

Blind Aesthetics:
Art as the currency of radical vision

by

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David Johnson

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Abstract

Blind Aesthetics: Art as the currency of radical vision

Blindness is both the instrument and the object of the blind author's art practice that leads this research thesis. As such this art and this thesis is as much *of* blindness as it is *about* blindness. Whether it is the floating touch-points of the *Transient Object* (2019) rendered in 3D print; or whether it is the image of thought generated in the mind of the beholder in the mirrored jigsaw puzzle *Blind I Stand...* (2020); or whether it is the vacillating musical tones that eddy and flow around the body of the visitor to the sound piece *Alarming Proximity* (2019), all of these artworks delineate and describe a blind-life currency, an economy of the visible and the invisible that is constitutive of the blind aesthetic that is proposed by this research.¹

The blind aesthetic or blind modality that emerges from this research has its own expressive language. This language celebrates the positive and generative aspects of blindness rather than striving to overcome the impediments that blindness presents in our contemporary ocularcentric society. As such, this work amplifies the work of contemporary disability-gain theorists Georgina Kleege and Hannah Thompson. These theorists are in turn, key members of the contemporary critical disability studies community.

The thesis starts by introducing the important concept of *anamnesis*. Anamnesis is a form of pre-experiential, latent, embodied knowledge. Anamnesis is the idea that the knowledge of seeing or sight is prior to actually seeing. Furthermore, anamnesis as prior knowledge allows for blindness to be integral to seeing or sight. The works of Jacques Derrida (1967 - 1990) and Jean François Lyotard (1993 - 1997) have been particularly helpful in articulating anamnesis and the powerful contribution it makes to the argument to blind aesthetics.

Chapter 2 of the thesis proposes that our epistemological lives consist of a fluxing, aesthetic currency and that, following Tobin Seibers (2008), this currency is essentially complex and embodied. Guided by the writings of Martin Heidegger (1953), Johnny Golding

¹ These artworks are featured in the research thesis and are Figures 19, 3 and 17 respectively.

(2010) and Tim Ingold (2020) the thesis goes on to argue that this life-currency is regulated and articulated not only by anamnesis but also by the twin concepts of Attunement and the Comma.

Chapter 3 examines the relationship between the spoken word and mental imagery. With the help of recently revived ideas on extreme imagination it is argued here that there is discontinuity between the mental image and the organs of sense. The final chapter of the thesis conducts a thorough survey of original blind artworks and blind-life experiences that consolidate the arguments used so far in the thesis.

The questions that have guided this research are:

- To what extent and in what ways might art made by a blind person contribute to a new epistemological paradigm around vision?
- To what extent and in what ways might this new paradigm impact on both the visually impaired and wider communities?

With the help of these questions this research proposes a radical rethink where blindness and blind experience is inherently complex and more contingently determined than previously thought. A far more integrated and distributed sensorium is proposed; here the coupling of modes of experience and their sense organs is more fluid and plastic than previously realised. Blindness, vision and visuality now expand into a realm way beyond the workings of just the eye and the brain.

List of accompanying material

1. Selected sample of thesis in Braille.
2. Braille two-way reader booklet of artworks.
3. The audio pieces that are embedded in the thesis as links will also be submitted as audio files.

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Introduction



Figure 1. *Too Big to Feel* (2015) - concrete; 50m² approx. © Hannah Thompson, all rights reserved.¹

This practice led research grew out of the blind author's long established art practice. Over many years of making art as a totally blind person it became clear that a particular and identifiable aesthetic or sensory framework was emerging from the author's art practice. At first this aesthetic, while strongly felt, was only partially understood. One aesthetic factor did,

¹ 17 large white concrete domes and 1 large red concrete dome, stride out across a grassy bank in front of the splendid Victorian façade of The Royal Holloway College buildings in West London. This work, made in 2015 covers an area approximately 50 square meters, and is an over-sized caricature of Braille. Using grade 2 contracted Braille the piece spells out the emotive words 'seeing red'. Each of the domes measure about 1 meter in diameter and rise about 20 cms from the ground. This magnified Braille is so large that blind Braille readers themselves cannot read it. Very few sighted people can read Braille visually; as such the meaning of the Braille words remains obscure to all but a few people beyond the artist himself. Meaning and aesthetic significance is therefore fugitive in this piece; it starts from one particular aesthetic home - that of Braille - but it has now moved beyond that place and is searching for a new aesthetic resting place.

however, stand out clearly in every work produced. The consistent factor was that, despite the total blindness of the artist, in all aspects of the artmaking process a dramatic mental visual experience persisted. From the original conception of the artwork, the planning process, the materials gathering, the fabrication process and the occasional exhibiting of the work - each of these stages included vivid and persistent chromatic image content for the author. While these vivid mental visual experiences occurred in all aspects of the artist's day to day life they manifested with particular force in those art related parts of the artist's life. By making art, by consuming other people's art by visiting exhibitions accessed with audio description and by participating in artmaking workshops, all of these activities generated particularly powerful mental visual episodes for the artist. The force of this paradoxical phenomenal interplay between total blindness and vivid mental imaging eventually crystalised into the current research that is presented here.

Early on in the research process and after due consideration of the image-based mental experiences just described, a broad working hypothesis emerged. The hypothesis is paraphrased as follows:

- Art made by a blind person embodies a blind aesthetic that might contain a novel and beneficial epistemology.

This hypothesis led to the formulation of the research questions that have guided this research. These questions are:

- To what extent and in what ways might art made by a blind person contribute to a new epistemological paradigm around vision?
- To what extent and in what ways might this new paradigm impact on the lives of both the visually impaired and wider communities?

The paradigm shift referred to in these questions is due to the relatively new concept of *cripistemology*. The neologism *cripistemology* was coined by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer in 2014 and is a clustering of ideas around new ways of knowing through the

sinewy materiality of the lived experience of disability.² Cripistemology promotes the idea that rather than disability being a barrier to knowledge and knowledge making, the raw, embodied experience of disability offers rich and untapped new knowledge horizons.³

This research project is concerned with the relationship between human knowledge and human perception. It is concerned with the shifting contingencies of what Jacques Rancière describes as “le paysage du perceptible”.⁴ The art practice that leads this research is regarded as integral to this domain and as such the art chosen will provide the topographical features that characterise this metaphorical landscape. The places in this research where the author’s artwork is featured is where the contour lines of significance coalesce to form apexes of thought and meaning in the argumentative journey undertaken. This is not dissimilar to how Braille imparts meaning and significance to blind Braille readers. Small perturbations in the smooth surface of the Braille paper (the landscape) coalesce into predetermined patterns and shapes and by so doing turn the meaningless landscape of the paper into meaningful text; from topographical chaos or indeterminacy to topological coherence or determinacy.

This research is premised on the argument that there exists a fundamental disjunct between the lived experience of sight loss and the widely held contemporary conceptions of what it means to be blind in the world. This starting point builds on the well-established work of disability studies writers such as Deborah Kent, Colin Barnes, Rod Michalko, Stephen Kuusisto, John Hull, and Georgina Kleege. In line with these writers this thesis argues that the divergencies and contingences of blindness as a way of life are still widely misunderstood and that there are generative affordances of the blind-life that are currently seriously undervalued. Importantly this thesis further argues that art made by a blind person can reveal these

² Merri Johnson and Robert McRuer, ‘Cripistemologies: Introduction’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 144–45, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12>.

³ Merri Johnson and Robert McRuer, ‘Cripistemologies Now (More than Ever!)’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 18, no. 2 (2024): 121.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (la Fabrique éd, 2008), 55.

affordances, divergencies and other useful epistemologies around vision. As such the author's blind artworks and art practices are placed front and centre within this research thesis. Adopting these arguments, intertwined with a raft of philosophic texts, the thesis concludes that there is a radical notion of vision that is peculiar to the lived experience of blindness disability. Led by the author's artwork this thesis gives substance to a radical rethink of what *seeing* refers to, what it means to be *blind* and, ultimately, what is meant by *vision*.



Figure 2. *Dark Matter* (2024) - Light bulb, Electric cable, 3.0 black paint.⁵

This thesis is organised around four central chapters each of which covers a particular research argument. These arguments are regarded as key structural elements all of which are necessary parts of the whole and all of which carry equal weight. Chapter 1 *Anamnesis: The Re-Membered Body*, the first of the central chapters, uses three original artworks and some key philosophical texts to work through the central theme of memory as anamnesis. Each artwork featured in this chapter focuses on a different modality with which to 'drill down' into memory. A range of materials including reflective Perspex, the spoken word and resin based

⁵ This oversized, ironic light bulb is painted with *3.0 black paint* which absorbs 95 percent of all the light that falls on it. This contradicts the normal function of light bulbs. The visual effect of this object is that it approximates the 2 dimensional; it is similar to the shadow that appears on the white wall behind it. The visual solidity of the object is now in question. To be confident of its solidity one would have to touch it. This piece questions the reliability of the visual. As such this piece is an appropriate starting place for a research project that questions the nature of vision and the nature of blindness.

3D print are used in the art featured in this chapter and which engage with specific modalities. Here it is explained that the anamnesis of memory is our knowledge of the world and derives primarily from our embodied presence *in* the world as integral elements *of* that world.

Anamnesis is an ancient concept of memory that regards some of our knowledge as deriving from our inherent selves rather than from our constantly shifting experiences.⁶ Anamnesis draws on the fact of the invariant, genomic structures of our body; a body that tends towards a stable constancy. This constancy, or hypostasis, enables the body to better understand the shifting vicissitudes of its environment.⁷ This non-historical, pre-dispositional way of conceiving of memory and its role in the generation of the image and of blind artmaking runs through the entirety of this research and is the main focus of this chapter.

Anamnesis is the ‘readiness’ of the body to experience the world. Our knowledge of the world derives primarily from our embodied presence in the world as integral elements of that world. Here the body is ready to see and to be seen. It is ready to touch and to be touched it is ready to hear and to be heard. The body, blind, disabled or not, is *of* the world that it is experiencing. The body and the world are re-membered, they are one and it is this *oneness* or *of-ness* that is anamnesis.

Chapter 2 *Currency, Attunement and the Comma* is structured around the three titular ‘apexes of thought’. These themes are regarded as key focal points in the ontological landscape. Each apex is analysed in turn and a number of artworks are presented throughout the chapter that stand as material embodiments of the themes and ideas being discussed. Once again the materials used in the artworks presented are regarded as vital conduits to the

⁶ Jerry Samet, ‘The Historical Controversies Surrounding Innateness’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2019, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/innateness-history/>.

⁷ Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, 1st ed (Harcourt Brace, 1999), 134–35.

sensorium. These materials include wood, Perspex, plastic, concrete, polystyrene and porcelain.

In this research currency is proposed as the unifying idea and phenomenon that pervades all life. The aesthetics argued for in this chapter and this thesis is a currency, a fluid continuum consisting of the transient and the transactional with the embodied, distributed sensorium at its core. This chapter opens with an analysis of currency followed by an extended and pivotal section where currency is employed to argue for an enhanced understanding of the heterogeneity of disability in general and blindness in particular.

Attunement is the second of the apexes featured in this chapter. This deeply relational concept is proposed as the first of the two principal ways in which the fluid and fluxing currencies of aesthetics are choreographed. A number of philosophical texts are analysed in this section which offer differing interpretations of attunement. Two original artworks are presented here that likewise have differing interpretations of attunement. The first, *Sanctuary Café* (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10) is attunement as collaboration and the second, *A Pair of Pear-Shaped Pears* (Fig. 11) is attunement as the throb of difference and repetition. Both of these artworks rely on a multi-sensory, immersive engagement by the beholder.

The other relational concept in this trio of apexes that make up this chapter is the comma. The comma is analysed here as both a gap or a pause but also in a more abstract way as an entity that arises interstitially from a substrate. A comparison is drawn here between the concept of a comma, a similar concept of the hyphen and how Braille works. An original artwork based on Braille is presented at this point to reinforce Braille and comma commonalities.

Chapter 3 *Grunts and Squeals* looks at the relationship between the spoken word and mental imaging. A wide-ranging analysis of the access service of audio description is presented here and concludes that there is a wide divergence in how people experience mental imaging. Following a critique of recent innovative approaches to audio description the

analysis goes on to take a brief look at the recently revived interest in the spectrum of visual mental imaging that includes aphantasia and hyperphantasia.

Chapter 4, *Blind Aesthetics*, gathers a cluster of blind-life experiences and, as far as possible, pairs them with original artworks. This chapter is the ‘denouement’ of this research where the strands or apexes of thought coalesce and materialise into a new aesthetic that has the blind-life world and blindness-gain at its core.

This thesis starts from the point of view of the lived experience of blindness which, it is argued, provides by far the most accurate and faithful evidence for research of this kind. While acknowledging vast amounts of variability within and between blind people, this research, and projects like it, can only be performed effectively and plausibly by visually impaired researchers who are living this life. Visually healthy researchers lack the depleted sensorium that is the necessary starting point for research of this kind. The central methodology of this research is therefore that of being blind in the world. As such blindness is intrinsic to this research.

The numerous and ubiquitous wayfinding techniques used to gain access to all the visually oriented material, information and experiences while undertaking this research have presented many challenges, but they have also provided interesting methodological alternatives to conventional research approaches. Every item of the diverse literature sources and resources used has required a wide range of intervention to gain blind access. These interventions are both digital and human. In order of importance and usage these interventions are:

- Live audio description for access to artworks
- Text to speech digital technology for all printed matter (JAWS)⁸
- Amanuensis services for note taking

⁸ ‘JAWS® – Freedom Scientific’, accessed 26 October 2023, www.freedomscientific.com/products/software/jaws/.

- Electronic book translation services
- Braille translation services

The necessity for interventions at every stage of the research process as just described is regarded as an important element in the methodological toolkit of this research. These abundant and necessary access methods can be grouped under the terms visually impaired wayfinding and guiding methods and they arise from the fundamentally ocularcentric education system that currently prevails in society.

The assistive interventions and techniques listed above amount to aistemological turn. As already mentioned, cripistemology is a relatively new development in critical disability studies. It is a derivative of crip theory which is a recent new wave of general disability criticism and disability activism inaugurated by Robert McRuer in 2006. McRuer's seminal feminist text, *Crip Theory* (2006), is featured later in this introduction but suffice it to say here that crip theory argues that people with disabilities are unnecessarily discriminated against because of an ingrained societal desire for the compulsory able-bodied ideal.

In recognition of these unusual crip methodologies two Braille objects have been submitted alongside the electronic thesis. These are firstly a Braille version of the thesis document and secondly a *two-way* reader booklet.⁹ The Braille version of the thesis is offered to the reader as a reminder of the physical bulk that Braille can produce. Braille has a 3-dimensional sculptural quality that is directly related to its tactility. People encountering this object should hold it in their hands and realise, through its bulk and through its tactility the dramatic difference in its physical presence to that of its electronic counterpart. Both formats contain exactly the same intellectual material.

⁹ Two-way reader books are books that can be read by blind people and sighted people together. These books contain both printed content and Braille content. Typically, they are used by blind parents of sighted children or sighted parents of blind children to assist with learning to read. In the UK the charity ClearVision provides books of this kind on loan. 'Clearvision Project: Books', ClearVision, accessed 19 February 2025, <http://www.clearvisionproject.org/Books/index.html>.

The second object submitted with the thesis is a small booklet containing photographic images of all the artworks featured in the thesis. Interleaved between the photographs are sheets of clear acetate that have been brailled with the names of the artwork that can be viewed through the transparency. The Braille names are repeated and tightly packed across the acetate sheets producing a patterned effect that can be both felt and seen. These Braille words produce a 'frosting' that blurs the photographic image on which they sit. The coincidence of the tactile and the visual that this booklet presents, is intended as an analogue of the integrated sensorium - a central theme of this research.

In addition to the methodological perspectives outlined above this research has also adopted a range of more conventional methods with which to analyse, unpack and illuminate the artwork and the ideas that the artworks materialise. These additional methodologies include philosophical phenomenology, radical materialism and critical disability studies which includes crip theory.

In order to better understand the methods and methodologies at work in this research some background information around the author's art practice and the author's blindness is necessary. What follows is a survey of these elements.

The author is a practicing blind artist working in multi-media producing a range of installations, assemblages and sound pieces. The author's practice is diverse in process, scale and materials. His output includes both monumental pieces and handheld pieces that use a range of materials including clay, concrete, plaster and latex rubber. Found objects and ready-made manufactured objects often feature in the author's output. These machine finished, often mundane and familiar everyday objects regularly appear with unexpected juxtapositions and often employ disability access gestures such as Braille and audio description. An additional and important branch of the author's work as an artist is the frequent creation and presentation of artmaking workshops for visually impaired people over many years and held in many galleries, schools and colleges.

Important to the author's art practice is that he identifies as a blind artist rather than an artist who is blind. This distinction is made to emphasise that blindness is integral to both the artmaking process and the outcome. For this reason, the author is at pains to stress that his art practice seeks to embrace the generative affordances of blindness rather than attempting to overcome the barriers that arise when blindness meets socially imposed constraints. Whenever possible the artist tries through his artmaking to first identify and then exploit moments of disability-gain. Disability-gain, or blindness-gain, is a development of deafness-gain by disability studies scholars Dirkson Bauman and Joseph Murray. Bauman and Murray argue for the *reframing* of the concept of *hearing loss* into that of *deafness-gain* whereby the deaf way of life is seen as a positive, flourishing way of being.¹⁰ This disability re-framing concept has subsequently been expanded and developed by Rosemary Garland Thomson, Georgina Kleege and Hannah Thompson.¹¹ Disability-gain or blindness-gain is where the disabled or blind way of life provides insight, practices or even actual objects that feed back into wider society.¹² These feedbacks then become embedded into wider society for the benefit of everyone. It is hoped that, in some small way, the findings of this research will qualify for the label 'blindness-gain'.

As noted earlier, the author of this research is a totally blind person who acquired blindness as a result of the hereditary eye disease retinitis pigmentosa. Retinitis pigmentosa, often shortened to 'RP', is a cluster of similar dystrophic diseases of the retina but which have

¹⁰ H.-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph M. Murray, 'Reframing: From Hearing Loss to Deaf Gain', *Deaf Studies Digital Journal* 1, no. Fall (2009): 1–10.

¹¹ Hannah Thompson, 'Blind Spot: Blindness Gain and the Art of Non-Visual Reading', *Blind Spot*, 5 October 2018, <https://hannah-thompson.blogspot.com/2018/10/blindness-gain-and-art-of-non-visual.html>.

¹² An example of a blindness-gain object is the audio book. The audio book was originally developed for the benefit of blind people. It subsequently was adopted by sighted people when they realised there were benefits of convenience and accessibility to be had from this format. The audio book is now ubiquitous.

a range of presentations.¹³ The typical symptoms involve the patient having full or nearly full sight as a child with visual acuity gradually deteriorating during adolescence and young adulthood. Early symptoms include poor vision in dim lighting conditions with poor recognition of objects in the periphery of the field of vision. These early symptoms are often generalised with the description ‘tunnel vision’. Later symptoms include the loss of acuity in the centre of the visual field involving the loss of detailed vision which affects both reading and mobility. Typically, some useful light and dark vision is retained until mid-life when total blindness often ensues. The deterioration of visual acuity in retinitis pigmentosa is caused by a gradual and currently irreversible loss of light sensitivity in the rod and cone cells that make up the retina. This deterioration is often gradual and uniform although it can occasionally take on a sporadic character. Given this trajectory, someone with retinitis pigmentosa usually has time to adapt to these changing visual circumstances. The author of this research has followed this typical trajectory and has been totally blind for nearly 40 years. As already mentioned, retinitis pigmentosa is a group of eye diseases all of which have slightly differing symptoms; this results in a complex range of outcomes for individuals with the condition. This heterogeneity is an important factor when analysing putative blind aesthetics and forms an important part of the analysis in chapter 2 of this thesis.

The impact of the symptoms of eye diseases on the lives of individuals is significant, diverse and complex. One of the aims of this research is to give room for this heterogeneity which, despite a chorus of scholarly voices clamouring for change, remains seriously under-represented in the everyday understanding of sight loss. The reality of the lived experience of vision loss is nuanced; if healthy eyesight includes many instances of visual opacity, likewise blindness includes many instances of visual experience. For the purposes of this research, it is these interpenetrations, cross-currents and overlaps that form an important part of the analysis.

¹³ ‘Retinitis Pigmentosa’, Retina UK, accessed 21 January 2025, <https://retinauk.org.uk/information-and-support/about-inherited-sight-loss/types-of-inherited-sight-loss/classic-retinitis-pigmentosa/>.

The above survey of the author's art practice and his journey with adventitious blindness together with the outline survey of clinical blindness available in appendix 5, is intended to emphasise the far-reaching effect that the disability of blindness has on individuals' lives. This somewhat self-evident point is made to stress that rather than attempting to overcome or circumnavigate these effects, the author has deliberately attempted to use blindness, wherever possible, as a research-gain.

The literature that has supported, guided and informed this research has been diverse and copious. Frequent visits to art exhibitions - both contemporary and traditional genres, attendance at and contributions to many seminars, symposia and relevant conferences, and a wealth of books and journals, all these have been a constant presence throughout this research.¹⁴ However, it should be noted that because this field of enquiry is relatively new and unexplored, there is a dearth of material and events and exhibitions *directly* relating to the subject matter in hand.

Many years ago the author of this research visited an exhibition of artworks from the BlindArt Collection- a collection of artworks by visually impaired artists currently held at Moorfields Eye Hospital, London.¹⁵ The author came away from the show feeling disappointed by the preponderance of pieces that relied entirely or predominantly on touch or haptics for their aesthetic impact. This apparent wholesale aesthetic investment in touch at the expense of the other modalities (including vision) left the blind author wanting. This persistence of the need for multi-sensory stimulation beyond optical blindness had a profound effect on the author's own art practice and latterly on this research. Following many subsequent visits to audio described art exhibitions it soon became clear to the blind author that the visual was

¹⁴ See Appendix 1

¹⁵ 'BlindArt Collection Donated to Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Trust', *Artlyst*, n.d., accessed 23 April 2025, <https://artlyst.com/news/blindart-collection-donated-to-moorfields-eye-hospital-nhs-trust/>.

very much alive and kicking in his mental life and that that there is far more to blindness than the simple binary negation of healthy eyesight.

More recently the author discovered the work of a number of writers in critical disability studies scholarship who lent weight to this need for a more nuanced understanding of aesthetics and sensory disability. Prominent amongst these authors are David Bolt, Georgina Kleege, Hannah Thompson and Tobin Siebers. In addition to these influential writers there is a clutch of practicing artists whose work is congenial to this more expansive and positive approach to blindness arts. These artists include Fayen D'Evie, Aaron McPeake, Ryan Gander and Carmen Papalia. All of these artists have had an important influence on this research.¹⁶

This research builds on the generative and positive approach to sensory disability and creativity favoured by the artists mentioned above. This research stands in stark opposition to the tropes and stereotypes of both the super-crip and the tragic hero models of disability. Unfortunately, these problematic caricatures persist in contemporary society and one of the important tasks of this research is to dilute their influence.

In recent years there has been a scholarly development that has significantly broadened the field of enquiry into the question of how and what we see. The recent emergence of sensory studies with its concomitant fields of cultural studies and visual studies

¹⁶ The following artists and artworks have had a strong influence on the trajectory of this research. Some of the artists named below are of interest because their work deals directly with art and visual impairment. Others are of interest because their work has a strong multi-sensory or non-visual bias.
 Fayen D'Evie - fayendevie.com/
 Aaron McPeake - www.aaronmcpeake.com/
 Fenwick Lawson, *The Pietà* - www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/explore/the-cathedral-building-and-grounds/the-chapel-of-the-nine-altars/the-piet%C3%A0-sculpture
 Carmen Papalia - cueartfoundation.org/carmen-papalia
 Ryan Gander - www.lissongallery.com/artists/ryan-gander
 Cildo Meireles, *Babel*, Tate Modern - www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/meireles-babel-t14041
 Rachel Whiteread - gagosian.com/artists/rachel-whiteread/
 Jo Longhurst - www.jolonghurst.com/

has resulted in a paradigm shift in our understanding of the links between sensory perception or aesthetics, culture and epistemology.¹⁷

David Howes's vast compendium titled *Senses and sensation: critical and primary sources* (2018) is a pivotal text in the collating of ideas around this new body of knowledge.¹⁸ Howes is at pains to stress a much-expanded notion of sensory perception; he points towards a new sensory landscape which includes cultural environments, the expanded integrated sensorium, and the embracing of synaesthesia. This move to the opening up of sensory perception has assisted the current research into blindness by providing a new climate for disability studies, and a new understanding of the *sensus communis*. As a result of this expansion, the parameters within which the question of how and what we see and how and what we don't see have amplified exponentially.¹⁹

In his seminal work *The Eye and the Brain* Richard Gregory confesses to being mystified by the complexities of vision, he says: "Sometimes it is hard to establish whether a visual effect should be thought of as belonging to psychology, to physiology, or to the physics of light."²⁰ In truth the "visual effect" should be thought of as belonging to all three of these elements plus a vast raft of additional social and cultural elements that Gregory, to a great extent, leaves out of the picture and which sensory studies scholarship goes some way towards providing a solution.²¹

¹⁷ Michael Bull et al., 'Introducing Sensory Studies', *The Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 5–7, doi.org/10.2752/174589206778055655.

¹⁸ David Howes, ed., *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources* (Routledge, 2018).

¹⁹ Martin Jay, 'The Senses in History', in *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources*, vol. 2 (Routledge, 2018).

²⁰ R. L. Gregory, *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing*, 5th ed (Princeton University Press, 1997), 23.

²¹ Bull, 'Introducing Sensory Studies'.7.

The healthy eyeball is, in and of itself, blind while the healthy brain with its visual cortex is, in and of itself, devoid of conscious visual thoughts. The light of the world is the medium that unites the eye and the brain. The vast and diverse cultural environment that all of us inhabit is an economy that gives meaning and significance to our visual perception. As such these elements that are the essential components of our visual capability are completely interdependent.²² To properly understand how we see and how we don't see, requires a thorough understanding of the relationship between these elements. A profound understanding of any one of these individual elements is impossible without a profound understanding of *all* of them. A fully rounded knowledge at this depth is beyond the scope of this research but acknowledging this need goes some way towards bringing it as a consideration into this research.

Since 2006 visual culture has become a distinct academic discipline within the field of sensory studies.²³ This new rallying point for the understanding of blindness and vision has generated a tsunami of research projects and written material all of which is indicative of the importance that visual perception has acquired in contemporary life. This trend correlates with the vast and global explosion in screen-based technology and the parallel ubiquity of the digital photographic image that has occurred over the last 30 years. While this has to be accepted as a fact of life it is also regarded, in this research, as a shift to a more ocularcentric state of affairs that, as such, simultaneously deepens the marginalised status of visually impaired people and raises the level of urgency attached to research projects such as this one which questions the current arbitrary hegemonic ranking and interplay of the senses. In what follows a number of key texts from the aforementioned tsunami will be examined to demonstrate the

²² Gregory, *Eye and Brain*, 10.

