**A transcript of content from *(Critical) Blindness Studies : Current Debates and Future Directions***

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**Plenary Presentation by Georgina Kleege**

**The Art of Touch**

Chair: Hannah Thompson

Moderator: **Céline Roussel**

**Georgina Kleege** 00:00

Thank you so much, Hannah. Thank you for that lovely introduction. I think I must be blushing. I should announce that as of today, July 1, 2022, I'm officially retired from the University of California, Berkeley. And I'm coming to you today, not from California, but from New York City. I'm in the midst of moving here. It's a kind of homecoming for me. I grew up in New York, and it seemed right now, to enter this new phase of my life, by returning to what I still consider my home. I'm so happy to be here. I, I was at the first conference in 2013, in Paris and the Blind Creations conference at Royal Holloway in what was it 20... 2015. And both of these conferences were among the best in my entire career. They were stimulating and inspiring and fun. And so I'm so happy to be together with Hannah and Vanessa, and Marion, to reconnect with old friends and many of you who are on the program who I've met at either those conferences or other events. But I'm also excited by all the new people, people, I don't know, people who are at early stages in their academic careers, entering this realm of what we're calling Blind Studies. It's so inspiring. Yesterday, yesterday's presentations, were just... my head was exploding anyway. And so I'm so eager to read more by all of you. And as Hannah says, it would be so lovely if we were together and could go out for a meal or just have coffee together and chat. So I hope that will happen in the not too distant future. I really want to compliment and praise and applaud Hannah, and Vanessa and Marion for organizing this very ambitious and complex online conference, and for giving to us this marvelous resource of the ongoing website, which if you even if you just glance at the bibliography, it's, it's a resource for scholars in the future. You know, who said what is this thing called blindness studies? Well, here's a bibliography, we can get started. And to know that there will be recordings of these events available is really marvelous. And I can only imagine how complicated it was to put this thing on. So all praise to our three leaders. I also want to applaud the interpreters; I was listening in yesterday and they did a heroic job, and I'm sure will continue to do a heroic job because, you know, it's difficult what they're doing. We are academics, we talk too fast. We use terminology that is often difficult to translate. And it's, it's been amazing to me to hear how they've been able to manage on the fly. So, of course, we can't applaud on Zoom, but I wanted to take a moment to applaud them.

Okay, to my presentation and my self-presentation. I will provide a description of myself. I am a 66-year-old white woman, a citizen of the United States of America. I have chin length, white hair, and I'm currently wearing a lavender colored t-shirt. I had to hesitate because I, when I took it out of the suitcase, I thought it was green. I was expecting it to be green, but no, I checked. Anyway, I'm going to talk today, to describe for you today, some projects, collaborative projects I was involved in from 2016 until just before- it's 2019, basically, before the COVID 19 pandemic. This was work that sort of extends what I wrote, some of the things I wrote about in my last book *More Than Meets The Eye*. I work in museums, specifically, I work in museums around touch access, touch tours, designed for blind and visually impaired people. I have to do my usual disclaimer, many of you have heard me say this before; I am using PowerPoint. I consider PowerPoint to be assistive technology for non-blind people, or sighted people, or as I sometimes refer to them as the visually dependent community.

05:41

And of course, some people are severely visually dependent and need this accommodation. I'm in an unusual situation, because, you know, if I was speaking exclusively to blind people, I wouldn't bother with PowerPoint, because one, and this is essentializing, but one observation I've made about blind people is that most of us develop skills of oral comprehension and retention. So that we could, we can follow an academic talk without any, any kind of aid or assistance. But our non-blind friends sometimes struggle with this and need to have images. So that's why I use PowerPoint; PowerPoint is not accessible to me, but I do it to accommodate others. I will for those of us who are, cannot see the slides, I will describe the images but on a sort of need-to-know basis. But basically, the images are there for the sighted people; you will be able to get my points, just by listening to my words.

I just wanted to pause to say if at any time, and this is a message for the interpreters and the captioners, if you want me to slow down, or repeat something, or spell something, or otherwise pause, please if you can let- somehow communicate maybe with Marion or Hannah, and just go ahead and interrupt me. I'm happy to be interrupted if it's necessary. Okay. Ah, so we can move to the next slide. Okay, I'm going to describe three or four projects that I did during this period around touch and the one that I'm beginning with, with is actually one that I mentioned in *More Than Meets The Eye* so it's something of a repetition if you've read that book. It was a collaboration with my friend and longtime collaborator, Fayen D’Evie. She's an Australia-based artist, scholar, researcher, who identifies as visually impaired. We were interested in touch access in the museum sector. Personally, I have always leapt at the chance to get my hands on art whenever it was on offer. And even though touch tours that are organized in museums vary in their quality, I usually can get something out of the experience. However, I know a good many blind and visually impaired people who are not fans of touch tours. And when I ask them, they say, I feel conspicuous. I feel rushed. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be doing. If there are other people around, I feel conspicuous that people are looking at me and it's, it's generally not, not worth the effort. So Fayen and I wanted to investigate this issue and figure out what, what, what there is to be gained by touch access to art, to offer recommendations to institutions about how it might be done better and also to make a case to the Arts, Arts Culture, to the museum sector, to visual culture in general, to make the case that touch access could be beneficial to everybody. One of the things that's strange to me when I take a touch tour, or when I've done this in the past, is I go in, I have this experience, and then, you know, the museum says goodbye, and I go home and it feels like I have something to give back. I have observations that I could share with the museum. But it's as if they, they, they're uncertain whether they would be able to translate that into understandings for the general public.

10:36

So it's been my mission to find ways to talk about what I get out of touching art, and to communicate this to visual culture. Okay. So Fayen and I got together we met in 2016, she had been in contact with the Kadist Foundation, which is based in San Francisco and in Paris; it's a private Art Foundation. So that is a private art collection. But they have gallery spaces in those two cities and they put on different exhibits and public events. And she persuaded them, I have to say it was her not me, I didn't believe that they would let us do this, she persuaded them to let us get our hands on some pieces in their collection, to research the experience, and to give some public events, workshops, and so forth. So she convinced them to do this. And that's what we did. There were four pieces that we were allowed to work with, we had the luxury of a great deal of time; we spent a whole week handling these objects, talking about it, recording our observations, and so forth. And then we synthesized all that research into some public facing events. And I'll just show you a couple of images that represent what we learned. So let's go to the next slide, please.

