subsequent movements it influenced, most of which share the use of disorientation as method.

Possibly the most famous call to use disorientation as a route to enlightenment was Arthur Rimbaud's demand that in order to see our world clearly, to become a 'seer' (*voyant*), one must pursue a 'long, limitless and systematic derangement of all the senses' (*un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens*).²⁶ The paradox of 'systematic derangement', which for our purposes might be rephrased as 'deliberate and systematic disorientation', feels like the core of this challenge.

One group that took on this challenge most ardently was the Surrealists, who pursued (and continue to pursue) this paradoxical research project. The Surrealists turned to Freud and his call to engage with the non-rational world of the unconscious in order to come to terms with and understand its processes and the way it influences us at the levels of the individual and collective psyches. While Freud, and the subsequent psychoanalytic movements, tended to focus on the individual and the search for psychotherapeutic 'cures' for psychic distress, the Surrealists took up the challenge to embrace the irrational as a method for investigating and foregrounding the unconscious and non-logical forces thought to be at work beneath the surface of our apparently civilised societies. They approached this by seeking practices that would allow us to crack through the veneer, disrupting our habitual, conditioned patterns of thought and behaviour to tap our deeper and usually hidden sources of motivation. In this way, they sought a dialectic to resolve the tension between our everyday lives and our unconscious desires, through a transformation of everyday life and ultimately of capitalist civilisation, in which we are held prisoner by our own (false) desires. It is often forgotten that Surrealism was initially a literary movement, and the earliest techniques were rooted in the verbal 'psychic automatism' of psychoanalysis, including 'automatic writing' and other

methods intended to suppress rational consciousness and thereby allow our unconscious desires to be foregrounded.

Although the Surrealists included some spatial elements in their practice, for example the use of walking in the city, it was the Situationists in the 1950s, '60s and '70s who applied some of the key methods of Surrealism to a more inherently spatial practice, aiming to develop a radical critique of city life, urban planning and urban civilisation.²⁷ In common with Surrealist research, the Situationists developed a set of systematic approaches to achieve the *raisonné dérèglement* required to break away from the habitual modes in which we engage with our surroundings throughout our everyday lives within the capitalist city. Situationists used one main method in their studies of urban geography: the *dérive*, defined as 'an experimental mode of behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique for hastily passing through varied environments'.²⁸ This 'passing through' involved relinquishing our habitual movements through the environment. By moving through the city with responsiveness to our surroundings, we notice aspects that are normally ignored. Thus, the frame of mind of the 'psycho-geographer' falls somewhere between concentration and unconsciousness, 'wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but a complete insubordination to habitual influences'.²⁹

As the Situationists carried out their research, wandering the streets of Paris in groups or alone, they would find themselves drawn to some places, and repelled by or even physically excluded from other spaces. Insofar as these inclinations are shaped by cultural and social forces, a detailed mapping of these inclinations may reveal such forces at work in the city. Finally, though, as with Surrealism, the methods implemented by the Situationist practitioners of the *dérive* produced very sparse data and even fewer coherent results or outcomes. While the methods guaranteed altered ways of encountering, and thus of perceiving and conceptualising our environments, the hours and shoe leather devoted to the practices produced relatively little of the promised revolutionary and practical intervention in our urban environments.

Benjamin Constant, arguably the most creative and visionary of the Situationists, drew together in his conceptual and physical works all of the concerns and ideas we have considered so far in this chapter.³⁰ Making explicit the political implications, he proposed 'orientation' as being the necessary mode of engagement with space within capitalism, where a notion like Kevin Lynch's 'legible city'³¹ is seen not as supporting a natural need for humans to remain spatially oriented but as one of several means of capitalist subordination. In opposition to this, Constant

emphasised the need for a ludic and revolutionary approach to space, which would require extensive experimentation involving exactly the kind of rational derangement advocated by Rimbaud.³² Constant explicitly conceived of the future city as a labyrinth, whose inhabitants exist in a state of ‘continuous *dérive*’, exploration and adventure, coining the term ‘labyrinthian’ to describe key aspects of this future space.

Getting lost in art

In this final section, I hope to travel on towards the centre of the maze, showing how each of the themes we have visited (spatial cognition, the labyrinth, the paradox of pleasurable fear, systematic derangement) can be applied in specific large-scale artworks, and how these immersive structures might lend themselves well to the engagement of blind or vision-impaired visitors.

Coline Milliard has noted that in an era when most artworks are ‘seen in and sold from digital pictures’, installations maintain the demand that the works are physically visited and experienced so that we can understand ‘what it feels like to discover a space or ... get lost in a labyrinth of rooms’.³³

Die Welt als Labyrinth

The first of the labyrinth artworks that I want to discuss never existed. It was conceived and planned by Benjamin Constant and other Situationists in the Netherlands as an installation to embody many of the critical ideas about urban space, human psychology and everyday life set out in Constant’s writing. It was intended to occupy two rooms in Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum in the summer of 1960. However, the entire exhibition was cancelled when the group pulled out in protest against restrictions placed on the project only weeks before its planned opening, including a number of safety precautions demanded by the Amsterdam fire department, agreement with which the group felt ‘would have meant underwriting the falsification of our project in advance’.³⁴

The description of the labyrinth presented in a subsequent report on the abortive project is tantalising, although, as with many reported Situationist projects, it may well include some ludic hyperbole:

The labyrinth ... presents itself as a circuit which can vary, theoretically, from 200 metres to 3 kilometres. The ceiling, sometimes

5 meters high, sometimes 2.44 meters, may drop in certain places to 1.22 meters. Its fitting out involves neither interior decoration of some kind nor a reduced reproduction of urban ambience, but tends to form a mixed environment, never seen before, through the *mélange* of interior characteristics (furnished apartment) and exterior (urban) ones. To do this it brings into play artificial rain and fog, and wind. Passage through the adapted thermal and luminous zones, the sound interventions (noises and speech controlled by a battery of tape-recorders), and a certain number of conceptual and other provocations, is determined by a system of unilateral doors (visible or openable from one side only) as well as by the greater or lesser attractiveness of individual locations; this ends up increasing the occasions for getting lost. Among the pure obstacles we may cite Gallizio's tunnel of industrial painting and the *detoured* hoardings of Wyckaert.³⁵

Labyrinth

*Labyrinth*³⁶ was a large-scale installation devised by Ralph Selby and constructed by him and a number of fellow artists as a commission for the Midland Group Gallery in Nottingham, as part of the Nottingham Festival in the summer of 1971.³⁷ The installation occupied the ground and first floors of a large Victorian terraced townhouse that once housed the gallery, at 11 East Circus Street, opposite the Nottingham Playhouse theatre (Figure 10.4). The maze was constructed from vertical lengths of plastic drainpipe, spaced regularly throughout each room to form a matrix of isometric triangles connected by bars just below the respective ceilings, forming a scaffolding. Between pairs of drainpipes, sheets of Melinex – a highly reflective plastic material – were hung to form the internal walls of the maze, creating a series of spaces, passages and dead ends through each of the spaces. Melinex sheeting also covered the tops of the drainpipes, forming the ceiling of the maze (Figure 10.5).

The lower space was bright and friendly, resembling a fairground hall of mirrors (Figure 10.6). Helpful verbal guidance was provided through strategically placed loudspeakers. The upper floor, however, was a very different proposition. Upon entering this area, visitors were issued with a 'survival kit' (or 'sus kit') consisting of a handheld torch, a set of headphones and a pair of white gloves (possibly a nod to Lewis Carroll's white rabbit, darting through obscure passageways?). This part of the installation was completely dark, and visitors used their torches to illuminate their immediate surroundings. The headphones were tuned

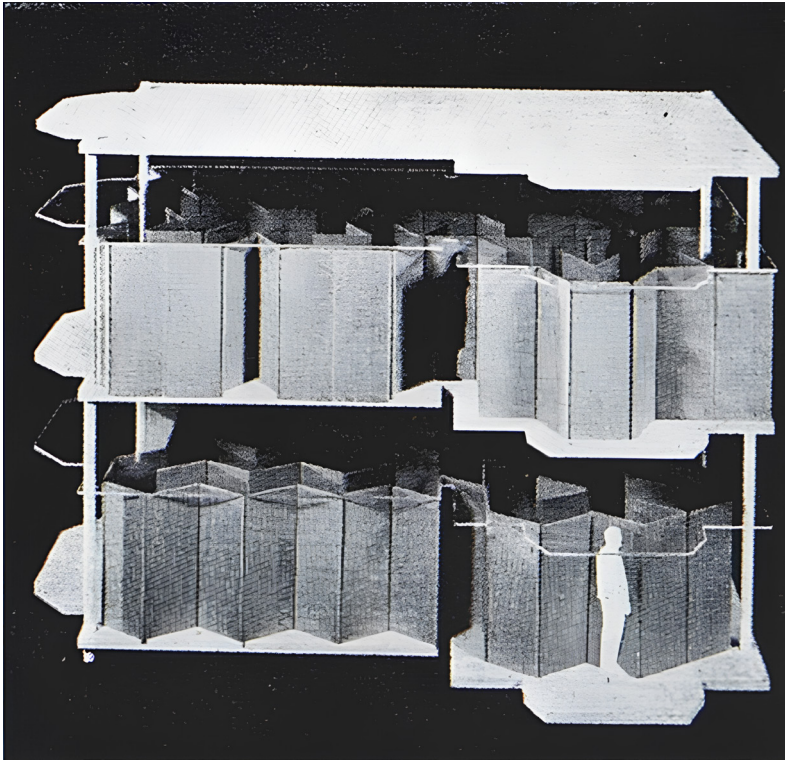


Figure 10.4 Ralph Selby, *Labyrinth* (1971). 3D model. Source: © Computer Arts Society.

to receive audio signals from aerials installed within the scaffolding poles, so that what was heard changed as they moved around the space (Figure 10.7).

Unlike the ground floor, the audio on the upper level was designed to disorientate, consisting of snatches of music (the British national anthem), birdsong, ghostly sounds, electronic music, readings from *Alice in Wonderland* (a story set in another maze-like world), and snippets of speech recorded elsewhere in the gallery by other visitors to the exhibit, which included deliberately misleading information about non-existent objects and events within the maze. Further confusion was generated by the presence of large, shiny metallic spheres equipped with internal motors that propelled them through the space, seemingly at random. These acted as potential landmarks when stationary, but would then spontaneously relocate. In addition, a number of fixed art objects could be encountered by visitors, including an independently standing



Figure 10.5 Ralph Selby, *Labyrinth* (1971). Ralph Selby in the magical, dazzling mirror maze. *Source:* Photograph used with the permission of the family of Ralph Selby.

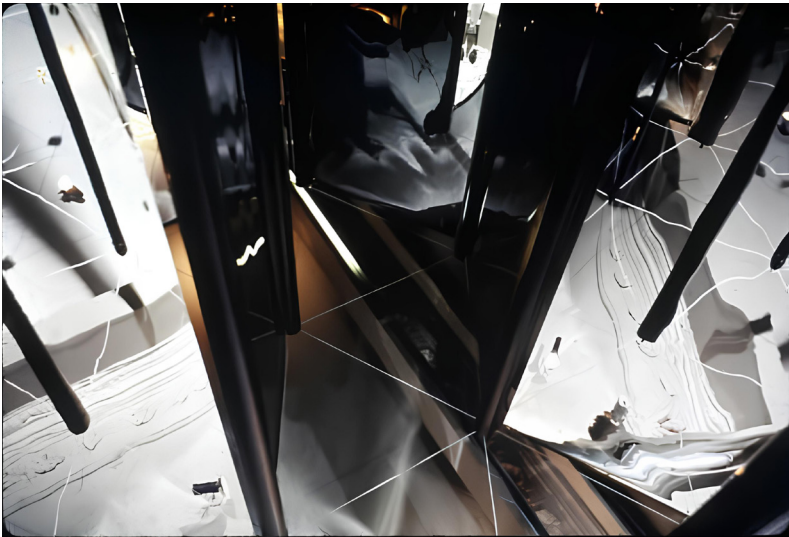


Figure 10.6 Ralph Selby, *Labyrinth* (1971). The baffling visual environment. *Source:* Photograph used with the permission of the family of Stroud Cornock.



Figure 10.7 Ralph Selby, *Labyrinth* (1971). Stroud Cornock using a 'survival kit' to negotiate the dark upper floor. *Source:* Photograph used with the permission of the family of Stroud Cornock.

business suit and a pair of boots (created by Peter Smailes by having his clothes cast onto him with liquid polyester, which was then heat-cured to harden it), which could be moved around the space surreptitiously to create a completely unreliable 'landmark'.

The 'goal' of the maze was a fantastical machine created by Stroud Cornock, which would dispense a souvenir badge to a visitor once they had spoken into it; these comments were subsequently broadcast to other visitors via the headphones. Meanwhile, the moving light from other visitors' torches created a further source of disorientation. In combination, these devices 'gave apparently reliable, but of course ambiguous and spurious clues to the travellers'.³⁸

Labyrinth seemed to provide some of the opportunities for self-awareness described by Coltan Scrivner et al. and Mathias Clasen.³⁹ For instance, according to Ralph Selby, '[m]ost visitors reported that moment of heightened awareness of their own reactions when they realised they couldn't find an immediate exit'.⁴⁰ Anthony Everitt of the *Financial Times* described the experience as 'a curious fusion of claustrophobia (the dark, the tunnels) and agoraphobia (the infinite recessions of mirrored images)'.⁴¹ In an echo of the earlier, ill-fated Situationist project of the same name described above, the installation nearly failed an inspection by the local fire officer three days before opening; however, an agreement

was reached at the eleventh hour such that ‘a maximum of 7 people were allowed into the maze at one time and all cigarettes, lighters and matches had to be surrendered before entering. This only added to the general mystery of the whole thing.’⁴² Although no explicit reference is made in the surviving documentation, there are clear similarities and parallels to the aborted Situationist *Labyrinth* from a decade earlier.

The Coral Reef

Mike Nelson’s *The Coral Reef*, commissioned by and first displayed at Matt’s Gallery, London in 2000⁴³ and subsequently purchased by the Tate Gallery in 2008, presents an even more complex situation. It is essentially a labyrinth – a set of 15 interconnecting rooms that can be explored in multiple directions: ‘numerous battered doors and bleak, grimy corridors that seem to endlessly fold back on themselves’ form ‘a warren of shabby, inhospitable spaces that have the air of recent abandonment’ (Figure 10.8(a) and (b)).⁴⁴ The rooms are linked by doors and narrow passages, but the connections between them do not make sense (the door of a dishevelled sitting room might give way to a sleazy bar), adding to the spatial and cultural disorientation. One room is even duplicated, so just when you think you have returned to somewhere you recognise, you might realise you are not where you thought. The rooms vary in shape and size, and each is furnished in different ways, but all suggest previous occupants who were ‘transients or outsiders’,⁴⁵ existing on the margins of mainstream society (Figure 10.8(c)). Nelson has described them as ‘a sequential series of rooms ... all receptions that never lead to anything’,⁴⁶ alluding to the inspiration he drew from Stanisław Lem’s book *A Perfect Vacuum*, which takes the form of an anthology of reviews of imaginary books. An added emotional layer of dislocation comes from a feeling that we are somewhere that we shouldn’t be – that we are ‘intruders, excited by [our] transgression, worried that the legitimate occupants might come back’.⁴⁷

The Coral Reef plays with and disrupts our orientation senses in multiple ways. The many twists and turns challenge the capacity of our vestibular system to maintain our sense of heading, while the complex and irregular layout challenges our capacity to form a mental map of the space. We are deprived of any external landmarks that might provide us with orientation cues. (A similar installation by Nelson, *The Deliverance and the Patience*, provides a staircase which rises above the ‘roof’ of the installation, offering views of the containing gallery space and thereby affording reorienting cues, albeit only for a brief moment.)



Figure 10.8 Mike Nelson, *The Coral Reef* (2000). Installation views, Matt's Gallery, London, 2000. *Source:* Photographs courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York; Galleria Franco Noero, Turin; Matt's Gallery, London; and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

Importantly, and forming a link between the political, cultural and spatial aspects of the work, *The Coral Reef* plays on, and disrupts, our preconceived expectations about interior spaces that are unconsciously triggered, such as what kind of room we are likely to encounter when we walk out of a kitchen, further heightening the sense of disorientation. Furthermore, the (sub)cultures – ways of life or systems of belief – evoked by each room often seem to conflict, such that ‘one is confronted by a continually shifting matrix of relationships’.⁴⁸ The title of the work is intended to evoke this ‘complex but fragile structure of belief systems that exist below the surface of a prevalent ideological structure, of capitalism’.⁴⁹ While *The Coral Reef* disorients, it also (literally) draws us in and demands/requires our engagement: physical, cognitive and emotional. Unlike traditional artworks that we can hurry past, Nelson set out to make a work that ‘entrapped you and forced you to spend time within it’.⁵⁰

All three examples above function to disrupt the traditional ‘white cube’ gallery space by obscuring the containing walls, and in a sense turning the gallery inside out, with the artwork itself becoming the structure of the space as well as being the art. In doing this, they potentially provide an experience that can be accessed by blind and visually impaired visitors. In practice, unfortunately, this is not always the reality. On my visits to *The Coral Reef* and *The Deliverance and the Patience*, while I delighted in their appeal to almost all my senses, I was constantly aware of the tactility of my surroundings, and often felt an overwhelming desire to interact with the objects and surfaces in this way (which was not permitted for the usual reasons of health and safety, risk of damage to the work and so on). In contrast, both *Labyrinth* and *Die Welt als Labyrinth* provided a fully immersive experience, drawing on and recruiting all the non-visual senses, including touch and sound, and I can easily imagine a version of Nelson’s work that might do the same.

Given what we know about some of the common differences in spatial cognition between sighted and blind or vision-impaired people, would the experiences of disorientation and misorientation provide the intended joy and opportunities for challenge to habitual modes of experiencing our environments? Might a fear of being lost present a barrier to the potential for joy and learning? I am not aware of any specific research in this area (it would be interesting to tie this in with future presentations of Nelson’s installations), but it is certainly possible to imagine exciting, inclusive and enjoyable spaces which offer opportunities for perceptual and cognitive challenge and learning in a fully

multisensory way. One can imagine features that might encourage collaboration by challenging and advantaging blind and sighted participants in different ways. Walls, for instance, might alternate between opaque and transparent, offering different viewpoints to different visitors. Darkness, as in the upper floor of *Labyrinth*, might offer opportunities for blind participants to guide their sighted companions, as might subtle tactile cues which are missed by those relying predominantly on vision. Sound, as in *Die Welt als Labyrinth* and Selby's *Labyrinth*, might also be used to structure the space but also contribute to a useful disorientation. Our speculations here can only be tentative, but if I have succeeded in my intentions for this chapter, they may help point to more inclusive kinds of immersive experiences, labyrinths and mazes.

Notes

- 1 An AHRC-funded symposium, organised by Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake as part of the Beyond the Visual network, held at Wellcome Collection, London in October 2022.
- 2 Lynch 1966, 3.
- 3 Dudchenko 2022.
- 4 Cited in Dudchenko 2022.
- 5 Jonsson 2002.
- 6 Hutchinson and Feldman-Barrett 2019.
- 7 Tversky and Kahneman 1982; Tversky 1992.
- 8 See Giudice 2018.
- 9 Ungar 2000.
- 10 Millar 1994.
- 11 Passini 1992, 2.
- 12 Passini 1992.
- 13 Passini 1992, 10.
- 14 Pliny 1962, bk 36, ch. 19.
- 15 Deschamps de Pas 1851.
- 16 Bord 1976.
- 17 Borges [1941] 2018.
- 18 Lupton and Tulloch 2002.
- 19 Scrivner et al. 2022.
- 20 Lupton and Tulloch 2002.
- 21 McKay et al. 2018.
- 22 Clasen 2023, 36.
- 23 Clasen 2023, 38.
- 24 Scrivner et al. 2022, 87.
- 25 Schoneveld et al. 2022.
- 26 Rimbaud [1871] 1966, 376. Translation of quotation by Pippa Ungar.
- 27 See Ungar 2005; Coverley 2010.
- 28 Debord [1958] 2006, 51.
- 29 Debord [1955] 2006, 11.
- 30 Pinder 2005.
- 31 Lynch 1966.
- 32 Lambert 1996.
- 33 Milliard 2011, 62.

- 34 Unsigned 1960.
 35 Unsigned 1960.
 36 <https://computer-arts-society.com/ws/stroudcornock/interactiveimages.html#labyrinth> (accessed February 2025). I am indebted to various people associated with this work who provided me with information and material from their own archives, in particular Lu Jeffries, David Ainley and Sean Clark.
 37 Christie 1971; Cooper 1971; Everitt 1971, 3; Melville 1971.
 38 Christie 1971, 22.
 39 Scrivner et al. 2002; Clasen 2023.
 40 Christie 1971, 22.
 41 Everitt 1971, 3.
 42 Cooper 1971, 2.
 43 <https://www.mattsgallery.org/exhibitions/the-coral-reef> (accessed February 2025).
 44 Delaney 2010, 2.
 45 Delaney 2010, 4.
 46 Wallis 2011.
 47 Milliard 2011, 63.
 48 Delaney 2010, 4.
 49 Wallis 2011.
 50 Wallis 2011.

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11

Blue House: the intangible space

Lydia Ya Chu Chang

Each year, Program X-Site organises an annual open call for projects to be located on the sloping outdoor plaza of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. The museum seeks proposals for temporary installations that address contemporary issues, encourage cross-disciplinary approaches, and foster dialogue between the museum, the public plaza and its audience. *Blue House* (藍屋), the ninth X-Site laureate, was open to the public from 21 May to 31 July 2022. Our project, realised by a team led by artists/architects Wei Chieh Kung (藍屋研究) and myself, Lydia Ya Chu Chang (藍屋研究), investigated human perception through the interface between architectural practice and bodily experience. The resulting design, in the form of a temporary pavilion, was accompanied by a public programme called *Blue House Study* (藍屋研究). These events set out to engage human senses beyond the visual, exploring ways of experiencing *Blue House* through multiple senses, and thus facilitating numerous readings of the space. These readings provided different levels of immediacy between the structure and its diverse inhabitants.

Through the overarching theme of the colour blue, *Blue House* provided a perceptual filter through which we aimed to transcend limitations of conventional language, vocabulary and architectural rationality. The curved floor and sloping roof – with its extremely low eaves – created urban ‘crevices’ that afforded intimate bodily experiences. *Blue House*, and the accompanying public engagement activities through *Blue House Study*, generated a multiplicity of spatial and bodily perceptions, unleashing buried memories and associations that were brought into consciousness.

Blue House and Blue House Study

In this chapter, I will describe the project in detail, set out some of its theoretical aims, and then focus on three of these participatory events.

Blue House was a freestanding structure located on the outdoor plaza of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Its floor plan, measuring 18 × 11 metres, was rotated 5 degrees in relation to the axis of the museum. Painted in a monotone shade of blue, the materials used were timber and steel, prefabricated in sections and individually craned into place. The roof structure spanned two sets of existing steps within the plaza, with two gabled end façades, one of which was composed entirely of the triangular gable section (Figure 11.1(a)). The height of the building ranged from 4.4 metres to 3.1 metres; the overhanging eaves on the structure's sides, however, were no more than 1.3 metres above the ground – this reduced further in places where the floor swelled upward. A gap was left, like a construction accident, between the undulating floor and the eaves.

Object-like structural components were scattered throughout the building, both inside and outside, read as individual sculptural elements, yet part of a unified – though fragmented – entity. At the rear, a hidden entrance (Figure 11.1(b)) was sneaked in behind an angled, oval wall, not quite circular, leading into a spacious interior.

Covered entirely by the exposed timber roof, connected to the outside only through the skylights and the gaps below the eaves (Figure 11.1(c)), the structure was open yet enclosed, simultaneously merged into and transcending its surroundings. The continuous space reshaped itself endlessly through the undulating floor, structural struts, and the ever-shifting light from the triangular and circular skylights (Figure 11.1(d)), implying ambiguous zones. Sometimes the space could accommodate a group of people and sometimes only a single person. Sometimes it felt like a home, a cave, the volume of a raindrop, or like being inside a giant ribcage.

Blue House explored the concept of intimacy in architecture and how it could establish a sense of familiarity and freedom within space.¹ It reflected on the ideas of universality and diversity in creating an intimate built environment experienced through all the senses. The design touched on the possibilities of a new architecture in blurring the boundary between public and private spaces.

The accompanying *Blue House Study* established a fluid structure that flowed around the built reality of *Blue House*. There were no rehearsals, no predicted end; the fluid programme strived to break free from the confines of established systems, expanding into an intangible,



Figure 11.1 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House* (2022). Various viewpoints: (a) exterior view; (b) the hidden entrance; (c) interior view; (d) skylights in the roof. *Source:* Studio Millspace.

shifting space. It explored the eternity of change, the infinite possibilities of improvisation, and the undefinable freedom that emerges when an audience's imagination is engaged.

Through a series of participatory events, those who came to *Blue House* immersed themselves within the space with all their bodily senses, not just through vision. As temporary inhabitants, they participated just by being there. The experiences were unbounded; they took us to places we had never been. *Blue House Study* and *Blue House* therefore formed an indispensable rapport between emptiness and substance. We brought together performance artists, aromatherapists, a visually impaired psychologist and sound artists to create alternative ways of experiencing space. The aim was to build an invisible space that emerges from memory and imagination, recognising these events as potentially eternal architectural forms.

The five key events, along with a continuous game, were: *Blue Ears: Spaces () Sound*, which emphasised the relationship between spatial orientation, boundaries, scale, materials and the body through sound; *Blue Eyes: Inner Landscape*, which reinterpreted home and the colour blue through a non-visual experience of *Blue House*; *Blue Nose: Being There*, which used scent to transcend physical space; *Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters*, which highlighted intimate bodily energy through ritualistic movements in a public space; and *Blue Mind: Collective Sleeping*, which explored collective dreaming and bodily responses to spatial forms, allowing participants to engage in each other's pasts through dream conversations. Finally, *Blue Text* involved hidden notes with instructions that prompted participants to use their bodies as tools to measure space, forming a crucial balance between emptiness and substance within *Blue House Study* and *Blue House* itself.

Illusion of order

In the process of becoming an architect, it seems that most creators focus on the act of 'presenting' themselves, thinking primarily about how to express their own concepts and ideas. Architects often find it hard to let go of the power that comes with their position and to adopt instead a more supportive role. Even when working on proposals for a defined community, it is rare that they truly listen to the voices of the people who will inhabit their architecture. In reality, people's needs are usually quite simple. Yet most architects and designers, driven by insecurity, tend to complicate things in order to prove their own importance, presenting

overly complex strategies that rarely address real needs.² Designers seem to feel the need to plan *everything* in advance, ensuring that spaces are orderly and that nothing unexpected happens. This tendency is reflected in the beautiful but staged architectural photographs found on online design platforms, where spaces are invariably empty and lifeless. In the eyes of most architects and designers, their pristine ideas take precedence over the realities of human inhabitation.³ Moreover, they rarely consider the reality of bodies and perceptual capacities that extend beyond normative and ableist assumptions. Architects seldom start from the reality of diverse bodies and different ways of perceiving the world.

Blue House and *Blue House Study* explicitly set out to confront these typical fears of the unknown: fears that make us as designers feel less important when the power dynamic between architect and user becomes more equal. Fear of the unknown often pushes them away from embracing new possibilities, driving them to seek a sense of security in unquestioned assumptions.⁴ Architects and designers invariably work for an anticipated future conceived as projections not of real need, but of their own image, and rarely address the present: to 'feel' space and to accept, and celebrate, the idea that people have agency to create their own space.⁵

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche discusses how norms and order can stifle vitality and lead to hypocrisy.⁶ Even if such norms do not reject art, he argues that they still devalue it, as the role of myth declines and philosophy emerges. For Nietzsche, when philosophy is no longer heeded, civilisation turns uncritically towards science. While not entirely rejecting rationality or science, Nietzsche uses Greek mythology to explore the 'Apollonian and Dionysian duality'.⁷ Nietzsche describes Apollo, god of the Sun, as a symbol of reason and logic, associated with 'the art of sculpture'.⁸ Apollo represents self-restraint, boundaries and the establishment of rules. By contrast, Dionysus, the god of wine and a figure of marginality, is the antithesis of Apollo, embodying not only drunkenness but also the non-plastic arts such as music and poetry. Surrounded by the 'dregs of society', Dionysus represents a state of existence before order was conceptualised. Science imposes rigid rules to serve a version of reality that is not its original state; poetry, through Dionysus's presence, expresses itself by shedding the trappings of civilisation to become a conduit for nature's emergence.

Blue House is driven less by the Apollonian impulse towards order, and more by the Dionysian impulse towards poetry and disorder. The metaphor of poetry is used here not as a mere comparison between

architecture and poetry, but as a revealing of things as they truly are. The constraints of human civilisation are illusory, as humanity incessantly attempts to define the undefinable in order to find comfort. These so-called Dionysian ‘dregs’ both exist and do not exist, much like the process of wine-making, undergoing transformation from life to death into a higher form of existence which is not predetermined but arises from intuitive encounters.

Echoes in the walls

Not only everything we see but also our very eyes are saturated with written language. Through the centuries, the habit of reading has changed *Homo sapiens* into *Homo legens*. But this *Homo legens* is not more sapiens than his ancestors. The nonreading man could see and hear many things we aren’t able to perceive now: the tracks of the beasts he was hunting, the signs of the approaching rain or wind. He could tell the hours of the day from the shadow of a tree or those of the night from the position of stars upon the horizon. And as to hearing, smell, taste, and touch, his superiority over us is undeniable.⁹

In *Blue House Study*, we venture into a realm of perpetual change, moulded by immediate bodily memory and sensibility. Here lies the conviction that the body holds a deeper truth than our minds. When heart and mind clash, we choose to follow the body’s guidance. While the heart and mind may grapple, the body and being remain synchronised, both expressions of nature. Though visible and invisible, they are intertwined facets of a unified phenomenon. The conflict between mind and heart arises from the mind’s susceptibility to influence and correction.

We must admit that architecture, intimately linked with human behaviour, wields immense power to both dominate and liberate. Whether offering shelter or shaping public realms, architecture inherently carries political power. *Blue House Study* was our attempt to raise awareness by emphasising ‘feeling’; when people begin to realise how their bodies are influenced by space, this political power becomes more equitable between the architect and the people who must inhabit the resulting space. Through the building of *Blue House* and the subsequent experiences of *Blue House Study*, we questioned the relationship between *Blue House*, architecture and the body.

We blurred the physical boundaries of *Blue House*, evoking various imaginations through sensory exploration and redefining the ways architects plan the experience of architecture through the flexibility of the human body. We envisioned a space consistently imbued with the essence of nature. We focused on creating experiences which are invisible, challenging the ocularcentric realm of visual imagery. Our hope was to embrace the essence of these moments, and to allow everyone to listen to their own body. This is impossible to represent through images, and the described photographs here merely serve as representations of these encounters. *Blue House Study* is always evolving, and this fragility and transience keep *Blue House* perpetually alive beyond the confines of the project.

The performance of absence

As I began to learn to perceive the invisible space, as a creator, I let go of myself, the environment and the audience. We shed the responsibility of our roles, returning to the purest form of communication with everything around us.

So I told all the artists and collaborators that what we wanted to attempt in *Blue House Study* was a performance *without* performers. Everyone's participation would be integral to the performance. This posed a significant challenge for the form of performance and the expectations of performers. Would the performers be willing to step back? How might they become catalysts for transforming the audience from passive receivers to active participants? How could we get people to let their guard down and completely immerse themselves? What were people's motivations for attending, and how might we find value in what they brought with them? I will describe three participatory events that took place during *Blue House Study*.

Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters

This performance was divided into three parts, with dancer Chen Chen (陳塵) embodying three characters from the Chinese classic text *Shanhai Jing* (山海經): 'Hundun' (混沌), 'Nü Ba' (女魃) and 'Di Jiang' (帝江). Accompanied by live music, we entered a dreamscape that was both personal and collective. *Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters* reconfigured *Blue House* as the sea of the subconscious, delving into the world of myth. Here, entering *Blue House* was akin to stepping into

a dream, symbolising the removal of personal masks. Entering thus, naked, represented the emergence of the self that can only surface in moments of profound solitude.

In part one, 'Hundun: Entering the Dream', dancer Chen Chen (陳塵) began by covering her body with a large piece of cotton cloth (Figure 11.2(a)), moving slowly to the melody played by musician Chuang Yi Fan (莊奕凡) (Figure 11.2(b)). The image was abstract, creating a sense that Chen Chen was not entirely herself. She let the cloth slide slowly down her body and draped it over a member of the audience. At first the man hesitated, unsure how to respond. He stood still, spreading the cloth with his hands, almost as if saying, 'I don't know what to do'. Everyone watched on in silence. After a brief pause, the man stood up and began to move under the cloth. This scene was truly beautiful; the man and Chen Chen look alike. The cloth passed magically from person to person, and the 'performance' began.

Everyone found their own space, lying or sitting quietly. Guided by the music, they entered their inner world through the music and stories, wandering through formless dreams, and sometimes entering the dreams of others when drawn under the cloth by Chen Chen (Figure 11.2(c)). *Hundun* in Chinese means 'chaos'; the philosophy of chaos emphasises a primordial state of disorder, where all things are undifferentiated and unformed, containing infinite possibilities. This state is seen as the source of all creation and transformation, the fundamental origin of things – where nothing becomes something.

Part two was entitled 'Nü Ba: Dark Night'. Nü Ba (女魃) is the drought goddess in ancient Chinese mythology and legend, the daughter of the Yellow Emperor (黃帝). According to the *Shanhai Jing* (山海經), when Chiyou (蚩尤) raised an army to attack the Yellow Emperor, the Yellow Emperor ordered Yinglong (應龍) to fight back. Chiyou summoned Fengbo (風伯) and Yushi (雨師), the deities of wind and rain, to unleash a fierce storm against Yinglong's forces. In response, the Yellow Emperor called upon his daughter Nü Ba (Figure 11.3(a)) to assist in battle. She successfully stopped the rain through the drought, ultimately helping the Yellow Emperor to win the war. However, Nü Ba's divine power was exhausted, preventing her from returning to the heavens. The place where she resided saw no rain, causing a severe drought.

In this section of the performance, Chen Chen guided the audience to touch the boundaries of *Blue House*, marking the first stage of our journey into the subconscious: encountering the thresholds

(a)



(b)



(c)



Figure 11.2 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). *Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters*, part one, 'Hundun: Entering the Dream': (a) dancer Chen Chen begins her performance under a sheet; (b) Chen Chen moves with the music; (c) Chen Chen engages audience members.
Source: Henry Wu.

(a)



(b)



(c)



Figure 11.3 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). *Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters*, part two, 'Nü Ba: Dark Night': (a) Chen Chen performing the role of Nü Ba; (b) audience members wearing theatrical masks interact within a zone drawn by sand; (c) the whole audience participate in the performance. Source: Henry Wu.

between consciousness and subconsciousness. Chen Chen narrated: 'Like the beach between the waves and the land, sometimes you draw the line, sometimes you cross it, sometimes you are invaded, and sometimes you need to push back to express your needs. Whenever you encounter another person, you touch a boundary.' We passed around theatrical masks and explored these boundaries through our bodies (Figure 11.3(b) and (c)). Nü Ba entered our boundaries or was driven out by us. Perhaps she was the shadow deep within our soul. What lay behind the veil of that shadow? Everyone in *Blue House* explored this together, and through these collective encounters revelations emerged.

The third part of the performance was 'Di Jiang: Celebration' (Figure 11.4(a)). Chen Chen recounted:

In ancient times, song and dance were for ceremonies. A ceremony was for commemorating and celebrating a transformation, or perhaps the transformation itself. We celebrated that moment, making it a ceremony that belonged to you and to us. Music and dance had been passed down long before words. Our bodies remembered more than our brains. Let us remember what we had forgotten.

Chen Chen described Di Jiang, the faceless god of song and dance, who moved through and blessed the ceremony. We found ourselves dancing and singing, immersed in the moment (Figure 11.4(b)).

Memories can be taken to many places without being limited by time and space, continuously evolving into new spaces through various life forms. Each moment in the present is a stack containing the past, present and future, constantly experiencing birth and death, construction and deconstruction, occupation and being occupied, and never ceasing to change.

Blue Eyes: Inner Landscape

I co-developed *Blue Eyes: Inner Landscape* with Yang Seng-Hong (楊聖弘), a psychologist born without sight, who had been introduced to me through Chao Yu-Tzu (趙又慈), a senior audio describer from Taiwan. While we were preparing the public programmes for the *Blue House Study*, *Blue House* itself was still under construction. I could only use words to let Seng-Hong experience *Blue House*, which forced me to think about how I should convey the orientation, colours, openings and



Figure 11.4 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). *Blue Body: Spirit Song Over the Waters*, part three, 'Di Jiang: Celebration': (a) Di Jiang, the faceless god of song and dance; (b) the audience sing and dance. Source: Henry Wu.

flow of movement. I focused on providing detailed descriptions, trying to capture every nuance of the space. Seng-Hong's imagination amazed me – he quickly grasped the sense of spatial arrangement through my words. Later, when I showed him a 1:25 scale model of *Blue House* (Figure 11.5), he was immediately able to link my abstract descriptions with the physical model, bringing the space to life. This was how we communicated about space, and the development of the event began.



Figure 11.5 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang discuss *Blue House* with Seng-Hong, utilising a 1:25 model of *Blue House* prior to its construction. Source: Photographs courtesy of *Blue House* project.

Upon completing *Blue House*, Wei Chieh Kung and I decided that one of the events in *Blue House Study* would be to offer participants the opportunity to experience it in the dark by covering non-blind participants' eyes with a black cloth. We invited the NGO Dialogue in the Dark, where Seng-Hong works, to be our guides. Participants were invited to experience the interior of *Blue House* prior to any visual knowledge of the space (Figure 11.6). As both a participant and a designer, experiencing *Blue House* without vision and conversing with the visually impaired guides was a special experience. Despite being the designers of the space, we quickly learnt that the guides, with their expertise in navigating dark environments, had much to teach us. They employed unique methods for memorising directions and understanding location.

Blue House is an unusual space compared to most architecture: the floor is curved, there are many slanted pillars, and the large, sloping roofs are open to the elements – rainwater and sound can enter from all directions. It was an experience that made us confront the limitations of our prior sensory experiences of the space. We became acutely aware of how crucial it is, without vision, to be attentive to the direction of sounds, to feel the wind guiding us towards the structure's openings, and to use touch to navigate obstacles. For someone who is blind, these are everyday experiences; for us, as the architects of the structure, it was a revelation.

Finally, Seng-Hong led the group in a brief meditation, encouraging everyone to imagine the shape of *Blue House*. The sighted participants then removed their blindfolds and attempted to draw the space they had envisioned. The results were strikingly diverse (Figure 11.7). In that moment, the boundaries of *Blue House* extended far beyond the limits of mere visual perception.

I recall Seng-Hong mentioning that around 9 a.m. at his home, when the sunlight hits the stairs, he can faintly discern the position of the staircase within his all-white vision through the subtle changes in light and shadow. He described this moment as his only real opportunity to familiarise himself with his surroundings through vision, rather than relying on his other senses. But what really struck me was the nuanced way in which he understands space through non-visual means. And after experiencing *Blue House* without vision, I gained a small insight into a way of reading the world that is vastly different from my own habitual engagements where I defer to sight. For example, I was intrigued by how Seng-Hong associates 'light' with 'warmth'. Despite my deep familiarity with the space I had designed and constructed, when I too relied on non-visual cues I could enter a more subtle state of perception, discovering new and enhanced ways of experiencing space. This reinforced my prior



Figure 11.6 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). Participants explore *Blue House* without sight. Source: Lydia Ya Chu Chang.

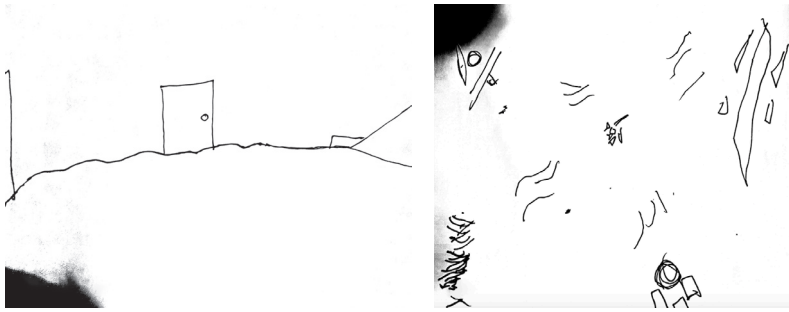


Figure 11.7 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). Participants' sketches of an imagined *Blue House* by Song Jia Jen (left) and Chen Jun Han (right).

conviction that architects should meaningfully embrace such perceptual modes as part of their practice. It was an experience that profoundly informed the following event.

Blue Mind: Collective Sleeping

At 10 p.m. one June night, 25 people gathered outside *Blue House*. I asked everyone to find a partner and share a dream they once had. We then began discussing our most memorable dreams, unfolding each person's history through them. Decades of time intertwined into a web of consciousness. These stories expanded the tangible boundaries of *Blue House* to somewhere afar.

I dreamed that my fat black-and-white cat, whom I had cared for for a long time, jumped off a bridge. I nervously looked down, but the cat wasn't visible on the riverbed. In a panic, I ran to the creek and suddenly saw a flat, round stone about the size of a face. I had a strong feeling that the stone was my cat – he had turned into a stone, and I felt a deep sadness. I then held the stone and cried by the creek.

I was searching for my way in an unfamiliar place, perhaps in Yunnan or somewhere with large wild lilies in bloom. Along the path, I encountered an old lady singing local folk songs. As I listened, I suddenly recognised the song. My body began to follow her, singing the next line involuntarily, and then I was drawn into the song.

With a small cup of butterfly pea flower tea and our dreams fresh in our minds, we entered *Blue House* and placed our bags against

the wall. The space was dim, illuminated only by a single round lamp casting a soft glow at the centre, while some ambient light filtered through the cracks. My friend Samantha, an Ayurveda healer, led us in familiarising ourselves with the space through contact improvisation (Figure 11.8). We moved with the music, our eyes sometimes open, sometimes closed, occasionally touching one another, sometimes dancing alone. Some of us kept moving, others remained still; some sat, others lay down. Each person chose a spot where they felt safe and comfortable, created their bed, adjusted their distance from others, and attuned themselves to the roof, walls, structure, dust, light and wind, gradually settling in.

That night we slept in *Blue House*, lying on the undulating floor that perfectly matched the curvature of our spines, with the gentle breeze blowing in from the open eaves and the triangular skylight shaping the sky with stars. The curved floor became a communal bed – a unit of space directly shaped by our bodies. We measured the space with our prone bodies, feeling the surrounding space and the distance between ourselves and others. We allowed our minds to rest, healing our tired bodies with our hearts, and letting go of vision and reasoning. With only a piece of cloth to lie upon, we entered a primitive state, tasting the original flavour of the world.



Figure 11.8 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). Contact improvisation before overnight sleeping in *Blue House*.
Source: Lydia Ya Chu Chang.

As we lay there, we released our pains, fragility, insecurities and fears, simply by being present in the moment. We closed our eyes, sharing dreams, perhaps to dream the same dream again (Figure 11.9). This experience created a collective body memory, something everyone could carry with them. This was a place without standard answers, famous quotations, statements or conceptual discussions. Architecture needs life; it is imbued with soul through living, and people continue to build it eternally through imagination, memory and dreams. This is what makes a building come alive.

I stayed awake until three in the morning, sitting at the edge of the space and observing everyone lying in *Blue House*. Most people lay still, seemingly sound asleep. Some adjusted their pillows or got up to change position; some used their bags to block the light of the café sign outside, or were troubled by mosquito bites throughout the night. There were also those who quietly crawled out from under the eaves and said that the experience of lying in *Blue House*, looking at the stars in the courtyard, made them 'too excited to sleep'.

The word 'animal' comes from the Latin *animale*, meaning 'living being, living creature' or 'one that breathes'. Like animals hiding in caves, each of us is a breathing soul. The *Tao Tê Ching* (道德經) states:

三十幅共一轂，當其無，有車之用。埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。鑿戶牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。故有之以為利，無之以為用。

The reason why pottery is useful is because of its emptiness. The reason why a house is useful is because of its void. The tangible is the carrier of action. The intangible is the real existence. Like the body and soul of a person.¹⁰

Architecture does not stop at the moment of its finished construction; its energy comes from the connections it forms between consciousness, body and space. I believe this is what is referred to by the Latin words *genius loci* – the soul of a place. A culture, drawing upon individual and collective beliefs, is accumulated and formed by irreplaceable memories, experiences and bodily senses.

The experience of collective sleeping in *Blue House* made me understand that the essence of architecture lies not in the structure itself, but in the relationships formed during the processes of construction and subsequent inhabitation – relationships that did not exist before its creation. It is also about how our bodies, through various

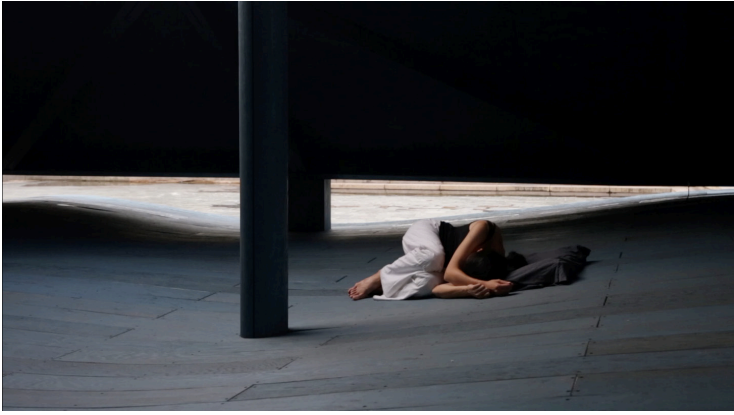


Figure 11.9 Wei Chieh Kung and Lydia Ya Chu Chang, *Blue House Study* (2022). Participants sleeping in *Blue House*. Source: Lydia Ya Chu Chang.

movements, embody what we believe in, slowly creating and building a sense of fulfilment in every encounter. The two and a half months of experiencing *Blue House* and *Blue House Study* reinforced my conviction that architecture is not only about appearance, nor even the existence of an object with material substance, but about the perception of both the mind and body, encompassing the past, present and future. One day, *Blue House* may disappear, but the intangible memories will remain.

Notes

- 1 Kung and Chang 2023.
- 2 In today's visually dominant era, it is sad to see people constantly chasing the extraordinary, always striving to stand out as the most special. In this competitive mindset, we have built a lot of massive structures disconnected from their communities and environment – particularly those tower blocks that fragment human relationships. We no longer know who our neighbours really are any more.
- 3 Robert Moses, an urban designer of the post-war era, is a case in point, as chronicled in Jacobs 1961. Moses' drive for modernisation led to the removal of anything considered 'disorderly'. Utopian systems that emphasise individual will cannot accommodate the organic, vibrant, unpredictable and ever-changing nature of life. Life does not conform to a single, fixed form. Eventually, it returns to a diverse 'norm' and that 'order' is questioned. Whose order is it? And whose bodily norms are imposed upon it? The modernist, unified management of collective housing, skyscrapers and public spaces often ends up with buildings left in a state of ruination, with some demolished, some taken over, and others left to decay.
- 4 Dutch architect Anne Holtrop (2022) notes that value has always been reflected in states of imperfection. The purest conditions are found in imbalance, abandonment and dirtiness, as dirt reveals the true essence of a thing. This is a contextual process: its use is established when it undergoes constant testing.
- 5 Architects believe they can create better-quality spaces, but is that really the case? How many of these buildings designed by 'master' architects stand empty, with people visiting merely to 'admire the architecture'? At that point, the building has long since lost its original purpose as a humble shelter intended to support human life. From my experience, working with the indigenous tribes of Taiwan and the villages of Bali, the simplest, most primal spaces are often more than enough to foster community relationships and cohesion.
- 6 Nietzsche [1872] 1995.
- 7 Nietzsche [1872] 1995, 1.
- 8 Nietzsche [1872] 1995, 1.
- 9 Calvino 1983.
- 10 Tzu, 6th century BCE. Author's translation.

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12

***Circumstantes*: a site-specific performance installation and film**

Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake

You can watch *Circumstantes*, a short film directed by Ken Wilder in collaboration with Aaron McPeake, here: <https://vimeo.com/238958284> (accessed February 2025). An audio-described version of the film, linked to the above, is in production at the time of writing.

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In this chapter, as authors we discuss a site-specific performance installation and film we co-created in 2017. The significance of this work for us, and why (as editors of this volume) we wanted to include it here, was that this book would not have come about without this experience of working together as practitioners. Later in the chapter, we discuss how the idea first emerged; but first, it is important to say something about the extraordinary building in which we intervened.

Sankt Petri, Klippan, Sweden

On entering the vestibule to the church, one's eyes must adjust to the dimly lit space. The temperature is surprisingly comfortable, despite the outside cold. The only natural light enters from a narrow window to the right of the entrance door and a slanted skylight overhead. One immediately registers the pungent smell of burnt candles. An asymmetrical, brick vaulted ceiling delineates a space underneath, the Chapel of St Andreas, with its cantilevered altar defying gravity. Every surface is brick, other than the tiled floor. Repeating a theme first encountered on the building's external façades, the brick surfaces are textured, the

wide mortar joints rubbed down with an old sack such that the bricks are smeared, rough to the hands. This is a highly tactile architecture in both its production and reception.

The wall opposite the doorway, ever so slightly aslant to accommodate the thickening of the external wall, funnels one through a large opening into the main body of the church, where the acoustic immediately changes. While the reverberation time – the phenomenon of overlapping sound caused by multiple reflections – noticeably increases, sound-absorbing slots in two of the external walls help to dampen the sound. Together, slots and ceiling provide a resonant but never harsh acoustic.

