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"BABIES TEACH THEIR MOTHERS WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW"

AN INQUIRY INTO THE ART OF THE REGISTERED BLIND

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

I have titled my thesis, "Babies teach their mothers what they need to know", as I believe it describes very well what an inquiry into the art of the registered blind is all about.

The term "registered blind" is used to describe someone who is considered legally blind, (an eye sight level of less than 6/60 in the better eye with correction and/or a field vision of less than twenty percent. However, of this group eight in every ten have some level of sight and so can be divided into visually impaired and totally blind. Therefore my interest is to investigate how this very specific, but diverse, group relate to their environment and how this translates into pieces of art work.

The art of the totally blind and visually impaired is a very broad and fragmented subject owing to the fact that working through art with this group has a relatively young history, no more than a hundred years at most. Many of the people who have dedicated themselves to this have often worked in isolation, very little of what they have done has been recorded until very recently and to my knowledge only limited attempts have been made to produce a cohesive picture of what has been and is going on in various parts of the world.

My inquiry is based around three headings. "Opinions", is a selective series of examples, of how societies and blind and visually impaired people themselves have treated blindness. "Relating To The Environment", is a look at specific examples of how visually impaired and blind people relate their experience in painting and sculpture. And "Art Doesn't Just Happen", a broad discussion of some of the elements that are needed to promote art among the visually impaired and totally blind. My reason for choosing to write on this subject is, as a child growing up and now as a student I have been interested in my own visual impairment and how I and others like me relate to their environment.

The purpose of my thesis is not to provide a survey of art by and for visually impaired and blind people. Neither is its purpose at any point to look at the work of known artists who worked through their careers with varying degrees of eyesight difficulties, such as Monet and Degas, or to provide examples of medical conditions which influence certain types of art. I hope my thesis will raise many questions, from how do blind and visually impaired people relate to their environment to how galleries and museums can be made more accessible, to what value involving blind people in art has. I would ask the reader not to treat any of the cases and examples of visually impaired and blind peoples' work with sympathy, but to open themselves to the possibilities that registered blind people can create, then objectively appreciate their creations and finally think how their work can be accepted and integrated for the greater good of mainstream art.



## CHAPTER ONE OPINIONS

### *Instances of Opinion*

A variety of opinions has always existed regarding totally blind and visually impaired people and their lack of vision, from their value as people, to their competency to participate as an integral part of society. These beliefs have contributed to the building up of prejudices and ultimately prevented blind people from entering the mainstream and achieving their full potential. Preconceptions such as these are further aided by the fact that blind and visually impaired peoples' eyes and way of looking and doing things are often different, and therefore easily distinguishable.

These opinions and beliefs are to be found throughout history and have continually changed as peoples understanding of the world has developed. In ancient times for example the Greeks abandoned blind and seriously disfigured newly born babies to die of neglect.

From the beginning of the world as seen from a Christian perspective, the very simple symbolism of light being good and dark being evil was the start of a myth which grew in complexity as Christians found it more and more necessary to explain and understand the relationship between God and man. The New Testament set up the more complex belief that all forms of disease and handicap were types of evil, and there are many instances in the Gospels where people were forgiven of their sins and then returned to full health.

In the middle ages Christian societies began to accept blind children as being God's wish and while disowned by parents, they were taken care of in monasteries or other religious houses.

However, Christianity was not the only religion to make this damning association with evil. Hindus who believe in reincarnation hold the view that a person born blind is being punished for their wrong doing in a previous existence. For this reason blind people are placed at the bottom of the caste system and, should they manage to lift themselves above this, it is but for the grace of God.

Totally blind people could not read or write, which meant education was not possible, therefore they relied completely on their memory, their concentration and ability to recall. The Argentinian poet Borges, who became blind in mid life, illustrates perfectly how blindness forced him to change his way of writing.

*"I can go on walking around the town, while I carry a sonnet in my head, polishing and altering as I go. You can't do that with a long piece of prose".<sup>1</sup>*



However, the independence gained by Borges and other writers and musicians such as Milton, Bach, Handel and visually impaired artists such as Rodin, Degas and Monet, was very much an exception to the rule. While cited as the great achievers among the blind and visually impaired, it must be remembered that their careers were established prior to their going blind. Consequently they had proved themselves as artists and so continued to benefit from their past. While their direction in many cases changed, their development was only interrupted while they made what were often very painful readjustments to the practical reality of living without sight. Most benefited from valuable patronage both financial and in terms of personal commitment. Milton's daughter for example took on the task of transcribing all of her father's thoughts, poetry and prose, subsequent to his going blind. This is probably the reason why the view that blindness led to a greater inner vision, an enlightenment not accessible to people with sight. This myth was often further contributed to by blind people themselves. Dr. Pierre Villey who was himself blind wrote:

*"There is more equilibrium and judgement with the gifted blind man than with the man who can see. This is not surprising for sight is the sense for amusement. The less one is disturbed thus, the less one's inner thoughts are interrupted by outward events, the more one is concentrated on oneself, the more time one takes to ripen one's reflections and to weigh the for-and-against of one's deliberations".<sup>1</sup>*

I think it is very important to question the motives of an opinion like Dr. Villey's. Is it an attempt to justify and find comfort for his blindness or a real attempt to assess the effect of blindness on his life? A group of Japanese school children at Kobe Municipal School for the Blind, on hearing a story of the inner peace a former world war two pilot enjoyed after going blind, responded by saying. "Sir, you're a professional blind man, aren't you?"<sup>2</sup>

It is not my wish to dismiss the achievements of these men, but to fit them into the context of a larger history.

In 1835 Louis Braille, a French man who lost his sight at the age of three, invented the now accepted and universally used form of script writing for the blind. Originally written from right to left and read from left to right it was a cumbersome process. The invention of the Perkins mechanical brailler in 1950, meant that blind people could take notes and gather information as quickly, if not quicker than most people could type. The invention of braille and subsequently a efficient braille machine are probably the most important factors in the history of blind people. For the first time they had access to written material that could be studied and built upon and commented on. This opening led to the development of a comprehensive education system for the blind, which in more recent times has been helped by further inventions such as the telephone, typewriter, talking books and the opticon (a device for reading print books), just to mention a few.



In Ireland, one can see how attitudes have changed in the last hundred and thirty four years. When the first institution for the blind was established in 1859 by the Carmelites in Glasnevin, Dublin, it was set up under the local poor law Union and called St. Joseph's Catholic Asylum for Industrious Male Blind. When the Institution moved to Drumcondra the name changed slightly, to St. Joseph's Asylum. In more recent times the name has developed along social thinking, St. Joseph's School for the Blind, Visually Handicapped Boys, Visually Impaired Boys and now just St. Joseph's. (St. Joseph's is now one of two primary and secondary schools for the blind in Ireland) However, it was only after 1971 that a secondary school education replaced apprenticeships in basket and mat making. Until this time young boys entered the school, continued to the workshops and often retired and lived out their lives in a home for the blind. They were not beggars, but in the majority of cases not integrated into society either.