12:16

Okay, this is an image of us our hands touching a sculpture by Daniel Joseph Martinez. It has a very long title, which I can never remember. But basically, these are pieces of marble that are cut with a jigsaw. They're cutouts to duplicate a photograph of the leaders of the Black Panther Party, which was an activist, civil rights activist organization; it still exists, but it was most active in the 60s and 70s, in mainly, in Oakland, California. But it was, appeared elsewhere. And it featured the two main leaders of that organization, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. And it's a very famous and often reproduced photograph of the two of them wearing what was the uniform of the Black Panthers, which featured a beret, and one of them is carrying a rifle. So one of the things that the first thing we learned in this region, we thought we were going into it and we are going to develop a richer vocabulary to talk about tactile and haptic experience because both of us though blind have a lot of vocabulary to talk about visual experience. But we felt that our ability to describe tactile and haptic experience was impoverished. So we wanted to come up with a better vocabulary and taxonomy to talk about these experiences. What we learned instead was that when you pay attention when you're touching art, the piece of art itself tells you how to handle it. So some pieces invite a very delicate, tentative touch; you feel sort of wary of doing damage to the thing. Others invite a more engaged and physical interaction. Others require manipulation. Others require a sort of movement back and forth in addition to laying your hands on the piece and so on and so forth. So in this piece, we're touching my hand is on the right; Fayen’s hand is on the left, our skin colors are sort of beige, the marble colors are a kind of creamy white. And we're engaging in different forms of investigation; my hand is pressing against the flat surface of the marble to detect its temperature. Fayen’s fingers are pinching the side of the marble to gauge its thickness; it was about two inches thick. Often, museum touch tours seem to emphasize - well, first of all, they seem to assume that the whole point is simply to make contact with the artwork and that somehow that's going to be enough. But we were-- so that the emphasis is on perhaps tracing the outlines of the object to understand what it depicts. In fact, the rewards of tactile experience often have very little to do with what the artwork is representing; it has more to do with the materiality of, the material that the artwork is made of, and observations about how the artist shaped and manipulated that material. But here we're engaging in the sort of the, the classic touch tour actions of tracing outlines, and sort of very respectful touching of their surface.

16:38

Let's go that the next slide, please. This is a work by Adrian Wong. It's an untitled work. It's a sculptural work that's found art. It's made up of pieces, sections of a metal gate, fencing material. So the type of gates or fences that you find all over the world. I've encountered these sorts of gates in North America, Europe, elsewhere. And the artist found two pieces and just sort of put them together, and has hung them on the wall. So they're both square pieces, and the top piece is orientated is rotated at 90 degrees so the bottom piece is orientated like a square, the top piece is oriented like a diamond. The paint on these bars is-- there's a dark color, which is a sort of blackish brown. There's a lighter color, which is a sort of a creamy, yellowish, white. And to the eye this work is particularly, from a distance, looks like a sort of interesting geometrical construction, abstraction. But once I think to people who see it, once you get close, you recognize this material because it's- it's ubiquitous. One encounters it, perhaps even in one's home, or certainly in public buildings, schools. What we found with this piece, and this is where we had the revelation about how a work of art communicates how it wants to be touched or provokes a certain kind of touching- the minute we touched this piece, and immediately, we wanted to grasp forcefully, rather than to simply examine delicately with our fingertips. So in the image, I mean, it's an artwork that's talking about, you know, you have this gate and it's sort of ornamental, but yet, it has this message of, of threat, of violence, it's there to keep, keep people out or keep people in. And so it sort of hides its purpose by its ornamental appearance. Fayen’s hand is on the left, and she's feeling the bar. You know, some of the paint had chipped, has chipped off. And the underside in particular, there were a lot of rough and rather sharp edges. So she was sort of pointing out a section that was, was potentially dangerous to touch. My hand is in the upper right, and I'm grasping one of these bars and you can tell apparently that I'm doing this with some energy. The tendons on my arm are standing out. The first time I laid hands on this, I immediately grasped it with two hands and started to shake, as if, you know, let me out. And I immediately pulled it right off the wall. So one of the recommendations that we took to arts institutions was if you're going to give people touch access to works of art, it impacts the way it is attached, anchored to the wall: you need more secure anchoring. Okay.

20:11

So there were other observations, I won't go through all of them. But it was basically about developing rather than developing a vocabulary of a touch experience, it was about developing choreographies of touch, sort of instructions of how to touch a specific piece of art sensitive to what the artwork itself was communicating to the beholder. Fayen coined that phrase, I think, to talk about people touching rather than people viewing art, okay. So we gave a lot of presentations and workshops, some of them were a little unsatisfying. When we had workshops, we invited people from the museum sector, but also people from the blind community. And it was disconcerting how when we invited other people to join us in touching the pieces, only the blind people stepped forward. And then it became a kind of problematic freak show experience. We, it was only with very aggressive urging, that we could get any non-blind people to join in. So that was a bit problematic, anyway, but it informed future work.

21:40

Okay, let's move on to the next project. This is a project I did in the next year in 2017, called Haptic Encounters at the Contemporary Jewish Museum. They commissioned me to come in to work on a show that they were doing. It was a commission show, so all contemporary artists, it was called The Artist as Maggid: Jewish Folktales Retold. So the brief for these artists was that they had to create a piece of art that somehow referenced a traditional Jewish folktale. Most of the work was two-dimensional painting and photographs and some video work. But there were six pieces of sculpture. And because people there had known the work I had done it at Kadist, they invited me to come in and engage with these works tactually and haptically. So I had the opportunity to be in the in the museum; I interviewed the artists, in some cases, I went to their studios, I touched the work. And in a couple of cases, I was there when the work was installed, so I could handle the work. And then I developed a script, a text, to communicate to other museum goers what I got out of this experience. And these texts were videotaped and also audio taped. And the audio was available in the galleries. They had listening stations, mainly because since these- all the works in the show were based on stories, they had audio of actors reading the stories so that museum visitors could, you know, get the story that the art was referencing.