²³ David Howes, 'Introduction: On the Geography and Anthropology of the Senses', in *Senses And Sensation: Critical And Primary Source* (Routledge, 2018), 1:9.

important part they play in creating a more enlightened, culturally infused, state of affairs that is now available as a counterpoise to the visual bias in contemporary society.

What follows are brief introductions to three influential texts in the contemporary visual culture movement and which have been especially useful in guiding and structuring this research. The first of these texts is *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger (1972).²⁴ This text is foundational to the scholarly field of visual culture. This text is a response to Kenneth Clark's book and TV series *Civilisation* (1969).²⁵ *Civilisation* is a personalised, monocultural overview of European art history. From the outset in *Ways of Seeing* Berger stresses the multi-cultural and the "infinity" of ways that one can interpret the visually perceived world. Having started by stressing the primacy of sight over speech or sound Berger quickly points out the complex, contingent and relational nature of sight perception. He pointedly states: "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled".²⁶ This instability between seeing and knowing is fundamental to Berger's argument and to this research.

Berger proceeds to expand on the theme that there are infinite points of view and on the relational nature of seeing. Socially constructed belief systems, emotional and attitudinal constructs, and attitudes to the reciprocal gaze are all mentioned by Berger as being cultural determinates of the myriad ways in which we see.

Berger goes on to discuss the image. He defines the image as always being a human construct or intervention. The image is, he says, an offering to the viewer of a particular point of view that might be a reminder of someone or something that is no longer present. The image might be a point of view that invites the viewer to personally relate to it in some way, or the

²⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*, 37. pr., 1. publ. 1972 by British Broadcasting Corp. and 1977 by Penguin Books (London: British Broadcasting Corp, 1997).

²⁵ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View*, 1st publ (London: British Broadcasting Corp. [u.a.], 1969); 'BBC One - Civilisation', BBC, accessed 12 March 2024, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00dtjbv.

²⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 7.

offering of a point of view as seen through the eyes of that particular artist. Berger's point here is to suggest that the image is a cultural offering that forms part of a complex transactional economy that involves a huge range of possible ways of seeing. This move towards a complex, relativistic standpoint is especially important for this thesis.

Berger devotes a significant amount of text to a discussion of perspective and the effect that the invention of the camera had on the way we see. He reminds us that the technique of vanishing point perspective, first appearing in the early renaissance and unique to European art, fixed the invisible beholder front and centre of the image. As Berger puts it:

“Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges onto the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.”²⁷

This highly specified, humanistic convergence on the spectator's eye is both anthropocentric and ocularcentric and, as such, runs counter to the blind aesthetic and blind phenomenology proposed by this research which questions and challenges the predominance of ocular ‘vanishing points’ and ocular horizons.²⁸

The overarching argument that Berger presents in this opening chapter of *Ways of Seeing* constitutes a political, historical commentary around the misuse of the photographic image. The ubiquitous, capricious photographic image, with its unanchored semantic content, means that “the visible, in continual flux, (becomes) fugitive”.²⁹ For the purposes of this research, Berger's analysis is informative in pointing out useful parallels between contemporary aesthetics and the blind aesthetics that is based on the blind ways of life.

²⁷ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 16.

²⁸ This subject area is dealt with at length in chapter 4 infra 98.

²⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 18.

The next two texts to be cited assist with unpacking the relationship between optics - the mechanics of seeing - and the newly framed, enculturated concept of seeing. Both of these texts are premised on an anti-dualist model of embodiment.

In the text *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, Donna Haraway struggles to come to terms with explanations of reality delivered by patrician parables and power plays passing off as robust scientific, objective truths.³⁰ Under the heading *The Persistence of Vision* Haraway turns to the visual, or visual culture, for solace, comfort and a stronger relationship with truth and reality. Haraway 'insists' on "the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim(s) the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere", what she calls the "god trick".³¹ Haraway proceeds to construct a powerful argument using visual markers to defend particular, partial, and situated perspectives against transcendent, unlocatable, irresponsible perspectives. So, guided by the idea of persistent vision, Haraway constructs a robust feminist argument while simultaneously dissolving the distinction between the subjugated and the objectified.

The last of the texts to be cited here has already been referred to above. It is *Crip Theory* by Robert McRuer.³² Since its publication in 2006 this text has spawned an important disability studies sub-culture and a number of related texts some of which are mentioned in what follows.

Crip theory is a progressive arm of the disability studies movement that challenges entrenched notions of 'compulsory able-bodiedness' that unjustifiably oppress and

³⁰ Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575, doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

³¹ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', 581.

³² Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Cultural Front (New York University Press, 2006).

marginalise disabled people. Crip theory was inaugurated by McRuer in his seminal text *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006). McRuer uses intersectional identity politics, in particular third wave feminism and queer studies, as the basis for his main argument. McRuer finds strong parallels between what he calls compulsory heterosexuality (queer theory) and compulsory ableism. McRuer argues that like heterosexuality, able-bodiedness is an unspecifiable and disembodied ideal. This unspecified status allows it to be regarded as the natural order of things. In McRuer's words: "*Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* emerges from cultural studies traditions that question the order of things, considering how and why it is constructed and naturalized; how it is embedded in complex economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be changed."³³

Crip theory examines the cultural environments that have led to these pathological histories and critiques them as being unnecessarily oppressive social constructs. This urgent and challenging arm of the disability rights movement has been a useful rallying point for newly energised disability activism and a new wave of useful disability theorising.

The emphasis that McRuer places on socially constructed cultural contingencies and the appearance of certain offshoots of crip theory such as cripistemology have proved very useful in this research.³⁴ Cripistemology places the disabled body front and centre of any discussion of or project involving disabled people.³⁵ This cripistemological turn resonates with the complexly embodied phenomenology referred to in chapter 3 and is regarded as central to blind aesthetics.

All of the above texts guide us towards a more complex conception of disability, vision and blindness than the over simple eye-brain-light triangulation that the Gregory model entails.

³³ McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 2.

³⁴ Merri Johnson and Robert McRuer, 'Cripistemologies: Introduction', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 2014): 127–48, doi.org/10.3828/jlclds.2014.12.

³⁵ Harshadha Balasubramanian and Clarice Hilton, 'Embodied Audio Description a Cripistemology Intervention in HCI', *Forthcoming*, n.d.

Now vision and blindness consist of a feedback loop that includes the embodied cultural environment. As such vision and blindness become areas where aesthetics hold sway and where the embodied, multi-sensory sensorium can be embraced as part of an extended understanding of vision.

Chapter 1 Anamnesis: The Re-Membered Body

*Thus, since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision... the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things...*¹

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

*The beginning of Heaven and Earth is today*²

Joseph Kitagawa, *A Past of Things Present*



Figure 3. *Blind I Stand Before the Mirror that Evokes an Image of Thought of Self whose Tessellating and Fragmentary Modes of Sensing are both the Instrument and the Object of Reflection.* (2022) - Reflective Perspex, photographic paper, plywood; 6m x 1m.

The physical presence of the artist-author standing in front of the five oval shaped jigsaw puzzle pieces (which include 2 real reflecting mirrors) evokes an image of thought of the author's body in his mind. This private image that no-one but the author himself can know, is the *real work* of this artwork. The total blindness of the artist-author means that the detail of

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 139. [1964]

² Joseph M. Kitagawa, "A Past of Things Present": Notes on Major Motifs of Early Japanese Religions', *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 42, doi.org/10.1086/462860.

that image depends on the mediated description he has received from his sighted assistant together with his intimate knowledge of this artwork derived from weeks of physical contact with the materials and processes used in the construction of the piece. A crucial additional element at work in the building of this image of thought is that of the faculty of memory. Memory is present at every stage in the construction of the image and, following Henri Bergson, memory just is the essential 'intersection' between the sensory modalities and knowledge itself.³ It is argued here that an important and under acknowledged element of memory as knowledge is that of the ancient concept of anamnesis.

The concept of anamnesis brings together the past, present and future in a temporal synchronicity that denies linear chronology; it is an ahistorical way of understanding the present where the existential experiencing body, the neuro-physical phenotype, is reconnected with its original destinies - the destiny to see for example. Anamnesis is a past of things present that reverses the Augustinian axiom "a time present of things past".⁴ This temporal synchronicity that is anamnesis, which privileges the 'now' over an historical view of the past and a clairvoyant view of the future, brings visibility and invisibility together into an aesthetic unity. The faculty of memory as anamnesis is prior to healthy eyesight in the process of artmaking in particular and seeing in general. Furthermore, and central to this research argument to blind aesthetics, is the idea that human blindness affords us privileged access to anamnesis. Experience of life in the absence of healthy eyesight affords the blind person privileged access to the workings of the non-ocular sensorium. The force and clarity of this privileged experience provides novel and unexplored material for the praxis of the blind artist.

The 'gallery of the mind', that the artwork under discussion creates, is also inhabited by the private mental images of all beholders, blind or otherwise, of this artwork. The sensory

³ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, Dover Philosophical Classics (Dover Publications, 2004), 6. [1912]

⁴ Augustine, 'The Confessions', in *Great Books of The Western World*, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), bks 11, 95. [AD 397-400]

experience that the blind artist is having and that the sighted beholders have is anamnesis. It is the workings of the memory that occur prior to actual sensory experience.

In this opening chapter the process of interrogating the link between the organs of sense and the sensing of the world begins. In what follows, led by a suite of the author's artworks and supported by some key philosophical texts, the generative force of blindness, blind artmaking and the nature and importance of memory as anamnesis will be interrogated. The philosophers that are used to support the arguments in this chapter include Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Jean François Lyotard.

Merleau-Ponty's work on the philosophy of embodiment and Lacan's insights into the psycho-mechanics of vision are particularly helpful in this chapter. The remaining philosophers cited in this chapter deal directly with the process of artmaking and the crucial role that memory plays in this process. All the writers cited in this chapter disavow the idea that healthy vision qua vision necessarily includes healthy eyesight. The original artwork that opens this chapter will now be returned to and a detailed description and analysis of the piece will follow.

This installation consists of a series of five large, flat oval wall-hangings that have traditional jigsaw puzzle configurations laser-cut into their surfaces. All five ovals are exactly the same size and shape and they each measure approximately 60cms high and 40cms wide. All the ovals are constructed from thin plywood. Two of the ovals are topped with highly reflective mirrored Perspex cut into jigsaw puzzle shapes, two of them are topped with identical photographs of the artist reflected in the same mirror jigsaw puzzle and the fifth oval is a blank untreated wooden jigsaw puzzle. When exhibited the ovals are hung in a row and are equally spaced. They are hung with the two mirrored ovals flanking the quintet and the two identical photographs of the artist are hung either side of the single central plain wood oval. Presented thus, the piece is strictly symmetrical about the central oval such that the left side of the piece is a mirror image of the right side; as such the work is an intense speculation on mirrors and reflection. This piece not only reflects the visitor in its mirrors but, through its symmetry, offers

a reflection of itself. Furthermore, due to the photographs of the blind artist reflected in the mirrors, the piece invites all comers to consider what it really means to see oneself.

This artwork is based on the recollections of jigsaw puzzles and mirrors. Engaging with both jigsaw puzzles and with mirrors as a blind person is both ironic and thought provoking. The motif of the jigsaw puzzle allows for the fragmentation of the images and suggests a mosaic of multiple perspectives that are, arguably, constitutive of both what it means to see and what it means to be seen. Memory as reflection, reflection as memory and symmetry are all part of what is captivating about mirrors. Applying the Lacanian notion of the reciprocal gaze (outlined below) to this artwork, the act of looking necessarily involves a two-way 'commerce' that is fundamental to the process of looking, seeing and being seen. With blindness this transactional process has the potential, but, crucially, not the necessity, to break down.

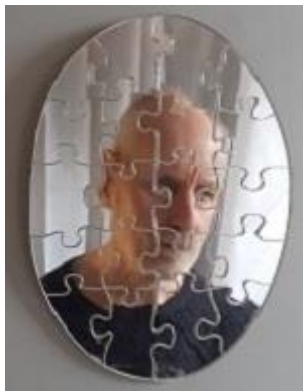


Figure 4. *Blind I Stand Before the Mirror that Evokes an Image of Thought of Self whose Tessellating and Fragmentary Modes of Sensing are both the Instrument and the Object of Reflection* (detail) (2022) - Reflective Perspex, photographic paper, plywood; 60cm x 40cm

The extended title of this piece works in the manner of an explanatory gallery label containing both descriptive and informational content. The mirror is a place where the self and the not self co-exist. It is an effective tool for capturing the presence of the beholder - a central motif in anamnesis. The mirror reflects the transient now; the moment that lies between the immediate past and the imminent future.

This piece is a design provocation on the phenomenology of perception. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's posthumous compilation *The Visible and the Invisible* he argues that our

sensory perception of the world and ourselves is a holistic, multisensory, entangled narcissistic chiasm and he uses the metaphor of the mirror to help promote this idea. The mirror-based art installation under review links strongly with Merleau-Ponty's thinking in this respect. When we perceive the world, whether we are sensorially impaired or not, we are perceiving ourselves in the sense that we are inextricably *of* the world rather than being *in* the world in a kind of ontic bubble:

"We have to ask ourselves what exactly we have found with this strange adhesion of the seer and the visible. There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself *surrounded* by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact—as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them. Thus since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things..."⁵

Here it will be useful to turn to the work of the Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who draws on the phenomenological thinking of Merleau-Ponty. The artwork under review has features that parallel Lacan's preoccupations. Of particular relevance here is Lacan's interest in the concept of the ego as developed by Sigmund Freud, a fascination with mirrors and reflexivity and a highly influential gaze theory.

In his famous essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' Lacan argues that the notions of "I" and "self" are established early in the development of the infant human. Lacan claims that despite the many incapacities of human infancy, from six months old the healthy infant recognises their specular mirror image as an image of themselves. Lacan

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 138–39.

argues that this “jubilant” realisation is precipitated in a primordial form; a pre-linguistic sense of otherness, or self as object, comes to the infant at this early stage of development.⁶ For Lacan the mirror stage is an important precursor to his notion of the *objet petit a* or simply *objet a*. *Objet a* is the symbolic psychological separation needed in order to constitute the self or ego as an object in the world.

Having identified these fundamental developmental stages of psychological separation Lacan proceeds to argue to a consequential separation or “split” at the scopic level. This dichotomy he calls the split of the eye and the gaze and it is of particular significance to the current research. This is the reflexivity of the visible; Lacan states: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides”. Lacan characterises this *split* between the seer and the seen, between the visible and the invisible, in relational aesthetic terms:

“In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision... something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it - that is what we call the gaze”.⁷

The commentator Steven Levine expresses Lacan’s argument with some helpful synonyms, he describes the split as:

“...the dialectic between the eye and the gaze, between the visible and the invisible, between the body and the soul, between the Imaginary register of immediate perception and the Symbolic register of mediated conception.”⁸

The split between the eye and the gaze proposed by Lacan is at the heart of the artwork currently under review. The blind beholder of the artwork forms an image of the piece and, of most importance, an image of themselves. This is the “visibility” formed through the

⁶ Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I’, in *Écrits: A Selection*, Repr, trans. Alan Sheridan (Routledge, 2003). [1949]

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Reprinted, ed. Jaques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (Karnac Books, 2004), 72–73. [1973]

⁸ Steven Z. Levine, *Lacan Reframed: A Guide for the Arts Student*, Contemporary Thinkers Reframed Series (I.B. Tauris ; Distributed in the USA by Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 61.

“commerce” or “strange adhesion of the seer and the visible” identified by Merleau-Ponty.⁹ This ‘blind’ image of self relies on a variety of sensory stimuli which thereby create a unique world or ekphrasis. Despite blindness the Lacanian idea of separation of self as other in order to appreciate the self as an object does not rely on the mirror. The force and mechanics by which this blind image of self and that of ‘world-making’ through the integrated sensorium or synaesthesia is covered in greater depth in chapter 3 of this thesis.¹⁰

It is Lacan’s emphasis on the complexity of how we visualise the world that is of interest. Employing the idea of the spectator operating within a scopic field Lacan identifies a dual, reflexive interplay between subject and object, between the eye and the gaze and between what he terms the geometral and the glare of the illuminated object. Lacan even cites blindness as being compatible with this process since, he argues, light moves in straight lines which can be directly translated into tactile equivalences with the use of lengths of (idealised) cord stretched between fixed points.¹¹

In order to strengthen and illustrate his argument Lacan recounts a story involving the writer as a young man at play assisting a small fishing community in northern France. Lacan and one of the fishermen are afloat in a small fishing boat off the coast of Brittany. Here Lacan and his companion notice a discarded sardine tin floating in the water close to the boat. The tin glints in the sunlight and catches their eye. Lacan and his companion speculate about the tin reciprocating their gaze as part of a complex inauguration of vision, one that relies upon the seer and the seen having a two-way interdependence involving vision.¹² This interdependence, involves blindness since the ‘gaze’ of the sardine can is devoid of ocular content. Likewise the artwork under discussion, with its mirrors and its photographs, is deeply

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

¹⁰ The complex way in which the mental image is created is covered in chapter 3 infra 87.

¹¹ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 86–87.

¹² Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 95.

involved in a reflexive, visionary transactional process with the viewer, and yet the objects (as well as the blind artist) are devoid of ocular capacity.

In the artwork under discussion, as the sighted visitor passes along the series of five ovals from left to right, they encounter a variety of perceptions where they are variously and simultaneously integral to and then peripheral to the artwork. They first encounter a real reflecting puzzle mirror where they themselves are reflected back to the viewer and hence become an integral part of the artwork. Next, they encounter a photograph of the blind artist reflected in an identical oval jigsaw puzzle mirror. This is a photographer's view of the artist made to look as if the artist is viewing himself in the mirror. Here the photographer is just out of shot and, like the sighted beholder, present and yet absent from the artwork. The viewer then comes to the blank wooden puzzle which is the central panel. Here the viewer's vision is problematised. Their gaze becomes uncertain. Maybe they see an after-image of a ghostly human figure projected onto the blank oval; maybe they see the jigsaw puzzle lines that criss-cross the surface, or maybe they are drawn to move in towards this blank oval to touch its grainy surface by hand and, by so doing, by-pass the confusing viscosity of this curious object that sits amid the photographs and mirrors. Moving on further to the right the remaining two ovals are firstly a repetition of the photograph of the artist in the mirror followed by a repetition of the real reflecting mirror jigsaw where once again the viewer will appear as part of the art. The symmetry of this series of ovals about the central wooden oval echoes the chiasmic nature of mirrors and that of the 'commerce' of looking, seeing and being seen as described in Merleau-Ponty's extract cited above.

This piece therefore attempts to choreograph the transactional act of looking, seeing and being seen that both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan stress in their analyses of embodied sensory perception and the split of the eye and the gaze. By including and then excluding the viewer from the materiality of its various elements the piece tests the extent and force of self-identification that is going on in these art encounters. Both the sighted and the blind beholder is forced to incrementally lose and then regain connection with their own image as object as

they move along the line of ovals that make up this piece. Memory as anamnesis is what fuels both the sighted and the blind experience of this artwork. Everyone that visits the piece derives a shifting sense of inclusion-exclusion, of looking and being looked at and of being sighted and being blind.

This art experience is a complex entanglement of vision, blindness and memory.¹³ This piece works towards 'breaking down' the way we see in order to better understand the way we see and the way we don't see both of which have memory at their root. A sighted beholder regarding themselves in a mirror involves them staring back at themselves in an infinite oscillation of self-reference in a reflexive, narcissistic feed-back loop. Sighted beholders stare at themselves, the reflected image meets and returns that gaze in an eyeball lock that is analogous to two mirrors facing each other and reflecting back and forth *ad infinitum*. Here memory is a complex embodiment that has healthy vision, 'healthy' blindness and knowledge as its constituent parts. The piece employs the medium of the mirror as a metaphor which stands for memory and demonstrates this by means of the phenomenon of self-imaging. The piece instantiates the idea that blindness or opacity resides at the very heart of healthy vision and that vision or visibility resides at the very heart of healthy blindness.

Anamnesis is the body's invariant predisposition to be in the world, to act in the world and therefore to know the world and therefore to know the light of the world. Anamnesis, understood in this way, ensures that, notwithstanding the blindness of the subject, the two-way, chiasmic process of vision and of the experience of vision, is preserved. By means of indirect sensory stimulation, otherwise known as synaesthesia, and thanks to anamnestic

¹³ The use of the word 'entanglement' is deliberate here. It draws on a broader conception of entanglement that goes beyond its everyday meaning of twisted together or caught in; instead, it refers to the event of two or more entities encountering each other in an essentially durational and transient environment. In the context of the artwork under discussion the events are the sighted viewer encountering their own image in the mirror and a blind beholder encountering an audio description of the piece. Cf J. Golding "The Courage to Matter," in Golding, Reinhart and Paganelli, *Data Loam: Sometimes Hard, Usually Soft (the future of knowledge systems)*, (De Gruyter: 2022), 450-487.

memory, an image of light can be generated in the mind of the blind person independently of actually seeing the light. The power of audio description to generate such non-retinal visual responses is analysed later in this chapter and further developed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

The artwork presented and analysed above introduces the idea that the way we see the world is complex. The simple subject-object binary of visual perception, and sensory perception generally, has, through this artwork, been shown to be inadequate in explaining how we see and how we do not see. According to Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan seeing involves both an othering of self and a reciprocal relationship between the seen and the seer. Here the visible arises from the interplay between the seen and the seer - it is simultaneously of both and of neither. The seen has a glare that is ready and waiting to be looked at and the seer has a multi-modal gaze that includes imaging far beyond optical imaging. So far in this chapter the importance of the body, its world and vision has been discussed; the deeply rooted connection between memory and perception - in particular visual perception - will now be emphasised with reference to certain key writers in order to bolster and build on the foundational elements discussed. In *Writing and Difference* Jacques Derrida draws on the Platonic notion of anamnesis. This is, says Derrida, “the Socratic mastery which teaches nothing, teaches only the already known, and makes everything arise from the self, that is from the Ego, or from the Same as Memory”.¹⁴

In his 1860 essay, titled “Mnemonic Art” written for the journal *Painters of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire makes a robust case for privileging memory and imagination over observation when it comes to the production of great art. With reference to the work of artist Constantine Guys (referred to by Baudelaire as Mr G.) Baudelaire argues that the expressive qualities of the art are enriched by the artist’s concentration on his “principal faculty” namely

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Reprinted, trans. Alan Bass, Routledge Classics (Routledge, 2005), 401. [1967]

memory. By privileging the memory, claims Baudelaire, the artist “brings an instinctive emphasis to his marking of the salient or luminous points of an object”.¹⁵

Baudelaire goes on to identify two key elements to the great artist’s method. Firstly, a process of remembering and recollection and secondly a “frenzied process of artistic activity where a mark making battle ensues to ensure that the orders of the brain may never be perverted by the hesitations of the hand”.¹⁶ It is argued here that memory as anamnesis is an important participant in this two-fold process. Here anamnesis, as the artist’s “principal faculty”, is that faculty that transcends the sensory faculties such as sight and touch and instead connects with the embodied predisposition to see and to know the world. The following analysis of Jacques Derrida’s work reinforces this argument.

In *Memoires of the Blind* Jacques Derrida picks up on Baudelaire’s analysis and similarly discerns a two-fold originary blindness to drawing; he calls these two aspects the transcendental and the sacrificial. The first of these aspects is a process of recollection or an elevated re-remembering of the act of drawing. This is the thought of drawing or the drawing of drawing or what Derrida calls: “the invisible condition of the possibility of drawing”.¹⁷ The second aspect is thought of as an event; the event of blindly choosing between options in an ‘economy’ of imaging or sacrificial forgetting. Derrida argues that due to these “blindnesses”, there is a strong correlation between the blindness or invisibility that is inherent to able-bodied artmaking and that of actual ocular blindness.

Derrida speculates at length on the blindness or invisibility of healthy sight and indeed blindness or invisibility at the heart of the act of drawing. He observes that the artist’s trait “proceeds in the night” and points to the “heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Mnemonic Art’, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, A Da Capo Paperback (Da Capo Press, 1986), 16.[1863]

¹⁶ Baudelaire, ‘Mnemonic Art’, 17.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 41. [1990]

drawing trait” which, he says, “remains abyssal”. It is here that memory as anamnesis is most active and, arguably, it is here that the contingency of the relationship between seeing and knowing is most dramatically revealed. Derrida argues that the artist and the seer is subject to the “heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible”, the “unbeseen”, “the anamnestic retrospective” and the impossibility of “the visibility of the visible”.¹⁸ All of which conspire against the primacy of healthy optical seeing and in favour of memory and embodied or anamnestic knowledge or what in this thesis will be called ‘radical vision’. This is the inherent blindness or invisibility that resides at the origin of healthy eyesight.

The above arguments place blindness or invisibility and memory ahead of healthy eyesight in the process of artmaking. As such it will be illuminating at this point to refer to the work of a contemporary artist Alison Carlier who adopts a similarly non-ocular approach to art production. Carlier’s multi-disciplined art practice starts with drawing but quickly seeks out the ‘edges’ of this discipline to find what lay beyond and to ‘look back’ and see what the object of her attention looks like from that place of precarity - a place that either moves into another discipline or falls into the abyss of nothingness. In 2014 Carlier became the first artist to win the Jerwood Drawing Prize (now the Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize) with a sound piece titled *Adjectives, Lines and Marks*.¹⁹

This short audio work (1 minute 15 seconds duration) consists of a recording of the artist reading out loud the descriptive texts from a museum archive giving detailed descriptions of certain ancient Roman artefacts. Carlier describes the piece as an “audio drawing, a spoken description of an unknown object”.²⁰

¹⁸ Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 45.

¹⁹ Cf. <https://1drv.ms/u/s!AmHojouWzeQZgd0VAYyepvjHsO4lrQ>.

²⁰ ‘Interview with Artist, Alison Carlier, Jerwood Drawing Prize Winner’, *Aesthetica*, 24 October 2014, <https://aestheticamagazine.com/interview-artist-alison-carlier-jerwood-drawing-prize-winner/>.

Carlier's work is the embodiment of a multi-layered memory. The original object itself is of secondary importance; the museum's archive description of the original artefact is what is of primary importance to Carlier. The new artefact is the recording of the artist reading aloud the museum's archival description. The original artefact has now been reconfigured and recreated in sound; the sonic and the aural have been promoted and the visual has been demoted in the sensory hierarchy - this is anamnesis and blind aesthetics in action. The short text of this piece is reproduced in Appendix 2.

Carlier's own observations on drawing in general are informative: "the quintessential nature of drawing, its proximity to thought, its directness, and often open-endedness enables it to create a discourse across and between media."²¹ Following Carlier's Jerwood success, Professor David Toop made some interesting observations around the common ground that drawing and sound occupy. Toop points out that linearity is common to both traditional drawing and sound or at least music. A line whether in music or drawn on paper traces a journey between two points in space-time. Furthermore, and linked to the previous point, he observes that the vocabulary of both sound and drawing - particularly the sketch in progress - is essentially durational, transient and provisional. Sound, like the drawing, is forever in flux, never fixed and always open ended and incomplete.

Another insightful comment on Carlier's work by UAL's former Chair of Drawing Professor Stephen Farthing points out that: "...good drawing, like good writing, reduces a complex state of affairs to a simplified, elegant and intelligible image".²² Here, the parallels with memory are irresistible. Drawing, like memories, brings the complexities of past events or those of prior knowledge into the present in a simplified or refined version.