It was at this point when a formal education became more widespread and important as society changed from being agrarian to urban, that the line between those who could see and those who had a visual impairment began to emerge. Prior to that the majority of people with visual impairments went unnoticed because they were able to live a relatively normal life and this probably explains why there are few references in history. Mansel Griffiths a painter who is registered blind and works in Glasgow, (see figure 1 for example of his work), suggests that he could lead a perfectly normal life if he lived in the age of the horse and cart, as visually life would not be as fast.<sup>4</sup>

Developments in modern medicine, in being able to restore sight and give solid and scientifically proven explanations for blindness, have played a very major part in the changing of the old beliefs regarding the causes and reasons for blindness. To generalise these reasons are; abnormalities from birth, disease and injury.

What has been common in most cultures throughout history is the sense of shame and helplessness parents to whom blind children were born felt.

*"Up until now I was ashamed that I had a blind child and would always look down at the ground". But when I realized that my child could also do this kind of skilled work, I became hopeful for her future".<sup>5</sup>*

This comment in many respects is timeless. Made by a Japanese woman after seeing her child's work at an exhibition, it raises a questions best expressed by Marcus Weisen, Arts Officer with the Royal National Institute for the Blind in London.

*"Why did we not expect them to be? Why are expectations so low? What is the extent of the damage that low expectations have done in education? How far would nascent talent develop? If only opportunities were there?"<sup>6</sup>*





Figure 1: Mansel Griffiths "Untitled"  
1.8 x 1.3m.



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This comment I think describes perfectly the result of all preconceived opinions of blindness and blind people. These popular beliefs were in their mildest form damaging, and in the extreme devastating to blind peoples' self confidence. After all the myths, folklore, ill-founded assumptions and lack of education for blind people, the one single factor that prevented and, in many instances still does prevent blind and visually impaired people from gaining an equal place in society, is their resulting lack of self confidence. Sue Blagden and John Everett point out how detrimental the resigned comment of an eye specialist might be.

*'Someone who has been told by an eye specialist "You cannot see", consequently does not see. It is possible for there to be sufficient residual vision to discriminate between shapes, colours and tones".*

If an eye specialist is to take the view that there is nothing he can do for a patient's sight and does not explain how they can maximise the use of the little sight they have, then I believe that specialist has failed as a member of the caring profession in providing a way forward for that person.

Mansel Griffith illustrates what life was like for him as a child, not knowing he had a serious eye problem.

*"I didn't even know there was really anything seriously wrong with my eye sight until I was about seventeen or eighteen. I had been told until that point that I had "bad eyes". So what big deal. I carried on as a normal child would, riding bicycles, falling down holes and jumping off garden sheds".*

Then he goes on to describe in a very blunt way how his view of leading a normal and anonymous life was totally changed when he was registered blind. (The term **registered blind/legally blind** describes the eye sight level of a person as less than 6/60 in the better eye and or a field vision of less than twenty percent.

*"I was told I was registered blind, which totally did my fucking head in. That was it, I was an "insurance risk" from then on. My chosen trade was completely up the spout, so I did just basically sod all for about a year. Then I was hauled in by the bloody Social Work Department and told the only way I'd ever get employment was through a training centre for visually impaired adolescents in Hethersett in Surrey. Christ, it wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced in life before".*

The implications of being registered blind can be enormous. In my view it marks the point between fading naivety and growing up. "Insurance risk" is in fact a product of present day problems of spiralling insurance costs. In some cases this has narrowed the further openings for blind and visually impaired people. So in many instances the irrational opinion "you can't do it because you're blind", has been replaced by the hard reality "perhaps you could but no insurance will cover you". This is a very serious issue that needs to be tackled by government.



In individual cases I honestly believe it would be possible to provide some type of supplement to high risk insurance to bridge the gap.

Situations like this often force blind and visually impaired people to choose from the tried traditional areas of employment, there is nothing wrong with these but they are limited as Mansel Griffith discovered.

*"I applied to get into the Royal National College for the Blind. I went there, I found the only chance I had for employment was either to be; a piano tuner, a physiotherapist or to do some sort of office work".<sup>10</sup>*

Fortunately with the higher levels of education being acquired by blind and visually impaired people these limited options are beginning to change. Jonathan Huxley, another painter who is registered blind, holds that hard work and the addition of a little arrogance was what helped in his getting into and graduating from the Royal Academy London.<sup>11</sup> This arrogance, I think really refers to the development of self esteem.

*"I dislike the word disabled. It focuses on what you can't do. I prefer to focus my life on what I can do. Otherwise you come to a very black place. I went there. It was very frightening. You have to focus on your abilities".<sup>12</sup>*

In this very selective look at opinions of blind and visually impaired people and their defective vision, what I believe becomes very clear is the importance played by the opinions of society and more significantly how these opinions can influence the self confidence of the blind or visually impaired person themselves. What type of person does it create and encourage?

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## CHAPTER TWO RELATING TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Eight out of every ten people who are registered blind have some level of sight.<sup>1</sup> Consequently the way each person in this category relates to the environment they live in, will be individual to their situation and eye condition. Having said that, there is a dividing line between those who are totally blind, and those who have some level of sight, however limited that might be. In this chapter I will discuss how visually impaired and totally blind people relate to the environment they live in, by taking specific examples of how they use their other senses to build up a perception of the world and how this translates into examples of painting and sculpture. However, I would like to begin by first just looking at how I relate to my own environment.

### *Visual Impairment*

The medical profession describes my sight as; left eye 6/60 and right eye 4/60 with field vision not greater than twenty percent. This means that I am "registered blind". For me this level of sight is normal, in so far as it is the only sight I have known. My vision is impaired by two conditions, bilateral congenital cataracts which resulted in permanent scarring and nystagmus, an eye condition that means my eyes are always trying to focus correctly but are unable to. Both of these conditions are stable and, through developing the use of my eyes over my life time, I can expect a marginal improvement. However, in clinical terms this will be hardly noticeable.

When people talk to me about my eye sight they nearly always assume that what I see is very similar to the depth of field in a photograph. For example, a clear foreground and out of focus background. (See figure 2.) In fact the image is much more subtle. From my experience I would describe my sight as an image with a lot of the finer detail missing both at near and far distance.

Wearing glasses, from a very early age I grew up with two separate images of my environment, the one I could see through the magnification in my glasses and a smaller but no less clear image I could see at the sides, using my peripheral vision. These images never merge, neither is my sight bi-focal in the strictest sense. Consequently when I got contact lenses at the age of twenty one I was able to enjoy a real three dimensional experience for the first time.

Probably the greatest difficulty that my visual impairment creates is that I can very seldom recognise people by their facial features, and so must rely on more general indicators such as their voices, colour of clothes, height and hair style.

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The first of these is the fact that the library is a public institution, and as such it is open to all. This is a very important feature, and it is one which is not always appreciated. The library is a place where everyone can go to find books, and it is a place where everyone can go to borrow books. This is a very important feature, and it is one which is not always appreciated. The library is a place where everyone can go to find books, and it is a place where everyone can go to borrow books. This is a very important feature, and it is one which is not always appreciated.