23:50

And then the pieces that I worked with, there was an additional track that you could dial in and hear my observations. I believe that work is still available on the Contemporary Jewish Museum website. As I'm sure you know, the museum sector is still in something of disarray following COVID shutdowns, so, you know, things that used to be on websites are, like, no longer there. But I think I think some of this traces that this can still be found. I'll just show, Hannah, if you could go to the next slide, please. I'll just show you one image of me interacting with one of the pieces. This is a piece by the artist Elisabeth Higgins O’Connor and it's a piece of referencing the story of the Golem. The Golem: I think this is a familiar folk tale. The Golem is a sort of supernatural creature made of mud and sticks. And he's both a benevolent and malevolent figure. But he's sort of made of detritus and then at the end of the story, he returns to the material that he’s made of. And in the artist's rendering of this piece, the Golem is usually understood as a sort of humanoid, human-like creature, this artist represented the Golem as more animal- like, kind of mythological animals. And actually, she made two figures, one of which is sort of like a bull or a minotaur, people describe it differently, and the other is a kind of foxlike creature, and they're installed in the gallery sort of facing each other. They're very, very large. They are made up of sort of referencing the story, all sorts of materials, pieces of paper, fragments of string, and ribbon, and nails and pins and cardboard, wood, so on and so forth. And all this material is layered, quite thickly over an armature. In the picture, I'm pictured with the one figure with that sort of minotaur or bull-like creature, I'm very tall, I'm about two meters tall, and the thing looms over above me by at least a meter. I am, I have, in the image, I have my white cane in one hand, and I have my arm inserted into the creature’s mouth. So I'm reaching up and into the creature’s mouth. And I don't know exactly, but I think my, my face must have an expression of trepidation. The reason I was doing this is because in the story, there's a plot point in the story that the Golem has a piece of paper in its mouth on which is inscribed the name of God. And so I wanted to investigate to see if the artist had included that in the sculpture. I did not find that piece of paper. But what I found was inside the creature’s mouth, the artist had gone to the trouble to create this sort of spongy textured thing to represent, I guess, the tongue and then there were sort of the cords hanging down, it might have been vocal cords or tonsils. I mean, there was all sorts of things going on in in that mouth. And it was striking because this was not something that would be visible to a non-blind person. So it's always satisfying in a, in a touch experience in the museum when one discovers things that are not available to the eyes alone. And that was one of my points.

27:53

Interestingly, touching this piece did create a sense of trepidation, trepidation; there is also the intimidation of approaching something that was quite a bit bigger than, than one, you know, which changes your, your feeling about touching something. Also, since the surface was made up of so many layers of this brittle paper and sharp edges, and so on and so forth, you sort of had to handle it with care. And in our initial interactions, with my initial interactions with it, of course, things were flaking off and falling on the floor. And the artist was fine with that. She's, she just picking things up and sticking them back on. The museum staff are a little bit more alarmed by this. But anyway, I had to learn to be wary. And I think it's in keeping with the story that when one should be wary when encountering the Golan. As with my work at Kadist, this was very rewarding for me. It was a bit frustrating that nobody else got to touch these pieces. We did have tours for people in the blind community where the artists donated pieces of their material so that people could and, in some cases, scale models of the work. So blind people could touch the materials and then I could talk about other aspects of the work that I had gained because I had this special privilege. But I was frustrated that you know this this touch experience was not universally accessible. And so let's go to the next slide.

I was very happy when I was invited to be a co-curator of an exhibit of tactile art. This was in 2019. It was at the Mosesian Art Center in Watertown, Massachusetts. The curator there, whose name was Annalise Ruggles, contacted me, and she was, she knew of my work in these San Francisco museums. And she said, we're putting on this show of tactile art and we'd like you to co-curate. And I had to, it gave me pause, you know, I had to say, you know, I'm a blind person and, you know, it's standard in a juried exhibition that artists submit images of their work. And then they're, they're judged by those, those images, and I wouldn't be able to do that. Also, it's across the country. So you know, it's complicated. But so we figured out a way to do this. Artists were required to, as they would typically, submit images of their work and a description of the materials and besides and so forth. But included in that description, they had to say- they had to produce a detailed image description of the work, and also a description of the rewards of touching the work. So there had to be some reference about what, what would one would get out of touching. And so I was reading these descriptions; my co-curator was also looking at images. And anytime I read a description which made me eager to get my hands on something, that gave it a high score, so we made our selections together. Some of them, of course, we were constrained by space limitations, and so forth, so we, there were some pieces we could not display. My goal as co-curator was a couple of things. I didn't want this to be an exhibit for blind people. I wanted it to be an exhibit that did not exclude blind people. I'm hearing a little distortion. Can you still hear me? I'll assume you can still hear me? [Yeah. Okay. Um, yeah, sorry, keep going.] Okay. So an exhibit, they did not exclude blind people. Um, I also wanted it to be an exhibit that a blind or visually impaired person could navigate independently. So among other things, the exhibit was always, the gallery, the the Mosesian Art Center is, is both a performing art, it's primarily a performing arts space, but they often put on exhibits of art in the lobby, and in the corridors and so forth. So the, when the facility is open, the, the entrance is attended. So the, the way it worked is if you came in, if you're a blind, visually impaired person, there was someone there to greet you. And then they could direct you immediately to the wall on the right, where you could acquire a braille guide, a large print guide; you can also borrow an audio device to listen to audio of the of the exhibit. There was a tactile map to give you guidance through the museum. And then there were tactile markers on the floor up the gallery to help you find where, where the works were. And next to each work, there was a wall label printed in in large font and had a braille overlay plastic overlay on top. So it was meant to be navigable, independently, by blind and visually impaired people as with sighted people, and everything was meant to be touched. Every, anybody who came could touch anything they wanted. Okay, so I'll just show you a couple of pieces and some people interacting. Let's go to the next one.

34:33

This is an image of a sculpture by Aaron McPeake who, many of you may know, is a London-based artist who I believe identifies as visually impaired. I first met him actually at the Blind Creations conference and I'm very grateful for that meeting. He had several pieces in the show, you know, I'm a fan of his work. This is an image of one of the pieces called Six Rings. McPeake is an artist who works in cast bronze, specifically bell bronze. And this piece has six, as the title indicates, six rings in graduated sizes from small to large. They are in bronze, they are very highly polished. So the surfaces are very sleek and slick, almost feels like glass. They are hung by wires so that when you move one it, it bumps against the one next to it and the bronze emits a sound and so people interacting with this piece could have a, both a tactile and a sonic experience. And if they could see they could have a visual experience. The surface is a very pleasing golden color. And they were hung in a way so that they cast shadows, so there was sort of a lot of movement and so on. In this image, we see a person who has been described to me as a young African American person wearing a yellow shirt; their back is to the camera and their hand is holding one of the rings. It's unclear if they're stopping its motion or actually moving it to touch the next ring or just feeling the cool and sleek surface. Okay, let's go to the next one.