²¹ UAL, 'Drawing Resurgent as Sound Artist Wins Jerwood Prize', UAL, 8 January 2019, www.arts.ac.uk/about-ual/press-office/stories/drawing-resurgent-as-sound-artist-wins-jerwood-prize.

²² UAL, 'Drawing Resurgent as Sound Artist Wins Jerwood Prize'.

Carlier's short sound piece leaves the beholder with a refined sound sketch of the artefact. The artefact has gone, and what remains is a paired down audio description of the vase. Like a memory our present experience of the vase amounts to a present distillation of the past - we are left with the salient luminosities of which Baudelaire speaks.²³ The cross modalities highlighted by Carlier's audio-visual piece and referred to by Toop are important synaesthetic moments. These modal interpenetrations are fundamental to synaesthesia and to anamnesis itself. The notion of currency that this suggests will be developed further in the next chapter and it is an important part of the blind aesthetic that this thesis is working towards.

In 2022 Carlier and the author of this research collaborated on a sound art project that focused on memory and which attempted to push forward ideas around audio drawing equivalent to those outlined above. Both parties in the collaboration produced some written prose-poetry based on our individual memories of life experiences using particular sensory modes. These experiences were then brought together in a series of sound recordings that featured combinations of voices performing the poems. In the recordings the voices are highly edited; they are layered and entwined with each other in various complex contrapuntal improvised rhapsodies. The resulting sonic voicescapes involve complex interlaced threads of spoken word where the traditional requirements of syntax and semantics become blurred and confused; where the spoken voices drift from coherent interplay to incoherent babble and then back again. Meaning and content swirl and drift in clouds of structureless framings that behave like sonic clouds or sonic murmurations. Meaning and telos are both present in these recordings but which, like memory and like the drawing process itself, drift and flex in and out of focus and remain forever unresolved and provisional. The two poems used in the recordings are shared below:

I remember everything I have ever heard.

²³ Baudelaire's emphasis on the importance of memory in discerning salience and luminosity was discussed above supra 36.

Every wood pigeon cooing out a beat, whilst I fell asleep on my birthday.

Every wedding band tap on the banister, followed by a slippered foot on the stair.

Every D-90 creak, stylus scrape, if I was a witch's hat, drip drip of the tap, like a voice after too much hash.

I can still hear the water in my ears plugging, unplugging an arrhythmical scale of bubbles.

I remember every fleeting sound down to the pound of my heart in my mouth in a burgled house.

It's like my entire life is a tone that oscillates from dark to light, from light to dark.

I remember everything I have ever seen...

I remember every glimmer and glint on the new coin mint,

every white letter name on the red bike frame,

thin white line on the black brown Churchill stamp,

every iridescent quiver on the dragonfly flying by moment.

Every spark every dark every light every mark in every park.

I still remember every sunken eye in the shadow of doubt on the LP cover,

the lucid land of grey and pink on the other cover,

the unsmiling faces of jazz and the smiling faces of jazz on the 12 inch sleeves.

I remember every white note, black note, blue note, every high note every low note every dusty mote that floats on high like plankton in the shafts of sunlight that stream through high windows.

It's like my entire life is an image that constantly presents itself to me and that is there to be seen whether or not my eyes are shut.²⁴

These collaborative recordings have strong parallels with Carlier's Jerwood audio drawings insofar as they are current reflections on a series of lived experiences from the past. These experiences, lived through either vision or hearing, are the elements that are constitutive of the person presenting them. They are not representations of past events rather, they are presentations of a now that includes the past. As such they stand as strong examples of anamnesis and of radical sensing or radical vision. The track offered to the reader below

²⁴ These verses, written by David Johnson and Alison Carlier (2023; permission to cite here given by the co-author) were inspired by the poem *Slumberland* by Paul Beatty that is quoted in the introduction to 'Listening to American Studies' by Cara Keeling - Paul Beatty, *Slumberland*, 1st U.S. ed (Bloomsbury USA : Distributed to the trade by Macmillan, 2008).

has my words read by the screen-reader software that I habitually use (as a blind person) to gain access to print and on-screen text. This bloodless, robotic, expressionless ‘voice’ jars against Carlier’s soft vocal tones producing a soundscape with tonal and textural variety that approximates that of a graphic drawing.²⁵ This sound art piece reconfigures the events from the past, referred to in the poems, and presents them as current accretions of everything that’s ever happened. This is another way of thinking of anamnesis - an embodied accretion or sedimentation of knowledge. As Sigmund Freud observed: “in mental life, nothing that has once taken shape can be lost, (that) everything is somehow preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances.”²⁶

Audio Drawing 1

Figure 5. Link to *Audio Drawing 1* (2024) – collaborator Alison Carlier

(Duration: 2 mins 7 secs - can be listened to once through)

Memory is central to the conception of vision argued for in this chapter and this thesis. With the help of the mirror-based artwork, the link between memory as anamnesis and vision, with particular reference to self-image, has been demonstrated. Following an examination of the Lacanian reflexive split of the eye and the gaze reinforced by Jacques Derrida’s insistence that memory and blindness are integral to all artistic endeavour, it was argued that blindness or invisibility and memory are actually integral to all healthy vision. With the analysis of anamnesis undertaken so far, the inseparable relationship between the visible and the invisible and the body’s readiness to be in the world have been clearly established. With these concepts in place, it is argued that the integrity of the blind or disabled experiencing body and its centrality to the aesthetic world cannot be denied. It is clear from the foregoing analysis that the efficiency or otherwise of the eyes or of optics in general is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for healthy vision. According to the analysis so far measuring eye health using the usual ophthalmic tools such as the ophthalmoscope and the Snellen Chart leaves something

²⁵ JAWS® – Freedom Scientific.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1. publ, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Books Great Ideas 19 (Penguin Books, 2004), 7. [1930]

essential out of the equation. Furthermore, it has been shown that healthy vision necessarily includes and involves blindness or invisibility. What is maybe missing from conventional assessments of healthy vision may be found within the realm of psychology and neurology as well as in ophthalmology and circles around memory and its close cousin anamnesis. In the final section of this chapter this psycho-analytic angle will be discussed with reference to another French philosopher, this time from the broadly post-structural school of thinking, Jean François Lyotard.

Before embarking on an analysis of a key Lyotard text a further original artwork will be presented. This installation titled *I As Object Unseen* is presented here as an embodiment of anamnesis. *I As Object Unseen* is a large, floor standing installation made from heavy duty steel scaffolding pipes with scaffolding connectors, 3 painted plywood boards and a series of 3D printed objects in resin. The installation, which measures 2.5 meters long, 2 meters high and 1 meter deep, consists of a large rectangular outer scaffolding framework, and a smaller rectangular inner scaffolding framework. The inner framework is divided into three equal sections that are delineated by the scaffolding pipework. Each of the three sections contains a baseboard suspended at about waist height on which are placed the 3D print objects. Each of the three boards support the same or similar 3D print objects. These objects consist of a scale figure of the artist (measuring about 30cms when standing) either sitting or standing but always holding a mobility guide cane, a scale model of an armless dining chair and a trilby style hat. The entire installation is covered in a unifying mid-tone grey paint; the only exception to this blanket grey are the bright red trilby hats and the white guide canes. In the two outer frames of the tryptic the figure is walking across the space in front of the chair. On the back of these two outer chairs hangs a red trilby style hat. In the middle frame the figure is seated on the chair and he is now wearing the red hat.

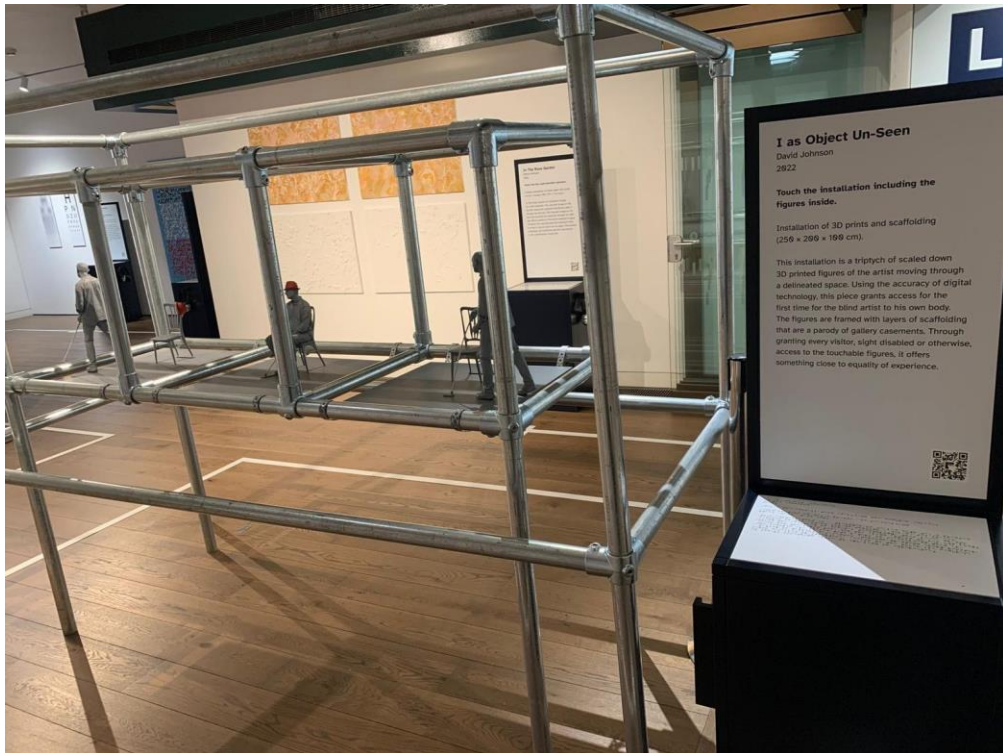


Figure 6. *I as Object Unseen* (2022) - Steel scaffolding, plywood, resin; 2.5m x 2m x 1m. © Katharina C. Husemann, all rights reserved.

This installation is a 3D sculptural narrative in three parts. Each frame depicts one of three moments in the life of the blind artist. If a sighted viewer stands in front of the long side of the framework facing the middle of the three frames, they will appreciate the trivial story

being enacted in front of them. In the right hand of the three frames the bare-headed figure of the artist strides into the space towards a chair placed in the middle of the space. A bright red trilby hat hangs expectantly on the back of the chair. This striding figure is holding his guide cane in front of him using it to feel his way forward. In the middle frame the figure has found the chair, he is seated, and he is now wearing the distinctive red hat. He is clutching the white cane across his body no longer needed for mobility. In the final frame on the left of the tryptic the figure is now standing and purposefully striding towards the left-hand edge of the frame as if to leave the installation. He is now bare headed again and the red hat is back on the chair.

This artwork features three self-portraits of the blind artist as he acts out simple interactions between theatrical space, a chair and a red hat. Visitors are invited to reach into the scaffolding frames and experience the detail and scale of the figures by touching them. This breaking through the 'fourth wall' in visual art encourages the visitor to think and behave in an unconventional, multi-sensory manner within the gallery. Here the visitor is encouraged to understand the piece by touch as well as by sight thereby breaking with normative, ocularcentric protocol in white cube, gallery settings.

This artwork amounts to a single physical realisation of anamnesis divided into three inextricably connected parts. These parts are the past, the present and the future. They are the 'absent presence' of an image that the artist hasn't seen for well over 30 years when the artist was last able to view himself in a mirror or in photographs.²⁷ Since that time the artist has been unable to independently objectify himself as a visual image beyond his own body space. This piece is an expression of anamnesis as the vast and boundless domain of the present that necessarily includes the limitless domain of the past and the future. This work reveals anamnesis as fundamental to the blind *lebenswelt* and, indeed, to everyone's

²⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, 'Anamnesis: Of the Visible', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (February 2004): 110, doi.org/10.1177/0263276404040483.

lebenswelt. This piece is an example of the ahistorical, temporal unity of anamnesis. As such it begins to articulate the notion of the non-optical, radical vision that this thesis is working towards.

The artwork described above is an instantiation of anamnesis. Freudian psychoanalysis has a long tradition of using anamnesis as a means to discover the causal factors in neurotic symptoms. Psychoanalysis is based on the belief in the healing power of the uttered word, or more precisely of recollecting memories. Relating the contextual events that have triggered the neurotic symptoms is extremely important. The patient has to remember facts, happenings, and other events, of any kind, that may be related to the occurrence of the symptoms.²⁸ In the article featured and analysed below Jean François Lyotard embraces this psychoanalytic tradition, particularly that of a working through (perlaboration) of certain types of memory.

The text discussed below started life as a spoken presentation. It is titled *Anamnesis: Of the Visible*.²⁹ It is a transcript of a lecture that Lyotard delivered at the opening of an exhibition of paintings by Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger in Israel in 1995. The fact of the text's spoken-audio origin is of significance to this research in two separate and yet connected respects. First, it resonates forcefully with the practice of audio description featured earlier in this chapter and central to the art project titled *Audio Drawing 1*, also featured above; secondly, the blind author of this practice led research accessed the entirety of the published literature resources used in the research by means of text-to-speech digital technology.³⁰ The entirety of the resources used in this project started life in a visually biased format which was then converted into an aural format. This was done to allow the blind user of the material largely

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (Penguin Classics, 2006). [1914]

²⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, 'Anamnesis: Of the Visible', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (February 2004): 107–19, doi.org/10.1177/0263276404040483.

³⁰ JAWS® – Freedom Scientific.

free and independent access to the material which would otherwise remain inaccessible. This translation of literature content from one sensory mode to another and the consequent impact that this conversion process has on the meaning and consumption of the texts concerned, lies at the very heart of blind aesthetics and reappears throughout this thesis. This conversion process was central to the dynamics of the process of doctoral study undertaken by the author of this thesis and as such is a strong example of crip time.³¹

Lyotard starts his lecture by immediately presenting his audience with a paradox. In line with Baudelaire, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty he argues that the work of the visual artist “strives to exceed the visible by means of providing us with a visual trace or sign”; the artist, says Lyotard, works towards presenting “chromatic material which will be unseen because beyond the visible, yet is colour”.³² Lyotard presents anamnesis as the embodiment of this paradox and does so by analogy to childbirth, the painting process, the writing process, psychotherapy and Jewish history.

Lyotard makes a clear distinction between anamnesis, history scholarship and historical writing. Memory as recall and the role of history is used to express past events in as truthful a language as possible. By contrast, anamnesis, stresses Lyotard, is something completely different. It explores the meanings of a given “present”, of an expression of the here and now, without immediate concern for (referential) reality, and it does this by means of associations. Anamnesis is a process of working towards a disposition one already has. In sum anamnesis is an “absent ‘presence’ “. Lyotard persuasively cites both the Judaic Talmudic tradition, in particular The Shoah, and the Proustian *Recherche*, as useful examples of how anamnesis differs from straight forward history or recall.³³

³¹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 25–46.

³² Lyotard, ‘Anamnesis’, 2004, 107.

³³ Lyotard, ‘Anamnesis’, 107–10.

Lyotard's analysis is particularly useful in delineating blind aesthetics. At its origin the visible is an embodied disposition to see; whether or not one can actually see. Merleau-Ponty pointed out that the visible is formed from the commerce between "(a) certain visible ... (and) the whole of the visible".³⁴ The idea thought or image of the visible must precede the visible for the visible to occur. The paradox is that the idea, thought or image of colour, which is unseeable because it is subjective, must precede the encounter with colour before one can actually see colour. Anamnesis is the process or work that must be undergone before the immanence of the visual becomes manifest.

The present blind body has vision or visual potential available. Whether the blind person is congenitally blind or has acquired blindness, the 'healthy' blind body and brain possesses or retains the latent capacity or disposition for vision. It is this latent capacity for vision that all 'healthy' blind and sighted humans possess and which they use to get to know the visible world. It is this latency that both blind and sighted artists alike, employ in their art-making processes. Blind people have privileged access to this latency due to minimal or non-existent light acuity.

Lyotard's lecture continues by providing additional, and useful, analysis which further illuminates the role of anamnesis in the creative process. Amongst other factors he proceeds to characterise anamnesis in terms of a sense of a "debt", the absent voice and potential "voice", the spasm, and the Freudian "*fort-da*" (the co-existence of absence and presence) all of which the artist might invoke as part of an anamnestic process.³⁵ Lyotard suggests that these elements work as fundamental forces, impulses and motivations that reside within all of us and which variously drive us to paint, write and procreate.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (W. W. Norton & Company Ltd, 1961), 8–9. [1920]

Significant parallels to Baudelaire and Derrida's denial of the prominence of healthy eyesight in artmaking are apparent throughout this lecture and the following passage taken from the latter part of the transcription of the lecture is typical of this:

“In order to paint, one must cease to perceive, stop trusting one's eyes, make oneself blind, or at least abandon oneself to blindness. And the painter recovers colour from the depth of that night, she brings it up, reveals it by inscribing it in a supporting frame which is not the retina.”³⁶

Lyotard then proceeds to invoke the entire history of western art and places anamnesis at its very core. A painting is a durational, stuttering colour event that is waiting to happen. Intermittent repetition, the idea of leaving and returning, is fundamental to painting, to psychology and to anamnesis itself.

The foregoing text has taken us on a journey where the idea of memory has been radically rethought in terms of the concept of anamnesis. The chapter commenced by looking at the time-honoured relationship between sensory perception and knowledge or understanding. From the outset memory was presented as the necessary hinge pin that connects our sensory response to the world with how we then interpret that world. So already memory is about the present; it is about our current experience, experience that is informed not only by past events but also by our innate, embodied, readiness to be and to act in the world.

The artworks that were presented in this chapter focused on differing anamnestic modalities. In the first artwork *Blind I Stand...*, mirrors were used to talk about eyesight and how we see ourselves. Then with the piece *Audio Drawing 1*, the voice was used to examine hearing or listening and finally with the piece *I as Object Unseen*, 3D print figures were used to consider touch and objectivity. In each case the analysis of the knowledge derived from the

³⁶ Lyotard, 'Anamnesis', 2004, 114.

encounter stressed the importance of a kind of embodied memory (anamnesis) rather than sensory acuity.

Leaning on Jacques Derrida's text *Memoires of the Blind* the idea of blindness being integral to healthy seeing and artmaking was presented and then, with the additional help of Merleau-Ponty, it was deconstructed. With the use of memory in the form of anamnesis together with a kind of sacrificial economy of images, an understanding of the world is arrived at. The work of Lyotard, with his Freudian sympathies, helped to reinforce the idea that visual perception has its roots in non-visual, embodied tendencies that require a labouring process to bring them forth. Anamnesis, so conceived, helps in the research process by interrogating what is really meant by human perception which is the basis of aesthetics. It also challenges the simplistic binary blindness versus healthy vision - a problematic binary that promotes the darkness of blindness and the luminosity of healthy vision. A radical move away from simplistic binary distinctions and towards heterogeneity in the visual world and in the blind world is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2 Currency, Attunement and The Comma

The business of making images never stops while we are awake and it even continues during part of our sleep, when we dream. One might argue that images are the currency of our minds.

Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*¹

Currency

Piano Murmurs

Figure 7. Link to *Piano Murmurs* sound file (2024) – collaborator Joe Hirst

(Duration: 4 mins 8 secs - can be listened to once through)

Piano Murmurs is a work that features flows of recorded sound that gradually, in imperceptible increments, increase and then decrease in intensity. Here waves of sound gradually ebb and flow pushing and pulling the listener into alternate states of calm tranquillity followed by angst-riven discordance. Deep listening reveals the presence of layers of sonic beating and throbbing as the complex and shifting soundscape interact in an emergent pattern of understated regularity. This piece was created by recording the sound of two strings of a piano being tuned one against the other. The sound files were then manipulated to eliminate much of the sonic idiosyncrasies that identify it as a piano. This was achieved by removing the initial percussive impact of the hammer striking the string.² What remains is a quiet concordant passage flowing seamlessly into a violent discordant passage then back again.

¹ Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 211.

² This impact is the primary signature sound that distinguishes the pianoforte from other percussion instruments. It is the force of this initial impact that can be regulated by the musician to produce either quiet (piano) sounds or loud (forte) sounds and this is how expressive content is introduced into piano. What is left after the initial hammer impact is removed is the infinitely divisible sonic decay as energy leaves the string. A recording of this decay was then mirrored to produce an infinitely divisible gradual sonic build-up of energy to a crescendo. These two recordings were then spliced together and repeated. The result is a sonic ebb and flow, a current or currency of repeated diminuendo and crescendo.

This piece is an immersive sonic continuum, a sonic currency designed to work with and against the beholder's emotions and sense of well-being.

The resultant sound is without development or structure other than a repeated diminuendo-crescendo pairing that is identical on each sounding. It requires the beholder to engage with the piece in an ambiguous, uncertain and maybe even uncomfortable relationship. This sound piece establishes a place that is situated between passive hearing and active listening. This is the zone so beloved of the avant-garde in the first half of the last century; a zone between music and noise, between art and not art, between art and nature. This is a zone that is indefinable, indeterminate and unavoidable. This is the birthplace or the zero point of all sensory modalities or aesthetics be it auditory, visual or tactile; this is the raw currency of aesthetics.

The composer John Cage, a central figure in 20th century avant-garde music and a devotee of Zen Buddhism, had an interest in the aesthetic force of the unity of the indeterminate:

“all things—stories, incidental sounds from the environment, and, by extension, beings—are related, and that this complexity is more evident when it is not oversimplified by an idea of relationship in one person's mind”³

Following this observation by Cage concerning the complex relational unity of all things, aesthetics is here thought of as a currency. Aesthetics is a fluid continuum where all things are interconnected, part of a holistic unity. Within this oceanic flow of connections objects and distinctions emerge. The arts, and the images that are integral to those arts, in all their rich diversity, are the media or currency within which social transformations and transactions are enacted. As Jacques Rancière eloquently puts it “[the arts are a] moving constellation in which modes of perception and affect, and forms of interpretation defining a

³ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Reprinted (Boyars, 2022), 260. [1961]

paradigm of art, take shape”.⁴ As this complex currency ebbs and flows various resonances or attunements begin to emerge together with the essential commas or intervallic pauses and punctuations that give it force, variety and shape.

In chapter 1, with the assistance of key artworks and certain key authors, it was demonstrated that the way we know the world depends as much, if not more, on the anamnesis of memory as it does on the organs of sense. How we know the world depends on a process of the re-membling or re-building of the invariant body that is ready to be in the world of which it is a part. Sensory impairment like blindness is not necessarily such a disqualifying status. The disqualifications that blind people experience are therefore largely (but not exclusively) socially constructed rather than intrinsic to blindness. In this chapter three conceptual *apexes* are introduced to further unpack how we get to know our world both as an able-bodied person and as a disabled person. These concepts are firstly (already introduced) currency, followed by the concepts of attunement and the comma. A raft of artworks by the author are also presented in this chapter and these pieces will lead the trajectory of the argument. These artworks are material embodiments of important blind-life experiences that will form the basis of the cripistemological turn that drives this research. As in chapter 1 this chapter draws on the writings of a number of philosophers to support the ‘argumentative’ thrust. Prominent among these writers are Donna Haraway, Tom Shakespeare, Martin Heidegger, and Tim Ingold. Haraway and Shakespeare contribute valuable material on the centrality of complexity in the analysis of vision and disability. Heidegger brings to the analysis his seminal existentialism that unifies the body and the world and Ingold contributes colourful and innovative explanations that have many useful anthropological applications.

To reinforce and expand the notion of currency an additional artwork is presented here.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (2019), xi. [2011]

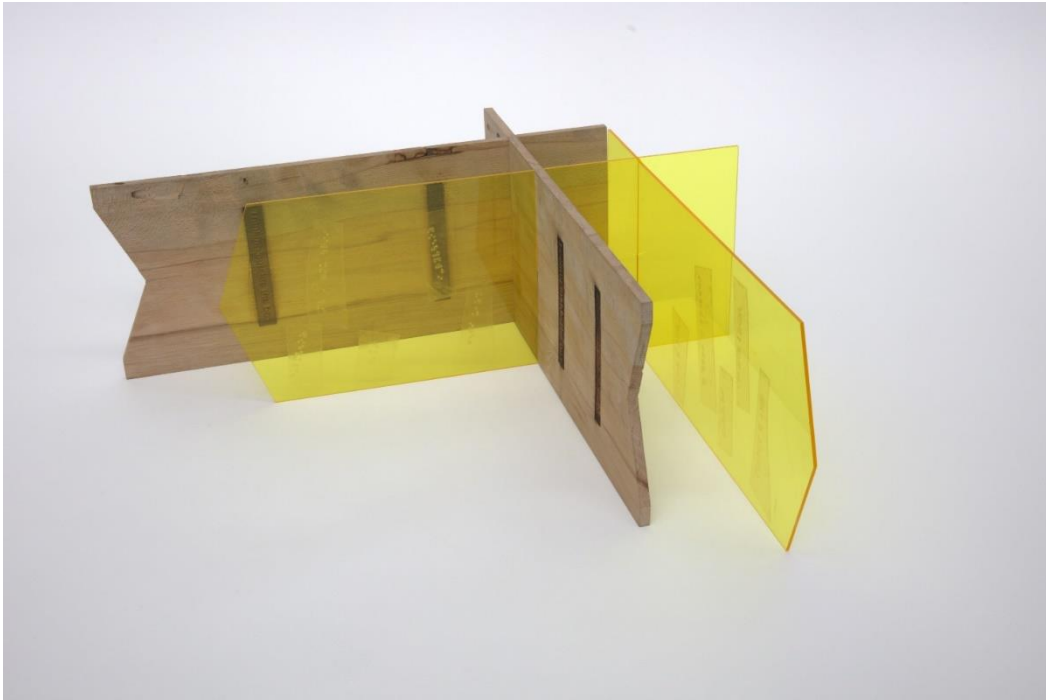


Figure 8. *Thinking Outside the Box, Feeling Inside the Box* (2022) – MDF, Perspex; 1m³.

This piece was made as part of a research summer school attended by the author in 2022. The course was part of a bigger project titled *DisOrdinary Architecture*.⁵ The course is designed as an experiment in how visually impaired persons understand space, the built environments and, crucially, how they might design and make buildings from the perspective of visual impairment. On this occasion the blind course participants were asked to design and build a ‘box of feelings’.

This piece embodies the idea of a blindness informed currency, a ‘moving constellation’ of ideas and experiences. This currency is a fluid circulation of modalities and percepts that breaks down certain conventional and entrenched relationships that are particular to the built environment. Using simple rectangular sheets of MDF and Perspex and in the manner of an architectural model, this piece opens up a conversation around the relationships between interiority and exteriority and between transparency and opacity. The shifting currencies of blind modalities present the possibility of rethinking these relationships.

⁵ ‘DisOrdinary Architecture’, The DisOrdinary Architecture Project, accessed 8 October 2024, <https://disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk/disordinary-architecture>.

A blind experience of a building allows one to rethink, to reprioritise the distal and proximal parameters of building spaces. To think through walls, to stop at the surface of the window, to re-calibrate the soundscape and to rethink the purpose of tactile surfaces. The modal and perceptual landscape becomes a fluid, porous, insecure, and pliable currency. These ideas are developed further in chapter 4 where this piece is revisited as part of a wider review of blind experience.

