

PDFlib PLOP: PDF Linearization, Optimization, Protection

**Page inserted by evaluation version
www.pdflib.com – sales@pdflib.com**

Somewhere in between Touch and Vision: In Search of a Meaningful Art Education for Blind Individuals

Karin De Coster and Gerrit Loots

Abstract

This article offers a theoretical framework of a meaningful art education for blind people. Existing literature focuses on the interaction between the artwork and the blind person. This text describes this aesthetic encounter which is complex due to tactile sensations, individual differences of the non-sighted viewer and specific features of the art work. The article demonstrates further the importance of thorough reflection on these issues. The paradoxical character of blindness and visual art raises some difficult theoretical problems. Several authors plead for an art education for the blind that

emphasises tactile experiences, instead of visual information. The article considers the consequences of such reasoning and stresses the importance of visual information in an art educational setting for blind people. Finally the article considers the roles of the art educator and the museum guide, as moderators in this dichotomy between the tactile elements of an artwork and its visual features.

Art education for blind persons

Ask anyone who is planning to visit an art museum what he intends to do there. It is very likely that person will respond: I will 'look' at art works. The same reasoning evokes an amazing gaze when confronted with blind persons in an art museum. Art is created in a visual world, it can function as a criticism, a deformation, a symbol, but there is always that link with the visual character of society. Why should blind people then be confronted with art? The answer isn't even that hard to find. Blind persons are used to visual concepts. Some have seen before, others still see a minimum and even persons who have never seen realise that vision is very important in the world in which they live. For the same reason they are curious about art, as an essential aspect of life, as sources of information and as typical experiences.

Fortunately, more and more museums are making efforts towards visually impaired people. In present policy attention is given to participation and access to cultural venues increases these practices and stimulates reflection on the topic. Several art museums in Belgium organise touch tours and handling sessions. However, a thorough reflection on their art educational approach seems to be lacking. Nonetheless, a proper educational 'approach' is indispensable when considering the complexity of the matter, namely: opening up visual arts to people experiencing difficulties in their contact with the visual world.

In this article we will outline a theoretical framework describing and analysing meaningful art education for blind visitors of art museums. The main literature on this subject describes the interaction between the artwork and the blind person: the aesthetic experience. This interaction will be further discussed from several angles and insights and we will conclude with introducing a third important actor, the museum guide, who besides the art work and the blind person also plays a leading role. In this article, however, we will limit ourselves to the description and discussion of the artwork and the viewer, which will illustrate the complexity of this interaction.

First of all we will have a closer look at the artwork that is being touched or viewed and describe the importance of its features for a meaningful art education. Secondly our attention will proceed to the blind viewer and his or her features that will influence the aesthetic experience of an artwork. From existing theories and research on the aesthetic experience of blind persons we will conclude with some reflections that will guide our further research and interest in the subject.

The art work: visual intensity

Vision is inherent to the phenomenon of art. However, we claim that not every work of art has the same degree of what we will call visual intensity. Visual intensity is the main concept of our first element in the art educational setting for blind persons. Its definition can be described as the degree of vision used for a deeper understanding of an artwork. This concept will prove to be helpful when considering art education for blind persons.

Throughout history art has emphasised different functions and goals. For example, during the Middle Ages art had an important medium function since it conveyed messages to people who couldn't read. Beautiful window frames represented biblical scenes for illiterate believers. It was an important source of information. Art could be seen according to this view as a visual narrative. The strong emphasis on the representational character of art lost its power with the invention of photography. This new technological development in 1839 had a remarkable impact on art and more specifically on painting. It led to the rethinking of the place of art in society and to a reworking of the definitions of art. Modernity in art history brought an end to the emphasis on realistic representation. From a generally realistic style, paintings moved towards impressionism as a detailed analysis of sight and the surrounding world. Impressionism in particular wanted to analyse sight into pixels, small units, with a deformation as result. The experience of sight became the subject of the artwork itself. A careful and subjective examination of what is seen