36:33

This is a piece by the artist Cindy Lu, Lu. It's called Fuzzy Logic. And it consists of, it's made up of 1000s of plastic pipettes or plastic straws that are used in biological and medical laboratories to aspirate medical samples. So all these, these slender plastic straws or pipettes are sound sewn together in such a way that if it was inflated, it would up here like a large, very large sea urchin, a sort of spiny, spiny globe. It is not inflated so that when it rests on a flat surface, as here in the image, on a plinth, it sort of slumps and drapes over the side. But these spiny protrusions stick out in all directions. When you touch it, it undulates. So it moves; it responds to the touch. In the image, there's a person described to me, as a white person with dark hair and glasses and floral patterned shirt, who is inserting their hand in between these pipettes perhaps to feel how they're attached at the bottom. And if you can see, the pipettes extend well up onto the person's hand. So they're quite long. The artist describes this piece, or she describes the sound that the piece makes when you stroke it as being like a gentle rain. And she talks about how, you know, the collection of biological material on something we understand as inanimate, she wonders is that creating a sort of new pseudo life form, so it's commenting on that, and interacting with this thing, it's hard not to think of it as alive. This was a favorite piece of the museum or the gallery staff, because it was in a central corridor, and every time they walked by, they would just sort of give it a little stroke as you would with a friendly animal.

39:10

Anyway, the, the exhibit, one of the highlights of the exhibit was the opening. There were a lot of blind and visually impaired people at the opening, because coincidentally, this this art center is right down the street from the Perkins School for the Blind, which was the first school for the blind in America. And so the Mosesian and the Perkins had had many occasions to interact. And it was gratifying at the opening where the blind people were instructing the non-blind people on how to interact tactilely. The artists who, you know, were working in work that was meant to be touched were very happy with this show. They were, you know, generally dissatisfied when their art was exhibited in other spaces where people weren't allowed to touch and they felt that people were not getting the fullest possible experience. And so they were happy and some of them were also – they felt when in in normal museum situations when they were trying to assert that their work should be touched, they got relegated to the realm of handicraft rather than high art. And so there was a reference to kind of hierarchies of aesthetic experience that they felt were dissolved by this. Okay. Let's go to the final project. Next slide, please, Hannah.

40:41

Okay, the final project was a little bit different. This was at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, SFMOMA. It was called the Artist Initiative. It was a project funded by the Museum and the Mellon Foundation. And the idea was that different artists would propose projects of engagement with works in the collection in kind of atypical or unusual ways as a sort of public engagement with the art. This was another collaboration I did with Fayen D’Evie, I'll spell her name again, d apostrophe e v i e. And our idea was to highlight non-visual encounters, non-visual engagements with art. So our team was Fayen, Bryan Phillips, who was a sound artist, also Australia-based, Bonnie Lacika, I think, I never remember how people spell their names, anyway, who is a choreographer, and myself. And for the purposes of this, this is where I coined the title of Haptic Docent to talk about what I do. Okay, next slide, please.

42:26

We worked with several pieces in the collection. But the one I'm going to talk about today was with a piece called, by Richard Serra, who is an internationally known sculptor, and his piece is called Sequence. The images here, I have two images. This was a piece that was temporarily on exhibit at SF MOMA. But it's permanent home, it has returned now to the art gallery at Stanford University, to the south of San Francisco. So in the Stanford location, it's an outdoor piece; in San Francisco, it was in a custom-built gallery, built for it. It is a massive work of sculpture in the type of steel that is used to build ships. It's, I don't know, two storeys high, at least, and weighs more than two tons. It is configured as a curvilinear curve, it's a curved form. The point is that you, you can walk around it, but also you can enter it, it's like a maze that you could walk through. And the path that you would describe as like a figure eight or an infinity sign. And so in the inside you, you turn, and you turn, and you turn, and then you come out into these round chambers, and then you turn and you turn and you turn and you come into another round chamber and then you can exit. The artist, it's, it's a choreographic piece of art, that is to say it imposes a certain kind of movement on visitors. We also, one of the things that we explored with this piece was that it was a sonic piece of art. I learned this when I was in the gallery in San Francisco waiting for something to happen, which is what I spend my time doing.

44:54

And there were two children, maybe eight-year-old boys running around inside the sculpture. And so you could hear their footsteps running, running, running. And then then they would pause, and one of them would say WOO and the other one would respond from somewhere else in the sculpture WOO. And they were doing this because the resonance in there was quite satisfying, that the sound was very lively. And they, they discovered this on their own and they were having a wonderful time in there and I was having a wonderful time listening to them. And so we wanted to learn from these children. I have to say, of course, these children are engaged in- were deviating from the standard deportment of museums, you know, they were running, they were making loud noises, and so on and so forth. But I'm sure that they retained a memory of this sculpture as a lot of fun, which is not necessarily how most museum visits go. Anyway. So we took up this challenge of engaging with the work sonically. And I'll talk about that in a minute and kinesthetically because we had to move through it. But we were not allowed to touch the surface of the sculpture. And this is ironic, of course, because when the museum - when the sculpture is exhibited outside, everybody's touching it all the time. In fact, when they brought the sculpture into the museum, and they were examining it and cleaning it, they discovered that there were footprints on the inner walls of this sculpture. And anybody here who knows things about rock climbing, or mountain climbing, it was a technique of bracing your back against one wall and then walking your feet up the other wall. So they're all these dusty foot, footprints on the inner walls of this sculpture.