What follows is an extract from the author's account of the process of making his 'box'.

The complete text is available in Appendix 3.

"Accordingly my own box design shivered and shook under the influence of this experience! Huge waves of thoughts crashed against the sides of my box shattering it asunder and encouraging me to reconstruct the idea of a box in radically new ways. I took the conventional four vertical sides of the box apart and re-attached them in a way that deliberately confused what is outside and inside, deliberately avoided enclosing space and deliberately muddled the functional roles of transparency (windows) and opacity (walls) in the plains that now criss-crossed my ragged, deconstructed 'box'."⁶

The currency that is proposed here is inherently and irreducibly heterogeneous. It is of space-time and it is the course or flow of time and events. Here Donna Haraway's words from her seminal article *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* provide an appropriate starting position for this discussion. Based on the metaphor of vision as knowledge that she calls the "persistence of vision", Haraway's words take a strongly post-modernist position that denies any hint of an over simplifying essentialist grand narrative:

"I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick

⁶ 'Architecture Beyond Sight (2022)', The DisOrdinary Architecture Project, accessed 8 October 2024, <https://disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk/archive/architecture-beyond-sight-2022>.

is forbidden.”⁷

Haraway’s call for complexity and partiality is the aesthetic currency that provides the environment within which the body gets to know the world. Socially imposed inequalities can and do, however, modify these knowledge systems to the detriment of vulnerable minorities. A number of contemporary critical disability studies commentators have taken up this cause. A prominent member of this group is David Bolt whose tripartite model of disability foregrounds complexity by identifying combinations of what he calls normative positivism, non-normative negativism and non-normative positivism in the lived experience of disability.⁸ In a later text, *Autocriticality and Interdisciplinarity*, David Bolt reaffirms and expands on the importance he attaches to complexity for a true understanding of disability. In this text he draws on both the minutiae of his personal journey with blindness and chronic illness as well as drawing on dramatic examples of chronic illness in popular culture.⁹ Bolt uses these examples to warn against the dangers of over simplifying, reductive approaches to disability studies.

Two other influential writers from this group will now be examined to see how they echo and amplify Haraway and Bolt’s call for complexity and embodiment. These writers are Tom Shakespeare and Tobin Siebers. Both of these writers disavow the use of crude and over simplifying models of disability arguing that such models fail to capture vast amounts of the reality of the lived experience - the phenomenology of disability. Both these writers adopt notions of currency in their analyses of disability. Firstly, Tom Shakespeare in the form of a continuum or a spectrum and then with Tobin Siebers in the form of an economy or as exchange.

⁷ Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, 589.

⁸ David Bolt, ‘Not Forgetting Happiness: The Tripartite Model of Disability and Its Application in Literary Criticism’, *Disability & Society* 30, no. 7 (2015): 1103–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1071240>.

⁹ David Bolt, ‘Autocriticality and Interdisciplinarity: Personal-Professional Applications of the Tripartite Model of Disability’, in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Disability Studies*, ed. Katie Ellis et al., Routledge International Handbooks (Routledge, 2025).

In his book *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (2006) Tom Shakespeare undertakes a methodical, if incomplete, dismantling of the hard Social Model of Disability.¹⁰ The Social Model of Disability has formed the backbone of Anglo-American disability thinking and disability activism for the last fifty years.¹¹ Following the rise of disability activism in the 1960's and 70's in the UK, an intellectual distinction was drawn between impairment and disability. Here disability was defined exclusively in terms of social factors.

Shakespeare commences with a withering critique of the status quo in disability activism claiming it needs to undergo what amounts to a reality check. He says of the current reliance on the polar opposites of the social model of disability versus the medical model of disability: "A good idea became ossified and exaggerated into a set of crude dichotomies which were ultimately misleading".¹² Elsewhere in the book he argues for a breakup of these crude binary opposites which are centred on reductive philosophical modelling:

"Everyday life is more complex and nuanced than philosophers sometimes allow for, and to this extent I agree with Zygmunt Bauman's call for a postmodern ethics: 'Human reality is messy and ambiguous - and so modern decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent.'"¹³

Shakespeare argues robustly against the historical over reliance on terminology and ideology in guiding thinking, activism and policy making in disability affairs. Instead, he argues for complexity, for a non-reductionist account of disability that allows for and embraces a wide range of phenomenological factors. His critique is based on what he regards as a failure of both the form and content, the logic and fact in contemporary disability modelling and theorising. Shakespeare argues that the current fixation with a strong social model of disability

¹⁰ Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (Routledge, 2006).

¹¹ UPIAS (1976) *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, London: UPIAS

¹² Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, 13.

¹³ Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, 3.

leaves out complex, embodied factors such as pain, chronic fatigue and mental illness. Instead, he advocates adopting a nuanced approach that regards impairment and disability as the necessary polar opposites on a continuous spectrum. On such a spectrum the medicalised individualism of impairment interpenetrates with the social constructivism of disability rather than excluding each other.¹⁴ As such the non-normative, disabled mind-body can justifiably be regarded as part of a complex, inclusive currency of the human condition.

In his book *Disability Theory* (2008) Tobin Siebers sets out a theoretical position that parallels that of Shakespeare. Siebers' position, which he calls "complex embodiment" proposes the existence of a unified "economy" between the experiencing body and the social context into which the body is thrown. Siebers points out the feminist, situationist provenance of this view. He argues that, like the situational and knowledgeable perspectives of the oppressed female body in a patriarchal environment, the disabled body has particular, knowledgeable and, above all, valuable contribution to offer to the whole community. Vital to Siebers' argument is the idea that individual embodied experience and social location or social factors amount to one and the same thing - they form part of a spectrum or a complex whole. This view echoes Shakespeare's argument and has complexity and currency at its very core. Siebers explains that an examination of how particular disabled bodies navigate and negotiate their often socially constructed and contingently challenging environments can reveal insights and adaptations that benefit the wider community. This is the basis of the important concept called *disability-gain theory*, a central pillar in the proposed blind aesthetic argument and referred to throughout this thesis.

With the theory of complex embodiment Siebers, like Shakespeare, rejects the crude and misleading dichotomy of the medical-social model debate. His alternative theory proposes a complex multi-directional economy involving reciprocation and mutual transformativity between the body and the environment, between the individual and society and ultimately

¹⁴ Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, 37

between the personal and the political. Siebers argues that deeply personal phenomenologies such as chronic pain, age related and mental health related factors, can be thought of together with technical and environmental factors. This complex understanding of disability that Tobin Siebers promotes, with its crosscurrents and mutualities, nuances the theoretical debate and hence this research. Both Siebers' and Shakespeare's work helps this research navigate the porous distinctions that exist within and between aesthetics, disability phenomenology, blindness and the artworks presented in this thesis.¹⁵

In view of the above, it will now be useful to narrow the focus of this study onto blindness itself. The lived experience of blindness and visual impairment will be examined in order to highlight nuances that are particular to this way of being. In what follows the way in which blindness resonates with the theme of currency and heterogeneity will be demonstrated. Previously unrecognised short feedback loops, interpenetrations, reciprocation, cross currents and multi-directional flows will be identified and argued for as indicators of novel and meaningful content. This variegated landscape or currency, ultimately figured and sculpted by attunements and commas, moves this research towards identifying a particular and radical mode of perception that is the privilege of blindness but which is also available to all.

The lived experience of blindness is inherently heterogenous; it comes with many determinates, idiosyncrasies and special and 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 diverse range of diseases, conditions and embodied causal trajectories all of which impact upon the individual in a similarly diverse manner. The heterogenous 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, any assumptions that generalise notions of embodiment and blindness are treated with suspicion by this research.

¹⁵ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*, Corporealities (University of Michigan Press, 2008), 22–32.

The 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 visually biased world. Factors 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 of these factors contribute to the variability 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.¹⁶

It is notable that the catalogue of factors that challenge the visually impaired individual listed above consist of a mix of both social factors and embodied medical factors; this mix resonates strongly with Shakespeare and Siebers' argument cited above. This inherent heterogeneity 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 life-world.

Attunement

In this research the term attunement is used in both the direct musical sense of a bringing into harmony and the indirect metaphorical sense, often employed in philosophy,

¹⁶ The author became acutely aware of the variability of sight loss when he was helping run a life class designed for visually impaired artists held at the Royal Academy of Art, London in 2019. Each workshop participant had a complex range of requirements with respect to accessible art materials and their position in the studio. Many of the participants were keen to discuss their individual journeys with sight loss and how this affected their relationship with art making and art consumption. The diversity of the participants' experiences and concerns was both notable and unexpected. While this was an informal event it might become the basis of an informative future research project into blind aesthetics and complexity. The inherent variability of the experience of sight loss was the focus of a recent research project between the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, Royal College of Art and the RNIB. 'How We See', *The Inclusionaries Lab*, 26 August 2020, <https://inclusionaries.com/portfolio/how-we-see/>.

referring to a special or notable relationship between two or more objects or entities.¹⁷ Here attunement explores a variety of relational possibilities in modern and contemporary philosophy which feedback into the research process and provide an additional methodological guide towards a better understanding of blindness and vision. Attunement and related concepts have been used as a metaphor in philosophy by a number of influential modern writers. Their interpretations of attunement have provided useful illuminations and explanatory signposts in the current research so an analysis of some of these texts will be shared in what follows.

Attunement is the synergistic or resonant interaction, interplay or encounter between bodies. As such attunements determine the contingent structures and regimes that constitute aesthetics and by extension society. How and why and whether bodies resonate with each other will be looked at through the writings of various thinkers including Martin Heidegger, Søren Kirkegaard and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (via Johnny Golding).

Martin Heidegger and his existentialist and essentially phenomenological analysis of being is the writer whose use of notions of attunement has provided perhaps the most useful material for this research. In Heidegger's most influential work *Being and Time* his stated aim is the examination of the "necessity of a retrieve of the question of the meaning of being". Heidegger persuasively argues that the question of being is subject to the following trio of prejudices: first, that *being* is the most universal concept; second, that the concept of *being* is indefinable; and thirdly, *being* is a self-evident concept.¹⁸ This last prejudice renders the question to be simultaneously the most obscure and the most obvious of questions with a priori evidence being available to all and sundry. This line of argument leads Heidegger to

¹⁷ This concept will be developed further but see Søren Kirkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: And, The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013) [1843 and 1849] Cf also This should be attributed to J. Golding (2010), 'Fractal Philosophy (and the Small matter of Learning how to Listen): Attunement as the task of Art', in Stephen Zepke and Simon O'Sullivan (ed), *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, (Edinburgh University Press), 133-156.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1 - 12. [1953]

perhaps his most famous contribution to existential philosophy that of *Da-sein*; the following quotation from *Being and Time* captures how he arrives at *Da-sein*:

“The question of being demands that the right access to beings be gained and secured in advance with regard to what it interrogates. But we call many things "existent" [seiend], and in different senses. Everything we talk about, mean, and are related to is in being in one way or another. What and how we ourselves are is also in being. Being is found in thatness and whatness, reality, the objective presence of things [Vorhandenheit], subsistence, validity, existence [Da-sein], and in the "there is" [es gibt]”¹⁹

Heidegger develops the notion of *Da-sein* by linking it strongly to the phenomenological structural determinate phrase *being-in-the-world*. This unitary composite links being to the existential condition of living, inhabiting or dwelling in familiar spaces.²⁰ It is this primary and inextricable connection that Heidegger makes between the phenomenal or the “being” and the world in itself that is useful to this research.

The blind aesthetic that this research seeks to demonstrate depends on the lived experience of blindness or partial blindness in the Heideggerian sense outlined above. The quotidian and ubiquitous psycho-physical encounters that the blind-body experiences are viewed as heterogenous, embodied and cripistemologically positive events which, it is argued here, what constitutes the largely unrecognised aesthetic that is here named *blind aesthetic*.

In chapter 29 of his text Heidegger introduces the concept of attunement and its identification with *Da-sein*. Here Heidegger equates *Da-sein* with attunement which he describes as moods or affects or feelings. In summary Heidegger delineates *Da-sein*-attunement as a relational, a priori, pre-cognitive psychological state of being that is either in

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 5.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 50.

concordance or discordance with the world. Heidegger helpfully points out that *Da-sein*-attunement consists of three “modes of attunement”.

These are firstly *thrownness*:

“In attunement, *Da-sein* is always already brought before itself, it has always already found itself, not as perceiving oneself to be there, but as one finds one's self in attunement”.²¹

This is a crucial conceptualisation in the pre-cognitive, a priori principle of anamnesis, the subject matter of chapter 1 in this thesis. The second mode of attunement is *being-in-the-world*. We have already met this composite phrase but Heidegger here elaborates on its function in attunement, he states: “Mood (attunement) assails. It comes neither from “without” nor from “within,” but rises from being-in-the-world itself as a mode of that being” It is argued here that this is the essential immanence of attunement. In general artmaking arises immanently from encounters with materials and objects and hence blind art arises from blind encounters with the same materials and objects. The third and final determination of attunement that Heidegger points out is that of fear or the threat: “Only something which is the attunement of fearing, or fearlessness, can discover things at hand in the surrounding world as being threatening”.²²

This reinforces the importance of the a priori in Heidegger’s work which, once again, resonates with chapter 1 of this thesis. The three features of *Da-sein* and attunement described above provide a very helpful philosophical framework for the research under review. Two of the key concepts that undergird this research, anamnesis and the comma, rely heavily on notions of the a priori and attunement (as difference) respectively.

The work of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard will now be looked at with respect to an alternative philosophical understanding of attunement to that of Heidegger. In 1843

²¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 127.

²² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 128 -129.

Kierkegaard published his highly influential book *Fear and Trembling*.²³ In this book Kierkegaard explores the ethical vicissitudes, paradoxes and complexities of religious faith in the context of the Old Testament story of Abraham and his near sacrifice, or murder, of his only son Isaac; it is also a thinly veiled allegory of his recently unrequited love for a woman.²⁴

Chapter 1 of *Fear and Trembling* is titled 'Stemning' or 'Attunement' which, following Howland, refers to interpreting or listening to or unravelling the "polyphonic" voices that are present throughout this text.²⁵ From the outset *Fear and Trembling* plays with ventriloquy. The book is written under one of Kierkegaard's many pseudonyms - this one being Johannes de Silentio. When the biblical story of Abraham is introduced to the reader in chapter 1 it contains a host of voices all speaking simultaneously. In the opening line of the book, Kierkegaard states: "Once upon a time there was a man who as a child had heard the beautiful story about how God tempted Abraham..."²⁶ With this storybook opening Kierkegaard introduces a babble of voices, including: the narrator (pseudonymously), the voice of the parents or minister telling the child the story, and finally God talking to Abraham. Here Kierkegaard represents the multiple ethical possibilities and paradoxes uttered by these various voices. *Fear and Trembling* is about 'tuning in' or 'attunement to' the various ethically conflicting voices of this story and which Kierkegaard goes on to analyse. Kierkegaard interprets the voices through a series of *problemata*.²⁷ Here it is Kierkegaard's use of *faith* as attunement that is useful for this research. In artistic creative endeavour it is a faith or commitment that is at work when the artist encounters the materials, the objects or the ideas that are the well springs of the

²³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: And, The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, with Gordon Daniel Marino (Princeton University Press, 2013). [1843 and 1849]

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 9

²⁵ Jacob Howland, 'Fear and Trembling's "Attunement" as Midrash', in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway, Cambridge Critical Guides (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 26–43, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139540834.003.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 60.

artmaking process. This complex process of attunement involves interpretation, faith and the voice or the spoken word as part of the collaborative dialogue. These ideas are further unpacked with reference to blindness in what follows.

Whether thought of in the Heideggerian sense of “thrownness” or “being-in-the-world” or in the Kierkegaardian sense of sensitivity to voices or a kind of faith or commitment, attunement is integral to the process of artmaking. In the blind author’s own art practice sighted assistance is sought and embraced as integral to the entire process. This sighted assistance is used at every stage of the process including planning, colour choice and many making processes. This assistance is so intense and generative that it is considered by the artist to be a co-creative, collaborative contribution over and above the usual standards of third-party disability facilitation. An essential element in this process is the spoken dialogue between artist and assistant. The dialogic audio exchanges that take place during this collaborative process generate a wealth of synaesthetic and imaginary responses in the artist that feed into the creative process.²⁸ Here an attunement or a resonance with the collaborative assistant is regarded, by the artist as being just as important to the creative process as being attuned to the materials being used or the ideas that underpin the project. The artwork presented below is a typical example of a piece, created by the author, that involved a vast amount of attuned collaboration between the artist and his assistants as well as attunement between artist and the end user.

²⁸ The conversations between the artist and the collaborative assistant about the processes and materials in an art project, are very generative. What occurs in these exchanges is the involuntary generation of synaesthetic and imaginary events in the mind of the blind artist. This is equivalent to what occurs in audio description events more detail of which will be dealt with in chapter 3. This generative interaction fuelled by the spoken word is attunement.



Figure 9. *Sanctuary Café* (2022) – collaborator Ben Twiston-Davies (Readymade bench table, Jesmonite, resin, plastic, floor paint; life-size). Commissioned by The Mayor of London's Liberty Festival in partnership with We Are Lewisham, the London Borough of Culture 2022. © Roswitha Chesher, all rights reserved.

This large interactive public sculpture consists of a life-sized 3D print of a woman sitting at a café table eating and drinking. Members of the public are invited to sit alongside the figure and to interact with both the sculpted figure and each other. This complex work involved the blind artist having collaborative assistance at every stage of its production. The production process of this piece involved developing very high levels of trust, understanding and attunement between all those involved.

Attunement is integral to this sculpture in both its production and its consumption. In its current location, the city centre shopping mall in the middle of Lewisham, South-East London, members of the public habitually sit, eat and drink with the sculpture. This piece consciously avoids the sense of reverence between artworks and beholders. The conspicuous absence of a plinth, the familiarity of the life-sized figure of a woman sitting eating and drinking at the table - she is a well-known local community worker- and the open invitation to everyone and anyone to sit at the table that is designed to accommodate wheelchairs and buggies, all these features combine to generate, as well as require, high levels of attunement.



Figure 10. *Sanctuary Café* (2022) – collaborator Ben Twiston-Davies (Readymade bench table, Jesmonite, resin, plastic, floor paint; life-size).

This review of the philosophical treatment of attunement concludes by focusing on the Deleuzian concept of “becoming” and does so via the work of contemporary artist and philosopher Johnny Golding. In Golding’s article *Fractal Philosophy: Attunement as the Task of Art*, the Heideggerian attunement as being-in-the-world is blended with the Kierkegaardian attunement to voices. Golding focuses on the Deleuzian notion of “becoming-x” and points out its fundamentally temporal and transient qualities.²⁹ Golding stresses Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of Hegelian Dialectics and all similar arboreal, totalizing logical systems in favour of the temporal, the fluid and the immanent.

For Deleuze and Guattari *becoming* or immanence has no history and no destination; it has what Golding describes as “radical fluidity”. This fluidity grants all things a complexity, a

²⁹ Johnny Golding, ‘Fractal Philosophy (and the Small Matter of Learning How to Listen) - Attunement as the Task of Art’, *CTheory*, 14 April 2010, 4/14/2010-4/14/2010.

plurality and an infinite divisibility - a multiple, rhizomatic body without organs.³⁰ Here art as poiesis, and as a series of intensities, has the task of taming this heterogenous currency. As Deleuze says: “Art undoes the triple organization of perceptions, affections, and opinions in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects, and blocs of sensations that take the place of language”.³¹ Here, argues Golding, attunement or the sonic refrain, clothed in melody harmony and rhythm, grounds the entire aesthetic edifice. The difference and the repetition that makes up the refrain, the riff and the pulse or the beat are common characteristics to both the aural and the visual, as well as to all aesthetic modalities.



Figure 11. *A Pair of Pear-Shaped Pears* (2021) – Expanded Polystyrene, Chemiwood, magnets, oil paint; 4m³.

³⁰ Golding, 'Fractal Philosophy - Attunement as the Task of Art', 9.

³¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, European Perspectives (Columbia University Press, 1994), 177. [1994]

The photograph shows two identical 2-meter-high pears in a gallery setting. Here the *throb of attunement* is embodied in the difference and repetition of these two identical, over-sized pears. The reflections in the window that is behind the giant pears lends this image additional force as throbbing repetition.³²

The analysis will now move to see how this radical fluidity, this throbbing, unified sensorium, might be further ‘tamed’ or choreographed with the influence of another apex of thought, that of the comma.

The Comma

The comma is a break, a cut, a gap or an interval. It is an indeterminate pause *without* which meaning is lost or at least obscured and *with* which words and movement derive meaning and impact. Narrowly applied, as text punctuation, the comma is a mark that denotes a break, a breath, a stilling in the effluxion of time. In music, a comma refers to a small disagreement or difference between two definitions of the same tone or pitch. Broadly applied the comma gives text its meaning, colours their energy and gives music its shape, impact and expressive force. Under this broader definition the comma is at the heart of a powerful modal intersection. The following analysis investigates how the comma contributes to a deeper understanding of disability aesthetics.

³² Below is the label text that accompanied this piece in an exhibition called *91DIVOC* (2021) which happened during the Covid 19 pandemic so the theme of touching - or not touching- was very much to the fore.

Touch Me Not - A Pair of Pear-Shaped Pears

Touch, perhaps the most fundamental of our senses, has been in short supply during the pandemic. *Touch Me Not* is about touching and not touching. The giant pears presented here don't quite touch each other and yet visitors are warmly invited to gently touch them to experience their texture and their shape as best they can (please hand sanitise before and after touching). The pears are nearly identical in form, they were machined out of polystyrene and the machine was controlled by an algorithm which was created from a digital scan of a real Conference pear. I didn't touch these pears at all until the finishing stages of production when my assistant and I sanded down the surface and coated them with plaster and finally painted them.

As punctuation in text, the comma or the cut gives room for fine grained modulations in rhythm, stress, inflexion and intonation all of which gives meaning, significance and prosody to what is being said or written. In music the comma is more descriptive of a musical or acoustical phenomenon. It is interesting and informative to speculate whether both definitions have temper or temperament at the root of their understanding. To temper is to tune, adjust or modulate something. As Ernest McClain puts it in his book *The Myth of Invariance*, which is a study of harmonic theory: “[Temperament is] any system of tuning which slightly modifies the normative roles of superparticular ratios.”³³

The comma as a timely interruption or pause is a ubiquitous presence in speech, written text and music and which generates and imparts meaning and significance and which is an essential element in aesthetics. The fundamental idea is that we exist *in* and are an integral part *of* a universe where nothing quite follows through in a precisely predictable way. The universe is subject to infinite variability and hence undecidability and the comma in its various manifestations, allows us to both express and to regulate, order and, to some extent, make sense of this infinite variance and indeterminacy. To again draw on Ernest McClain from the conclusion to his book *The Myth of Invariance*:

“What seemed most certain to our ancestors was that physically nothing endured In this sea of restless change man discovered an island he could trust, the octave of ratio 1:2—the “basic miracle of music”—functioning as a matrix for all smaller intervals and providing a metric basis for a tonal algebra.”³⁴

McClain goes on to express this human need to corral the forces of the indeterminate and the infinitely variable by observing:

“The study of number (meaning rational number, the only kind then imaginable) led then inevitably to the insight that number must be dethroned as an absolute and viewed instead as a tool for human

³³ Ernest G. McClain, *The Myth of Invariance: The Origin of the Gods, Mathematics, and Music from the Rg Veda to Plato*, ed. Patrick A. Heelan (Nicolas-Hays, 1984), xviii.

³⁴ McClain, *The Myth of Invariance*, 196.

rationality to order as best it can the evidence of eye...and ear...The wisdom which suffuses the Republic was restated more prosaically by Aristotle and Aristoxenus when they affirmed simply that the ear—not number—rules the universe of tone...”³⁵

The power, the indeterminacy and the ubiquity of the comma has been a useful way of articulating many relationships in this research. All disabled bodies are differently aligned in complex and indeterminate ways; all disabled people and disabled modes of existence, which obviously includes blind people, have a privileged access to altered perceptions of the world and their place within it. As such blind and disabled people have a privileged access to abundant and interestingly altered workings of the comma. An in-depth, speculative investigation of the comma and how blind art is both constitutive and enabling of the comma, will now be undertaken. As part of this exposition an original artwork by the author will be presented, described and analysed in an attempt to demonstrate the complex interplay between the blind body, artmaking materials and processes and notions of the comma.

When a comma appears in a piece of text as punctuation it denotes and creates some kind of relationship between what precedes it and what follows it. The comma has multiple relational functionality; it can connect the two parts of the text, it can separate or differentiate them, it can synthesise them and it can pluralise them. Daniel Rubenstein, in his analysis of Jean François Lyotard’s use of the comma in the title of his book *Discourse, Figure*, articulates the importance of the comma as a relational marker between notions of discourse and notions of figure. He states:

“Chronologically the comma comes before the Figure, but it recovers a figure right inside the discourse. This sensual contraband is not imported into the discourse from outside but is found at the same place where the sign, representation and logos reside. For

³⁵ McClain, *The Myth of Invariance*, 196–97. A close equivalent to the Indo-European use of comma as just described is the Japanese tradition of Ma. Ma is part of an ancient religio-aesthetic paradigm. The Japanese word ‘Ma’ refers to a gap or an interval between two or more spatial or temporal objects or events. The concept of Ma is deeply embedded in classical Japanese culture and arises especially strongly in Japanese Noh Theatre. But the concept of Ma is also far-reaching in Japanese contemporary culture informing architecture, art and latterly film making. See for example Kunio Konparu, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*, 1st ed (Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983).

Lyotard this is a key strategy in dismantling the sovereignty of the logos.”³⁶

The relational function of the comma that Lyotard (via Rubenstein) points out here is fundamental to much of the argumentative strategy of the current research thesis. The relationship between the various sensory modes in the proposed pluralised sensorium, the relationship between disability living and able-bodied living and the relationship between being blind and being sighted, not to mention the relationships that exist within and between artworks cited within this text and which constitute the blind aesthetic, all of these relationships rely on the power of the comma as explicated in what follows and as supported by various key commentators.

A vital function of the comma in text is as a mark of separation or differentiation. What is fascinating about the comma is that it separates the text it sits within at the same time as connecting its various strands. This simultaneity is one of the key characteristics of the function of the comma. Tim Ingold in his essay ‘Thinking Through the Cello’ discusses the simultaneity of joining and differentiation that is captured by the ancient usage of the word *harmony*. Ingold explains that harmony (originally *Harmos*) refers to the articulation of differentiated elements of an assemblage that work together in fulfilling the purpose of that assemblage. The assemblages concerned, explains Ingold, could be as diverse as beams or joists within a house, a temple or a ship or alternatively bones within a skeleton. Ingold argues that the modern preference for using the word harmony to refer to musical matters, undermines the force that this word possessed in its former and wider application.³⁷

Ingold goes on to introduce the phrase *interstitial differentiation* as a way of reintroducing notions of *articulation* as part of a powerful concept that has become diluted and

³⁶ Daniel Rubinstein, ‘Discourse in a Coma; A Comment on a Comma in the Title of Jean-François Lyotard’s Discourse, Figure’, *Philosophy of Photography* 4, no. 1 (1 September 2013): 3, doi.org/10.1386/pop.4.1.103_1.