determined the painting and in consequence one has to see the work in order to understand it. Impressionism was soon followed by many other styles: expressionism, fauvism, cubism, and so on. They all had one thing in common: they were deforming or radicalising visual reality as a reaction against the idea of representation as an accurate depiction of reality. This art historical evolution is often seen as linear in the sense that styles followed each other and each style was a reaction to the previous one. During this process the barriers of what was considered as art were constantly moved and extended. The role of vision in this defining process can be seen as subject to change. Gradually this historical evolution was not merely a visual one, but became more and more a matter of theory and philosophy. Early examples of conceptual art were ideas written on a piece of paper and presented in a gallery or museum. Danto in particular emphasised the benefit of art history and art philosophy in looking at art. In his reference to the *Brillo Boxes* of Andy Warhol he posed the question, 'What is the difference between a real box and the boxes of Warhol?' [1] The difference cannot be seen, he argued. This cerebral 'shift' in art is not absolute. It is clear that seeing a work of art still plays a major role but at the same time these reflections and theories illustrate how art is not only about its appearance. Sight can be part of a confrontation with art but there is more to it. It is also about thinking, about history and about philosophy. *Fountain*, or the urinal of Marcel Duchamp is another good example. Does seeing the *Fountain* alter the understanding of it as an object of art?

In our contacts with art we take sight for granted; it is always there, a work of art is created by using sight and is evaluated by using sight. It is only in confrontation with blind people that we start reflecting on this matter. An art educational setting with blind persons can always begin by questioning the visual intensity of the discussed work of art. It is clear from the examples that this visual intensity will vary a great deal, depending on the art object itself and the context in which it

was created. The *Brillo Boxes* require a different approach than, for example, a work by Monet or Rothko. The visual intensity is clearly very different in these cases. A meaningful art education will therefore take the visual intensity of the artwork into account.

Blind viewer: emphasis on cognition: some theories of aesthetic development

Besides the artwork, our next component is the spectator. A successful contact with art involves at least two factors: the object and the viewer. On the side of the spectator, cognitive activities and reasoning in front of an object are treated separately next to the specific perceptual features of a tactile exploration. It is clear that this distinction is purely a theoretical one. In practice a continuous interaction between both will take place. In this framework it is important to treat both separately, since touch involves very unique features.

Cognitive models of aesthetic appreciation, developed from interviews with sighted people, focus on the mental schemes people use when interpreting art works. These models presume that the level of aesthetic development explains the variations in art appreciation. People who are familiar with the arts tend to diverge more in their aesthetic preferences compared to people lacking such experience. Existing models therefore underline previous contact with art and see aesthetic development as a linear process. Most of the research is inspired by Piaget's cognitive developmental theory and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. This study stresses that aesthetic judgements differ due to cultural, historical and individual differences. All these factors contribute to a more general state of perceiving and of giving meaning to the surrounding world. The most important contributors are Gardner, Parsons and Housen, who distinguish five stages in art appreciation when analysing how people respond to art works.

Parsons [2] defined a stage as a set of ideas that people use to make sense of paintings. These sets change as experience with art increases. The first

stage is characterised by favouritism, where people, usually young children, are attracted to colour or subject matter. They see a painting as a stimulus for a pleasant experience. In the second stage, paintings are judged according to the way in which they represent something. The attention focuses on the subject matter and the viewer realises that the basic purpose of a painting is representation. During the third stage the purpose of art is seen to express an experience. The quality of the feelings that a painting can produce in the spectator is the basic argument for liking a painting. At the fourth stage attention moves towards style, form and medium. At this point people recognise that a painting is situated within tradition and history. Finally, stage five emphasises the central concept of autonomy of judgement. Besides judging the work of art, the viewer also examines the concepts and values used in evaluating works of art. Parsons' study was seen as an important contribution to the field but at the same time was criticised by others. The criticism was aimed at methodological as well as theoretical aspects. One criticism involves the relation between age and developmental progression. Parsons claims that there is no necessary relation between age and stage but does not offer empirical or theoretical support for this statement [3]. The only conclusion that can be made is the fact that people understand art in different ways. Another point of criticism of great importance is of a methodological nature. Parsons did not justify his choice of the particular paintings he used for his research [4].