46:59

So people who were touching when it isn’t displayed inside, but in the gallery, nobody was supposed to touch and there were all sorts of signs up that say, nobody's allowed to touch. Of course, all the time that I spent with this sculpture, people were touching it all the time. Anyway, but since we were part of an official, officially sanctioned group, we weren't allowed to touch so at first my only way to navigate in this space was to follow somebody because the pathways inside are quite narrow, so I had to follow somebody with my hand on their shoulder. Gradually, we developed other methods of moving without touching the walls. But because of chanting or clapping or snapping or singing, so on and so forth, to kind of gauge the resonance of the metal. I lobbied for permission because they asked well how would you navigate a space like this if you were allowed to touch it. I said I would shoreline; shore-lining is a term used in training for blind people learning to use a white cane where you tap the wall to follow its contour. So you tap and you follow then tap and you follow and so you know how far away you are from the wall or from the curb or whatever it is. Shore-lining as in navigation with a boat where you follow the contours of the shore. Um, so I wanted some people who do this use it for echolocation; I don't I don't have that skill. But so I got permission to shoreline inside the, the, the piece and then we also got permission to hang contact microphones on the piece that we could record the resonance of the metal responding to the tapping of my cane. Anyway, I'll show you an image of that later. But let me show you the next image which is our team part of our team inside one of these central chambers.

49:13

I'm on the far right I have my white cane and my mouth is open so I'm probably talking about something. Fayen, who is rarely photographed is in the middle, holding a boom mic recording something and Bryan is kind of crouched, our sound artist is crouched on the floor, he has a recording device, he has a whistle in his mouth so he was trying to gauge the sound in in in the interior there. I should say that the color of the sculpture because it is made of steel, which oxidizes to this this warm orangey brown rust color and that's on purpose that that actually acts as a preservation to the material, since it is a material that's often in water. Let's go to the next slide. Okay, this is an image of me with Bryan outside of the sculpture. It took us a lot of time to figure out how the, the museum did not want us to want me to touch the sculpture with my cane tip itself, so that they wanted it covered. So we had to try out various types of tape and different things to cover my cane tip. And, you know, on the one hand, we were willing to do that, but we didn't want anything that would deaden the sound. So I'm seated and I'm handling the tip of my cane, and Bryan is standing watching me. We're both smiling because this, these experiments were kind of ridiculous. One thing we discovered when, when I had any kind of sticky tape on the end of the cane, when I would go through there, I would come out with great gobs of dust on the end of a cane because apparently nobody cleaned at the bottom edge of the sculpture. So I felt like, at least, I was doing a service to the museum by cleaning underneath this massive sculpture. Okay, next slide, please.

51:27

Yeah, okay, here I am in the interior chamber, and I am shore-lining; my cane tip is tapping against the wall. Bonnie Lacika, the choreographer is on the floor; she was doing a choreographic intervention of the piece, she's semi-reclined; her arm is reaching up sort of following the curve of the wall, the walls were not perpendicular to the floor, they sort of curve out and the curve overhead and then flare out as you as you move through the piece, so she's not touching the walls, but she's sort of mimicking the, the curve of the wall. Let's go to the next slide.

52:20

Here I am with Bonnie outside of the piece, we're in the gallery, but we're walking outside of the piece. You'll note that our feet are both, we're in, our steps are in sync, we were practicing the choreography of the piece, we were learning the steps of the piece, we did a lot of counting of steps and sort of, you know, turn right turn left turn right turn left. Because our ultimate goal was to go to the site at Stanford, where the, the sculpture now resides and had, had lived before and to sort of recreate the choreography of the piece there. Um, let's go to the next slide. So here we are at Stanford at the site where the sculpture now lives and had lived previously. And so I'm with my cane extended; Fayen is holding the boom mic towards my cane, and I am trying to recreate the choreography of the piece on the cement slab where it was due to return. Our work was slightly hindered because, they had this huge plaza out there. And so of course, they had put other works of sculpture out there. So I was bumping into a lot of works of art. But we were doing the best we could. Okay, and the final slide.

53:55

This is just a picture of me. I'm touching, I'm bent over so my head is the top of my head is facing the camera, and I'm touching the ground that cement slab to feel the... to see if I could feel the traces of the sculpture from when it had been there before. I mean, it's very, very heavy and it actually did leave some some grooves, some texture in the cement but it was not as tangible as I could have wished. This image, or when people describe this image to me, it always makes me feel a little sad, a little nostalgic. Because I, I enjoyed this work. I enjoyed this sculpture quite a bit, the, the memory of the sculpture is very much in my body. And so this is an image of kind of its absence and me feeling for it's, a memory of it there. That's the final image. I'll just to conclude to say that the, the point particularly of this final project, where it was about non-visual access for a piece that we weren't officially allowed to touch. But it was a way of, we hoped, bringing a blind experience into a museum of visual art and to suggest to the museum sector, to visual culture, in general, non-visual ways of engaging aesthetically with works of art that could be mobilized in Arts education, in curatorial practices, in object description, and other facets of the museum sector. So part of my mission with all of this work was to flip the script a bit. Whereas typically, an Arts institution sees blind access or touch access or audio description as a service they provide to blind and visually impaired audiences, but what I wanted to say is that those blind and visually impaired audiences, when they acquire this access, have something significant to give back, which enlarges the culture, its experience of art. I will pause now and will be happy to answer any questions or hear any comments that people would like to make. Thank you very much.

**Hannah Thompson** 56:46

Thank you, Georgina. That was absolutely wonderful. It's a good job I was on mute, because as I did last time I heard you speak, I was laughing out loud. Your description of accommodations for the severely sighted dependent, I think that's an absolutely -- I use it all the time, I always credit you. But I do use it with my students routinely now and my colleagues. There's, there's so much that I could say about your talk, I just want to quickly highlight a couple of key points that I think are going to resonate across the conference. Your- I love this idea of art, of kind of art-lead description, or art-lead interaction. So it's the art that tells you how to engage with it. That's actually something we, we alluded to yesterday, when we were talking about reading, Max in relation to Borges has said something very similar, I think, which and I think we're going to touch on that again, in roundtable five later today, which is about audio description. I also love this idea of kind of curatorial anxiety versus artistic glee at having work touched. And I know from my own conversations with Aaron how he feels about, about that, and and the what the madness that ensues when people aren't allowed to touch, touchable art. And then my final point is this brilliant idea of having artists do their own image descriptions. I think that should be standard practice; let's just have that happen as a matter of course, and then we can just pop those image descriptions into the exhibit. And there you have built-in access, built-in inclusivity. I'm going to hand over to our moderator Céline. In just one minute. I just want to ask you, Georgina very quickly if we could have your thoughts on the, on the three key questions of the conference. So how do you understand your work in relation to disability studies? How do you understand the field of critical disability studies, of critical blindness studies? And what kind of definitions of blindness do you work with? I think you've probably answered the third question a little bit already. But in terms of critical blindness studies, especially I'd be very interested to hear your thoughts.