³⁷ Tim Ingold, ‘Thinking through the Cello’, in *Thinking in the World: A Reader*, ed. Jill Bennett and Mary Zournazi, Thinking in the World (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

diminished by the modern usage of harmony with its current musical bias. From the same text Ingold explains:

“This distinction between joining up and joining with, or between articulation and correspondence, is critical. One is an exterior connection, a coupling of parts each of which is already formed to its own specifications. But in the other, every movement participates from the inside in the generation of every other, while at the same time distinguishing itself. I call this latter process interstitial differentiation.”³⁸

The notion of interstitial differentiation that Ingold introduces to substitute for the lost usage of the word harmony, is useful for the current research. Interstitial differentiation is analogous to how the comma works as punctuation by differentiating and articulating elements within a text. The concept of the comma works in analogous articulatory ways to that of actual commas in text but now within works of visual or plastic art. Commas, or comma-like relations, exist within and between diverse elements of sculptures, paintings, installations and assemblages. By doing so, these comma relations perform the same function as the comma as punctuation namely as a connective, a differentiator, a synthesiser and a pluraliser. Like the comma’s role as punctuation in text, the comma in art conducts and choreographs a similar range of rhythmic, metrical and cadential relations and roles within, and even between, artworks. So the comma in art, like its work in text, is a kind of silent or invisible provider or articulator of the *music* of the artwork without which it would lack life and meaning. Most of what follows is concerned with explaining and demonstrating these comma relations within art to build towards new ideas of aesthetics that include and embrace disability and blindness.

The comma’s simultaneity and articulatory function that is captured by Ingold’s notion of interstitial differentiation, relies on a synthesis of the differentiated elements within a text or discourse, within a building, within a piece of music, within a body and within an artwork. The composition or combination of diverse parts or elements are simultaneously connected and

³⁸ Ingold, ‘Thinking through the Cello’, 207–8.

differentiated by the comma or comma relations to form a pluralised and yet coherent whole. Jean François Lyotard's short book *The Hyphen* is a meditation on the significance of the hyphen mark in the phrase "Judaéo-Christian". Here Lyotard grants the hyphen an equivalent function to that of the comma. For Lyotard the hyphen, in this context, simultaneously unites and disunites the theological traditions of Judaism and Christianity.³⁹ Daniel Rubinstein, in his essay (already cited above) on Lyotard's use of the comma in the title of his book *Discourse, Figure* argues that it is the presence of the comma itself, by introducing an indeterminate interruption between *discourse* and *figure*, that denotes the parallel interdependence and mutuality of the two concepts discourse and figure. Here the comma is being used to 'interstitially differentiate' between notions of discourse and notions of figure.

Returning to Ingold's article 'Thinking Through the Cello' it is useful to reflect on how Ingold uses the Deleuzian concept of *making the difference* which is part of the latter author's philosophy of difference. In his book *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze argues that differences, as determinations, are only ever relative, empirical and extrinsic. He goes on to point out an important unilateral relationship that exists between that which is determinate and that which is indeterminate. He says:

"Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground."⁴⁰

Ingold embraces this idea to articulate and upholster his notion of interstitial differentiation. He compares playing a line of melody on his cello to following a path through a grassy and overgrown area of countryside. The line of melody and the well-trodden path are both *drawn-out* and distinguishable from the ambient sound or the surrounding ground and

³⁹ Jean-François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Philosophy and Literary Theory (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanity Books, 1999), 13 - 28.

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Continuum, 2004), 28. [1968]

vegetation. However, both Ingold and Deleuze point out that the reverse is not the case. Ambient sound and surrounding ground are an indistinguishable and indeterminate part of a whole that includes the melody or the pathway. From the perspective of the generality of, in this case, sound and ground, differentiation or interstitiality only works when the associated melody or pathway are indeterminate parts of the general categories concerned. The unity and cohesive integrity of the general category from which the melody or pathway arises relies on this unilateral character of the relationship and, it is here argued, the essence of how commas and comma relations operate. The synthesising and pluralising character of Ingold's interstitial differentiation, illustrated in the examples just referred to, is directly analogous to the way in which the comma, or comma relationships, work in text as punctuation, and how they work in works of art and, more widely, how they work in identity and disability theory. The comma mark or a comma relation, divides and differentiates two or more things while simultaneously synthesising or pluralising them into some kind of important categorical unity.

At this juncture an example of the author's artwork is presented and used to argue that comma relationships of the kind just described are at work within art. The piece presented here is titled *BrailleScape* and, as the name suggests, it uses the tactile language Braille as its central motif. It is important to understand the process of Braille production in order to appreciate how comma relations work in this piece. A brief outline of the Braille code and how it is produced will now follow.

Braille is the tactile language developed in France by Louis Braille in 1824. Braille enables blind and visually impaired people to read and write by touch alone. Using the sensitive pads on the fingertips the Braille reader feels tiny, raised dots on the surface of the page. Literary Braille systems use a code of symbols based on differing arrangements of raised dots in a standardised Braille cell. The conventional Braille cell consists of two columns of three dots clustered closely together. The six dots are included or omitted in various combinations to represent either individual letters of the alphabet or alternatively common prefixes and suffixes or even entire words. These cells are small enough to fit comfortably

under the fingertip. The cells are placed together to form words, sentences and numbers and they are arranged in rows that are read from left to right across the page. The experienced Braille reader slides their fingertip lightly along the Braille cells to facilitate fast and efficient reading.

The important characteristic of Braille for the purposes of this thesis is that Braille is typically produced in an embossed format. Braille production involves pins being pushed through the thick Braille paper to produce clusters of raised dots on the other side of the paper which becomes the reading surface of the paper. As such these raised dots are tiny eruptions in the surface of the paper or card used in the process. The clusters of dots produced make up the readable Braille cells as described in the previous paragraph. The dots are *of* the substrate and hence the meaning and significance that the dots communicate to the reader arises from the material employed. This close relationship between meaning and material contrasts with conventional print or screen-based text. With printed text contrasting ink is adhered to the paper and with screen text letters and other shapes are displayed by contrasting luminosity on the screen.

Braille is strongly analogous to the comma relationships described above. With Braille the meaning of the text is integral to its ground or substrate. Similar to the Deleuzian-Ingoldian model the meaning arises unilaterally from an indeterminate substrate. Meaning and material have a comma relationship. The indeterminacy of the substrate becomes determinate Braille by means of the comma.

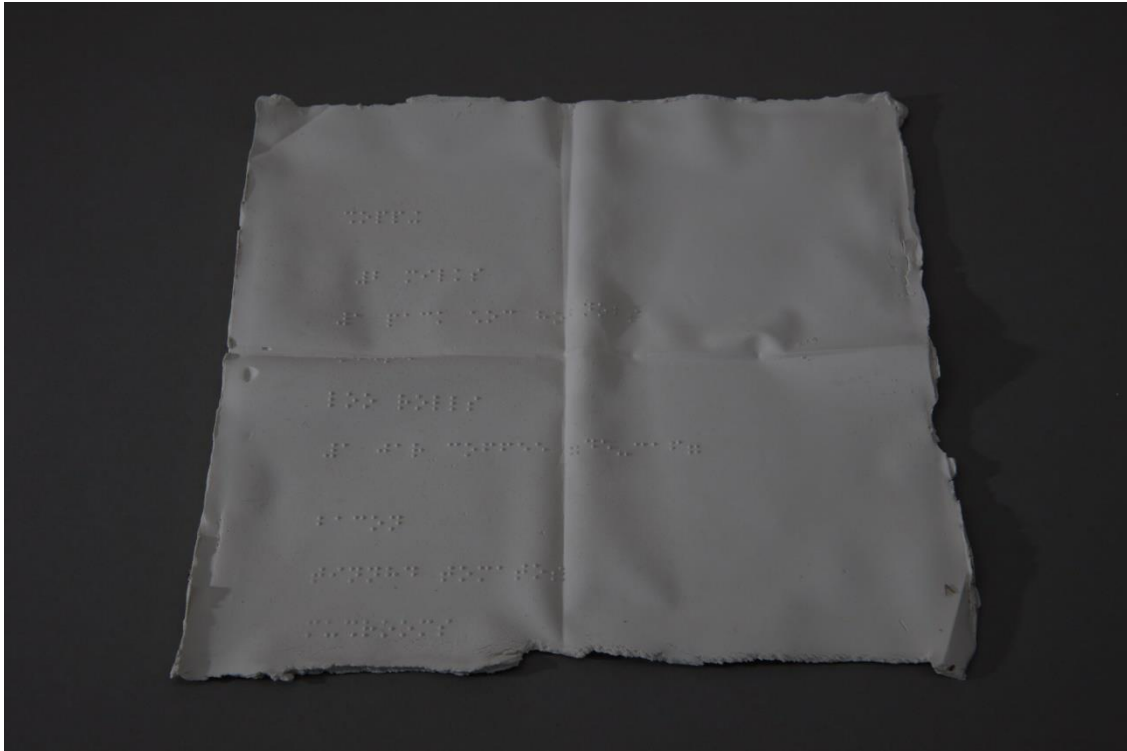


Figure 12. *BrailleScape* (2024) – Porcelain; 30cm x 30cm.

BrailleScape is a fired porcelain casting. It is designed to be touched by the beholder and is based on a simple shopping list that includes everyday items such as biscuits, coffee and cheese, but all listed in Braille. The piece derives from an actual Braille shopping list that belonged to the author and had been in the author's pocket for some time. Consequently, the Braille paper had become crumpled and creased and the Braille was beginning to merge back into the topology of the crumpled substrate. The transience of the Braille is emphasised by the Braille becoming lost in the folds and creases of the landscape of the whole and hence the meaning begins to disappear back into the paper from whence it came.

The unilateralism of difference described by Ingold and Deleuze above is evidenced in this piece. The Braille items of the shopping list are distinguished from the substrate but the substrate is indistinguishable from the Braille. Furthermore, the Braille is mixed or is becoming mixed or indistinguishable from the environmental chaos of the creased and crumpled surface of the 'paper'. The transience of the Braille and the paper is held artificially in stasis by it being cast in porcelain. Currency, transience and flow are held here in a momentary pause in meaning and materiality. This piece is a material embodiment of the comma. In the next

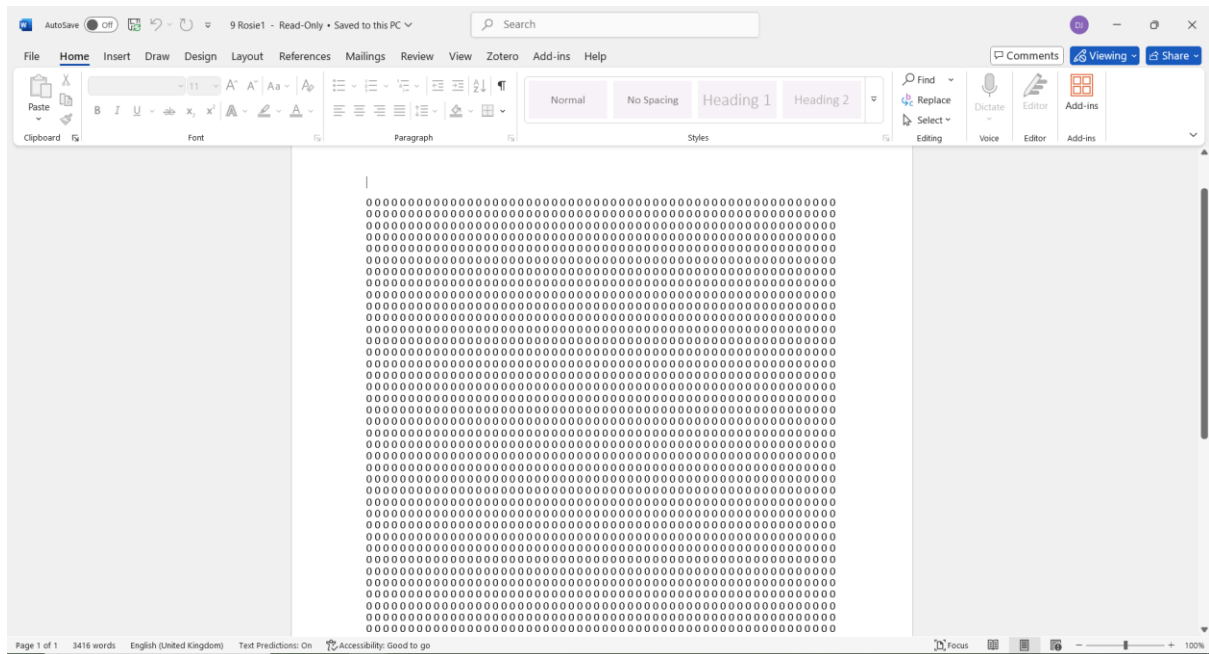
chapter vision and the comma are connected through the power of the spoken word or audio description; here it will be argued that vision arises from the sensorium in an analogous manner to the unilateralism just described.

The preceding text brought together aesthetics and disability in a fluid environment or currency which is articulated and punctuated by attunements and commas. The analysis of currency emphasised the presence and importance of heterogeneity, diversity and warned against the dangers of misleading modelling in disability studies. A blind way of knowing is what is emerging from the artworks presented and from this research in general. This cripistemological blind knowledge economy, governed by attunements and commas, begins to suggest radical new epistemologies based on the sub-optimal, the broken and the disabled. In the next chapter these cripistemologies will be looked at in more depth towards an expanded conception of vision that arises from the spoken word.

Chapter 3 Grunts and Squeals¹

O sweet Light of my secret eyes.

St Augustine, *Confessions*²



Rosie 1 sound file

Figure 13. *Rosie 1* (2013) - Screenshot of word document, audio file.

(Duration: 2 mins 0 secs - can be listened to once through)

A screen shot showing a screen filled with zeros. The soundtrack is a screen reader telling the listener what is on display. The meaning of the repeated word begins to shift in the mind of the listener. Here an uncanny synthesis between subject and object is revealed in an audio version of Ludwig Wittgenstein's Duck-Rabbit construal.³ Here meaning toggles

¹ Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *G.F. Watts* (Duckworth & Co, 1904), 88–91, <https://archive.org/details/gfwattsgk00chesuoft/page/90/mode/2up?q=unions>.

² Edmund Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), 183. [AD 397-400]

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953), II.xi, pp. 194–206. See also the work of artists JODI internet provocateurs JODI pioneered Web art in the mid-1990s. Based in The Netherlands, JODI <https://net-art.org/jodi> (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans) were among the first artists to investigate and subvert conventions of the Internet, computer programs, and video and computer games.

between the spoken words ‘zero’ and ‘Rosie’ rather than between the images of Duck and Rabbit. The meaning of the audio shifts independently of the meaning of the world it is describing.

In his article ‘*Umwelt* or *Umwelten*? How should shared representation be understood given such diversity?’, Colin Allen points out that despite species genome invariance and neuro-phenotype similarity there exists a huge diversity in our interpretation of our life-world encounters from one individual to the next. For example two individuals’ response to the word ‘dog’ varies enormously despite ‘dog’ referring to a single species. Allen points out that notwithstanding the limitations of the “arbitrary system of grunts and squeals” that constitutes a common language, it is this commonality that allows us to manage the diversities and to introduce convergence and shared meaning and shared understanding.⁴ It is these convergencies, and in particular the phenomenon of vicarious experience, (which includes the possibility of vicarious vision), that is the focus of this chapter. This will be done through an analysis of the access practice known as audio description. A connected look at mental imaging and the phenomenon of extreme imagination, otherwise known as aphantasia and hyperphantasia, will follow and forms part of a wider discussion around the nature of the mental image and the persistence of visual experience within and beyond blindness.

This chapter argues for a dramatically expanded role for synaesthesia and the embodied subjectivity that this entails. It is argued that (the assistive service) audio description, judiciously delivered, provides a small but powerful, polymodal antidote to the inequalities of aesthetic distribution identified by Jacques Rancière and which are featured in the next chapter.

⁴ Colin Allen, ‘Umwelt or Umwelten? How Should Shared Representation Be Understood given Such Diversity?’, *Semiotica* 2014, no. 198 (1 January 2014), doi.org/10.1515/sem-2013-0105.

Audio description, often shortened to AD, is a disability access support practice that started as such in the 1980's.⁵ Audio description is a service available to blind and visually impaired people wanting to access film and television output, theatre and dance productions and exhibitions in art galleries and museums. The hallmark of audio description is the targeted use of spoken commentary to accompany an artwork, an artefact or any other visually embedded object, performance or broadcast. The way audio description is delivered varies dramatically between media due to the varying technical constraints and due to differing practices that have grown up over time. With the audio description of art, the main concern of this research, conventional practice is to provide the service to groups or to individuals as a live performance in the gallery space in front of the art. Visually impaired listeners passively consume the description and thereby understand, imagine or even experience what is on display. Alternatively art audio description is provided as a recording available to gallery visitors or on-line as part of on-demand disability access content.

Audio description, as a formalised service, uses one sense modality (speech-hearing) to communicate the existence and the attributes of an object that was designed for or appeals to an alternative sense modality (usually vision); it is a process of telling rather than showing. In its conventional format audio description relies on the skilful use of the spoken word to provide a non-diegetic or extra-diegetic accompaniment to the artwork or object on display.

Audio description exploits the power of the sound of the spoken word to connect with and stimulate multi-modal image responses in the listener. In chapter 1 of this thesis audio description was referred to in connection with the work of Alison Carlier and with the author's collaborative artwork *Audio Drawing 1*. With these pieces the power of the spoken word to elicit sketch-like psychological visual responses in the listener was noted. The power of the spoken and heard word to connect with images of sight and images of hearing due to memory

⁵ Georgina Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 97.

as anamnesis was proposed. Here the analysis of audio description expands on this idea and focuses on the power of audio description to elicit vicarious sensory experiences for the listener.

With audio description, as with Carlier's piece *Adjectives, Lines and Marks*, the original object of the description assumes an altered role; it becomes part of a complex triangulation of meaning. Meaning arises from the intersection of the original object, the voice of the describer and then the mind of the listener. The voice and mind of the describer takes on an active role and acts on the memory of the listener and may elicit a complex of mental responses. The object that ends up in the mind of the listener has an anamnestic relationship with the original object. In other words, the understanding of the object in the mind of the listener relies on an 'absent presence'.⁶ The absence of the original object is juxtaposed with the presence of a complex of remembered experiences, synaesthetic associations and innate embodied epistemologies.

Audio description has been used widely in this research both as an art practice in its own right and as an object and instrument of analysis. For many years the author has been an enthusiastic consumer of, predominantly, live art audio description in galleries and museums mainly in the UK. Audio description, as a necessary constituent of the blind author's access to art, has meant that the service has become integral to the author's art practice rather than just an extrinsic add-on.

It is argued here that what occurs during the audio description of an object - and this is particularly true in the case of the live audio description of artworks - is potentially far more than the provision of disembodied information concerning the 'presence and content' of the object. Far more than vital statistics such as relative size, shape, composition and basic colour can be, and is, conveyed to the listener. What is happening in the audio description process

⁶ Lyotard, 'Anamnesis', 2004, 110.

is what might be thought of as a form of *synaesthesia* - the involuntary and unavoidable interplay between the modal faculties that all of us, at some level or other, possess.

With the complex modal interplay that is synaesthesia comes the exciting and under-explored possibility of generative *ekphrasis*. Ekphrasis is the creation of an original artefact that is derived from a pre-existing artwork.⁷ With ekphrasis comes the real possibility of generating powerful and vivid multi-sensory entities in the mind of the listener. Excitingly for blind listeners these responses can include vivid visual experiences. For adventitiously blind people these experiences are a complex of potent reminders of *historical* colour experiences as well as *ahistorical* anamnestic re-memberings of chromatic potentialities. For congenitally blind people such experiences *must* be due solely to the body's ahistorical anamnestic visual potentialities or, to put it in lay terms, the body's readiness or preparedness to see is here being drawn upon. This is the innate reservoir of light that our bodies, to a greater or lesser extent, possess.

Our sensory experience of the world is never simple. Despite often favouring one modality, such as sight for driving a car or hearing for listening to music for example, we never experience objects or events using a single sensory mode. All of our faculties are involved in everything we do. So if we deliberately stimulate our sensorium in a particular direction, by attending a live art audio description or a music concert where our hearing is being favoured, for example, then notwithstanding this sensory bias our response will always be complex and multi-sensory. As such the sensorium is always fully integrated and synaesthetic interplay is intrinsic to our experience. So, synaesthesia is not the outlandish aberration as it is sometimes characterised.⁸

⁷ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Nachdr. (The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 136.

⁸ Silvia Casini, 'Synesthesia, Transformation and Synthesis: Toward a Multi-Sensory Pedagogy of the Image', in *Senses And Sensation: Critical And Primary Sources*, vol. 2 (Bloomsbury, n.d.).

The notion of an integrated and distributed sensorium and its relevance to audio description and synaesthesia resonates strongly with certain of the philosophical phenomenologists. The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty has already been referred to in chapter 1 of this thesis. Merleau-Ponty was particularly interested in vision; he repeatedly analysed the relationship between vision, the body and the world.⁹ For Merleau-Ponty the body, memory and vision are a single unity.¹⁰

Merleau-Ponty refers to the body's *schema* that is ready to be habituated in a variety of ways including walking, driving a car, dancing, playing a musical instrument and he even helpfully refers to a blind person's use of a guide cane as an extension of the body. All of these examples describe the body's ability to dilate its voluminosity. This allows the habituated body to relate and reach out to the world without the need for what he calls objectifying metricity.

The notion of the body, disabled or not, as being part of a seamless continuum with the world is to Merleau-Ponty's thinking and how audio description and anamnesis is thought of in this research. Our body which, of course, includes our sensory perception, is already 'knowledgeable' of its world. Merleau-Ponty was particularly interested in how the optical becomes the epistemological. The following extract from *Phenomenology of Perception* captures the essence of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology and the integrated sensorium:

"My body is precisely a ready-made system of equivalences and of inter-sensory transpositions. The senses translate each other without the need for an interpreter; they understand each other without having to pass through the idea."¹¹

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2012), xvii. [1945]

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 430.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 243.

The subject's *readiness to be in the world* expressed in this extract resonates strongly with the 'always already' character of anamnesis and provides a robust theoretical framework for blind aesthetics as blind experience. The experience of synaesthetic modal cross-talk and notions of a unified and distributed sensorium where all sensory faculties are 'pregnant' with all other sensory faculties, both alluded to by Merleau-Ponty, is also very much in line with the current research trajectory.

How does the blindness-altered sensorium work within this complex economy of the faculties? The author's artworks that lead this research stand as statements of the blindness altered sensorium. They are material embodiments of the artist's sensorium. These artworks are multi-sensory and include content that is driven by all the faculties including vision. This is of pivotal significance to this research project and a foundational part of a radical conception of vision. Radical because, at the level of the sensorium each modality has every other modality within it. This unified and distributed sensorium means that the deaf person or the blind person may have the image of sound and the image of vision still available to them.

The nature and the force of the audio generated evocations is the subject of much debate in critical audio description circles. The idea that synaesthetic responses are inevitable when delivering an audio description as discussed above challenges the subject-object distinction. If synaesthesia is inevitable and unavoidable then maintaining a detached objectivity is an unattainable myth. As a general rule audio description providers are guided towards descriptive neutrality or dispassionate objectivity.¹² But however much one might try to adopt an objective relationship between oneself as a describer and the artwork to be described, synaesthesia dictates that total objectivity is impossible. Both parties in the process of audio description are involved in the sensory event that unfolds between the describer, the

¹² Louise Fryer, *An Introduction to Audio Description: A Practical Guide*, Translation Practices Explained (Routledge, 2016), 164.

art and the listener. They are all *of* the situation in a currency of sensory interplay, a currency which is choreographed by anamnesis, attunements and commas.

In her influential book *More Than Meets the Eye* Georgina Kleege devotes two chapters to the issues of how much bias or subjective interpretation should or shouldn't be allowed into art audio description.¹³ Kleege's conclusion is that notwithstanding a conventional and general prohibition of subjectivity in the language and performance of audio description, more subjectivity is both ethically desirable and unavoidable.

Kleege argues against conventional injunctions to maintain a neutral, dispassionate detachment when describing films, theatre and art works. Kleege devotes many paragraphs to an analysis of differing styles of actual audio descriptions of artworks. She argues that typically audio descriptions, arbitrarily, on the one hand provide too much information presented in a bewildering format and on the other hand, withhold vital information about the artwork. Furthermore, many of the descriptions analysed make assumptions about what the blind recipient of the description needs to know and generally imposes an unnecessary, top-down, patronising relationship between the artwork in its institutional setting and the blind person. Kleege concludes:

“If I can derive any specific recommendations...it would be to abandon the pretext of objectivity. It is impossible and beside the point. The blind listener knows that there's some interpretation involved in even the most basic description, and often the systematic cataloguing of depicted objects is more information than anyone wants. Once the pretence of objectivity is abandoned, it could be replaced with descriptions of the artist's techniques, as well as the effect the work has on the viewer, recognizing that this will differ from individual to individual.”¹⁴

What emerges from the foregoing text is that the experience of blind people when receiving audio description and when the subjective interpretation is given free rein, real and

¹³ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 100.

¹⁴ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 121.

present mental visual experience can be achieved. There is variety in the evocations that are generated by audio description and this diversity or heterogeneity is an important element in the radical vision being argued for and forms an important part of the blind aesthetics that this thesis is working towards.

Marion Chottin and Hannah Thompson in their article "*Blindness Gain*" as *Worldmaking: Audio Description as a New "partage du sensible"* takes Kleege's stated position a step further.¹⁵ Chottin and Thompson argue that conventional audio description in galleries and museums embeds rather than reduces oppressive ocularcentric bias. They argue that practices such as ocularcentric art curation, using visually healthy audio describers and having specialist and difficult to access pre-recorded audio description machines available on request, reinforces the marginalised status of blind visitors to galleries by emphasising the primacy of the visual in artworks on offer. Instead, they propose 'co-created' audio description. By 'co-creation' they propose an audio description that is initiated by visually impaired beholders themselves. This methodology allows for and encourages a more multi-sensory aesthetic approach to the object being described. By so doing, argues Chottin and Thompson, all the "key senses" are given equal prominence in the audio intervention and the visual is thereby demoted from its overwhelmingly prominent, ocularcentric hegemony. Chottin and Thompson argue that this reconfiguring of the process of audio description undermines the "primacy of the visual" and by so doing restores or maintains the blind visitors' cultural, political, and social equality. This innovative move rests on a trio of important concepts.