If one is sighted, or has some usable sight, one looks up at the high vaulted roof, supported by a single, T-shaped central column with clear symbolic significance (referencing the T-shaped *crux commissa* of early Christianity). This is constructed from two rusted steel ‘T’ sections which in turn support the transversal beams. The vaulted roof (Figure 12.1), combining brick and steel, is unprecedented in the history of architecture, a hybrid of 1960s brutalism and medieval architecture. Paradoxically, the brick vaults, without ever denying their materiality, appear to billow.¹ The effect is achieved by the subtle rise and fall generated by the widening and narrowing of alternate vaults, generating a geometry made even more intricate by the subtle slopes that disperse



Figure 12.1 The vaulted roof structure, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6. Source: Ken Wilder.

rainwater. Providing complex sound reflections, the vaulted roof is key to the church's distinct acoustic.

There are just three relatively small windows in the space, each of which is frameless, the glass clamped to the outside wall using brackets, giving the feeling that the openings have no glass. This minimal natural light is supplemented by skylights, but their narrowness ensures that direct sunlight rarely enters the space. This is a space of darkness, even on a bright day; the darkness persists even when the multiple brass pendant lights, designed by the architect, are switched on. It is a space where our perceptual processes are slowed down: a space where smell, touch and sound take precedence.

One also attends to the floor, especially if one is blind, which at the threshold of the church transitions from tiles to brick. The undulating floor of Sankt Petri is quite remarkable. By the large tropical shell which functions as a baptismal font (Figure 12.2),² located to the immediate left of the entrance, the bricks swell up, as if moving under one's feet, such that a fissure forms: a narrow trough filled with water that extends underneath the swollen floor.³ The story is that this references Exodus 17:6, when Moses is instructed by God to smite the earth and water runs out. The ends of the trough reveal, in its most explicit manifestation, the idiosyncratic rule for which the two late churches by Sigurd Lewerentz are famous: that no brick be cut (Figure 12.3).⁴ It is a rule that necessitates wide mortar joints accommodating the resulting geometric puzzle. But it is only within this narrow gap, over which the baptismal shell is suspended on a metal frame, that the bricks stick out like the teeth of an opened zip.

The trough facilitates the most distinctive sound of the church. The baptismal shell is fed by a shockingly utilitarian copper pipe that generates a constant drip;⁵ endlessly overflowing, it discards drops into the water-filled channel, producing a double-drip of different tones, a sound that permeates the entire space. It is an evocative location device in the darkness. But it is not the only non-visual cue for positioning oneself in the space. The complex brick floor pattern, improvised on site by the architect and his bricklayers, is characterised by directional cues that can easily be picked up by a white cane. Wider joints in the mortar fix the position of the back legs of the beech and wickerwork chairs, designed in the late 1930s by the Danish architect and designer Kaare Klint.

The floor not only locates the freestanding furniture, but gently slopes down towards the altar (Figure 12.4), as if (as Lewerentz would remark) 'to help the doubtful towards the communion table'.

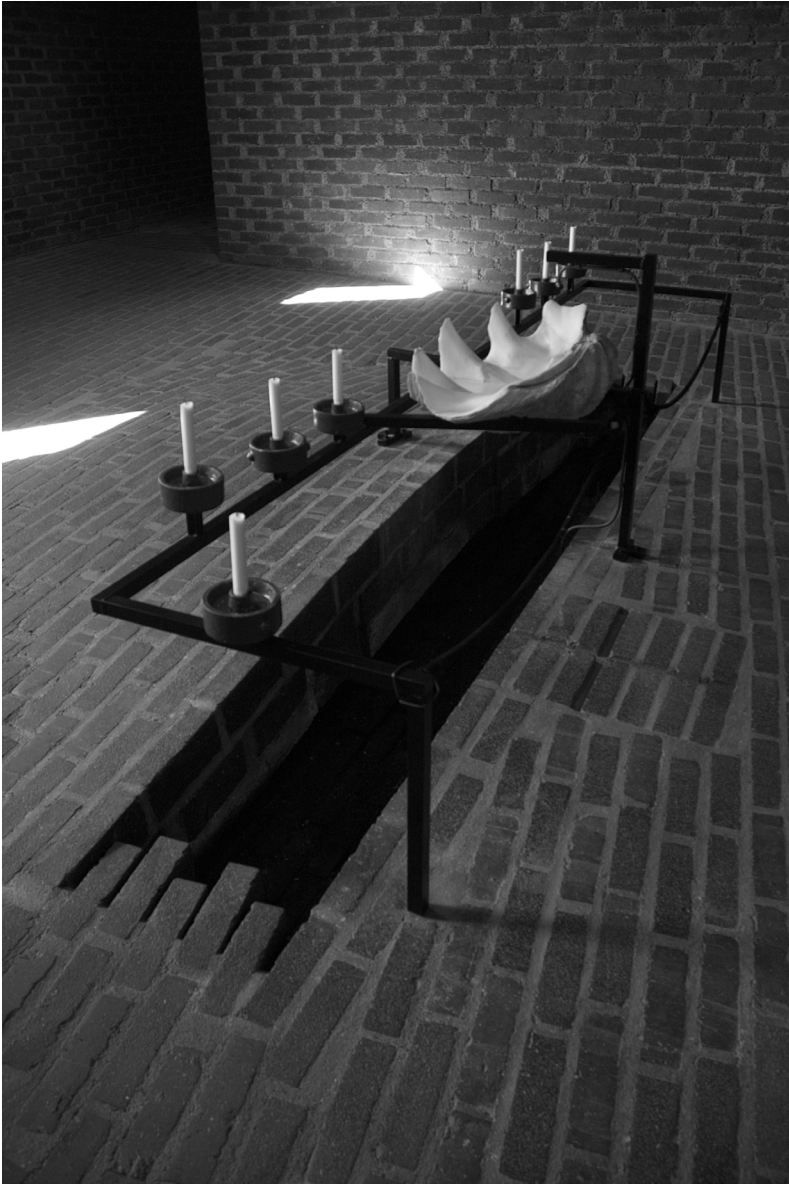


Figure 12.2 The baptismal font and trough, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6. *Source:* Ken Wilder.



Figure 12.3 Uncut bricks, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6.
Source: Ken Wilder.



Figure 12.4 The altar, Sankt Petri. Sigurd Lewerentz, 1962–6. *Source:* Ken Wilder.

And, indeed, the whole design, with its unusual square plan, is a response to *Circumstantes*, a term taken from the Latin word for encircling, adopted by the architect to describe a situation where the celebrants surround the performance of the sacraments. This refers back to the

earliest Christian practices. The architectural solution, with its vaulted roof and central T-shaped support, is an ingenious response to an imperative set by the project's Lutheran adviser, and an astonishing counterpart to Lewerentz's earlier basilica form at Markuskyrkan in Björkhagen, Stockholm.

Towards a blindness architecture

We began this chapter with a description, to give some sense of what it is like to enter the space of the church, perhaps for the first time. Sigurd Lewerentz's Sankt Petri, completed in 1966 when Lewerentz was already in his 80s, is exemplary in the multisensory experience it affords. It has long been a cult favourite of architects. Lewerentz was an important forerunner of Brutalism, championed outside of Sweden by Reyner Banham, author of the 1966 *The New Brutalism*.⁶ Yet, as Colin St John Wilson notes, this designation of Lewerentz as a proto-Brutalist contains only a half-truth; intensely private, Lewerentz's architecture was driven not by association with any group or manifesto, but by the internal necessity of the available resources.⁷ And Sankt Petri certainly exemplifies the material from which it is constructed – uncut brick – through its ubiquitous use.

What is rarely mentioned in the architecture literature is that both Sankt Petri and Lewerentz's earlier Markuskyrkan are exemplary of an architecture unusually attentive to non-visual engagements. Given deeply entrenched ocularcentric attitudes within architecture and architectural theory – a perceptual and epistemological privileging of vision over other senses – Lewerentz's Sankt Petri stands out as a notable exception. Perhaps his age (he walked with a stick and wore thick-lensed bifocal glasses) contributed to his sensitivity towards non-visual cues as a means of navigating and experiencing space. Few buildings are designed by architects in their 80s, when unlike their younger counterparts they are perhaps more cognisant of accessibility issues. But Lewerentz's approach reaches far beyond accessibility; it constitutes a profound engagement with an architecture of tactility, acoustics, and even smell. An architect such as Peter Zumthor would refer to its distinctive *atmosphere*.⁸

But Lewerentz's sensibility is not the abstraction of so many architects influenced by phenomenology, who rarely address the real experience of diverse bodies and (in this instance) visual acuities. As Jos Boys observes, 'architectural phenomenology makes certain kinds

of bodies obvious and unproblematic, emphasizing the sensuality and immediacy of experience while simultaneously assuming only “normal” (unencumbered, mobile, independent) subjects who have archetypal responses to space and objects’.⁹ We would be lying if we were to deny that Lewerentz’s work is often valorised in such a way. And yet Lewerentz’s attentiveness to non-visual engagements does not emphasise sensuality at the expense of pragmatic issues of access; indeed, what is salutary is Lewerentz’s consistent merging of the ordinary with the extraordinary, where he transforms practical necessities into poetic language.¹⁰ Pragmatism and symbolism collide, as with that unexpected juxtaposition of copper pipe and tropical shell, and the structural solution to the church’s square plan. And if ever there was an architecture exemplifying the notion of ‘blindness gain’, in terms of everyone benefiting from an attention to non-visual cues, then as authors we would struggle to think of a better example.¹¹

The germ of an idea

After a commission from the children’s charity Coram for an installation in the former children’s mortuary at the London Foundling Hospital, a building that was due to be demolished to make way for a new development on Coram’s site, one of this chapter’s authors, Ken Wilder, started to hanker for an opportunity to intervene in a multisensory way into another architectural structure. Wilder’s *Skylights* (Figure 12.5) opened on the evening of the summer solstice, 21 June 2016, the longest day of the year, and exploited the midday and evening light through two apertures (one south facing, one west) inserted into openings in the roof that had long been covered up (Figure 12.6). Having flooded the boys’ and girls’ mortuaries – the children poignantly separated by gender even in death – the apertures generated otherworldly lighting reflections (Figure 12.7), activated by the movement of the barefooted beholder within the two flooded spaces. This sought to activate a space associated with the worst kind of death, that of young children: to metaphorically allow dormant spirits to rise up and out of the long-neglected building prior to its demolition.

In April 2017, after discussions between Wilder and the Reverend Pernilla Håkansson Olsson at Sankt Petri, Wilder was commissioned to make a one-off site intervention at the church. Conceived as a kind of companion piece to *Skylights*, it was agreed that the performance installation should coincide with the autumnal equinox – when day and night



Figure 12.5 Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016). Exterior view of girls' and boys' mortuaries, Coram Campus, London. Source: © Ken Wilder.

are approximately of equal length – on the evening of 21 September 2017. Wilder had long held ambitions to intervene into this space, first encountered in 1989 through black and white photographs taken by the distinguished architectural photographer H el ene Binet.¹² Arriving back in London, Wilder invited blind Irish artist Aaron McPeake to collaborate on the project. McPeake had helped Wilder install *Skylights*. After visiting Sankt Petri, Wilder had immediately thought of utilising McPeake's bells and singing bowls as a means to engage Sankt Petri's extraordinary acoustic, while keen to draw upon McPeake's experience of acoustics and lighting.

McPeake's involvement, allied to the inherently multisensory nature of Lewerentz's architecture, inevitably brought the issue of blindness to the fore. Indeed, it was this collaboration, significantly as two *practitioners*, that (as noted earlier) first planted the seeds of an idea that was to come to fruition in the publication of this volume, and the two preceding Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded projects out of which it emerged (see the Introduction to this volume for more details). At the time, however, we had simply resolved that the performance installation would be as inclusive as possible to the local community, and while it involved light (referencing fragmentary perception) the intervention would be as much about Lewerentz's acoustic and tactility as about its visual reception.



Figure 12.6 Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016). Reflection of room aperture in girls' mortuary, Coram Campus, London. *Source:* © Ken Wilder.



Figure 12.7 Ken Wilder, *Skylights* (2016). Light effects in boys' mortuary, Coram Campus, London. *Source:* © Ken Wilder.

Circumstantes and the idea of encircling

From the outset, we settled upon the title of the work, *Circumstantes*. As noted earlier, this is the Latin word for encircling, adopted by Lewerentz to describe the desired spatial situation where participants encircle the performing of the sacraments. The idea of encircling inspired the first thoughts of using rotating vertical strips of light as a means to ‘scan’ the space, conjuring up thoughts of analogue scanners where a band of light slowly moves across a scanned sheet. This referenced the constantly shifting, and often fragmented, ribbon of light that had been such a feature of *Skylights*. These rotating bands would be like the beams from a lighthouse, sweeping the space in the darkness, transforming the sea of suspended brass pendant lights (a datum overlaid onto the space of the church) into sparkling stars.

Metaphors of lightness and darkness naturally arose, reinforced by the one-off performance installation coinciding with the autumnal equinox (a day celebrated in many world religions, but which also has prehistoric roots). But the evolving performance installation could also conjure up metaphors for a fragmented visual reality, where a mental image of a space is built up from fleeting perceptions. If *Circumstantes* was a work that explicitly set out to explore the relationship between light and darkness in relation to the equinox, it was also – as a collaboration between a sighted and a blind artist – a work exploring the fragmentary nature of visual perception for many with sight loss.

We drew upon our past experiences and skills, Wilder having practised architecture, McPeake having practised as a theatrical lighting designer for many years. We invited Alex Marshall to undertake the cinematography, and Owain Caruana-Davies and Kit Fretz (along with McPeake) to operate the lights. Keen to maintain the reference to analogue technology, the three vertical strips of light, generated by three 70-degree-wide theatre spotlights shuttered to produce vertical slots of intense white light, were to be operated manually in order to incorporate an element of improvisation and unpredictability. We evolved an economical tripod mounting system using adjusted Ikea stools (enjoying our private joke of taking Ikea stools back to Sweden). The light operators and stool-mounted lights are at times picked up by the rotating lights, in a reflexive gesture revealing the technical processes of the installation’s performance.

The movement of each of the lights was to be prompted by the playing, by Wilder, of two ‘singing’ bowls and one bell, cast in bell bronze by McPeake (with a further singing bowl made by McPeake used as a

prompt for the slow panning shots in the film). While the live site-specific installation performance lasted under 20 minutes, and was performed to a local audience (followed by a discussion), the work was also conceived from the start as a short film, filmed (responding to the equinox, and in the spirit of structural filmmaking) over the course of a 12-hour period, from midnight to midday. The resulting colour film is 19 minutes long, each of the 12 minutes of the section between 01:30 and 13:30 corresponding to an hour passing, moving from darkness to light.

The score

A central aspect of both the installation and film was the score, which was used to determine the paths of the three encircling vertical slots of light, but also aspects of the filming, doubling up as a shooting schedule. In a reflexive gesture, the score was not an imposition from outside the situation, but an interpretation of Lewerentz's pattern of slots on the south wall of the church. These vertical slots were used to modulate the sound of the space, meticulously located by one of Lewerentz's detailed drawings; they were translated into a score by Wilder (Figure 12.8), such that the resulting notation determined the ringing of the three singing bowls and one bell. These were used as directional cues, determining whether the light operator rotated the light in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction. Each bowl or bell had its own distinct tuning (G#2 101.5 Hz, G#3 203 Hz, A#3 230 Hz and G#5 826 Hz), ranging in weight from a modest 2.5 kg to the 35 kg of the largest bowl. They were chosen because of their capacity to 'ring' each other (a capacity enhanced by the space of the church itself, with its significant reverberation time). This happens when the kinetic energy from the striking of one bell or bowl provides sufficient force to ring the others, even when they are static.

The alternating arcs of lights were not only mapped out in the score, but also integrated into the filming. The lowest frequency (and largest) of the singing bowls was used to control the camera in the film, triggering a slow panning shot whenever it was rung (interrupting the otherwise static sequence of camera positions). The score therefore determined both the movement of the lights and the filming, particularly the timing and selective use of panning shots in the film. The generous offer by the church to allow us to film and record the sound of the four Sankt Petri bells as they rung within the belfry (a memorable experience) meant that the film length was increased from the original score to accommodate, in real time, the actual duration of these bells' sounding, the film's final

shot being of the rocking motion of the automated mechanism of one of the bells. We discovered that each of these bells is named after a saint: St Andreas, St Petrus, St Paulus and St Tomas. The contrast between the tones of McPeake's four bells/singing bowls and the sound of the church's larger, in situ bells added an extra layer of sound – and meaning – to both the film and the live performance.

The performance installation

The performance installation (Figure 12.9) was held in near total darkness (the programme starting at 19:00), the only light provided by candles around the perimeter of the space and around the baptismal font, placed in candleholders designed by Lewerentz, and by the three slots of intense white light which scanned the space. The distinctive smell of burning candles dominated the space. The ribbons of light illuminated, respectively, junctions between the floor, walls and ceiling; at times these bands aligned, in unpredictable patterns determined by the speed of the scans, which was left to the operators to improvise. The scans constituted a kind of drawing of the space through light, as they cumulatively unveiled the materiality and complex geometry of Lewerentz's vaulted space.

This was not a performance where the audience were confined to their seats; rather, while some chose to sit throughout, we encouraged people to move freely around the space, and to experience the shifts in the resonating acoustic and the tactility of the space. The disruption of the beams of light became an integral part of the performance, casting fleeting shadows of the audience onto the walls. Sound was absolutely crucial. The performance began in silence, other than the double-drip of the baptismal font, lit by candles and one of the static theatre lights. It was strangely moving to be in a space with so many people listening to this most familiar yet poignant sound, establishing the centrality of baptism to the space. As Peter Blundell Jones notes, the sound helps establish baptism as the church's resounding theme, where 'the space of the church is cave-like and intimate, more sanctuary than celebration, a place of deep mystery rather than stark protestant clarity'.¹³

Then the first of the singing bowls was rung, and one of the ribbons of light started to rotate in a clockwise direction, left to right. Each time the singing bowl was struck, the direction of rotation switched. After just over two minutes, the small, higher-pitched bell was struck and a second band of light started to rotate, almost straight away followed by a

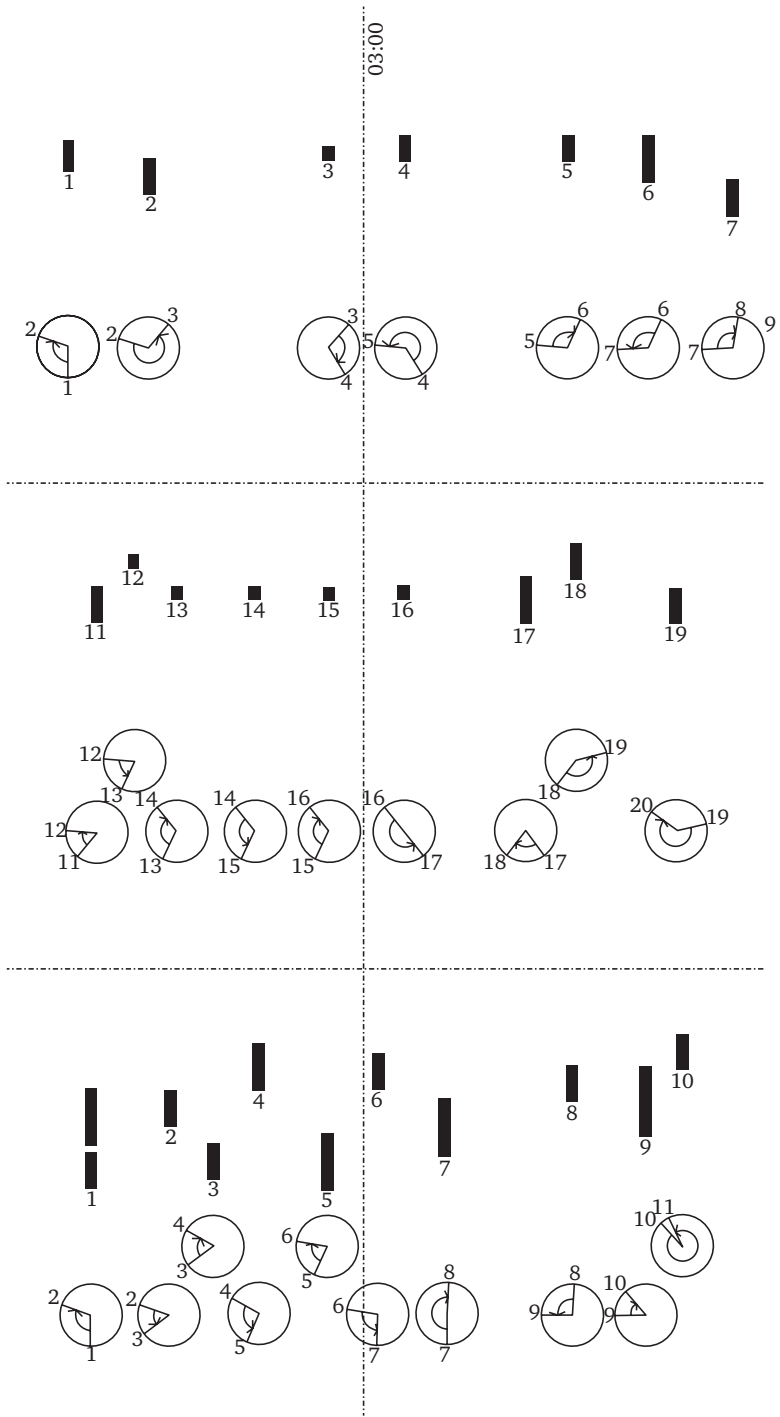


Figure 12.8 Ken Wilder, detail of the score for *Circumstances* (2017).
 Source: © Ken Wilder.

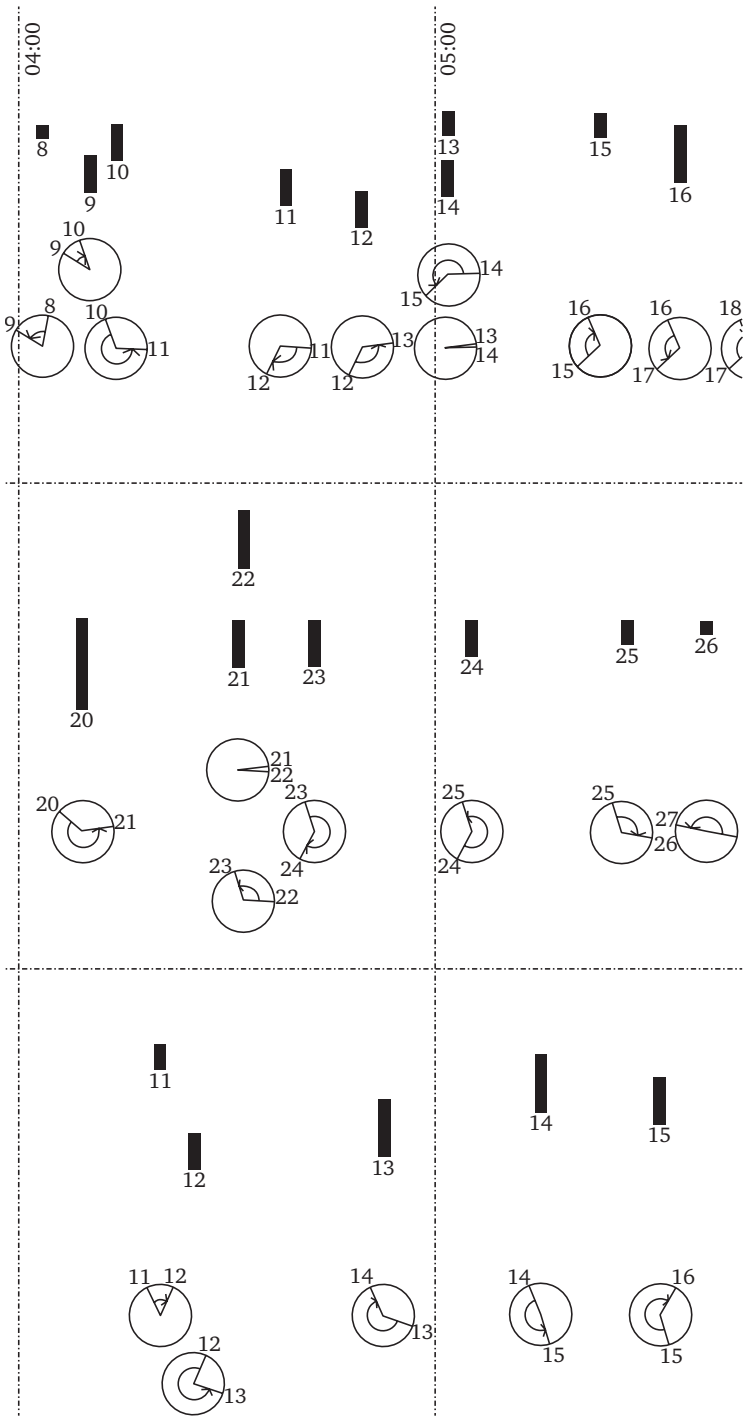


Figure 12.8 (continued)



Figure 12.9 Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake, *Circumstantes* (2017). Performance installation. *Source:* Alex Marshall.

second, lower-pitched singing bowl and a third band of light. Very soon, the strips of lights were overlapping in complex sweeps of the space, and a minute or so later a third singing bowl, with an exceptionally low tone, began also to be struck. Each bowl/bell resonated with the vibrations of the others, creating complex harmonies and setting each other off even when they were not directly struck. After 12 minutes of rotating lights triggered by the singing bowls and bell, the sounds inside the church were interrupted by the deeper tones of the four in-situ Sankt Petri bells being rung (through automated mechanisms) in the belfry. Even though they are always rung at noon each day, here they were integrated into the performance. The sounds of the church bells could be heard for some minutes, overlapping the vibrating bowls and bell inside the church until the latter faded to silence. As the final peals of the bells in the belfry faded away, the church was once more returned to silence and darkness, bringing us back to that ever-present double-drip from the baptismal font.

The film

The film, which didn't include the candles used in the performance, starts in total darkness, other than an ambiguous shadow of an object lit by a single block of light. The only sound is water dripping, and (with sufficient visual acuity) you can make out the shadow of drops of water emerging from a narrow pipe attached to a frame. The opening credits fade in and out over this still image. At **00:52** (all time codes are in bold in this description) the camera position recedes, revealing the illuminated objects generating the shadow, most notably a large tropical shell, into which the copper pipe discharges drops of water (Figure 12.10a).

At **01:12** the image switches to a close-up of the shell's shadow, animated by wave-like reflections from the water in the baptismal trough. At **01:30** we hear the first singing bowl, and a caption indicates that it is midnight, 00:00. A wider shot of the baptismal font shows a band of light sweeping across the scene, and in a succession of shots from fixed camera positions we follow the progress of this slot of light as it rotates through the church's interior. At **01:59** the singing bowl is struck again, and the band of light reverses direction.

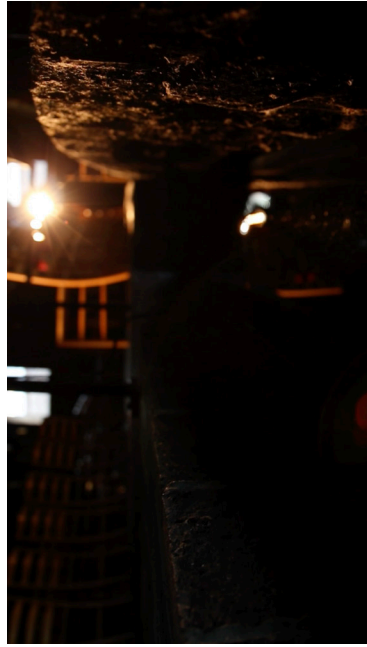
Between **02:13** and **02:18** we see, silhouetted, one of the light operators as he switches the direction of the light as the bowl is struck once more. The following shots reveal the pendant lights sparkling, the flickering of chairs momentarily lit up by the moving light, and details of the brick floor and walls. At **02:30** the second time caption appears (it is now 01:00). Over the next minute (constituting an hour of filming) the film progressively reveals more of the church, including the altar and its attached crucifix (Figure 12.10(b)), designed by Robert Nilsson, at its centre the letter 'P' (the Chi Rho symbol referred to as the *corpus*, Latin for body).

At **03:46** (just after 02:00) we hear a higher pitched bell, and almost immediately after, the lower tone of a second singing bowl followed by the ringing of the initial bowl. All three bands of light now circumnavigate the vaulted space, overlapping, while the bell and singing bowls generate resonating harmonies. Then at **04:47** the final singing bowl, with the deepest tone, is rung for the first time, and the camera – static until now despite its shifting perspectives – starts to pan the space, responding to the score.

Over the next few minutes, more and more of the space is revealed. At **05:38** and **05:56** one of the three light operators, Owain, is fleetingly lit up, along with the mechanism for rotating the lights; at **06:26** the camera reveals the water-filled trough and waves formed by a single



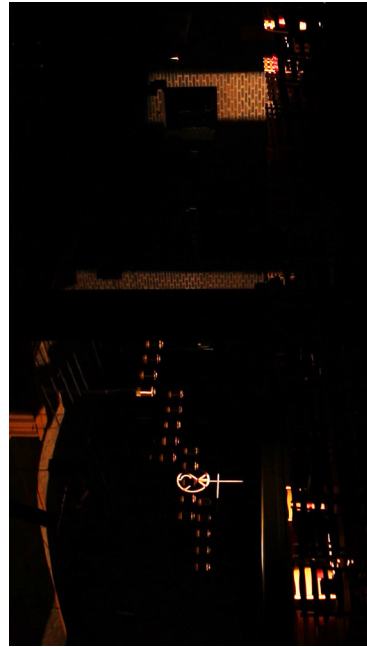
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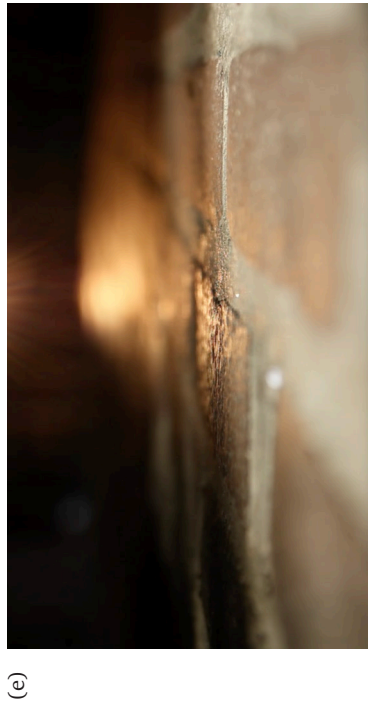
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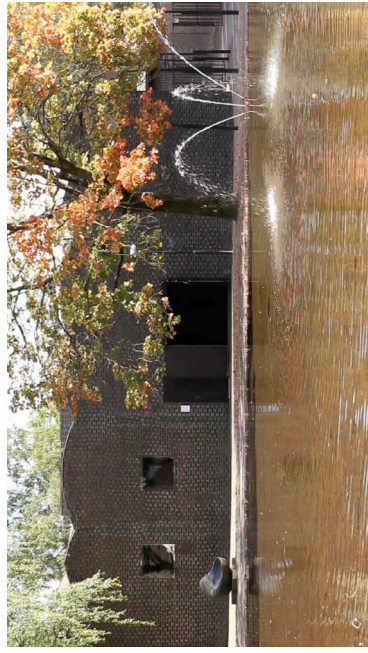
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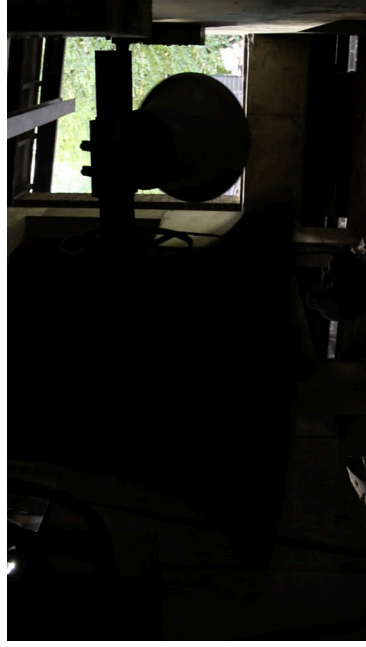
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(e)



(f)



(g)

Figure 12.10 Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake, *Circumstantes* (2017). Film stills: (a) the baptismal font; (b) the altar; (c) the church interior; (d) view from the baptismal trough; (e) dappled sunlight; (f) the west façade; (g) Sankt Petri's bells. *Source:* Alex Marshall.

drop of water, and then the caption revealing that it is now 05:00 in the morning; at **06:41** the back of Aaron's head appears as he manipulates a light. A long shot starting at **06:57** gives us our clearest overview of the whole church ([Figure 12.10\(c\)](#)), still bathed in darkness, including the altar, central column and arrangement of chairs, as the three bands of light sweep across each other, overlapping and separating.

At **08:09** the view out of the window is of a deep blue sky: it is getting lighter, and morning is upon us. And over the following shots we get progressively more glimpses of the outside light, including a shot at **08:35**, from just above the water level in the trough, of Kit operating the bright theatrical light ([Figure 12.10\(d\)](#)), silhouetted against two windows through which light is now entering the church. Then at **09:30** (it is now 08:00) we hear for the first time one of Sankt Petri's bells, St Andreas, which is rung every day at 08:00 and 16:00.

At **09:47** we leave the church, and in the low light we can just about make out the large bell swinging towards and away from the camera as it rings, gradually slowing.

At **10:27** we return to the church, and a detail of an embroidered banner, designed by Sven Erixon and woven by the textile artist Barbro Nilsson. At **11:00** we see dust suspended above the backs of chairs, now lit up by light entering through the windows as well as the sweeping bands of light; at **11:23** we see a close-up of the flickering dust, followed at **11:36** by dappled daylight on the floor ([Figure 12.10\(e\)](#)). At **12:08** a slow panning shot (triggered again by the deepest toned singing bowl) gives us the clearest view of the interior, which is still surprisingly dark despite the sunshine outside. Then, at **13:30** (it is 12:00 noon, on the autumnal equinox), we hear the first tolls of a bell in a sequence where all four Sankt Petri bells eventually play, as they do every day, overlaid onto the sounds of Aaron's singing bowls and bell which slowly fade.

At **14:22** the doors leading to the garden and fountain slowly open, admitting bright light and the sounds of the fountain. And at **14:46** the camera moves outside, looking back across the pond and fountain to the open doors in the building's west-facing façade ([Figure 12.10\(f\)](#)). Various exterior views of the building follow, until **16:16** when the camera enters the belfry, followed by a series of detail shots of Sankt Petri's bells and their mechanisms ([Figure 12.10\(g\)](#)).

We hear the final peal of one of the bells at **17:16**, and the final held shot commences at **17:30**, a detail of one of the circular ringing mechanisms gently rocking to and fro, over which the final credits play.

Notes

- 1 Colin St John Wilson poetically suggests that the vaulting conjures up the rise and fall of human breath: a kind of inhalation and exhalation (St John Wilson 1988, 72).
- 2 The giant tropical shell, which acts as a font, is an explicit reference to early Christian representations showing Christ baptised by John the Baptist with a scallop shell.
- 3 Peter Blundell Jones writes, 'the baptismal trough at the corner where one enters [is] a primeval slot, a water-filled fissure, the edge of which swells up mysteriously' (Blundell Jones 2002, 166). The verb 'swell' here beautifully emphasises that this is a process still ongoing.
- 4 The only exception to this rule is the pulpit, the altar and its floor, where Lewerentz uses a half-brick – but split, counterintuitively, lengthways.
- 5 This is typical of Lewerentz's idea of transfiguring the day-to-day, uniting functional and symbolic meaning. For Lewerentz, the poetic and the pragmatic frequently coincide.
- 6 Banham 1966, 142–3.
- 7 St John Wilson 2001, 112.
- 8 Zumthor 2006.
- 9 Boys 2018, 55.
- 10 Wilder 2021.
- 11 'Blindness gain' is a term developed by Hannah Thompson (Thompson and Warne 2018).
- 12 Along with accompanying models and drawings, H el ene Binet's photographs were part of a seminal exhibition of Lewerentz's work held at the Architectural Association in London, which introduced the architect to a wider audience.
- 13 Blundell Jones 2002, 166.

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Part V

Touch, sound, smell, taste

13

Holding Eva Hesse [treatment]

Fayen d'Evie



Figure 13.1 Georgina Kleege be-holds Eva Hesse's *Sans II* (1968) during Fayen d'Evie's sensorial research at SFMOMA, 2017. *Source:* © Estate of Eva Hesse, courtesy Hauser & Wirth. Photograph: Don Ross.

Preamble

This text is a treatment for an audio essay – a study in be-holding *Sans II* (1968), a sculptural work by Eva Hesse in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). To 'be-hold', as I have written elsewhere, reclaims the etymological root of 'beholding', before

the term's co-option as ocular observance. In Old English, *bihalden* denoted deep regard, the conjoining of *bi-* 'thoroughly', and *-halden* 'to guard, to preserve, to maintain, to take care, to hold'. My practice of be-holding is an ally of conservation practice, preserving and carrying stories of embodied encounters with artworks, and tending to sensory nuances not usually disclosed.

By framing this text as a treatment for an audio script, I intend a blatant political position: an insistence that more can be done to offer diverse perceptual entry points into our creative conversations. The dominant structures of publishing are so deeply bound to a narrow idea of a normal perceiving and cognitive body that there is an urgency to turn to blind, Deaf, autistic and non-verbal mentors to innovate sensorial writing and publishing. This project requires a rejection of capitalist models of efficiency in favour of redundancy. Rather than a singular mode of messaging, it builds in multiplicity through parallel texts that convey similar thematic content with perceptual variations. This manifesto has arisen out of friction. Invitations to author print essays grate against my blind-ish practice. By grounding print essays in audio narratives, I hope to sustain the privileging of blind readers, while deploying the scripting and transcribing process to affirm Deaf readers.

In the context of this issue orbiting constructs of care, and the tragic circumstances of Eva Hesse's illness and death, the term 'treatment' could suggest medical recuperation. However, like many disabled writers, I have a skeptical relationship with the medical industry, and reject insinuations that the quality and value of a life relies on medical repair. The earliest known usage of 'treat' in the fourteenth century was not in the medical sense, but as an intransitive verb meaning 'to discuss terms of accommodation', or 'to deal with a matter in writing or speech'. An intransitive verb is not transactive; it does not need to act upon an external object, but instead describes the actions of the subject. Through this text, I announce a refiguring of 'treatment', not as a prescribed programme of repair for an externalised other, but as a fundamentally reflexive commitment to access within writing and publishing. An archaic cognate of 'treat' is *behandle*, meaning 'to touch with the hands' or 'to discuss'. Enfolding these concepts elaborates a discursive structure of care for artworks and audiences. Intimate be-holding encounters may bring close attention to an artwork in one moment in its durational life; these private encounters may be shared with public audiences through ekphrastic audio description; and with be-handling, treatments may be crafted that mingle scripting and transcribing, opening space for trans-sensory conversations about how we experience artworks.

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Cue Audio. Narrator. HOLDING EVA HESSE

Fade in to murmuring. Overlay footsteps and voices:

Do you have any personal thoughts about the shifting legacy of artists?

Based on the attrition of the artworks? ... I haven't given it much thought – to consider how someone will be known in the future based on what evidence remains ...

*Narrator. Wednesday 19 July 2016. We huddle in one of the third-floor galleries of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. There is a quorum of blindness amongst us, and a quorum of SFMOMA staff. The museum is closed to the public, but we are not alone. In an adjacent gallery, an on-camera interview is taking place. We have been given permission to proceed with our study of *Sans II* by Eva Hesse – as long as we speak in hushed tones. We settle close to head conservator Michelle Barger, who has cared for *Sans II* since the work entered SFMOMA's collection in 1999:*

It was made in 1968 during that period in her career where she was branching into larger-scale sculpture. She was trained as a painter at Yale, and in the mid-1960s had a moment where she shifted towards doing three-dimensional work. She probably would still describe it as painting ... For the first time she moved into using polyester resin and fibreglass. It was also the first time she went outside of her studio and worked with a fabricator ... and then it ended up being somebody who worked with her for the rest of her life, which was about three more years after that ... It's made up of two rows of six, I'm going to call them windows, three-dimensional windows ... sort of box-like units that are stacked, the top row on top of the bottom, recessed toward the walls with the sides coming toward us ... It's about three and a half feet high, seven feet wide ...

When *Sans II* was first exhibited, at Fischbach Gallery in New York, the work spanned five times this length.

When Hesse made it, she made these five units and they were on display in a gallery show she had, one piece with five units. They were displayed all together, in a horizontal line. But no institution committed to owning all five and so it was sold separately. The Whitney purchased two, and the other two went to private collectors. The fifth one she traded to her dentist for dental work. So her dentist had it in his home, on view in a suburb of New York City. And that unit stayed at his house, until it came into this collection.

When SFMOMA mounted a retrospective of Eva Hesse in 2002, the five units were reunited and installed side by side in their original, horizontal formation.

It's supposed to look like it's a continuous strip, so you want them as close as possible. Of course, we had couriers from each institution who were really nervous about you handling their work, and getting it too close ... I call it the Quintuplets Study, because these were out in the world and on their own and then brought together, and you could see evidence of the lives that they led in different locations. Each part has had its own life over the years and so when it comes together, they don't all look the same again. They're varying in degree of yellowing and dust. The two that are in the best condition are the two that the Whitney had purchased.

The *Sans II* in front of us is a deep amber colour, like sugar caramel. We are told that it was the most yellowed of the quintuplets, but not the dirtiest.

It wasn't in a controlled museum environment. The private dentist had it on view all the time. This tacky surface, if you get dust on it, it really is hard to get off, it just embeds in it.

Jill Sterrett, SFMOMA's Director of Collections, chimes in.

There's years of New York City suburb dust stuck onto that tacky surface.

Georgina Kleege tucks her white cane under her arm, and poses a question to those amongst us with some degree of visual perception:

Where does your eye go first, looking at this piece? What attracts your gaze?

Layer polyphonic responses: // ... the intersection of several of the boxes toward the centre, because it creates a pinwheel effect, and also is suggestive of honeycomb. It's the ripple in the otherwise relatively regular grid that's the little difference that draws the eye ... // ... these curves and divots and the creases ... // ... the work has presence on the wall, but there's light reflecting through it and bouncing back from the wall ... // ... the word that comes to mind is dappled – dappled light, or you look out a window and you see a tree that has light coming through with areas of patches of leaf. Because where I'm standing now, you feel that from the shadows created by the deep walls. There's shadows in the thickness of the resin ...

Kleege changes tack:

I was interested to know that she started as a painter, and still continued to think of herself as a painter, even though this is theoretically a 3D work ... Visually, does it look like a painting? At what distance do you know that you're looking at a 3D piece?

A long silence followed. This question was more difficult, drilling beyond superficial visual observation to probe underlying assumptions about what makes a painting a painting, what makes a sculpture a sculpture.

Layer voices: // ... the viscosity of resin, it can be brushed onto fibreglass like paint ... // ... Hesse favoured the tools of a painter, even as she explored sculptural mass ... // ... the stacked boxes of Sans II resemble a painting in reverse, its stretcher bars exposed ...

By orienting the descriptive exercise through blindness, Kleege has modelled one of the methods we have been trialling by which blindness can nuance or challenge visual observation. Where possible, we prefer to move beyond the visual to claim space for tactile aesthetics (see [Figure 13.1](#)). Conservator Michelle Barger has been a crucial gatekeeper in our quest to touch works, the ultimate arbiter on what kinds of handling may be possible in each instance.

I remember being surprised at how light *Sans II* is, but also really nervous because it talks to you when you move it. It becomes quite brittle and just moving it, it sort of is crinkly, which makes you nervous initially. Then when you get to know the piece and you realise that's a part of how it talks and how it acts, you just handle it in a way that supports it ...

Then the words we have been waiting for:

I think we can do some touching today ...

We lean across the riser, which is designed to dissuade an intimate approach. The walls of *Sans II* feel paper thin, but in some places we feel thick layers of fibreglass and resin. We whisper tactile notes:

More brittle than I thought. I thought it'd be more rubbery.

Our fingertips find the rippled pinwheel joints at the junctions of the grid, and bubbles and tiny holes along some of the walls. Michelle Barger explains that the fibreglass is composed of non-directional, matted strands of glass, and that there are pockets of air in the mesh, so the holes form where the resin has not been worked into the mesh enough:

The holes are areas of resistance.

We sniff the surface of *Sans II*, but there is only a faint smell. Barger notes that the smell is intense when *Sans II* has been in storage:

When we bring the crate in to install it, you open the crate, and you get poof, a hit of polyester. I have lost my sense of smell, but the crew always talks about you get this oof, you get hit with some chemical smell of how it's still reacting and off-gassing.

Jill Sterrett recommends we touch the glassy texture of the flat back panels, where the work is more saturated with resin:

This is where Hesse's moulds would have been.

Hesse created the first plaster mould herself, then gave it to her fabrication assistant Doug Johns to create the resin units. Johns still has the original mould in his studio in Topanga Canyon, Southern California, where he

makes sexually explicit artworks. When SFMOMA's conservators were researching Hesse's materials in preparation for the retrospective show, they invited Johns to demonstrate the process of creating *Sans II* by making a mockup using the original mould.

He wrapped the mould in the fibreglass, and then bound it with resin. So painted resin, with fibreglass holding the resin together, forms the structure of each one of these individual boxes, then he uses the same process of fibreglass and resin to join them, and that process of joining is what creates the ripply edges. The thing that was so striking when we did the mockup is that we saw the clear, water-white resin, what it looked like when it was first made. It's translucent.

The day after the show closed, we took our four-panel mockup and installed it on the wall right next to this piece. And it was so profound to see, because when you held it, it still had presence, but when you put it on the wall, it just disappears. Hesse talked famously about nothingness, and you then saw this work sort of disappear on the wall ... So that was the really big surprise, how clear this actually was ... Seeing the mockup made you rethink everything that this sculpture had been ...

In Hesse's diary of 1967, she wrote:

compartment, interval, void. Sans: without.

A few pages later, she wrote:

1. SANS: < L. absentee, absence. (under influence of sine, without) (archaic or poetic, without).

A year later, in her statement for the Chain Polymers exhibition where *Sans II* was originally exhibited, Hesse wrote:

I would like the work to be non-work. This means it would find its way beyond my preconceptions ... It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know ... It is something, it is nothing.

The translucent mockup suggests that *Sans II* would have originally hovered between something and nothing. Hesse had cast an empty form, and then serialised the void, creating a work shimmering on the edge of

invisibility. But as the quintuplet units of *Sans II* have transitioned to a rich amber patina, they have accrued visual density. They have become more object-like and lost the suggestion of nothingness. And this amber quality has not just displaced the memory of *Sans II*'s pale translucence, it has become mythologised as integral to the work – so much so that when SFMOMA chose the cover image for the retrospective catalogue, they chose a pinwheel join of *Sans II* and heightened the amber colour.

Hesse had anticipated the impermanence of her materials:

At this point I feel a little guilty about when people want to buy it. I think they know but I want to write them a letter, and say it's not going to last ...

Ann Temkin has spoken of the quandaries facing curators and conservators, asking:

Is the condition of the piece so far from the artist's intention that it is better to leave it unseen and make do with photographs of it in good condition? Does one attempt to remake the objects or portions of them, sacrificing literalness to present something true to the spirit of the original? Or does one accept the aging of the sculpture as part of its meaning and present it as it now exists?

So how can we expand our concepts of conservation to account for the immaterial? How can we better care for and preserve the stories of works as they age?

Perhaps Hesse's own poetics of erasure offers a response. In 1964, Hesse made a series of lyrical collages and drawings in which she brushed over text with a wash of white pigment. Hesse's close friend Gioia Timpanelli has described this use of white as transparent cancellation, like a postmark struck over a stamp that documents the placement and the relationship between both marks, while negating neither.

Our encounter with *Sans II* washes tactile notes across preceding memories.

Even the SFMOMA curators present have never experienced the piece in this way, including Tanya Zimbaro:

I never knew that one could be, with permission, able to touch this, so there's this sort of pleasure. Also, it felt like how I imagined, which isn't always the case. It had a kind of delicate, almost crystal kind of quality to it.

Layer voices: // ... it talks to you ... // ... curves and divots and the creases ... // ... glassy ... // ... glossy ... // ... it creaks ... // ... the resin has formed a surface where it's touching the mould, the texture will tell you also which was facing in and what was out ... // ... brushstrokes ... // ... in some places there's multiple layers of fibreglass and resin, so it's quite thick. And then around the edges it's paper thin ... // ... feel the holes ...

Sound as vibration: a method of making and a mode of reception in contemporary arts practice

Aaron McPeake

Most of my sculptural work is interactive and multisensory in nature. It demands different types of touch and generates different sounds and smells for beholders to perceive. However, despite their intrinsic multisensory nature, I would consider these works as fitting the classification of 'sound' or even 'vibrational' sculptures. That is to say, the sound/vibration produced is often the most prominent feature of the work; that they can be touched and rung by beholders also makes them somewhat novel as fine art objects, on the grounds that the museum sector largely prohibits physical engagement with objects.

These works are made from bell bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, 80 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. These two relatively malleable and soft metals, when combined, produce a very hard and resonant material. The molten metal freezes into a fine crystalline structure, which gives it a sonorous quality as well as a tendency to become brittle. Bell makers often refer to this brittleness as being 'crispy'. The colour of the metal can vary but it frequently appears 'whiter' than other bronzes. Yet like other bronzes, when touched, the copper-based alloy causes a reaction with the oils produced by the body, generating a unique smell similar to that occasioned by handling copper coins. The works can be touched in different ways: with hands, knuckles, fingers and fingernails, and often with the aid of a bespoke 'clapper' with which the works can be struck; it is through these different modes of haptic engagement that sounds are generated. The works are multisensory in that they can be seen, touched and sounded as well as smelled.

My art practice has been widely affected by my vision loss, which has been happening in descending steps over a period of some 35 years. I now have a visual acuity which can be measured as Two Sixty, which

is to say I see in detail at 2 metres what people with average sight see at 60 metres. However, becoming adventitiously blind, rather than being born with the condition, has meant that I have managed to acquire an extremely detailed visual memory and sensibility. This has been helped by a previous career in stage lighting design, which involved not only visual references and checks but also an architectural and spatial dimension that was dependent upon an awareness of geometry. As a lighting designer, one needs to fit cones of light within the cubic volumes of theatre spaces; repeating this process over a number of years has resulted in a tacit knowledge of the volumetric geometry of both these cones and spaces more generally. So now, as a blind practitioner (Figure 14.1), I have a different set of skills relating and responding to sensory stimuli, resulting from both my work experience and the gradual experience of 'losing' sight.