It is exactly this point of criticism that inspired Housen in her study of aesthetic development, *The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development*. One of the study's aims was to come forward with a reliable instrument for measurement. In order to avoid a too suggestive questioning, she coded spontaneous reactions to works of art. This method tries to capture the thoughts and feelings which go through one's head in a free responsive situation. This technique takes an interest in the spontaneous thoughts and natural feelings of a viewer. The

person talks out loud as he or she looks at a work of art. Housen called it the Aesthetic Development Interview (ADI). She stated that: 'The elicitation method does not distort the aesthetic response. Using a pre-formulated set of questions it is not clear whether the interview reflects the aesthetic experience of the viewer, the researcher, or some hybrid of the two' [5]. Housen also believed that the development of aesthetic understanding needed to be looked at across the entire life span. According to her point of view, in order to formulate a mature aesthetic response, viewers should have acquired the ability to reason abstractly. Since the acquisition of this competence differs from age to age, Housen worked with adults and adolescents. Like Parsons, she distinguished five stages: the accountive stage where personal and idiosyncratic associations are central, the constructive phase where medium and technique form a central focus, the classifying stage in which the viewer's history and affective domain are suppressed, the interpretive stage which stresses emotional expression. In the fifth stage she discerned a creative reconstructive process in which the artwork is treated as a particular object with its own laws and rules [6]. Different from Parsons' theory is the fact that Housen places stage three and four in reverse order. While Parsons sees attention to expression before form and style, Housen's theory concludes the contrary.

Housen's work is extremely interesting because she applied her theory to visually impaired visitors in a pilot study where she evaluated the educational method for blind persons in the Museum of Modern Art in New York [7]. She registered the aesthetic reactions of visually impaired subjects while looking at tactile drawings designed by Art Education for the Blind in order to explain the paintings. One of her findings was that most of the participants fell within the first stages in which people seek a narrative by identifying and looking at the objects within the visual field. She also found that visual impairment didn't seem to alter the approach to works of art. In this stage the viewer is interested in a response

to the question of 'what it is' and he or she constructs a story of what he or she sees.

These conclusions are important since they illustrate that the cognitive approach to the aesthetic experience and art education shows similarities to those of sighted viewers of art. Although it is not completely clear to what degree aesthetic development will be similar, it does indicate that a certain parallel can be drawn between sighted and blind viewers.

Since all aesthetic developmental models originated from Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories of psychological development, it is reasonable to presume that people who became blind later in life will show similarities with sighted people in their aesthetic response. The benefit of these theories for an art education for blind persons is their emphasis on extrinsic elements, such as previous contact with art and knowledge about art. A successful art education will take these aspects into account and offer information that is suitable for that particular stage of development. Blind visitors are often seen and received in museums as an homogeneous group. However, not only do they differ in perceptual characteristics, they also have very different experiences with art. It becomes even more complex since some people have previous experiences whilst still having sight; others have had most art experiences when they suffered from low vision. In evaluations of art educational practices for blind persons the tendency of museums to treat them as an homogeneous group and their lack of acknowledgement of interpersonal differences in previous art experiences is expressed as an important frustration for blind visitors [8]. More attention to cognitive models in the elaboration of educational services for visually impaired visitors might therefore lead to a more differentiated approach and avoid a singular concentration upon visual features.

Perceptual aspects of aesthetic understanding for blind people: The singularity of a tactile perception

Establishing a contact with art logically includes

sensorial activities. In the case of the non-sighted, one tends to talk about touch as a substitute for vision, which can be used by all blind people. It is true that a lot of blind people rely in many circumstances on touch for the understanding of space and objects. There is, however, a great difference between the adventitiously blind, who became blind later in life and the congenitally blind, who have never seen. The first group knows what it is to see and will keep using these memories after becoming blind. It is also the largest group; only a small number of people are born blind. A distinction must also be made between people whose sight deteriorates gradually and those who lose sight suddenly. It should also be clear that besides completely blind persons, a majority of people with a visual handicap suffer from low vision and still have some useful sight. On the other hand it is a frequently stated prejudice that blind persons live in the dark. Some blind people can still see light sources. And people who are legally blind [9] can still function visually for the performance of some tasks. As a consequence of this diversity not all blind people will rely to the same degree on touch. Some will use touch in addition to some residual sight, others still make frequent use of their visual memories, still others prefer description. Of course there is a large number of blind people for whom the sense of touch is the major information source of the surrounding world. Touch is a sense with unique characteristics, compared to vision.