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Figure 2: How people think I see.







It is not that I can't actually see them; I can, but it can take some time to collect this information into a set of distinctive features. I enjoy doing portraits (see figure 3) but would most probably not recognise that person on the street if they did not say hello. However, I have found that my reliance on colour means that my choosing of colours and matching is exceptionally fine. My other senses such as sound which I have already touched upon, is very important not only for recognising peoples' voices but also for judging the distance of on coming traffic crossing roads and like most people I do break red lights but only if it looks and sounds alright. My sight has changed very little from when I was a child; the way I use it and my visual awareness has changed dramatically, so in practical terms I see much more. This relates primarily to understanding my sight better and a higher level of self confidence.

I think the examples I have given of my own visual impairment go a long way to illustrate the subtlety of visual impairment. The effects are determined not only by the eye condition or combination of conditions, but also by the person's out look on life and the type of experiences they have been exposed to. An inquiring mind and visual or sensory stimulation, while clinically not improving the person's eye sight, might in fact create a better awareness and understanding of their surroundings. What this fact underlines is that a categorisation of eye conditions, while important, is not the answer, but an all-round understanding of the individual is what is really needed.

A resulting eye condition or combination of conditions may mean that a person can distinguish the difference between light and dark and colours and tones, while another might depend on specific lighting conditions and another have a very narrow field of vision which will allow them to see detail but not to have an overall view of their environment. These conditions might be stable, degenerate over time, or vary from day to day. The extent to which a visually impaired person may depend on their other senses of touch, sound, smell and taste to understand their environment is governed by their desire to fill in visual blanks, my own example being a case in point.

However, with the limited sight they have, visually impaired people often have a keen eye for what they can see. This was very much impressed upon me in a conversation I had with Liam Belton of St. Joseph's School for Visually Impaired Boys in Drumcondra Dublin, where he is a ceramics teacher.<sup>2</sup> He holds the view that people with poor vision are better at picking out the important features in a scene or object because fully sighted people often take for granted what they see. This point can be best illustrated by the work of visually impaired students at the School for the Blind of Northern Greece, who are encouraged to mix their own paints using vinyl glue, powdered pigments and water. (See figure 4, 5 and 6)





Figure 3: I enjoy doing portraits but have difficulty recognising people.







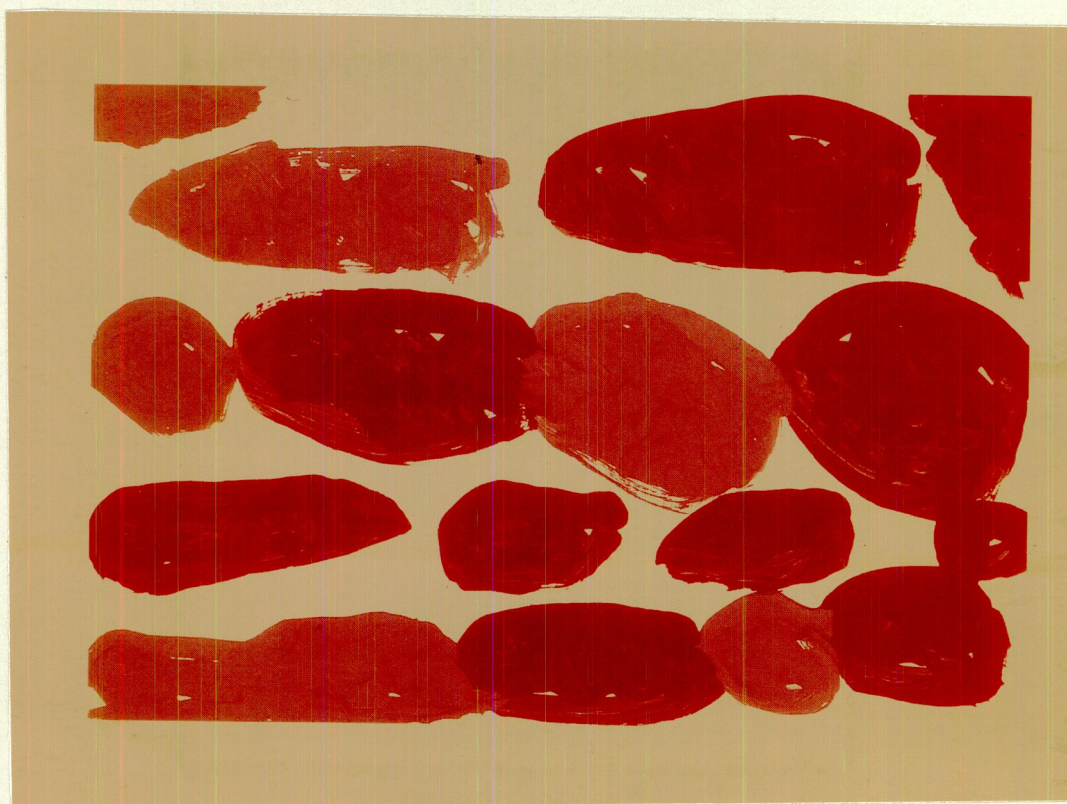


Figure 4: Stelios Ioannidis, "Composition",  
1988, 35 x 50cm.









Figure 5: Vasilis Dimitriads, "Oasis",  
1986, 50 x 70cm.



Figure 6: Theodorodora Siopka, "In The Museum",  
1989, 92 x 172.



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Art can play a very important part in helping a person with poor vision to maximize their sight, even if that sight is limited. This, in turn, can help them to understand how they actually see, which may help them explain their situation to other people. One very fine example of this is the work of Jeanette, an eighteen year old student at the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford. Jeanette has no sight in one eye and very little in the other. Growing up, Jeanette accepted that she was blind and so made very little use of the sight she had. Consequently, it was only when she went to study at the college that she discovered drawing through the art department, and began to learn about the potential for maximizing her sight.

Drawing from observation, and building up the forms from dark to light, Jeanette learned that what she could see was very dependent on light conditions and as a result was constantly changing. In a drawing of objects on a window sill with the background being the view of grass and buildings outside, Jeanette shows that she does indeed have sight and can use it to create an image of the world she sees. (See figure 7.)

On looking at this picture I first see the haziness, but almost immediately my attention is taken from this to the subtlety and harmony of the colours used. This, in my opinion, illustrates the great sensitivity with which Jeanette draws. For people with reduced vision like Jeanette the process of discriminating fine details is automatically taken care of by defective vision, allowing her to concentrate on a complete harmony which I personally find very attractive. Instances like this not only show the value of the discriminating eye in art, but also illustrate forcefully that visually impaired people, can and should be encouraged to, participate in art at all levels.

Having completed this drawing, Jeanette stood with her teacher to discuss her work, and suddenly the sun reemerged from behind the clouds. Her reaction was, "What's that, where did it come from"? The sun had highlighted a white drainpipe which Jeanette had not been able to see in the subdued light of the brick wall, and she could not make sense of where it had come from. Whereas no one had tried to help Jeanette previously understand how her own sight worked, she had a theoretical knowledge of perspective. It does, I think, indicate how much people underestimate the visual abilities of those with poor sight and also how little belief many of these people have in themselves because of the low expectations of others.