An education in vibration

Sound and vibration have always been a strong part of my daily sensory experience, which fed into my thinking and practice before any onset of vision loss occurred. For much of the last 20-something years since I became registered blind, I have regularly encountered a set of common assumptions about my interest in, and practice of, creating sound sculptures. Responding to these and clarifying my position and intent have often been a tiring endeavour; having to embark on explanations about my work relating solely to my visual disability detracts from the primacy of the work I make and the intentions it holds. There are assumptions made by those that Georgina Kleege refers to as the 'visually dependent' (see Chapter 1 of this volume) in respect of the responses to my work. In the main these assumptions attribute qualities of the work as being related to my circumstances (replacements for the visual) rather than being accepted as simply artworks with their own properties, qualities and intentions.

Since childhood, I have been aware that we are seldom taught how to best utilise the senses; or, to put it more accurately, very few people benefit from pedagogies related to using the senses. I am of course making this general point in relation to industrially developed societies, whereas in a rainforest, savannah, prairie, steppe or tundra landscape, one's survival depends to a great extent on an acute use of *all* of the senses in combination with one's knowledge of the environment, its inhabitants and its hazards. In modern industrial societies, I would argue that only



Figure 14.1 Aaron McPeake, *Once I Saw it All* (2022). Source: © Aaron McPeake. Photograph: Ken Wilder.

conservatoire musicians, mechanical engineers and (hopefully) anaesthetists are instructed as to the finer points of listening. In the realm of smelling, perfumers, cooks and sommeliers have the edge, and probably with tasting, too. Dancers, masseuses and other hands-on clinical practitioners get the benefits of lessons in touch. Lessons in looking are reserved for the artist, designer, architect and photographer, as well as – probably the most honed of all – the military spotter and sniper. I would also argue that using the senses is largely steered by prohibitions: ‘how not to’ look or touch rather than ‘how to’.

My own childhood critique of the lack of sensory expertise and consideration was an ongoing and almost daily reality, confined not just to other children of my age but also adults. Growing up in the countryside and by the sea meant that my peers and I were in constant contact with the natural environment as well as what it presented for the senses. With hindsight, sounds – and the lack of attention to them – are most memorable. When exploring new places in the hills and fields, I would regularly point out to my playmates that there were pine or willow trees over the brow of the hill, in that I could hear the particular quality of sound the wind would make in their leaves and branches. I would be scolded, however, as we had not visited that place before so ‘I could not possibly know what was ahead of us’. When we crossed into the new territory and I was shown to be correct, I would draw attention to the specific sound made by the particular leaves and branches and there would be accepting nods or grunts from my fellow explorers.

Another instance of this was detecting the prelude to the wash: the large, metre-high, surf-type waves generated by the ferries from Belfast to Liverpool in Belfast Lough (which are no longer allowed to travel so quickly due to the damage they caused to the shores). Once the ferry had passed by, around 2 kilometres distant, its wake would result in a series of waves crashing on the shore. As with a tsunami, the energy of the incoming wave made the water withdraw to fuel the incoming wave. For many of my young friends this was a predominantly visual event, predicting the wave by noting the bearing of the ship or the dramatic drawback of the water. For me, the unique and eerie sound of the drawback was the strongest signifier, rather than the associated visual cues. As with shingle, sand or rock, the withdrawing of any wave makes a slurping sound. The sound of the wash drawback, however, continued for almost a full minute, followed by a few moments of stillness and silence before the roar of the first wave’s ascending eruption. Despite the fact that the birth and life of the wave were visually spectacular, the associated sounds, and the lack of recognition they received from my

peers, made me acutely aware of living in an ocularcentric world (even though I did not then have a word to name this phenomenon). This did not so much ignore but rather demote the other senses when they were not being considered in isolation. When I say 'in isolation', I am referring to the singular actions of, for example, smelling a flower, listening to music, tasting a dish or touching a novel material.

As the use of senses is not generally taught, knowledge surrounding them is also very limited. Few could elaborate on how touch, scent or taste receptors function, yet they are in almost constant use and our understanding is tacit or based on lifelong experience. Similarly with the ocular realm, most of those with sight cannot tell how the macula and retina work, or what the component parts of rods and cones are and what they do. Even within the art school my experience is that few can elaborate on the nature of light and colour, or phenomena such as why the sky is blue overhead or red in the evenings and mornings. Similarly with sound and vibration, few are taught how to use hearing and understand the associated principles.

Sound as vibration

Sound is the vibration of matter such that the oscillation is transmitted from the origin outwards through gas, liquid or solid. A visual analogy of this would be the concentric ripples in a pond caused by a stone. It is in effect a disturbance of pressure, alternately expanding and contracting the material medium through which it travels. This reliance on material means that sound cannot travel in a vacuum; or, alternatively, the speed of sound in a vacuum is zero. For humans, audible sound lies between 20 and 20,000 Hz (cycles per second of an entire wave) and is limited in ability when compared to other animals.

Wavelength describes the *distance* between one vibration and the next one along the line of propagation: strictly between a part of the vibration and the same part again. One could liken these peaks and troughs to rungs of a ladder with regular intervals. These are linked to the frequency via the speed of the wave. So, if something vibrates up and down 5 times a second, and it propagates outwards at 10 metres per second (m/s), then in one oscillation it will have gone out 2 metres, therefore the wavelength is 2 metres. $\text{Speed} = \text{frequency} \times \text{wavelength}$ or $\text{wavelength} = \text{speed}/\text{frequency}$. In sound, air molecules are both compressed and stretched out. This pattern pushes along, like naughty kids jostling whilst lining up in the dinner queue. The distance between

a compressed bit and the next compressed bit (or a stretched bit and the next) is the wavelength.

Sound travels through different materials at different speeds: slower through 'gasses' than liquids and slower still through liquids than metals. Generally (but not entirely), the denser the material the faster the sound travels; and the higher the temperature, the faster the sound also travels. In air at zero degrees Celsius, sound travels at 331.45 m/s whereas at room temperature it travels at 346 m/s. In water it travels at 1,496 m/s and in copper at 6,420 m/s. In the human body there are also considerable variations in the velocity of sound. This ranges between 1,450 m/s and 1,580 m/s in muscle, whereas in the skull bone where the ears (or microphones) reside, it travels at 4,080 m/s.

Some people who use therapeutic sound practices – such as plate gongs (*kyi zee* and *toh zee*), gong baths or immersions, crystal bowls and singing bowls – claim that certain frequencies have properties beneficial for the wellbeing of users. While some condemn this to the realm of pseudoscience, 432, 528, 639, 741 and 777 Hz are often cited as having such properties, and the thousands of years of continued use of this practice in both Hindu and Buddhist cultures goes beyond the anecdotal and is taken seriously by healing practitioners.

Though certainly more common in Eastern cultures, ancient Europeans also posited that sound could play a part in reaching deep within the human psyche. Pythagoras (b. 570 BCE) established the principles of sound in a geometrical and mathematical fashion. He and his followers were obsessed with geometrical patterns and thought that everything in the universe somehow fitted within or obeyed these shapes and structures. Pythagorean discoveries surrounding harmonics showed that if you have a string that naturally vibrates at a certain frequency (fundamental frequency or 1st harmonic) and you have another string which is half the length of the first one, the latter will vibrate with twice the frequency (2nd harmonic). If you have a string a third of the length, it will vibrate at a higher frequency (3rd harmonic).

In sound you can of course have any combinations of notes, but some combinations sound terrible to the ear. Using harmonics, multiples or fractions of a fundamental frequency can sound pleasing. Researchers also think these pleasing effects extend to other animals and, some would even argue, plants.

The 'Mystical' frequencies (432, 528, 639, 741 and 777 Hz) themselves generate patterns in material. This can be demonstrated using the Chladni plate (after the German physicist and musician Ernst Chladni) on a loudspeaker apparatus. Here, a loudspeaker vibrates a

flat plate of thin metal and the fine particles of salt (or the like) create two-dimensional patterns on the plate depending on the frequency input. These can be very complex geometric shapes, sometimes like fractal sets. This in effect makes the sound visible through the vibrations creating geometric patterns in materials: particularly smoke, dust, salt, sand or other fine grains which can easily be displaced by the kinetic/vibrational energy of the sound.¹ I am currently embarking on a series of experiments using similar methods to the Chladni plate, which will create a catalogue of images generated through the vibrations generated by some of my own, sonorous bell-bronze works.

A number of artists, such as Ray Pierotti and Scott Snibbe (along with many playful physics experimenters), have used this method to visualise standing waves of sounds in their work. This relatively new field of art practice, which explores sounds through other senses (though mainly the visual), is termed Cymatics or Cymatic art. Patterns such as fractal sets are generated and can be visualised through vibrating materials and converted into images or video, as demonstrated in Scott Snibbe's work with Björk for her concert tours. However, there are a great number of artists who centre sound and vibration within their practices without using transduction or illustration, allowing the sounds and vibrations to physically interact with the beholder. Before considering some of these practitioners, it is important to realise that there is an extremely long tradition of using sound and vibration as a central part of cultural life, which can be traced back to the Stone Age.

Prehistoric vibrational expertise and practice

Though it is unclear why prehistoric societies did this, it appears that sound and vibration were a central element of rituals that had religious or ceremonial significance. Steven Waller, who carried out studies and measurements into Palaeolithic cave art (between 15,000 and 40,000 years old), particularly in France and Spain, discovered that there was a strong correlation between the positioning of cave art works and locations with acoustic resonance or pronounced echoes.² In places where there was minimal echo or resonance, works were simply not produced, while larger chambers with prominent echoes were almost always where cave art was found. This research makes a compelling case that the visual and acoustic are absolutely connected.

In his paper 'The first picture show', Edward Wachtel makes the case that the flickering of torches animated the cave art, introducing

time and movement.³ If this is combined with Waller's findings about acoustic choices made in the situating of cave art, it would seem feasible to suggest that a multisensory experience was generated in Palaeolithic times. If we move forward 30,000 years or so to the Neolithic period, we find in architecture a much more deliberate and sophisticated inclusion of sound and vibration in the construction and design of ceremonial sites.

When visiting stone circles such as Easter Aquhorthies and Stonehenge, archaeologist Aaron Watson noticed that the sites afforded strange acoustic phenomena. In 1995 he teamed up with cybernetics researchers David Keating and John Was on a project entitled *Archaeoacoustics*, in order to take precise acoustic measurements of Neolithic sites and landscapes, starting with the stone circle of Easter Aquhorthies in northeastern Scotland. Over the course of taking many measurements they discovered that standing waves were present at Easter Aquhorthies, such that standing approximately 7 metres from the recumbent stone the sound would be three times louder than it was perceived in the open space.⁴ In the case of Stonehenge, Watson noticed that in the interior of the circle the stones were smooth and concave, whereas the exterior faces were rough. This would indicate a deliberate design to reflect sound within the circle.⁵

Standing waves, or stationary waves in physics, are basically opportunities for sound to be amplified because the rebounding wave adds to the previous wave or, in the subtractive sense, the sound can get quieter because the waves cancel each other out. The sound moves out from the sources, in all directions, as a series of compressions and rarefactions. These will then reflect off surfaces like walls and bounce back directly or, depending on the angle, in a different direction. If the wavelength (or frequency) is right, the waves moving from the source will interfere with those coming back, and you get regions of 'constructive' and 'destructive' interference: in other words, when two waves travelling in the same direction overlap, their crests combine to generate a larger wave, or when two waves travelling in the same direction are aligned, the crest of one is aligned with the trough of another.

If you could see all the molecules of air in a room or cave in which a sound was made, you would notice regions of space where the molecules were moving back and forth around a central point, whereas in other parts of the room the molecules would be still. If you stood in these 'still' areas, you would hear no sound. By contrast, if you stood in the area in which molecules were moving, you would hear the sound at its loudest. With a single frequency this is easy to demonstrate; when listening to music, however, we witness a more complex interplay between the walls

and the various standing waves which will only occur at key frequencies. Therefore, with multiple sources and frequencies things become much more chaotic.

Watson's work would uncover not only many standing waves in Neolithic sites, but also infrasound, which is not audible as it is a vibration that is below the range of human hearing. The best human ears can hear to around 20 Hz; however, at Maeshowe (a Neolithic chambered cairn and passage grave some 5,000 years old, situated on Orkney, Scotland), Watson and his team discovered a resonance of 2 Hz, a frequency which, while inaudible, can be sensed through the body. This infrasound resonance might have a connection to the chamber's relationship with the elements and landscape. Keating posited that the chamber could be acting as a Helmholtz resonator (also known as a wind throb), creating very low frequencies like those one can observe when blowing across the top of an empty bottle.⁶

Though not conclusive, this added factor in the generation of infrasonic vibrations would have had considerable physical impacts on those experiencing the 2 Hz resonance. When drums and Bronze Age horns were played in the Maeshowe chamber, Watson's team reported feeling sleepy, uneasy and nauseated. The standing wave was shaking their bodies and possibly also interfering with the brain. The Neolithic builders appear to have had an understanding of vibration that went beyond the audible.

This proposition is borne out by investigations at the giant Neolithic chamber tomb at Newgrange in County Meath, Ireland, which is older than the Pyramids and over a thousand years older than Stonehenge. Bob Jahn, Paul Devereaux and Michael Ibison uncovered some incredible acoustic phenomena.⁷ The passage tomb at Newgrange is aligned with the winter solstice: at sunrise a beam of sunlight travels through the 19-metre-long entrance corridor to hit a stone at the rear of the chamber. Jahn and his Princeton University team discovered that the main chamber at the centre resonated at 110 Hz, which is akin to a baritone human voice. The researchers investigated other sites in Cornwall and Ireland and discovered that other chambers also resonated in the vicinity of 110 Hz. This did not seem to be a coincidence: some of the chambers had ceilings, some did not; some were square, some were circular; and some appeared to be retrofitted (that is to say, baffles were fitted or stones were moved to create further voids to enhance this 110 Hz standing wave).

The data collected at Newgrange showed that there were 12 pairs of acoustic peaks and troughs in the standing wave, and many of the

rock carvings reflect this geometry, suggesting that this is not coincidental. Both in the chamber and in the kerbstones (kerbstones K1–K97) that surround it, spirals, concentric circles and herringbone motifs are cut into the stone. Within and without the chamber, the herringbone chevrons are always in sets of 12, which correlate to the standing wave data. Jahn arrived at a simple explanation for the spirals and concentric circles carved into the rock, in that the chevrons correspond to the standing wave looking at it from the side, where dust or smoke particles would shift in an up-and-down fashion. If we were to take a 90-degree shift in viewpoint, we would see that the sound emanating from its central point would appear like splashes in a pool, corresponding to the concentric circles and spirals carved into the stone. It seems that our ancient ancestors were able to visualise the vibrations, probably using dust or incense-type material suspended in the air, and then cut these visualisations into the rock.

The consensus among archaeologists seems to be that something magical appeared to happen to participants: with standing waves, moving toward the sound source made it quieter, while moving away made it louder. This effect may have been interpreted as their ancestors speaking to them. Regardless, it would seem that our Neolithic ancestors had a sophisticated knowledge of acoustic and vibrational properties, which we appear to have forgotten. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) referred to the ‘collective effervescence’ experienced by communities in religious or collective ceremonies, where a community or society may come together and simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action.⁸ At Newgrange, one might argue, this effervescence was not just emotional but also visible and vibrational, and permanently materialised by carving these vibrational properties into stone.

Contemporary works by Marcus Vergette, Lina Lapelytė, and David and Álvaro Escalona

Marcus Vergette is a British-based American sculptor, composer and musician who has made bells for many years. In fact, his text on the Royal Society of Sculptors website simply reads, ‘I design and make bells’.⁹ Vergette is best known for his ongoing project *Time and Tide Bells*, which began in 2008 and has (so far) seen 13 bell installations being completed around the coast of Britain (Figure 14.2). Vergette’s uniquely shaped and richly harmonic bells (which appear as two bells joined, resembling



Figure 14.2 Marcus Vergette, *Trinity Buoy Wharf Bell* (2010). Installation view, Trinity Buoy Wharf, London. Part of *Time and Tide* series of 12 bells. Source: Aaron McPeake.

a bulbous egg timer) are triggered by the energy of the high tide and ring twice daily.

The concept for this project was very much connected to sea level rise and the tide that wraps itself around the coast of Britain twice each day, triggering the sound as a reminder of this tidal presence. Vergette notes that bells ‘tell stories’, and that ‘it is the same bell that rings for a wedding and a funeral’.¹⁰ The nature of the daily ringing in *Time and Tide* is extremely changeable, as the sounds and vibrations produced depend not only on the tide’s height but also on other environmental factors such as wind and weather, which affect the driving of the bells’ ringing mechanisms. Furthermore, the sounds of the wind, rain and swell also impact on the nature of the resulting sounds, altering their quality, intensity and direction of travel. With these installations we have distinct vibrational encounters each time we behold them.

These same situational factors are integral to Lina Lapelytė’s work. From March to June 2024, Lithuanian sculptor Lapelytė’s installation *Copper Lick* (Figure 14.3) was active in an inner-city green space near Kabelsteg Bridge in Munich. The installation consisted of two large, four-hundred-million-year-old limestone boulders, conjoined and carved in



Figure 14.3 Lina Lapelytė, *Copper Lick* (2024). Public Art München.
Source: Courtesy of the artist. © Lina Lapelytė. Photograph: Judith Buss.

such a way as to create a single parabolic hollow about 2 metres in diameter. The sculpture becomes a gathering or listening point, and functions as an acoustic reflector and amplifier, ‘a mirror reflecting the city’s acoustic identity’. During the three months of the installation, a participatory performance took place every Tuesday at 5 p.m. This involved six churches situated in the immediate locale, and a community of bell ringers who rang the churches’ bells simultaneously. Lapelytė states: ‘In the combination of city bells and live performance, a temporary mix of materiality, space and rituals of coming together and listening is created.’

Outside these performance times, the work became an accessible sonic mirror of the city, reflecting its acoustic details, such that the work ‘challenges the perception of sound amplification, questioning what we choose to hear and what remains ignored’.¹¹ Although Lapelytė’s work is very large (over 2 metres wide) and weighs many tonnes, hopefully there will be other opportunities to tour the work, and to provide beholders with reflections of many other places and spaces.

Recently, after a residency in La Mancha, Spain, I visited friends in Granada, including the sculptor David Escalona.¹² I have previously exhibited with David in the Czech Republic and in Spain, and we have maintained an ongoing dialogue, which, unfortunately, was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. On visiting his studio, I was delighted to learn

that his practice had taken a dramatic turn: we now shared a common perspective that placed vibration at the centre of our artistic interests and ambitions. For many years, David has made a variety of sculptural work as well as works on paper. He and his brother Álvaro, a renowned composer and sound artist, created a body of new work for an exhibition onomatopoeically titled *Trrr ...*.¹³ Supported by the University of Granada and the Music for All Foundation, the show was held at the Madraza Palace in Granada in the spring of 2024.¹⁴ While the exhibition was extensive, two of the works were quintessentially vibrational in nature.

Nada 1 (Figure 14.4) consisted of a piano harp/frame, complete with tuned strings, that rested on the gallery floor on sheets of patterned wax (to reduce chaotic vibrations of footsteps). The piano was ‘played’ by vibrational loudspeakers attached to the chassis of the harp. Sounds arranged by Álvaro comprised tunes and pieces the brothers had played as children, along with ambient soundscapes from their travels which were fed to the speakers, vibrating the strings in sympathy. The work made for a fascinatingly complex sonic experience, where the piano strings vibrated seemingly randomly, yet at times the original tunes and sounds could be discerned. Furthermore, the vibrations were not just



Figure 14.4 David Escalona and Álvaro Escalona, *Nada 1* (2023). Installation view, Palacio de la Madraza. *Source:* © David Escalona and Álvaro Escalona. *Photograph:* David Escalona.

confined to the audio spectrum but could be felt through the legs and, if touched, through the hands.

Nada II was an innovative work made possible with the support of the Music for All Foundation, which provided vibrational vests for the exhibition. The vests were fitted with vibrational loudspeakers, which effectively shook the body with a vibrational representation of the music or sounds being played. The Escalona brothers used the vests in combination with headphones, such that beholders could (if possible) 'hear' the actual sounds being played at the original pitch/frequencies. In one example, the sound of bee wings in flight was re-pitched, and the body vests translated it into an effect akin to an earthquake or volcanic eruption. This work, designed to be accessible to Deaf beholders, went far beyond the realms of accessibility and was acclaimed by most visitors.

Sound sculptures: genesis and specific artworks

My own sound sculpture works attempt to enhance and question our experiences of sound and vibration, and how these manage to interact with vision, touch and smell.

My work has always expressed an interest in sound, aiming to enhance active listening of those engaging with it. I do have to acknowledge my belief that the sense of hearing is gendered, insofar as women are more likely to fear hearing loss due to associated social implications. I have always had a need to make sculptures that are audible and hopefully interactive. For many years I played with materials such as metals, ceramics (porcelain) and, best of all, lead crystal. I learned to blow lead crystal (glass) to an intermediate level of competence and made bells, singing bowls and gongs (Figure 14.5). However, these are incredibly brittle, and many breakages have happened over the years. I do hope to return to working with this wonderful glass material in the near future, if I can find (and afford) the facilities.

About 25 years ago, my dear friend Derek Lawrenson brought back a *kyi zee* (or *Kyizi*) gong from Burma, and it still hangs under a bookshelf in my home (Figure 14.6). This incredibly resonant gong gave me a new insight and approach to the possibilities of metal casting. The *kyi zee* is a flat plate or sheet gong, quite different to circular gongs such as that used in the Rank Organisation's old cinematic logo. Its pitch is much higher and, because it is hung from a single point, it spins when struck, distributing the sound somewhat like a lighthouse; it is a pulsar of vibrating metal.

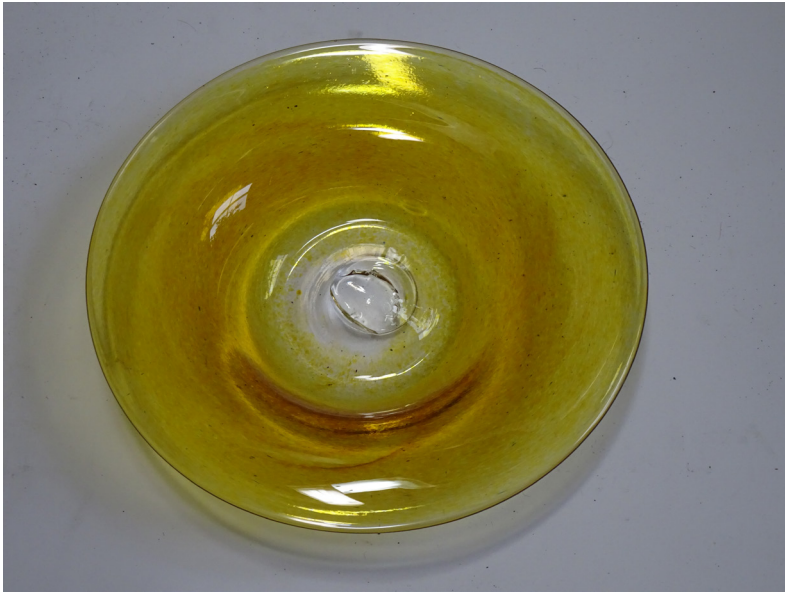


Figure 14.5 Aaron McPeake, *Spun Lead Crystal Plate* (1997). Source: © Aaron McPeake. Photograph: Aaron McPeake.



Figure 14.6 A *kyi zee* – a gift from Derek Lawrenson to the author. Source: Aaron McPeake.

On commencing my PhD programme at Chelsea College of Arts, I was able to utilise the foundry facilities, something I would not have been able to afford otherwise. I also had the good fortune to begin a relationship with the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, established in 1624. The craftspeople there taught me a lot about the material, the various alloys and the ancient associated production methods. This knowledge was invaluable to me, and the relationship continued until the sad closure of the foundry in 2017. Poignantly, I had the privilege of casting the last pieces from Whitechapel, and still have the ingot and evidence of its provenance from this wonderful historic foundry (Figure 14.7).

Bells and gongs are traditionally made in two basic ways: loam casting, which involves a mixture of clay, sand, horse manure and goat hair; or sand casting, which uses a very particular type of sand with granules of varying sizes. In sculpture, bronze casting, ceramic shell casting and 'ludo' (or lost wax) methods of investment are used. I was able to take advantage of mixing up these different methods, principally to reduce costs but also, as it turned out, to develop my own novel method for one of the bodies of work that I continue to make.

I can divide my bell-bronze works into three basic types. The first consists of a body of bells, gongs and singing bowls, created primarily for their sonic and vibrational quality. The second encompasses objects drawn from personal history; these works are not only sonic and interactive but also possess other associated narrative qualities. The third type consists of topographical 'paintings', which depict the volcanic landscapes of Iceland. For this final body of work, I have developed an 'open cast method' (Figure 14.8), whereby the metal freezes (cools to solid) in the mould whilst exposed to the air. Here the topography is

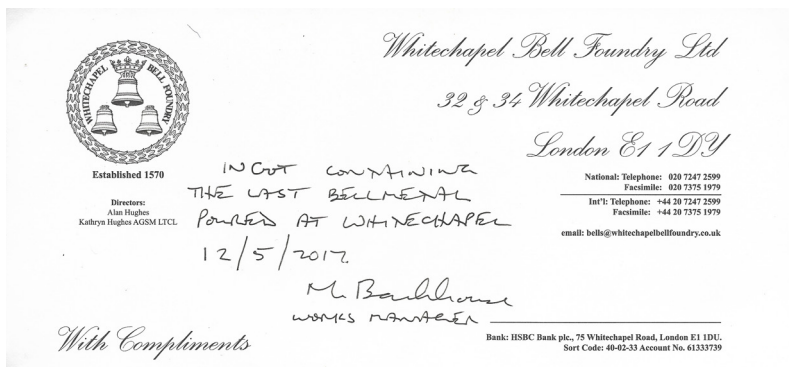


Figure 14.7 Certificate of provenance, Whitechapel Bell Foundry.
Source: Aaron McPeake.

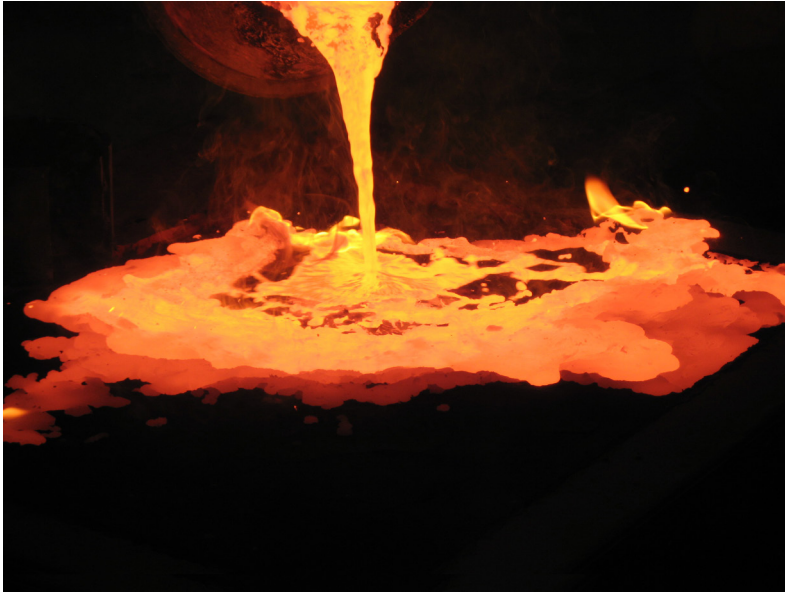


Figure 14.8 Pouring bell bronze into an open mould made by Aaron McPeake, 2009. *Source:* Aaron McPeake.

created by the molten metal freezing in flow lines and the tin component of the alloy oxidising, much like lava fields. As a result, the works have an uncanny resemblance to satellite images of volcanic landscapes.

All of the works have a ceremonial or religious quality, hinting at East Asian traditions. In pagodas and monasteries across Burma, Laos and Thailand, bells and gongs are found both within the buildings and in their immediate surroundings, and I draw upon this as a comparison to where my own work is situated. In temple grounds, bells and gongs are very often memorials, either to donors, famous monks and nuns, or indeed to significant social events. In the Laos, Thai and Shan languages, the word for time/hour is *mohng*, which is an onomatopoeic reflection on the sound of the gong. Two of my larger commissions, which were around 60 kg in mass, directly followed this tradition.

In 2013, I was commissioned to make a work for the garden at Camden Art Centre. It was not just sited *in* the garden but was also *about* the garden. At the time, ash dieback disease was becoming increasingly prevalent in the UK, so I chose a trifurcated ash tree in the centre of the garden as the site for the work, and used a leaf from the same tree as a model for the large plate gong. The leaf was scaled up to about 25 times its original size and a pattern was made, incorporating the veins of the



Figure 14.9 Aaron McPeake, *Toll* (2013). Installation view, Camden Art Centre, London. Source: © Aaron McPeake. Photograph: Aaron McPeake.

leaf (Figure 14.9). Relief lettering was then added to the mould, which read ‘Elm, Thrush, Butterfly, Bee, Starling, Sparrow, Ash’. This work referred to species that were ubiquitous when I was a child but were now under threat due to environmental degradation.

The finished gong was hung within the trifurcated tree, along with a clapper – a mallet made from tamarind wood with a leather surround to soften the strike. The work is popular, particularly with children, who can explore the sounds by striking the leaf gong in different places and with varying force. Although the sound can be quite loud and the work is sited adjacent to an aged care home, there have never been any complaints. This is partly due to the trifurcated tree trunk and foliage absorbing much of the sound, but also because the tones that the piece generates are not perceived as shrill or jarring. It has been a pleasure to listen to children commenting on the sounds, as well as the fact that they can feel the vibration long after the audible aspect has disappeared. The gong has been in situ for well over a decade, and has probably been rung many tens of thousands of times, creating a unique experience for each beholder.

The Henry Moore Plinth at Chelsea College of Arts, Millbank, usually hosts a large bronze by Moore, *Two Piece Reclining Figure No. 1* (1959). Commissioned to make a work whilst the sculpture was on loan to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, I made a large bell titled *The Sound of their*



Figure 14.10 Aaron McPeake, *The Sound of their Deaths in Australia* (2015). Installation view, Henry Moore Plinth, Millbank, London. Source: © Aaron McPeake. Photograph: Aaron McPeake.

Deaths in Australia (2015) (Figure 14.10). Millbank had been the proposed site of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison, from which prisoners were shipped to Australia and Tasmania. Indeed, behind the plinth stands a large bollard, once used to moor ships carrying the deported prisoners, now marked with a bronze plaque commemorating the deportations.

The courtyard in which the work was located was open to the public and received considerable footfall due to its proximity to Tate Britain. A very large rope with a plaited loop hung over the edge of the plinth. Beholders were able to pull the rope, activating a timber clapper that rang the bell. Despite the many offices and seminar rooms overlooking the courtyard, staff working nearby had no issues with the regular sound of the ringing bell. Several of them commented that it interspersed the day with interesting thoughts in response to the resonant sounds. As in the grounds of the East Asian monasteries and temples, the bell sounds were seen not as polluting or jarring, even in the context of a modern city, but rather as welcome occurrences prompting meditation or contemplation.

In East Asia, the sounds of bells and gongs within temples, pagodas and monasteries are very different in nature to those within the surrounding grounds. That is to say, such sounds have a much more indexed or formal meaning when rung within. They can be signifiers

of parts of a ceremony or acknowledge actions such as the receipt of donations, where *kyi zee* gongs are sounded by temple staff. There is also a very different quality to the sound and visual aspects of the ringing objects – one that encompasses the lighting, materiality and acoustic properties of the spaces.

Similarly, within gallery spaces, my own work is influenced by the visual and acoustic properties of the room. Beholders also have an influence on the work, as they are complicit in its activation through touching and striking (ringing). Therefore, the nature of the room, its lighting and acoustic properties, and the location of the work within the space have a profound effect on the beholder's experience.

Many of my works hang from a single string or cable, which results in spinning, swinging or rocking motions. The slightest of touches or even air currents can make them move, even before they are struck. The metal surfaces of the works vary in reflectivity, ranging from polished shiny finishes to patinated or dull ones. Regardless of the finish, this reflection is an important precursor to the beholder's experience as they are seeing the work from multiple angles, involving varying degrees of shimmer and movement. I would argue that it is through movement that the work comes 'alive', grabbing the beholder's attention in a novel way, challenging the often static nature of the traditional exhibition context. With static sculptures, the relational distance and angle of encounter (visual viewpoint or sense of presence) are fixed, even though we can change position. Static works also, more often than not, cannot be touched, so I would suggest that there is an increased anticipation when approaching a work that can be interacted with.

The physical aspects of the space and object do not act in isolation. The social ambience of the gallery and the presence, behaviour and attitude of docents or invigilators also impact on the beholder's interaction with the work.

In 2023, I was commissioned to make an interactive sculpture for the Naples collection at Compton Verney in central England. The work was titled *Sensing Naples and Vesuvius* (Figure 14.11) and consisted of a volcanic rock from said volcano, which sat on a plinth. Above the plinth, three bronze-cast copies of the rock were suspended in a triangular formation, each cast as a bell with varying masses to produce distinct tones. While clearly representing Vesuvius via the volcanic rock, the work also alluded to the church bells in Naples, which are not tuned like bells in the UK. Each bell is random in its tuning, and the dissonance emanating from over five hundred churches makes Naples sound only like Naples.



Figure 14.11 Aaron McPeake, *Sensing Naples and Vesuvius* (2023). Installation view, Compton Verney, Warwickshire. Source: © Aaron McPeake. Photograph: Aaron McPeake.

Beholders were invited to touch the lava rock as well as the bells, and even the slightest of touches made them collide, bouncing off each other. The Compton Verney Gallery is a restored eighteenth-century mansion surrounded by a Capability Brown-landscaped garden.¹⁵ The large rooms, with their soaring ceilings nearly 5 metres high, meant that the work filled the space with sound. The cables suspending the rock bells were attached to the original timber beams in the ceiling, which resulted in the sound resonating throughout the building, particularly the galleries on the floor above.

The influence of the presence of docents on the behaviour of beholders was illustrated in a 2016 exhibition at the San Diego Art Institute, titled *Sweet Gongs Vibrating*, curated by Amanda Cachia. Unfortunately, one of my works was damaged when a young visitor swung from it, dislodging its anchor and causing it to fall and slam on the gallery floor. This ‘fairground behaviour’ surprised me as much as the fact that the 9-millimetre-thick bronze ring cracked, as I had previously dropped it accidentally onto concrete myself, leaving the piece entirely unharmed.

The novelty of touching – and indeed striking – sculptural objects for both visitors and docents requires clear guidance on how

to best navigate these interactions and their boundaries. Additional training for invigilators is essential, helping them inform and guide visitors on when and within which parameters touching the artworks is encouraged. I believe that developing this kind of training within galleries is essential if we hope to make touch – especially of vibrational works – commonplace. Furthermore, my experience to date indicates that dialogue between docents and visitors, rather than a didactic, scripted lecture, creates much more fruitful interactions. I feel that the very occasional breakages (as seen in the incident at the San Diego Art Institute) are a price worth paying, or should be accepted until the culture within the museum sector changes and touching works becomes more commonplace.

The acoustic properties of the exhibition space greatly alter the interaction with the work and influence the overall experience. In a 2012 exhibition at Chelsea College of the Arts, several bodies of my work were hung across a number of rooms. In one of the rooms, a series of plinths held a collection of my singing bowls (Figure 14.12). These ranged in size from 12 cm to 60 cm in diameter. My series of Icelandic bronze landscape paintings were arranged across the walls. This room was extremely resonant, with a significant reverb time, which was



Figure 14.12 Aaron McPeake, *Singing Bowls and Iceland Paintings* (2012). Installation view, Chelsea College of Arts, London. Source: © Aaron McPeake. Photograph: Aaron McPeake.

amplified by the painted concrete floor and the very old-fashioned lath and plaster walls.

Many visitors noticed that when they struck one of the bowls – particularly the larger ones – it became apparent that the other bowls began ringing as well. Basically, two things were happening. Some of the bowls corresponded with the standing wave of the room, and receiving this natural amplification induced enough energy to ring the other bowls. While the kinetic energy from striking one bowl would have rung some of the other bowls regardless, the reverberation of the room made them more audible. If the room had been ‘dead’ or without reverb, we could have detected this, but not by hearing – rather only by touching the bowls and feeling the fizz of the kinetic energy.

A vibrational practice

After two decades of experience in creating these bell-bronze works across many countries, I have gained an understanding in my making process of how the finished works will not only sound but also how they will behave visually in space, and how beholders might interact with them. I believe that my bell-bronze sculpture practice goes beyond the sonic, haptic and visible aspects of how works vibrate. They behave differently depending on their settings, and therefore the experiences and meanings that they might articulate may also vibrate. Metaphorical waves, in four dimensions – the three of space and one of time – vibrate at every stage of bell-bronze casting practice; the thinking, the testing, the positive, the negative, another positive, another negative then the positive, which has to be cut from its umbilical and exhaling tubes (both feeding the metal in and allowing air out). Finishing, storing, documenting and transporting the works are all resource-hungry activities, and must be considered and executed before any display. All stages are vibrational, in that other elements and influences, which may be totally unconnected to the work, are at play. Each stage in the production contributes to an emergent system that becomes ever more complex and cannot be fully described.

Kandinsky wanted his paintings to sound, sending vibrations into the soul. Denis Diderot likened the action of a tuned string to human affinities and relationships.¹⁶ These are both metaphorical uses of the term ‘vibration’, rather than referencing physical actions. Physicist Max Planck makes a more compelling case for vibration, and when read against Einstein’s theory of general relativity this argument is especially

profound. Whilst Einstein states the $E=mc^2$ (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared), Planck posits the $E= hf$ (energy equals the Planck constant [h] times frequency [f]); therefore, through cancellation across these equations (where c^2 and h, the two constants, cancel each other), mass and frequency have an equivalence. To that end, everything in Planck's universe is vibration.

The term *vibrational practice* in respect of my bell-bronze works (as well as the work of many of the artists cited earlier) goes beyond the remit of the sonic, haptic and visual vibrations of the objects themselves. It encompasses the spaces and places that are transformed by the works, and, in turn, the material characteristics of these spaces and places affect the works and their situated context.

Consideration of vibrational practices demands attention and further development in the contemporary arts, as they promise a breadth of sculptural encounters that can go far beyond the ocular. As we have seen, this was understood and embraced by early humans. By making the case for change in museums and galleries, to more frequently include sculptural works that can be touched and experienced in a more multisensory way, we need to consider how such a shift might be realised. Amanda Cachia has posited expanding the remit of access, making it integral to practice in both curatorial and artistic creations (see [Chapter 7](#)), which she refers to as 'Access as Praxis'; this approach moves beyond mere accommodation as a matter of compliance.¹⁷

Vibration as an element of contemporary sculpture is often overlooked, or (if we look back to the origins of art) forgotten. Drawing upon Cachia's reframing of access, I propose that encounters with vibrational sculptural works (and the reconfigured spaces they inhabit) can create effervescent experiences for beholders. These are often activated by the beholder, who becomes an agent for new experiences which are greater than the sum of the work and its host space.

Notes

- 1 <https://sciencedemonstrations.fas.harvard.edu/presentations/chladni-plates> (accessed February 2025).
- 2 Waller 1993.
- 3 Wachtel 1993.
- 4 Watson and Keating 1999.
- 5 Watson 2006.
- 6 Watson and Keating 2000.
- 7 Jahn et al. 1996.
- 8 Durkheim 1912.
- 9 <https://sculptors.org.uk/artists/marcus-vergette> (accessed February 2025).

- 10 <https://www.timeandtidebell.org/project-history> (accessed February 2025).
- 11 <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/589495/lina-lapelycopper-lick> (accessed February 2025).
- 12 <https://davidescalona.com> (accessed February 2025).
- 13 <https://soundcloud.com/alvarodescalona> (accessed February 2025).
- 14 <https://canal.ugr.es/evento/trrr-exposicion-accesible-de-arte-musica-y-tecnologia> (accessed February 2025).
- 15 Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown was a pioneering eighteenth-century gardener, designer and entrepreneur.
- 16 Diderot, quoted in Clark 2008, 102.
- 17 Cachia 2022.

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15

To be sniffed at: the role of smell in contemporary art

Clare O'Dowd

Smell is a crucial, complex and highly individualised sense. Simply put, smell is a means of detecting chemical changes in our surroundings. Almost every creature on earth has some capacity to do this: insects use antennae, snakes use their tongues, and humans use their noses. Although the mechanisms are different for different creatures, the process is largely the same. In humans, odour molecules in the air bind to protein receptors in the protective mucus in our noses. This mucus also contains enzymes that break down and filter the molecules before conveying them to the smell receptors located in the olfactory epithelium, the skin inside our nasal cavities, where the olfactory neurones that decode smells are located. The olfactory neurones are covered in smell receptors called G-protein coupled receptors, which respond to these proteins by creating an electrical charge that then transmits the information through the olfactory bulb to the brain.¹ It is an amazingly complex process and is still not fully understood. Although great strides have been made in the last 30 years, the science of smell in general is a relatively under-researched area.²

Smell is intrinsically linked to memory, and our experiences of smells depend to a great extent on the memories we associate with them. This is often referred to as the 'Proust phenomenon', which is derived from the moment in the first volume of Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* when the narrator's childhood memories are powerfully triggered upon dipping a madeleine biscuit in linden tea: a sensation of involuntary, odour-evoked memory that is very different from other types of memory stimuli, and significantly more visceral.³ Uniquely amongst the senses, smell is processed by the same part of the brain that processes emotional experience and emotional memory, and therefore

it has the capacity to trigger responses that visual, aural and even tactile stimuli cannot.⁴ While Proust's madeleine moment evoked a flood of happy memories, the emotions associated with particular smells can also be negative or traumatic, and responses are highly individualised and often culturally specific.

Smell is therefore a powerful stimulus, and one that we might not automatically associate with museums and art galleries, which generally privilege visual experience. This chapter will investigate the ways in which smell emerges – accidentally or by design – as an important component in contemporary installation art. Installation art is, for the most part, designed to be a multisensory experience, engaging audiences through participatory, perambulatory and tactile modes of beholding an artwork. This chapter will explore the ways in which the broader sensory experiences of each installation are enhanced by the inclusion of scent, sometimes rendering the visual manifestation of an artwork a secondary consideration.

Extrinsic versus intrinsic smells

The use of scent in a museum or gallery context is not uncommon. I first encountered it more than 30 years ago on a visit to the Jorvik Centre in York, where large-scale tableaux of Viking life not only featured detailed reconstructions of streets, houses and people, but also conveyed very vividly how Viking life might have smelled. Scent has been used widely in art galleries to enhance and augment what is a largely visual experience: one might think of the 2015 exhibition *A Victorian Obsession* at Leighton House, the highlight of which was Lawrence Alma-Tadema's extraordinary painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888). The painting, which measures over 2 metres in length, depicts the infamous story of the Roman emperor Elagabalus smothering his dinner guests to death with rose petals. The visual encounter with Alma-Tadema's vast expanse of rose petals was accompanied by diffusers that wafted the scent of Jo Malone's 'Red Roses' perfume, creating a multisensory experience intended to bring the painting to life.

These examples can be categorised as extrinsic smells: the smell is not inherent to the material on display and is added later to provide a supplementary sensory encounter. Within installation art practices smell is often an intrinsic component, emanating from the inclusion of particular materials or processes. Throughout the early 1990s the Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres regularly produced sculptures made

of foodstuffs, including fortune cookies and wrapped candies, the mass of which often corresponded to the weight of significant individuals in his life: his father, for example *'Untitled' (Portrait of Dad)* (1991), or his boyfriend Ross *'Untitled' (Ross)* (1991). The smell produced by 175 lb of confectionery is very noticeable in a warm art gallery; overwhelmingly sugary and sweet, but variable depending on the type of confectionery used. For the 1994 staging of *Do It*, Hans Ulrich Obrist's open-ended, multi-site exhibition, the instruction for curators to re-create Gonzalez-Torres' work simply read: 'Get 180lbs of a local wrapped candy and drop it in a corner.'⁵ Here, the olfactory element of the work was entirely site-specific, depending on what was available locally and what the curator chose to use, which could be anything from Bacci chocolates to Bazooka bubblegum, each with its own distinctive aroma.

The profusion of found materials used in installation art is another source of intrinsic smells, which often constitute an important component within the multisensory experience of many installation works. The work of British installation artist Mike Nelson is an excellent example of this. Nelson's installations are large, labyrinthine constructions in which the audience moves between different spaces containing carefully configured scenarios.

Nelson's work evokes different characters and situations through the use of found objects, which he spends a great deal of time sourcing. Spaces within *The Coral Reef* (2000) (see [Chapter 10](#) of this volume) appeared to be inhabited by a diverse range of characters, including a mechanic, whose garage smelled distinctly of engine oil and rubber tyres; a security guard, whose surveillance room smelled of old upholstery and hot wiring; and a Soviet-era conspiracy theorist from whose quarters emanated the fragrance of old paperbacks and dust.

Nelson's *Amnesiac Shrines* series is based around an entirely fictional biker gang, whose attempts to re-create their memories of the world involve faking fires and constructing effigies: *Amnesiac Shrine or Monumental Skulpture to Publyck Mourning* (2006) added a recognisable layer of burned wood to the tang of metal and the mustiness of old clothing, which recurs in many of his installations and which seemed to permeate the entirety of the Hayward Gallery during Nelson's 2023 retrospective.⁶

In all of the above examples, smell has a role alongside the visual elements of an artwork, and the visual element is usually privileged. The visual cues are important in terms of identifying the source of the smell, or interpreting it in a specific way; for instance, the visual appearance

of Gonzalez-Torres' wrapped sweets prompts an identification of the source of the aroma, and the associations that we may make with that particular smell (the sweetshops of our childhood, confectionery as a special treat, and so on). However, when the visual clues are missing, the smell assumes a much greater importance, becoming the major sensory experience of the artwork.

There are a few examples of this kind of artwork, where the olfactory is privileged, that have stuck with me. One key aspect of olfactory sensations is that they are very resistant to reproduction: you cannot photograph a smell. As an art historian, I find myself looking at visual reproductions of artworks constantly, in books or on the internet, and quite often these reproductions will be the only experience I have of a particular artwork. With smell, this is not the case: you cannot smell a photograph. The scent of an artwork can only be experienced in its presence, and the only way to reproduce it is through description, which can only ever be subjective. It might be highly evocative to one person while remaining unrecognisable to another. The smell of sweets might conjure a childhood treat for some people, or it might be sickly and overwhelming for others. The smell of charred wood might bring to mind camping holidays and log cabins for one person, or the horror of a burning building for another.

It is therefore quite difficult to write about smells without having experienced them, and case studies here are limited to those I have encountered in person. Such is the subjective, psychological nature of smell that the olfactory experience of these artworks has remained with me for years afterwards.

The rotten side of chocolate

In 1995 I was studying Fine Art in Manchester when the British Art Show 4 came to town. Across the city, venues including Castlefield Gallery, the Chinese Arts Centre, Cornerhouse and the Whitworth Gallery were filled from November until the following February with contemporary art. My cohort was urged to visit every venue, and so on a damp day in December we duly made the pilgrimage. Most of what I saw has since vanished from memory, but I vividly remember what I smelled, and I smelled it long before I saw it.

Anya Gallaccio had painted the walls of the Castlefield Gallery with chocolate. We could smell it from the street outside, and because we were permanently hungry students we were drawn to the gallery

like Charlie Bucket was to Willy Wonka's factory. In the catalogue of the British Art Show 4 the piece is listed as *Installation*, 1995, and Gallaccio had shown similar work throughout 1994 with *Couverture* at Filiale, Basel, and *Stroke* at Blum and Poe in Los Angeles and Karsten Schubert in London.⁷ Schubert's description of the process and its results is highly evocative:

At the beginning of 1994 Anya Gallaccio painted my entire London gallery with chocolate. The preparations were prodigious, the walls – which were to be covered to a height of about six feet – had to be carefully primed and clad with cardboard. The application of the melted chocolate was fun to begin with, but after a few days turned into a chore as the liquid chocolate cooled off too fast, clotted and made the brush stick and drag. The private view and first days of the exhibition were wonderful, the colour rich and the scent delicious. Gradually, all changed. The even, luscious brown soon became blotchy with white crystallization, as the smell went from appetising to disgusting and the atmosphere from Gingerhouse cute to something altogether sinister. Towards the end of the exhibition I actually dreaded coming in for work as the reek of slowly decaying chocolate had become pungent and overwhelming. It was the instability of the installation and its shifting tone that made the event so memorable, and to this day those who saw it talk about this with excitement.⁸

I agree with Schubert in one respect – that people still talk about this artwork. However, I disagree that this is because of what they saw. There was, in truth, not a great deal to see early on in the exhibition's run: the walls were brown and somewhat lumpy, the white bloom was beginning to appear by that day in December, but was patchy and sporadic and the lighting was on the dim side. While I am absolutely certain that anyone encountering this artwork regularly, as Schubert did, would have been struck by the process of decay and the visible result of this on the surface of the chocolate, visitors who encountered it fewer than a handful of times were struck almost solely by the smell.