Revesz [10] posed the question whether sighted, late blind and congenitally blind persons tended to visualise what they had touched. It was clear for the first two groups that they tried to construct a mental visual image of their tactile experience. Adventitiously blind people remember how things look and will use these memories when constructing a mental image. For the third group, the congenitally blind, it was not that easy to determine how they experienced tactile impulses. Plausibly, it might be expected that this group will have tactile mental images. However, research has demonstrated that congenitally blind

people might have some kind of visual imagery, although it is not clear how to name it [11].

The most cited features of touch are successive, slow, analytical, and active. During a successive perception several components are perceived one by one. The moment when the different impressions come together, a global idea of an object arises. Consequently, this process will take more time than visual perception, where a glance can give a large amount of information. Revesz analysed the haptic perception as follows: after a global exploration where an idea of the size and the larger parts is constructed, a process of analytical touching begins of the more detailed parts. Finally all these impressions come together in a total idea.

Gestalt theorist Rudolf Arnheim nuances the idea that blind people would be deprived of the gestalt conception present in the arts:

It is true that the constant presence of the total visual field greatly facilitates the synthesis of the fixations. ... This does not mean, however, that haptic perception is limited to making do with a sequence of elements that at best can be patched together intellectually. Rather, the need to integrate elements of a coherent whole is as dominant in haptic perception as it is in any other organic process [12].

However, he does not deny that vision has the advantage of a constantly present image of the visual field. A tactile experience with an art object involves a continuing proximity. Especially in dealing with art, sighted people tend to approach the work and then take a step back for a more distant final look. This continuing change between distance and proximity is excluded in a tactile perception of an artwork.

Aesthetic experience of blind persons

The foregoing illustrates the complexity of a non-visual aesthetic experience. Both components, the artwork and blind people, suggest aspects that lead to a unique situation. The visual inten-

sity of a work of art, the uniqueness of touch, the individual tactile experience, the previous contact with art, and knowledge one has about art make it a very complex subject.

Few researches have been undertaken in the past to describe the aesthetic experiences of blind people and most work was established more than fifty years ago. These early studies make the assumption that the aesthetic experience of the blind can never be compared to those of the sighted. Some, like Cutsforth, argue that non-sighted people can have a kind of aesthetic experience, others, like Revesz, argue that they can never have such an experience. Revesz's thoughts are prominent in the field. For a long time, he was intrigued by the question: 'Can a blind person have an aesthetic experience through the sense of touch?' He answered in the negative by focusing on the specification of touch. Since touch is a sequential and gradual process, in contrast to vision, which is spontaneous and immediate, a blind person does not have the ability of a complete and spontaneous understanding of art. A blind person is, according to Revesz, capable of interpreting only the content of an artwork by exploring it through touch. His judgement of art would then be based on the existing models/schemes the viewer has about reality. Everything that is perceived as an affirmation of these schemes is appreciated and things that deviate from it are rejected. More recent theories like Arnheim's nuance the extreme dichotomy that is drawn between touch and vision, but nevertheless stress a sensorial contact with art.

As mentioned above, Cutsforth, contrary to Revesz, presumed that a certain degree of aesthetic experience is possible with blind individuals [13]. Whereas Revesz sees an experience as the result of an emotional, perceptual reaction, Cutsforth sees it as a response of the whole personality, which includes intellectual growth as well as emotional growth. 'Aesthetic growth doesn't take place so much through the senses as it does through the entire intellectual develop-

ment' [14]. Here Cutsforth stresses the importance of a stimulating environment to attain a sensibility for beauty. In contrast with Revesz, he explores the possibilities of an aesthetic experience by taking the entire intellectual development as a condition.