Solving all the visual misunderstandings may take a life time, not only to grasp, but to sufficiently understand, so that Jeanette can explain to other people how she actually sees the world. As well as illustrating the individual way in which Jeanette sees, it also shows the importance of having the opportunity for every visually impaired person to understand the way their own sight works



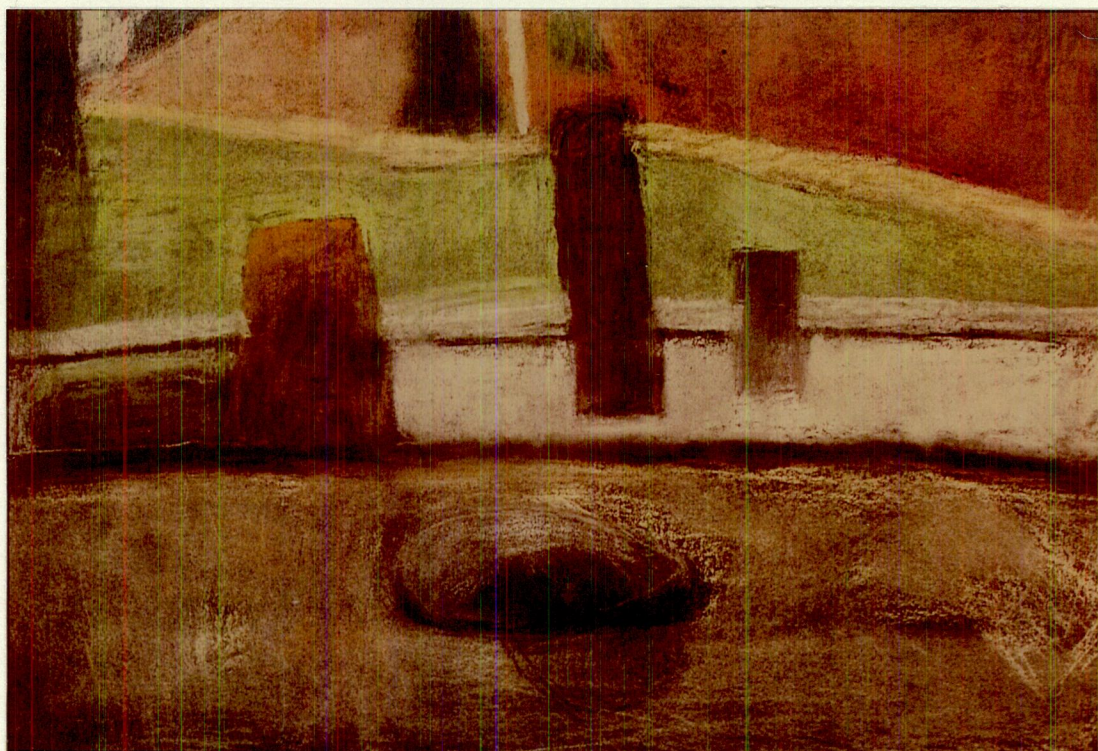


Figure 7: Jeanette, "Drawing of objects on a Window sill.  
The Royal National College for the Blind, Hereford.



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## Blindness

The terms of reference of the blind person fall into two distinctly different categories. The person who lost their sight and so carries a set of fading visual references, and those who are born blind and so develop their own way of interpreting a world that is completely non-visual.

Many people who lose their sight through disease or unstable eye conditions as opposed to accidents in early or mid life, find it deteriorating gradually and so go through a period of time when their set of visual references is continuously changing and consequently, it is often difficult for them to evaluate the different stages of this deterioration. In such cases the change is not as traumatic as when sight is lost suddenly. While a firm set of visual references will have been established prior to the onset of deteriorating sight, over time this visual memory begins to fade and becomes fragmented.

The relief panel of Lindsey who is seventeen years of age (See figure 8.) and a student at the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford illustrates how, by placing familiar visual references together, it is possible for her to depict in a recognisable way what she could previously see. However, she must work in tactile blocks and can no longer consider the whole composition, as it is bigger than the span of her finger tips. Blagden and Everett refer to this as the "episodic" way of working.<sup>4</sup>

The comparison of a blind person as someone living in darkness is in many respects appropriate when talking about someone who has lost their sight. However, in the case of a person totally blind from birth this is in fact not so, simply because light does not exist. Yohei Nishimura a teacher at Chiba School for the Blind in Japan, illustrates in a very simple way how the blind person perceives the world he lives in, in a piece titled "The Infinity of Seventeen Centimetres".

*"Visually impaired children make up their visual objects through various experiences and understanding... Some of them float down a flight of stairs with seventeen centimetre risers as though there were only one stair. Ones who can see depend on vision and ones who can't see depend on their experience and understanding that each step is seventeen centimetres in height. Both of them go down the step according to their life style".<sup>5</sup>*

While this is in part true, the way and accuracy with which a blind person can build up an understanding of the environment they are in is slightly more complex than this.

Besides the sense of sight, every person is equipped with a sense of smell, taste, touch and hearing. While we all have these senses, the use we make of them is very much dependent on the quality of our sight.