Gallaccio's first chocolate piece, *brown on white*, was made the year before, in Vienna at Galerie Krinzinger. She left the corridor outside the work empty, so that, just as at Castlefield Gallery, visitors could smell the work before they entered the room. In a later interview, Gallaccio described the origins of the work as an attempt to move beyond the clichés about a particular place or material:

Vienna is famous for its café culture, a city of chocolate, the *sachertorte*, drinking chocolate, the Mozart balls, *Mozartkugel*; Mozart reduced to saccharine consumption, but Mozart's work and life is far from sweet. It is the city of Freud, the birthplace of psychoanalysis. There's a darkness or underside to Vienna, and so I wanted to make something that encapsulated this sense of desire and repulsion, to sum up this weird tension.⁹

This tension between desire and repulsion is especially marked in Gallaccio's chocolate works, largely because of the intensity of the smell. Obviously, this depends to an extent on whether or not a given visitor actually likes chocolate, but for the many that do, the initial smell powerfully evokes the taste of it, which stimulates a desire to eat it. The smell of chocolate means different things to different people: pleasure, temptation, the forbidden or 'naughty', or something sickly, depending on one's personal relationship to it. As Gallaccio remarks, 'It is up to you how you respond, depending on your own subjective history.'¹⁰

It can become overwhelming, though, and desire can easily turn into repulsion as the highly concentrated aroma becomes nauseating. In particular, the process of the chocolate's gradual decay and putrefaction, and the resultant stench of this, can transform something highly desirable into something repellent. This process is prevalent throughout Gallaccio's work, which often involves making visible the ravages of time on various perishable materials: flowers, fruit, ice, even blood. Gallaccio's attitude to the inevitable decomposition of her sculptures is not about entropy, as it might have been for, say, Robert Smithson, nor about framing them as some kind of memento mori. It is more about the possibilities and limitations of the materials, and, most importantly, their potential for transformation – which naturally includes their smell.¹¹

Sweat and tears

My next memorable encounter with an intrinsically smelly, largely non-visual installation came in 2008, with Gregor Schneider's installation *Süßer Duft* at Maison Rouge in Paris. The title translates to 'sweet smell', which should have been a clue, but there was little information available about what to expect. Things got off to an unnerving and somewhat theatrical start when I was asked to sign a waiver on entry, absolving the gallery of any liability in the event of my injury or death

within the exhibition. Visitors were admitted one at a time, and had to wait for the previous person to exit before going in.

Ratcheting up the tension forms a key element of Schneider's practice. This was exemplified in an artwork he had been commissioned to produce the year before in the storage facilities of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin. Invitations were sent out for the opening, which was to take place between 7 p.m. and 8.30 p.m. on 31 May 2007. Expectations were high, and a queue of people duly formed outside the opera house to await entry into the much-anticipated performance. What they did not know was that the queue was staged and that they *were* the performance. Schneider watched proceedings through hidden cameras.¹² The key elements of building audience expectations with a queue or a liability waiver, and using visitor reactions to form the core content of the artwork, were deployed to great effect at Maison Rouge.

The installation of *Süßer Duft* was constructed on a grand scale, using the gallery's entire 1,300 m² exhibition space, and consisted of a series of rooms linked by a cramped and dirty passageway lined with pipework and ducting. The rooms only had door handles on one side, so it was impossible to retrace one's steps. The first room was dark, low-ceilinged and lined with corrugated steel sheets. There was nothing in there apart from a single low-wattage lamp, and it was stiflingly hot. Initially this was a relief, because it was February in Paris and there was still snow on the ground, but it rapidly became uncomfortable. Then it was back out into the passageway, and into a second, cavernous room which was entirely white and completely empty, into which was pumped a disturbing odour that reminded me of toilets and the smell that emanated from the boys' changing rooms at school. I only later learned that this was the smell of cleaning fluid and artificial sweat.

Back out into the passageway again, one entered another stainless steel room resembling a brand new shipping container, which led directly into a freezing cold space, lined with steel and containing nothing but a large air-conditioning unit. A door with an industrial airlock led from the freezing cold space into ... nothing. This final space was shrouded in complete darkness and the heavy insulation resulted in near-total sensory deprivation.¹³ As a sight-dependent person it is difficult to describe the relief at finding the door handle and being able to exit through the gift shop.

Schneider has form for sensory deprivation. He built a series of works in the late 1980s named *Total Isolierkisten* (*Total Isolation Boxes*), square chambers that were completely insulated with layer upon layer of foam and lead. The boxes grew into entire rooms, padded out with

layers and layers of insulation to investigate the idea that inside such a room, a person would, as Schneider has suggested, no longer be sensually perceptible.¹⁴ In his best known work, *Haus Ur*, which he began in 1985, Schneider reconfigured and rebuilt rooms in his family home until it was impossible to tell which bits were original and which were his constructions. One of the rooms in *Haus Ur* was *ur 12: Total Isolierstes Gästezimmer*, or *Totally Isolated Guestroom*, an addition constructed in 1995. Schneider's list of materials for this room include: 2 layers of lead, 3 layers of glass wool, 1 layer of rock wool, 1 layer of sound-absorbing material around a room, 3 wooden constructions, plaster boards and plastering, 1 door, 1 lamp, 1 pit, 1 grey wooden floor, white walls and ceiling.¹⁵ No one could ever enter the room, since the fact that Schneider had left off the door handles meant that anyone entering the room would be completely trapped there, and the heavy insulation rendered it airtight: the 'guest's' death would be a quite real prospect, one way or the other.

Within *Süßer Duft*, however, the sensory deprivation was not so complete, although the potential for becoming trapped certainly felt quite real. (I assumed at the time that if I did get locked in, someone would come to rescue me, but I could have been wrong.) The smell could be described as extrinsic given that it was artificially generated, but it was absolutely intrinsic to the installation and the experience of being in that specific space. With no visual clues to speak of, the bodily sensations generated by heat, cold and smell, and the psychological responses to these, became the real content of the installation. For me, this was deeply discomfiting: my personal 'content' was a series of unnerving flashbacks to the torture of school toilets and PE lessons, and I definitely did not wish either to revisit these memories or to be trapped with them in an isolation chamber. Speaking about his 2009 installation *Kinderzimmer*, which contained a similarly blacked-out space, Schneider described his intention thus:

You will be walking into an empty box. The visitor will find nothing except his own inner experiences in that space. He will be asked to confront them. My work is not about making you fearful. It is about helping you to reflect upon and overcome your fear.¹⁶

Applying Africanness

I encountered my final example in 2019 during the Yorkshire Sculpture International festival, which took place throughout the summer across the four Yorkshire institutions confusingly designated as the Yorkshire

Sculpture Triangle: the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, The Hepworth Wakefield, Leeds Art Gallery and the Henry Moore Institute.

The sculptor Phyllida Barlow was invited to be a 'provocateur', providing a series of thought-provoking statements about sculpture, to which the festival curators and participants could potentially respond. Barlow's statement that 'Sculpture is the most anthropological of the art forms' was chosen as the most compelling, summarising as it did the innate human impulse to make and connect with objects.

The idea of connecting with objects manifested in different ways throughout the festival, which included audio and kinetic sculptures by Tamar Harpaz, Akeelah Bertram and Tarek Atoui, a light installation by Kimsooja, and highly tactile fabric sculptures made by Tau Lewis. A more directly anthropological approach was taken by artists including Sean Lynch, who looked at the history of fakes in museum collections, and Huma Bhabha, whose public artwork *Transmission* explored connections between different histories, cultures and languages through figurative sculpture.¹⁷

At the Henry Moore Institute, the idea of a direct physical connection with an artwork was crucial to the installation produced by the US-based sculptor Rashid Johnson. *Shea Butter Three Ways* (2019) consisted of three large tables, each of which was weighed down by an immense quantity of shea butter that filled the room with a discernible nutty aroma. The blocks of shea butter on the first table were carved into the rough shape of human heads, resembling abstracted portrait busts. On the second table, the blocks were left untouched but had been stacked into a large pyramid. The third table was left as an open invitation for visitors to engage with the material as they wished.

At first glance, the tables suggested an artist's studio, or a kind of potted art history demonstrated through the shapes of the shea butter, from rudimentary portraiture through Minimalism to contemporary participatory art. This was a somewhat superficial reading of the work, though, which elided the more culturally specific aspects of Johnson's practice as well as the way these were interwoven with Barlow's overarching provocation.

Johnson works across many different art forms, including photography, painting, film and sculpture, using a variety of media to explore issues of race, class and masculinity from an autobiographical perspective. Much of his work reflects on his experiences and identity as an African American man living in the USA. Johnson also has an abiding interest in Black culture and history, inherited from his mother Cheryl Johnson-Odim, an academic and the first African American woman to lead the history department at Loyola University.¹⁸

Johnson has widely discussed the disparate influences that have fed into his work, including Joseph Beuys, who often incorporated fat into his artworks; David Hammons, whose use of materials and inclusion of signifying gestures was hugely important to Johnson; the conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers; and the minimalism of Sol Le Witt and Franz Kline, all of which fed into *Shea Butter Three Ways*.¹⁹ Shea butter is a key signifier not only of Black identity and history in Johnson's work, but also of the way in which it has been exoticised and co-opted by the beauty industry for consumption, including by a significant White market.

Shea butter is extracted from the seeds of the African shea tree, *Vitellaria paradoxa*, which grows across the savannah belt of West Africa from Senegal to Sudan. It is processed by grinding the oily kernels of the seeds, which are then boiled so that the oils liquefy and rise to the top. Once cooled, the oils solidify into a buttery layer that can be removed and processed. Shea butter can vary in colour, from pale cream in its raw state through to dusty yellow after it has been mixed with palm oil, and it is this distinctive mustard-yellow butter that Johnson favours in his work. Shea butter has a variety of uses: it is edible, and is often used in cooking, but is most commonly found in cosmetics due to its moisturising and anti-inflammatory properties. It is a key ingredient in black soap, a traditional skincare product originating in Nigeria that is used widely by African diasporic communities, and another fundamental material in Johnson's work.

Johnson has discussed his motivations for using shea butter many times, in particular the idea of applying what he describes as an 'Africanness' to one's skin, and the complicated processes of identification that this evokes for Black Americans.²⁰ For Johnson, this has immense autobiographical significance:

My mother is an African history professor so she would have these kinds of materials around the house. When I got older [I] started to see how things like shea butter and black soap were African products that really speak to an African American audience. They were delivered and sold on the streets of Harlem and the streets of Brooklyn and on the South Side of Chicago. I thought about what these materials must mean to the people that are using them and came to the conclusion that they were a way to culturise oneself in Africanness as you're exploring or looking for an identity, especially in a country that has had such a complicated history with the people. Because of the lack of information that most Americans have about their ancestry they try to build their own histories,

build a narrative or bridge to that African experience. There's an absurdity to it, but it's also really poetic.²¹

Most shea butter used in North America and Europe has been heavily processed by the time it is incorporated into cosmetics and skincare products, and it loses its aroma during processing. Untreated shea butter has a distinct, nutty fragrance, which is not discernible in most products. *Shea Butter Three Ways* filled the gallery with this aroma, and walking into the space on a warm summer's day was initially more of an olfactory than a visual experience. Visitors to the Yorkshire Sculpture International were encouraged to engage with the shea butter as an 'open proposition', and the wall text stated: 'You are invited to use the material on this table to make your own forms, or even as a moisturiser.' Many did exactly that, using the shea butter in a variety of ways that demonstrated the human urge to connect with objects and materials, sometimes with profound results. The malleability of the material meant that it behaved like modelling clay, lending itself to some ambitious sculptural experiments. Many visitors were happy to simply plunge their hands into the chaotic mass and enjoy the free moisturiser, which was a joyous experience in itself. To dig one's hands deep into the squidgy bulk of warm, waxy butter is a very different experience from applying a commercial moisturiser, and if one took up the invitation, the smell of untreated shea butter remained on the skin long after leaving the exhibition. There was a powerful kind of poetry to this, as visitors of all ethnicities left the exhibition with the scent of Africanness on their skin.

The relation between smell and memory

The connections between smell and memory mean that artworks with an olfactory component have a powerful potential to evoke experiences. This comes in two waves: the experience of the smell within an installation work that triggers a memory for the audience, and the new memory of that experience that is laid down afterwards. The two layers of memory combine to produce a compelling combination of emotive effects that are both physiological and psychological, with the result that the artworks explored here have stayed with me long after leaving the gallery.

The experience of an artwork depends, as the artists above have noted, on the visitor's own relationship to a particular smell or situation, and this response is entirely subjective. My experiences of these artworks

will inevitably be completely different from other people's experiences. What I am remembering now is not only the smell I experienced in each installation, but the associations and past experiences that were triggered, and the highly effective way that each artist played with the potential of olfactory experience. As part of the broader sensory experience of installation art and what one might retain of the experience, the visual in these examples becomes secondary: the smell is what lingers in the memory.

Notes

- 1 For a much more detailed explanation of the olfactory system, see Hawkes and Doty 2009, 1–59.
- 2 For example, Linda Buck and Richard Axel won the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 2004 for their groundbreaking research into the genetic coding of odorant receptors. See Buck and Axel 1991.
- 3 Herz 2016.
- 4 Herz 2016. Touch and smell are processed by completely different areas and pathways in the brain. Tactile sensations are processed by the somatosensory cortex and travel to the parietal lobes via the thalamus. Olfactory sensations are processed by the olfactory cortex and travel to the frontal lobe via the limbic system, the structures of which include the amygdala, hippocampus and hypothalamus, all of which are involved in the formation and storage of emotion and memory. Smell is the only sense that follows this pathway: tactile sensations might provoke memories, but they are not processed with the part of the brain that produces them, whereas smell is. For a much more detailed explanation of the tactile neural pathway, see Abaira and Ginty 2013.
- 5 Obrist 2004, 118–19.
- 6 Nelson's retrospective *Extinction Beckons* ran at the Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, from 22 February to 7 May 2023. Works included *The Amnesiacs*, 1996–; *The Deliverance and the Patience*, 2001; *Triple Bluff Canyon*, 2004; *I, Imposter*, 2011; *Gang of Seven*, 2013; and *The Asset Strippers*, 2019.
- 7 Cork et al. 1995, 49, 108.
- 8 Schubert 2013, 9.
- 9 Wallis 2013, 238.
- 10 Wallis 2013, 238.
- 11 Richard Cork, 'Injury time' in Cork et al. 1995, 15.
- 12 Siebold 2008, 9–10.
- 13 A second, highly contentious version of *Süßer Duft* was staged as part of the Edinburgh International Festival in 2013. In the Edinburgh version, the final darkened room was not empty but was instead populated by 10 naked Black actors, whom Schneider had hired to remain in the room, who fell silent when visitors entered.
- 14 Looock and Schneider 2003, 66.
- 15 See Schneider's website: https://www.gregor-schneider.de/places/1995rheydt/pages/1995_ur12_rheydt_01.htm (accessed February 2025).
- 16 Campbell-Johnston 2009. It is fair to say that Schneider was employing this same principle in the 2013 version of the work, albeit with visitors experiencing a very different kind of confrontation, heavily implied to be with their own prejudices.
- 17 More information about the festival can be found at <https://henry-moore.org/whats-on/yorkshire-sculpture-international-2019> (accessed February 2025).
- 18 Rankine 2023, 8.
- 19 Rankine 2023, 12–18, 45; Brinson 2014, 8–9.
- 20 Laster 2016; Rankine 2023, 14.
- 21 Laster 2016.

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16

The mouth in between the eyes: food art and material, social, sensorial relations

Rain Wu

Twenty years after leaving my hometown in Taiwan, I am still struck by feelings of familiarity when I see – or smell – food offerings on the streets of London. Every day, the owner of Thai Massage puts a silver tray on a low stool at the height of the flowerpots, holding a cup of coffee, a stack of biscuits, a few brightly coloured flowers and a plate of wrapped sweets. The family at the Vietnamese supermarket maintains a small shrine at the end of the last aisle, offering rice and wine. My Japanese carpenter friend has also built a shrine, using interlocking pieces of solid English oak, which hangs in the corner of their workshop, adorned with a bunch of braided rice straws. These diverse practices of communicating, with their own associations, evoke childhood memories through myriad forms of ‘offering’, but with the common factor that, curiously, they all involve the use of food.

This is very familiar to me. In Taiwan, my mother sets up a square fold-up table to hold plates of food: nine dishes to be precise, along with rice wine and chopsticks, left in the open for the precise time it takes three incense sticks to burn. Carrying these cultural bedrocks into my studio practice, I have developed a particular interest in food as an art medium that transcends boundaries – visceral, physical and spiritual. We eat three times a day, and every time we look at, smell or taste a bowl of food, we are immediately connected to the various landscapes shaped by the environment in which its ingredients were grown. These imagined landscapes connect humans with the weather and seasonal changes that signal seeding and harvest. The seasons are ‘read’ from the sky above, where the muted patterns of the universe were the inspiration for many myths of gods and goddesses who shine light on our ‘ethics’ and how we live in a social world. While food links us with this immense scale above our heads, food also links us with the depths below our feet, into the very

soil and its complex mix of minerals, organic matter, living organisms, gases and liquids.

Importantly for my practice, the bowl of food that nourishes us is a means by which we create social relations and find companions – a word which, going back to its Latin roots *com* and *panis*, means ‘with bread’. To break bread is to share a meal with others. Not only do we thereby form relations with human companions, but eating and digesting food also establishes invisible connections with the micro-organisms that enable our bodies to function. As such, food touches all corners of our world: near and far, internal and external.

Emerging from such social practices, my work as an artist engages with food in its most holistic sense. It is not only the material from which my works are made – its literal content – but also an interlocutor that constructs a dialogue grounded in the interconnectedness of food. Within the context of this volume, my focus in this chapter will be on how my food projects engage taste and other sensory experiences *beyond the visual*; in so doing, the chapter also sets out ambitions for how these projects seek to transmit meanings in an artistic sphere, engaging the intrinsic social relations bound up with food. This locates my work within the realm of ‘relational art’ or ‘relational aesthetics’, a concept introduced by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his groundbreaking 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics*. Bourriaud defines it as a ‘set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context’.¹ I seek to organise new communicative situations with food at their very centre, initiating new cycles of relations between the artist and an engaged audience that literally consumes the art.

However, while these works are rightly recognised as examples of relational art, they differ markedly from other works engaging food championed by Bourriaud, most notably those by the New York-based artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, who was born in Buenos Aires to Thai parents. As Claire Bishop notes, Tiravanija ‘is best known for hybrid installation performances, in which he cooks vegetable curry or pad thai for people attending the museum or gallery where he has been invited to work’.² She points out that ‘several critics, including Tiravanija himself, have observed that his involvement of the audience is the main focus of his work; the food is but a means to allow a convivial relationship between audience and artist to develop’.³ This emphasis on conviviality has sometimes led to criticisms that relational aesthetics lacks criticality, and Bishop is at the forefront of this criticism. Bishop points out a difficulty with works such as Tiravanija’s installations, in that there is ‘an erratic relationship to the work’s ostensible subject matter’.⁴ The aesthetic

qualities of the food are not identified as an issue by Bourriaud, who is more interested in the fact that the food is given freely and brings people together than any sensory experience it may offer.

In contrast, my own work seeks to reinstate aesthetic criteria, but not in a way that reduces the consumption of food to some kind of spectacle. Importantly, in the context of this volume, I foreground non-ocularcentric modes of perception: through smell, taste and the tactility of food. By providing structured guidance for experiencing the work, I establish a political context while simultaneously inviting the audience's personal associations, in a manner akin to Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open' work, which originally influenced Bourriaud.⁵ My relational art achieves criticality, offering ample space to explore ethics and politics – central concerns of conceptual art – without diminishing the importance of content. And importantly, content here is not just something to be discerned, but something that is consumed and digested, its meaning slowly released.

I will present three of my food projects from the past decade and discuss how these works redefine 'exhibits' not just as something for the eyes, but as multisensory environments embedded with intrinsic social, material and political meanings. These projects harness the power of food to convey the concept of art, not only through its visual presentation (though that remains significant) but by engaging taste, smell, touch and other bodily sensations. This approach invites broader audience participation in museum spaces, extending the accessibility of art beyond conventions that dictate one must merely observe – never touch, let alone eat. In doing so, my projects aim to make art more inclusive, reflecting the interconnectedness of our experiences, where food and its stories hold profound cultural and personal significance. Through multisensory engagement and a critically aware approach to relational aesthetics, these projects deepen the connection between art, individuals and their environments, challenging traditional notions of art as static and untouchable, and instead emphasising the dynamic interplay between our bodies, our social relations and our surroundings.

Each project embodies ideas that are foundational to my practice: storytelling through food, and the idea of 'digesting' meaning. Like a Trojan horse, these projects use food to subtly penetrate the sensory experience, offering smells, tastes, textures and temperatures that collectively create an unforgettable, multisensory engagement. Each work challenges dominant forms of visual and textual display in contemporary art, circumventing established conventions. In so doing, the works explore how artworks can exist not just as objects, but as platforms of social and material relations that extend beyond the visual.

Eataipei, 2015

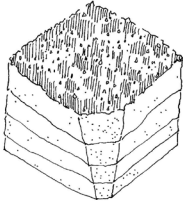
Eataipei (Figure 16.1) was a food performance presented at the London Design Festival in 2015, hosted within the Taiwan Pavilion alongside that year's selection of design objects from Taiwan. My collaborator Shikai Tseng and I aimed to foreground the 'cultural nutrients' that feed the inspirations of Taiwanese designers. Through food and storytelling, we aimed to bring the minds and lives of the designers closer to the London audience. The exhibition layout pushed the design objects to the perimeter, giving centre stage to a dining table for 10 guests at a time. The performance consisted of five dishes, each of which introduced a different aspect of Taipei, from 'history' and 'culture' to 'people', 'lifestyle' and 'future'. As the dishes were served, a script read by the host invited the audience to experience Taipei through its tastes, smells and stories.

The performance itself was shaped by the act of commensality – the practice of eating together – with the audience engaging in moments of personal recollection afforded by the various tastes on offer. The dining set-up playfully disrupted traditional restaurant norms: the menu consisted of ingredients in the form of stories (Figure 16.2) and was presented on a thin tissue-paper napkin (Figure 16.3), crumpled up as a sculptural blossom, referencing a used napkin at the end of a meal to raise curiosity and redirect audience expectations away from everyday

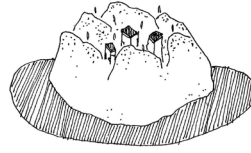


Figure 16.1 Rain Wu, Shikai Tseng, chef Chung-Ho Tsai, *Eataipei* (2015). A five-course food performance. Source: *Eataipei* team.

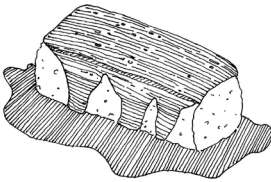
Eataipei



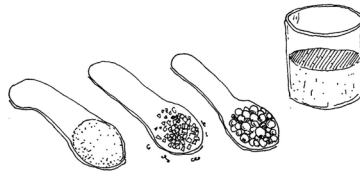
Dish 1: Mixture of the Past.
Layered rice cake with
chef's special sauce



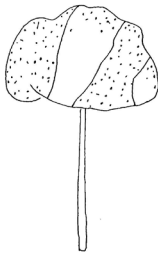
Dish 2: The Land Surrounded by
the Mountains and the Sea.
Spinach-flavoured mashed
potato with fried shallot,
Iberico ham, coriander
and seaweed broth



Dish 3: Taipei.
Squid ink butter with steamed bun



Dish 4: Ting.
Honey soaked Tapioca, Bolong tea
foam, popping candy, zesty citrus pool
and carbonated lemonade



Dish 5: Towards a sweet future.
Fruit, fruit purees, liquid nitrogen

Eataipei,
a unique food
design event, presents
a culinary delight that
narrates five aspects of Taipei
City: History, Landscape, People, Lifestyle
and Future. Through participating and
tasting a series of exquisitely crafted
dishes, audiences will be led on
an immersive and sensory
exploration of Taipei –
the World Design
Capital of
2016.

Food design by Shikai Tseng and Rain
Wu with Chef Chung-Ho Tsai
Design by Kellenberger-White
Illustrations by Rain Wu
www.eataipei.com

Figure 16.2 Eataipei menu. Source: designed by Kellenberger-White, with illustrations by Rain Wu.



Figure 16.3 *Eataipei* menu. Source: *Eataipei* team.

dining experiences. The dishes took on sculptural forms, evoking the sensory experience of strolling through the streets of Taipei. Our collaborating chef, Chung-Ho Tsai, prepared each dish to be served in synchrony with the script. Below, I illustrate and describe the five courses that constituted the performance.

With the opening dish, ‘Mixture of the Past’ (Figure 16.4(a)), we attempted to capture Taipei’s mixed cultural influences using the popular dish *wa kuei* – a rice cake containing flavoured rice paste which is steamed and served in a bowl (a ‘wa’ in Taiwanese). Like a geological sample, but with cultural strata, each rice cake is multi-layered, displaying, from the bottom up: a white layer infused with indigenous rice wine, representing Taiwan’s indigenous roots; a yellow layer with saffron, symbolising European colonial influence; a green layer with wasabi, echoing the Japanese colonial period; a red layer with Sichuan pepper, representing the Chinese military occupation; and, sprinkled on top, a thin layer of popped rice, signifying the capitalistic influence brought by the United States.

The second dish, ‘The Land Surrounded by the Mountains and the Sea’ (Figure 16.4(b)), forms a miniature model of Taipei’s basin geography. It comprises spinach-flavoured mashed potatoes, evoking the vegetal tastes of the surrounding mountains, Iberico ham representing the city’s towers, with parsley as trees, and a seaweed broth, which is

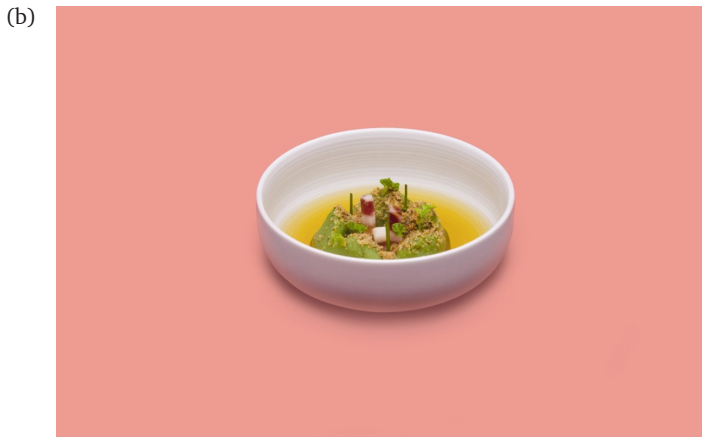
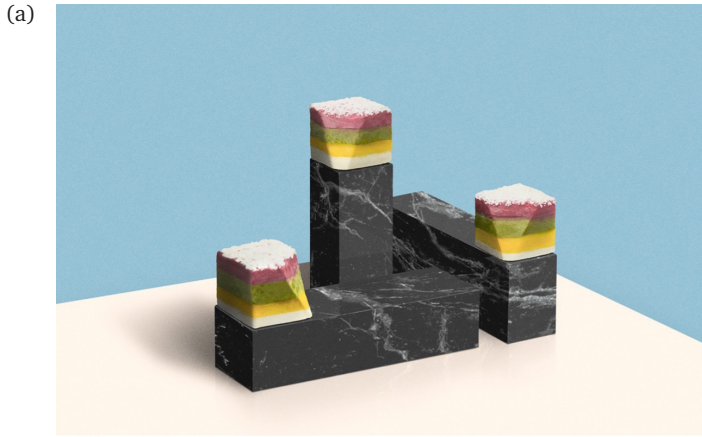


Figure 16.4 Rain Wu, Shikai Tseng, chef Chung-Ho Tsai, *Eataipei* (2015). The five dishes: (a) ‘Mixture of the Past’; (b) ‘The Land Surrounded by the Mountains and the Sea’; (c) ‘Taipeian’; (d) ‘Sing’; (e) ‘Towards a Sweet Future’. Source: *Eataipei* team.

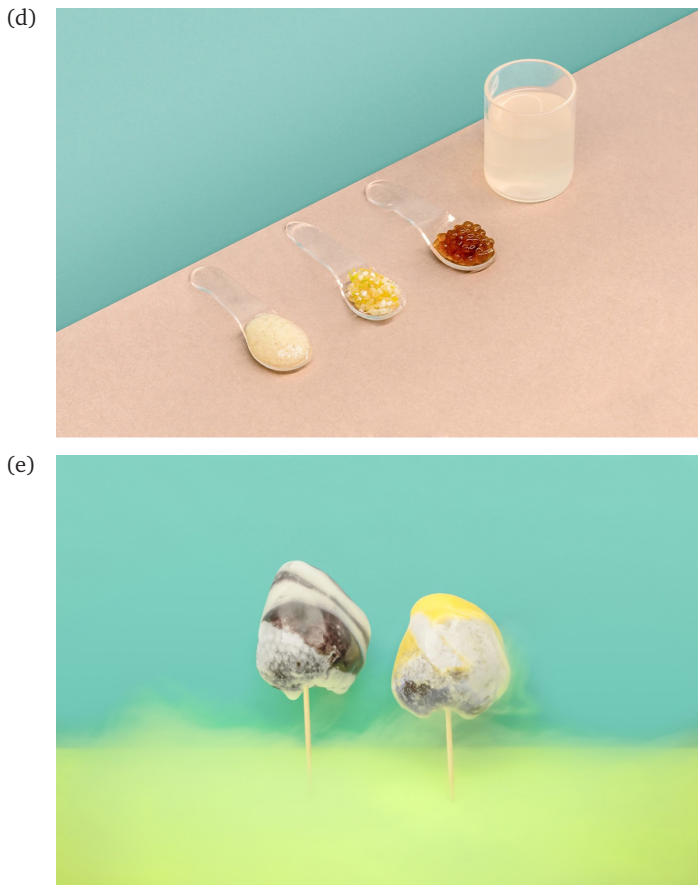


Figure 16.4 (continued)

poured into the simple white bowl to represent the sea into which the Tamsui River flows from Taipei. The accompanying narrative, told from a first-person perspective, recounts a moped journey ascending from the city centre up into the mountains. The dish was presented on two stacked plates, containing dried straw, hay, thyme and rosemary. As the dish was served, the herbs were performatively torched to release an intense earthy aroma, creating a sensory experience that transported the audience to a distant landscape.

‘Taipeian’, our third dish (Figure 16.4(c)), captures the duality of the city’s inhabitants – a blend of passion, open-mindedness and the islanders’ innate melancholy. The dish is made of a squid-ink butter block, imitating the appearance of concrete, but torched to melt over a soft, porous ‘man tou’ bread bun.

The fourth dish is ‘Sing’ (Figure 16.4(d)) – a playful deconstruction of Taiwan’s iconic bubble tea, presented as a small cup of lemonade and three bespoke spoons holding oolong tea foam, popping candy and mini tapioca balls. The audience are asked to sample each element of this deconstructed dish one by one, building up layers of texture (airy, spiky, slimy, soft, bubbly) with layers of taste and smell (tea aroma, sour, caramel, lemon, sweet). All the sensorial modes mix and mingle in a complex fusion of tastes. The surprising element of the dish is the crackling sensation as the popping candy bursts in the mouth, offering ‘a party in your mouth’ experience – evoking the joyful atmosphere of karaoke.

The final dish, ‘Towards a Sweet Future’ (Figure 16.4(e)), captures the spirit of Taipei’s rich history of civil participation in Taipei, from student-led political activism in 2014 to the rise of Taiwan’s closed-loop battery recycling ecosystem. It highlights the power of participation as a means of building a common future. In a playful, interactive experience, the dish invites the audience to create their own iced lollies by dipping fruit skewers into fruit purée, then freezing them instantly in liquid nitrogen. The result is a unique, unpredictably colourful creation that mirrors the diverse and dynamic nature of Taiwan’s evolving societal landscape.

The Tea Set, 2016

The two places I have lived – Taiwan and England – both have a deep cultural pride in their tea drinking traditions. In Taiwan, the distinct flavours of different teas are closely tied to their terroir – the environments in which they are produced. In contrast, in the UK, tea drinking often remains disconnected from its origins, a relic of colonialism where tea drinkers are culturally and geographically distant from the hills and mountains where the tea leaves are cultivated.

The Tea Set (Figure 16.5) was a site-specific sculptural performance project commissioned by the Design Museum London, designed to challenge the traditional role of objects in museum settings. Unlike design objects encased by vitrines, these objects invited active participation, allowing visitors to engage in a communal tea-making performance. Every step of the tea-making process was designed to synchronise with narratives of the socio-political history of British tea drinking, guided by the master of ceremonies. *The Tea Set* revealed stories of tea trades, colonial plantations and tea



Figure 16.5 Rain Wu, *The Tea Set* (2016). Source: Su Yu Hsin.

drinking – stories with a dark colonial past, from slavery to the forced introduction of opium into China by the British. This subject resonated with the location of the performance: the Design Museum London had recently moved into the former Commonwealth Institute building.

The tea set, constructed in ceramics and fired with a charcoal glaze, was placed in the gallery on a temporary podium constructed from stacked concrete blocks borrowed from a builders' yard. The podium established an intimate set-up where up to five people could take part in each performance.

As the viewers gather around the podium, the master of ceremonies begins with a question: If the UK lacks suitable environments for tea cultivation, where is tea grown? He narrates the story of tea's introduction to England in the seventeenth century, through the marriage of Portuguese princess Catherine de Braganza to King Charles II. To support the aristocratic fashion of tea gatherings, fast ships were sent to gather seasonal goods from China, including tea and silk.

As the story unfolds, the master of ceremonies reaches for the ship's wheel on the lid of the tea caddy ([Figure 16.6\(a\)](#)), revealing its contents: loose tea leaves inside a hull-shaped container. The tea caddy references the fast trading ships that once transported tea, such as the famed *Cutty Sark* displayed at the Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London. These sailing ships needed to be exceptionally fast given that they were carrying seasonal goods.

As the appetite for tea drinking grew among Britain's elite, tea traders could no longer rely on a single supplier, and so turned their attention to setting up tea plantations in India, Sri Lanka and Kenya. The master of ceremonies narrates the history of colonial terraforming – the process of modifying an environment – and passes around the tea scoop (Figure 16.6(b)). Participants feel the weighted end of the scoop, which references ploughs in the fields and the heat of the sun. Combining elements of a shackle and a spade, the scoop encapsulates the story of tea growing under British colonial rule. Participants scoop tea leaves into the teapot to begin the brew.

Hot water is poured from the water jug to steep the tea. During the Industrial Revolution, rapid urban growth led to the pollution of rivers and wells, making water unsafe to drink. The safest form of hydration was small beer, while the alarming rise in gin drinking – originally used as a medicine – had a detrimental effect on a capitalist society reliant on workers' capacity to operate dangerous machinery, with often terrible consequences. Industrial leaders, the women's temperance movement and religious leaders all came together to promote tea, made safe by boiling water rather than through a brewing process, as a means of promoting an orderly, compliant capitalist society.

An hourglass incorporated into the sugar stand (Figure 16.6(c)) measures the brewing time, and the tea is poured into small teacups (Figure 16.6(d)). Given the size of the cups, frequent refills are required: drinking from small cups generates an invisible thread between the drinkers and the tea. My father makes tea this way, continually refilling the cups during conversations with relatives and guests.

Sugar is added from the triangular sugar stand, referencing the sugar trade triangle that exploited slaves and lands. Finally, milk is poured from the milk jug (Figure 16.6(e)), its small front door symbolising the collaboration between industrial and religious leaders in making this bitter, foreign brew a national drink. Adding milk to soften the taste reflects the reformers' hope that tea would 'tame' a society increasingly influenced by alcohol consumption, helping shape tea as an everyday beverage, not just an aristocratic pastime.

The ceremony ends with each participant holding a cup of tea, and as they sip, they are invited to talk about their own interpretations of the history of tea, unravelling the complexities of a practice that combined fashionable pleasures and human subjugation.

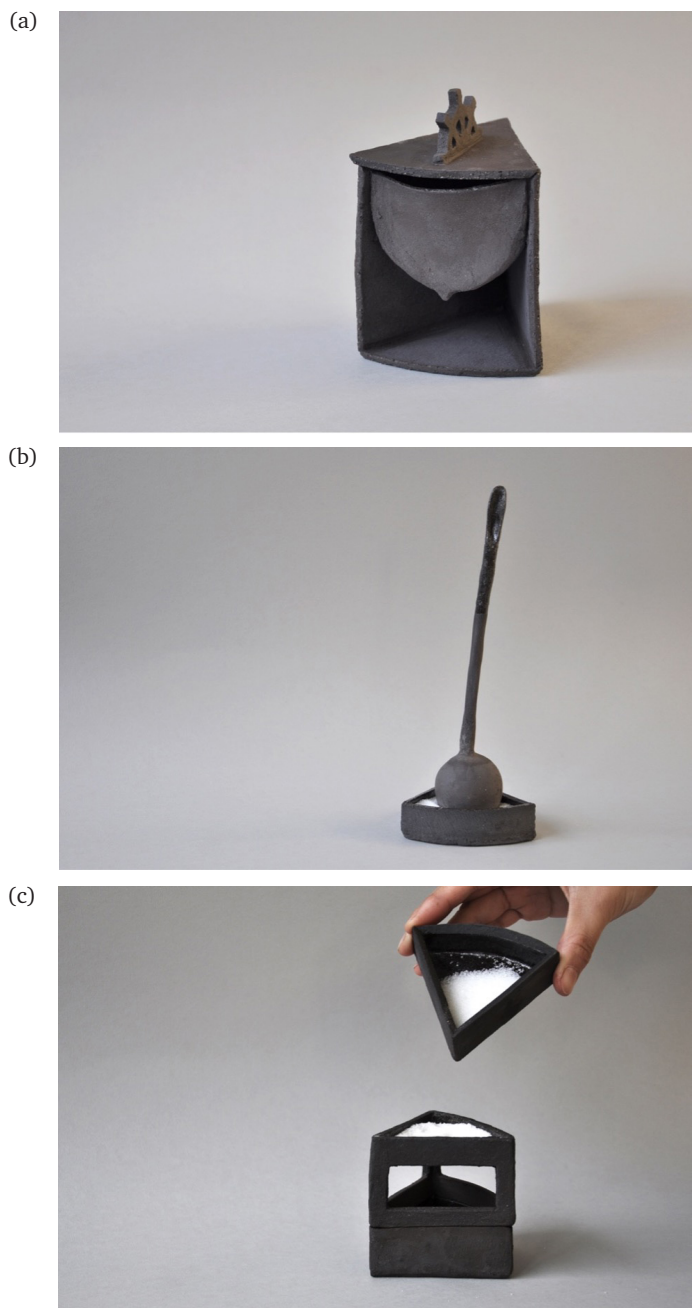


Figure 16.6 Rain Wu, *The Tea Set* (2016). Objects within the set: (a) tea caddy; (b) tea scoop; (c) sugar stand; (d) teacups; (e) milk jug.
Source: Rain Wu.

(d)



(e)



Figure 16.6 (continued)

Bread, 2018–

Bread (Figure 16.7(a)) is an ongoing series of installations in which pieces of bread are displayed for consumption in exhibition settings. This work draws on the idea that bread is one of the first prepared foods in human history, serving as a symbol of the shift from hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural and commercial civilisations. The smell of the bread often leads the audience to the display, where they are invited to consume a piece and reflect on the last landscape they encountered that produced food.

The surface of the bread bears patterns reminiscent of aerial photographs, revealing landscapes divided into distinct sections with different uses: fields of wheat, orchards, scattered poppy fields, and distinctive bright yellow rapeseed flowers (Figure 16.7(b)).

(a)



(b)



Figure 16.7 Rain Wu, *Bread* (2018–). Two views: (a) installation view; (b) detail. Source: Romy Finke.

Eating bread can be an everyday, secular act; in the context of Christianity, it carries profound significance as the symbol – or, in Catholicism, the actual body – of Christ. Circumventing spiritual connotations, *Bread* creates a sensory, visceral interaction that intimately connects with the body of the audience through the digestive process. Ultimately, the work seeks to convey that even the most profane everyday act has deep-rooted relations with dimensions beyond the visual. When considered thoughtfully, eating becomes a series of choices that shape our relationship with

the environment around us. A change in eating behaviour can create ripple effects, transforming the material reality of the landscapes around us. In other words, these choices are acts of micro-activism.

Notes

- 1 Bourriaud [1998] 2002, 113.
- 2 Bishop 2004, 55–6.
- 3 Bishop 2004, 56.
- 4 Bishop 2004, 64.
- 5 Eco 1989.

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- Bishop, Claire. 2004. 'Antagonism and relational aesthetics'. *October* 110: 51–79. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379810>.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. [1998] 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les presses du réel.
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Part VI

Words, translations, descriptions

Extracts from *Black Cane Diary*

Joseph Rizzo Naudi

Hannen House, Camberwell, London

April 2021

My boots by the front door. Square boots, I thought of them as. Though they weren't square. But there was something square about the way they sat between the wall and the white laminate.

It was laminate designed to look like tiles. That was why we chose it. A kind of lino laminate, chipped in places, in one place in particular, where the black undercoat ate the edge of the white, a receding map.

My jacket too. The blue jacket that was sometimes black. It hung on the back of the bedroom door. A formless hump.

Then there was the backpack in the bedroom, groped for by the wardrobe. What went inside?

A jumper and bottle. Maybe a camera. Maybe the dictaphone.

The jacket and boots, the backpack, those things. And the cane, of course.

Where was it?

In its nook between the living room and the bathroom door. A narrow space for narrow objects. Straight rubber handle, four black shaft sections and the metal joints along its length. A little hemisphere at the end of it in white ceramic. Sound like a cue ball when touched to the laminate.

I saw it, the cane, leaning narrowly in its nook. I saw it whenever I walked from the bathroom to the bedroom, or from the living room to the kitchen and back again, just like I saw the jacket hanging on the bedroom door, or the boots on the laminate.

It was the contrast that did it. The black shaft against the white wall, a dark jacket and pale door, the boots on the tiles. Clear. Delineated.

The parameters understood. Most people don't like so much contrast. They prefer a little diffusion, perhaps because most things to most people already contain enough contrast, especially in the city. A lack of contrast is a novelty they design into their homes, if they live somewhere they can do that. If they don't live anywhere, or they live in a place where changing things is unfeasible, or they lack the money, they might blunt the contrast by other means, let the light shimmer through the lids, where skin and lashes filter what is there until what is there becomes something vaguer, softer, easier on the mind.

The first time I painted my bedroom, after the builders had finished gutting and plastering the flat, I painted it grey.

They can paint the hallway and the kitchen, the living room and the bathroom, I told my parents, but leave the bedroom to me. It will be nice to feel as if I've done something in the flat, something to make it my own.

The second time, five years later, I painted it white. For cleanliness and contrast. For delineation. I took the roller and felt over every bit of it, ceiling to skirting, corner, edge and window line. The first coat was easy. The roller erased the grey. The second coat was white on white. I gathered all the lamps in the flat and turned them to shine on the wall. To see where I had been. To see where I needed to go.

Clissold Park, London

August 2021

What did Rebecca see?

A spread of green. The bright sheet of water and dimples where the pond weeds entered. The skimming of water boatmen and other insects she could only guess at. The white sun coming through the clouds. The trees' green canopy stretching in the sunlight.

She saw me too, I know, out of the corner of her eye.

A smudgy shape that resolved into a person when her gaze fell in my direction. A pale-skinned man in his 30s with a short brown beard. A figure reclined on the bank of grass, a beer can in his hand. Someone who eyed her fingers as she rolled a cigarette, who listened with his head tilted as she explained how she was only smoking two per day, on weekdays, and then at times like this, when it was about socialising and relaxing, she allowed herself two more.

But never more than four, she said.

She pointed towards the pond, the cigarette vertical between her fingers, to where a heron stood, its legs in the water, its slender beak

angled toward the surface, its eyes in black sockets searching for insects, we imagined, and, finding none, or finding none that aroused its interest, the heron had resolved to stand still, we conjectured, and wait with us, its legs sunk into the sucking mud, its neck an S, with the woman in an orange dress and the bearded man staring at it from the bank.

Sometimes the world is like this. Lying on the grass beside Rebecca, watching the heron, listening as she told me how her grandfather had owned two pairs of shoes, as far as she knew.

His out shoes and his in shoes, she said. The in shoes, I don't think he ever got a new pair of those. They were like old dogs. They stank, but you loved them in spite of it, or maybe because of it. His out shoes were brown, polished leather, almost tan. Brogues.

She laughed. My eyes were on her face, then moving quicktime down her front as she leaned back on the grass, her white forearm straight edged against the green, and the orange patterned dress flowing about her bare legs.

What was the pattern?

I needed to study it further, to run my eyes up and over it, up to the curve the collar cut against her neck and down again to where it tightened round her stomach, and up towards her neck again until she raised her hand (I saw) and moved some hair from her face, the palm brushing the rounded tip of her nose, with her eye tracking mine, squinting a little in the setting sun, a blue-ringed pupil, the white wide and questioning.

That's how it was.

The heron poised. Ready to jab its beak into the pond.

The mirrored surface. Why disturb it?

I felt for the beer can in the grass. Its anchored weight.

Though it might appear like a spangled wash, I said. Though it might seem like an overlay, it isn't always there.

She sipped her beer. Her eyes were on the heron.

But there's a way in which it is always there, I said. And even then, although it's always there, how I experience it depends on how I'm feeling. It might seem like the worst thing in the world, or a very interesting thing, something to study, to articulate and talk about. I am so proud of it, sometimes, and then at other times I want to hide it away, never show anyone.

Was that what I meant?

It's what I said.

It's like gasps, I said.

A malfunctioning machine, I said.

It's an alarm sounding. A buzzing motion. Something is wrong in the visual realm. And I need to get away from it, to distance myself from it, to understand, monkishly, that what we see is not what is there.

Or it is not the only thing that is there.

Or it is not the whole story.

Because what is there is sometimes the heron dipping its beak (more slowly than expected) into the surface of the water, the heron lifting its wings to stabilise itself, the sun behind the heron and the silhouette of its legs, the skidding shape of water boatmen to its right.

Do you see the delicate way it lifts its leg, Rebecca? Cat-like, this feline bird, the raising and lowering of limbs in the water, stalking the bank and then receding.

This evening, in this park, I told her, as the sun moves behind the buildings on the high street, what I see is dust drifting on the wind, droves of it coming in on the slow breeze through the gates.

It's not exactly right, but it will do.

The dust gathers at twilight. The dark summons it. Like magic, the way it moves, the way it shimmers.

And if we look closely (I nudged her, she laughed) perhaps there is something there in the pattern the dust makes as it settles on the pond's edge, as it moves about the heron's legs, as it passes over the treetops and coats the sleeping brickwork of the high street.

She touched my arm.

Listen.

Bushmead Road, Whitchurch, Buckinghamshire

November 1997

One night I couldn't sleep.

What is it?

She lifted me into the bed and held me close in front of her. Placed her lips on the back of my head, so I knew she was there whenever thoughts of the man came into my mind.

He was tall and faceless, my brother said. A figure walking behind us on the way home from school.

It was true.

I could see him.

There, against the grey sky, against the sterile bushes, against the white houses hunched along the roadside.

My brother's chapped lips grinned.

He's following us, he said.
And whenever I looked away, he pointed and shouted,
He's there! He's there!
So my head was snapping over my shoulder to him to my shoulder
to him, the polyester of my jacket shushing.
Mum told him to stop.
Stop scaring your brother.
But he was caught up in the performance of it, in the response he
got, the shivering thrill, pirouetting on his command, the blue circle of
my face.
She felt it too, I think, looking out in the afternoons from the
kitchen window, over the arcing fields, the crop stubble white against the
mud, the gate at the bottom so distant it was miniature.
And beyond the gate she saw the land stretched up and over, up
and over like the scales of a fish. Something was coming from the town.
Up with the mist from the bottom of the vale, up and up, through the
gate, over the stubble. It reached our fence. Ran through the climbing
frame. Tapped onto the decking. It was pressing against the back door.
A diagnosis is like a flower. Hidden until it comes, but when it does
we think, yes, that's what this is about, that's why we've been waiting,
watching, thinking, why are we here, what will happen now?
It's like a slap too. The way it comes from nowhere to thud.

Waterloo Bridge, London

March 2022

There was a boy riding a scooter.

Small he was, four or five years old. With a thick head of hair.

He coasted on the pavement beside me, then moved ahead, agile
as a fish, slowing only as the crowd thickened, his little leg shooting out
behind him, a wee shoe scuffing the ground near a bollard.

He aimed for a gap between two pairs of legs, kicked back and was
off again, zigzagging away on the north embankment, close by Temple
tube, heading west from Blackfriars.

Remember God's banker?

They hanged him there. A silhouette swinging against the river.

And me with my cane, trip trap, trip trap on the paving stones.
Myself with blue jeans and brown parka, the Thames a cataract streak
on my left, the wrought lamp posts, the benches raised on plinths, and
the boy on the scooter just ahead of me, weaving between people's legs.

He could be my son, I thought, the way he kept a little in front, never looking back to check but listening for the cane's trip trap above the diesel engines. A rhythm for him to follow, to know I was not far behind and if not watching over him then nearby in case anything should happen.

Which it might. This is London after all, with Waterloo Bridge a low block ahead of us, stretching onto the water.

Man and boy, father and son, trip trap into the shadow beneath the bridge. Trip trap under its supporting pier, a shallow arc across the road, the cool damp underside and the concrete beams above us, zigzagging ahead.

It was a concrete smell, I remember. Wetness from the Thames, the evaporation of the river, the recent rain.

And there was urine, too, urine on old concrete. Though there'd been good air until then, the sun on the paving stones, the white breeze blowing gently from the river. This new smell was part of the walk. It had its place. I didn't wish it badly.

On our left, some building work. Barriers corralling us into a thin strip of paving. Fences to stop us falling into holes or tripping over wires. The boy zipped through and a figure, seeing my cane, stepped off the curb to let me pass. Another shape appeared too, appeared to the left of us, from the roadworks, the construction site, a figure rising from a tent with the sound of a zip, a man emerging from a blue flap.

Urine, guy ropes and waterproofs, cardboard and plastic. A community of people under here.

The man from the tent was on my left. He said,

Why are you using a cane?

And then I was past him. Out from the shadow of the bridge. Because I've learned it's better not to stop. Better to emerge instead from the underside and into the daylight, where I replaced my sunglasses to counter the glare and kept the cane working trip trap ahead, the pavement widening out, the boy still there in front, scooting ahead, hair ruffling.

He put a leg out, scuffed, swivelled on his heel, swung the scooter round in a practised arc and looked over his shoulder at something behind me.