The first of these concepts is ekphrasis. Chottin and Thompson suggest that the co-created audio description of the gallery paintings they propose will be a self-sufficient ekphrastic artwork capable of being appreciated in its own right. The second important concept identified is linked to ekphrasis; it is that of world-making. They argue that the new co-created,

¹⁵ Marion Chottin and Hannah Thompson, "Blindness Gain" as Worldmaking: Audio Description as a New "Partage Du Sensible", *L'Esprit Créateur* 61, no. 4 (2021): 32–44, doi.org/10.1353/esp.2021.0045.

multi-sensory audio description creates a unique aesthetic world - a world that foregrounds all the senses rather than giving priority to vision. The third of the concepts that underpin Chottin and Thompson's project is that of blindness gain. Blindness gain is a development of deaf gain and disability gain.¹⁶ Gain theory argues that innovations and practices that were designed for disabled people actually generate benefits beyond their original remit. So, the audio descriptions proposed by Chottin and Thompson may benefit all comers to the gallery including the non-blind describers themselves.

Chottin and Thompson argue for the relegation of the visual from its *superior* or *pre-eminent* position. They cite the experience of Sally French, a visually impaired person, who is completely 'indifferent' to objects that are conventionally visually 'beautiful'. French was frustrated as a child with her parents' anxious desire for her to experience these objects of beauty. Chottin and Thompson argue that this is an example of how the 'non-blind' seek to misguidedly impose an ocularcentric model of the world on blind people.¹⁷

To propose a model that promotes an 'indifference' to visual beauty is in danger of negatively impacting the many hyperphantasic blind people who experience strong visual responses to audio description. There may be many blind people for whom visual beauty is irrelevant and of little or no interest. Georgina Kleege herself said: "I am not sure that I have a mind's eye".¹⁸ But just because Sally French, and Georgina Kleege have a lack or a minimal or a reduced interest in visual experience, doesn't mean that all blind people deny the continuing importance of visual experience in their lives. This 'indifference' stance is in danger of throwing the visual baby out with the ocularcentric bathwater. It is suggested here that an audio description model that raises the non-visual modes to the current level of vision is

¹⁶ H Dirkson et al., 'Deaf Studies in the 21st Century : "Deaf-Gain" and the Future of Human Diversity', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

¹⁷ Chottin and Thompson, "Blindness Gain" as Worldmaking', 8.

¹⁸ Kleege, *More than Meets the Eye*, 101.

preferable to one that relegates the visual or is 'indifferent' to the visual. A poly-modal model for audio description that gives all modalities equal weight at a high level of intensity, would give all beholders equal access to all sensory responses.

This analysis has concentrated heavily on audio description because of the singular force with which audio description can stimulate imagery in the mind of the listener. The quantity and quality of this mental visual imagery is, however, diverse and variable from one individual to the next. It has already been noted above for instance, that the visually impaired writers Georgina Kleege and Sally French have little or no experience or interest in mental visual imagery. It will be informative at this point to examine more closely the diversity of experience of the mental visual image for what this might tell us about the nature of healthy vision and healthy blindness.

The artworks that have been presented in this thesis have variously been used to evoke vision experiences in the mind of the blind artist. The sound pieces use music or the spoken word to evoke visual responses and the tactile pieces use touch to evoke the visual. The degree to which other beholders of this art gain equivalent responses is beyond the control of the artist but the artist obviously hopes and believes they will. The effect of these pieces depends on synaesthetic interplay in the context of a proposed vastly expanded sensorium.

To a greater or lesser degree most people experience non-optical, psychological visual episodes. Hallucinations are commonplace, even visually impaired people experience vivid hallucinations in the form of Charles Bonnet syndrome.¹⁹ Lucid dreaming and the mind's eye are also commonplace ways of describing non-optical visual events. This non-optical seeing is what is typically regarded as part of our imagination. In recent years the diversity of the experience of the mental visual image has been observed and has stimulated research

¹⁹ 'Charles Bonnet Syndrome', RNIB, accessed 11 February 2025, www.rnib.org.uk/your-eyes/eye-conditions-az/charles-bonnet-syndrome/.

interest in the fields of psychology and neural science and art theory.²⁰ Researchers in this growing field of interest have turned to the Aristotelian term *phantasia*, meaning mental visual image, in order to label the phenomenon and, by so doing, allow for variability.²¹ Accordingly, people who identify as experiencing strong or vivid mental visual images are said to have 'hyperphantasia' and those identifying as experiencing weak or no mental visual images are said to have 'aphantasia'.²² In what follows examples of both hyperphantasia and aphantasia will be examined to see how this might contribute to a better understanding of both healthy vision and healthy blindness.

The curator and artist Douglas McCulloch has worked with some of the world's most accomplished blind photographers. In 2009 McCulloch curated an exhibition of these blind photographer's work titled *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists* (2009), an exhibition that is still touring today.²³ In an article that accompanies the exhibition, titled *Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography*, McCulloch features the work of blind artist Evgen Bavčar who displays strong hyperphantasic tendencies.²⁴

Evgen Bavčar plans his photographs with meticulous care based on his own vivid mental visual images explains McCulloch. Once his preparation is complete and with some assistance from a sighted companion and an automatic digital camera, Bavčar takes the photograph. Bavčar refers to the potency and the privacy of his mental visual images: "I have a private gallery, but, unfortunately, I am the only one who can visit it, Others can enter it

²⁰ Susan Aldworth and Matthew MacKisack, eds., *Extreme Imagination: Inside the Mind's Eye* (The Eye's Mind, University of Exeter College of Medicine and Health, 2018).

²¹ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, with John H McMahon (Dover Publications, 2013), bks 1, Chapter 9. [350 BC]

²² Aldworth and MacKisack, *Extreme Imagination*, 7.

²³ Douglas McCulloch (Curator), *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists*, Photography, Touring Exhibition, (2009 -2013).

²⁴ Douglas McCulloch, 'Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography', *Afterimage* 39, no. 6 (1 May 2012): 7–10, doi.org/10.1525/aft.2012.39.6.7.

by means of my photographs. But they aren't the originals anymore. Just reproductions.”²⁵ The strength of Bavĕar’s personal visual images described here clearly indicates the presence of a hyperphantasic mind at work.



Figure 14. *A Close Up View* (n.d.) by Evgen Bavĕar

McCulloch regards the work of Bavĕar and other blind photographers as residing at the very origin of the visual: “Blind photographers” argues McCulloch, “operate at the heart of the medium; they are the zero point of photography. These artists occupy the pure, immaculate centre - image as idea, idea as image”.²⁶ McCulloch goes on to speculate that blind artists such as Bavĕar, who work in the realm of the private, “inviolable urimage”, might actually be in touch with that which is sufficient for vision, namely “memory and the imagination”. It is interesting to note that Bavĕar himself identifies more as an iconographer rather than a photographer. As McCulloch points out, the icon presents that which is absent to the senses, the icon is a “visible (re)presentation of invisible things”.

In his capacity as curator McCulloch observes that blind photographers’ creative process is as diverse as any other group of art makers. He says that most (but not all) blind photographers use the photographic process to bring the private mental visual image into the

²⁵ McCulloch, ‘Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography’, 8.

²⁶ McCulloch, ‘Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography’, 8.

realm of the visible. Clearly this group of blind artists, who rely on the non-optical, vivid mental visual image for their art, reside at the hyperphantasic end of the mental visual image spectrum described above.

If McCulloch's analysis is correct then most blind photographers, and indeed many blind artists and blind people, have access to something fundamental in the process of vision and eyesight. Rather than blindness necessarily condemning people to the tragic abyss of darkness, loss or lack, on the contrary, blindness may be a portal to the visual image of thought that is the very spark that is the origin of all vision. It may be that the thought rather than light lay at the origin of vision; this has important implications for how the blind aesthetic proposed by this research might be constituted.

In the article *Inside and Outside of Vision and Blindness: Seeing within The Mind's Eye and the Inner Darkness of Aphantasia* author and scholar Kevin Hunt undertakes an analysis and commentary of both the art practice of Evgen Bavčar and on McCulloch's work with and curation of blind photographers.²⁷ During commentary on the diversity of mental visual imaging between individuals Hunt reveals that he is himself aphantasic and so unable to form mental visual images even though he is otherwise visually healthy. From here, inspired by this self-realisation and the variability of mental visual imaging and with the help of references to a host of blind artists, Hunt proceeds to speculate on the relationships between visual perception, blindness, image-making and the imagination. He concludes that "healthy" eyesight is very prone to culturally imposed blind-spots and that the experience of blindness can be infused with vivid visual qualities. Hunt reminds us of the telling and insightful words of painter, film maker and author Hugues de Montalembert in the movie *Black Sun*, who said: "vision is a creation, it's not a perception".²⁸ Hunt's concluding suggestion is that the diversity of the visual

²⁷ Kevin J. Hunt, 'Inside and Outside of Vision and Blindness: Seeing within The Mind's Eye and the Inner Darkness of Aphantasia', *Afterimage* 50, no. 4 (1 December 2023): 149–55, doi.org/10.1525/aft.2023.50.4.149.

²⁸ Hunt, 'Inside and Outside of Vision and Blindness', 153.

image may be evidence of the true nature of seeing or vision - the well spring of vision may be a created construction fed by cultural forces rather than just light and optics.

During this research Hunt and the author met and discussed their respective experiences of mental imaging. It soon became clear that they each come from opposite ends of the hyperphantasia-aphantasia spectrum. The author of this research habitually experiences vivid and colourful mental images (hyperphantasia) while Hunt habitually experiences mental events with little or no visual content (aphantasia). To better understand the nature and content of their contrary mental imaging experiences the author and Hunt undertook a series of extended conversations. In these conversations both parties attempted to describe their respective recollections of very familiar childhood experiences. They decided to each recall their grandparents' homes focusing on familiar, often-seen items such as furniture, ornaments and the front door to the house. Given the diversity of the participants' mental experiences the results of these conversations followed expected patterns, but they revealed interesting differences in the sensory *flavours* at work. Perhaps the most telling revelation is that the visual is not a given element of the mental image. Objects can be recalled in ways other than by the visual.

The hyperphantasic author recalled his grandparent's home in fine visual detail. The room layouts, furniture types and colourings, ornaments and the front door of his grandparents' home were all recalled by the author in vivid colours, shades, and luminosities. These vividly recalled images drew on a time when the author had near full sight. Hunt, on the other hand, who identifies as aphantasic, recalled his grandparent's home with a different sensory focus. Hunt's recollections were based on the relative positioning of objects. Furniture and ornaments were recalled by 'what' they were, 'where' they were and sometimes with reference to texture and surface. Hunt had difficulty in articulating how he was recalling these details but often spoke of having a 'spatial' recollection. Hunt's recollections contained little in the way of mental visual detail. His imagination with respect to this particular experiment seemed to rely on naming and locating objects in space rather than 'seeing' them

These informal experiments in sensory imagery indicate a wide range of possibilities in how the mental image presents. There seems to be a wide variation in the content of the mental image from individual to individual. The author's total optical blindness linked with strong hyperphantasia and Hunt's healthy optical acuity linked to aphantasia, together with the 'indifference' to the visual image stated by Sally French (noted earlier in the chapter), suggests a disconnect between the realm of optics and that of mental imaging. Mental imaging seems to be capable of adopting multi-modal character: sometimes predominantly visual, sometimes predominantly spatial or tactile or auditory. The imagination is not, therefore, necessarily wedded to, or dominated by, the visual or any other organ of sense. The mental image, freed from an intrinsic ocular connection, becomes an *idea* or a thought that arises from the body existing in the world. The modal 'flavour' of that thought depends on the polymodal sensorium which varies from person to person and from culture to culture. This lends weight to the idea put forward by McCulloh above, that vision might originate from the idea of vision. The idea, or the image, arises from the body and then loops in, if available, with data from the organs of sense.

In Appendix 3 an email exchange between Hunt and the author has been reproduced. In this exchange Hunt works through some ideas from the writings of Michel Serres on vision and sensory perception that he has found helpful. Here Hunt also expands on his aphantasic responses to the informal experiments we conducted.

Given these observations, vision may originate from a thought or an idea rather than originating from the passage of light from objects to the eye and thence to the brain where it is processed and becomes an idea. If our informal discussion carries any weight, it suggests that the neurological, psychological and the cultural elements of eyesight should be afforded more prominence in the brain, eye, light triangulation of vision than it is currently given. Much more work is needed in this area to be confident about drawing hard and fast conclusions from these initial indicators.

Chapter 4 With the Lived Experience.... (Blind Aesthetics)



Figure 15. Blindness – *A Touching Performance*, *Earthwise* exhibition, Beaconsfield Gallery, London, 2023. © Varvara Shavrova, all rights reserved.

Having worked through the two-way flows between memory and vision in chapter 1, the heterogeneities of disability and its currencies in chapter 2 and the coincidence of diversity and convergence within audio description and mental imaging in chapter 3, these apexes of thought will now be brought together in the last of the thematic chapters of this thesis. In this chapter the blending of art and the lived experience of blindness will be analysed for what this union contributes to a blindness aesthetic and to a radical approach to vision. In the introduction to this thesis, it was stated that “the divergencies and contingences of blindness

as a way of life are widely misunderstood". One of the aims of this research is to give room for this heterogeneity which remains seriously under-represented in the everyday understanding of sight loss. In chapter 2 the heterogeneity of vision loss was placed at the centre of a currency of factors, both bodily and cultural, that interpenetrate and result in a lived world that is highly complex and nuanced. Now, in this chapter, complexity will be given additional prominence, this time through a series of the author's artworks that are presented alongside a catalogue of complex blind-life experiences. These experiences are presented as generalisations that cluster around various modalities. Such experiences will vary between individuals so words such as 'tendency' and 'currency' are frequently used in the descriptions to emphasise their intrinsic variability and fluidity.

Aesthetics refers to a broad cluster of ideas and activities that is grounded on sensory perception and which includes art and philosophy. The entire edifice of aesthetics rests on the ancient idea of aesthesis. This is the sensory discernment of the world - a discernment that is 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 boundaries. This latter is the enculturation of the senses; that is to say, the gradual acquisition of norms, practices and regimes of behaviour that determine the distribution of aesthetics.

The lived experience of blindness is an example of where the two realms of the physical and the cultural converge and where their distinct and yet interdependent threads encounter each other in a contested and unresolved terrain. Art, and the arts in general, have the unique capacity to express, critique or at the very least, acknowledge the existence of these contested realms. In this chapter the analysis will highlight several of the most prominent experiences that characterise the blind-life world. Most of the phenomena cited will be paired with an example of the author's artworks. These artworks are presented as art manifestations of the phenomenon under discussion. Before embarking on this survey it will be useful to

present a short analysis of the work of the French art critic and philosopher Jacques Rancière whose writings provide useful insights into how the sensory and the cultural and the political intersect. This analysis will contribute additional information on the constitution of the putative blind aesthetic.

Rancière is not concerned with the 'natural' variations in the sensory that occur through disease or natural aptitude; moreover, he doesn't refer to sensory impairment or disability in his writings. Rather Rancière is concerned with those contingencies that are arbitrarily constructed and imposed on our communities and which result in the unnecessary and oppressive divisions between equally deserving groups of people.¹ Rancière characterises this state of affairs as an aesthetic regime. He identifies the 18th century revolution in the arts as the root of this shift which he describes as a "regime of perception, sensation and interpretation" to emphasise its contingent character.²

In his book *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* Rancière develops the idea of the inherent contiguity between aesthetics and politics.³ According to Rancière, the unity of these two vast paradigms of human life rely on particular interpretations of both. Rancière denies the singularity of aesthetics and politics and regards both as having dissensus, or the

¹ In his short book *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* Jacques Rancière identifies some of the fundamental relationships that are distributed unequally. 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 'politicity' on which functioning social units can be erected such as families and cities. Here Rancière gives an early indication of the inextricable joining together of the political and the aesthetic.

Later in the same text Rancière develops the idea that these linguistic differences lead to unnecessary social disagreements, social demarcations and political heterogeneity. This unnecessary conflict, argues Rancière, is enacted in a 'political stage' or a 'theatre of a paradoxical community' where language games and 'heterogenous rules of expression are played out'. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 2–49. [1995]

² Rancière, *Aisthesis*, x.

³ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Reprinted, trans. Steven Corcoran (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). [2010]

dissenting voice, at their core. *Dissensus* is concerned with setting out these interpretations. Rancière argues that the relationship between aesthetics and politics depend on two key principles; first, the concept of the *partage du sensible*.⁴ This is the idea that societal and individual sensory perceptions are shared out contingently and distributed in a way that deny egalitarian principles. Secondly that of *dissensus* itself.⁵ Dissensus is a reaction to the first principle. Dissensus is the disrupting of the excluding effect of an arbitrarily imposed sensory or aesthetic regime. This excluding state of affairs Rancière calls the “police” - a problematic consensus based on “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”.⁶ Rancière identifies within this regime the absence of space or a “void” for the excluded members of society, the part that has no part - the part he calls the “supplement”.

While Rancière omits any mention of disability in his work, his arguments provide a ‘good fit’ for the status of disability in general and disability arts in particular in contemporary society. Both principles of *partage du sensible* and *dissensus* explain the contingencies at work in the world of disability arts and the wider social status of the disabled individual. There is little or no room (or void) for the disabled and the disabled artist in Rancière’s model, but it doesn’t have to be that way.

Blind aesthetics is the ‘lived world’ of blindness with all the attendant experiential idiosyncrasies of blindness coupled with the regime of cultural factors that are brought to bear on the individual through the societal factors identified by Rancière. Chapter 2 of this thesis identified a complex intersection between socially constructed factors and medical or bodily

⁴ Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetic*, 36.

⁵ Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetic*, 37.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Pbk. ed, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2006), 34. [2004]

determinates, residing at the heart of a proper understanding of disability generally. It is argued here that aesthetics has an equivalently hybrid and complex constitution.

What is it about being *blind*, or the experience of the blind-life-world, that might create or inform “a moving constellation of perception”?⁷ A tentative answer to this question might be the following: those aspects of a phenomenological experience or episode that are demonstrably, forcefully and unambiguously attributable to human blindness. What follows is a series of examples of experiences and phenomena that fulfil these criteria. The phenomena identified below have flowed from the life experience of the author and have come into sharp focus during the course of the doctoral research that underpins this thesis. Many of the phenomena cited below are coupled with an original artwork created by the author. These artworks are material embodiments, instantiations or expressions of the sensory phenomena they are coupled with and, as such, are the art-aesthetic markers of the putative blind aesthetic that drives this research.

- With the lived experience of blindness there is a significantly altered multi-sensory perception of the world and the blind body's place in it. The blind-disabled experiencing body encounters the world and knows it according to an altered sensorium. With blindness there is a heightened awareness of all modalities working together despite, or maybe because of, vision loss. For all bodies, blind or otherwise, the multi-sensory experience depends on the synchronicity of a strongly pluralised and yet synthesised encounter between the body and the world where the one experiencing body becomes many and the many become one. This situated, blind or disability altered embodied knowledge - via the altered and pluralised sensorium - is the basis of a 'cripistemological turn' that pervades this thesis.⁸

⁷ Ranci re, *Aisth sis*, xi.

⁸ Johnson and McRuer, 'Cripistemologies', 127 - 148

- With the lived experience of blindness there is a significantly heightened sense of a panoramic understanding of the environment that the body inhabits at any given moment. With visual impairment there is less of an inclination to focus on the front facing, binocular reading of the surroundings. This results in a dramatically altered experience of ocularist perceptions of body-environment relationships such as horizons, perspectives and framings.

With blindness the horizon, which is the extremity of our sensory perception of an environment, becomes multi-sensory or non-visual in character. So, a horizon might become the proximal, tactile encounter where the foot meets the floor or where the guide cane meets the floor. Or it might be a sonic horizon such as the sound of a coffee machine at work in a room that informs the blind person's understanding of the space.

Perspective is the linear and ocularist reading of relations between the body and the environment. With blindness these relations alter and the body and the environment become uncoupled or differently coupled. The body is freed from the front-facing optical linear focal points and instead become pan centric. Tactile, sonic or olfactory focal points now become of greater importance. Nobody can directly see behind themselves, and yet blind people develop a greater awareness of the space behind them because they don't see what's in front of them. This kind of realignment of the self and the environment is at the heart of this research into blind aesthetics.

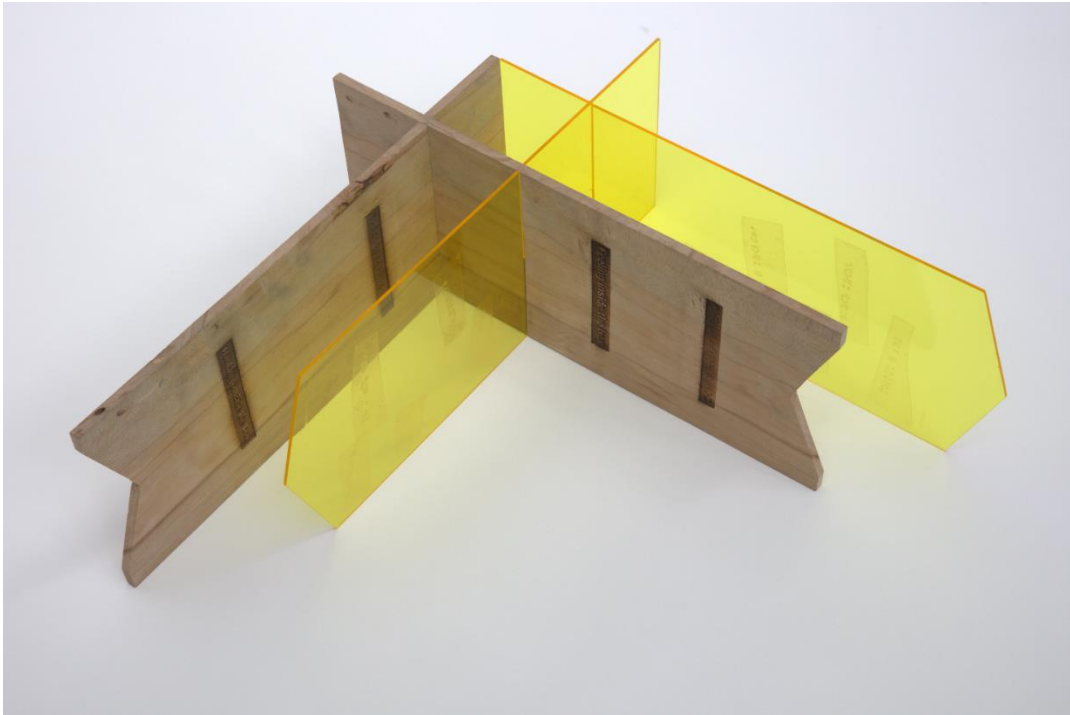


Figure 16. *Thinking Outside the Box, Feeling Inside the Box* (2022) - MDF, Perspex; 1m³.

Thinking Outside the Box was first introduced in chapter 2; it is presented here again with additional commentary. This artwork is about the blindness altered understanding of space and the built environment. When encountering enclosed spaces with blindness the distinctive functions of walls, windowpanes, doorways and window apertures becomes blurred and altered. This piece interrogates the shifting nature of these encounters. Closed windows or large sheets of fixed glass, for example, when experienced with blindness, begin to lose their scopic and illuminating function. Instead, such objects now begin to take on the attributes of a wall, that is to say a visually opaque barrier. With the heightened awareness of a panoramic sonic environment that comes with blindness, an open doorway or an open window becomes a source of additional noise that can dramatically alter the soundscape within the enclosed space. With blindness the very sense of bodily interiority and exteriority can, on occasion, become uncertain or at least altered. This is because the blind experiencing body tends to favour non-visual markers when attempting to understand the environment. Sound, tactility, smell, air movement, air temperature all start to be

favoured over how light and shadow works within a space. The reader is referred to Appendix 3 for an account of an actual blind encounter with the British Library building.

- With the lived experience of blindness there is a heightened and altered awareness of everyday auditory encounters. For the visually impaired person the abundant panoply of experienced sounds tends to take on a more abstract, disembodied character. This is because for a blind person sound can rarely if ever be linked visually to its origin. As such clouds of unanchored sound frequently swirl in a bewildering array around the blind person leading to disorientation or altered orientation. The blind body is subjected to altered sonic perspectives; distant sounds mingle with close sounds in ways that challenge sonic relationships. This point is close to the previous point made about the absence of binocular vision, but here focuses on the absence of visual anchors for ambient sounds.

There is a heightened intimacy between the blind body and remote, uncoupled sounds such that the 'far cry' appears to be simultaneously far away from the experiencing body and yet within that body. The blind body tends to 'lean in to' ambient sounds. Externally generated sounds become part of the beholder's body. Sounds are absorbed into the body tissue such that the distant cry, while remaining distant, is simultaneously intimately held by the listening body. The panoply of ambient sounds, many of which are present sounds waiting to be heard, become an internalised, universe of sound. This intimate unity of sound and body *just is* the currency that is the subject of chapter 2; it is a complex array of altered body-environment relationships that suggest intriguing new blind dimensionalities.

Alarming Proximity sound file

Figure 17. Link to *Alarming Proximity* sound file. (2019) - Proximity sensors, sound generators; 3m².

(Duration: 2 mins 57 secs - can be listened to once through)

This sonic artwork is an experiment in the interdependent relationship between the beholder and the beheld in the experience of heard sound. This piece uses electronic proximity sensor technology to acknowledge the interdependence of body and sound as the fluxing body is dramatically coupled with flux in the music.

Alarming Proximity consists of 4 stations each containing a proximity sensor linked to a sound generator with its own audio speaker all controlled by a computer. The four stations are arranged in a 3-metre square. When switched on each of the four stations simultaneously broadcast a steady and repeated, pre-recorded four note musical phrase; at this stage all four sounds are playing at the same tempo.

A visitor is then invited to enter the 3-metre square space enclosed by the four stations. As soon as they enter the space the sound generators are programmed to react to where the body stands within the space. If the visitor approaches any of the four stations the music generated at that station accelerates and the other three generators slow down or possibly stay constant. As the visitor moves around the quadrant the music shifts with each station speeding up or slowing down accordingly. There follows a complex choreography between the visitor's body position and the texture of the music as each reacts to the other in a febrile, interdependent *pas de deux*. The body is ready to hear sounds and sounds are ready to be heard by the body. This piece artificially dramatizes this relationship and presents it as a work of blindness aesthetics since with blindness the interdependent relationship between sound and body is intensified.

- With the lived experience of blindness, the effect of light and shadow on the surface of perceived objects is much reduced or entirely absent. As a result, there is a strong tendency for many surfaces, when experienced primarily or entirely through touch, to become part of a seamless continuum, an undifferentiated unity. Connected surfaces that are normally visually differentiated by light and shade as being upper or lower, above or below or within or beyond and which have no other tactile distinguishing qualities, now lose their visually informed bifurcation and tend to be perceived as one seamless, tactile unity. This erosion of the distinction between light and shadow that comes with visual impairment is, once again, an example of the aesthetic continuity or currency referred to in chapter 2.

The erosion of the distinction between light and shadow as just described is a reminder that blind people don't see black, they see nothing. Blindness is not the absence of light it is the presence of nothing. However, this sensory nothingness is not a void. Like nature's famous abhorrence of vacuums, the absence of vision is involuntarily substituted with the host of remaining modalities that make up the sensorium. It is in this depleted sensorium that the synaesthetic interplay between the senses can flourish given effective stimuli such as audio description or art making.