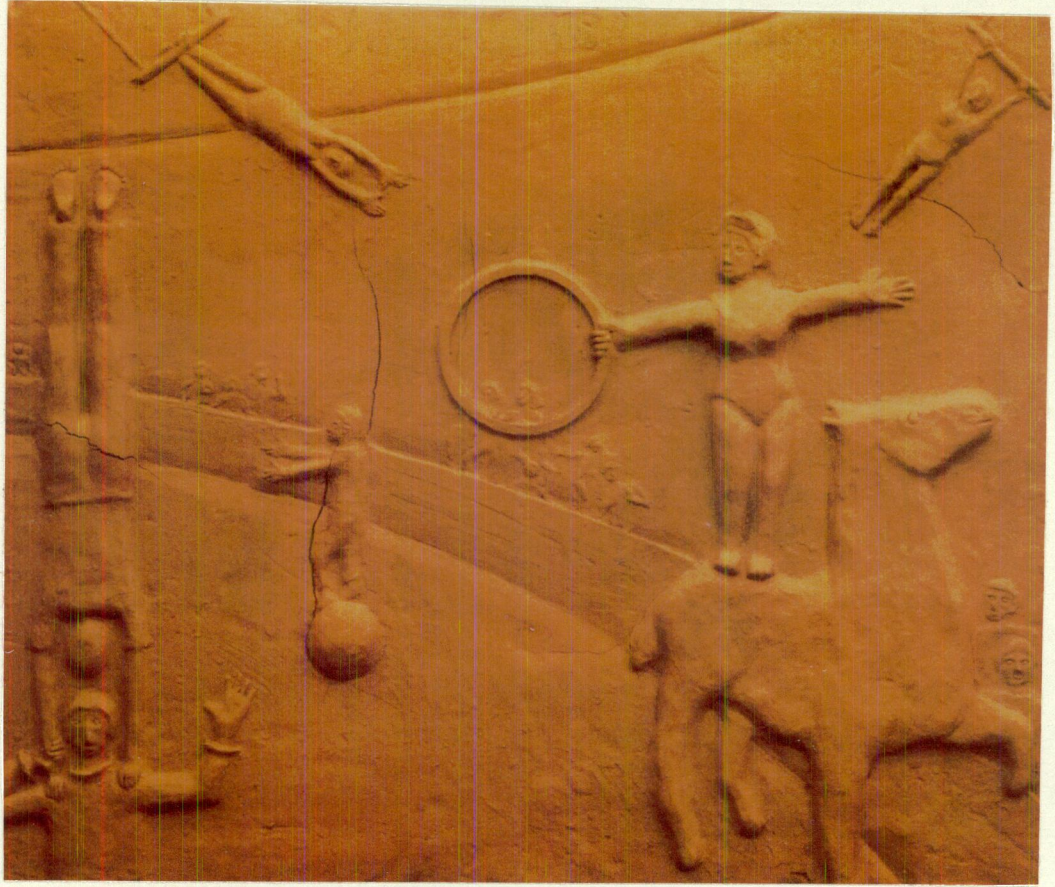


Figure 8: Lindsey, "Relief Panel",  
The Royal National College for the Blind.



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Unlike other senses, sight is the one that allows us to gain the greatest overview of any situation, be it as big as a house or as small as a tea cup. For the totally blind person this option does not exist.

The combining of these senses by the blind person allows them to collect pieces of information to conceive an image of a whole object, very similar to the "episodic" nature of Lindsey's relief panel. (See figure 8.) However, this can only be done in stages and so can never produce a instantaneous image.

These other senses of taste, smell, sound and touch all reveal different qualities and aspects of the environment we live in. It would appear that the least important of these senses for the blind person is taste, as I have been unable to find any examples of where it plays a more significant role in the lives of blind people, then those of fully sighted people. Smell is slightly more important. As well as being useful for recognising the obvious things like foods and flowers etc, it is more cleverly employed by some blind people to recognise family and friends. I remember asking a totally blind friend of mine at school. "How do you always recognise me when I pass you by". His answer was. "I smell you". He then went on to remind me that I had been using the same soap for the last month and he had become familiar with it. It was very interesting, therefore, to note art teacher Shiro Fukuria's story of a young child at his school, who brought his mother's handkerchief with him to remind himself of her smell.

The idea that blind people have super-sensitive hearing and touch is still today a common held belief, but most blind people and those who know them would say that these super-sensitive qualities are no more than making maximum use of their senses. Sue Blagden and John Everett, in looking at popular myths about blind and visually impaired people, say.

*"A blind person's senses are no more acute than anyone else's but they can learn to pay careful attention to what their ears and body surfaces can tell them about their surroundings".<sup>6</sup>*

Having said that, hearing does assume a special importance for totally blind people, as many of them use variations in relationships between sounds, which subtly continue to change as they move about in an environment, for example, in a house or walking along a foot path.

*"With his new shoes soaking wet, Tokio came into the room complaining. The wind blew so strongly I couldn't find my way to school. My sense of intuition didn't work and I fell into a ditch".<sup>7</sup>*

To many it may seem a little fanciful to suggest that blind people can use sounds to establish where they are and where they wish to go. I think the best way to explain this is to consider a situation where a sighted person is often short of visual information.



Most people would be familiar with the principle of testing an oil tank, gas cylinder or similar type container, by tapping your hand along the side to establish the level inside. In this same way a blind person by listening carefully to all the sounds around him or her, can work out the distance between themselves and a nearby road or between themselves and another person.

Hearing also serves another very important purpose for all blind and many visually impaired people, as it is their way of identifying family members and friends, by the distinctive qualities in their voices. I personally use my knowledge of a person's way of dressing (these features are much larger than facial features) and the sound of their voice to identify most of my friends.

Touch is by far the most important sense for a blind person, in terms of gathering information to construct an understanding of the solidity of their environment. This is very well represented by a student of Fukurai's who depicts getting onto the school bus as, the steps, the handrail and the floor. (See figure 9.)

In using touch as a terms of reference, there are only two natural ways of assessing an object. The first is with the whole body and the second by the tips of the fingers.

Taking your own body as a measure, it is only possible to assess anything relative to your own height, arm or leg span. In practical terms this means that it is very difficult for a totally blind person to conceive space and volume greater than themselves. For this reason Nishimura encourages his students to make pieces in clay with their whole body. (see figure 10.)

Consequently it is also difficult for the totally blind to perceive how individual features relate to the whole of an object and how that object relates to the greater environment. For example, blind people have a tendency to flatten the features of an object or persons body onto separate planes, and over emphasise those of most importance. This is very clearly illustrated by the work of a student at the School for the Blind of Northern Greece, Polycarpus Hadzipavlidis. (See figure 11.)

The only object, therefore that can be completely understood by the blind person is one which comfortably fits into the hand. For the blind person, the opportunity to go up close enough, or being able to touch an object because of its size, may in many cases prevent them from ever understanding certain objects except for some individual features. This story, told in Shiro Fukurai, demonstrates very well how the judgement of a blind person often cannot relate a small feature as a part of a larger object:

*"Has any one ever used a saw before? One blind student had. Once I sawed some wood at home. While I was doing it my older brother came running up to me yelling Hey, stop, stop it! Now your cutting a corner pole of the house. What if it falls down?" "Oh, darn, it would have been funny if it had!" grinned another blind child mischievously".<sup>8</sup>*







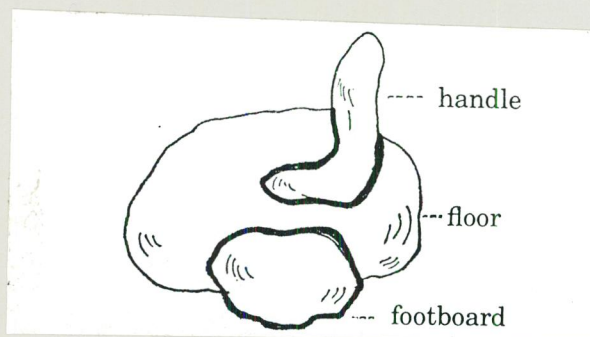


Figure 9: Sixth Grade Girl, "The School Bus".  
A clay model.









Figure 10: Student making with whole of his body.  
Chiba School for the Blind.









Figure 11: Polycarpus Hadzipavlidis, "Woman", 1990, 86cm, School for the Blind of Northern Greece.



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theoretical aspects of the problem.



So far in examining the four other senses which a totally blind person is completely reliant on, or a visually impaired person may use in part, to understand their environment and translate that into art, I have perhaps created the impression that these senses work individually of each other in specific situations. This is in fact not true, as some if not all of these senses of touch, sound, smell and taste combine to produce a mental image of the environment. While this can not replace or substitute for a visual understanding of the world, it is nonetheless an environment full of as much interest and mystery, with the possibilities for investigating and extending the imagination, but just in a different way.