Footsteps. The man from the tent, the man from the bridge. I heard him clearly, close behind. An English voice, from the south, closing the gap and saying,

Conman. Using a cane. Trying to get sympathy. You're not really blind. What are you doing? Conman.

His voice cut through the engine noise, the river noise, the city noise. His voice erased the river, erased the boy, erased the passing figures. Just my cane and his words as he came alongside me, a few metres away, within striking distance. And I turned my head to look at him, to see him for the first time, in the clear circle of vision I have remaining. A man, my height, a grey hoodie, light grey, dark trousers, holding a lead, a dog on the end, trotting beside him and barking every time he shouted,

Fucking blind guy. Fucking poof. If you're not really blind then I'll make you blind. You wanker. Wanker.

In the middle of the road now, he was crossing, turning back to look over his shoulder and shout things at me, the same things,

Conman. Poof. Wanker. Blind guy.

And so I stopped. I pulled the cane up to my chest and turned to face him. I watched him recede, still shouting. I was facing him and opening. Letting his words pass through me or absorbing them. A black sheet gathering in, refusing to reflect. An open figure, cane drawn up to the breastbone and fighting the urge to shout something in return, afraid my throat would seize up, remembering what I had read, how the design of the bridge called for the supporting beams only at the outside edges, to bring light and sweetness to the underside. Where one afternoon he opened his tent and saw someone. A figure walking, holding a hand up to his eyes to shield them from the sun, his other hand gripping a cane. Tapping it from side to side in front of him. And the man from the bridge said,

If you're blind then why are you looking?

And having said that, more came, because he saw him seeing, this man with the cane, the man who could see, the man who kept walking, walking as words condensed inside him. Bubble, dribble, trickle, jet. He sent the river my way.

Boots by the door. Cane in its nook. I went to lie on my bed, face up.

The wood creaked and the mattress settled and I stared at the ceiling, moving my eyes until I found the indentation where a hook had been removed. But what was it for, that hook in the ceiling? So strange when we moved in to find it there, securely bolted. To hang something heavy, certainly.

In the early hours he came back to me. He wouldn't leave. There in the still, dark room, the man in the hoodie returning and returning, his dog on the leash, his white skin and brown hair, so much like mine, and the dog trotting beside him, barking each time he shouted,

Blind guy. Conman. Wanker. Poof.

Returning to me throughout the night, returning even though this was not an attack against me but an attack against something else, something larger or apart from me, something burning, inside him or outside me, something in which I was present only as a fantasy, a fiction. Not something really there. Not me, not exactly.

The boy returned too, on his scooter, with ruffled hair. Wasn't there something about the way he drifted close by the busy road and back again? How he moved between legs. How he weaved?

To be him. Or to have been him once. Gliding. Compact and brave. Not myself, grown older. Blinder than I'd ever been. A flimsy cane in my hand, long, segmented, trip trap on the paving stones as I moved beneath the bridge.

Where years ago a local Lambeth lad we knew had hung from the railings, I remember. His hands gripping the top white pole, his arms out behind him and his chest forward like the figurehead of a ship.

Two hands, then one. The water moving far below.

You moron, we told him. And he hung there, cackling.

All night long the river flowed beside me, back to the days when I didn't dare use my cane, when I was crossing the bridge after a night out, not long into my first year of university, when a girl I liked had been distant and I was crying as I walked.

Crying. That's how it was.

Until in the middle of the bridge a police car pulled up beside me. The front passenger door half opened and a voice asked for my name.

I told them.

And the door closed. The car drove away.

I stood looking after it, then out to the black surface of the river, resuming my walk, back to halls, back to my cuboid room, not crying now but sober, my vision richer, as it used to be, only a light coating of the dust blowing in from the river and a crackling in the deep shadows beneath the bridge. I was awake then to my surroundings, to the whirring buses, the hard drops of rain, the pavement and the river, and wondering why I was stopped, who they were looking for, whether the way I was walking had attracted their attention, or if they could somehow sense that I was unhappy, and what I needed was to be stopped on the bridge to be asked who I was.

Revelon Road, Brockley, London

June 2022

I thought I saw her elbow, almost.

In the bedroom. In the dark. It was almost white.

And though I couldn't see it, her elbow, I saw it. There in front of me, as I stood, holding it between thumb and forefinger. My eyes wide open. There and not there. The joint spanned and measured, gauged and tested. Her elbow. A silver gimbal turning now leftways towards me.

And then her hand came to rest against my stomach. Her fingers gripped my t-shirt. She pulled its hem from out of my jeans, pulled and pulled. The canvas of a tent stretching. A thousand hairs stirred on my belly when the night air touched them. Follicles closing. A pale desert. So silvery in the dark, I imagined.

My hand moved from her waist. My fingers found her belt buckle and held her there, taut. She gripped my t-shirt. I held her buckle. We spun slowly in the bedroom. Immobile yet moving. A satellite's slow gesture above the slender world.

When I pulled her in, my pulling was not an attempt to claim her (my hands wandering once more, from hair to shoulder to waist to belt buckle). My movements not to claim or own her but to describe her, to know what was there (from buckle to jeans button and down further, to nestle in her thighs, my knuckles brushing the denim seam between her legs). All this motion for her to appear before me in the darkness, in the space that was so full of life, I was sure. So teeming and massed. It wanted only the pads of careful fingers, back and forth, over and round on shoulders, chests and thighs, again and again until the shape of something became beneath our hands (her palms pressed against my cheeks, her fingertips on my eyelids as she kissed me).

And then she pulled back and away from me, her neck arcing through the dark with the weight of her head, I imagined, an atmospheric body, something glittering that I could see, I thought, my eyes gazing wide and stupid into the void, where she was, I knew, my hands finding the shape of her ribs, her waist and down again. This image under my fingers in the sparkling dark. Was it real? The form of her as I traced it. As if trailing silver. Spectral. A way of gleaming dust adhering to a curve. The lunar line of her rising.

Then one of us (I don't know which) took a long, low breath. An inhalation for pleasure. For intimacy. With her lips landing on the pale parts of my neck.

Holloway, London

January 2023

At the top of Camden Road, where the headlights peel off from Highbury, and the buses rush down from Finsbury Park, at eight in the evening, after the rain. Look!

It's the long finger of my cane.

See how it scratches the pavement, how it brailles the concrete, how it probes the gullies where slab meets slab meets slab.

I followed close behind and found the button for the pedestrian crossing. An eye ringed in red. A place of safe passage.

I waited. Across the road the red man waited too.

The cane flashed in the beams of passing cars. A lightning rod, it channels attention. And if I want to leave my house, walk to the bus stop, meet a friend, I have no choice but to be illuminated, to stand out, to be called upon and approached, and probed.

Hello! Are you OK there?

A man's voice. Cheery, clear, with a softness to it.

I'm good, I called back. But thanks for asking. I appreciate it.

How this long stick arouses the curiosity of the sighted. They see us from a distance. They stalk us, eye us up, close in and paw us, snuffling for a prize.

Just to check that we're OK, of course.

Just to check. Just to check.

Footsteps passed behind me. Strong, hard strides on the paving. Then they stopped.

Do you mind? the cheerful voice said. Can I give you something? Can I give you a present?

Across the road the red man persisted. Implacable.

What could I do? He had a gift for me. What if I refused? Would he get angry? What else might he want from me? And who was this person, anyway, out walking these streets in the dark, approaching blind people with gifts to give them?

Sometimes I just want to cross the road.

But I'm a public-minded person too. I believe in the life of the street. The mixing of the city. Acts of kindness. They are appreciated. I welcome these interactions, as much as I'm scared by them, as much as I'm bored by them, as much as I do not ask for them.

John Hull writes that blindness is a gift. A dark gift, a mysterious gift. Not one that we want, not one that we ask for. But a gift nonetheless.

The green man appeared.

I can't carry much, I said into the darkness.
Don't worry, they're very small, the man said.
Somewhere in front of me he took a step forward. I heard him fumbling in a plastic bag. I held out my right hand, palm up.
The bag was invisible. His hands were invisible. His face was invisible. The lights of the garage were bright behind him. I saw only the shape of a man's shoulders, the form of his head, that was it.
He placed something in my hand. Two things, small, lively almost. I closed my fingers over them, but one fell to the pavement.
Oops! he said and stooped, found it, placed it in my hand again.
They were hard, irregular. Light.
What are they?
Walnuts! he said.
Walnuts! I said.
And he placed a warm hand over mine, and he pressed the two spheres into my palm.
For what's been taken away, he said. And for what you've received in return.

Bunavoneader, Isle of Harris, Outer Hebrides

October 1988

When I stopped wriggling, she fed me. Sleep came. She pressed her lips to my head, to feel the fontanelles through my hair. My skull fusing. Our growing separation.

We were living on an island then, two miles from the nearest neighbour. Dad had the car. He left early in the morning and when he came back it had been dark for hours, my brother and I had been asleep for hours, the stove was cold and it was just the wind wrapping itself around the cottage.

The sun came in through the big window in the mornings. My brother flapped about, stuck his fingers into holes, rested his head against the radiators. There was a lull while he played with the Brio. Mum opened the hatch in the stove and stoked the coal. She got more from the wooden store at the side of the house, making dust with the iron shovel.

Where was the baby?

I was in the basket on the table sleeping, the soft blanket tucked around my chin, my eyes closed and breath light as a leaf on the silky hem. My brother on the carpet in the living room.

I felt the smack of island air when she opened the window. She held me up to see, watched as I blinked.

One. Two. A clean egg wrapped in blue.

Outside, the whaling station's ruined chimney, the bothy at the foot of the garden.

Do you see the soft moss? The walkers' trail, the wide grey loch? There's a road which winds about the island.

Follow my finger.

Look.

No one in sight.

King's Cross Underground Station, London

October 2023

It has something to do with judgement. With the arbitration that writing-recording seems to carry.

I deem such-and-such worthy of record and such-and-such not, leaving it unrecorded.

Even if the poetics of the record, quote unquote, attempt to clean what's recorded of its judgement. There's still something judgemental there.

How did it go then?

We were in a dark passageway. All of us. And moving quickstep between the escalator and the platform. And I knew where I was. I know that part of the network well. Though it's dark. And I was feeling, what?

A premonition.

No.

But there was (there is always) a sense that something might happen in that passageway, maybe just because it's a dark place, and there are so many bodies moving at speed together. And there are those stairs at the end of it. Almost hidden. Descending.

So I kept my cane tip running in the crevice between floor and wall, grating it against the tiles, the little white hemisphere running in the grouting, running in the gutter, I thought.

In the gutter. Those were the words.

So we walked the passageway, all of us, and I approached those hidden stairs with caution and premonition and (not) to my surprise a gentle, low-toned, North American voice spoke up from behind me, on my left as I was towards the right of the passage. And the voice said,

Careful now there's someone there on the stairs there's someone set there on the stairs.

The elegance of the phrasing. Not too cautious, nothing escalatory. I didn't lurch with anxiety. Above all it was the repetition that struck me. The way the voice passed over its meaning twice. With variation. Like a finger.

I turned my face in the direction of the voice and said, also in undertone,

Thank you very much.

And as I spoke I heard someone in front of me on the stairs, and I almost saw the dark shape of them, as if the voice's spoken warning had conjured their form, and I assumed it was someone who'd set up there to ask for money. A strange assumption as I've never (not once) come across that happening at the top of the stairs on the underground. It's always at the bottom of staircases when it happens, that you find them. For safety. For everyone's.

The shape in front moved and the voice that came out of it was middle-class and white, if I had to guess, and soft-toned, so I thought woman, quote unquote, and the shape made sounds like rustling bags and moved themselves and left their spot and seemed to hurry on their way. And their voice was rushed and slightly flustered as they made their apologies, because of the inconvenience and the danger they'd interposed, they presumed, such that someone (as a matter of fact) had felt it necessary to speak up and deliver a warning. To inscribe a judgement into the thin passageway air.

Yeah. That was how it was.

And I said into that thin air, to the North American voice, the one who'd warned me,

That would've been painful for them.

Meaning that if I'd walked into the shape on the stairs with the cane it would've hurt them, and the voice replied,

Painful for you both.

I didn't know what to make of that, though there wasn't any time or need to say something further because we all three of us were then walking with the rest of the crowd down onto the platform, with the train pulling in just like that, as it so often does, beautifully on time from our perspective, and the carriage doors slid open in front of us such that we didn't need to break our stride to get on, where then the train doors closed and the carriage jolted forward to move us down the line.

On the train, in that bright carriage, I saw a man sitting with white hair, blue or black white-checked shirt and some kind of grey cardigan

over the top, a Tesco bag with a bottle of water or something in it, and he with the kind of expansive forehead, button nose and pink complexion of a white-man-in-his-sixties, as far as I could see.

He could have been, in some other life, an academic or a grandfather or a farmer, I thought, but here on this carriage he was an evangelist and maybe also schizophrenic, quote unquote.

That's the word my mind found. I record it here.

That's how it was.

And maybe he was those other things too, academic, grandfather, farmer. But when I got on the carriage I thought crazy person, quote unquote, because he was speaking loudly and I didn't dare look him in the eye.

No.

That wasn't it.

At first I thought activist, quote unquote, talking about Gaza, I thought, because he said,

The occupation by an armed force, a foreign armed force, the occupation of a land, armed forces moving in a foreign land. Is there any love in the train? Is there any love in London? No? Well I've got love. I've got love.

And he took a swig from his water bottle or whatever it was and said,

I am Jesus Christ. I am the light of the world.

And it struck me, the poetics of this. The poetics, quote unquote, with its characteristic shifting of perspective, the first-person I used in quotation or in madness. As if possessed.

18

A film you can feel: sensory deception, translation and confluence

Jo Bannon

You can watch an audio-described version of *Passing*, a short film directed by Jo Bannon, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJMMgRXZYow> (accessed February 2025).

The timecodes listed next to particular talking points in the following text correspond to timecodes in the film.

~ ~ ~

This is a director's commentary on *Passing*, a film I directed in 2023. It is a hybrid between artist moving image and documentary, and its subjects/performers are Sindri Runudde, a visually impaired dancer and choreographer, and Augusto Corrieri, a sighted magician and performance-maker who specialises in close-up, sleight-of-hand magic.

The film explores the kinship between the experiences of the two performers and their respective practices. It was filmed on a set dressed entirely in hot pink velvet. The performers' costumes are made from the same fabric. Throughout the film we experience the performers, their actions and their spoken words in a highly abstracted, unlocated space.

The work uses audio description, haptic cinematography, tactile set design, close-up choreography and autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) to elicit the mysterious and ambiguous sensations possible within a primarily visual medium such as film. It is part of *Blind Magic* – a triptych of artworks I'm making which explore the performativity of visual impairment.

Passing is just under 12 minutes long, meaning that this extensive commentary would run on long after the picture fades to black. But here I'm more interested in what translation can offer, rather than replicate:

to bend time to suit my sensory and perception needs, to instate a bit of crip time, to change the pace of ‘viewing’ and to take the time it takes.

The form of a director’s commentary appeals to me for many reasons, but most of all for the cachet of giving behind-the-scenes, never-before-seen backstage access. I’m really interested in how we can make access for disabled audiences not just equitable, but additional: a little extra, a premium-tier subscription, the bespoke platinum package. I like to think of it as granting VIP access, in my case for my VIPs (Visually Impaired People) in the audience.

It’s one of the things I enjoy as a disabled audience member or consumer (and you have to find the perks where you can!); the times you get to go behind the scenes and be escorted through the building early, or via a strange route, and you get to peek at the things normally hidden, the things you’re not supposed to see. Like when I’m asked to board the plane early and I get to see the cabin crew ‘off duty’, not yet with their poker faces, still warming up. Or the thrill I get from a touch tour, as I’m escorted into the theatre an hour before the show and invited to meet some of the company, touch costumes and props, see the technicians folding away the ladders and sweeping the stage. And, of course, the clandestine whispering of the audio describer in my ear ...

Director’s commentaries have long been a staple in filmmaking. Their purpose is often to give cinephiles insight into the technical aspects of a film’s production, for the actors to relay techniques and moments of emotional poignancy, and for (most frequently) the male creative leads to compare war stories from the trials of production.

My intention here is to do something different – to subvert this form of address. I want to give VIP access to behind-the-scenes knowledge, but not of the technical details of cameras, lenses and blocking. Instead, this commentary explores the aspects of research and making process that have a particular resonance for VIP audiences. It’s a way of putting my finger on the scales in favour of the audience I’m most interested in making work for, a perhaps crude response to Hannah Thompson’s elegant theory of ‘blindness gain’ (see [Chapter 2](#) in this volume). A bit more bang for your buck.

A characteristic of the director’s commentary that I am keen to keep is the loose, spontaneous nature of the address. Typically, the commentary is an impromptu conversation between several members of the creative team. It has a particular rhythm, as individuals dip in and out of silence, sometimes delivering a one-line observation, at other points delivering longer anecdotes, provoked by the memories that a particular

image or scene conjures. Commentaries often have the feel of being in a living room with the creative team and being party to a private conversation. This text is attempting to attain that intimacy and that sense of being overheard.

The commentary shares some characteristics with two central preoccupations of this project: audio description (AD) and magician's patter. These styles of oration pay close attention to visual elements. A magician might verbally describe taking off their jacket to prove there's nothing up their sleeves, or make a point of describing how a card is placed into the middle of the deck. An audio describer will detail the essential aspects of a location, a performer or a prop. Both the magician and audio describer work in close intimacy with visual and sonic material – working to a rhythm that allows for and plays against imagistic material. Successful AD and magician's patter also attenuates to shifts in audiovisual sequences: ad-libbing, heightening in tone in responsive, rehearsed improvisation.

This commentary is in line with this modality of speech. It speaks in relationship with the inherently visual material of a short film, attentive to describing what's in the image, whilst also giving VIP access. Its aspiration is to do so in the style of an intimate conversation. Because my favourite form of AD is the kind performed by my close friends as they lean over to me in the cinema, gallery, theatre or party and give me a whispered, clandestine running commentary on the inside scoop, of what's going on, and who is kissing who ...

Opening shot (02:37)

The opening shot is a close-up of a performer's face. This is Sindri Runudde. The lens takes us so close to them that I can see an old piercing under their bottom lip, something I had never noticed despite knowing Sindri for many years before making the film. They move their eyes and face from side to side, sometimes looking straight at us, sometimes looking up beyond the edge of frame right, then off to frame left.

The rest of the frame is filled with a hot pink colour. In this frame, the depth of field is very shallow. Sindri's eyes are in focus but even their ears are out of focus. The detail in the pink behind them is indiscernible; it seems to have folds, it could be a curtain, but it can't be verified in this shot.

Some viewers might notice that even Sindri's shirt is hot pink. It's just perceptible at the bottom of the frame. But the intimacy of the shot,

and the way that Sindri moves between eye contact and looking into the distance, is so engaging that it's hard to take your eyes off them. We stay like this, in wordless intimacy, for a long time. They purse their lips, we hear a breath, might they speak? Not quite yet.

And then: 'So, by looking somewhere else,' they say, as they look off into the distance beyond the right of frame. Already, they're alerting the audience to sight and looking, essential elements of the film. 'But actually,' they continue, immediately unsettling the viewer's orientation, 'all my attention is straight forwards ... where my chest or heart area is pointing'.

They describe an internal process here and speak directly to a split between how they are perceived from the outside 'looking somewhere else' and the internal reality of where their attention truly is. Sindri continues: 'I catch where the sort of ocular connection is and then, as soon as I can, before I forget where it is, I try to go there.' With these final words, they move their eyes to look straight down the lens.

I chose to open with this shot because it sets out, in a matter of seconds, the culmination of months of research and process. Sindri speaks directly to the experience of being visually impaired and the multi-faceted labour they undertake to perform or 'pass' as sighted. They let us into one of their 'tricks', the way they use their usable peripheral vision to plot a sightline, and fake eye contact, creating the illusion of normative, central vision, which is in fact 'not really there'. They speak about a technique of finding an ocular connection, whilst managing the perception of another person. They do so in a vernacular that refuses explicit statements, and in a register that privileges visually impaired experience, with allusions and a vocabulary that might elude a sighted viewer but may elicit recognition for those with similar visual impairments.

The sequence shares something in character with sleight-of-hand magic. It reminds me of Penn and Teller's habit of performing a trick and then showing its inner workings. What you thought was going on was *that*, but actually it was *this*. They, and Sindri, upend the myth that knowing how it's done will ruin the magic; in fact, knowing how it's done *reveals* the magic – the real and magical work of deception. The small details used to convince you of what you are seeing; the misdirection and deflection; the small margins of error and highly choreographed actions and poses. These techniques are known and valorised in the practice and performance of magic, but less so in the performance of navigating through space with reduced sight. It takes me back to the origins of the work, which coincided with meeting Sindri ...

Origin story

The project began on the terrace of a hotel bar. I was sitting with a new friend and future collaborator, Sindri Runudde, a Swedish visually impaired choreographer whom I had recently met. We had both been invited to attend a Crip Lab residency in Dusseldorf, hosted by tanzhaus nrw, specifically designed for disabled artists to be in community with each other and share practice. By day two, Sindri and I had become fast friends. Hence the hotel bar terrace ...

So the waiter arrived with two of those gravity-defying, large, bulbous, perilously long-stemmed wine glasses and placed them with a clink on the glass coffee table between us. What happened next was, to my eyes, both ordinary and extraordinary all at the same time. It was as simple as this: Sindri reached out, and with one elegant, deft motion, picked up the glass by the stem and took a sip. It was as complicated as this: through an intricate convergence of senses and environmental factors, Sindri used a combination of proprioception, acoustics, muscle memory, peripheral vision, choreography and audacity to reach out with one elegant motion and pick up the glass by the stem and take a sip.

It struck me as the most perfect magic trick I'd ever seen, performed just for me, and I held it close, cherished it and thought about it often.

Like the best magic, it was a mixture of the everyday and the impossible, following the lineage of magical props – cards, coins, glasses – all ordinary things you have in your home, doing things that these ordinary objects cannot do. Like the best magic it was beautiful, seamlessly constructed, quietly virtuosic. And like the best magic it was impossible to tell how it was done.

And like all audiences seeing magic, I was desperate to know *how* it was done. And perhaps like all audiences of magic, on some deep, subconscious, ineffable level, I already knew ...

A phrase kept repeating in my head: Blind Magic. And a specific image took hold, of a kind of twinning, between the performance of a magician and the performance of visual impairment. And this question began to gnaw away at me. What if we were able to deconstruct, understand and validate the technique, training and methodologies at work within this performance of sightedness? And hold it in the same regard as we hold the laborious, detailed, repetitive training of a skilled magician? Not all projects have such a clear origin story; some are more slippery, an idea seeping into you over time. But this one, fittingly, had a real Abracadabra flavour to it!

And so, ever since that evening on the terrace, I've been asking Sindri how it's done. Or perhaps, more truthfully, what followed was a series of conversations and time spent together talking about this, trying to work out how it is done. Why is it done? And who is it done for? Because, whilst I am in no way as trained or as virtuosic as Sindri – I am not a trained dancer as they are – it is worth noting that I have more usable vision than them. I knew this way of being in the world.

For me, I think of it as my Ginger Rogers moment, when I find myself yet again at the top of an unfamiliar staircase. For Ginger it was always those grand, sweeping double staircases curving downwards onto the Busby Berkeley-like stage filled with men in tuxedos dancing in formation. For me, it is more often those tricky staircases in clothes stores or fancy hotels, uplighting hitting the steps at awkward angles, my depth of field disabled, the terrain marbled and blended. It is there that I start my performance. If you're walking with me, you'll barely notice that I have slowed my pace; perhaps I'm pointing to a detail in our surroundings to distract you; perhaps I'm just magically slowing down time, as I give myself an extra second's grace to float my hand down elegantly for the start of the banister. My fingers barely brush it, as though in a gloved hand, and yet all finger muscles are primed and ready to pounce and grab if my centre of gravity shifts a millimetre. One foot will glide forwards, all weight still resting on the back foot planted firmly, head held high as all my attention goes down into my toe as it finds the gap of the first stair, and down I will lower my body, shift my weight, seemingly effortless, whilst my core is alert and primed. And I begin the rhythmical count, not of the steps but of the pace of them, the space between them, the rhythm, the depth, the dance I need to perform as I move down them, seemingly without a care in the world.

I've been thinking a lot about how much extra work it is ... And I often wonder or I have wondered a lot, like, is it exhausting my brain? You know ... But I also think about it the other way around. That this is like a hyper training of coordination of my body and for the brain, you know, which is what the human body is sort of made for. (Sindri Runudde)

Here I think it's important to state that I am partially sighted. I have usable vision that I rely on, and no way of really knowing what information, details, definition I might be missing. I think of myself as sitting somewhere between the sighted and non-sighted world. Visually impaired, partially sighted, a mixed identity. Not enough vision for

most things, too much vision for a straightforward diagnosis. Highly dependent on my visual sense and highly suspicious of it too. And on top of that, apparently I don't 'look' visually impaired, whatever that means. Except if you know about the sight implications caused by albinism, a condition which affects both my vision and my visual appearance. Or if you know I'm actually quite smiley really and that isn't a frown line it's a squint because the lights are too strong. And that I'm not reading the menu, rather I'm remembering the dish I already chose when I looked online before I arrived to avoid an awkward exchange with the waiter. I 'pass' easily in the world as sighted and it is a performance I have trained for all my life.

And it goes without saying that stitched into everything described above are the questions: Who is this performance for? What am I 'passing' as? And why? And that some of those answers, for myself at least, are uncomfortable. I know that I learnt many of these 'tricks' so long ago I can't remember how, that I imbibed a way of being in the sighted world that I am unconscious of. That some of those roots are from structural ableism that I encounter within society, and some are from internal ableism that I uncover within myself almost every day. And these are good questions to interrogate and pull apart. But there is also another reason for this performance – because I'm good at it. Because it delights me to have the option, and, to be clear, the privilege, to pass at will, and be capricious with my identity. And because I'm good at it, and like many things you put a lot of work into, I like to show it off from time to time.

Hands (04:24)

I would never do this kind of thing in front of an audience. It's a bit like showing off I guess. And the idea with magic is that of course on some level you're showing people something that other people can't do or don't know how it's done. But still I think it should be that the amazement lies with the audience, not with what you're doing. Yeah, I think as much as possible I try to hide this sort of direct showing off I guess. (Augusto Corrieri)

These are Augusto Corrieri's hands. Augusto is a sleight-of-hand magician, which means he specialises in close-up magic, often performing with the aid of small props and only his hands. This is not the David Copperfield vanishing woman in a cabinet vibe; this is a bit more intimate. When we

first met, I must have known of Augusto's double life as a magician, but I mainly knew him as a performance-maker and academic working in the field of contemporary performance. And yet, there were clues: the way he held himself, his posture, a precision in the way he demonstrated a thought or movement, and then of course there were his hands. Even in conversation they were elegant. Soft, articulate, expressive, but also somehow a bit reserved. Like they knew they were being watched. I became fascinated with them. With how much knowledge they had, with what they could do. And with what they could do independently of the body they were attached to. Because this is how I think of my hands, that they have a life of their own.

My hands are often off discovering the world, resting on ledges, brushing along clothes rails, reaching for something before my eyes can get there. They are my first responders and my confirmatory sense, assuring me that the world is as it seems. My tactile navigation of the world is completely interdependent with my vision, but in a way that is not conscious. It is a language fluently spoken between these two senses that becomes such an embodied shorthand it is hard to decode. The practice of magic is often the reverse, at least in the beginning. A training in separating the eye from the hand, allowing the hand to work independently of your focus, to do something fiddly, difficult, precise, and make it look easy or invisible. Like patting your head and rubbing your belly at the same time.

When I first start talking to Augusto about how he trained in magic, he talks to me about recording Saturday night TV specials on VHS as a child and repeatedly rewinding, pausing and studying the magicians performing their acts. To begin with it was a simple act of copying, following the outwards steps of a choreography of hands until the secrets of what must be happening revealed themselves. Something about this copying, through vision, but without enough vision to see what was really happening, struck a chord with my VI identity. And it became a clue to the style of the film.

In this shot we see a pair of hands slide out from under a pink velvet curtain. They fill the frame. We are as close as we can get. The hands turn themselves over, showing us there is nothing concealed within them. The fingers of the left hand close in a helix formation as the right hand circles it, rotating the hand at the wrist to give us a 360-degree view. Nothing up our sleeve here. This kind of move, Augusto tells me, is a convincer; it is a way of showing, rather than telling, an audience that there is nothing going on. You show the hand open, you show behind the box, you prove through vision that nothing is there. And yet it is there. Somehow.

Because the empty closed palm opens, and now it holds a shiny silver dollar coin, glinting in the camera lens.

I was fascinated with, in a way, how equitable magic is. That although in one way it is a highly visual medium, it is also predicated on not being able to see what is happening. That sighted members of the audience experience the perhaps rare phenomenon of not being able to believe their eyes. And how magic forces you to lean in, to get up close, to try to see the invisible. As a partially sighted person this desire to get up close was something I wanted to lean into in the aesthetics of the film. Hands, faces, eyes are shot almost uncomfortably close. Sound is recorded with such proximity that we can hear the performers purse their lips. Hands, objects, rabbits move in and out of focus, textures blur but we can almost hear the heartbeat.

But it is only afterwards, as I review the edit, that I see that the visual identity of the film is in some ways the aesthetics of my visual impairment. Simple, almost minimal composition, vivid high-contrast colour, shapes and shadows, and a proximity which allows you to see the pores, fine hairs and intimate detail of the hands at work. I realise I favour a very haptic, tactile style of cinematography, often with the camera hand-held, close up and roving across the subject. Scanning the scene like my eyes, less concerned with clarity, precise focus or convention, more concerned with detail, intimacy and the feel of something. I think this is because when I use my visual senses my tactile senses are stirred. That they have a kind of kinaesthetic empathy, where looking at hands touching soft velvet creates a mild synesthetic reaction within myself and my fingers tingle in anticipation of the touch stimulus. It's a guide for how I want the film to feel, or, perhaps more aptly, I want to make a film you can feel.

Cards (07:06) and rabbits (11:38)

One of the shortest routes to feeling and emotion I experience is sound – music, yes of course – but also the everyday ordinary sounds of my environment. The sound of the teaspoon against the cup downstairs as I hear my husband making our morning tea. The low growl of the washing machine on its final spin. The quiet after the shower turns off and the bathroom is full of soft, steamy acoustics and leftover droplets hitting tile. These sounds locate me in the world, they comfort me, they give colour and detail to supplement what I see around me, and, for reasons I do not entirely understand, they make me feel things.

A similar conversation sprang up on an online forum circa 2007, giving name to what we now call ASMR.

A 21-year-old registered user with the handle 'okaywhatever' submitted a post describing having experienced a specific sensation since childhood, comparable to that stimulated by tracing fingers along the skin, yet often triggered by seemingly random and unrelated non-haptic events, such as 'watching a puppet show' or 'being read a story'.

Replies to this post indicated that a significant number of other people had experienced the sensation described by 'okaywhatever', also in response to witnessing mundane events.¹

ASMR is a tingling sensation that usually begins on the scalp and moves down the back of the neck and upper spine, commonly triggered by specific auditory or visual stimuli. Some people experience it, others don't, and the sounds that create triggers vary from person to person. But some common ones are whispering voices, mouth sounds, tapping, turning pages of a book, crinkly tissue paper, hair brushing or rainfall.

I've often wondered if my interest in ASMR and the sound of ordinary things is related to my visual impairment. I know that, akin to touching things, I listen for things, as a confirmatory sense: that I'm more likely to assess the soil in my garden on the feel and sound of the trowel slicing through than on its granular appearance; that I only listen to music through headphones in my home or along familiar routes because in unfamiliar terrain I need to hear the environment around me. And whilst I'm deeply suspicious of those almost trite adages that if one sense is reduced then another increases, I'm aware that I all too often catch myself turning my head to check the road only after I've already stepped off the curb, having already listened for car sounds. Either way, I'm curious about what sound can offer as an aid to vision or lack of; what it might be able to do.

I know that I have a pull towards objects, that I like to be in relation to them, and that I have an almost pathological obsession with tidiness and things being in their proper place. Which serves as not just an aesthetic choice but an access mode. I like to handle objects, to turn them over in my hands, and have familial relationships to specific items in my home. And I have quite specific metrics about what makes a good ladle or pen or handle and what doesn't. I wondered if the same specificity applied to magic props, also historically chosen for their ordinariness: handkerchiefs, coins, cards, all things often found

on the person of a Victorian gentleman. I was fascinated to learn from Augusto about the varying weights of different coins, old silver dollars and halfpennies, and the impact these marginal differences had on what you could and couldn't do with them. How his preference for specific decks of cards relied on the paper stock, the finish, the grip, the slip, the sound.

With ASMR I'm fascinated by this convergence of the senses, this mix of vision, touch and sound creating this internal body sensation: where sound feels like touch or touch creates visual images. And I'm curious about how this slippage across the senses can be used as an aesthetic and an access tool in art making, particularly for a VI audience. In *Passing*, I'm experimenting with how ASMR can function like an additional audio description, creating extra information and shortcuts for the listener to understand what is happening onscreen.

A valued collaborator in this research is the sound designer Julie Rose Bower, who specialises in ASMR sound design and whose films *ASMR at the V&A* turned me on to the potential that ASMR sound capture has to allow for this kind of 'close looking'. For *Passing* we chose to close mic everything, placing specialist microphones much closer to the action than the camera tells us we are, an absolute no-no in conventional filmmaking. In the edit, we chose to place these ordinary sounds high in the mix, at a juicy volume with as much clarity as we could. To give precedence to the sound of things, over the look of things. To create in the viewer the sensation of leaning in and to pull the image towards us through sound. Because although film is a medium that traditionally puts primacy on vision, a conventional filmmaker's adage is that poor visuals with good sound is much more forgivable by an audience than poor sound with good visuals. Here we prioritise the sound of things and try to get as close as we can.

In the shot where Augusto is shuffling cards, we are as much working with the pace, rhythm and sound of the footage as we are with the visual picture. We know that sound without seeing it, we hear the click and concertina of the cards as they fan through his hands. We could have added an AD voiceover putting the image into words, but I felt it wasn't necessary. In fact I wondered what would be lost by doing so.

There are times when I resent traditional AD, where it feels like too much work. When I don't want to have to translate words into images or have images translated into words. There's a strange kind of insistence sometimes in the words that feels like they are forcing you 'to see', and that is only one sensory mode in which I understand the world. In this

film, I wanted to privilege the others, to – where possible – leave the AD as audio, to let ASMR sound capture do the heavy lifting and let sound and image speak directly to each other. I'm interested in trying to take the shortest route of translation possible and, for those that feel ASMR, offer an embodied mode of listening which becomes sensation, feeling and images. It feels like an exciting and pleasurable access offer.

It's partly why the rabbits are in the film, for pleasure. Because they sound so good. Because they are like natural ASMR triggers, all scratching, tapping, nuzzling, sniffing, mouthy, purring, pleasure sounds. They sound how they feel, and they fill the film with feeling.

Curtain (12:30)

For the final scene I wanted to speak directly to the things that occupy me most about magic and visual impairment – that things disappear, that we cannot trust our eyes, that perception is constructed and can therefore amaze us. And, of course, what's a film about magic without a vanishing trick?

In fact, it is an homage to one of the earliest examples of film we have – *The Vanishing Lady* by Georges Méliès, shot in 1896. In the original, and in this closing scene, we see a person draped in a curtain vanish before our very eyes. And like the original, this version is also achieved by a combination of mime, physicality, rudimentary camera trickery and editing. If you look closely, it is possible to tell how it is done. And yet it tricks the eye. Perhaps we still retain the ability to amaze ourselves, if only for a moment, if we suspend our certainty and lean in to the mystery of how we perceive the world around us.

Note

- 1 Wikipedia entry for ASMR, accessed February 2025.

Reimagining inclusive museum audio description: what is it, who creates it, and who is it for?

Rachel Hutchinson and Alison Eardley

Many museums are striving to become agents of social change within their communities. However, they often struggle to provide basic access to collections for people with disabilities. We argue that audio-descriptive interpretation can provide museums with a tool for enhancing the museum experience for all visitors, at once broadening participation and supporting social change. Traditionally, audio description (AD) is created by sighted people for blind AD users, defining AD as ‘access’ and excluding blind users from its creation. However, recent projects have challenged this understanding of the definition and purpose of AD by exploring new and innovative forms, and more inclusive approaches to AD creation.

Grounded in co-creation by blind, partially blind and sighted people, new approaches emphasise the importance of subjectivity and experience in AD. The repositioning of museum and art AD from ‘access’ towards inclusive interpretation raises questions of who creates AD, for whom, and for what purpose. Such questions are of particular importance in light of emerging AI innovations which may take AD development in new and hitherto unexpected directions.

Agents of social change

Museums and galleries are responding to a changing world by questioning their identity and authority as cultural institutions. Historically, museums permitted the masses to encounter precious objects and great works of art from an appropriately reverential distance, holding audiences at arm’s length.¹ For many museums, engaging audiences has become a key

focus.² Increasingly, this is driven by an active desire to strengthen societal connectivity and belonging, by helping visitors feel more connected to their cultural heritage, to each other and to themselves. As civic organisations, museums and galleries have a social responsibility to impact positively on people's lives.³ Government policy in the UK defines a need for museums to be agents of social change,⁴ and sector organisations have launched campaigns such as 'Museums Change Lives' to drive impact on audiences and communities.⁵ One positive impact can be the promotion of visitor wellbeing. Wellbeing is understood as a complex construct that can encompass personal growth and self-realisation,⁶ engagement in life and activities, developing positive relationships, and having interesting and perspective-changing experiences,⁷ as well as enhancing life satisfaction and positive emotions.⁸ Museums and galleries are increasingly being socially prescribed worldwide to encourage wellbeing in visitors.⁹

The potential for museums to have a positive impact on society is arguably more important than ever in a world facing fast-paced and troubled change in terms of climate change, wealth inequality, gender equality and species extinction.¹⁰ However, for societal change to be possible, museums need to be talking to all sectors of society. Museums continue to struggle to provide equitable access to some groups within society. Visitors who are blind or partially blind (BPB) typically have only partial, infrequent and often segregated access to museums and galleries. AD, generally regarded in museums and galleries as a niche access provision, consists of pre-recorded or live tours which have been designed to meet the anticipated needs of BPB people. AD typically describes the visual content of exhibitions, but can also include touch, smell and sound descriptions. As museums and galleries challenge themselves to engage audiences in new and impactful ways, practitioners and researchers have reflected on how AD can keep pace with museum innovation, such as experiential rather than object-led exhibitions.¹¹

Building on this question, we wish to position AD as a forerunner to, rather than a follower of, innovation in an activist museum. We contend that, through interrogating our understanding of what AD is, who it is for and who creates it, AD can operate as a creative driver of change in museums and galleries as they strive to fulfil their potential as a force for good.¹² However, before we rethink our understanding of AD, we consider the ableist and disablist biases that are often implicit in museum practice and society more broadly. We argue that museums and galleries should take AD seriously as a form of inclusive interpretation that can help them better engage and serve their communities, providing an opportunity to lead by example, as agents of social change.

Addressing ableism and disablism

The belief that museums and galleries have an ethical and moral responsibility to drive social change rests on the assumption that museums can play an important role in shaping our social understanding of the world. As we go about our daily lives we are exposed to biases and stereotypes in our environment. Disablism describes the bias, prejudice or discrimination against disabled people. Ableism describes the bias, prejudice or discrimination in favour of 'able' people. These two are clearly related, but there are likely to be differences in the ways they are enacted. In the case of disability, within the UK at least, both of these biases are underpinned by a dominant social narrative: the medical model positions disability as an individual impairment, disorder or deficit that needs to be fixed or cured.¹³ Disability becomes an individual tragedy. Because disability is conceived of as a flaw within an individual, society is not automatically responsible for meeting the needs of those individuals. This leads to negative stereotypes of disabled people as suffering or dependent upon others. In contrast, disabled people who lead happy, successful lives are often portrayed as 'overcoming' their disability or as having some kind of superpower.¹⁴ These stereotypes lead to biases that are replicated and repeated throughout society, meaning they can contribute to people's understanding of disability, whether they are consciously aware of this or not.

These biases are likely to be perpetuated by our cognitive processes. Humans are known to engage in 'social categorisation'. We have limited attentional capacity, and, in order to preserve these attentional resources, we have a tendency to 'group' an individual that we encounter into a pre-existing mental framework or understanding.¹⁵ These processes of social categorisation generally take place below the level of conscious awareness. Disability, along with other social categories such as age, gender and race, is one aspect which may be subjected to this kind of automatic and unreflective social processing. Whilst this type of grouping helps us preserve our limited attentional capacity, it can lead us to neglect information at the level of the individual, in favour of these pre-existing cognitive frameworks. These frameworks may be influenced by dominant societal biases and stereotypes, meaning we risk drawing on preconceived ideas or even prejudices. These types of implicit biases and stereotypes are exactly the type of societal thinking that museums have the opportunity to expose and challenge. They can do this through the art and objects they choose to exhibit, and the interpretation they create in order to tell their stories, both of which can work together to

create new and alternative narratives of disability. In this way, museums can make a difference.

Combating ableism and disablism

One area where museums can make a difference is through challenging the systemic ableist biases that have marginalised communities. Qualitative analysis of visitors' responses to museum visits indicates that visitors will construct meaning during a visit, and museums can support that process by making explicit connections between exhibitions and societal trends and events.¹⁶ This potential to influence thinking comes with a significant responsibility. The role of museums as a teller of stories and interpreter of our collective human cultural heritage can never be a neutral one.¹⁷ Indeed, all decisions taken in museums, from which collection items to exhibit through to how to position them, what to communicate to visitors about them and how to market the exhibition, will impact on the experience that visitors will have. With this responsibility, it is important to acknowledge that the implicit biases that underpin the broader societal understanding of disability are likely to be present within museums. As such, the representation of disabled people in museums may be stereotypical, skewed or missing altogether.¹⁸

Museums may be keen to foreground stories of disabled people in their exhibitions, but may be held back by a lack of expertise within curatorial or exhibition teams, and/or confidence in doing so.¹⁹ Disabled people are underrepresented within museum workforces, although programmes such as *Curating for Change in the UK*²⁰ are taking direct action to address this imbalance. Richard Sandell and Jocelyn Dodd's 2010 research revealed anxiety among museum professionals about causing offence, for example through misuse of language in interpretation, which may act as a constraint on innovative practice in terms of disability representation.²¹ However, by working in equitable collaboration with people with lived experience of disability, museums have an opportunity to both provide a voice to disabled communities and create museum environments that are truly inclusive. By leading on anti-ableism in this way, museums could challenge public perceptions of disability and facets of disabled identities. This could impact positively on the lives of disabled people and society more broadly.

Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell highlight the lessons to be learnt from work with other marginalised communities in museums

(for example LGBTQ+) and the need to have conversations about difficult and potentially uncomfortable topics.²² They also emphasise the ‘immortality of inaction’.²³ The potential for museums to influence social perceptions and narratives regarding disability is promising, with research already demonstrating that art engagement can drive specific relational outcomes such as increased empathy.²⁴ Museums therefore have a moral impetus to tell new stories, in new ways, collaborating with previously neglected audiences to do so. By tackling this challenge head-on, they stand to develop richer and more nuanced understandings of disability in society at large.

It should go without saying that, in order to lead on anti-ableism, museums must not only tell the stories of disabled people, they must also ensure that they are telling all stories in inclusive, accessible and ethical ways. However, access is rarely positioned at the heart of an interpretation strategy. Museum practice is underpinned by the ableist biases of the medical model that assume an able majority, with disability being the individual tragedy of a minority of individuals. Access is regarded as a niche, ‘add-on’ service, and is all too often considered after the exhibition design is complete. This practice is in line with the medical model which dominates societal thinking about disability, but this model has been challenged by the social model of disability. The social model makes a crucial distinction between impairment and disability, and argues that individuals are only disabled because society disables them by failing to provide an environment within which they can thrive. Crucially, this model makes the organisations and structures within society responsible for disability, and therefore makes society responsible for change.

The social model provides an important challenge to disablism, but it does not deconstruct ableism.²⁵ Considered within the context of museums, it does not challenge the assumption that ‘abled’ people can access not only museum buildings but also museum collections without any further ‘access’ support than is currently provided. However, drawing on evidence from psychology, museum studies, translation studies and critical disability studies, researchers have contended that the assumption that vision is both necessary and sufficient to gain access to museum collections is flawed.²⁶ We should abandon the false dichotomy of abled and disabled, and acknowledge that everyone sits on a multidimensional spectrum of access needs, whereby access is conceived of within multiple strands, including physical, sensory, emotional, cultural and cognitive, and each individual will sit at a different point within each of those individual spectrums of access need.²⁷ In line with this framework, traditional conceptions of museum AD have been reimagined as a form

of inclusive audio interpretation, which serves as a tool to combat both ableism and disablism within museum practice.

What is museum audio description?

AD practice grew out of a positive desire to broaden participation for BPB audiences by giving them access to modes of communication that have traditionally assumed a sighted audience. This led early advocates to describe AD as ‘the visual made verbal’.²⁸ However, these early conceptualisations of AD are now being replaced within museum practice, as we better understand what AD is and can be.²⁹ Considering first what AD is seeking to communicate, we have argued elsewhere that ‘visual’ is a highly reductive way to describe the ‘source text’ of a museum experience.³⁰ By limiting the museum experience to solely ‘visual’ perceptual information, the traditional model of AD risks neglecting the rich multisensory, emotional and personal experience that museums are seeking to evoke in their visitors. We consider that the notion of the ‘source text’ for museum AD should be expanded beyond the visual elements of artworks and collections. It should seek to address the wider museum or art experience, namely the experience of the visit itself, in all its sensory, aesthetic, emotional, cognitive and social complexity.³¹ In support of this, research has suggested that both sighted and BPB visitors prefer shorter and more interpretative descriptions³² that support emotional engagement.³³

Traditional conceptions of what AD seeks to communicate also rest on the mistaken assumption that the ‘visual’ experience is essentially ‘objective’ or neutral. This has fostered the expectation that describers should describe ‘objectively’, as guidelines for museums and visual art have predominantly upheld the overarching principle of objectivity.³⁴ In fact, differences in the way we perceive sensory information, and in the way we pay attention to that information, mean that there cannot be one ‘right’ way to experience museum collections.³⁵ Consequently, a fully sighted person can only ever provide their own individual description of an item in a museum collection. That is not to say that there would not be similarities in descriptions, but it does nevertheless mean that description is always going to be a subjective process.³⁶ As audio describers each bring their own individual context, schemas, memories and experiences to their work, AD becomes a ‘lens through which we may view human meaning-making in action’.³⁷ It is precisely this emphasis on the variability of human experience that stands to enrich and develop AD creation.

Who creates museum AD?

Up until now, traditional AD practice has predominantly minimised rather than embraced this variability of human experience. This is apparent both in terms of who typically creates AD and in the extent to which information about their authorship and positionality is available. In the UK, AD recorded guides are generally prepared by sighted audio describers, often with input from sighted museum and curatorial staff. Audio describers will work with curators to select artworks or objects for description, generally describing a few of the many available in any given exhibition. The audio describer will spend time in the gallery, or remotely, studying the appearance of the objects, and will then prepare their descriptions, receiving feedback and input from the museum and sometimes from other audio describers who act as editors.

Once a draft is available, BPB consultants may be asked to review the guide and check it for usability. For BPB audiences who use the guide, there is generally no information provided about this back-end process. Audio describers are not usually named, and their positionality is, for the most part, invisible. This contrasts starkly with interlingual translation, where a translator's preface not only provides the name of the translator and their background and experience, but will also likely explain their process, allowing the translator to assert and define their presence within the text.

Live AD tours will be prepared and run either by a professional audio describer, sometimes in conjunction with museum staff/curators, or by museum staff trained in audio description. The physical presence of the audio describer stands to elucidate their process: AD users can identify who has put the tour together and, to some extent, how. However, both live AD tours and recorded AD are still almost exclusively created by sighted people for BPB audiences. Indeed, the status quo in museum/arts AD is that BPB visitors are typically involved only as test audiences, if they are involved at all: they are not generally invited to co-design the AD experience.³⁸ In this sense, traditional definitions of AD are arguably complicit with the ableist bias that assumes that (full) vision provides a privileged experience of museum collections. This is because AD has also been underpinned by the broader societal understanding of blindness as a loss, an impairment or a defect. Hannah Thompson argues that we should talk about blindness gain, and not sight loss.³⁹ She argues that living as a blind person in a world designed for sight stimulates creativity and inventiveness, underpinned by multisensory experiencing. She argues that blind living is an art, and that the tools created by and

for blind people have the potential to enhance the lived experience of non-blind people.

New approaches to AD are actively rejecting the ableist biases that dismiss the experiences of artworks (and museum collections more broadly) of anyone who is not fully sighted. They seek to drive democratisation and multivocality in museums by centring the creation of audio-descriptive interpretation on groups of blind, partially blind and sighted co-creators.⁴⁰ Co-creation of AD can bring together blind, partially blind and sighted audiences, audio describers, artists and museum professionals. This approach gives multiple stakeholders the opportunity to describe, and multiple subjective responses can inform the development of the interpretation. The W-ICAD (Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description) model developed by Alison Eardley et al. creates a blueprint for museums to draw on in the co-creation of AD.⁴¹ Crucially, this model is based on a collaborative process between museum professionals and researchers.

Co-created AD also helps to address the question of authorship in museum and art AD by bringing previously unheard voices into the museum,⁴² lessening the dominance of the curatorial and professional audio describer voices. As co-creation of AD challenges the prioritisation of vision and embraces the multivocality of co-creators, authorship becomes more democratic. Crucially, co-creation not only helps to recalibrate the balance of power within authorship but also leads museums closer to true collaboration with audiences, moving beyond mere involvement – emphasising action, agency, shared learning and experience. These issues have been recognised in the broader AD field. Elena Di Giovanni emphasises that the co-creation process is not just about producing a product; it is an inclusive experience in itself, promoting the opportunity for people to learn from each other and their experiences.⁴³ Di Giovanni's study with blind and sighted children showed that co-creation of AD led to more creative, subjective and character-focused description, hinting at the myriad of new creative possibilities that co-creation of AD might ignite. The positive experience described by Di Giovanni is mirrored in the experiences of co-creators involved in the creation of AD within the W-ICAD model.⁴⁴

Who listens to museum AD?