**Georgina Kleege** 59:17

Well, I'll, I'll combine the first two questions. Maybe, you know, Disability Studies, is where I found my intellectual home. You know, because I'm old. You know, I mean, I started when I first, I first learned heard the term Disability Studies in the 1990s. And I said, Oh, that's what I do. And, you know, for many scholars of my generation, that was an experience just like, oh yeah, that's, that's me. So I wholeheartedly embrace Disability Studies as a definition for what I do and the methodology for what I do. I have to say also, you know, and, and, and so in some ways, I'm excited by the idea of critical blindness studies as maybe an offshoot or a, you know, a category within disability studies, which might maybe be different than I think how Deaf Studies is understood, which, where there's greater unease about connecting with disability that's changed. But I think there's still some of that discourse around. I mean, one of the things I was thinking about this, because as I said, I found yesterday so stimulating and this question itself- when I was a very young person, and when I was a university student, and it was my first occasion of activism. And it was my first occasion really to interact with other blind people. You know, and I think that's a familiar story for you know, that part of, you know, the way blind or visually impaired people are educated is we're isolated from each other, you know, in the past, people of a previous generation would have been more likely to be in a specialized school. But anyway, but I do remember in the 1970s, being at meetings with other disabled students. And, I mean, I was used to talking, by then, to blind people, but then I would be in a room with people using wheelchairs, or people using crutches, or deaf people, or, you know, all these other people. And someone would say, we have shared interests and goals. And there would be a silence for five minutes, where everybody was thinking, really? Do we really have shared interests and goals? Because I have shared interests and goals with the other blind people, but you know, you're a wheelchair user, I, what, what do we have in common? And it was a really paradigm shifting moment for, I think, people in America, people of my generation. And it was that thinking that, you know, what, if were divided into the different impairment categories, so you have the mobility impairment over here, and you have the visual impairment over here, and cognitive impairments over there, that that dilutes our impact politically. And so it was in in those years that when disabled people came together, and, you know, said, we have a shared interest and goals, and it was that kind of thinking that in America led more or less directly to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

1:03:20

So legislation that was to fight discrimination against all of us. Also, so, you know, so I kind of grew up with both an awareness of blindness but also a sort of inclination to think of myself as a person with a disability or disabled person and not that the blindness didn't matter, that was sort of the specifics, but the general category was to be a disabled person. I also remember, in maybe in the 80s, there was a kind of a trend with activists, particularly when, when speaking to the public, speaking to journalists, to say I'm a disabled person, and to not really engage with the question of like, well, what's wrong with you? It's like, if you're a wheelchair user, does it matter really, that you became disabled due to polio, does it matter that you were in a car accident? What, what difference does that make? The significant thing is that the architecture does not accommodate me because I use a wheelchair or the, the, the educational system doesn't accommodate people who don't read print. So, so in that way, I think my inclination is to, to think of disability studies as the umbrella organizing principle, and to recognize that maybe blindness studies has specific contours and specific methodologies, but it's still informed by, it’s a child of disability studies theory, and in answer to, as you said, in answer to how do I, how do I define blindness? I, you know, I've written extensively about this. But I have a very capacious understanding of blindness that I refer to myself as, as blind, like **Selina** was saying yesterday and different in different contexts, but sometimes I might refer to myself as visually impaired, I don't, I don't know that I do that much anymore. But you know, if I'm talking to an ophthalmologist, I can give you the precise dimensions of my retinal scotoma, if that's how you want to talk about it, but basically I’m comfortable referring to myself as a blind person. The fact that like, many I have some residual vision is makes me different from people who are born totally blind or people who become totally blind. And I can talk about those differences to those individuals. It's not that they don't matter. But I think for simplicity’s sake, I am a writer, I care about language, and I think the word blind is a perfectly respectable word. And when I get into these configurations of visually impaired or low vision or ... there's an imprecision there that distresses me, so that's my position.

**Hannah Thompson** 1:07:01

That's great. Thank you so much. I'm going to hand over to **Céline**, who is going to take some questions, I can see there's a few hands up, I know, there's something in the Google Doc as well. So over to C**é**line.

**Céline Roussel** 1:07:13

Yes, thank you. I'm going to be speaking in French and a few words to present. I'm 32 years old and French, and I'm talking from Germany. We met twice in 2015 and 2017, because I'm working on a thesis about autobiographies of blind writers. And thank you for the experience that you have, a very rare one, that you have provided us with in this presentation. We have touched thanks to your voice to the artwork. And yes, you've allowed us to touch and transfer of sensory experiences: it's almost a new practice for us. Thank you for having offered us this new space of exploration, experimentation. And I won't say any more myself, even if I would like to go on. But I'm going to hand over straight away to our participants. There is a question for you on the Google Doc; I'm going to read it in French. Georgina Kleege: How did you convince artists to think of their works on a multisensorial level? And how did you convince them to write the, the sensations that can be felt through other means than sight? I hope my question is clear.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:08:40

Yes, thank you. That's a great question. In fact, I, I came to my interest in art, because I'm the daughter of two visual artists. I've written about that. And so I grew up in artists’ studios, and in museums, but particularly in artists’ studios, and I observed that artists in general, this is a gross generalization, but I'll make it anyway, are a lot less squeamish about having people touch their art than are museum conservators and curators. Okay, so in all my visits to artists’ studios, they're always, I mean, they're always touching their art because that's how they make it they make it, with their hands, by and large. And so you know, they're pointing out something here a touch this, you know, twisting this that got out of shape or, you know, scratching some dust off of this. So, so the artists were not, were not, I've never found artists that were particularly resistant. And in the exhibit the “please touch the art” exhibit that where all the artists had to submit these descriptions with their images, it didn't seem to cause anybody, you know, consternation. Of course, I don't know who didn't submit their work, you know, you don't know, these were all artists who create work meant to be touched. I mean, it was not a foreign concept to any of these artists. And that was the whole point that they were meant to be touched. So for instance, I showed two sculptural works, but there are a lot of works in textiles, things with embroidery, with weaving, with knitting, so on and so forth. And the artists in their description talk both, both about what, what it felt like but also what it felt like to make it and, and that was significant to description. There are also a lot of works in bas relief, particularly mosaic. And there the descriptions are often in the form of instructions; it's like start at the top left, and then trace the line that this stone makes to the- you know, so it gave you a kind of set of instructions and how to touch it. And there was often even a kind of a narrative element. So I didn't find the artists themselves were particularly resistant to describing the touching, because it was it was how they thought of their, of their work already. I hope that answers the question.