Dreams are probably the best way to show how these four senses without sight come together to form and recall images from a totally blind person's experience. Fukurai was told by one of his students. "Teacher, our dreams are like radios". Pondering this comment he makes the following observations.

*"Blind people have dreams based primarily on words, sounds and textures. I have heard them describe dreams about forgetting schoolbags, fires, worms, getting lost, getting run over by cars and deceased parents. Particularly unusual was a dream one child remembered in which he felt the roughness of a scrubbing brush".*

In examining how visually impaired and totally blind people relate to their environment and how this understanding translates into painting and sculpture, I think it has become very clear that their environment is no less tangible than that of the fully sighted person. For me the most important point is to open yourself as an observer and that every one with a visual impairment or who is totally blind, has because of their condition and individual experience an almost unique way of seeing.



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**CHAPTER TWO**

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## CHAPTER THREE

### ART DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN

Art can mean very many different things. My Oxford Paper Back Dictionary describes it as, "The production of something beautiful... Works such as paintings and sculptures produced by skill". I doubt there is one person who would agree that this is an adequate description of what art is. I suppose what this description lacks is a definition of the human factor. When you introduce this human factor art begins to live for you, regardless of whether you are a student of art, an artist/designer or a spectator. In this chapter I would like to discuss aspects of how the painting and sculpture of the visually impaired and totally blind has actually come about and how it can be further promoted.

#### *Why Do The Visually Impaired And Blind Need Art?*

Blagden and Everett put forward the opinion that totally blind and visually impaired people are denied an opportunity for "casual visual learning".<sup>1</sup> This learning process is something a fully sighted person almost takes for granted, but only after they have acquired the ability to assimilate details at a glance as children. For many visually impaired and all totally blind children they must learn to use a combination of touch, sound, smell and taste to actually name and code objects.

If art for the fully sighted is a way of using their eyes to see better as well as to create and extend their imagination, does it not then have the same possibilities for visually impaired and totally blind people to develop their way of seeing with their four remaining senses, thus allowing them the opportunity to appreciate and understand their environment and art better and also creatively commenting on it?

The recognition of and opportunity for art by visually impaired and blind people is a very new development. So much is this the case that the greatest instances of where it occurs is in schools and institutions for the blind. In global and continental terms this is a disjointed and sporadic picture of projects, all following ideas and aspirations, which are overseen by dedicated artists and art teachers often working in isolation. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, in many countries art by visually impaired and blind people has yet to be established in teaching practice or, in others, is still in its infancy. For this reason many schools are going through the experimental period of finding a solid ground, some are also trying to shake off the tag of recreational areas, therapeutic or occupational departments rather than places of growing awareness and expression.



ART. 10. - THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE TO KNOW  
AND TO BE INFORMED

It is the right of the people to know and to be informed of the actions of their government and of the actions of their representatives. This right is a fundamental part of the democratic process and is essential to the proper functioning of the government. The government has a duty to provide the people with the information they need to make informed decisions about the actions of their government and about the actions of their representatives. This duty is a part of the government's responsibility to the people and is a part of the government's obligation to provide the people with the information they need to make informed decisions about the actions of their government and about the actions of their representatives.

ART. 11. - THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE GOVERNMENT

It is the right of the people to participate in the government and to be heard by their representatives. This right is a fundamental part of the democratic process and is essential to the proper functioning of the government. The government has a duty to provide the people with the opportunity to participate in the government and to be heard by their representatives. This duty is a part of the government's responsibility to the people and is a part of the government's obligation to provide the people with the opportunity to participate in the government and to be heard by their representatives.

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Secondly, visually impaired and totally blind people make up a small percentage of the population of any country, so the opportunity to spread and be exposed to new ideas nationally is reduced. Consequently these ideas don't often have the strength to make an impact internationally. The exception to this rule is Japan, which today has seventy schools for the blind where art is a standard part of the curriculum. In this instance there is a history of teaching art to the visually impaired and blind which goes back over forty three years. This concentration of schools in one country has allowed for the exchange of ideas, and has set in place a healthy competitiveness.

I touched earlier on the fact that many schools for the visually impaired and blind who are developing a way of art teaching, are finding it difficult to differentiate between art and therapy. One example of this is, that after three years of teaching painting and sculpture in various mediums such as clay, plaster, wood, resin and polystyrene at the School for the Blind of Northern Greece, Richard Whitlock found in a revision of school policy "that art is to be taught not in the sense of fine art but as occupational therapy".<sup>1</sup> For me this issue is of fundamental importance. I would agree that the teaching of art has a therapeutic role in assisting visually impaired and totally blind people to understand their environment better and to bridge the gap in appreciation between them and fully sighted people. However, I find the view "that art is an occupational therapy" narrow, as it turns the work of the students into a product, rather than looking at the message behind the object. In many European countries there has been a tendency in the past to have blind and visually impaired people make baskets and mats in schools and workshops for example, to provide them with secure employment. While there is financial value in teaching someone how to produce albeit short term, if that person never learns to create the product, how can they ever love or truly identify with what they make? It also assumes that the development of skills is more important than the cultivation of an active and creative personality.

If art is to concentrate on giving visually impaired and blind people the ability to understand the world they live in better and assess it creatively and I believe it should, then a wide range of opportunities needs to be built up, on both a national and international level. This involves the promotion of teaching, not just in the classroom but also in galleries, museums and the greater environment. To show how this can be achieved I would like to look at some specific examples.

### *The Palata Garden Project*

The Palata Garden of touch, sound and smell sets out to give blind and visually impaired people an opportunity to enjoy and appreciate elements of diverse natural landscape. Located on a seven acre site adjoining the Palata Nursing home, in central Prague, it is now in the final planning stage.



The project is being designed by Drahoslav Sonsky a Czech architect who is well known and respected within the country. The high profile that the project has been given by the involvement of national figures can only help create a better awareness of the possibilities that exist, for encouraging people either in a novel self discovering way or, by necessity, to extend the use of their senses beyond their visual one.

This ambitious design is created in an unassuming way in that it provides suitable leisure space, areas for mobility training and facilities for outdoor concerts. In a growing city the size of Prague, that can only be a welcome to all that will, in itself, help break down barriers.

What I find really exciting about this garden is the fact that it is open to all the citizens of Prague, but designed primarily with the needs of the blind and visually impaired in mind.

There are a number of clever devices used to make the garden accessible to blind people who choose to visit by themselves. To assist them, there are a number of tactile guides at different points which outline the features of the garden relative to the surroundings. The paths of sand, cobble and tarmac are lined with flower beds on either side which form corridors that connect the different thematic areas. This makes it very easy for a blind person with a mobility cane to keep to the paths and also provides opportunities for him or her to observe plants while moving between the different areas.