It is equally important to reimagine who AD can benefit. In museums and galleries, AD can serve as a form of 'guided looking' for people

with sight, encouraging them to spend longer looking and guiding their visual attention.⁴⁵ As such, AD can be repositioned as a form of inclusive interpretation. This aligns with what Hannah Thompson terms ‘blindness gain’.⁴⁶ This notion is borne out by empirical research on museum collections, which has demonstrated that AD has memorability benefits for sighted people, and that AD is enjoyed by sighted people in a museum⁴⁷ context. Kim Starr also notes that potential applications of AD include pedagogy (for example, developing visual literacy), second language learners and people with autism.⁴⁸

We have argued that museums and galleries should take AD seriously as inclusive interpretation for blind and sighted people, and that modes of AD creation can and should be varied and diversified. However, we are not arguing that the perspectives and knowledge of the curator, and/or potentially the artist, should have no place in audio provision for audiences. While some listeners may prefer a description that limits explicit opinion and interpretation, others will actively want to ‘know’ the curator’s perspective on an artwork.⁴⁹

Subjectivity in AD may be received differently by audiences, depending on individual expectations and preferences, and on regional AD traditions – currently, subjectivity is generally less accepted in the US than in Europe.⁵⁰ As empirical research starts to build a more nuanced picture of the forms that museum and gallery AD can take, it is important to keep the focus on offering choice to audiences. New forms of AD will be enjoyed and preferred by some but not others, and there will always be audiences who prefer to engage with traditional forms of AD.⁵¹ We are therefore in agreement with Bree Hadley and Janice Rieger that co-creation is at the centre of offering choice to AD users.⁵²

Generative AI

It is important to acknowledge that the shift in museum AD practice towards a more subjective, equitable approach for both creators and audiences is occurring alongside an exponential growth in the capabilities and quality of generative AI. Co-created AD has both time and cost implications. A 2022 report from the European Commission highlighted that AI has the potential to feed into audience engagement activities by reimagining and reinterpreting collections.⁵³ It is likely that the possibilities for generative AI to contribute to AD production will have expanded and evolved by the time this text is published. However, some initial opportunities and considerations are already apparent. Many museums

have millions of artworks or objects available to search and view online, and producing human-generated description of works in this number is an expensive and time-consuming endeavour, particularly if those human-generated descriptions will be co-created. It is important to consider whether generative AI could and/or should replace human endeavour.

Generative AI tools such as Chat GPT are increasingly being recognised as conversational partners that can support creative writing processes. These tools are already being used to write articles, novels, poems, web content and computer code, calling the nature of human authorship into question.⁵⁴ In her exploration of the potential for AI to help authors overcome writer's block, Iona Gilbert contends that generative AI can overcome the threat of the 'blank page', generate limitless ideas and unpredictable responses, and even provide a means for authors to find a way in to writing about topics they find difficult or uncomfortable. Thus, in the traditional model of AD production, where the audio describer(s) writes a text, generative AI could come into play. For example, AI could generate vocabulary that might enrich a description, or stimulate new writing styles – 're-write this description in a comic style', 'put this description into verse', or simply be used as a tool for creative play: 'write me a description of the Mona Lisa from the perspective of a mouse in the gallery'.

However, some aspects of AI give pause for thought. Concerns surrounding the ethics of AI-generated material, and biases within it, need to be front of mind. In her consideration of the implications of AI for the cultural heritage community, Susan Hazan emphasises that image and text generators are trained on huge amounts of legacy text and image data.⁵⁵ Not only does this raise issues of copyright, but human biases and misconceptions are likely to 'pre-pollute' massive data sets. AI-driven image generation has already been shown to foreground disturbing stereotypes and biases, and even to risk the erasure of some groups of people.⁵⁶ It therefore seems to us, at the time of writing, that generative AI could be an exciting tool for creative play in traditional AD, but its use should be mediated by understanding and awareness of the dark side of its ethical position.

However, the picture for co-created AD is very different. Models such as W-ICAD draw on the very positionality of participants that AI could stand to erase.⁵⁷ During co-creation sessions, participants respond to the artwork or object under discussion and their reflections are recorded, later forming the basis for a co-created description. The emphasis in workshop sessions is on conversation, not 'writing by

committee', as verbal exchanges are found to be a more enjoyable, productive and pragmatic method of co-creation. In these conversations, participants are invited to share their thoughts, associations, experiences, even personal memories, which then later come through in the AD written text. AI simply cannot replace the human contribution in this instance. Nevertheless, we would argue that generative AI's real potential lies in its ability to create extended alt-text descriptions. Although these descriptions would be limited for all the reasons described above, they would nevertheless provide some form of access to millions of collection items that were previously entirely inaccessible.

The future of museum AD

We have argued that by taking a small step towards inclusive co-created audio description, museums will be posing a radical challenge to the systemic ableist and disablist practices that are prevalent not only within museums but within society at large. Inclusive co-created AD recognises the importance of the emotional and personal experience that museums are seeking to encourage in visitors. It challenges the ableist prioritisation of vision within museum experience, and provides blind, partially blind and sighted museum visitors with audio-descriptive interpretation to enhance access to museum collections.

We are not suggesting that it is feasible, or perhaps even necessary, for museums and galleries to run co-creation workshops for every piece of recorded AD or for every live tour they offer. Generative AI does potentially have a role to play in making museums accessible in a very different way to inclusive co-created AD. While AI is not likely to support and encourage interest in people who are not already engaged with a collection for a particular reason, it would provide any blind or partially blind individual who is already interested enough to search an online collection, or to seek out a collection item in a museum or gallery context, with a level of access that they would be unlikely to otherwise have.

It is highly unlikely, however, that AI could replace the benefits of co-creation. Co-created AD offers audiences new choices in terms of the nature of the finished product and how it has been produced. The process of co-creation itself should drive the democratisation of AD, by inviting new audiences to participate and bringing people together to share and define the experience of responding to collections. Museums and curators will need to upskill themselves in terms of the co-design process,⁵⁸ but models such as W-ICAD provide a framework within which they can do that.

Ongoing commitment will be needed to reach and develop audiences to participate in co-creation: it should be an iterative process, not a one-off event.⁵⁹ Crucially, co-created interpretation will need to be embraced at an institutional level, in order to ensure that those carrying out this process have the time and resources needed to make it successful. It is important to acknowledge that while moving towards inclusive AD will begin to address the ableist biases that have privileged vision in art museums, it does not solve the problem of limited representation of disabled artists within collections and exhibitions.⁶⁰ This needs to be addressed alongside a reimagining of AD practice.

Nevertheless, the potential gains are innovative, forward-looking and exciting for audiences, practitioners and museums alike: more democratic and participatory relationships between museums and their audiences, breaking down social barriers, diversifying the voices in museum interpretation, and inclusive, enjoyable and creative experiences for participants and AD users. As AD builds on its 'access' remit and moves towards its future as inclusive interpretation, providing and enhancing access to collections for diverse audiences, it can be ambitious in its aims to drive an activist, anti-ableist and anti-disablist agenda.

Notes

- 1 Candlin 2010.
- 2 See, for instance, Lumley 1988; Vergo [1989] 2017.
- 3 Janes and Sandell 2019.
- 4 Newman and McClean 2006; Mendoza 2017.
- 5 Museums Association 2013.
- 6 Dragija and Jelinčić 2022.
- 7 Cotter and Pawelski 2021.
- 8 Dragija and Jelinčić 2022.
- 9 Cotter and Pawelski 2021.
- 10 Janes and Sandell 2019.
- 11 Taylor and Perego 2020.
- 12 Janes and Sandell 2019.
- 13 Withers 2012.
- 14 Withers 2012.
- 15 Smith and Zárate 1992.
- 16 Sandell 2007.
- 17 Janes and Sandell 2019; Museums Association 2013.
- 18 Kudlick and Luby 2019.
- 19 Sandell and Dodd 2010.
- 20 Fox 2025.
- 21 Sandell and Dodd 2010.
- 22 Janes and Sandell 2019.
- 23 Janes and Sandell 2019, 29.
- 24 Cotter and Pawelski 2021.
- 25 See Withers 2012.

- 26 Eardley and Jones 2025; Eardley, Jones, Bywood et al. 2025; Eardley et al. 2025; Eardley et al. 2022.
- 27 Eardley and Jones 2025; Eardley et al. 2022.
- 28 Snyder 2014.
- 29 See also Greco 2022.
- 30 Hutchinson and Eardley 2019.
- 31 Hutchinson and Eardley 2019.
- 32 Szarkowska et al. 2016, cited in Luque and Soler Gallego 2019.
- 33 Wang et al. 2020.
- 34 Hutchinson and Eardley 2020; Luque Colmenero and Soler Gallego 2020.
- 35 See Eardley and Jones 2025.
- 36 Eardley and Jones 2025.
- 37 Starr 2022, 476.
- 38 Hadley and Rieger 2021.
- 39 Thompson 2017.
- 40 Chottin and Thompson 2021; Eardley and Jones 2025; Hadley and Rieger 2021.
- 41 Eardley, Jones, Bywood et al. 2025.
- 42 French 2019.
- 43 Di Giovanni 2018.
- 44 Eardley, Jones, Bywood et al. 2025.
- 45 Eardley et al. 2017.
- 46 Thompson 2017.
- 47 Hutchinson and Eardley 2021; Hutchinson and Eardley 2023.
- 48 Starr 2022.
- 49 See, for instance, Hadley and Rieger 2021.
- 50 Hutchinson and Eardley 2020.
- 51 Eardley and Jones 2025; Eardley et al. 2022; Hutchinson and Eardley 2021; Hutchinson and Eardley 2023; Wang et al. 2020.
- 52 Hadley and Rieger 2021.
- 53 European Commission 2022, 148.
- 54 Gilbert 2023.
- 55 Hazan 2023.
- 56 Hazan 2023; Johnson 2022.
- 57 Eardley, Jones, Bywood et al. 2025.
- 58 Hadley and Rieger 2021.
- 59 Connolly and Rea 2015.
- 60 Sandell and Dodd 2010.

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20

Describing anarchy

Matthew Cock and Hannah Thompson

Plus l'artiste se penche avec impartialité sur le détail, plus l'anarchie augmente. Qu'il soit myope ou presbyte, toute hiérarchie et toute subordination disparaissent.

Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne'
(1863, 377).

The more the artist concentrates impartially on detail, the more anarchy increases. Whether he is short-sighted or long-sighted, any hierarchy and any subordination completely disappear.

(Translation by authors)

She:

They are two friends. They are cis, white, middle aged and middle class. They are comfortable in the walls of the art gallery where they find themselves. They both come with inherited and acquired cultural capital. They present to you here the work of their minds and the work of their bodies. They share with you the fruits of their labour. They are a partially blind woman and a non-blind man who share a collaborative description of what they saw. It's not perfect, it's not complete; some of it they brought with them, and some they found afterwards. They sit about 2 metres away from the painting. He describes a sunlit grassy field. There are also wildflowers, but he doesn't mention them.

Far

He:

The wildflowers are invisible to her. The field stretches back to a high, tree-lined horizon which curves gently downwards left and right: as if the scene is so vast that they are witnessing the curvature of the earth itself. Several long furrows or paths run across the width of the painting. They too curve downwards on the right side of the painting. This is the largest orchard that ever existed. The space between trees is so huge; it appears to have no boundary, no hedgerows, fences or other markings of property. This is common ground.

She:

One of the apple trees stands just off centre in the foreground. Measured against the human figures in the picture he guesses it represents a tree about 5 metres high, with a bare trunk that rises before a brief kink ends in leafy branches spread wide across the width of the picture, concealing much of the narrow strip of sky.

The sun must be high: the shadows are quite small and there is a pinkish tinge to the bright, dazzling afternoon light. A group of young, healthy people work together in the tree's shade. He doesn't tell her that their clothes are clean, plain, hand-made and loose-fitting. A man reaches up, head tilted back as he pokes with a long thin pole to shake the ripe fruit from the branches high over his head. Two women bend at the waist to pick the fruit from the ground and place them in baskets. A third stands and watches the others at work, her hand resting on her chin in thought. Behind her are two baskets, full to the brim; the taller one would be too heavy for one person to carry when full.

He:

Two trees in the middle distance are the only ones that stand between the tree in the foreground and those that line the horizon. Their profile is the same: tall, smooth-trunked, with a spread of branches too high for a person's reach. Under one stands a white horse harnessed to a covered cart. It will soon make its way across the vast space. They will lift the basket onto the cart and take it to the market. They will keep what they need and sell the surplus to others at a fair price for their labour; these others will in turn bring their surplus to sell.

She asks, 'Can you see the apples?' It is difficult to make out individual apples from where they are seated. They move to stand closer to the painting.

Near

She:

What initially resolve as orchard, sky, branches, leaves, apples, people, clothes, horse and cart are in fact thousands of small, regular dabs of colour applied with a brush. One dab has no higher value than another. All are equal. The painter's work in the field was as repetitive and rewarding as the pickers' labour. He did not seek to exploit these workers. Colours are grouped to produce a shimmering harmony. There's green, pink, orange, blue, red. The trunk of the tree is green, blue and purple, while the grassy orchard floor is made up of green, orange and pink; with red, blue and violet added in the shadows. The colours blend and shimmer, but details disappear in a haze as they get close, and they lose the sense of the scene.

The sky is a wash of pale blue covered with white and cream dabs. Looking through the foliage, into the sky, the boundaries are hazy.

He:

She asks again if he can see an apple. Aside from three or four in the top of the tall basket, it's difficult to make out the individual fruit. There are many red dabs of paint in the shadow cast by the tree, and in its leaves, but as they lean in, they can't make out many whole apples.

These apples aren't those of temptation, or of beauty or wisdom. They aren't the apples of Paris or the Hesperides. Neither is this the biblical Garden of Eden, the scene of the human fall from innocence to the knowledge of sin, misery and death, that followed from Eve's eating of an apple. No, this boundless orchard is an anarchist's vision of the future. This would surprise most people in the gallery with them: this picture is calm – it does not show the violence or disorder that most people associate with anarchy. It shows a vision of the world after the revolution, where there is no private property and no hoarded wealth, and there are no social classes. A world where family and extended groups engage in productive and fulfilling work, without exploitation or overworking, and within their own control.

She:

A security guard approaches and tells them not to get too close or they will set off the alarms. **He** apologises and retreats.

He:

She laughs at their own tiny moment of anarchy. Glancing again from a distance, lots of apples show themselves. How could they not have noticed them close up?

Translator's postscript

The artist is Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), a Sephardic Jew of French-Portuguese origin, who was born in the port town of Charlotte Amalie on the Caribbean island of St Thomas. Then a colony of Denmark, it is now one of the US Virgin Islands. The painting is *La Cueillette des pommes* (1887–8) (*Apple Harvest*), now in the collection of Dallas Museum of Art.¹ They encountered the painting when they visited the exhibition *Pissarro: Father of Impressionism* at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford in May 2022.²

The piece of writing above is a co-created, subjective audio description, a transcript of the text we presented to delegates at the *Beyond the Visual* conference at Wellcome Collection on 21 October 2022. The references to 'She' and 'He' indicate how we divided the text between us as we read it aloud.

Much has been written recently about what is at stake when a work of art is translated into words. Blind, partially blind and non-blind gallery visitors, museum professionals, allies, advocates and academics have expressed varied opinions about their preferences and recommendations.³ Some people prefer the objective 'What you see is what you say' model, while others argue that objectivity is never possible because the words we use carry a wide and varied range of denotative and connotative meanings. Some people believe that a sighted expert or specialist is best placed to capture the artwork's nuances in language; others prefer to hear a range of voices representing different positionalities including disability, race, gender and class.⁴ Unlike the standard audio descriptions generally favoured by most museums and art galleries, our audio description asks what happens when we embrace the subjective potential of an experiential dialogic encounter with a painting. Rather than presenting an apparently objective and authoritative account, our work foregrounds the plurality of responses to art, while simultaneously insisting, like Baudelaire, that all ways of seeing – blind, partially blind and non-blind – are equally valid.

We started our description in the gallery. We set ourselves the challenge of putting our perceptions of the painting into words without

initially knowing anything about the painting except the name of the artist and something of his anarchist politics. We walked and talked, moving closer and further away to reflect the reality that a beholder's relationship with a painting is never static. We recorded our conversation and used a transcript as the starting point for a collaborative writing process. Like the artist himself, we encountered the painting from many angles, and in our references to 'Far' and 'Near' we have attempted to capture the ways the painting changes as we move around it in our description. References to our physical presence in the gallery emphasise that visual to verbal translation is a process of communication rather than a static, solitary or straightforward act. We show how we communicate, with each other and with the painting itself, as well as with other protagonists in the gallery.

Our translation aims to capture in words something of how it feels to encounter a painting for the first time. We have tried to recreate the whole gallery experience, so that any blind, partially blind or non-blind beholder who encounters this text can share our sense of excitement as we discover it together. As the encounter with the security guard shows, our behaviour in the gallery was somewhat anarchic. We probably talked too much and too loudly for some visitors, and we ventured very close to the glass, inadvertently triggering a security alarm. We spent a long time in front of one painting, and our bodies, with their bags, brochures and white cane, disrupted other people's journey through the exhibition. But this unruly behaviour was an essential part of our creative engagement with the painting. We were inspired just as much by each other's words as we were by what we could see of the painting; we have attempted to capture this co-creation in the alternating voices signified by 'She' and 'He'. We agree with theorists who argue that translation is always a kind of creative writing.⁵ Our attempt at visual to verbal translation has produced a creative audio description that celebrates subjectivity, positionality and different ways of (not) seeing.

Notes

- 1 <https://dma.org/art/collection/object/5305135> (accessed February 2025).
- 2 <https://www.ashmolean.org/pissarro> (accessed February 2025).
- 3 Georgina Kleege (2017) provides the best overview of the issues at stake in audio description of works of art. See also Colmenero and Gallego 2020, 65.
- 4 See Chottin and Thompson 2022 for a discussion of the importance of including a selection of subjective voices in AD.
- 5 See, for example, Fang 2021; Perteghella 2013.

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Part VII

Towards a blind aesthetics

Blind aesthetics: complexity, contingency and conflict

David Johnson

Blind aesthetics is an expression of the power of blindness to generate new and exciting experiences. With the phenomenology of blindness, spatial experiences and temporal experiences are more readily perceived as what they really are for everyone, namely a rich and exciting, pluralised and entangled continuum.

With blindness there is an increased sense of flux or transience when encountering objects that are usually experienced as being ontologically present and static. With visual impairment, and when experienced by momentary touch, objects often take on a more transient quality. With the absence of healthy vision with which to check from a distance an object's continuing presence, then that object's ontic presence becomes subject to doubt in the mind of the blind beholder.

This chapter (and this book) starts from the wrong mode of communication with which to start a conversation about blindness, namely the written word and its close cousin, the printed word – possibly the least blind-accessible place to start from. This chapter opens and closes with audio descriptions of artworks made by the author in an attempt at circumventing, or at least acknowledging, this problem.

Introductory artwork

Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles (Figure 21.1) comprises two pieces that examine the moment of contact in space-time between subject and object, between the subject's skin and the surface of the external object. Utilising 3D print technology, the zero points of momentary contact between the hand or fingertips



Figure 21.1 David Johnson, *Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles*. Source: © David Johnson.

and an everyday object are digitally isolated and then printed. These fleeting moments of touch are represented by blocked-out areas of the piece: either Pringle-shaped areas for the fingertips or larger areas for the palm of the hand. The Voronoi programming used in constructing these pieces has produced novel and unexpected architectures.¹ The objects generated by this process imply, rather than state, the form of the object concerned; they hint at its formal characteristics. They are expressions of the simultaneity of the object's phenomenological presence and its absence.

This work is about the encounter; it is the recording of a moment in time, the suspension of a transient shudder. Fingertips and hands holding everyday objects such as coffee mugs and apples and pears are the encounters that have been recorded so far. The resulting object is concerned with trying to better understand what it is to touch. It is focusing on the transient nature of the tactile encounter. It also highlights the ambiguity and complexity of touch; the moment of touch is both of the body, or the skin, and of the object being touched. In recording this moment, one is recording a synthesis where two become one and when one is pluralised. They are moments of spatio-temporal synchronicity and quantum-entangled superpositionality.

What it is to be blind

This chapter starts from a point that is common to everyone reading it: from the place of being human. Then it moves within that place to a place common to many but not all the readership: that of being blind.² But blindness experience reveals truths that are common to all human experience. Blindness art instantiates this common human experience and can therefore provide useful additions to knowledge.

There is currently a knowledge deficit in academia and amongst the general public: namely, an absence of rigorous and comprehensive accounts of the blind experience of being in the world from the point of view of blind people themselves. With a few notable exceptions, the generalised perception and conception of blindness is largely populated by stereotypes, caricatures and superheroes that masquerade as 'blind'.³ These blindness tropes infuse the minds and souls of the consuming public, blind and otherwise, with monstrous, horrific and deviant characterisations of what it is to be blind; these tropes continue to perform a massive disservice to the understanding of the truth of the blind experience.

The preceding artwork is one example of the blind author's art practice that is primarily interested in sharing 'what it is to be blind-in-the-world' from the 'inside'. This piece represents a ubiquitous experience in the blind lifeworld and is therefore paradigmatic of the blind aesthetic argued for in this chapter. Importantly for the research that supports this chapter, the phenomenon that this piece examines is true and relevant to the wider, able-bodied community as well as the blind community, so emphasising the far-reaching implications of what is presented here. The key takeaways from this piece are the spatio-temporal complexity and the universality of what it demonstrates.

Complexity is a key theme in what follows. The text will commence with an analysis of the inherent complexity of the lived experience of blindness.⁴ This is followed by a review of the work of Tom Shakespeare, who argues for complexity in the wider context of disability. Linked to notions of complexity are notions of contingency – another key theme of this chapter. The lived experience of the blind or disabled person doesn't have to be the way it is. Many if not most of the factors that delimit the enjoyment of a full and flourishing life for a disabled person don't have to be the way they are. The copious work of French art critic and philosopher Jacques Rancière will be used to work through the complexities of this domain. The overlapping concepts of aesthetics, politics and conflict⁵ are central to Rancière's thinking and to the argumentative thrust of what follows.

Rancière identifies three pivotal concepts. These are: the contingency of the aesthetic regime; an indeterminate gap or interval in the 'sensible fabric' or aesthetic world; and a persistent dissenting voice or *dissensus*.⁶ In what follows, these ideas will be analysed and, despite Rancière's profound and deafening silence with respect to disability, we will see how notions of blind aesthetics neatly fit into Rancière's ideas on the interdependence of aesthetics and politics.

Complexity and phenomenology

The lived experience of blindness is inherently complex; it comes with many determinates, idiosyncrasies and special (yet not unique) features. Many of the features that are highlighted in what follows apply to many people beyond the group under review. Blindness qua blindness refers to a complex and diverse range of diseases, conditions and embodied causal trajectories, all of which impact upon the individual in a similarly complex and diverse manner. The heterogeneous complexity of the phenomenology of blindness and of the category 'blindness' cannot be overstated. This means that it is difficult – and potentially problematic – to draw general conclusions about the embodied experience of sight loss; as such, from the outset we reject over-simplifying assumptions about universal notions of what it means to be embodied.

The complex heterogeneity of blindness disability is powerfully evidenced when one considers the vast range of factors that impact on the individual as they go about their daily round in a very visually biased world. This might include the age of the individual blind person, the degree of trauma involved in the vision loss, the degree of pain and discomfort present, the stability or otherwise of the sight loss, the point in the individual's life when the sight loss commenced, the rate of decline in vision if the sight loss is progressive, and the socio-economic circumstances of the individual blind person. All these factors contribute to the complexity of blindness and profoundly affect the individual's ability to progress with their lives in an effective and generative manner when experiencing sight loss. These are also factors that are frequently overlooked in discussions about blindness at all levels of such discussions. Crucially, many of the complex factors and features just enumerated apply to everybody's lives in one way or another.

It is notable that the catalogue of factors that challenge the individual blind person, listed above, consists of a complex mix of both social factors and embodied medical factors. This inherent complexity of blindness

disability is currently under-acknowledged both in critical disability scholarship and in the popular perception of blindness disability. This results in the persistence of unhelpful and damaging stereotyping, generalising and modelling of blind people and their lifeworld.

Disability modelling in general, and the social model in particular, have been the broadly accepted method by which arguments have been made and campaigns have been fought for the last 50 years. In his 2006 book *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, Tom Shakespeare presents a robust critique of this situation.⁷

In the 1970s and '80s, following the work of key pioneering groups such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation and individuals including Michael Oliver, it was argued that most, if not all, of the ills and harms that befall disabled people can be attributed to contingent societal factors.⁸ It was argued that if these unnecessary social impediments were eliminated then all of the physical and mental disabilities confronting the individual would also be eliminated. Oppressive and excluding barriers to social, employment and intellectual opportunities and experiences would disappear, and the human rights and rewards of life would become available to all. This is the now much vaunted 'social model of disability' that stands in opposition to the previously prevalent 'medical' or 'tragedy' model.⁹ By contrast, the medical model holds that disability resides in the individual's own body, and correcting the problems in the body through the intervention of medical science will eradicate disabilities.

There is no doubt that the social model has many merits in undermining entrenched and erroneous ways of thinking about disability. While it has been instrumental in generating many beneficial statutory, cultural and attitudinal changes in recent years, it still falls well short of addressing many of the complex problems that come with disability. In *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, Shakespeare identifies the problem. He argues that it is the polarised use of the terms 'impairment' and 'disability' that is the problem. Impairment is defined in individual, bodily contextual terms, whereas disability is defined in terms of a socially constructed artifice; for strong social model advocates it is disability that makes impairment a problem.¹⁰ However, Shakespeare argues that impairment and disability are *always* interdependent; the individual's embodied experience can never be separated from the social context. To over-privilege *disability*, as the social model does, risks overlooking the impact of the pain and discomfort that impairment can represent, and it thereby risks reducing impairment to a mere essentialist category.

Shakespeare goes on to usefully advocate the idea of an *interpenetrating* spectrum or continuum where ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ are the polar extremes and which embraces both medicalised individualism and social constructivism, all resting on a post-modern non-essentialist, pluralised philosophical platform.¹¹ Shakespeare’s argument here has the benefit of embracing the true complexity of disability while retaining the power of the social model to promote beneficial change.

In what follows, the inherent complexities of blindness disability, as outlined above, will be foregrounded, and regarded as irreducible constituents of blindness. The analysis links these complexities of disability with those of aesthetics. Leaning heavily on the work of Rancière, who argues for a strong link between aesthetics and oppressive political structures, the analysis will argue – by analogy – towards a blind aesthetic.

The argument from Rancière’s *Dissensus* and distribution of the sensible

The complex phenomenology of the blind life experience is constitutive of notions of a particular and currently unexplored aesthetic. It is to be argued here that art made by blind people – and in this case by the blind author – can demonstrate and instantiate this aesthetic. This amounts to a new and critical phenomenology. The work of Rancière has been pivotal in articulating notions of an aesthetic that is inherently complex, inherently political, and inherently dissenting and challenging of the status quo – a status quo that is unnecessarily prejudicial to blind and disabled people. In what follows, Rancière’s work will be used to expand, amplify and buttress the arguments for a blind aesthetics.

Aesthetics refers to a broad cluster of ideas and activities involving sensory perception, art and philosophy. The entire edifice of aesthetics rests on the ancient idea of aesthesis.¹² This is the sensory discernment of the world: a discernment that is, of course, available to all humans in common. *In common*, however, is not the same as *equally*. There are two principal ways in which aesthesis is distributed unequally. First, humans have differing levels of sensory acuity, whether through disease or accident or natural variability. Secondly, access to the sensory world is delimited by arbitrary and socially constructed differences.

In his short 1995 book *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*, Rancière identifies some of the fundamental relationships that are distributed unequally.¹³ He starts his analysis with the faculty of speech

as the defining human trait. He builds his argument on the individual's capacity and participation in the staging and performance of linguistics. He points out a key distinction between *speech* and *voice*. Speech expresses a view, while voice indicates a state of being. With *speech*, an expression of the *useful* and the *harmful* leading to the *good* and the *evil* can be shared with those who understand, whereas *voice* simply indicates the *useful* and the *harmful*.

On this distinction, argues Rancière, rests a 'politic-ity' on which functioning social units can be erected, such as families and cities.¹⁴ Here Rancière gives an early indication of the inextricable joining together of the political and the aesthetic. He proceeds to elaborate on these vital linguistic distinctions by pointing out the importance of distinguishing between an expression of *harm* and an expression of *injury*:

[W]here exactly do we draw the line between the unpleasant feeling of having received a blow and the feeling of having suffered an 'injury' through this same blow? We could say that the difference is marked precisely in the logos that separates the discursive articulation of a grievance from the phonic articulation of a groan. But then the difference between unpleasantness and injury must be felt and felt as communicable, as defining a sphere of community of good and bad. The sign derived from the possession of the organ – articulated language – is one thing. The manner in which this organ exercises its function, in which language expresses a shared aisthesis, is another.¹⁵

Later in the same text Rancière develops the idea that these linguistic differences lead to unnecessary social disagreements, social demarcations and political heterogeneity. He deduces that 'the inequality of social ranks works only because of the very equality of speaking beings'.¹⁶ The inequalities that arise within communities that use a common language arise because of this fundamental, and yet arbitrarily applied, disagreement between those who regard all interlocutors as being equal and those who do not. This unnecessary conflict, argues Rancière, is enacted in a 'political stage' or a 'theatre of a paradoxical community' where language games and 'heterogeneous rules of expression' are played out.¹⁷

The social status of the blind community, and the wider disabled community, in contemporary society is a good and telling 'fit' into the model that Rancière is proposing in this text. The contingent and provisional nature of the disagreement that Rancière identifies is critical to much of the lived experience of blind and disabled people.

Rancière unfortunately neglects to single out disability in any of his writings, but the parallels are so strong here that they will be highlighted throughout what follows.

In the concluding section of *Disagreement*, Rancière delineates the arbitrary differences and disagreements with startling and powerful insights. He says that the status of those on the margins of society

is not not belonging. It is belonging twice over: belonging to the world of properties and parts and belonging to the improper community, to that community that egalitarian logic sets up as the part of those who have no part. And the place of its impropriety is not exile. It is not the beyond where the human, in all its nakedness, would confront itself or its other, monster and/or divinity. Politics is not the consensual community of interests that combine.¹⁸

Rancière proceeds to use the metaphor of the indeterminate gap, the interval and the interruption to stand for the reality of social exclusion:

The political community is a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself. It is a community of worlds in community that are intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places.¹⁹

In his 2020 book *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics*, Rancière brings together the key ideas set out in *Disagreement* and other works and develops them further, so it will be illuminating to discuss this book in more detail.²⁰ Rancière's main concern in *Dissensus* is to establish the inherent contiguity of aesthetics and politics. The unity of these two vast paradigms of human life relies, according to Rancière, on particular interpretations of both. Rancière denies the singularity of aesthetics and politics and regards both as having dissensus, or the dissenting voice, at their core. His book is concerned with setting out these interpretations.

Rancière argues that the relationship between aesthetics and politics depends on two key principles. The first is the concept of the *partage du sensible*.²¹ This is the idea that societal and individual sensory perceptions are shared out contingently and are distributed in such a way that they deny egalitarian principles. The second is the concept of *dissensus* itself.²² Dissensus is a reaction to the first principle; a principle based on the disrupting of the excluding effect of *consensus* in society.

Both guiding principles that Rancière describes are, once again, helpful in framing this chapter's argument to blind aesthetics. Both *partage du sensible* and *dissensus* can be used to explain the contingencies at work in disability arts and the wider social status of disability.

The text of *Dissensus* is structured in a manner that reflects Rancière's unitary conceptualisation of politics and aesthetics. Part 1 of the book is entitled 'Aesthetics of Politics', and here Rancière sets out his particular conception of politics. Part 2 is entitled 'The Politics of Aesthetics', and here he similarly describes his historical conception of aesthetics. Both Parts 1 and 2 contain strong elements of the other, which indicates the interdependence intrinsic to both aesthetics and politics in Rancière's analysis.

Chapter 1 of Part 1 of *Dissensus* consists of a series of 10 explanatory theses. In Theses 1 to 5 he builds on the principles he set out in *Disagreement*. Here Rancière argues towards a conception of politics based on the individual subject and their relationship with, and involvement in, public affairs. This relationship depends on the Aristotelian definition of the *citizen*, namely 'he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled'. It is this dual 'partaking' or '*avoir part*' that is important to Rancière.²³

From here Rancière proceeds to work through breaking with traditional logics of domination and entitlement. This is necessary to establish a 'void' or space into which those who don't currently count (the *demos* or the *supplementary*) can, once again, have a voice and partake in that which is common to all.

Theses 6 to 10 contain the most innovative aspects of Rancière's analysis. This is where he weaves together his notions of the political and the aesthetic in such a way as to give the political an essentially dissenting role with respect to aesthetics – or what he elsewhere describes as the 'sensible fabric' of life.

In Thesis 6 Rancière identifies two ways of counting the parts of the community. The first way counts 'real groups' of consenting people but excludes those with no voice. The second way counts the part with no part, that is to say the *supplement*. The first Rancière calls the 'police', the second he calls 'politics'. In Thesis 7 Rancière explains the difference between these two aspects of the community in more detail. The police, he explains, refers to a partitioning or distribution of the sensible. Here aesthetic considerations consist of differing modes of perception or of sensing that are tied to differing groups in the community. Here 'police' refers not to law enforcement as such but rather to 'a system of coordinates defining modes of being, doing, making, and communicating

that establish the borders between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable'.²⁴ This division of the sensible or 'distribution of exclusive parts ... presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot'.²⁵

On the other hand, politics, or the political, explains Rancière, is the place where the *excluded* confront the distributive structures of the police. Or otherwise put: '[T]he political is the terrain upon which the verification of equality confronts the established order of identification and classification.'²⁶ So Rancière establishes two opposing tendencies within the community. Firstly, a distributive partitioning of aesthetic qualities that is essentially consensual and conforming for those included. Secondly, a dissenting and reactionary tendency.

With Thesis 8 Rancière drives home the oppositional role he demands of the political, arguing that the essence of politics is *dissensus*. Here Rancière emphasises the aesthetic roots of the problem: 'Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself.'²⁷

Here is where, once again, blindness disability is applicable. Rancière's conception of the police involves the absence of what he calls the 'void and of a supplement'.²⁸ In other words, the police regime is a construct that divides up aesthetic participation such that it leaves no room (void) for the entry of excluded others (supplements). Despite Rancière's silence with respect to disability, clearly disability representation and disability art qualify as worthy candidates in Rancière's world.

In Part 2 of *Dissensus*, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', Rancière turns his full attention to aesthetics. Here he proposes the existence of what he calls an 'aesthetic regime'. In chapter 9, 'The aesthetic revolution and its outcomes', he focuses on the work of Friedrich von Schiller and his claim that 'Man is only completely human when he plays', and that this 'playing' is capable 'of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living'.²⁹ Here Rancière and Schiller grant the aesthetic a prominence it had not held for millennia, placing it front and centre of human life and politics.

Rancière gives the aesthetic regime a specific historical and cultural context. In the revolutionary fervour of the middle to late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe, with its violent realigning of geopolitics and institutional hierarchies, Rancière identifies a parallel revolution in modes of individualistic thinking and perception. With these tectonic shifts in society came an upsurge in the establishment of key social institutions, such as museums, art galleries,

libraries, and educational programmes and institutions. Freed from the shackles of royal and ecclesiastical patronage and domination, the arts acquired a refreshing and long overdue freedom and autonomy. These events, argues Rancière, spawned an aestheticisation of everyday life where the arts acquired a new autonomy and where the modernist notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ was born or reborn.

In the Prelude to a further book by Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the aesthetic regime of art* (2011), the author eloquently describes the birth and the character of this new aesthetic regime.³⁰ He claims that since the turn of the nineteenth century, aesthetics qua ‘aesthetics’ includes all manner of objects and practices due to fundamental shifts in the ‘sensible fabric’ and ‘intelligible form’ of what we call art. Art is now aesthetics and aesthetics is the reconfigured ‘sensible form of experience’ that allows for an almost limitless host of possibilities. Rancière’s own words describe the aesthetic regime with a force that is worth sharing. The book:

shows how a regime of perception, sensation and interpretation of art is constituted and transformed by welcoming images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art ... It shows how art, far from foundering upon these intrusions of the prose of the world, ceaselessly redefined itself – exchanging, for example, the idealities of plot, form and painting for those of movement, light and the gaze, building its own domain by blurring the specificities that define the arts and the boundaries that separate them from the prosaic world.³¹

Referring to the ‘scenes’ around which Rancière structures *Aisthesis*, the book ‘inscribes them into a moving constellation in which modes of perception and affect, and forms of interpretation defining a paradigm of art, take shape’.³² In this environment, where aesthetics has a new prominence and where the politics of egalitarianism abounds, disability and difference begin to be demystified, normalised and embraced as integral to the human condition. The slow process of disability justice and equality has begun.

Art and the body politic

Early on in this chapter we saw how Tom Shakespeare argued for the inseparability of the complex impaired body of the individual from its wider political, disabling context. This unitary move forcefully parallels

Rancière's analysis of the integral relationship between the aesthetic and the political. In the preceding text it was argued that blindness art can provide a place (or stage) where the voice and body of disability can be heard and touched properly for the first time. The irreducibility of the complexity of disability has been emphasised. Embracing complexity means that the problematic binary distinctions between *impairment* and *disability*, and arguably between *disability* itself and notions of the *able bodied*, can at long last be dissolved and rethought.

In the work of Jacques Rancière we saw how the arbitrary exclusion of certain voices and visibilities exists at the very heart of communities, due to the unfair and unnecessary *policing* of aesthetic distributions. The power of the arts as a dissenting voice – and hence a force for societal change – was highlighted. In the revolutionary climate of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, argues Rancière, a new aesthetic regime emerged that granted the arts a new autonomy. This autonomy provided oxygen for the politicised, dissenting voice of the arts to shout louder and be heard.

The complete absence of references to disability in the written output of Rancière was frequently referred to above. The interval or the gap that Rancière says is missing from the arbitrarily arranged aesthetic distributions, but which is opened up by the dissenting voice of the arts, provides a comfortable and inviting place for disability art and blind aesthetics to flourish. Rancière argues that politics and art-aesthetics are inherently mutually dependent, and that politics consists of the dissenting voices of unheard or marginalised groups of people. Despite Rancière's silence on disability, this is where disability comes in by implication. The aesthetics or the particular percepts of disability arts – and hence art made by blind people – chimes harmoniously with the chorus of other dissenting voices. Blindness art grants *everyone* access to blindness experience. If blindness is regarded as a way of life, as a distinctive *umwelt*, rather than just a dysfunction or problem to be overcome, then the aesthetic possibilities begin to emerge and to proliferate and expand. With blindness comes a wealth of shifting horizons, reconfigured landscapes of the perceptible, and new and radical dimensionalities. This is where the experiences of blindness life and art become constitutive of blind aesthetics.

Concluding artwork

The concluding artwork to be presented here is an example of the author's art practice that attempts to combine the personal and the political in a manner that exploits and draws on the lived experience of blindness.

Here the art is *of* blindness rather than being just *about* blindness. This artwork arises directly from the lived experience of being blind. The visual is present but not prominent or dominant and the multi-modal is emphasised. This accessible piece invites the disabled visitor to actually join the piece on a par with able-bodied visitors. The physical presence of the visitor's body is integral to the whole. Here art and disability and the body join together in a blind aesthetic.

Sanctuary Café (Figure 21.2) is a large, interactive public artwork that was produced in the wake of the Black Lives Matter activism and in response to the related tearing down of public statuary as acts of protest against the celebration and honouring of key figures in the transatlantic slave trade and historical colonial expansionism.

The piece, consisting of a life-size human figure sitting at a wooden, accessorised picnic table, was commissioned by Liberty – the Mayor of London's free festival celebrating the work of D/deaf, disabled and neurodiverse artists. It was presented in partnership with We Are Lewisham in 2021 to the people of Lewisham, London's Borough of Culture 2022. It represents the research and development element of a much larger conception consisting of a series of similar tables and seated figures, such that the original ambition was to produce a cluster of these seated figures into a real working sculpture café where members of the public could mingle and socialise.



Figure 21.2 David Johnson, *Sanctuary Café* (2021). Sistah Stella Headley is seated next to the artist. *Source:* Samuel Dore.

The final realised piece, consisting of a single figure sitting at a table, is an arresting blend of the ordinary and the extraordinary. The seated figure is a 3D print of Stella Headley, a well-known Lewisham-based community worker and activist. The figure is depicted drinking, eating and engaged in conversation. The other seats around the table are empty; visitors are invited to sit with the figure and with friends and enjoy a drink and a conversation. By so doing, the boundary between art and its beholders becomes blurred and ambiguous.

The table has been significantly altered in order to make it accessible for wheelchairs, buggies and infirm visitors. On the tabletop are some cast objects that mimic ordinary café table clutter, together with some explanatory cast braille embedded in the wood. The entire installation is covered with a grainy exterior-quality paint that homogenises the whole, both visually and texturally, and mimics brutal modernist concrete.

This piece involved a great deal of collaborative cooperation at all stages of its production. The scanning, the 3D printing, the casting of the accessories and the sourcing of the table all involved third-party assistance. The artist's role was restricted to providing the original conception, project management and decision making at every stage, and occasional assistance with fabrication and painting. As such, this piece is emblematic of a blind artistic production process that has collaboration, cooperation and co-creation at its very core.

Of necessity, art made by a blind person may involve unorthodox processes and high levels of sighted assistance. As such, this, along with similar artworks by the author, raises questions around ownership and authorship, as well as its very status as art.

The deliberate inclusion of spaces and places for members of the public to sit and engage with the sculpture while having a drink and enjoying conversation with friends introduces a playful aspect into the piece. The piece is designed to deliver a serious message around race, community and inclusion, but to do so in a light-hearted way. As such, its role as art or 'entertainment' is confused and uncertain.

The fidelity with which 3D print processes reproduce likeness and provide a *mirror on reality* has a power that remains largely unexploited. The potential for blind artists to gain access to tactile artistic expression through 3D print processes remains largely untapped. This piece copies the world and yet simultaneously *is* the world. It simultaneously represents the world and is present as a functional object; it is therefore at once art and not-art.

Notes

- 1 For an explanation of Voronoi programming see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voronoi_diagram (accessed February 2025).
- 2 World Health Organization 2023.
- 3 A few notable exceptions that have come to the attention of the author include: Hull 2017; Kleege 1999, 2; Bolt 2014, 2.
- 4 It will be useful to cite the work of Tobin Siebers at this point. Siebers argues for complex embodiment as a way to better understand disability. The following extract from his book *Disability Theory* is informative: 'Social construction offers advantages for the political representation of the disabled because it demonstrates the falseness of any claim for political identity based on natural kind. It reveals that gender, race, sex, nationality, and ability are heterogeneous, indeterminate, and artificial categories represented as stable or natural by people who want to preserve their own political and social advantages.' Siebers 2008, 73.
- 5 The word 'conflict' is used here to stand for art or blind art as a dissenting voice.
- 6 'Sensible fabric' is a term frequently used by Rancière to stand for aesthetics.
- 7 Shakespeare 2006, 15.
- 8 Shakespeare 2006, 15.
- 9 See, for instance, Oliver 2013.
- 10 Shakespeare 2006, 35.
- 11 Shakespeare 2006, 37.
- 12 For a definition of aesthesis see https://www.oed.com/dictionary/aesthesis_n?tab=meaning_and_use#9576005 (accessed February 2025).
- 13 Rancière 1999.
- 14 Rancière 1999, 2.
- 15 Rancière 1999, 2.
- 16 Rancière 1999, 49.
- 17 Rancière 1999, 49.
- 18 Rancière 1999, 137.
- 19 Rancière 1999, 137.
- 20 Rancière 2015.
- 21 Rancière 2015, 36.
- 22 Rancière 2015, 37.
- 23 Rancière 2015, 27 (editor's introduction).
- 24 Rancière 2006, 94.
- 25 Rancière 2015, 36.
- 26 Rancière 2006, 94–5.
- 27 Rancière 2015, 38.
- 28 Rancière 2015, 36.
- 29 Rancière 2015, 115.
- 30 Rancière 2019.
- 31 Rancière 2019, Prelude.
- 32 Rancière 2019, Prelude.

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22

Gravity: the great big weight of the (visual) world

David Mollin and Salomé Voegelin

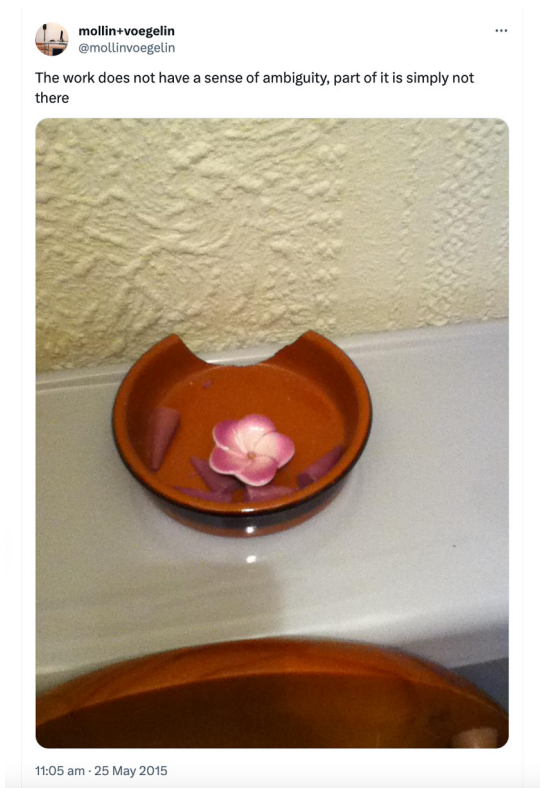


Figure 22.1 One of a series of tweets produced by the artists as part of the sound work *During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)* (2015). Kunstraum Riehen, Switzerland. Source: © David Mollin and Salomé Voegelin.

This chapter begins with an image from a series of tweets that accompanied a work by the authors, shown at Kunstraum Riehen, Switzerland in 2015 (see [Figure 22.1](#)). The work was an installative framing of a conversation between one of the artists and their mother, discussing an exhibition of visual art she could not see but needed narrated. The ceramic bowl depicted in the tweet has a part missing, yet it remained on display in the mother's home, probably on account of her not seeing it missing a part nor its missing part.

The image is not ambiguous; part of it is simply not there. This invites a reflection on this missing part, on what is missing and from what, and triggers a discussion about what this incompleteness means in relation to aesthetics and to power: the hegemonic organisation of how things should be, and how things should be seen.

From this sense of absence and the authors' own physical and conceptual blindspots, this chapter explores the relationship between what is not there and the habitual or wilful blindness inherent in the production of aesthetic knowledge. The suggestion is that the visual manifestation of an artwork or a situation, the trust in and preference for its apparent presence and unity, leads to conclusions and claims about what a work/the world is, when what is not there – what is apparently absent – opens a plural space for different 'presences' and 'possible worlds': the simultaneous variants of which a work and the world are made, acknowledging the plurality of what we think we see singularly, and engaging in ephemeral relationships rather than thinking in bounded bodies, objects or forms.

This chapter performs a textual materialisation of such variants from what we see to be there unambiguously, what we do not see, and what might simply not be there. It developed from a conversation between the two authors, one of whom is certified blind and the other who ostensibly can see.¹ This collaboration investigates the edges of visibility and what we normatively base our working together on: the assumption of a joint view, a mutual understanding of what there is to be seen, what is present, witnessed and certain. There is a trust, or rather belief, that we see the same. However, in any collaboration, even between apparently sighted people, there is no shared (visual) world. The membrane of visibility is an illusion, vision only a separation, and then further separations as you remove surface after surface to reveal the deceit of a shared visual foundation. Instead, collaboration becomes a negotiation of what is not seen or what is seen differently – a disentangling and questioning of the layers of separation that the visual cannot congeal.

In this sense, collaboration enacts a notion of blindness. I cannot see what you see and you cannot see what I see, and we have to negotiate a contingent lifeworld made up of what is there, what is ambiguous, and what simply is not there.

All human beings are blind with respect to one another. The 'sighted' do not see what the blind see and do not see. Non seeing is also a kind of seeing. The blind person sees. I who am not blind do not see what the blind person sees. I am the blind for the blind.²

We do not see what our collaborator sees or what is missing from their view. However, this encounter is not binary. It is not a matter of seeing and not seeing – on–off – but a more diffuse and gradual surface exploration. Tapping together at the edges of a cultural visibility, we find portals and access points into the possibility of a temporarily and hesitantly shared vista. In this way, the chapter materialises the complexity of collaboration: for one of the authors, things are often really not there, but also not missed or needed; and for both, sight is a doubtful undertaking, full of habits, norms, expectations and hegemonies that cloud the path to a different, more complex and plural view.