Both views show some similarities; due to the spirit of the time, they both define aesthetic experience as an experience of the beautiful. The goal of confrontations with art is in these views: a contact with 'the', almost divine, beautiful, whether tactile or visual. The exploration of the beautiful is different in a tactile than in a visual engagement. So the aesthetic experience of blind and sighted people can hardly be compared. Definitions that consider beauty as the synonym for an aesthetic experience consequently imply that an encounter with art should be pleasurable. Today's interpretation is quite different; many aesthetic experiences are not pleasurable. Some are even intended to disturb, to perplex [15]. For this reason, these theories are no longer seen as authoritative in this domain, although they opened up the discussion and influenced further studies.

Several contemporary researchers interested in art education for blind people develop these earlier studies in the sense that they equally emphasise the specificity of touch, although they do not follow their outmoded view of aesthetic experience as a synonym for beautiful. Arnheim foregrounds features of a tactile sensation when he states that blind people prefer symmetry and other simple formal relations; he concludes that they are inclined towards styles of art meeting these conditions. He makes the comparison between a Brancusi, as being simple in form, and a Bernini [16]. Symmetry and simplicity of form facilitate the building of a mental image in a tactile process. However it seems too uni-dimensional to conclude that art styles meeting these conditions will be preferred. Previous art experiences are likely to play a crucial role here.

It is striking that some theories often determine art contact as a strictly tactile sensation of

an object. Less attention is given towards the visual character of that object and its social function becomes negligible. Most authors therefore choose an art educational approach that emphasises the tactility of art, its texture, its weight, and so on. Candlin pleads for an art education that starts from tactile sensations and criticises the focus on vision in art education:

This lack of attention to how people touch is indicative of the degree which sight structures museum education. Rather than touch being a skill and a means of understanding and enjoying art in its own right, it is effectively used as a substitute for sight. ... The discursive elements of touch tours tend to prioritise the absent visual experience at the expense of non-visual elements such as texture, balance, weight and temperature. This is surprising given that art education neither encourages discussions about art's materiality rather than its appearance, nor does it have the vocabulary to cope with the non-visual [17].

And she continues her criticism when she states:

Indeed it would be ridiculous to claim that you understood something without knowing whether it was warm to the touch, how much it weighed, its texture, how you held it, how it articulated with the user's body or what noise it made. A subtle vocabulary dealing with the non-visual aesthetics would be developed and the emphasis on an art object's appearance would be considered extremely limiting and one-dimensional [18].

Reflections

Resuming the foregoing, several points need to be considered. First of all, it is striking that all authors plead for an art education that starts from tactile sensations and almost all agree that vision and touch will both lead to very specific experiences of art. Secondly, the tendency to see the blind as a homogeneous group with very specific features is still present. Only Candlin explicitly pleads for more individual attention. In this atmos-

phere the idea of 'an art for the blind' arises, as separate and different to the art for the sighted. This overemphasis on touch carries the danger of denying the importance of art's visual character. In the contemporary discourse of access to the arts and culture for all members of society this reasoning can have some consequences.

When we look at art as a social construction it is important to offer ways for blind people to participate in the artistic discourse of society. A full focus on the specificity of touch in art would elicit a completely different art approach for blind people and would exclude them from this artistic discourse. It would lead to a different and isolated 'tactile' art debate. It is our opinion that art itself should not be at stake. Art is visual and it is important to keep looking for possibilities to allow blind persons to access visual art. Furthermore, only a minimal proportion of art is 'touchable'. Conservation rules, size and art form influence the tactility of certain works of art. Even sculptures that fulfil these requirements are in the first place a visual formation of ideas, feelings or concepts. Sculpture is visual and aspects such as space, form, texture, surface and shadow play an important role in its understanding. If sculptures have a tactile dimension, it will be different to the visual.

From a theoretical point of view this exclusive attention to tactile contact with art seems to bring us further away from the main goal of today's access discourse: bringing people who are blind into meaningful contact with art and culture made in a visual society.