There are specific zones or areas within the garden with individual themes. A garden of sounds, smells, and shapes, as well as a water source, a spring garden, a sheltered resting place, a leisure-time field, a flower parterre and a music terrace. Features in these zones will include suitable flowers, shrubs and trees, as well as a sculpture that creates natural melodic sounds, canopies of light vegetation for shelter, a cascading water fall, mountain and sea scapes.

One of the design features that impressed me most was the plan to use raised flower beds and place them in the centre of some of the zones in the garden, so that blind people who were wheel chair users could fully appreciate the vegetation.

The designer of this garden Drahoslav Sonsky, in my opinion, has made maximum use of the fact that his primary audience, the blind and visually impaired, do not require the large amount of space that is normally used as a device to make a garden more aesthetically pleasing to a fully sighted person. Consequently he has been able to fit the dynamics of the natural landscape into a small area of just seven acres in a city. In visual terms I think very many people may find it a confined space, but in terms of touch, smell and sound this information is contained in small areas which allows the visitor to collect perceptual information with his or her hands but also with the whole body.



My one wish is that, when the Palata Garden is opened, it will be promoted as a place where all people could go to experience nature, using their other senses as well as sight, so that it can be a resource from which the whole city of Prague can benefit from.

### *Teaching Art To The Visually Impaired And Blind In Japan*

As I have already said, the Japanese way of teaching art to the visually impaired and totally blind is at a much more advanced stage than any other country in the world. While before the war art teaching for the blind was confined to handicrafts, very much as a form of occupational therapy, today it enjoys a growing awareness in society in which art by the visually impaired and blind is not just possible, but is becoming more and more accepted as a form that can contribute to the growth of mainstream art.

Its History goes back to 1950 and a thirty year old unemployed newspaper art designer Shiro Fukurai who was asked to teach art to students at Kobe Municipal School for the Blind. On offering him the job the principal, Mr. Hideo Imai suggested.

*"Mothers become mothers after they give birth to their children... Nobody knows beforehand how to bring them up. Babies teach their mothers what they need to know".<sup>3</sup>*

Imai's view of how art could be taught to blind and visually impaired students was in fact the catalyst which today means that art is an integral part of the curriculum of the seventy or so schools for the blind in Japan. The universal message of the Japanese approach is one of the teacher learning from the students what their world is like and, while he or she can share in this experience, they can never fully understand it. The job of the art teacher, therefore, is to encourage the children to explore their environment and understand themselves better. Yohei Nishimura describes it as teaching the children to have "the heart to see".<sup>4</sup>

When Shiro Fukurai began teaching at Kobe in 1950 he was the very first person to try teaching art to the blind, most probably in the world, but certainly in Japan. The school catered for students from elementary through to junior high school. The most successful material he found for teaching art was clay. However, many of the children could not remember what they had made and the results were the same from the youngest to the eldest classes. Those students who made pieces, used them to poke fun at their new teacher. One student made a box with a hole in it, it was a pit for his teacher to fall into. What this indicated, was the fact that the students had no knowledge of how to express their tactile and emotional experiences. They also had great difficulty in appreciating why they needed art.







After the first year students began to adapt to the clay and make things they were familiar with such as food, radios and flutes. However, these pieces were composed of balls, flat slabs and sticks of clay, their proportions were exaggerated in the features they knew best, and parts of the objects bore no resemblance to the whole. The pieces did have some redeeming features in that the children could recreate texture and had the ability to imagine.

In 1953 a totally blind student won the Japan UNESCO prize for art, for a horse he made in clay, which he modelled from his memory of a toy horse he had when he was a small child. This prize signalled a turning point in the teaching of art to totally blind and visually impaired in Japan, as it instilled a great deal of self confidence and self worth in the children. It also made other schools in Japan aware of what the blind and visually impaired could do. Fukurai learned that this confidence was best maintained by entering the work of his students into competitions on a yearly basis, such as the Nikaten Art Exhibition for the schools of western Japan, with children from mainstream education.

Fukurai introduced periods of singing and dancing to teach his students how to move their fingers more dynamically, he also exposed them to a wide range of objects so that they could learn to understand their different parts and then the complete object. (Such as the bones and muscles and then the body.) By listening to the children he tried to work with them on specific themes which were directly relevant to their lives. He also encouraged the children to stand up when they were working and do breathing exercises to concentrate.

The staging of an exhibition of students' work from the School in 1957 in Kobe titled Exhibition of Lightless Sculpture, exposed the general public to the art of the blind in a major way for the first time. This water shed exhibition was so well received by the critics that it toured most of the major cities in Japan for a full year, but more importantly created a greater acceptance of their work and paved the way for art education in all schools for the blind in the country.

Of all the work that was done by students at the school under the direction of Fukurai, was a piece by a student called Kiyoshi Mizobata I Want Eyes, (see figure 12.)

While not all of these ways of teaching are still continued in Japanese art classes in schools for the blind, they do explain the foundation for the fundamentals of art education for the totally blind and visually impaired in Japan, of encouraging the child to make maximum use of their sense of touch, to understand their environment and to gain an understanding of themselves.

I think the purpose of art in all the schools for the visually impaired in Japan is best described by the aspiration of Yumiko Kubota an art teacher at Ehime Prefectural Matsuyama School for the Blind.









Figure 12: Kiyoshi Nizabata, "I Want Eyes",  
Kobe Municipal School for the Blind.



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*"We should make every effort to develop their abilities because all the students, whether they are visually impaired or not, have strong desires to express themselves as humans".*

### *The Tom Gallery of Touch-me Art*

The Tom Gallery of Touch-me Art was opened on the 3rd of April 1984 and designed by the Japanese architect Hiroshi Naito . In part its purpose was to preserve the work of the students of Fukurai from 1950-1974. However it was the first gallery of its kind in the world to totally dedicate itself to the holding of four tactile exhibitions each year. The gallery's motto aptly describes its aim. "We the blind, we too have the right to enjoy Rodin".

The name Tom Gallery of Touch-me Art and its motto 'We the blind we too have the right to enjoy Rodin, are in themselves two very unique and demanding phrases, about how we do and can appreciate art.

The first, Touch-me Art very accurately describes what the gallery is about. Giving people the chance to handle, and come to understand through the sense of touch, each exhibit. However, this opportunity is not just given to visually impaired and blind visitors but open to all. The gallery guide invites everyone to recall their "sense of touch" and reconsider the meaning of "to see with hands". The belief being that not only blind people will benefit by their coming to experience art through touch, but also that new directions may be found for exploring different approaches to artistic expression in the future. This point relates firmly to the view, that the building of a perception of the world we live is primarily established through the use of vision complemented by our other senses. The visitor is not being asked to discover a use for a secondary sense, but being challenged to rediscover, an awareness of touch made almost redundant by our modern way of life, totally reliant on the gathering of information in the quickest way possible, sight. In this hands-on approach the gallery places only two practical restrictions on the visitor. They must remove watches, bracelets and rings and wash their hands before they begin to observe the exhibits.