Because we are forced to work with and around the generalisations which align our seeing in the 'congealment' of what is apparently visible, we engage in fragmentations and disorganisations that lead to a journey, which Clarice Lispector called 'the great un-finding'; a journey that made her so fearful of a 'useless vision', a vision in which she could not find the expected, that 'I can only accept that I got lost if I imagine that someone is holding my hand'.³

Since I must save the day of tomorrow, since I must have a form because I don't feel strong enough to stay disorganized, since I inevitably must slice off the infinite monstrous meat and cut it into pieces the size of my mouth and the size of the vision of my eyes, since I'll inevitably succumb to the need for form that comes from my terror of remaining undelimited – then may I at least have the courage to let this shape form by itself like a scab that hardens by itself, like the fiery nebula that cools into earth. And may I have the great courage to resist the temptation of to invent a form.⁴

We likewise need this great courage to undertake a collaborative investigation strong enough to face the infinite monstrosity of what

can be seen between our respective blindnesses. The courage not to compose or organise the seen into pieces the size of existing mouths and eyes, resisting the return to known forms, which in any event would immediately reaffirm the visual order and relegate blindness to 'not that' as a certain presence of absence. Instead, blind to each other's vision we have to walk together, hand in hand, towards an 'un-finding'; going, as Lispector suggests, courageously like a sleepwalker 'towards the enormous absence of form that is sleep ... handing myself over to what I don't understand'.⁵

Jean-Luc Nancy talks of dreams as bringing form to sleep. This is not the return to the comfort of a certain and singular form, however, and it is not an inventing of new forms, equally certain. Instead, with Morpheus, he understands the forming of dreams, his metamorphosis, to contain 'the very mystery of sleep'.⁶ Thus it brings forth a new seeing of what is there in its fluid possibility, in its formless plurality, which is contingent, a matter of time and space, generating the world from time-space variants: from the simultaneous possibilities, the composibilities of contingent and plural morphologies. The world changes as we look at it differently, post-sleep, or with sleep as method, and with different eyes that see not only what is apparently present but also the manner in which we look at it and the 'virtue of presence',⁷ its passing quality, that contains its possibility. Sleep performs our openness to the world. We must fall, we must 'plunge into the world instead of surveying it',⁸ descending towards its possibilities instead of returning to the actuality of a normative view, to have the courage to live in the fiery nebula of dying stars to see 'the full visibility' that surrounds us.

What the sleeper sees is this eclipsed thing. He sees the eclipse itself: not the fiery ring around it, but the perfectly dark heart of the eclipse of being. But this darkness is not an invisibility: on the contrary, it offers the full visibility of what, in front of me – that in front where every image comes to be imaged, every color to shimmer, every outline traced – there is no more 'in front' and everything is made equivalent to 'in back' or to 'nowhere'.⁹

We are in this 'nowhere', and this nowhere is everywhere, intersubjectively constituted. We are in the depth of vision where we do not see the thing in front of us as an individuated object of our visuality, possessed by our eyes, but we see vision, its own path and process that

materialise the seen as well as the seer in their simultaneous possibility. Thus the thing seen is not visible from the front, from a distance, but is seen from the back and in proximity to our own visibility, which is a visibility from nowhere where nothing is expected and the world remains open, unknown, un-found, and where everything thus becomes possible, because ‘there is no share of the visible, consequently there is no invisible either’.¹⁰ It is this un-found vision that requires us to hold hands, to have the courage to collaborate, to look together, without the assumptions of a shared, foundational view, and to see what is there in the compossibility of plural morphologies.

There is a subtle but important difference between walking apparently awake in the known world – where one resists re-routing into the process of an un-found vision and its reciprocity, but grasps what is there from the front and pre-defined – and sleepwalking in a new or unknown world, which literally appears in slices. These slices are not in the size of one’s mouth and eyes, but at the edges of one’s vision that become central. This ‘sleepwalking’ together presents a starting point for piecing together the actual possibilities of what is seen by us as individuals. However, this piecing together does not produce a whole or unity, a synthesis of the seen and the unseen into a certain presence to which we can both refer. Instead, our common view remains eclipsed to a frontal vision, and requires always and again the engagement with the darkness, the absent that is not invisible but we cannot see.

This careful piecing together from unknown slices into a formless darkness is not, as Baudrillard would have it, ‘faintly ridiculous’,¹¹ and neither does it have to mean the ‘undelimited terror’ of Lispector. Instead, it sees a world materialising, as in taking on formless forms on the go, in slices, and fragments of which we are part, to generate new understandings, and not to return to the grammar of old. This is not the form of sleep, but the form within and of the infrastructure of a vision that is created with each step, taken in the slow hesitation of materialisation rather than the accelerated consumption and direction of a conventional view.

This resistance to inventing a new form can also be interpreted as un-finding a form within the world that is not there. In other words, it is okay to invent new forms that are not configurations of the fully sighted but are new forms entirely: that are formless in relation to the old grammar and conventional geometry. They are new in their contextualisation and the infrastructure within which they are created. They are not seen straight on, from the front, already knowing what is

there and where it is. Thus they cannot fall into the binary of absence and presence, but create the presence of absence as the sensibility of an expanded view.

From here, this chapter performs a collaborative sleepwalk into a temporary form and vista, in the depth of vision, and engages in the tapping needed to feel rather than see this plural world together. This text moves through 'I' and 'we' and 'you' as part of the plural layers of a collaborative vision that the visual cannot congeal. Each of these positions is a negotiation and materialisation of what is seen, what is not seen and what is seen differently, performing grammatically, a disentangling of the presumed unity of vision's own blindspots.

It ponders the mother's vision, like the mother('s) tongue, as a line of maternal significance, and discusses the inheritance of blindness by considering how, more generally, we inherit vision and what we consider visible. The tapping is narrated as a touching, a retinal touching of the world through the cyborg vision of a 'blind stick',¹² touching the visible world not to recognise it but to expand its visibility through touch. Thus, it works against the gravity of the visual world, which is there before us, determining our form, and delimiting the work and the world to expectations that close them into a dominant aesthetic and hegemonic reality. Tapping, instead, we create the possibility of the world from the lightness of the in-between, where things float in a mobile dimensionality, just that little bit off the ground.

Tapping, touching, inherited eyes

During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)

TRANSCRIPT¹³

Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland

Entschuldigung ... wo ist die ... Ruscha, Ed Ruscha?

Ed Ruscha?

Ed Ruscha

Yes, it is here on the mezzanine floor on the left side

Ah ...

Sorry what have you got for technical instruments here?

I am recording

Recording?

Yes, sound

Sound? Okay, good
Merci ...

Living room of mother's house in Barry, South Wales

Now what part of your vision ... can you see anything there?

I can see some writing there, but I can't see what it says

OK, well these are, this is umm ... by Ed Ruscha, the picture is by
Ed Ruscha

Well tell me something about him?

Ummm ... he is an American artist

Contemporary?

Eh?

Contemporary?

He is still alive ... he is still alive

That's what I mean

...

What sort of writing?

Italic, it is put on the apartment; you can see that it is not painted
on its proper heavy lettering that has been stuck on the side of
the apartment

What does it say?

The Fourteen Hundred, the fourteen hundred now that must
probably have to do ... yes here is the number you see it is called
the fourteen hundred because it is number 1400, very funny

Yes

So he titles the photographs by the names of the buildings so
you don't get any sign of any other intention here apart from
recording the buildings. You don't get, you know, it does not say
'car parked in leafy Los Angeles', it's called the 1400 and there is
a car parked in front of it

Can you give me any idea what sort of style architecture it is, could
you think of anything that I would remember?

Ummm ... well it's like modernist,

Yes

Square blocks with ...

This is an excerpt from the transcript of the conversation that ensued when one of the artists showed the catalogue of the Ed Ruscha exhibition seen at the Kunstmuseum Basel according to his vision with Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) to his mother, whose own vision had progressed into further slices and fragments and an acute mind's eye. They talk and touch

with words and hands the photographs and texts that ostensibly present an organisation of the work: a chronological and logical sequence, which their hands and voice disrupt and reinvent. Rather than seeing them to conjure what they show as catalogue and document of a certain oeuvre, they perform their own fragments and slices, in the simultaneous nonchronology of different progressions of RP. They tap the paper to reveal ever new surfaces that reveal the deceit of seeing one work, and the impossibility of producing one reading, as their hands and voices bring their bodies into the visual mix.

Seeing with hands and voice and the mind's eye becomes a negotiation and materialisation of what is seen, what is not seen and what is seen differently, disrupting the curatorial notion of an exhibition, the editorial hope for a book, and the illusion of one actual world. At the same time the exhibition and the book stop being a rarefied event and become the same as the world, explored through tapping with fingertips and a blind stick. Touching curbs and edges not to know what form they make, not to read their outline, or what thing they produce from an indifferent and distanced view, but to create an outline in proximity and in the encounter, to establish a contingent spatial reality that feels and sounds our possibility together.

This is the reality of how they, the things, touch my touching, and how in our coincidence we materialise a contingent scene that remains obscured to a frontal vision – the conventional grammar of seeing – but is seen from the corner of my eyes, in my blindspots that are felt on the surface of my skin.

This is a stick-based vision, a cyborg's view, whose body, with technological extension, generates the seen from the in-between rather than as separate objects. It un-finds the world in its relationality. Thus 'seeing' stops being a means of identification and valuation and the singular performance of a hegemonic view; it becomes a conduit between the toucher and the touched, a cycling movement, creating a joint nervous system and expanding perception into the in-between, which conventionally remains invisible and ignored.

Thus, looking at Ed Ruscha with her fingertips and the touch of her voice, she was creating something as she went, new, fresh, renewing not only the images, but the action of seeing, and the relationship between the images and the body, the work and the world – generating a contingent arrhythmical view with a new grammar and a new infrastructure. Producing a 'hand's view', which as the deaf-blind poet John Lee Clark in his story 'Tactile art' suggests holds different (aesthetic) values:

As you tiptoe deeper into the garden, you find where the proper plants are and begin to examine them. There, among the pencil trees and ferns, you meet the most beautiful flowering plant.

It has a fan of smooth arching blades, and from the fist that holds this fan sprouts stems stretching out at odd angles. A matte-like human skin covers these stems, and it reminds you of a warm handshake.

Excited, you look for someone to read the label, because nothing is in Braille here. The first sighted person you find is your mother. You tug her to meet your new friend and you ask her its name. She looks and says there is no label. 'Why', she then inquires of you, 'do you want to know the name of such an ugly plant?'¹⁴

His is a world reached through the information available in his touch rather than by labels or a pre-existing notion of (visual) beauty and worth. It produces the new forms of the un-found that are not of the old grammar, found through a conventional infrastructure of seeing. Instead, they emerge as possible worlds, as actual variants of a normative reality, generated from the tactile view on the invisible. And we can ponder what that means, that world which he feels with his fingertips in the garden without labels, where the reality materialises between toucher and touched, contingently, step by step. A world that is not dominated by the hegemony of the system, a system largely instrumentalised through the visual, its celebration of distance and totality, and the consequent desire for judgement, possession and finally extraction and violence. That is the hegemony of knowledge and of aesthetics, impressed upon us through the illusion of a unified and common view, away from the body, eschewing its participation and the darkness of the eclipse: the covering of the body with the world and the covering of the world with the body to get an entangled view that is expanded and expansive. Instead, it enforces a visual control that stems from the singular source of patriarchy and princes, whose eyes we have inherited.

This visual unity has its own blindspots, but this does not stop its sleight of hand to present a whole and persistent reality formed by the elimination and exclusion of what might trouble its totality, and refusing to see its own darkness. It presents itself forcefully as the only view possible; and because we do not question the process of our vision, because we do not examine the slices of our eyes, or the direction of our looking, from the front or from the back, but only question and judge the seen, we can never withstand the pull of its controlling norms. Hegemony pursues a 'strategic blindness' that is the visual equivalent

of Nikita Dhawan's description of a 'strategic deafness' – the maybe unconscious but deliberate desire not to hear certain things, which demonstrates the desire not to hear political realities and subjectivities that are undesirable, unthinkable and a threat to the status quo.¹⁵ It is a deliberate not seeing, as a political and economic imperative, controlling reality and devaluing any alternatives to a present, actual view. What is missing from this view is then not missing or even ambiguous but deliberately excluded and simply not allowed to be there. Governed by this (political, state) reason we will only see things within its terms, which leaves its reality intact as a hegemony: as 'the only thing possible'.¹⁶

By contrast, the world reached by touching photographs, plants and curbs, to conjure rather than congeal the seen, from the back and the in-between rather than the front, is an uncontrollable world built from tentative steps and tapping and touching. These make new rhythms that are disjointed and produce a most wonderful new place, new words and sentences, new formations and new outcomes for an individual, whose blindness and vision we have to share in equal measure through our own tentative touching of our own visuality. This new world is the possible world of a sliced vision. It is built on trust that what is seen is what is there, in its contingent encounter, that carries the visible as well as the apparently invisible in its visibility. And it confirms that this understanding is not a mistake due to 'missing something', missing something from a previous world, but the materialising of a new world between fingertips, bodies, plants and things. Its rhythm is not missing a beat. It is not ambiguous. Instead, the important key points that are demanded by previous visual regimes are simply not there and are not needed.

But do I really see fragments or do I see small holes into something unseen surrounded by stars and something indistinguishable in its construction, always moving, alive?

Perhaps I should follow my mother's own blind eyes into her visions and portals: into the alcove, halfway down her corridor. No apparent reason for it, there was no architectural sense for its existence. There was no space under the stairs – there were no stairs inside her flat. This was simply an alcove, perhaps in its most early sense of the word. There was just enough room for a small table and a high-backed dark oak hall chair with broken cane backing. On the table was a white phone with large black buttons; it was not connected. The table had a little drawer that I would often open when I sat on the chair, though it never had anything new in it. Stuff relating to her old bank account, cyan, with a date and other redundant info embossed in silver. Some bent-back

dog-eared cheque stubs and a pin sentry that I suspected would still come to life if anyone bothered to stick the old card in. In hindsight, I understand it as a drawer of someone who could no longer see.

The drawer would often jam in the most annoying way as one of the items would catch and have to be pressed down again to allow it to open. It figured as an access point or portal through which to move between the foundational world of seeing, normatively, the expected, and the more diffuse vision that allows the mysteries of visuality to appear within its midst, at the centre of her vision and now mine.

I can see the appearance of this portal through the spaces unoccupied by the clusters of ever new stars emerging from the dust and gravitational pull in my own eyes. The existent. The place within which Nancy's daydream 'already shapes sleep in broad daylight, sleep in the midst of waking', though not this time in daylight but in my non-sight, where the 'fragile reverie' produces 'a somnolent world into which the dreamer sinks and is lost. When it has reached the place where neither the slightest solidity nor the least density of any kind of outside persists dream can arise.'¹⁷

This is not in the space left by the stars – that is not right; it is where new stars are forming with and from the others, the surrounding cosmic halo of Nancy's Eclipse that is not a darkness but an unidentifiable light, a flat lightless light that is not visible. They are the images generated by the new context left to its own devices (without devices), allowed its own gravitational pull, constantly shifting and developing a new form. This is where the goldfinch sings and where we can see daffodils and shapes and textures of the unseen.

These are fantastical images and frightening to myself, but not to my mother, who pointed to these shapes, traced them for me with her finger, as if drawing them herself.

At the moment, the doctors are trying to figure out the genetics of my blindness. Whether it is X or Y, or a hundred others. In other words, what form my formless vision might have. They drew blood to determine my visual heritage. We could more broadly speak about inheriting vision, not just that of the blind, but as a cultural and ideological inheritance of norms and expectations of everybody's view. We do not just inherit the way we look in appearance, but also the way we look – the way we perceive the world as in front of us or from the back as part of it, relational, conjured in our touch and being touched, or from a distance, with the desire to close this distance while staying afar: to possess, to

own, to grasp with our eyes as instruments of judgement and classification, or with eyes as instruments of materialisation from the in-between, as toucher and touched, aware of our participation in what we see.

Our visual heritage is also connected to courage and to the political world: to the political possibilities of what we see and how we see, as delimiting what is politically possible as in thinkable, and what remains faintly ridiculous and laughable even. Hegemonic politics, like hegemonic visuality, is frontal. It does not engage in the darker parts or the in-between but sees to grasp, comprehend, extract. It has the weight of a taxonomical knowledge and organisation that renders the world real in the sense of quantifiable, that carries the burden of proof and the gravity of a metric system that does not involve the body and the mysteries of perception but replaces them.

The gravity of the visual world

Two forces rule the universe: light and gravity.

Gravity. Generally what we expect of others depends on the effect of gravity upon ourselves, what we receive from them depends on the effect of gravity upon them. Sometimes (by chance) the two coincide, often they do not.

What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him? Gravity.¹⁸

Jorge Luis Borges talks with gravity in networks of esteem. It is difficult. His writing is beautiful though. He talks about being the director of the National Public Library in Buenos Aires and that he was the third blind person to be given this position. His gravity finds weight in the biblical and in the ancient Greeks, in the infrastructure of visual, grammatical language, and the institution. He describes a masculine canon of blindness to find gravity in a normative sense and reason of life. But then, what then? What does that confer to not seeing or seeing otherwise, the highest praise of hegemonic eyes?¹⁹

My mother was not interested in the mythological and patriarchal view of blindness, although it inevitably had been amassed in her body, unavoidable in a cultural patriarchy and the dominance of the visual and the sighted. In relation to the weight imposed in the telling of the metaphorical significance of the loss of sight, maybe my mother too was held in the reflection of this paralysing gravity. But I didn't get that impression.

She had a medallion that she would ask to help her find things. And she often had joyful watery eyes. She saw through a small central area, and perhaps also some small examples of the sighted presented at the outer edges. I wondered later if she even saw anymore through the central part or whether this had become something else over time, another drawer, a portal of some sort into another world, that would open to me momentarily when hearing her describe what she could see. And what she could see would often emerge from the stars.

There she was held by something else that defied gravity. Moments happened that were once unnoticed. The rain has fallen, a path is produced with a traffic light reflection from the distance, the swoop of light glancing off stones and bollards, briefly illuminating the obstacles ahead, the precarity and chances that are hidden from us in the confidence of the markets. The magic that an artificially constructed confidence must hide. More and more new understandings would gather.

Borges sees this magic as he is surrounded by the gift of good will. And from there another gravity is born. Because, following Simone Weil into her debate on light and gravity, gravity is not a matter of physics only, but manifests in the response of other people – how we are seen rather than what we see.

Where would such gravity take us? To an encasement. Like staring at a pane of glass at night, where the reflection plays tricks with your eyes: light and then dark on a whim, sometimes neither. The outside was not really there, or rather only present as the blind opaque volume within the light of the room's reflection, which itself was not there, but deeply present in the shadows of what was in the room, gathered, pooled in the hollows of her eyes, the depth dark of a thousand moments embedded as they circled both helpless and with agency into the sump of desire to see past her own faint and darkened inscription. The finely inked lines of her empty room, itself reflected, delicately documented in triplicate between this world and that. The lines of her room angled like legs of an ancient gnat. The whole scene set like an inevitable future in compliance with something she could no longer see clearly, other than as the fragments of a monument. The bodily gravity, the pull of the blood down, the pull of others' perception, the sheer energy needed to keep it from settling at the bottom. Its weight is the assumption of hegemony's own dead metaphors, pressed upon her, demanding compliance in the light of an unwelcome difference. The metaphors created by patriarchy further impose a sighted grammar that carries the weight of unseeing righteousness, when instead we can hover, more lightly, just above the ground.

'We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is supernatural intervention.'²⁰ This intervention is the portal, the access point that blindness opens, to another light or to another relationship, to light not as a means to see what is there, before us, but to gain energy, creative energy; to have the courage and strength not to see as in to survey and to grasp, but to generate a view between what is there and what might not be there and even what definitively is not there: 'There is only one remedy for that: a chlorophyll conferring the faculty of feeding on light. Not to judge. All faults are the same.'²¹

Borges's gravity stems from patriarchal metaphors that align themselves with the illusion maintained by our own complicity in not looking and the normativity of vision. However, the magic of his writing conjures another sensitivity – a shy and tentative openness to the possible that is the antidote to his confident situatedness. Because his blindness surrounds him with kindness it gives him a presence beyond the canon, beyond normativity and the masculine networks of esteem. Here he can appreciate blindness as an instrument – a device to see differently, rather than as a metaphor for another greatness.

Cixous felt that the loss of sight was for her a strategy for writing without distraction. It unhooked her from the political, and from what her eyes might want. Through a 'simple magic trick' she closes her eyes 'and presto: the moorings are broken. At that instant I am no longer of this political world. It is no more. Behind my eye-lids I am elsewhere. Elsewhere there reigns the other light. I write by the other light.'²²

In this other light she meets Weil's economic concerns, and is allowed a new sight, her sight 'unmoored' from the visual demands of our system: what we want, what we want to have, what we want to buy. This visual sight sees the world as a resource and creates the desire and purchase imposed upon us by our socio-economic condition, which is political. Cixous writes by the other light. That's true. But there are differences, least of which is that there was no switch in the case of my mother. This was her eyes wide open. Closing her eyes was a moment not of respite, but of looking, which intermingled with fragments of vision of what was there and what was not or was maybe not there.

And there was the goldfinch, and the daffodils. The daffodils that my mother painted with watercolours, once, as a hobby. The creation of particular moments that she traced with her finger in the watery pool of original life. She draws within the nowhere space of the sleeper who is wide awake, and that is everywhere and intersubjectively constituted. It is a 'non-space' in the sense that it is boundaryless and porous

because it does not work within outlines but starts from the centre, fizzing outwards towards nebulous stars. It is dense with activity, busy, formulating constantly, but without a ring around it. It is not a space but an area to draw on. It is Nancy's canvas at the bottom of sleep, but not, as he describes, a black canvas in broad daylight or by electric light, because the light here is irrelevant, and it is not dark. It is probably not even the other light described by Cixous.

In my mother's case, it was the bright neon light in her kitchen that is the light that she was bathed in, but her light is not that light either. It is this other light, that is not the light of sleeping, that is not a romantic illumination, but it is her only light. And here I guess is the key difference between the use of blindness as a creative strategy and a political tool and its actual seeing. Her blindness *is* her light. It is not poetic but it is possibly, like Borges said, an instrument. As it is the light of her eyes' simultaneity with the world, where they do not survey the seen, but see *with*, and where portals thus open towards her own vision, illuminated by that other light, that is light but not that. And within this light one acts and one sees shapes that are not referential but relational and contingent. Or rather, one forms and shapes that which is there in its diffuse plurality, which is not what was there, and is not what she, or I, or you, are told is there by old grammar, geometry and a dominant discourse. Instead, reality emerges from a light that is not reflective and organising, but that is her only light. It is nebulous, dense and shifting. It doesn't lack the colour red, like Borges's; it is not a blueish colour like that of distance. It is a formation, not a light. 'Love is not consolation, it is light.'²³

Dancing in the temporary clearing of blindspots

Having declared at the beginning of this chapter that collaboration cannot start with the assumption of a foundational, shared vision, but needs to enact a notion of blindness in order to see the seen and seeing together, there is not really a conclusion to be reached. There is no end point, but only the invitation to keep on looking at the possibility rather than the actuality of the work and the world; to consider the hegemonies of knowledge and aesthetics not from afar in a blueish light, but close up and aware of our participation in what we see; and without expectations which only foreclose the world and the work in what we thought we could see. Instead, we need to open aesthetics and knowledge to the other light, that is a portal rather than an illumination, and that starts the

journey of the great un-finding that Lispector feared and desired in equal measure.

My mother searches the land that she can see and she finds another where she can't see, or rather where only she can see. We do not know what she sees. But she tells us and she tells us the truth. This is the new infrastructure, which is not the infrastructure of the institution of knowledge, its surrounding exterior working as referent of accuracy and validation, but a landscape where she finds what she was not looking for or is not able to see anyway. So it is truly not there, but found in the infrastructure of her own vision. She creates a system of understanding from not seeing rather than against it. This system of knowledge is not based on what she cannot see: the supplementary and normative description of what is there, universally and unquestionably, if only you could see it, making her vision a lack, a dark canvas, sleep. Instead, it is based on her vision that is her light. It is a system of knowledge that performs and participates in what is there in the activity of her own central vision: the fuzzy centre without a ring, whose darkness does not reject sight but covers her body to get an entangled view that is expanded and expansive.

This entangled view is not separate from a normative hegemonic visuality. It is not its exception, nor its opposite. But it is the everything of vision that sees the everywhere of nowhere where the world remains open. Where it is not organised along the straight line of the canon, within metaphors of gravity and hegemonic sleight of hands that are full of blindspots. Instead, it is the home of vision for which seeing the supposedly real is a reduction. A denial of its access points and portals that lead into the possibilities of its light. That other light. Here we dance in the temporary clearing, for perhaps that is the real blindspot that opens another view.

Notes

- 1 One of the authors has Retinitis Pigmentosa, which is a progressive and hereditary eye condition that renews vision daily. Thus what is understood as seen today is contingent, for now only. It will renew tomorrow. More parts will be missing, while other possibilities will appear from their absence.
- 2 Cixous 2005, 185.
- 3 Lispector 1964, 9.
- 4 Lispector 1964, 7.
- 5 Lispector 1964, 8–10.
- 6 Nancy 2009, 8.
- 7 Nancy 2009, 8.
- 8 Merleau-Ponty 1968, 39.
- 9 Nancy 2009, 24–5.
- 10 Nancy 2009, 25.

- 11 Charles Baudelaire in Derrida 1990, 43.
- 12 We are aware that the word 'stick' in lieu of 'cane' will offend some readers. However, in this context we leave it, even in its offence, to bring in the rudimentary, the idea of a basic tool, as well as the philosophical concepts that spring from there, and in deliberate avoidance of the more brutal Victorian sense of a cane and its corporeal punishment. This is a stick that brings not pain but a form of liberation, a different way to touch the world.
- 13 *During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)* is available both as an audio piece (<https://soundcloud.com/mollinandvoegelin/duringthenightthecropswillstillgrow>) and as a text work (https://www.academia.edu/42669806/During_the_Night_Crops_will_Still_Grow_unless_the_player_sleeps_) (accessed February 2025).
- 14 Clark 2019.
- 15 Dhawan 2012, 53.
- 16 Rancière 1999, 133. Rancière talks particularly about the consensus system of political reality and suggests that the final truth of metapolitics is the management of reality as the only thing possible, in order to exclude those subjects and things that fall outside the parameters of its truth administration from even thinking or articulating their position.
- 17 Nancy 2009, 25–6.
- 18 Weil [1952] 2002, 1.
- 19 Borges 1984.
- 20 Borges 1984.
- 21 Borges 1984, 3.
- 22 Cixous 2005, 185.
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'Touch-space', 'blindness gain' and the ontology of sculpture

Ken Wilder

Outside of critical disabilities studies, blindness is rarely mentioned in relation to theories of so-called 'visual' arts. Indeed, ableist assumptions behind the very term 'visual arts' would seem to sideline sensory engagements beyond the ocular. While one of the drivers of intermedial art – such as installation, sound and performance art – was to open up new non-visual ways of beholding art, blindness is still marginalised in discussions about what kind of entity contemporary art is (what philosophers call the ontology of art), particularly when we limit the conversation to sculptural practice.

An historic exception is the British art critic Herbert Read's 1956 book *The Art of Sculpture*. Read uses a clay modelled sculpture by an anonymous, congenitally blind young artist to make the case for a haptic sensibility built upon a multitude of tactile impressions accumulated independently of vision.¹ For Read, the modest work – a kneeling figure with raised arms and disproportionately large hands – draws attention to the non-visual role of embodiment in sculptural appreciation. Read goes on to boldly argue that, in giving preference to tactile sensations, sculpture attains its highest values.²

Read's position, indebted to the work of Henry Moore, was to face fierce criticism – indeed ridicule – from American critics, most notably Clement Greenberg. Reviewing *The Art of Sculpture* in a *New York Times* book review in 1956, Greenberg attacked Read for his 'absurd' views of sculpture as 'palpation', claiming: 'I have heard of no one who let his pleasure of a piece of sculpture wait upon his handling of it.'³ Greenberg's assault on Read echoes his earlier, scathing review in the *Nation* of Moore's 1946–7 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.⁴ Moore is characterised as a 'minor artist'; by contrast, Greenberg's later

writing on sculpture extols the opticality of constructed work, as manifest in the output of David Smith and Anthony Caro. And Caro, despite being Moore's one-time assistant, echoes Greenberg when he states:

You use your eye as a surrogate for the body ... I hate the 'I can run my hand over it' sort of tactility. By and large the idea of sculpture for the blind is nonsense. Distancing yourself, and imagining yourself in, but not going in, has been an important feature of a lot of my work. A sculpture has an invisible barrier around it.⁵

Caro's derogatory comments dismissing how blind people might appreciate sculpture through touch might justifiably be thought of as offensive in the context of a volume celebrating blindness arts. And yet, from a very different starting point, I also want to question the notion of sculpture *for* the blind, in that it implies a sub-category of sculpture (as though there is an equivalent sculpture *not for* the blind). In the decade or so following Tate Gallery's 1976 exhibition *Sculpture for the Blind: An exhibition for the blind and partially sighted*, held at what is now Tate Britain in London, an unprecedented number of 'touch' exhibitions took place at major British museums and galleries. Many of these included the phrase 'sculpture for the blind', or something equivalent.⁶ Unsurprisingly, Caro's work is noticeably absent, even in major shows such as *Revelations for the Hands* at Leeds City Art Gallery and later the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, which included work by many of the leading British sculptors of the time.⁷

While these exhibitions genuinely sought to increase access for a blind or partially blind audience, they were almost exclusively curated by sighted curators, and, in addition to including very few women or black artists, rarely included blind artists.⁸ Moreover, at least some of them, like *Revelations for the Hands*, seemed as much concerned with promoting a particular brand of modernism heavily influenced by Read and Moore (the latter was a prominent supporter and features heavily in the exhibitions) as with challenging ocularcentric attitudes.

Fiona Candlin, in her 2010 book *Art, Museums and Touch*, stands out as a distinctive critic of assumptions behind much of this early access provision for the blind, claiming that such exhibitions tended to decontextualise sight loss, and – with their emphasis on cast bronzes – gave a distorted view of sculptural practice at the time. Moreover, touch was overwhelmingly thought of as functioning as a *substitute*, where disability was 'understood as being an impairment or lack that as far as possible needed to be made good through the other senses'.⁹ And for all

their good intentions, Candlin argues that treating touch as a compensatory mode of access ‘was entirely normative for it attempted to introduce blind and partially sighted visitors to art objects understood within a visual paradigm, rather than recognising that touch might comprise a different way of engaging with the exhibits’.¹⁰

The blind writer Georgina Kleege (see [Chapter 1](#) of this volume), when reflecting upon curating the *Please Touch the Art* exhibition (2019) at Mosesian Arts, Watertown, Massachusetts, gives weight to the disquiet about sculpture for the blind when she states: ‘I was adamant that this was not to be an exhibit for the blind. Rather, it was an exhibit that did not exclude blind people.’¹¹ The distinction is important to draw, and is an approach that Aaron McPeake (see [Chapter 14](#)), Clare O’Dowd (see [Chapter 15](#)) and I have adopted for our curation of the *Beyond the Visual* exhibition (November 2025 to March 2026) at the Henry Moore Institute, which this volume accompanies. This exhibition foregrounds sculptural work by blind or partially blind artists.

In this chapter, while I want to defend Read’s notion of ‘touch-space’, I believe we also need to acknowledge that his position is flawed, and some of these flaws are still being replicated in exhibitions prioritising touch. In narrowly endorsing cast or carved works, Read negates the radical incorporation of space into sculpture as manifest by modernist works by Smith and Caro, let alone the later challenges of an expanded sculptural practice chronicled by Rosalind Krauss.¹² And yet, despite this, there is still *something* in Read’s account that might usefully be retained.

Why was the debate between the two critics so fractious? As has been noted by David Getsy, the ‘exchange between Read and Greenberg was more than a clash of egos or a specialists’ debate’, it was ‘a contest in the battle for a public image of the emerging post-war internationalist modernism’.¹³ While Getsy chronicles the protracted debate between the two critics in terms of its modernist legacy, my aim in this chapter is somewhat different. I want to radically reframe Read’s touch-space through the notion of ‘blindness gain’, a term developed by Hannah Thompson (see [Chapter 2](#) of this volume).¹⁴ This is therefore not an argument for a distinctive ‘sculpture for the blind’ in the manner of the exhibitions held in the UK in the 1970s and ’80s referred to above; rather, ‘blindness gain’ posits a gain for both blind and non-blind people alike, resulting from a consideration of blind experiences of art and other cultural experiences. Celebrating the creative potential of blindness, it challenges normative characterisations of beholders, asking what we gain when we start by considering the reality of diverse embodied experiences of art. What might beholders gain from engaging

with embodied experiences of *all* sculpture beyond the visual? And, crucially, what might the attempt to answer this question reveal about what kinds of entity sculptures are, challenging dominant ontologies? Without denying their visuality, they are clearly not objects merely to be 'looked' at.

This is not a case of simply reversing the ocularcentric trajectory of sensory modes considered in isolation, thus privileging the tactile – narrowly thought of as 'palpation' – over the visual (thereby negating other non-visual engagements such as through sound, vibration, smell and even taste). Rather, I propose that we conceive of sculpture as affording an intrinsically multisensory experience distinguished from painting not just by being able to be touched, but by both its physical reality and its virtual mode being co-located with (that is, overlaid onto) our existential space – even if these co-locations are often deliberately misaligned, setting up a tension between them. The 'gain' for both blind and 'visually dependent' beholders like myself (to use Kleege's brilliantly funny term) is an understanding of the role of touch not just as one of aesthetic enhancement through object handling (though this *is* undoubtedly important), but as playing a critical role in (1) what Richard Wollheim calls criticism as retrieval,¹⁵ and (2) locating the beholder relative to a sculpture's literal *and* virtual modes of space (in the sense developed by Susanne Langer).¹⁶ This means extending the role of touch in sculptural appreciation beyond just cutaneous touch – largely experienced through the hands – to encompass other aspects of embodied touch, such as proprioception (cognitive awareness of the relative location and orientation of our bodies in space) and kinaesthesia (behavioural awareness of the direction and weight of movement of the body). But it also means acknowledging that *other* sensory engagements are involved. That sculpture is intrinsically co-located with our existential space, while establishing its own mode of virtual space, means that we – by default – bring *all* our senses into play. The privileging of one sense, vision, over all others distorts this ontological distinction of sculpture from painting; but equally, touch should not be considered in isolation, as Read tends to do. Indeed, we also need to acknowledge that the majority of people registered blind have some usable sight.

The chapter continues by revisiting Read's argument for sculpture as 'touch-space', before testing this notion against two sculptures emblematic of the two sides of the Read–Greenberg debate. It will argue for the importance of touch in *both* works: one by Barbara Hepworth, a vocal supporter of tactile engagement, and the other by Caro, one of its vocal opponents. An adequate ontology of sculpture cannot start from a

position of ruling out much of its history as somehow being ‘optical’ or ‘pictorial’ and therefore not *really* sculptural. The chapter then addresses the role of touch in (1) retrieving something of a work’s creative process, and (2) realising a sculpture’s kinetic potential. Both, I believe, are examples of blindness gain.

The chapter concludes by applying this argument to a work of my own: an example of a hybrid painting/sculpture that explicitly addresses distinctions in its mode of beholding. The work was made as part of my practice-based PhD, prior to my more recent research into blindness arts. Nevertheless, it was made at a time when I was mindful of discussions I was having with the co-investigator of the two iterations of the *Beyond the Visual* project that this book emerges from, the blind artist Aaron McPeake (who had started his own PhD at Chelsea College of Arts as I was finishing mine). It was Aaron who suggested that I conclude this chapter with this example taken from my own sculptural practice, and I am grateful, as ever, for the suggestion.

Touch-space

Adopting William James’s term ‘touch-space’, Read claims that ‘sculpture is primarily an art of “touch-space” – is and always should have been – whereas painting is primarily an art of “sight-space”’.¹⁷ Read acknowledges that while no art is based on one sensation alone, if ‘sculpture has any such particularity, it is to be distinguished from painting as the plastic art that gives preference to tactile sensations, and it is precisely when this preference is clearly stated that sculpture attains its highest and its unique aesthetic values’.¹⁸ It was a sentiment shared by Moore and Hepworth, who, while certainly not dismissive of the visual effect of their work, believed touch played a crucial role in the understanding and appreciation of sculpture.

The preface to *The Art of Sculpture* underlines the importance of Moore for the development of Read’s concern with tactility, citing Moore’s 1937 ‘The sculptor speaks’, where he states that the sculptor:

must strive continually to think of, and use, form in its full spatial completeness. He gets the solid shape, as it were, inside his head – he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualises a complex form from all round itself; he knows while he looks at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its centre

of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realises its volume, as the space that the shape displaces in the air.¹⁹

This concern with the space that a shape ‘displaces’ is key to what Read terms a sculpture’s ponderability. Read writes:

The distinction between sight-space and touch-space ... has the effect of disengaging, from the purely visual apprehension of reality, the quantity known as *volume* or bulk. If, in addition to touching an object, we lift it or try to lift it, we get a sensation of its *ponderability* or mass. We may have an intuition of ponderability without actually lifting the object, merely from our generalized knowledge of the relative weight of such materials as marble, clay, bronze, and lead.²⁰

Read identifies three distinct factors in his notion of touch-space: ‘a sensation of the tactile qualities of surfaces; a sensation of volume as denoted by plane surfaces; and a synthetic realization of the mass and ponderability of the object’.²¹ Yet only the last of these factors is identified as key to the aesthetic engagement sculpture affords. Read argues that there is ‘nothing specifically sculptural about surface aesthetics’;²² likewise, a sensation of volume as denoted by plane surfaces is likened to a ‘pictorial’ way of perceiving sculpture, and hence a ‘dematerialization of the plastic volume of sculpture as such’.²³ It is an approach which notoriously leads Read to reject the contrapuntal movement of Baroque sculpture, which contradicts his commitment to the ‘tactile compactness that by definition is the distinctive attribute of sculpture’.²⁴

Likewise, he rejects the kind of radically open constructed modernist sculpture championed by Greenberg (pre-eminently with the work of Smith and Caro). And, of course, Read dismisses any notion of situational, expanded sculpture, or dematerialised works where the material qualities are actively downplayed. Instead, the role of touch for Read is exemplified by a work such as Moore’s *Oval with Points* (1968–70), where the ‘knobbed’ form of the sculpture is reminiscent of the pieces of flint collected by Moore (Figure 23.1). For Read, such a work exemplifies the compactness which he believes is a property of all great sculpture: ‘the tactile compactness that by definition is the distinctive attribute of sculpture’.²⁵



Figure 23.1 Henry Moore, *Oval with Points* (1968–70). Bronze, 332 cm. Installed at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2007. Source: Anita Feldman. Reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation.

Hepworth's *Pendour* and Caro's *Prairie*

A consideration of the 'real' engagement of sculpture by blind beholders (as opposed to blindness used as a trope), rather than endorsing Read's overly narrow position, reminds us that a haptic sensibility is not *only* the tactile experience of surface, volume and mass, but one that integrates

muscular and visceral feelings within the skin, and our bodily orientation towards the work. In *The First Sense: A philosophical study of human touch*, Matthew Fulkerson examines how touch ‘involves a wider range of sensory transducers and informational channels than the other senses, and has a complex structure closely aligned to both bodily awareness and exploratory action’.²⁶ Touch – pre-eminently touch employed in sculptural appreciation – is not restricted to the hands, nor to the skin. Receptors located in our muscles, tendons and joints ‘provide critical information about the location, movement, and status of our bodily sensory surfaces’.²⁷

This is certainly not to downplay the role of ‘object handling’, using a taxonomy of active touch that might include movements such as gliding the fingertips, tapping, grasping, pressing and so forth. As with vision, aesthetic and informational touch are intertwined, gaining complex information about shape, texture, hollowness, weight, temperature that not only gives pleasure in its own right (as an end in itself), but clarifies representational features and retrieves vital information about materiality and the making process that is simply not available through vision alone. Moreover, as we shall examine later, touch is central to what I have elsewhere called the locative function of art: in other words, how artworks bring our orientation towards their worlds into play.²⁸

But first, let me compare two modernist works that exemplify the kind of modernist sculpture championed, respectively, by Read and Greenberg. I want to claim that *both* benefit from a fully embodied multisensory engagement involving touch. I want to compare Barbara Hepworth’s 1947 work *Pendour* (Figure 23.2) with Anthony Caro’s 1967 work *Prairie* (Figure 23.3).

Of course, if one has experienced these works there are immediate and obvious differences. The horizontally oriented *Pendour*, just 74.5 cm wide, sits on its own integrated timber plinth (usually placed on a neutral, white plinth), whereas Caro has abandoned the plinth altogether so that his much larger work sits directly on the ground.²⁹ *Pendour* is carved from a single piece of plane wood, polished on the outside, the holes that puncture the elongated, seed-like form painted in white or pale blue, while *Prairie* is a painted steel piece, fabricated out of independent sections which are then welded together, painted in two tones of a matt yellow ochre. *Pendour* is a compact work whereas *Prairie* is linear, using plastic line to create movement. *Pendour* is organic in form, comprised entirely of curved forms, referencing the sculpted landscapes and coves of Cornwall, whereas *Prairie* is very much a constructed object, a feat of engineering, employing straight lines and sharp angles.³⁰



Figure 23.2 Barbara Hepworth, *Pendour* (1947). Wood and paint, 34.9 × 74.5 × 23.8 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. *Source:* © Bowness. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Photograph: Alex Jamison.



Figure 23.3 Anthony Caro, *Prairie* (1967). Steel, painted matt yellow, 96.5 × 582 × 320 cm. *Source:* © Estate of Anthony Caro. All rights reserved, DACS/Artimage 2024. Photograph: John Goldblatt.

For all these differences, a haptic sensibility plays a crucial role in our engagement with *both* works – and not just for beholders who are blind. Unlike Caro, Hepworth famously endorses ‘the quality of surface which speaks through our hands as well as eyes’.³¹ As noted by Alex Potts in *The Sculptural Imagination*, *Pendour* presents different relations between interior and exterior from either side:

From one side, Hepworth’s modestly sized wooden *Pendour* ... looks like a fairly solid object, resting flat on its side, with two rounded cavities scooped into it that run through to what seem to be equivalent cuts made into the other side. From this opposite side, however, more, and also larger cavities come to view, and a hollowing out effect takes precedence over a sense of rounded solidity. The difference between the two views is emphasised by the slightly different coloration of the hollows, light blue on one side and white on the other, with both contrasting with the darker, outer form of the work. Moreover, because the cavities are cut out sharply with no transitional modelling, the interruptions created by those on the far side breaking into the simply rounded, overall, form of the sculpture cannot be inferred from slight irregularities in the shaping of the sculpture’s outer surfaces on the near side.³²

Potts goes on to make an important distinction with Moore’s work, such as one of his reclining figures:

With Moore, by contrast, the overall relation between the outer shape and the hollows gouged into it can usually be apprehended from the principal viewpoint, and there are few unexpected shifts in one’s perception of the work as one changes position. It is [as] if what animates one’s viewing of a sculpture by Moore is primarily some suggestion of movement represented by the pose or overall shape. In the case of the Hepworth, the animation is much more kinaesthetic, and located in the continually shifting apprehensions of the work to be had as one circulates round it, and hollows and cuts come in and out of view.³³

While these shifting apprehensions can be experienced visually by those with sufficient visual acuity to do so, Hepworth’s work benefits greatly from the touch that is now, unfortunately, generally prohibited (contrary to the wishes of the artist). This allows us not only to fully explore the work’s complex internal/external relationships (our hands passing

through the object, feeling the juncture and shift in texture between the smooth, polished wood of the exterior and the matt painted surfaces of the interior), but also to retrieve something of the creative process by which it was carved by Hepworth. Indeed, in such circumstances touch is crucial to the kind of theory of criticism as retrieval, addressed in the next section, where what is 'retrieved' is not the artist's intention but aspects of the creative process (in this case Hepworth's engagement with the materiality of the plane wood from which it is carved, and the distinctions between how the work presents itself to us from either side).

By contrast, Caro denies the benefit of intimate viewing, let alone the touching of his sculpture. And yet few sculptures problematise our orientation like *Prairie*.³⁴ Its four horizontal, parallel steel poles defy gravity, as though levitating – a 'weightless configuration suspended in space'.³⁵ This theme is reinforced by a lower corrugated steel section that also 'floats', upon inspection supported by two alternately oriented angled 'L'-shaped plates balancing on their outer edges. Astonishingly, two of the four poles are welded only at one end to the outer edges of these plates, the pole in between connecting the plates and thus (along with the corrugated sheet below) stabilising the form. The other cantilevered pole is welded to an upright rectangular plate that is itself connected to a horizontal plate that discretely prevents this entirely separate element (surprisingly detached from the rest of the sculpture) from collapsing: a detachment not immediately apparent to the beholder, as Michael Fried has observed.³⁶ As Fried remarks, this effect of defying gravity persists even when we know how the work is constructed. This alters our relation to the floor on which the work sits. Fried brilliantly describes how:

the ground itself is seen not as that upon which everything else stands and from which everything else rises, but rather as the last, or lowest, of the three levels which, as abstract conception, *Prairie* comprises. (In this sense *Prairie* defines the ground not as that which ultimately supports everything else, but as that which does not itself require support. It makes this fact about the ground both phenomenologically surprising and sculpturally significant.)³⁷

According to Potts, *Prairie* engenders 'a powerful disintegrative logic' that is at odds with Fried's insistence on its 'galvanising sense of integrated logic'.³⁸ Crucially, despite its undoubted opticality, Caro's sculpture, as Potts notes, constitutes 'a partial subversion of the standard idealist paradigm of viewing a sculpture as fixed form or essence set in a sphere apart'.³⁹ I believe Potts is right. And, controversially (but crucial to my

argument), I believe it is an effect of disintegration that can also be experienced not just visually but through touch. Indeed, experiencing the work through touch, whether or not combined with vision, enhances the necessity to constantly rotate around the work, and to move in and out, adjusting our bodily stance.⁴⁰

A suitably expanded notion of touch, as we shall discover in the next section, recovers something important about Caro's working method, where, as Potts notes, 'Caro himself insisted that he would often work on a sculpture in a confined space where he was prevented from backing far enough [away] from it to take it in as a whole'.⁴¹ While Caro, as noted above, talks of distance and invisible boundaries, he intensely disliked exhibiting his work outside, where we can step back too far, deliberately exhibiting in smaller spaces that require just such an intimate interaction. An expanded role for touch in sculptural appreciation might therefore even encompass the artist perhaps most emblematic of the new optical sculpture as it emerged in the 1960s.

The role of touch in retrieving a sculpture's creative process

What is clear from the above is the distinctive role touch plays in accessing aspects of a work's creative process. In his chapter 'Criticism as retrieval' in *Art and its Objects* (originally published in 1968), Richard Wollheim (disregarding gendered assumptions about artists, critics and beholders) usefully distinguishes the creative process from the artist's intention. Wollheim argues that the former is more inclusive than the latter, in that 'the creative process includes the many background beliefs, conventions, and modes of artistic production against which the artist forms his intentions'; this is an inclusive list that includes 'current aesthetic norms, innovations in the medium, rules of decorum, ideological or scientific world-pictures, current systems of symbolism or prosody, physiognomic conventions, and the state of tradition'.⁴² Moreover, the most important consequence of such a distinction for criticism as retrieval directly follows:

In recording an artist's intention the critic must state it from the artist's point of view or in terms to which the artist could give conscious or unconscious recognition. The critic must concur with the artist's intentionality. But the reconstruction of the creative process is not in general similarly restrained. The critic must

certainly respect the artist's intentionality, but he does not have to concur with it. On the contrary he is justified in using both theory and hindsight unavailable to the artist if thereby he can arrive at an account of what the artist was doing that is maximally explanatory ... Anachronism arises not when the critic characterizes the past in terms of his own day, but only when in doing so he falsifies it.⁴³

One of the benefits of shifting focus onto the creative process is that it can avoid extreme forms of intentionality, without – importantly for Wollheim – denying that an artwork is the product of intentional activity. Information about an artist's ideological and aesthetic commitments, and processes of making, aid the retrieval of the creative process but, in the absence of background information, we always have the physical reality of the work itself. The argument from critics of retrieval accounts, such as Norman Bryson,⁴⁴ that we cannot claim absolute knowledge of the object of art history, therefore misses the crucial point. When the process of understanding is seen as 'essentially experiential', even when there is a large gap between the perspective of the artist and that of the interpreter, reinterpretation *requires* that we 'look' again: 'understanding a work of art is ... understanding by acquaintance'.⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly, I want to argue that we not only *look*, but interact through other senses, and particularly (with sculpture) through touch. And here we might note that *understanding through acquaintance is built into the intrinsic extended temporality of beholding a sculpture through touch*, slowing down the cursory glance of so many sighted beholders.

So how might touch retrieve aspects of the creative process distinct from vision? Touch can access properties that include (but are not limited to) a sculpture's materiality, such as weight, texture, quality of finish, temperature, density, resistance and vibration. Tapping can generate sounds, revealing aspects such as hollowness. Touch can tell us something about how the work is formed or fabricated, revealing (where relevant) individual marks or traces of the maker and the tools they used. Touch can reveal flaws in a surface, or fine texture that is simply not discernible by sight. *Pendour* exemplifies the benefits of such an engagement.

Less obviously, and perhaps more relevant to a work such as *Prairie*, touch also locates us relative to the work in a position that replicates that of the artist. Indeed, a tactile engagement with *Prairie*, such as tracing the length of one of its horizontal poles, experiencing its springiness and feeling the thickening of material at its welded joints, recovers something

of Caro's own intimate process of making: a process distinguished from, for instance, Moore's, involving the manipulation in the studio of large bits of steel often found in scrapyards and constructed directly (aided by the extraordinary skill of Caro's welder and assistant, Charlie Hendy) rather than through an intermediary process of maquettes and working models. This is not the "I can run my hand over it" sort of tactility' Caro hated but nevertheless a genuine form of tactility utilising locational information.

Of course, our sense of touch, like vision, might be fooled, though this is less likely. Indeed, one might think of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St Thomas* in the Sanssouci, Potsdam, where the doubting apostle inserts his finger into Christ's wound; or Andrea del Verrocchio's sculpted *The Incredulity of St Thomas* in Orsanmichele, Florence, depicting the moment before, when Christ pulls back his robes to reveal the wound and invite touch. Referencing both works, Geraldine A. Johnson observes: 'It was precisely sculpture's ability to give tactile proof to doubtful beholders that became a key theme of many pro-sculpture arguments presented by Early Modern writers.'⁴⁶

On a more secular note, if one were to be allowed to touch one of Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* works (however unlikely this would be, given their highly polished painted steel surfaces), the illusion of weightlessness would instantly be dispelled. And of course, what touch can reveal about fabrication is one reason why touch is so crucial to connoisseurship, and why curators regularly handle objects.⁴⁷

Moreover, as many observers have noted, touch connects us with the past in a way that sight would struggle to compete with, hence the urge towards 'unauthorised' touch.⁴⁸ This plays a particular role in religious art, such as the well-known ritual of kissing the worn-away toe of the statue of St Peter at the Basilica in the Vatican (sometimes attributed to Arnolfo di Cambio, c. 1300). But touch can also put us in intimate contact with the thought processes of an artist in a way that sight might struggle to do.