**Céline Roussel** 1:11:52

Thank you very much for your answer. Unfortunately, I don't have the name the person who has asked the question. So we've got 10 minutes ahead of us. 10 minutes for three other questions. I think we'll have enough time to respond to those questions. The first to have raised his hand is Bertrand Verine. So Bertrand Verine, the floor is yours now.

**Audience Member** 1:12:14

So hello, I hope you can hear me. I would like to thank very warmly, Georgina, for this very specific exercise pertaining to memory, which allows us to promote and look at our experience of art and I'm I'm awaiting for the availability of this video. I think this should be broadcasted and sent to the managers of French Museum, which unfortunately are very very ableist. I would like, I've got many other things to tell you, but I shall just say one thing, one question: during your presentation, you have shown the different reactions of the people, when they are prompted to touch the works of arts and especially those who do not want to do so. So, my interpretation on the basis of French society is that the total lack of education to the sense of touch, except for the alternative education systems, such as Montessori schools, which dramatically, is detrimental not only to the sighted school children but also to blind school children. So I wanted to know what is at stake in North American society, what happens in North American society, would you say that touch the sense of touch is not used by most people except for those who need high language but it is never taught, never used in the education system as a means for aesthetics as a means of discovering works of art.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:14:45

Thank you very much, Bertrand. This is Georgina first for that question or series of questions. I would say first of all, I don't know that the North American context is that much different from the French context. At least in terms of museum practices, I think they're, they're very similar. Also, I think the educational system, I think is very similar. I think education in Western culture, and it may be different elsewhere, that people might be able to address this, is really about not touching, you know, that children from a very early age are told not to touch. And yet, at that early age, it's, you know, an early stages in infant development, touching, it's essential to knowing the world. I mean, long before children can really see, well, I'm talking about non-blind children, they're gaining a lot of information about the world through touch, and yet, education, it's all about keeping your hands off of things and off of other children. So, you know, one of the things that I, I'll say two things, just to be brief: one thing that I've been very adamant about in all of this work is to not subscribe to the, the, what I call the myth of compensatory powers, which is the idea that, you know, if you lose one sense, the other senses are enhanced. And although I believe there's been some neurological studies that have shown some evidence where this happens, but it's not, it's not as dramatic or robust as it is sometimes represented in popular culture. Um, I claim expertise in touching art, because I have a lot of experience of doing it. And I phrase it that way, because, you know, as we've, as we've been talking, you know, the, the metaphors of blind- that blindness and sightedness where, you know, particularly the metaphors of sight or sight equals knowing, you say, I see it means I know, I understand, therefore, to be blind is not to see and therefore not to know. And so there's almost an understanding that blind, you know, what is blind experience, people don't, they, it's understood as an absence. And I think we all are promoting an idea of, of blind gain, of blind epistemology, of blindness as a different way of knowing the world. And it's a way of knowing the world that's available to non-blind people. They just don't need it as much, or they don't, they don't have as much experience at it. So I'm always sort of pushing this idea. I mean, that's why I came up with a title for myself as a haptic docent; to say I have, I've been professionalized. I have theorized this. And I think that's, that's important, particularly in dealing with an institution like a museum. Another thing I'll say that, that I've been harping on in my work in museums, is to make a distinction between informational touch and aesthetic touch. And I'll give you a specific example of the Louvre in Paris, where they have a touch gallery. Now, the good thing about this touch gallery is it's available to anybody at any time that the museum is open. It has plaster casts, scale models, so they're scaled down models in plaster of works, primarily of classical sculpture. I mean, the good thing about it is it's always available. The other good thing is anybody can use it, it's not a segregated accommodation just for the blind people. Also, it has some of the best braille signage I've ever encountered at any museum and there are extensive texts that are descriptive of the, the artwork and the particular historical period. And you know, it's very, it's informational. The downside to it, and the reason that it's not aesthetic touch, so it's, it's providing information, but it's not an aesthetic experience, because the difference between touching plaster and touching the, the actual material, which might be marble, or it might be granite, stone, whatever it is, it's radically different, you know, so it reflects an idea that the point in the museum's mind is that the point is for the blind person to trace the outlines of the object, and then get instantly a picture in their mind's eye to know what it looks like. Okay? And I don't think that's the point at all, you know, I don't I, speaking myself, I'm not particularly good at forming images in my mind's eye. And it sort of reflects the notion as if to look at a sculpture is to say, Oh, that's a horse. Oh, that's a woman sitting in a chair. Is that really why people go to museums just to sort of identify the objects that are depicted? I don't think so. I think there's something else that's going on. So and, you know, the other problem with that touch gallery is they’re scale models. So you have nothing of the sense of the scale, what is the scale of the artwork, and that's a big part of the experience is, is that when something is incredibly large, and it's looming above you, your experience of it is very different than if it's very small and you could hold it in your hand where it may feel more precious, delicate. Also, some of the, the objects in that touch gallery are not actually in the Louvre’s collection. They're, they're reproductions of other, you know, similar artwork. So it's, it's, it's kind of a mixed, mixed experience. So but I am trying to promote the idea that there's, there's an aesthetic experience here, which is beyond just knowing what the object depicts. So I'll stop and let someone else ask me a question.

**Céline Roussel** 1:21:55

Well, thank you very much. I can see a comment from Hannah to Georgina now. So I shall read it in English. ‘To see an image I took from the empty gallery, go to my Blind Spot blog.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:22:15

Yes, thank you, Hannah. And those of you who have never seen Hannah's blog, it's really, it's a good read every day.

**Céline Roussel** 1:22:30

Unfortunately, we've got very, very limited time. So for both the audience and researcher I will ask you ask questions, very briefly, please. And Georgina I will ask you also to respond to the questions raised very quickly. We are really running out of time, almost a couple of minutes left for this session. So I will leave the floor to Michelle Botha. Michelle, please unmute your microphone and ask your question.