Figure 18. *Inhibition: Beyond the Doubt of a Shadow* (2019) - Silicone rubber, a readymade table

Inhibition: Beyond the Doubt of a Shadow is a response to the frequent discovery of spent and discarded chewing gum stuck to the underside of furniture in public places. With blindness the underside of furniture is not in shadow and therefore not such a dark and hidden realm. The doubtful and shadowy world of the underside, usually the domain of spiders, is less a place of uncertainty and is on a par with the upper surfaces.

This work consists of a number of facsimiles of discarded chewing gum shapes made from pink cast silicone and stuck to the underside of a small café table. The facsimile gum pieces are placed in Braille configuration which spells the word 'inhibition' in grade 2 Braille. So, the Braille gum is hidden from view and can only be accessed by touch; here the art is on the underside of the table-plinth and out of sight but available to everyone who chooses to feel by hand within the doubt of the shadow. The above image shows the table under which the Braille 'chewing gum' is placed.

- With the lived experience of blindness spatial experiences and temporal experiences are more readily perceived as an entangled continuum. This is manifested by 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 to distantly check an object's continuing presence, that object's ontic presence becomes subject to doubt in the mind of the blind beholder.



Figure 19. *Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles* (2019) – collaborator Hannah Terry (Resin; 20cm³).

The piece *Transient Objects Caught in a Multi-Dimensional Moment of Impossible Pringles* investigates the moment of touch in space-time between subject and object. Utilizing 3D print technology, the points of momentary contact between the hand or fingertips and an everyday object are isolated and 3D printed. These fleeting moments are represented by various 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 the pieces has produced interesting, unexpected architectures.

The above piece 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. This piece 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 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 becomes one and when one is pluralised. They are quantum moments of spatio-temporality or

synchronicity. This represents a ubiquitous experience in the blind-life world and thus is central to the blind aesthetic.

- With the lived experience of blindness there is a heightened awareness of the tactile environments. The texture, resistance and temperature of the ground under the feet, the clothing on the skin, weather on the skin and of a myriad of other everyday proximal haptic encounters.

Artwork: *The Mindful Body* (forthcoming)

This project, still in progress, involves 3D printing an entire human body. But, as with *Transient Objects* (see above), the idea is to isolate and print only those points of the body that are in contact with other objects. In the case of a figure sitting on a chair and leaning onto an adjacent table, the print will only include the soles of the feet in contact with the floor, the model's backside in contact with the chair seat and the model's forearms in contact with the tabletop. Recording the subtle encounters between body and clothing is also being considered as an extension of this concept.

To date technical and financial constraints have held up progress with this piece. The concept has, however, been presented on a number of occasions as a live workshop where participants have been invited to mindfully consider what and how they are feeling in the moment as their bodies touch objects and clothing.⁹

- With the lived experience of blindness there is a significantly altered relationship with memory and recall. With visual impairment there is an increased reliance on memory due to the frequent inaccessibility to printed text, written text, and

⁹ '(Critical) Blindness Studies : Current Debates and Future Directions', Fourwaves, accessed 29 July 2024, <https://event.fourwaves.com/blindness/pages/20d49cff-5a5a-4d0f-9012-392962f0e7bb>.

ocularcentric portable screen-based technology. As such many blind people develop innovative personalised strategies for assisting with memory recall.

- With the lived experience of blindness there is frequently a strong continuity or persistence of visual experience. For the purposes of the research that supports this thesis these non-optical visual experiences are clustered under the term radical vision. It is argued that radical vision is a cluster of traditional psychological experiences of vision such as hallucinations and lucid dreaming plus new expanded understandings of the sensorium, synaesthesia and memory as anamnesis. The purpose of this research and this thesis is to identify, analyse and contextualise these additional understandings. All the author's artworks presented with this thesis are instantiations of this phenomenon and as such are constitutive of blind aesthetics.

The preceding list of phenomena is by no means exhaustive but it does capture the most common and the most dramatic experiences of blindness. It also captures the essential heterogeneity and diversity of the blind-life world. The artworks presented in the preceding list are integral to the currency of aesthetics that is being argued for in this thesis.

Conclusion

*...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!)*¹

Fayen d'Evie, *The Radical Potential of Blindness*



Figure 20. *Nuggets of Embodiment* (2024) – Jesmonite, a biscuit tin, 3.0 Black paint; 30cm³.

This installation consists of a large tin full of facsimile biscuits. The tin is painted with 3.0 Black paint - one of the blackest of black paints that makes objects appear two-dimensional because it absorbs nearly all light.² The facsimile biscuits are cast in the concrete

¹ Fayen d'Evie, 'The Radical Potential of Blindness', *Art Journal*, no. 76 no 3/4 (2017): 51.

² 'Black 3.0 - the World's Blackest Black Acrylic Paint', Culture Hustle, accessed 14 February 2025, <https://culturehustle.com/products/black-3-0-the-worlds-blackest-black-acrylic-paint-150ml>.

derivative Jesmonite and are close replicas of familiar standard digestive style biscuits. Each cast biscuit has one of the key research words engraved into its upper surface. The same word is also written in Braille on the same upper surface of each biscuit. As such the key words can be read using vision or by touch. In western culture biscuits are used as tokens of friendship, sharing and nourishment. With this piece the biscuits are offered to beholders to hold and to experience as physical embodiment of these sentiments. As food replicas these 'biscuits' embody and evoke all the key sensory images including olfaction and gustation. Visitors are invited to hold onto the biscuits and even take them away as souvenirs. The piece is therefore gradually dispersed and distributed until it might even become completely dislocated from its 'gallery' setting. This piece instantiates the synthesis of image and material embodiment - a concept that is central to this research.

This research is *of* the body. It is of the body that lives a life; a life that is *of* the Earth; a living, breathing, pulsating, dying life that has arisen over epochs of evolution.

This research is *of* the body. It is of the body encountering its world, its Earth. The encounters that occur are of a world it already knows because it is *of* that world.

This research is *of* the body. It is of the body making and doing art and furthermore, it is *of* the blind body making and doing art.

Each artwork made by the blind author and presented with this thesis is *of* the blind body. Each artwork produced by the artist is a material embodiment of the blind- life. These embodiments are manifestations of the images of thought that arise from the artist; here the image and the artwork as embodiment become entwined. The artworks arise from an image, they then become manifest in a variety of materials and then, in turn, the artworks generate images of their own. These secondary images can, by ekphrasis (as explained in chapter 3) become new artworks in their own right. The image-embodiments that arise from the artmaking processes come with a variety of *flavours* and *tinctures* that coalesce around - but are not equivalent to - particular modal faculties. Some of these embodiments are more visual

in flavour and some more tactile and so on through all modalities. It has been noted that this diversity depends on the sensorial idiosyncrasies of each beholder that comes to the image-artwork either directly or through interventions such as audio description. For the author it is the embodiment of the visual that has been of particular interest in this research. Despite the blindness of the author the visual remains a persistent presence in his art production and his daily life.

One of the privileges of adventitious total blindness is that of having direct access to an altered sensorium - a sensorium that has had direct optical vision entirely removed. The absence of healthy eyesight through adventitious blindness does not leave in its wake an equivalent void or negative space. To put this in clumsy but perhaps clearer terms: the void that is created when eyesight is absent is not 'eye-shaped'. The powerfully synergistic and powerfully synaesthetic sensorium now, with blindness, functions with an altered and a depleted set of modalities. The remaining elements of the sensorium work together, cross talk and generate more sensory output than the sum of the remaining individual faculties. It is from this interactive and expansive synergy that non-optical visual experience may arise in the form of the mental image. This visual immanence is perhaps, evidence of the origin of all vision. This is the "radicality" of blindness referred to by Fayen d'Evie in the quote at the head of this conclusion and this is the radical vision towards which this research is moving. As a totally blind person and an artist the author of this research has the privileged opportunity, through blind artmaking, to give expression to this phenomenon. This unique cluster of sensory relationships is identified as *blind aesthetics* in this research. This aesthetic, that is unique to the blind-life, has remained, until now, relatively unexplored.

The artwork *Nuggets of Embodiment* presented at the head of this conclusion consists of items that can be taken away from the whole. This is a metaphor for what this research offers to its readers and to its relevant fields of enquiry, namely aesthetics and critical disability studies. The nuggets on offer are conceptual apexes that have arisen from a landscape of the lived experience of a blind-life and a blind art practice. These apexes are familiar themes but

have been infused with novel interpretations following a prolonged research process. A brief recap of these apexes now follows.

The apex of anamnesis of memory: Supported by contributions from philosophical phenomenology, Freudian psycho analysis and postmodern de-construction, it was argued here that healthy eyesight is necessary but not sufficient for healthy vision. Part of anamnesis is the body's innate, pre-disposition to see. So long as the neurological structures of the body are healthy, then optical blindness may not be, or should not be, such a disqualifying status.

The apexes of currency, attunement and the comma: These three concepts were identified as important constituents of human ontology that are particularly relevant to blindness and disability. The most important take away from this chapter is the identification of a currency that is inherently complex or heterogenous. Supported by key critical disability analysts, a fine grained, nuanced approach was identified as essential to a proper understanding of blindness.

The apex of the image: Chapter 3 of the thesis looked at the relationship between the spoken word and the mental image. Audio description as an access to culture was analysed. The issue of personal interpretation versus dispassionate objectivity was discussed at length. This led to an important section on how and whether the mental visual image arises. The main take away from the analysis in this chapter is that there is huge diversity in the character and content of the mental image. This raises important questions around the function of the mental image and its relationship with the organs of sense. The final chapter of the thesis brought together all of the apexes in a catalogue of blind-life experiences and art and which *just is* the blind or blindness aesthetics.

The research journey that this thesis documents has been long and eventful. It started with a hunch; a hunch that the relationship between blindness and artmaking has more to it than current opinion allows. Current opinion in the West is based on finding ways around blindness rather than using what blindness can offer. Focusing on the positive affordances of

blindness rather than the negative constraints of blindness is central to this research and to blindness-gain theory.

Having started from a place of uncertainty about the relationship between blindness and art curation and artmaking borne out of involvement in access events and borne out of the author's own art practice, this research morphed into an investigation into blindness and vision. The research became an enquiry into what it means to not see and what it means to see. Ultimately it became an enquiry into the very nature of the image and vision itself. The shift in focus that this research has undergone as just described has resulted in some unexpected but fruitful outcomes. Aside from recalibrating the generative possibilities of the relationship between art and blindness, what this research has perhaps reaffirmed above all else is the independence of the mental image from the organs of sense. The thoughts we have about our world work through and across the information that our organs of sense may be giving us. This allows us to process the tsunami of sensory information that assails our bodies every moment of every day (and night) without that information being necessarily affixed to the source modality. A synthesis of independent elements consisting of 'data' from the organs of sense, anamnestic embodied memory, and socially constructed cultural and political regimes come together in our mental images which, in turn, become the building bricks of our knowledge systems. From the outset this research has sought to show the ways in which the body navigates this landscape so full of the potential for conflict and consensus, harmony and dissonance and for beauty and ugliness. The implications of this understanding of the uncoupled image are radical and far reaching.

The artworks that have accompanied the analysis in this thesis are *of* blindness. They are expressive manifestations of the blind body. As such these pieces, together with the artworks by other artists cited in this thesis, have gone some way towards addressing the questions that have guided this research. The principal question asked about the way in which art made by a blind person might contribute to new epistemologies around vision. The artworks start life as a thought. This thought is an image. This image-thought arises from the body - a

body that is *of* the world and hence a body that knows the world and that is ready to see, to hear, to touch and to walk and to talk. This body, blind, disabled or not, then makes an artwork, an artwork that is subject to a heterogenous currency of attunements and commas. But of course, this knowing body may not be inclined to make an artwork at all; it may want to do one of a myriad of activities available to humans. Any and all of these activities involve the sensorium in all its rich diversity. The original image-thought can now be turned to any of the modes that favour the chosen activity. This body may want to simply sit and think, in which case the image is free to be affixed to any modality depending on appropriateness or aptitude. So, the hyperphantasic blind person may think visual images and the aphantasic sighted person may think spatial or tactile images. So, as stated earlier, the thought-image can and does operate independently from the operational capacity of the organ of sense.

The secondary research question asks about the impact of this research on the blind community and communities beyond blindness. At the heart of this research into blind aesthetics is the author's art practice which, as has been noted, is the expression of the blind-life experience. These expressions employ the many under-explored affordances of blindness as a means of revealing truths about blindness, about vision and about life in general. As such blindness and blind aesthetics is both the instrument and the object of this artistic endeavour.

Hitherto the expression of the blind-life cultural experience has been largely limited to music and literature with a small amount of dance and theatre tagged on.³ The 'visual' or plastic arts have received very little attention when it comes to blind art practice. When the plastic arts are referred to in conjunction with blindness it tends to be of the *super-crip* or *extraordinary sensing* stereotype of blindness disability. This tendency exacerbates the

³ David Bolt, *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (2016), 68.

harmful othering and the discriminatory side of disability arts and the public engagement with disability in general.⁴

It is clear from this practice led research that, given favourable circumstances - which include suitable materials, suitable processes, an enhanced culture of collaborative artmaking, as well as moving away from traditional ocularcentric art practices - that artmaking by blind people is something that is currently under subscribed and requires profound reappraisal by both educators and artists.

What is perhaps more exciting and more impactful for the wider so-called able-bodied community is what this research offers with respect to an enhanced understanding of vision. This understanding encompasses the wider reach of synaesthesia that this project has argued for, and the consequent extended and distributed sensorium where the sensory modalities are regarded as fully integrated and inseparable. This, together with the idea that vision, along with all the modalities, originates from a nexus of encounters between the body and the world, significantly alters how we understand sensory perception and aesthetics. From now on, how we see might have as much to do with how we hear, how we feel, how we taste and how our environment connects with us, as it does on the health of our eyes, this is disability-gain in action.

The positioning of blindness-disability at the front and centre of this practice led research is novel and has produced illuminating and unexpected outcomes. Blindness is now intrinsic to the research outcomes rather than being an extrinsic barrier to them. This positioning resonates with and builds upon both blindness-gain and the cripistemological turn both of which have been referred to throughout this thesis. The enhanced understanding of the culturally informed, polymodal mental image now uncoupled from any particular organ of sense, suggests far-reaching possibilities in the fields of neuroscience, photogrammetry and robotics. The contribution that this research and the blindness artworks have made to a new

⁴ Catalin Brylla, 'Bypassing the Supercrip Trope in Documentary Representations of Blind Visual Artists', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (4 September 2018), doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6485.

epistemological paradigm around vision remains an open question. It is, however, argued here that the radical and nuanced redefinition of vision, along with all other sensory modalities, as originating at the pre-cognitive point of encounter between body and environment, is a contribution to new knowledge and provides an exciting launching position for further research.



Figure 21. *Too Big to Feel* (2015) – concrete; 50m² approx. © Hannah Thompson, all rights reserved.

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List of Appendices

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Appendix 1 – Conferences, Exhibitions, Workshops

Conferences/Workshops

(**E** - exhibited, **PP** - presented a paper, **PW** - presented a workshop, **W** - Workshop participation, **C** – Consultant)

Blind Creations, Royal Holloway University of London, London, June 2015 (**E, PP, PW**)

'Creations off the Beaten Path: A Discussion on Disability and the Arts Challenging our Preconception of Artistic Practice and the Experience of Artistic Creation', panel presented at *Transcultural Exchange*, Boston, USA, February 2016 (**E, PP**)

IVLA 2016 - Engaging the Senses, Concordia, Montreal, 2016 (**E, PP**)

Founding a Community of Practice for Sensing Culture Through Inclusive Capital, University of Bath, Bath, March 2018 (**PP**)

91DIVOC (part of MaMoMi initiative), Gallery@oxo, London– 10th – 14th November 2021 (**E, PW**)

Lewisham College Student Workshop (Workshop themes were self and senses: exploring self-identity and collaborative work through hybridity), Lewisham College, London, May 2022 (**PW**)

(Critical) Blindness Studies: Current Debates and Future Directions – online, July 2022 (**PP, PW**)

"(Dis)Repairing Access: Rights, Refusal, and the Pluriverse", *Rights, Access and Refusal* (JUST AI working group), Toynbee Hall, London, July 2022 (**C**)

Workshop retreat, *Rights, Access and Refusal* (JUST AI working group), Cambridge, July 2022 (**C**)

Dis-Ordinary Architecture workshop, London, August 2022 (**E, W**)

Nottingham Trent University workshop with 2nd year textile design students and members of Nottingham Charity MySight's Art group, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, January 2023 (**PW**)

Irruptive Chora's *HYPERSPACE* - a collaborative curatorial platform founded in London by artist Ania Mokrycka and curator Agata Kik, February 2023 (**C**)

The Handlers project with artist Jo Bannon, Wellcome Collection, London, September 2023 (**C**)

Beyond the Visual: Blindness and Expanded Sculpture (AHRC funded), November 2021 – July 2026

- *Non-visual perception and orientation*, Tate Modern, London, February 2022 (**W**)
- *Rethinking the gallery situation*, Tate Modern, London, February 2022 (**W**)
- *Expanding art and curatorial practices*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, May 2022
- *Beyond the Visual: Non-Sighted Modes of Engaging Art*, Wellcome Collection, London, October 2022 (**PP**)
- *Consultation workshop 1*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, January 2024 (**W**)
- *Object handling workshop*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, March 2024 (**W**)
- *Beyond the Visual: Inclusive audio description workshop*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, May 2024 (**W**)
- *Sensory Innovations and Creativity in the Arts*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds November 2024 (**PP**)
- *Sensing Spaces Differently Symposium*, Camberwell College of Arts, UAL, London, February 2025
- *Blindness and Expanded Sculpture* conference, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, March 2025 (**Introduction of keynote speaker plus discussion**)

Forthcoming –

- *Collaborative Audio Description workshop*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Leeds, April 2025
- *Beyond the Visual exhibition*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, November 2025 – March 2026 (**E**)

Uncommon Senses V, Concordia University, Montreal and online, May 2025 (forthcoming) (**E, PP**)

Exhibitions of my work

'sculptures from the inner space – please do touch' exhibition, *IVLA 2016 - Engaging the Senses*, Concordia, Montreal, 2016

Share Art online (part of *Outside In*), online, April 2021 (Chaired this event and exhibited)

91DIVOC (part of MaMoMi initiative), Gallery@oxo, London, November 2021

Liberty Festival, Lewisham, London, Summer 2022 (Exhibition of commissioned work)

Layers of Vision, The Arcade at Bush House, South Wing, King's College London, November - December 2022 (Exhibition of commissioned work)

Earthwise, Beaconsfield Gallery, London, June 2023

Forthcoming -

Beyond the Visual, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, November 2025 – March 2026

Exhibitions Visited

(Audio Describer – **AD**)

Longplayer Day, Goldsmiths, University of London, to Trinity Buoy Wharf, June 2019

Artist talk with disabled artist and disability rights activist Tony Heaton, (online), December 2020

The Human Touch, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, June 2021 (**AD** Dean Thom)

Francis Bacon: Man and Beast, Royal Academy of Art, London, January 2022 (**AD** Francis Martin)

The Stand Ins: Figurative painting from the Collection, Zabłudowicz Collection, London, February 22 (**AD** Harry Baxter)

Beano: The Art of Breaking the Rules, Somerset House, London, May 2022 (**AD** Jim Clarke)

Hockney's Eye: The Art and Technology of Depiction, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, August 2022 (**AD** Dean Thom)

MADI BOYD *The Complexity of Touch*, Bermondsey Project Space, London, May 2023

Grayson Perry Smash Hits Tour - Edinburgh Festival - July 2023

Ana-Cartography (...None of the Above) - various artists, Gallery 3 Cromwell Place, London, September 2023

The Graduate Art Show, Woolff Gallery, 89 Charlotte Street, W1T 4PU, October 2023

Nicholas Middleton Viva Exhibition *Beyond the Frame*, Hockney Gallery, RCA, March 2024

Ensemble - Participating artists: Louise Ashcroft, Cash Aspeek, Terence Birch, Fran Cottell, Colin Lievens, Aaron McPeake. Independent artwork descriptions produced by Collective Agency, written by Joe Rizzo Naudi, A. P. T. Gallery, May 2024

There is always more than a wish in Lewisham, The Lewisham Art House, June/July 2024 (**AD** Phil Baird)

Colour Made Manifest - Material Engagements Research Cluster, The Pump House Gallery, Battersea Park, London, July 2024

Kaleidoscopic Realms – Shift* project, Nottingham Castle, September 2024 (AD Harry Baxter)

* SHIFT exists to give recognition to and amplify the voices and works of learning disabled and neurodivergent artists and makers across the UK

Publications

Johnson, David, and Florian Grond. 'Remote Feelings: On Blind-Sighted Collaborations and Long-Distance Art Making'. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (4 September 2018). doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6474

Johnson, David. 'The Shades of Dark Matters: Dappled Insights into the Aesthetics of Blindness'. *Prova 5*, Royal College of Art, 2020.

———. 'Unlikely Mike and the Counter Factuals'. *Prova 5*, Royal College of Art, 2020.

Johnson, David. 'Blind Aesthetics: Complexity, Contingency and Conflict'. In *Beyond the Visual - Multisensory Modes of Beholding Art*, edited by Ken Wilder and Aaron McPeake. UCL Press, forthcoming.

Johnson, David, and Chang Gao. 'How Do Affect and Phenomenology Reshape Representation and Art?' In *Representation - Research Communiques*: RCA School of Arts and Humanities, edited by Josephine Berry, 39–53. Royal College of Art, 2022.

Appendix 2 - Adjectives, lines, marks by Alison Carlier (words)

Jars with short necks, flared rims, which may be rolled or undercut and are often close to lid seated and may have one or two grooves below the neck.

Medium hard grey brown with a grey core and a blackened exterior surface and a little muscovite.

Distorted vessel, probably local in a hard grey fabric with a lighter core and a little muscovite and dark grits.

Hard red brown with a medium grey core and black surfaces, scattered minute muscovite and some quartz.

Hard darkish grey with a lighter core and a little minute Mica.

Appendix 3 - In the Wake of DisOrdinary Architecture 2022

Thinking Outside of the Box

This account is a personal reflection on the DisOrdinary Architecture course that I attended in August 2022. I was very pleased to be invited to join the event and what transpired exceeded all my expectations. In what follows I will attempt to draw out the main themes, ideas and feelings that I am left with as a result of my immersive participation in the course. The founding creator of the course Professor Alan Penn, argues that the current architectural design sector and the built environment it spawns is unhealthily fixated on the visual. Professor Penn and the designers of this course believed that by observing how blind and visually impaired creatives respond to a carefully thought out series of workshops and initiatives, much can be learned by the wider architectural design community. Below I have headed up the four main themes 'Box 1' to 'Box 4' to emphasise the importance of the idea of the *box* both as a metaphor for containment, differentiation and categorisation and also as a way of describing a building.

My own PhD practice-based research into blind aesthetics has many common strands with the stated aims of DisOrdinary Architecture so it is hoped that some mutually beneficial cross-fertilisation of ideas, processes and methods might emerge from the encounter between these two projects.

To a great extent this account is a record of relationships. First and foremost the relationship between human blindness and the built environment, secondly the relationship between blindness and creativity and thirdly, and by no means least, the relationships between a group of visually impaired people gathered together, often in basement environments, as they wayfind their way through a weeklong residential architecture course in unfamiliar and ocularcentric surroundings. As such, I will pepper the following account with a few anecdotes that add a social commentary to the whole.

Box 1

Starting from Difference¹

The 12 visually impaired participants of the course gathered at UCL's John Adams hall of residence, London WC1 in the midst of the record breaking summer heatwave. Our initial challenge was to navigate the social landscape of the gathering while navigating the labyrinthine complexities of the basement of the UCL hall of residence where we were to sleep. We were a very diverse bunch with nothing much in common apart from visual impairment and a general interest in artistic creativity.

¹ Jos Boys and Zoe Partington, *Starting from Difference with Zoe Partington & Jos Boys*, F_PODCAST Intersectional Spaces in Practice, n.d., MP3, accessed 17 January 2023, <https://f-podcast.podigee.io/4-starting-from-difference>.

The complexity and diversity in our response to finding our way around both the physical space and the social space was striking. 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.

Box 2

Feelings and Stuff

To kick-start the week's proceedings we were all taken to the UCL Institute of Making which is part of the Bartlett School of Architecture. We were introduced to the work of the institute and their vast array of materials by the curator of the facility Sarah Wilkes.

Following this multi-sensory and very physically engaged introduction to materiality we embarked on a series of exercises that were designed to strengthen and examine our *relationship* with hand-picked materials from the collection. Mandy Redvers-Rowe steered us through this process during which she encouraged us to consider four questions: What does the material under consideration feel like? What memories does it evoke? What function do you think it has? How does it make you feel? I find it particularly interesting to consider what questions 1 and 4 have in common and how they differ. The close relationship between feeling as emotion and feeling as proximal touching is being interrogated here. But like the relationship between seeing and knowing, and their colloquial interchangeability, they have to be treated with extreme care.

Boxes within Boxes

On the walk back to our accommodation that afternoon my guide Otis noticed the preserved figure of polymath Jeremy Bentham displayed in a glass case in the lobby of the adjacent UCL buildings. Jeremy Bentham, as well as being credited with the invention of philosophical Utilitarianism, conceived of and designed Millbank Prison, Pimlico, which is now the site of Tate Britain. I mention this because Millbank Prison was originally designed as a panopticon; a building in which all parts of the building can be viewed from one central viewing point. This optimising of the optical where every cell (or box!) is visible is arguably the antithesis of the DisOrdinary Architecture project which is attempting to relegate or realign the visual aspects of building design.

Social Comment 1: The Communal Kitchen

Finding Your Feet and Finding Your Voice

Most of the visually impaired course participants were accommodated in the basement of the hall of residence. The basement consisted of a series of underground box room

bedrooms including a communal kitchen all interlinked by a series of confusing and labyrinthine corridors. Once we had settled in our rooms the kitchen became the room to which we gravitated both to meet people and to get refreshments.

It was here that the process of finding our feet socially began in earnest. Interestingly those of us with some vision took on a prominent role both socially and practically in assisting those with less vision to find their way around the kitchen and indeed the basement area in general. This was the start of a social dynamic that persisted and shifted in interesting ways throughout the week ahead. A complex ecology of hierarchies, anxieties, vulnerabilities, frailties, irritabilities were exchanged, traded, choreographed and fought over throughout the week in a largely unspoken sub-text to the week's proceedings. The communal kitchen was the place where this drama was acted out.

Box 3

The British Library in Fragments

The British Library, Euston Road, hosted us for a full day of events that have left an indelible trace on my memory and which were central in informing the creative process that followed in the workshops. The events included an audio described building tour, a talk from the buildings manager Richard Warren followed by a series of workshops intended, I think, to heighten our individual and our collective sense of placing the body in the built space.

Richard's talk consisted of giving us hands on access to a huge range of examples of building fragments that make up the fabric of this extraordinary building. The body parts of the library were handed around for us to touch and feel, smell, sonify and even taste! Hand rail fragments, doorknobs, fragments of floor tiles and ceiling tiles variously featuring brass, bronze, wood, stone, clay and leather were all passed around for us to engage with.