While the above is only a brief summary of the multiple engagements touch facilitates with respect to a sculpture's creative process, it is enough to demonstrate that even for sighted beholders something fundamental is therefore lost when we are told not to touch the art, or the work is confined within a vitrine. And of course, any kind of sculptural appreciation is removed for blind beholders beyond the not insignificant creative use of audio description (see elsewhere in this volume).

Wollheim's notion of retrieving a work's creative processes offers good evidence of what touching a sculpture can achieve. However, I have misgivings about the narrow 'archaeological' implications of Wollheim's

‘criticism as retrieval’, particularly in that it excludes aspects of a work’s situated reception from contributing to its meaning-bearing properties. Wollheim emphasises the internal arc between making process and art object which tends to negate: (1) the beholder’s performative share in bringing associations and dispositions that are often challenged by the work in question; and (2) the situated context where such an encounter takes place, which often primes aspects of the encounter. Juliane Rebentisch in her book *Aesthetics of Installation Art* has argued that aesthetic experience:

exists only *in relation* to an aesthetic object; conversely this object becomes aesthetic only by virtue of the processes of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic object cannot be objectified outside aesthetic experience, nor does the subject ultimately become, on the occasion of an object that must be bracketed, the object of its own experience. The new conception of aesthetic experience as a process that comprehends the subject as well as the object of this experience to the same degree and equiprimordially, and which therefore cannot be attributed to either of these entities alone, follows a new conception of aesthetic autonomy as well. Art is not autonomous because it is constituted in this or that way, but because it allows for an experience distinct from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason, by virtue of the specific structure of the relation between its subject and its object.⁴⁹

Thus, as I have written elsewhere, the ‘object is aesthetic not by virtue of qualities that *precede* the experience of such an object (that is, guaranteed by production), but only when the encounter with the artwork initiates a specifically aesthetic experience’.⁵⁰ Crucially, such an experience, while avoiding the pitfalls of a subjectivism positing the subject’s aesthetic experience *as its own object*, must account for, and value, diversities in perceptual capabilities and bodily engagements that the beholder brings to the processes of aesthetic experience.

I now turn to the particular role of ‘bracketing’ in structuring an encounter ‘distinct from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason’.

Sculpture’s kinetic volume

So far, I have attempted to demonstrate a distinctive role for touch in accessing a work’s creative process, including – but not reduced to – the

making process. I will now address a distinctive role for touch in how artworks (particularly situated artworks) locate the beholder relative to both their physical reality and their virtual or, perhaps better, bracketed realms.

Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty, F. David Martin writes in 1976 that sculpture 'vivifies the life of sensory space' through a haptic engagement, returning us 'to things as they unfold anew, as in creative perception of the child before he is enchained in habit'.⁵¹ Read would no doubt agree. And Martin adopts Read's terminology distinguishing sight-space associated with painting and touch-space with sculpture, such that 'touch-space is often as important and sometimes even more important with sculpture'.⁵² But, critical of Read's overly narrow role for touch, Martin adds: 'Our bodies are points of reference by which things achieve location, and consequently show forth as spatial.'⁵³

This theme echoes Susanne Langer in her 1953 book *Feeling and Form*, who refers to 'the semblance of kinetic volume' – which she regards as sculpture's particular mode of virtual space.⁵⁴ This activates the space surrounding a sculptural object. For instance, in Antonio Canova's 1804–19 marble sculpture, the imagined trajectory of Theseus's club, about to be deployed against a centaur that he holds by the throat, passes not through the space of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, but rather through the represented mythological realm. But abstract works also imply a kinetic potential through our imagination, whether through gestural features or, as with *Prairie*, by activating the space of the gallery. Martin likewise refers to an experienced 'thickness', where 'the space around a sculpture, though not part of its material body, is still an essential part of the perceptible structure of that sculpture' such that 'the perceptual forces in that surrounding space impact on our bodies directly, giving to that space a translucency, a thickness, that is largely missing from the space in front of a painting'.⁵⁵ And for Martin, even when 'we do not touch the material body [of a sculpture], we sense its power penetrating the surrounding space and pressing on our bodies'.⁵⁶

It is clear that for Martin, touch plays a crucial role in experiencing something of that thickness. While this might sound fanciful, such an approach can draw upon evidence from contemporary cognitive psychology. Susanna Millar's book *Space and Sense* reverses the usual focus on vision in cognitive psychology to refer to a 'haptic perception' as one that synthesises a combination of inputs from touch and movement. Millar proposes a spatial coding model as an active process that continually integrates body-centred and external cues that specify

the location, distance and direction of objects.⁵⁷ Key to such locative mechanisms is how external sources for reference are able to link to bodily-centred proprioception.

Memory and mental imagery play a key role in this indexing process, crucial to allocentric-based cognitive mapping – in other words, mapping using external rather than egocentric frames of reference. This is consistent with Gareth Evans' claim for the role of actions (including touch) in our egocentrically organised perceptual experience,⁵⁸ and Fulkerson's linked claims around the role of tactual binding (in turn sympathetic to Zenon Pylyshyn's writing on visual binding).⁵⁹ Binding refers to a fundamental cognitive function of assigning distinct features to a perceptual object. And importantly for our appreciation of sculpture through touch, Fulkerson argues that:

the binding found in haptic touch is continuous with, and not separate from, the binding found in passive cutaneous touch. That is, haptic perception involves the assignment of distinct individual features to the very same external objects felt through cutaneous touch. Haptic touch is thus not a separate form of experience but rather an extension of cutaneous touch mediated by novel inputs provided by kinesthetic involvement.⁶⁰

In other words, through the assigning of individual features to a perceptual object, as we move around a sculptural object such as Hepworth's *Pendour*, the fragmented information received through gliding the fingertips over the thresholds of the work's various holes is, over time, integrated with internal bodily sensations through receptors located in our muscles, tendons and joints as we shift our location and bend forward, twisting to better interact with the work, and circumnavigating the sculptural object. These sensations are as much a part of haptic perception as cutaneous touch.

Importantly, blind and partially blind people rely far more on cognitive reflection to navigate space relative to visually dependent people, who typically defer to current visual perception. Georgina Kleege (in a contribution to one of the *Beyond the Visual* workshops held at Tate Modern in 2022) emphasised the 360-degree awareness of someone who is blind, always aware of what (or whom) is behind, compared to the dominant frontality of vision. It is not that non-blind people lack this sensibility, rather they typically defer to current visual perception. This temporally extended 360-degree awareness is something crucial to the perceptually heightened appreciation of sculpture I have been

discussing, and is something that I believe both Hepworth and Caro's works engender, even in the sighted.

The claim is that the haptic plays a crucial role in locating us not only in relation to the work's objective and subjective poles, but also in relation to its 'inner' or 'bracketed' reality, engaging the sculptural imagination (in Alex Potts', but also Caro's sense).⁶¹ While Read acknowledges a 'tactile imagination', he offers no distinction between 'actual' volume (the space a shape displaces in air) and what Langer refers to as the semblance of kinetic volume. This omission, one suspects, stems from Read's particular valuing of tactile compactness that actively negates movement. By contrast, I want to maintain that touch plays a crucial role in experiencing correlations and (importantly) misalignments between a work's *inner* and *outer* realities.

Let me try to clarify the argument. For Langer, like Martin, 'tangible form is more than the area which the figure occupies'; it 'has a complement of empty space that it absolutely commands, that is given with it and only with it, and is, in fact, part of the sculptural volume' such that 'the figure itself seems to have a sort of continuity with the emptiness around it ... however much its solid masses may assert themselves as such'.⁶² Langer could be describing *Pendour* when she states that 'the enfolding space has vital form as a continuation of the figure';⁶³ but she could equally be describing *Prairie* where a datum is inscribed onto the host space by its floating elements, shaped by the kinetic potential of the sculpture itself, and causing a kind of oscillation through a miscalibration between the real (reinforced by the physical presence of the beholder) and virtual or bracketed realm (our imaginary engagement). Indeed, as Fried has observed, *Prairie* disconcertingly destabilises the very ground on which we walk. This is not, strictly, a feature of the work itself, but something we bring: the beholder's share. The work is changed by our presence, but also changes us, the beholder. It is a reciprocal process. It requires our imagination to realise the work's kinetic volume by activating an otherwise static object, but at the same time our imaginative involvement reinforces the kind of invisible barrier to which Caro refers. As Martin puts it, 'the attraction or repulsion of the material pulls our bodies in and out'.⁶⁴

While Langer writes of this kinetic volume as existing primarily for vision, a strong case, consistent with Martin's position, can be made that for *all* beholders touch and proprioception play an important role in experiencing kinetic volume in conjunction with cognitive reflection. Such a consideration would potentially shore up an expanded sense of Read's touch-space against Greenberg's justifiable accusation that

Read negates the incorporation of space into sculpture, while (contrary to Greenberg's ocularcentrism) acknowledging the durational shift required when sculptural work is experienced primarily through haptic perception. And, contrary to Read's hypothetical use of blindness to establish his theory of touch-space, I want to argue that this genuinely constitutes a form of 'blindness gain' with the potential to challenge entrenched curatorial norms that routinely (and often unnecessarily) exclude the role of touch in sculptural appreciation. As Kleege writes: 'True inclusion of previously marginalised groups requires abandoning mere accommodation of difference; it means fostering collaboration with different kinds of knowledge and expertise.'⁶⁵

Monochrome Passage

I conclude with an example taken from my own work. *Monochrome Passage* (2008) was an installation made for a gallery space at the former Central Saint Martin's building at Southampton Row in London. It was one of a series of hybrid works investigating an uncertain territory between sculpture and painting.

Monochrome Passage comprises two 'paintings' in two adjacent spaces, separated by a dividing wall (Figure 23.4(a)). Each painting outwardly manifests as two blocks of monochrome colour of different sizes separated by a gap, one of which is square (respectively 80 × 80 cm and 24 × 24 cm) and one rectangular with a 1:3 proportion (respectively 80 × 240 cm and 24 × 72 cm).

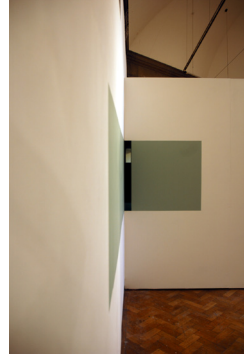
One of these pairings occupies an internal corner (Figure 23.4(b)); the other, in the adjacent space, is centred on the wall (Figure 23.4(c)). These 'paintings' are connected, via the gaps, by an internal stepped passage (Figure 23.4(d)), just 8 cm wide, the height of which reduces from 80 cm to 24 cm in a series of steps. The positioning on the wall (standing height on one side, wheelchair height on the other) enables a beholder to, depending upon their visual acuity, either peer or whisper from one space to the other (Figure 23.4(a) and (e)), an activity that unwittingly draws the beholder into the work's content (activating, and subverting, its minimalist presence).

It is only through such an intimate stance, physically pressed against the wall, whispering into its void, that the viewer grasps the spatial relationship between the two spaces. As such, what initially appears as independent artworks now registers as one continuous folded form, in effect an unbroken 'frame' belonging to both the work's outer and inner

(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)



(e)



Figure 23.4 Ken Wilder, *Monochrome Passage* (2008). Mdf and paint. Various viewpoints: (a) installation view, with the blind artist Aaron McPeake interacting with the work; (b) left-hand space; (c) right-hand space; (d) the stepped passage; (e) the blind artist Aaron McPeake places his head within the work. *Source:* © Ken Wilder. Photographs: Ken Wilder.

(‘bracketed’) apparatus. The unapologetic ocularcentric rationality of the work’s outward proportions, based on simple Albertian whole-number relationships, is sharply contrasted with the essential irrationality of the plenum-like dark passage, with its disconcerting ambiguity of scale and exclusion of the external beholder (despite its three-dimensional properties, this is a space we cannot enter but can only imaginatively occupy).

Two contrasting realities are juxtaposed. The work hovers between being two separated ‘paintings’ and a single, inside-out ‘sculptural object’, but one that is determined solely by its internal rather than external form. In so doing, it implies two distinct modes of engaging – one distanced and ocular, the other intimate, tactile, and engaging the beholder’s imagination.

Notes

- 1 Read 1956, 29–31. Read’s position, for contemporary readers, is undermined by his use of the prevalent racist language of the time (despite his prominence as an anarchist and opponent of fascism), where he goes on to compare the work to sculpture of ‘primitive races’.
- 2 Read 1956, 30–1.
- 3 Greenberg 1956, 62.
- 4 Greenberg 1947.
- 5 Caro, in conversation with Brian McAvera: see McAvera 2002.
- 6 Foregrounding sculpture rather than two-dimensional art, these exhibitions sought to engage blind and partially blind audiences by actively facilitating the touching of artworks. Tate Gallery, for instance, hosted a second, expanded *Sculpture for the Blind* exhibition in 1981, to coincide with the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons (a catalyst for museums and galleries to review woefully inadequate access provision). Other exhibitions include *Said with Feeling: Tactile sculpture for the blind and sighted to share* (1979) at the Castle Museum, Nottingham; *Sculpture for the Blind* (1980) at the National Museum of Wales; *Twelve Sculptures to Touch: An exhibition for the blind and partially sighted* (1981) at Portsmouth City Museum and Art Gallery; *Sense of Touch* (1982) at Ulster Museum; *Please Touch* (1983) and *Human Touch* (1986) at the British Museum; *Beyond Appearances* (1985) at the Castle Museum in Nottingham; and *Revelation for the Hands* (1987) at Leeds City Art Gallery and later the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick.
- 7 This included works by Reg Butler, Stephen Cox, Jacob Epstein, Barry Flanagan, Anthony Gormley, Barbara Hepworth (the only woman), Eduardo Paolozzi and Peter Randall-Page.
- 8 One notable exception was *Beyond Appearances: Sculpture for the visually handicapped and sighted to share*, at the Castle Museum in Nottingham. Despite the anachronistic title, it was curated by trailblazing blind artist Kirsten Hearn and the museum’s Michaela Butter, and the exhibition included an installation by Hearn. See Nottingham Castle Museum 1985.
- 9 Candlin 2010, 124.
- 10 Candlin 2010, 124.
- 11 Kleege, interviewed in *Orion*. See Triolo 2021.
- 12 Krauss 1979.
- 13 Getsy 2011, 105.
- 14 Thomson, in turn, acknowledges Garland-Thomson’s earlier positing of the concept of ‘disability gain’, Bauman and Murray’s use of ‘deaf gain’ and Kleege’s reflections on ‘gaining’ blindness. Thompson 2018; Garland-Thomson 2013; Bauman and Murray 2013; Kleege 2017.
- 15 Wollheim 1980.

- 16 Langer 1953.
- 17 Read 1956, 48.
- 18 Read 1956, 70.
- 19 Read 1956, x.
- 20 Read 1956, 69.
- 21 Read 1956, 71.
- 22 Read 1956, 73.
- 23 Read 1956, 97.
- 24 Read 1956, 103.
- 25 Read 1956, 103.
- 26 Fulkerson 2013, 15.
- 27 Fulkerson 2013, 20.
- 28 Wilder 2024.
- 29 For implications of Caro's move, see Wilder 2020a, 161–2.
- 30 *Prairie* arguably references another kind of landscape (hinted at in its name), a point I make in Wilder 2020a, 173–4.
- 31 Barbara Hepworth, text written in 1951 for the catalogue of her 1954 retrospective at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, Tate Archive TGA 20132, uncatalogued collection. Cited in Smith 2013.
- 32 Potts 2000, 151–2.
- 33 Potts 2000, 152.
- 34 See Wilder 2020a, ch. 8.
- 35 Potts 2000, 183.
- 36 Fried 1968, 25.
- 37 Fried 1968, 25.
- 38 See Potts 2000, 183.
- 39 See Potts 2000, 184.
- 40 Perhaps if Fried had, on reviewing the work when it was first shown at the Kasmin Gallery in London in 1967, used touch to palpate the poles he might have discovered that they were steel rather than the aluminium which he had assumed from the evidence of his eyes.
- 41 See Potts 2000, 184.
- 42 Wollheim 1980, 200–1.
- 43 Wollheim 1980, 201.
- 44 Bryson argues that meaning is a 'variable term fluctuating according to the fluctuations of discourse'. Bryson 1983, 85.
- 45 Wollheim 1993, 142.
- 46 Johnson 2014, 92.
- 47 See Candlin 2007; MacDonald 2007; Pye 2007.
- 48 Candlin 2007, 89; 2017.
- 49 Rebentisch [2003] 2012, 11.
- 50 Wilder 2020b, 352.
- 51 Martin 1976, 285.
- 52 Martin 1976, 282.
- 53 Martin 1976, 278.
- 54 Langer 1953.
- 55 Martin 1976, 282.
- 56 Martin 1976, 282.
- 57 Millar 2008.
- 58 Evans 1982.
- 59 Pylyshyn 2008.
- 60 Fulkerson 2013, 61.
- 61 See Potts 2000.
- 62 Langer 1953, 88.
- 63 Langer 1953, 88.
- 64 Martin 1976, 282.
- 65 Kleege 2022.

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Index

- 3D printing 36, 133, 357–8, 370
360-degree awareness 407–8
- Abdul, Shade 97
- ableism and disablism 30–1, 155, 335–8
- absence, seeing and not seeing 374–8, 387–8
gravity of the visual world 384–7
During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps) (2015) (Mollin and Voegelin) 373, 374
tapping, touching, inherited eyes 378–84
- access
‘aesthetics of access’ 125
CBS perspective 29
collective 139, 143–6, 150
curatorial practices 38–41
meaning of 126
museums and galleries 334
needs, multidimensional
spectrum of 337
politics of 76
resonance as form of 167–8
touch access 18–19
see also creative access; Open Access
- accessibility, reimagining 61–2
‘Accessibility manifesto for the arts’ (2018) (Papalia) 143–4
- active exclusion 112
- aesthesis 362
- aesthetic experience 405
- aesthetics, blind *see* blind aesthetics
- ‘aesthetics of access’ 125
- Aesthetics of Installation Art* (2003) (Rebentisch) 405
- AHRC-funded *Beyond the Visual* projects 3–4
- Aisthesis: Scenes from the aesthetic regime of art* (2011) (Rancière) 367
- Alam, Kishor 25
- Alma-Tadema, Lawrence 276
- Alston, Adam 77–8
- Amnesiac Shrines* series (Nelson) 277
- Apollo 197
- Archaeoacoustics* project (1995) 256
- architecture
non-visual engagement (Lewerentz) 220–1
see also *Blue House and Blue House Study* (2022) (Kung and Chang)
- Architecture Beyond Sight project 95
course testing 100–2
development process 96–100
initiating 96
learning lessons 102–6
moving forward 106–7
- Art, Museums and Touch* (2010) (Candlin) 2, 392–3
- Art and its Objects* (1968) (Wollheim) 402–3
- art establishment 1
- articulating blindness, new ways of 25–8
- Art of Sculpture, The* (1956) (Read) 391, 395–6
- art school 50
- ASMR 330, 331, 332
- audio describers 339, 340
- audio description 14–15
characteristics 33–4
creative approaches to 126–31
cross-sensory translation 166
Cult of Beauty exhibition (2023) 40–1

- audio description (*cont.*)
 development of 75
FAB Too Touch (2022) (Reynolds) 41–2
I As Object-Unseen (David Johnson) 42–3
La Cueillette des pommes (1887–8) (*Apple Harvest*) (Pissarro) 349–53
 within mainstream provision 40
Once I Saw it All (2022) (McPeake) 43–4
 as part of medical model of blindness 32
In Plain Sight exhibition (2022–3) 39–40
 and resonance 167
 shared characteristics with director’s commentary 323
Sheer (2012) 82, 86–8
 subjectivity and objectivity in 338, 341, 352
 use by Extant 75–7
 use by Graeae 76
 West Space exhibition (d’Evie) 65
 workshops 32–5
see also [inclusive museum audio description, reimagining](#)
- Auslan 64
 autobiography 43–4
- Bannon, Jo *see* *Passing* (2023), [director’s commentary](#)
- Barger, Michelle 241–2, 243–4
 Barlow, Phyllida 283
 Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL) 95, 98, 104, 106
 Baudelaire, Charles 349
 beholders, engagement of 4–5
 ‘be-holding’ 53, 239–40
 bells and gongs 63, 226–7, 230, 231, 233, 234
Sweet Gongs Vibrating exhibition (2016) 128–9, 131–2, 133–4, 136, 269
see also [sound as vibration](#)
- Benus, Ezra 135
Beyond the Visual projects 3–4
- Bill C-7 152–3
 binding 407
 Bishop, Claire 290
Black Cane Diary (Rizzo Naudi), extracts from 307–20
 blind aesthetics 357
 art and the body politic 367–8
 complexity and phenomenology 360–2
 concluding artwork 368–70
 introductory artwork 357–8
 Rancière and distribution of the sensible 362–7
 what it is to be blind 359–60
 blind authors 59
 Blind Community Center, San Diego 133
 blindness
 complexity of lived experience of 359, 360–2
 definitions of 25, 27, 30, 60, 110
 as journey 42–3
 methods used to explore 28–30
 as mode of perceiving 60
 new ways of articulating 25–8
 paraphernalia of 41–3, 74
 radical potential of 58–9
 blindnesses 27
 blindness gain 21–2, 25, 33–4, 339–40
 architecture 221
 audio description 341
Prière de toucher! Art and Matter exhibition (2016–17), as example 36–8
see also ‘touch-space’, ‘blindness gain’ and the ontology of sculpture
- blind stick/white cane 42, 157n, 378, 380, 389n
see also *Black Cane Diary* (Rizzo Naudi), extracts from
- Blue House and Blue House Study* (2022) (Kung and Chang) 193–6
Blue Body 199–203, 204
Blue Eyes 203–8
Blue Mind 208–12

- echoes in the walls 198–9
 illusion of order 196–8
 participatory events 199–212
 various viewpoints 195
 blundering 52–3, 63–6
 bodily experiences *see Blue House and Blue House Study* (2022) (Kung and Chang)
 ‘bodyminds’ 143, 144, 145, 146, 156n
 Bolt, David 26, 27–8
 Boon, Lizzie 63
 Bord, Janet 177
 Borges, Jorge Luis 384, 386
 Bourriaud, Nicolas 290, 291
 Bower, Julie Rose 331
 Boys, Jos 220–1
 braille 41–2
Bread (2018-) (Wu) 301–3
 installation view and detail 302
 bronze 249, 265
brown on white (1993) (Gallaccio) 279–80
 Bryson, Norman 403
 burlesque 72–3
Burning Tears project 164, 166

 cabaret/shows ‘in the dark’ 77–8, 79
 Caltieri, Sarah 84
 Candlin, Fiona 2, 392–3
 Caro, Anthony 392
 Prairie (1967) 398, 399, 400, 401–2, 403–4, 408
 Cartin, Daniel 106
 casting 264–5
 cataracts 52
 Cavallo, Amelia 74, 75, 76–7, 78–9, 80, 82, 88, 92
 cave art 255–6
 ‘Celebration of Light’ fireworks
 festival, Vancouver 160
 Chang, Genevieve I. 73
 Chang, Lydia Ya Chu 193, 205
 Chartres Cathedral, labyrinth laid
 into floor of 175, 176, 177
 Chen Chen 199–200, 201–2, 203

 children with visual impairments
 (CVI) *see creative play by children with visual impairments* (CVI)
 Chladni plate 254–5
 chocolate works, Anya Gallaccio 278–80
 Choi, Crystal 130
 Chottin, Marion 37
Circumstantes (2017) (Wilder and McPeake) 215
 film 231–4
 and idea of encircling 225–6
 non-visual engagement (Lewerentz) 220–1
 origins of/inspiration for 221–2
 performance installation 227, 230
 Sankt Petri, Klippan, Sweden (building) 215–20
 score 226–7, 228–9
 civic culture 50–1
 Cixous, Hélène 49, 375, 386–7
 Clark, John Lee 380–1
 co-creation of audio description
 340, 341–4
 audio description of *La Cueillette des pommes* (1887–8) (*Apple Harvest*) (Pissarro) 349–53
 collaboration
 between beholder and artwork 32
 between blind and nonblind people 31–2
 collective access 139, 143–6, 150
 colonialism, and civic culture 50–1
 colour 43
 communities
 building 143, 144, 146, 148, 151
 marginalised 336–7, 364
 community
 of ‘co-conspirators’ 142
 Rancière on 363–4, 365–6
 complexity of lived experience of
 blindness 359, 360–2
 Constant, Benjamin 180–1
 contingency *see blind aesthetics*
 copper 249
Copper Lick (2024) (Lapelytè) 259–60

- Coral Reef, The* (2000) (Nelson)
186, 187, 188, 277
- Cornock, Stroud 185
- Corrieri, Augusto *see* *Passing*
(2023), *director's commentary*
- COVID-19 pandemic 64–6, 134
- Cox, Lynn 98
- creative access 32–8, 125–6
creative approaches to audio
description 126–31
curating haptic activism 131–6
new accessible futures 136–7
- creative play by children with visual
impairments (CVI) 109–12
axial coding findings (translation
of early philosophies into
practice) 114–17
conclusion 118–20
definitions 110–11
open coding findings (anomalies
in theories of blindness)
112–14
selective coding findings
117–18
- Crip Ecologies* exhibition (2021)
134–5
- critical blindness studies
within critical disability studies
22–4
current conversations in (Critical
Blindness Studies [CBS]
conference [2022]) 24–31
hopes for the future 44–5
significance of *In Plain Sight*
exhibition (2022–3) 38
- critical disability studies 22–4
- criticism 402–3
- cross-sensory translation of light *see*
pyrotechnic arts
- Cult of Beauty* exhibition (2023)
40–1
- curatorial practice(s) 38–41
see also creative access; d'Evie,
Fayen, experiences and
creative liberation of curatorial
practice
- Curiosity Paradox 154–5
- Cymatics 255
- damage to objects 133–4, 269–70
- Dans le Noir 77–8
- darkness
Blue House Study (2022) (Kung
and Chang) 206, 207
performances in 92
Sheer (2012) 80, 83–4, 85, 88,
89, 90
theatre in the dark 77–9
- 'deaf gain' 45n
- death 141, 157n
- 'decentering vision' 30–1
- decolonisation and *Decolonist*
exhibition (2016) 56
- Demodocus 114
- derangement 179–81
- d'Evie, Fayen, experiences and
creative liberation of curatorial
practice
approaching blindness 49–53
artistic development 54–9
blundering as wayfinding through
uncertainty 63–6
and Kleege 16, 55
radical potential of blindness
58–9
reimagining accessibility 61–2
terms of blindness 59–61
West Space exhibitions 54–5,
63–4, 65–6
- Dhawan, Nikita 382
- Die Welt als Labyrinth* (cancelled
exhibition) 181–2, 188
- digitisation 29
- Dionysus 197–8
- director's commentary *see* *Passing*
(2023), *director's commentary*
- disability
critical disability studies 22–4
epistemological model of 111–12
and expressive communication
61
medical model of 335, 337, 361
as 'method of creative media
practice' 31
social model of 22–3, 337, 361–2
use of term 361–2
use of word 'normal' 74

- Disability Filibuster Against Bill C-7 152–3
- Disability Justice 139, 141, 145, 146, 154, 155
- Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006) (Shakespeare) 361–2
- disablism and ableism 335–8
- Disagreement: Politics and philosophy* (1995) (Rancière) 362–4
- DisOrdinary Architecture Project 95, 96, 98, 104
- disorientation 172–3, 175, 176–7, 179, 188–9
see also *Labyrinth* (1971) (Selby); labyrinths
- Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics* (2020) (Rancière) 364–7
- Dokumaci, Arseli 31
- Doria, Corinne 30, 44
- Double Blind* (2008) (Hirsch) 44
- Downey, Chris 100, 101
- Dramatizing Blindness* (2021) (Healey) 26–7
- dreams 376, 383
- Dudchenko, Paul 172
- During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)* (2015) (Mollin and Voegelin) 373, 374
- Easter Aquhorthies 256
- Eataipei* (2015) (Wu and Tseng) 292–7
dishes 295–6
menu 293, 294
Rain Wu, Shikai Tseng and Chung-Ho Tsai 292
- Eco, Umberto 66–7
- embodied approach 73
- ‘emerge’, etymology of word 53
- Enlightenment philosophies 113–14
- epistemological model of disability/blindness 111–12
- Escalona, Álvaro 261–2
- Escalona, David 260–2
- eugenics 67n
- eversion 59–60
- Excerpts from Color Journal (In Plain Sight)* (2022) (Gossiaux) 43
- exclusion 111–12
passive 112, 113, 117–18, 119–20
social 364
- expression, modes of 61
- Extant 71–2
cabaret/shows ‘in the dark’ 77–8, 79
productions following *Sheer* (2012) 92
use of audio description 75–7
see also *Sheer* (2012)
- eye charts 43–4, 251
- FAB Too Touch* (2022) (Reynolds) 41–2
- fear of the unknown 197
- Feeling and Form* (1953) (Langer) 406
- ‘Fingerworks for Fireworks’ project 161
- food art 289–91
Bread (2018-) (Wu) 301–3
Eataipei (2015) (Wu and Tseng) 292–7
The Tea Set (2016) (Wu) 297–301
- fossilised handshake 16–18
- Frazer, Mat 73
- frequency (sound) 253, 254–5, 256–7
- Fried, Michael 401
- Fryer, Louise 75
- Fulkerson, Matthew 398, 407
- Gadsden, Rachel 98, 100
- Gallaccio, Anya 278–80
- Gallery Gachet 141–2
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie 22
- Garneau, David 141, 142
- Gebbles, Tim 85
- generative AI, museum audio description 341–3
- Getsy, David 393
- getting lost 171–5
in art 181–9
labyrinths 175–8
rational derangement 179–81
- Gilbert, Iona 342
- Gilmore, Heather 85

- Giovanni, Elena Di 340
- Goeltzenleuchter, Brian 129
- Goidell, Hillary 63, 64
- gongs *see* bells and gongs; sound as vibration
- Gonzalez-Torres, Felix 276–7, 278
- goosebumps 160
- Gossiaux, Emilie 43
- Graeae 76
- gravity of the visual world 384–7
- Greenberg, Clement 391–2, 393
- Griffiths, Anna 73
- Griffiths, Gavin 104
- Groot, Raphaëlle de 132
- Hampton Court Palace maze 176, 177
- handling scores 17–18
- haptic activism, curating 131–6
- Haptic Encounters* (2017–18) (Kleege) 35
- haptic perception 406–7
- harm, expression of 363
- harmonics 254
- Haus Ur* (1985–) (Schneider) 282
- Hazan, Susan 342
- Headley, Sistah Stella 369, 370
- Healey, Devon 26–7
- Henry Moore Institute (HMI) exhibition 4
- Hepworth, Barbara, *Pendour* (1947) 398, 399, 400–1
- Hesse, Eva and *Sans II* (1968) 239–47
- heuristics 174
- Hirsch, Antonia 44
- Hopkinson, Tamsen 55–6
- Hulstrom, Brett 160, 166
- I As Object-Unseen* (David Johnson) 42–3
- illusion of order 196–8
- images, describing 14
- impairment 22–3, 337
- use of term 361–2
- visual, definition of 110–11
- inclusive museum audio description, reimagining 333
- addressing ableism and disablism 335–6
- combating ableism and disablism 336–8
- creators of museum audio description 339–40
- future of museum audio description 343–4
- generative AI 341–3
- listeners to museum audio description 340–1
- museum audio description 338
- museums and galleries as agents of social change 333–4
- Indigenous art and artists 55–6, 58
- Indigenous writers 57–8
- inequality 363
- infrasound 257
- injury, expression of 363
- Ink, Marion 34
- In Plain Sight* exhibition (2022–3) 16, 38–40
- Installation* (1995) (Gallaccio) 278–9
- institutions, development of early 114–17
- interdependence 139, 144–6
- intersectionality 23, 91–2, 136, 141–6
- Jacob, Wendy 128–9
- Jahn, Bob 257
- Johns, Doug 244–5
- Johnson, David 42–3, 104, 106, 369
- Sanctuary Café* (2021) 369–70
- Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles* (2020) 357–8
- Johnson, Rashid 283–5
- Jonsson, Erik 172–3
- Kilburn, Fae 104
- Kinderzimmer* (2009) (Schneider) 282
- King, Jo 81, 82
- Kittay, Eva Feder 145
- Kleege, Georgina 1, 2, 31–2, 34–5, 60 and audio description 14–15

- and d'Evie 16, 55
Haptic Encounters (2017–18) 35
More than Meets the Eye (2017) 2, 31, 32, 35
 and *Sans II* (1968) (Hesse) 239, 243
Sight Unseen (1999) 60
 and touch/touch access 15–19, 35–6, 393
- Klein, Wilhelm 115–16
- Knossos, labyrinth at 175, 176, 177
- knowledge, two-directional flow of 31
- Kung, Wei Chieh 193, 205
- kyi zee* gongs 262, 263, 268
- Labyrinth* (1971) (Selby) 182–6
 3D model 183
 'baffling' visual environment 184
 as fully immersive experience 188
 mirror maze 184
 Stroud Cornock using 'survival kit' to negotiate dark upper floor 185
- labyrinths 175–9, 181
Die Welt als Labyrinth (cancelled exhibition) 181–2, 188
The Coral Reef (2000) (Nelson) 186, 187, 188, 277
- La Cueillette des pommes* (1887–8) (*Apple Harvest*) (Pissarro), audio description of 349–53
- landmarks 173–4
- Langer, Susanne 406, 408
- language 6, 25–8, 37–8, 59–60
- Lapelytè, Lina 259–60
- Layers of Vision* exhibition (2022–3) 38
- Leacy, Paul 82
- Let's call it grass* (2015) (Goeltzenleuchter and van Suchtelen) 129
- Levison, Poppy 102, 103
- Lewerentz, Sigurd 220–1
 see also *Sankt Petri, Klippan, Sweden*
- light 385, 386, 387
 see also *pyrotechnic arts*
- Lin, Yo-Yo 135
- Lindgren, Kristin 128
- Lis, Michael 146–7, 151
- Lispector, Clarice 375, 376
- lost, getting see *getting lost*
- Lynch, Kevin 172
- Machon, Josephine 90
- MacKenzie Art Gallery 147, 150–1
- Madurforo, Miracle 103
- Maeshowe chamber 257
- magic see *Passing* (2023), director's commentary
- magician's patter 323
- manifesto, definition and role of 143–4
- marginalised communities 336–7, 364
- Martin, Darrin 132–3
- Martin, David F. 406, 408
- Massey, Petra 82–3
- mazes see *labyrinths*
- McPeake, Aaron 63, 249–53, 410
Once I Saw it All (2022) 43–4, 251
Sensing Naples and Vesuvius (2023) 268–9
Singing Bowls and Iceland Paintings (2012) 270–1
The Sound of their Deaths in Australia (2015) 266–7
Spun Lead Crystal Plate (1997) 263
Toll (2013) 265–6
 see also *Circumstantes* (2017) (Wilder and McPeake); sound as vibration
- medical model of blindness 30, 32
 d'Evie's experiences of 51, 52
 and *Prière de toucher! Art and Matter* exhibition 37–8
- medical model of disability 335, 337, 361
- Meerding, Duncan 98, 100, 102, 104
- memoir 28–9
- memory, and smell 275–6, 285–6
- metaphors 26–8, 166

- methods used to explore blindness 28–30
- Michalko, Rod 2, 27
- Millar, Susanna 406–7
- Milliard, Coline 181
- Mills, Selina 25
- misorientation 172, 173, 176–7
- ‘missing’ *see* absence, seeing and not seeing
- Mollin, David, *During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)* (2015) 373, 374
- Molyneux, William 113–14
- Monochrome Passage* (2008) (Wilder) 409–11
- Moore, Henry 266, 391–2, 395–6, 400
- Oval with Points* (1968–70) 396, 397
- More than Meets the Eye* (2017) (Kleege) 2, 31, 32, 35
- multisensory engagement 5
- museum audio description, inclusive *see* inclusive museum audio description, reimagining
- Museum Incognita 16, 57–8
- myopia 49–50, 51
- Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness* (1998) (Michalko) 2
- Nada 1 and Nada 2* (Escalona and Escalona) 261–2
- Naismith, William 172
- Nancy, Jean-Luc 376, 383
- Nelson, Mike 186–8, 277
- neo-burlesque 73
- New Access Consortium Presents* exhibition (2015) 141–3
- Newgrange Neolithic chamber tomb 257–8
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 197
- non-professional contributions 59
- ‘normal’, use of word 74
- ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ 104, 108n
- objectivity and subjectivity in audio description 338, 341, 352
- ocularcentrism
- challenging 79
- d’Evie’s experiences of 50, 51
- metaphor for 88
- sustaining of 140
- O’Dowd, Clare 4
- Once I Saw it All* (2022) (McPeake) 43–4, 251
- Open Access 29, 64, 153
- interdependence and collective access 144–6
- and Papalia 141, 142, 143–4, 146, 154, 156
- ophthalmology 30
- order, illusion of 196–8
- Oshodi, Maria 71, 78–9, 88
- see also* Sheer (2012)
- otherness 140
- Oval with Points* (1968–70) (Moore) 396, 397
- Papalia, Carmen 64, 90–1, 139, 149, 164
- Provisional Structures* exhibitions 146–55, 156
- shift toward collective creation 155–6
- ‘uncovering the realm of the nonvisual’ 140–4
- paraphernalia of blindness 41–3, 74
- Partington, Zoe 98, 100, 104
- Passing* (2023), director’s commentary 321–3
- cards (07:06) and rabbits (11:38) 329–32
- curtain (12:30) 332
- hands (04:24) 327–9
- opening shot (02:37) 323–4
- origin story 325–7
- Passini, Romedi 175
- passive exclusion 112, 113, 117–18, 119–20
- Pendour* (1947) (Hepworth) 398, 399, 400–1
- Penn, Professor Alan 96, 99
- perceiving, blindness as mode of 60
- ‘perceiving body’ 34

- perception
 blind 27
 haptic 406–7
 need to offer diverse entry points 240
- Pereira, Carlos Mourao 98, 99
- performative creative play 109–10
- Phillips, Bryan 57
- Pié Balaguer, Asun 146
- Pissarro, Camille, *La Cueillette des pommes* (1887–8) (*Apple Harvest*), audio description of 349–53
- Planck, Max 271–2
- play *see* creative play by children with visual impairments (CVI)
- police (Rancière) 365–6
- politics and aesthetics 364–7
- ponderability (sculpture) 396
- Porter, Liz 98
- Potts, Alex 400, 401–2
- PowerPoint 13–14
- Prairie* (1967) (Caro) 398, 399, 400, 401–2, 403–4, 408
- Prière de toucher! Art and Matter* exhibition (2016–17) 36–8
- Project Fire Flower* (2021) 162
- Chrysanthemum* tactile panel 163
- Dahlia* tactile panel 164
- pyrotechnical tableau 165
- tactile panels 162
- Proust, Marcel 275
- Provisional Structures* exhibitions 146–55, 156
- Carmen Papalia with model of architectural design 149
- entrance 152
- inside the domed tent 153
- model of the structure 149
- pyrotechnic arts 159–61
- Burning Tears* project 164, 166
- ‘Fingerworks for Fireworks’ project 161
- Project Fire Flower* (2021) 162–4, 165
- resonance as form of access 167–8
- Pythagoras 254
- Quagliozi, Dominic 135
- Rader, Matthew 140
- Rancière, Jacques 359–60, 362–7, 368, 389n
- Razlan, Mohammad 105
- Read, Herbert 391, 393, 395–6, 406, 408–9
- Rebentisch, Juliane 405
- recreational fear 178
- Redvers-Rowe, Mandy 97, 98, 100, 101
- reimagining inclusive museum
- audio description *see* inclusive museum audio description, reimagining
- relational art/aesthetics 290–1
- religion 113
- resonance 160, 164, 167–8
- Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) 379–80, 388n
- Reynolds, Clarke 41–2, 43, 103
- Rimbaud, Arthur 179
- risk 177–8
- Rizzo Naudi, Joseph, extracts from *Black Cane Diary* 307–20
- Roses of Heliogabalus, The* (1888) (Alma-Tadema) 276
- Runudde, Sindri *see* *Passing* (2023), director’s commentary
- Ruscha, Ed 378–80
- sachse, jes 146–7, 148–9
- Sanctuary Café* (2021) (David Johnson) 369–70
- Sankt Petri, Klippan, Sweden 215–20
- altar 219, 232
- baptismal font and trough 218, 232
- film and film stills 231–4
- non-visual engagement 220–1
- uncut bricks 219
- vaulted roof structure 216
- see also* *Circumstantes* (2017) (Wilder and McPeake)
- Sans II* (1968) (Hesse) 239–47
- Schiller, Friedrich von 366

- Schneider, Gregor 280–2
- Schubert, Karsten 279
- Script/Rescript* exhibition (2022) 129–30, 135
- Sculptural Imagination, The* (2000) (Potts) 400, 401–2
- sculpture, ontology of *see* ‘touch-space’, ‘blindness gain’ and the ontology of sculpture
- ‘sculpture for the blind’ exhibitions 392, 411n
- Sealey, Jenny 125
- seeing and not seeing *see* absence, seeing and not seeing
- Selby, Ralph 182, 184, 185
- Sensing Naples and Vesuvius* (2023) (McPeake) 268–9
- sensitivity 140
- Seymour, Anna 61, 64
- Shakespeare, Tom 361–2
- Shea Butter Three Ways* (2019) (Rashid Johnson) 283–5
- Sheer* (2012) 72
- Amelia Cavallo as Miss Stagmus 82
- audio description in 82, 86–8
- background to 72–4
- building from 91–2
- consideration of audio description, and use by Extant 75–7
- converting knowledge and experience into a professional production 79
- critical response 89
- directing 79–83
- general assessment and fracture points 89–91
- Heather Gilmore as Bifuckular 85
- Sarah Caltieri as Squint 84
- summary of, and techniques 83–6
- Tim Gebbles as Cataracto 85
- Siebers, Tobin 371n
- Sight Unseen* (1999) (Kleege) 60
- Singing Bowls and Iceland Paintings* (2012) (McPeake) 270–1
- situated art 5
- Situationists 180–1
- Skalman, Aren 133
- Skylights* (Wilder) 221–2
- exterior view of girls’ and boys’ mortuaries 222
- light effects in boys’ mortuary 224
- reflection of room aperture in girls’ mortuary 223
- ribbon of light as feature 225
- Slater, Andy 64
- sleep 376–7, 383
- smell 129, 275–6
- chocolate works (Gallaccio) 278–80
- extrinsic *versus* intrinsic smells 276–8
- and memory 285–6
- Shea Butter Three Ways* (2019) (Rashid Johnson) 283–5
- Süßer Duft* (2008) (Schneider) 280–1, 282
- and touch 286n
- Smith, Althea 105
- Snellen eye chart 43–4, 251
- ‘social categorisation’ 335
- social change, museums and galleries as agents of 333–4
- social construction 371n
- social exclusion 364
- social model of disability 22–3, 337, 361–2
- Somigli, Luca 143–4
- sound as vibration 249–50, 252–5
- contemporary works 258–62
- physics of sound 253–4, 256–7
- prehistoric vibrational expertise and practice 255–8
- sound sculptures 262–71
- vibrational practice 271–2
- Sound of their Deaths in Australia, The* (2015) (McPeake) 266–7
- Space and Sense* (2008) (Millar) 406–7
- spatial cognition 174–5, 176–7, 188–9
- speech 362–3
- Spun Lead Crystal Plate* (1997) (McPeake) 263
- standing waves 256–8

- stereotypes 335
- Sterrett, Jill 242, 244
- stone circles 256
- Stonehenge 256
- 'strategic blindness' and 'strategic deafness' 381–2
- Streatfield, Satu 39–40
- Stroke* (1994) (Gallaccio) 279
- subjectivity and objectivity in audio description 338, 341, 352
- Suchtelen, Anna van 129
- surfaces 396
- Surrealists and Surrealism 179–80
- Süßer Duft* (2008) (Schneider) 280–1, 282
- Sweet Gongs Vibrating* exhibition (2016) 128–9, 131–2, 133–4, 136, 269
- Taipei Fine Arts Museum 193
- Tao Tê Ching* 210
- Tea Set, The* (2016) (Wu) 297–9
 - objects within the set 300–1
- Temkin, Ann 246
- 'temporarily able-bodied' 146
- 'temporarily sane' 146
- Theatre in the Dark* (2017) (Alston and Welton) 77–8
- theories of blindness and visual impairment
 - anomalies in 112–14
 - early, translation into practice 114–17
- Thompson, Hannah 2, 339–40
- Three threads an a thrum (for D.B.)* (2016) (Jacob) 128–9
- Time and Tide Bells* (2008) (Vergette) 258–9
- tingles 160
- Tiravanija, Rirkrit 290
- Toll* (2013) (McPeake) 265–6
- Total Isolierkisten (Total Isolation Boxes)* series (Schneider) 281–2
- touch
 - access 18–19
 - curating haptic activism 131–6
 - damage to objects 133–4, 269–70
 - different aesthetic values 380–1
 - FAB Too Touch* (2022) (Reynolds) 41–2
 - generating holistic and memorable account of artwork 35–6
 - handling scores 17–18
 - manner of, dictated by work of art 18
 - Prière de toucher! Art and Matter* exhibition 36–8
 - representing light 161
 - revealing features not visible 35
 - Sans II* (Hesse) 239–47
 - sensitivity 140
 - and smell 286n
 - tours 14, 15–16, 18, 35, 56, 322
 - and visually dependent people 14, 15–16
 - West Space exhibition 54–5
- touching, creation of 'new world' 382
- 'touch-space', 'blindness gain' and the ontology of sculpture 391–5
 - comparison of Hepworth's *Pendour* (1947) with Caro's *Prairie* (1967) 398–402, 403–4
 - dimensions of touch 397–8
 - Monochrome Passage* (2008) (Wilder) 409–11
 - role of touch in retrieving a sculpture's creative process 402–5
 - sculpture's kinetic volume 405–9
 - touch-space 395–7
- toy design 109
- training for invigilators 270
- Transformers* (2021) (Quagliozzi) 135
- transience 357, 358
- Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles* (2020) (David Johnson) 357–8
- trauma-informed lens 149–50
- 'treatment' 240
- Trinity Buoy Wharf Bell* (2010) (Vergette) 259

- Trrr ...* exhibition (2024) 261
 Tsai, Chung-Ho 292, 294
 Tseng, Shikai, *Eataipei* (2015) 292–7
- Uchelen, Collin van *see* [pyrotechnic arts](#)
- Vancouver Art Gallery 141–2, 151
Vanishing Lady, The (1896) (film) 332
- Vergette, Marcus 258–9
 vibration *see* [sound as vibration](#)
 Vicuña, Cecilia 56–7
 visitor wellbeing 334
 visual certainty and ambiguity *see* [absence, seeing and not seeing](#)
 visual dependence/visually dependent people 13–16
 visual hallucinations 49, 52
 visual impairment, definition of 110–11
Visual Inspection (2019) (Rader) 140
- Voegelin, Salomé, *During the Night Crops will Still Grow (unless the player sleeps)* (2015) 373, 374
- voice 363
 volume 396, 406, 408
 Vout, Caroline 40–1
 Vo Vo 146–7, 148, 149–50
 vulnerability 146
- Waller, Steven 255
 Warne, Vanessa 2, 41
 Warren, David H. 117–18
 Watson, Aaron 256, 257
- wavelength 253–4, 256
 waves 252
 Weil, Simone 385
 wellbeing 334
 Wellcome Collection, and audio description 40
 West, Katie 16, 56–8
 West Space exhibitions (d’Evie) 54–5, 63–4, 65–6
What Can a Body Do? exhibition (2012) 128
 white cane/blind stick 42, 157n, 378, 380, 389n
see also [Black Cane Diary](#) (Rizzo Naudi), extracts from
- Whitechapel Bell Foundry 264
 W-ICAD (Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description) model 340, 342–3
- Wilder, Ken
Monochrome Passage (2008) 409–11
see also [Circumstantes](#) (2017) (Wilder and McPeake); [Skylights](#) (Wilder)
- Willet, Cynthia 145
 Wollheim, Richard 402–3, 404–5
- Wu, Rain
Bread (2018-) 301–3
Eataipei (2015) 292–7
The Tea Set (2016) 297–301
- Yang Seng-Hong 203–4, 205, 206
 Yorkshire Sculpture International festival 282–3, 285
- Zeros and Nils* (2002) 75
 Zimbardo, Tanya 246

'This book marks the first coherent approach to setting out just what visually impaired and blind people bring to art as a way of exploring the world; it powerfully sets out the net contribution of sight loss to human creative endeavour and the experience of appreciating that output.'

Anna Tylor, Chair of Trustees, RNIB

'This publication shines a light on the relationship between blindness and art practice, a subject long deserving of far greater consideration, reminding us that the best so-called "visual art" must always be much more than visual.'


Godfrey Worsdale OBE, Director of the Henry Moore Foundation

Beyond the Visual broadens the discussion of multisensory ways of beholding contemporary art, with a particular emphasis on modes that transcend a dependency upon sight. A central premise is that a shift in the aesthetic engagement afforded by hybrid forms of contemporary art has the potential to open up new sensory and cognitive engagements for blind and partially blind people. This is a subject that has rarely been addressed within the literature on contemporary arts or disability studies.

Bringing together leading international scholars and artists in the emerging field of 'blindness arts', including blind and partially blind artists, curators, advocates for inclusive practices and models of audio description, cognitive psychologists, and theorists of installation, performance and sound art, the book offers a detailed consideration of exemplars of such multisensory engagement, pre-eminently in works by blind or partially blind artists. In so doing, the book not only shifts the discussion on access and inclusivity – reconceiving access as integral to the creative process – but argues that this has the potential to enrich the experience of art for all beholders, moving beyond an often-unexamined reliance on vision.

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