General conclusion

In our theoretical construction of a meaningful art education for blind people we came up with several components. First, the interaction between the art object and the blind spectator is complex in nature. The specific visual intensity of the discussed work of art, the cognitive schemes used by the viewer and the specific perceptual character of looking are highly individual but at the same they will determine the nature of the aesthetic experience. On the side of the viewer

we stress the individual approach. It is extremely difficult to talk about aesthetic experience of the blind, at best it seems possible to name some aspects of such an experience. However, the unique and highly relevant stories of each individual are underestimated. Blind individuals are in the first place people with an individual history in the arts and an individual way of looking at art. It is not so hard to believe that an adventitiously blind man who used to visit every art museum would have suddenly more in common with a adventitiously blind man who was never interested in art, than with a sighted man equally fascinated with art.

Secondly, it seems important to respect the visuality of art, and this also true for the blind spectator. A tactile sensation of an art object is a meaningful and direct experience of the object, but we argue it should be translated or linked to the visual features of the work of art. Every object in an art museum has its place in historical tradition. It transfers an idea in a visual form. We should look for ways to translate a tactile experience into a visual version. It is at this point that a third element rises in our quest for a meaningful art education for blind persons: the art educator, or the museum guide. The museum guide can be seen as the translator between visual art and the experience of the blind person. A dialogue of a shared experience of the blind spectator and the museum guide elicits a joint construction of the art object. Aesthetic experiences are no longer seen as strictly subjective sensations of beauty. Instead it is through conversation and dialogue that a meaningful and mutual comprehension of the object arises. The use of language is extremely important in this joint inter-sensorial construction. Vision and touch will both have their place in this dialogue and it is the educator's task to moderate tactile sensations into visual components of the object. Further research should incorporate this third element as the main link in the existing interaction between the blind spectator and the art object.

Note

An earlier version of this article was presented at the VIPHEC conference, KULeuven, Belgium, 6–8 Nov. 2003.

Notes and references

1. Danto, Arthur C. (1986) *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Colombia University Press.
2. Parsons, M. J. (1987) *How We Understand Art: A Cognitive Development Account of Aesthetic Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Feldman, D. H. (1988) Aesthetic Judgements: Changes in People and Changes in Domains, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 22, pp. 83–116.
4. Winner, E. & Gardner, H. (1988) Essay Review of M. Parsons' *How We Understand Art*, *Human Development*, Vol 31, pp. 256–60.
5. Housen, A. (1983) *The Eye of the Beholder: Measuring Aesthetic Development*. PhD thesis. Harvard University, Department of Education, p. 35.
6. Housen, A. (1987) Three Methods for Understanding Museum Audiences, *Museum Studies Journal*, Vol 2, No. 4, pp. 41–9.
7. Housen, A. & Desantis, K. (2003) Very Nice to my Visual Imagination Memory: An Inquiry into the Aesthetic Thinking of People who are Visually Impaired, in Axel, Elisabeth Salzhauer & Levent, Nina Sobol [Eds] *Art beyond Sight: A Resource Guide to Art, Creativity and Visual Impairment*. Art Education for the Blind, New York: American Foundation for the Blind, pp. 85–95.
8. Candlin, F. (2003) Blindness, Art and Exclusion in Museums and Galleries, *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, Vol 22, No. 1, pp. 100–10.
9. Legally blind individuals can be defined as best-corrected vision of 20/200 or less in the better eye or a visual field of twenty degrees or less in the widest meridian. A person who is classified as 'legally blind' can therefore still have usable vision.
10. Revesz, G. (1950) *Psychology and Art of the Blind*. London: Longmans, Green.
11. Heller, M. A. (1991) Haptic Perception in Blind People, in Heller, Morton A. & Schiff, William [Eds] *The Psychology of Touch*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 239–61.
12. Arnheim, R. (1992) Perceptual Aspects of Art for the Blind, in *To the Rescue of Art: Twenty-Six Essays*. Oxford: University of California Press, pp. 136–7.
13. Cutsforth, T. D. (1980) *The Blind in School and Society*. New York: American Foundation for the Blind.
14. *Ibid.* p. 176.
15. Carroll, N. (2002) Aesthetic Experience Revisited, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol 42, No. 2, pp. 145–68.
16. Arnheim, R. *op. cit.* p. 140.
17. Candlin, F. *op. cit.* p. 104.
18. *Ibid.* p. 108.