The afternoon was perhaps, for me at least, the climax of the visit and possibly the week. Mandy took us through a series of mindfulness workshops designed to reinforce awareness of our bodies, both collectively and individually, within the built spaces of and around the library. These workshops involved slowly spinning our bodies on the spot through four points of 360 degrees and then audio describing the experience. These mindful exercises were performed in various hand-picked locations in and around the library. Some of these exercises were choreographed by Mandy others were chosen by participants themselves but all of them dramatically heightened our sense of self in a panoramic, pan-sensory space. The body and the environment are, of course, an indivisible unity; our bodies are never discontinuous with an environment. These exercises just reinforced that fact and encouraged us to name the nature of that connectivity.

Social Comment 2: Meals Out

From the get-go we were required to sort out our own evening meals and entertainment. This requirement exacerbated the social dynamics within the group and

referred to above; those with some vision, local knowledge and internet facility took the lead and the rest of us followed. So a series of snakes of visually impaired people following a leader were to be seen most evenings seeking out restaurants, cafes, or supermarkets. On the one hand this was a positive, bonding necessity on the other hand it embedded social hierarchies based on relative visual acuity which can be problematic.

Box 4

The Jig and the Well Spring of Creativity

Introduction to the workshop

From the outset of the course we were asked to choose between one of two course pathways. These were firstly a workshop project entitled *Box of Feelings* and secondly a studio project entitled *Minimum Conditions of Creativity*. The workshop option gave us a clear practical brief involving making a box by using a range of tools and materials and which expressed our personal responses to the British Library experience. The studio pathway was more conceptual and involved a consideration of what it is that drives our personal creative impulses. The personal base elements that we need in order to produce some kind of design intervention in a space. This was an extremely difficult choice for me to make as I regard these two strands of creativity to be two indivisible sides of the same coin.

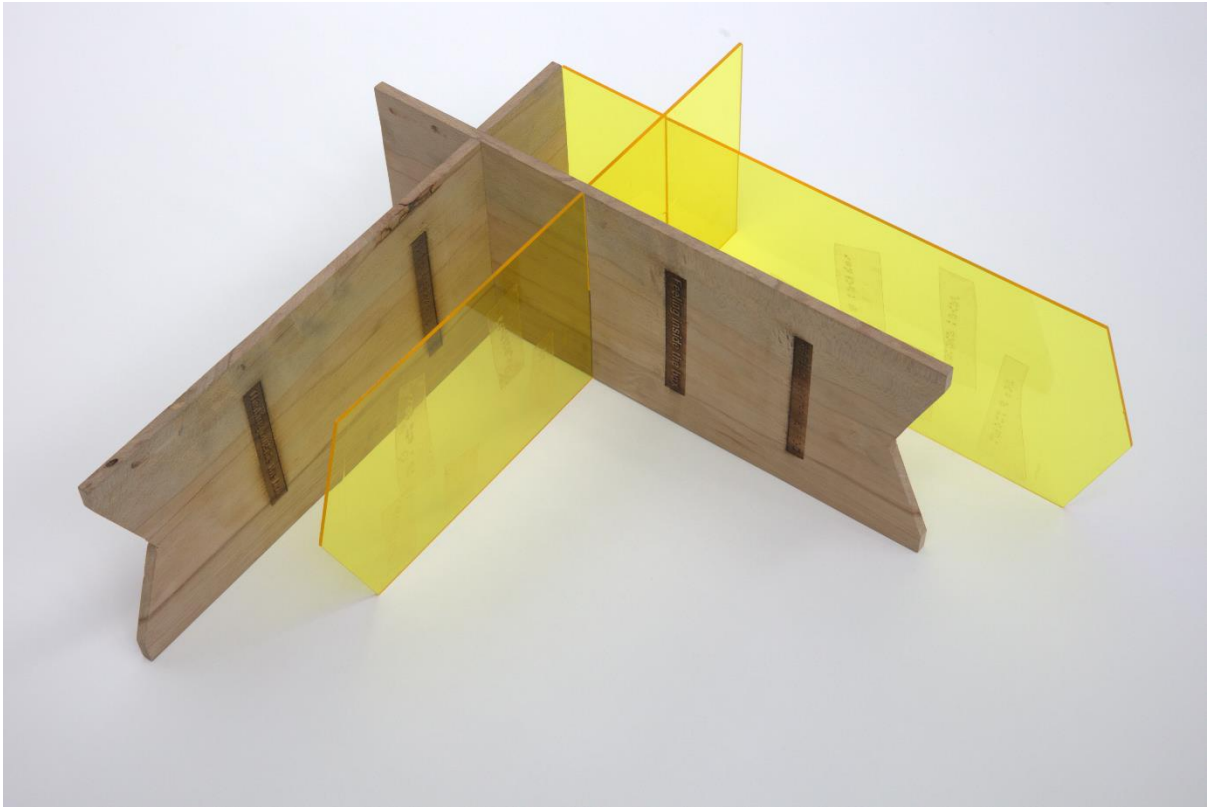
Duncan, James and Tom were the technicians who guided us through the workshop element of the DisOrdinary Architecture course. Health and safety, achieving outcomes, maximizing autonomy and independent working, maximizing creative freedom and agency and minimising stress were the stated aims of Duncan and his colleagues. Given the diversity of the participants' visual impairment, workshop experience, and personal workshop ambitions, this was an exciting, ambitious and fabulous undertaking.

Thinking Outside of the Box; Feeling Within the Box

My own contribution was within the workshop pathway and is entitled *Thinking Outside of the Box; Feeling Within the Box*. As a general rule and as a totally blind person I find buildings a curious mixture of altered perception, enigma and uncertainty. The British Library was no exception! Key elements within buildings take on contradictory and paradoxical characters when experienced as a blind person; windows become walls and walls become windows, floors and ceilings drift away from their usual roles, interiors and exteriors become confused and less of a binary opposite. The British Library with its nautical themes exaggerate and magnify these phenomena. In the atrium area of the library the outdoors floor patterning comes into the interior space, the flooring creeps up columns, and the vast atrium space rises up to the roof as layers of interior accommodation jostle with the atrium for a place in space in what amounts to an architectural and spatial war zone.

Accordingly my own box design shivered and shook under the influence of this experience! Huge waves of thoughts crashed against the sides of my box shattering it asunder

and encouraging me to reconstruct the idea of a box in radically new ways. I took the conventional four sides of the box apart and re-attached them in a way that deliberately confused what is outside and inside, deliberately avoided enclosing space and deliberately muddled the functional roles of transparency and opacity in the plains that now criss-crossed my ragged, deconstructed 'box'.



The Jig

I want to pause here to make special reference to the use of the jig in the workshop making process. Duncan Meerding had created a number of jigs to help us measure, repeat and to work independently and to move away from dependence on conventional tools and metrics.

The jig allows the maker to measure accurately without recourse to numbered rules. It allows the maker to perform multiple repetitions of the same task without loss of accuracy. It's the application of relative rather than absolute metrics. It is a spacer, it is the straight edge, it is the stamp, it is the block, it is the template, it is the stencil, it replaces or provides an alternative to the measure with its unitary subdivisions, it is the mark made flesh.

Social Comment 3: Morning Counterpoint

I awoke early on the final morning of the course in order to prepare for the busy day ahead. As I lay in bed gradually coming to I became aware of the morning chorus of city

sounds as the night slowly turned to day. Vehicles beginning to move, sirens occasionally wailing, doors slamming, builders beginning to build, and, of course, birds beginning to sing. Prominent among these birds were seagulls with their plaintive and evocative cry ringing out across the city. As I lay there thinking about how outside sounds mingle with interior sounds and how my open window acts as a doorway for sounds and cool air as well as for light, the arresting sound of a young woman in full throated orgasm drifted in through my window from a nearby bedroom. The woman's primal wailing mingled with the seagulls' cries and the city sirens provided a wonderful morning counterpoint and was, I thought, a fitting climax to a great week of creativity and discovery!

Conclusion

The box can be so many things; a room, a building, a container, a prison cell or a secure and comfortable living space. But the box unseen or partially seen and encountered through visual impairment is fascinatingly different. The box experienced primarily through touch, through sound or sonics or through smell or taste is a box with a difference. It is still a container or a prison cell, or a comfortable living space but its relationship with the human user has changed radically.

As noted above what a box or an environment feels like and how it makes you feel are key questions when trying to understand the relationship between a person and a built space. The sensory thresholds, liminalities and horizons that delineate and inform a person's understanding, and hence their relationship with a space, shift radically with blindness. Walls dissolve, windows become opaque, flooring and ceilings become sound boards. The threshold between the interior and the exterior zone become blurred and ambiguous. Horizons can become proximal encounters such as the soles of the feet touching the floor covering or possibly distant sonic horizons that emanate from way beyond the limits and boundaries of the built space. DisOrdinary Architecture and the course reviewed above has made important inroads into a better understanding of these altered perspectives and it represents a vital step in the journey towards a more inclusive built environment and equitable aesthetic climate for everyone.

Appendix 4 - An email conversation between Dr. Kevin Hunt and David Johnson

Kevin:

...

Some thoughts on Serres:

Reflecting on our conversation from Tuesday, my understanding is that Serres (like us) also tends to think in terms of spectrums rather than binaries and, as we briefly discussed in terms of my 'polymorphic sense of spatial awareness' (I think that's the term or phrase we used, or you that you kindly suggested but please correct me if I've misremembered) these spectrums tend to also be topological rather than linear. One of the metaphors or analogies Serres often uses (if I've understood his work correctly) is of knowledge being like a river or a sea, which is rich and multiple and constantly changing, and that finding new knowledge occurs when we are swimming between, or are otherwise positioned somewhere between, the land on either side. In other words, the binary position of the two banks on either side of the river is connected by a spectrum of possibilities with perhaps an infinite number of positions that any one of us might take, including by journeying across from one position towards the other. So our positions are potentially dynamic rather than fixed, although Serres favours finding a fairly balanced position while also accepting that it is fluid rather than absolute. The flow of the water includes factors such as time and multiple other influences that are constantly changing, which can be large-scale social, political, and cultural forces as well as more personal and individual factors. So no two journeys by any one of us from one side to the other, or whichever point we happen to be in, are necessarily the same. At the same time, we are connected to other people by our experiences, partly because other people are part of our journeys and they are typically an integral part of the lived environment each of us experiences, so the process of exploring our positions and sharing knowledge of where we are at between the two river banks is where new knowledges can be found. Just to add, Serres probably wouldn't see the river banks as very fixed either because everything is potentially in flux, but where fairly solid positions have emerged the analogy seems to work quite well with the acceptance that the banks or coastlines are also changing over time.

My reading of Serres, which is informed by other commentaries, is that his thinking is potentially quite similar in places to phenomenological thinking, such as Merleau-Ponty, even though Serres is often quite dismissive of phenomenology and of Merleau-Ponty in particular (there is a reason for this I'll come back to shortly). As I understand his work, one of the qualities Serres identifies in the arts is their capability to share new knowledge in forms that are non-linear and that artworks can potentially engage an audience through experiences that are more embodied than conventional written descriptions. These experiences of art are potentially primarily sensorial rather than intellectual, with our rationalised thoughts about the experience of the artworks coming slightly after our bodily/sensory engagement with them. For Serres, all our knowledge comes from experiences that are mediated through or otherwise processed in some way through our bodiliness, at least as a starting point for how a new understanding of the world emerges (so even theoretical physics and complex mathematical insights are typically based upon or informed by some form of empirical knowledge, such as existing laws of observable physics). Serres therefore tends to oppose more Platonic

philosophical positions that advocate abstract intellect as the highest form of knowledge, such as Plato's theory of the forms, although he never totally dismisses any philosophical positions completely. Instead, Serres tends to oppose by generalising, which is to say he recognises alternate positions as one possible position that is contextualised by multiple other alternatives. This can open up his work to accusations of being too relativist or relying upon relationalism so that anything goes. However, Serres's approach is to question the idea of any top-down absolute approach to 'truth' while arguing that knowledge is always, in some way, related to empirical sensory experiences so there is always a physics that underpins metaphysical thinking. Serres advocates a pacifist and collaborative approach to knowledge and its application in ways that are sustainable and collectively positive rather than competitive (especially where competition is initiated in ways that benefit individuals, institutions, or nations at the expense of others), so he takes a moral position on how knowledge should ideally be sought and applied.

Just to backtrack to Serres's dismissiveness of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty and the traditional phenomenological approach tends to advocate reflective thought about sensory experiences and then narrowing down the underlying experience through an analytical process, using quite precise and therefore linear language to help identify or define an embodied experience. This seems to be quite a strong part of Serres apparent dismissal of Merleau-Ponty because the process focuses upon using academic or philosophical knowledge to intellectually reflect upon and thereby rationalise sensory experience, rather than embracing the sensory experience in and of itself. It's an apparent contradiction within the phenomenological method whereby revealing embodied knowledge requires an intensely rationalised and analytic intellectual process. Serres prefers to work through synthesis and analogy, such as the river or sea analogy, and to share insights through federating and connecting knowledges rather than breaking things down analytically into smaller parts. This is one reason why his work is written poetically and in a fairly non-linear structure, because he is intending to convey the richness and multiplicity of knowledge through the form of his work as a synthesis of ideas rather than as a linear analysis. I think it's also why he likes to use analogies and draw upon examples of paintings, novels, and poems to show his openness towards the arts as a form of knowledge making and sharing. I think this interest in synthesis, the arts, and non-linear thinking, as well as embodied knowledge and the senses, is why I feel quite drawn to a Serres's philosophy.

Some initial thoughts about my experiences of spatial thinking or spatial memory:

I'll have to think more about how to best explain my spatial thinking with aphantasia. One approach to this, which is a visual one so perhaps isn't all that helpful, but it has some interesting connections to our discussions, is that I feel quite a strong relation to the visualisation of experiences shown in the film *Notes on Blindness*. As you'll probably already know, the film is based upon John Hull's biography *Touching the Rock* and it recounts selective moments in his life using his actual tape recorded reflections and insights to help articulate his thoughts and feelings about losing his sight. In certain sequences, he talks about the way sound and hearing helps him to visualise a space. On screen this is recreated as a blank or black screen and as various sounds are introduced, relative to his position, they can be heard in front, to the side, or perhaps even behind him, and in some cases moving across the screen or around him in different ways, and as this occurs the sounds become accompanied by

sketchily presented forms in blue lines. These forms can move, when appropriate, but they aren't especially distinct although they are recognisable as the source of the noise, such as being in a park and hearing leaves rustling on the trees which then become visible as a sketched slightly ghostly form, or joggers on a footpath running with a crunchy gravel underfoot, or a bandstand where music might start playing, and so on, and as each sound is recognised the blue lines indicate the position of the source of the noises. We don't really see a full picture but there is a distinct spatialised awareness of where the different elements are. In John Hull's case, he uses sound to help build up this picture. And, as an interesting aside, he also speaks about how the rain can help him to build this picture, in the right context, because it can make things audible (including over quite long distances) that otherwise might be silent. Objects in an environment therefore become more 'visible' in his mind's eye or in his psychological vision. The example of this I can recall (which is hopefully correct) is that he stands at the open door to his house when it's raining and the rain drops reveal where various cars are parked due to the way the rain hits their metal rooves and that other surfaces and materials either dampen the sound of rain falling or reveal a material surface through the noise made, or even movement like the sound of car tyres moving on a wet road.

My experiences with aphantasia aren't really to use sound but my sense of spatial awareness perhaps has some sort of similarity because I tend to recall the relative spatial position of things within an otherwise blank screen or blank space. I don't see the equivalent in my psychological vision of the blue lines used in the Notes on Blindness film, although my understanding is that some positions on the spectrum towards aphantasia do include people seeing sketched forms or outlines, and that this potentially moves from a blank vision through increasing distinct mental forms through to a more complete picture or detailed vision, which is more towards hyperphantasia. So I think I have a sort of relative awareness of where I am in relation to my mental landscape and even though I don't visualise anything I have a sense of being in a certain place and how I might move through that place. I'm thinking in particular of remembering my grandmother's house. The details aren't very distinct but I know where the rooms are and I can recall certain ornaments and objects without being able to see them in any detail. Some of these have colour attached, which I can't really visualise but I could identify what I think is a similar equivalent, such as a very bright orange ceiling lampshade that I think had a similar bold colour to an orange fruit. As I'm writing this I also think it is easier for me to mentally develop a sense of space and recall things that have a three dimensional quality, whether I'm thinking about myself within a space or an object in space. Like the orange lampshade that was, I think, like an inverted glass bowl, so it was smooth rather than fabric and I have awareness of that sort of tactile quality as well as the bold colour, so perhaps those qualities help me to imagine the properties of the object even though I can't visualise it.

Where we have discussed paintings, including quite abstract paintings that tend to be on the surface of the canvas, I find it a lot more difficult to mentally situate anything. My attempt at recalling Picasso's paintings were quite a long way off his actual work, such as *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. version), where my mental image of the painting tends to make me think of a very strong diagonal organisation of space, almost like the painting is split between or organised around a diagonal line from top right to bottom left, but looking at the painting the five figures are more evenly organised and although the painting has quite strong geometrical

cubist forms there isn't really a diagonal force in the way my mind wants to impose one. Perhaps I'm recalling the idea that a curtain is being lifted or held by some of the figures and my mental association with this is to recall how it feels to lift a curtain, like when an art exhibition has an area that is sectioned off to perhaps show a film and there is a black curtain that is fairly fixed and I would then have to lift it or move it to the side to create a diagonal opening to let me enter the space. So maybe some of my thinking is associative with spatial experience and I try to fill in the gaps in mental visualisation with something I associate with the image? I'm also thinking that, quite some time ago, I likely read art historical descriptions of Picasso's painting, as well as seeing reproductions of the image, and that the figures emerging from behind a curtain or curtains was discussed as being part of the cubist formation of space in that work. I'm not quite sure what to make of all that but it feels like associations of spatial thinking, even when they aren't really very closely connected to something, can perhaps inform or misdirect my mental image of space.

By contrast, if I think about a painting I know well and that is more traditional or distinctive (to me) in its use of space then I feel more confident that I could sketch out roughly what the painting looks like. For example, John Constable's *The Haywain* as a fairly traditional sort of landscape that shows Willy Lott's Cottage to the left of the painting and the Haywain cart in the river towards the centre of the image is a picture I know quite well. This is partly because I studied it quite a lot for my A Levels, some time ago now, and I have visited the original site a number of times because it's not too far from where I grew up in Colchester. I also drew or painted a contemporary version of the scene a few times. So I could probably sketch something similar to the general organisation of the key features within the image, based upon their relative positions in space.

Another interesting idea that we discussed related to rhythm and how that perhaps relates to space and pattern within certain artworks or images. So I can't particularly recall any very defining qualities of Jackson Pollock's paintings, even though I've spent quite a bit of time looking at them as reproductions in the past, but I have a distinct sense of the rhythm that defines his painting style with the sweeping gestures of his arm as he would move around his canvases in a dancing type motion. I've seen film footage of him creating some of his paintings so I suspect I'm quite influenced by this. I also have some art historical knowledge of his works, partly from my PhD thesis about American painting from mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century, so I would potentially be able to recognise certain works by him by name but in most cases I would probably have to see them for the connecting title or name to come to mind. I'm not quite sure how this works but, for example, I think I'd recognise his work *Autumn Mist* if I saw it but I couldn't offer much of a description about what it looks like beyond the fairly generic idea of a misty image with perhaps grey and bluish lines that weave together on the canvas into a finely tangled web. So I have a sense of specific awareness of the painting and that it is distinctive and quite famous within his body of work, but I'd need to see it to connect my knowledge of the work with what it really looks like. When I try to recall it as a visual experience there's very little I can draw upon, perhaps because the image is flat and surface orientated, and all I seem to have is a sort of awareness of the tangled lines in space.

One thing that I'm also aware of is that I'm not very good at imagining objects in space and then moving my position around them. In fact, I can't really do this at other than recalling experiences of a particular space I've been in or perhaps an object I've held and I'm familiar with in a tactile sense. So when I'm recalling my grandmother's house that seems to be based upon how I would physically move through the house when I was there. What I mean by this

is that I understand some people can look at an object and then perhaps visualise it, or in some cases even draw it, as if then seeing it from all sorts of different positions, as though their initial experience of looking at the object from all around it enables them to log a sort of 360 degree understanding of that object and then revisit that vision in their mind's eye or psychological vision. I have a recollection of reading about this ability in Oliver Sacks's work, where someone was, I think, drawing a bird's skull or something similar and they produced a whole series of fairly small, detailed, sketches on a single sheet of paper showing the skull from the sides, above, behind and so on, without moving the skull from its position on the table once they'd looked at it and put it down. I remember reading this at the time and finding it astonishing as an ability but, even then, I don't think I'd connected this fully with my inability to mentally visualise. Instead, I think I somehow assumed that once the artist started drawing they would somehow construct the image through spatial awareness of its three dimensional form rather than, as I now assume, also drawing quite significantly and perhaps primarily upon a strong visual memory of what the different aspects of the skull looked like.

I'll have to keep thinking about this further, including how this sort of spatial thinking or recollection might relate to Serres's topological or non-linear thinking. There is perhaps something interesting here relating to the way that Western art historically draws upon fixed point perspective and recession into depth as a breakthrough in developing realistic images and the way perspective requires or assumes a fixed point from which the observer sees things. Serres's interest in topology tends to resist the idea of fixed points and my own spatial awareness perhaps seems to work most effectively when there is movement and depth associated with the memory of something. So even for artists whose work I find really fascinating, like Francis Bacon's paintings, I can probably describe my experience of walking through his Man and Beast exhibition at the Royal Academy from a few years ago more effectively than I can remember most of the paintings on display, despite knowing many of the themes and the sort of imagery the exhibition focused upon. I can't recall the exact layout or progression of the rooms because I'm not that familiar with the gallery space at the Royal Academy but I can recall they had painted the walls in darkened colours, more like greys and navy than a white cube gallery space, and that this helped to make the background colours in Bacon's paintings stand out, especially where he had quite bold pink or orange backgrounds. So perhaps contrasts and boldness are part of this as well. Perhaps the non-linear or topological element relates to my preference for depth and movement, which requires three dimensions rather than two dimensions. This might be part of why I can't distinctively recall the colour of the front door at my grandmother's house, which I must have seen numerous times over many years, but I can recall the layout and selected details of the rooms inside.

...

Best wishes and apologies for the long email!

Kevin

David:

Hi Kevin,

...

Your comments on Serres approach to knowledge and his critique of Phenomenology are fascinating and an area I would like to investigate further- I use Phenomenology quite a lot in my work so I have a vested interest in this!

Your insights into John Ull's visualisation of sound and space- linked to your own experiences of aphantasia, strongly suggest a synaesthetic explanation might help here. When you referred to the tactile qualities of your grandmother's lampshade this reinforced the possibility of synaesthesia!

Your fascinating allusions to art history, with your mentioning of Pollock's gestures and the lifting of the curtain in the Picasso, once again suggest synaesthesia but this time with kinetics or bodily movements included.

All of the above suggest the vision or visuality might arise or emerge from a non-optical or a synaesthetic origin and this might account for how people have very different visual mental lives- 'hyper' to 'a' phantasia.

To do justice to your amazing email I need to spend more time on it-time that I don't have at the moment. I do , however, look forward to taking this conversation forward next week when we zoom.

With all good wishes

David

Kevin:

Hi David,

Many thanks for your message and for sharing your thoughts about my attempt at describing how my sense of spatial visualisation feels like it might work. I'm pleased this was interesting and I'm also really interested in your reply and how we might keep developing our conversations around these ideas. One of the effects of trying to explain my sense of spatial visualisation (or whichever term feels appropriate) is that I tend to flow from one thing to another, so the process of writing and trying to articulate how my non-visual recollection of visual things might work is that it really makes me think more deeply about what I'm experiencing.

I'm also really interested in synaesthesia and crossmodality of the senses, and the idea that these qualities of cross communication or entanglement between the senses are more widespread or fundamental than has historically been acknowledged or understood. I very much look forward to speaking about this further. I don't really have any answers but through our conversations it definitely feels like we have some ideas or positions that might be emerging, including the research you've been undertaking for your thesis.

All best wishes,

Kevin

Appendix 5 - Information on Blindness

Clinical blindness or vision loss is common in human society. Worldwide 285 million people are visually impaired and of these 39 million are blind. 90% of blind people live in low-income countries. In the UK there are over 2 million people living with sight loss. Here 'sight loss' refers to those with 6-12 Snellen vision or worse, that is to say people who cannot read more than halfway down the optician's letter chart. Of the 2 million people with sight loss 320,000 people are actually registered blind or partially sighted in the UK. Of those registered, 80 percent are 65 years old or over so age is a significant risk factor in eye health and sight loss.¹

Aside from blindness or vision loss due to injury and accident there is a wide range of diseases, both acquired and congenital, that result in vision loss. The most prevalent diseases that result in sight loss in the United Kingdom are as follows:

Age related macular disease 23%

Cataracts 19%

Diabetic retinopathy 5%

Glaucoma 7%

Uncorrected refractory errors 39%

Other eye diseases (including retinitis pigmentosa) 7%

¹ 'Key Information and Statistics on Sight Loss in the UK', RNIB, accessed 23 September 2024, <https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics-on-sight-loss-in-the-uk/>.

Addendum: Glossary

Beauty

In this thesis *beauty* refers to a combination of qualities that are pleasurable, but which avoid the normal visual bias associated with the term. In this sense the experience of *beauty* can start from or favour any sensory mode or combinations thereof. The visual may well arise as the primary faculty or alternatively it may arise indirectly by association or by synaesthesia, but it doesn't necessarily dominate the experience. This more generalised, non-ocularist understanding of beauty allows this research, that is anti-ocularcentric, to continue to embrace the experience of beauty as part of aesthetics.

Crip-time

This term, which derives from *crip theory*, refers to the categorising of the lived experience of disability in temporal or durational terms. In the thesis under review crip time follows the principles set out by Alison Kafer in her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.¹ Here Kafer points out the pervasiveness of the language of time in the realm of disability and reminds us of the inevitability of disability in everyone's life. We will all encounter disability at some point in our lives.

Kafer expands the notion of crip time to include not only the well-known idea that disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere but also suggests that disability demands a rethinking of normalising approaches to temporal features such as pace and scheduling.² This approach to temporality and disability has been of great value in the research under review.

Cripistemology

The term *cripistemology* was coined by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer and was first shared with the disability studies fraternity in their article *Cripistemologies* in 2014.³ In this text Johnson and McRuer discuss how the term cripistemology was enthusiastically adopted before the breadth and scope of its meaning was fully realised.

In their more recent publication on the subject, *Cripistemologies Now (More than Ever!)* 2024, Johnson and McRuer attempt a firmer framing of cripistemology. For instance they say: "What does it mean to call someone a living cripistemology? One answer could be that the (disabled) conditions of one's life repeatedly form the basis for creative embodied interventions in ableist logics."⁴ This interpretation of cripistemology as an embodied methodology that challenges everyday ableist norms has been a very useful methodological tool throughout this research.

¹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013).

² Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 25–26.

³ Merri Johnson and Robert McRuer, 'Cripistemologies: Introduction', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (2014): 127–48, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.12>.

⁴ Merri Johnson and Robert McRuer, 'Cripistemologies Now (More than Ever!)', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 18, no. 2 (2024): 116.