**Audience Member** 1:23:06

Thanks so much. Thanks so much, Georgina. I think I echo so many of us when I say that your work has been massively valuable to me, as a blind scholar and blind person. My question is about the practice that we often see of blindfolding sighted people to provide a non-visual experience. And this is something that I've had some very problematic experiences with, not so much in the museum and art space, but working in the nonprofit sector here in South Africa. But I was just wondering how much of that you've come across? what your thoughts are, and whether you've ever seen that done, done well? Or- yeah, or whether you can speak to some of the perhaps problematic ways that that is done or if you've seen that done in more helpful ways, perhaps. Thanks.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:24:02

Thank you, Michelle. This is Georgina speaking. Yes, I agree that it's a problematic practice. I think part of the reason that it's problematic and it goes back to the idea of, you know, a lack of understanding about blindness and experience. You can put a blindfold on a sighted person and they will have a lot of trouble. And that's what is communicated to them “blindness, it's trouble.” Because it doesn't, you know, if you wear a blindfold for an hour, even a day, it doesn't allow you to understand that blind people, blind people that are not born blind, adapt. Human beings adapt, like other organisms, and there is knowledge that's acquired over time. And so part of it is about the temporality of the blindfolding practices that are supposed to create empathy. Um, I will say there is a practice that many, I don't know many, but a friend of mine who is an artist and teaches drawing, and there are, there are different, there's a practice called blind contour drawing, which I'm not going to talk about, but this is something that she does with students, where she has a little bag, and she has some kind of object inside of it. And she has the people-- so they're not blindfolded, but they, they can't see it, they can feel it. So it's usually some kind of toy or a doll or something, or just an interesting shape. So the idea is for the person to feel it with one hand and then draw what they're feeling with the other hand, and that I think is something that that can be revelatory, you know, something like that. It helps if you already know how to draw. But yeah, I think it's a problematic practice. It doesn't, it doesn't communicate anything about the realities of different kinds of blindnesses. And it doesn't allow for the understanding of how living with blindness changes over time. So that's my, in a nutshell.

**Céline Roussel** 1:26:32

Thank you very much for being very brief in your response. So the last question is from Brian. I will ask Brian, to be very brief so we do not exceed the time that is given to us. Thank you, Brian. It's pleasing me unmute. If you can unmute your microphone; sometimes people will experience technical difficulties. So Brian, we cannot hear you.

**Audience Member** 1:27:03

Can you hear me now. Thanks so much. It's Brian Waterman, from Cape Town. Georgina, it's so wonderful to, to hear you in person. Thanks so much for your talk. I was just curious about your thoughts about this. As you know, I'm interested in critiques of rehabilitation, amongst a whole lot else. And I was interested in your thoughts about the possible role of art appreciation in visual impairment rehabilitation. And in the sense that, you know, so much of what's problematic about rehabilitation for visually impaired people, people who have become blind, is to deal with the idea of adjustment to deficit. And it just seems to me that, you know, everything you've been saying about art appreciation presents the possibility of presenting newly blind people with an experience of a phenomenology, which actually adds to experience, you know, where art and the appreciation of art, the deliberate appreciation of art, might create a situation where, which, which grows our recognition of what it is that blindness can bring, in terms of a new apprehension of the world. I was just curious about your thoughts about that.

**Georgina Kleege** 1:28:32

Thank you. Thank you, Brian. This is Georgina, speaking now. And it's, it's great to hear your voice that's so wonderful to be in this space with people I've corresponded with, or I've read, or whatever. So thank you for that question. Yeah, I mean, it's, it's an issue. I mean, I know a lot of blind people who just are not interested in visual art, and, and find all these interventions and accommodations and programming- it's like, that's just training me in ocularcentric values. Okay and I'm just not interested. And I would rather partake of aesthetic experiences that are already available to me, such as music, to name one thing. Um, so that's, that's one setup. And I defend those people. You know, it's like, yeah, I don't, if you don't want to go to a museum, don't go to a museum. If you don't want to know about the whole, the whole history of visual art. Fine. You already know about it, because you've grown up in visual culture. So you already sort of have, have had this education even if you haven't had this education. I think that yeah, in terms of rehabilitation, you know, I think there's a role for introducing newly blind people to opportunities that they as sighted people, they didn't know were available. So I meet newly blind people and I talk about my work. They say, really? Museums let you do that. That sounds like something I'd like to do. You know, and I think that's better than when they say, oh, no I'm blind, I can never go to a museum again. Well, yeah, you can. And, you know, with our advocacy, you know, more and more opportunities will be available. I think in terms of touch, you know, people, you know, blind or sighted, we all grew up being told not to touch things. And so I think there's a role in rehabilitation to train people how to touch. I often cite the deaf blind poet and writer, John Lee Clark, who's written extensively on these sorts of issues. He's been a promoter and sort of founder of pro- tactile, not sure how to spell that, pro-tactile I guess, which is a sign language specific for deaf blind people. So it's a different kind of sign language. But he talks a lot about touch. And he taught he, he's a braille teacher by profession. And so he's often working with newly blind people and blind children to teach them braille. And he, he's written about how frustrating it is that blind children have been told not to touch, not to touch and he's trying to train them to read braille, it's like, no, you really have to touch this, you know. And he, in one of his poems that I can't recite, but I like very much, he talks about how objects, you know, around his house, speak to him, and they, they demand to be touched in a certain, a certain way. And he says that people could have training in being alert to those signals that objects give, give off to learn how to explore an object because you want to, you know, open a packet of crisps, or you want to open a bottle of vinegar or something. It's like, how do you how do you figure out where is the thing that you tear on? That's all about tactile exploration. So yeah, I think people who have been told all their lives don't touch need to have training to say, okay, touch but touch in this way. Thank you.

**Céline Roussel** 1:32:42

Thank you very much. Thank you for this very fruitful dialogue and exchange, which highlighted the points you make during the conference. Thank you very much for being brief in your conclusion. It is not your last word, Georgina, because we're going to meet very soon in the next roundtable. So thank you, indeed to you all. For this conference, and as the chairperson, I will leave Hannah, the task to conclude, and to tell us as an organizer when we shall resume.