The second, "we the blind we too have the right to enjoy Rodin". was not a motto coined by the gallery owners, artists or critics, but an appeal by a Japanese school boy who wanted to have the freedom to appreciate sculpture in galleries and museums, which without exception display the sign "DO NOT TOUCH". Asserting the demand that blind people have a fundamental right to be allowed to touch works, and placing pressure on institutions to change their policies, the Tom Gallery then set itself up as a forum for providing visually impaired and blind people with the opportunity to participate in the appreciation and criticism of art, as well as evolving a language true to their own terms of reference, a real and living touch aesthetic.









Figure 13: Handelling the work of Aranaldo Pomodoro  
at "Balls For Meditation", 1988, Paris and Tokyo.



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The work featured in the shows at the gallery is mostly by contemporary Japanese and internationally recognised artists, who work to a gallery brief in the case of group shows, or whos' work is of a tactile quality in the case of one man exhibitions. The gallery also has its own growing permanent collection, including works by Auguste Rodin, Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti. In the future it is hoped to extend the scope of the Tom Gallery into other areas of the arts, such as drama, dance and music. There is a special interest in promoting what they term "creative music education", by holding seminars and concerts given by European musicians and composers.

Since its opening in 1984 the Tom Gallery has featured many different innovative exhibitions. One of these was "Balls For Meditation" organised in conjunction with the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

This group show involving nine contemporary artists (see list in Appendix 1) was given the brief of exploring the spherical form. Visitors were encouraged to experience the pieces totally through touch, some taking this invitation literally, hugging, caressing and embracing individual pieces. There were a number of features which led the visitor to this show onto new ground. Firstly, it was a tactile exhibition and while more common than they were, they are still a special event. (See figure 13.) Secondly, it was an exhibition with a very strict brief, the spherical form, thus giving the visitor a structured set of references with which to compare each piece, and the tactile experiences gained from each one. In the French version of "Balls For Meditation" there was a third distinguishing feature about the exhibition, the provision of a taped commentary by each artist to accompany their work. These commentaries were based on answers given to questions by blind and blindfolded children. Such taped commentaries allow blind and visually impaired people the opportunity to visit and examine exhibits independently.

As well as promoting art appreciation and access to museums for the blind and visually impaired., the Tom Gallery is also encouraging the continued growth and development of art education. This they do through the Tom Prize established in 1986; a biannual nation wide art competition open to all seventy schools and institutions for the visually impaired and blind in Japan.

In 1992 thirty five pieces from twenty two different schools were selected for exhibition at the gallery. The initial selection was made by assessing photographs and then by the vote of a five member panel. The theme for the competition was "birds". This brief was treated in two very different ways by the children. (See figures 14-20.)

The first was the breaking down of the birds' distinctive features into a series of touchable images. When the totally blind artist constructs in this way, he often makes features in order of importance and independent of each other,



arriving at the finished piece through putting together a series of separate impressions. An example of this, is a piece by Kouki Sakata, aged fourteen made in clay. (see figure 14.) We can see clearly that there is a certain lack of unity between the distinctively rendered features, beak to head, feathers to body. the space between the raised feathers on the back and those on the body. However, this is very much compensated for, by the fact that even through a photograph Kouki's bird has a very exciting tactile quality.

The second was the perception of flight, the motion or wish to fly. Here the artist is again drawing from his own experience but in a different way. This time the image is based more on internal feelings and emotions rather than a solid three dimensional reality. The blind child, or in this case the visually impaired child, might actually imagine what it feels like to fly. An example of this is a piece in clay by Keichu Taira aged thirty three. (See figure 16.) The first thing you notice is that the image is much more abstract than the first. There is a minimum of texture with large smooth flowing areas. In certain sections the clay appears to be paper thin. What I like about most of the pieces, is that the glazing is applied sympathetically to the tactile way they were conceived.

I must say that I feel totally inadequate in describing these pieces in visual terms, not only because they are made by touch but more significantly, because I can not touch them to describe them, I really have great difficulty converting what I see into a tactile description. In fact I think it is impossible.

There are a number of points I would like to stress in concluding this final chapter. Firstly I feel it is very important to recognise the importance of the teacher in promoting art among the visually impaired and totally blind, and how much more important art teaching is for some one who is not exposed to a limited casual intake of visual information. This in turn, emphasises the need for an open policy where the teachers' ability to take art beyond occupational therapy and onto creative platform for expressing the way a student relates to the environment is acknowledged. In the selective examples I have shown, I think it is very clear that this job of the teacher is supplemented by encouraging opportunities for the visually impaired and blind to experience for themselves, aspects of the environment as well as art. For the fully sighted teacher and observer of art by visually impaired and blind people, it stresses the importance of not trying to totally evaluate in visual terms, that which was conceived by touch, but to rise to the occasion and regain or reawaken the use of the forgotten senses.









Figure 14: Kouki Sakata, "Birds 11",  
blind, 14 years old, 44 x 28 x 25cm,  
Hachioji School for the Blind.









Figure 15: Hiroshi Yorishita, "Birds 11",  
blind 16 years, 26 x 50 x 30cm,  
Kyoto School for the Blind.









Figure 16: Keichu Taira, "Birds 11",  
visually impaired, 33 years, 60 x 50 x 45cm.  
Okinawa School for the Blind,



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Figure 17: Yoshihisa Yokoyama, "Birds 11",  
blind 14 years, 35 x 35 x 25cm,  
Kagoshima School for the Blind.









Figure 18: Nobuhiko Tsuchiya, "Birds 11",  
blind 19 years, 55 x 52 x 27cm,  
Shinseien.









Figure 19: Fuyoko Ohtsuka, "Birds 11",  
blind 14 years, 51 x 51 26cm,  
Gunma School for the Blind.









Figure 20: Hiroyuki Odaka, "Birds 11",  
visually impaired 12years, 44 x 28 x 25cm,  
Chiba School for the Blind.







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4. Yohei Nishimura, Lets Make What We've Never Seen, p47.
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CHAPTER THREE

Richard and Everett, West College in the West 1924

Richard Whitlock, 1924 and 1925

Richard Whitlock, 1924 and 1925

Richard Whitlock, 1924 and 1925

Richard Whitlock, 1924 and 1925



## CONCLUSION

For me there is no doubt in my mind that the blind and visually impaired can create meaningful art, which may not only assist them to understand the way they relate to their environment, but also, the way society appreciates their world.

For the reader this is probably your first experience with art by visually impaired and blind people. It was for that reason that I chose the title, "Babies Teach Their Mothers What they Need To Know", as it describes, I think, the only way this type of work can be accepted: By opening yourself to new possibilities every time you consider; a different person, a different piece of work.

The evidence I have shown of the use of the other senses besides sight, illustrate that there are other ways to gain an appreciation for the world we live in, While these senses can never replace sight, as the best sense to capture the over view of the moment; sound, touch and smell can reveal the subtle features of our environment that sight can not. I think it also illustrates the extra dimension that can be added to the fully sighted experience.

It is very important that visually impaired and blind people should not feel apologetic, by the means they have to use to perceive the environment they live in, and that they are encouraged to take the opportunity in explaining their particular terms of references.

What will make art more possible for the blind and visually impaired people in the future I believe, will be the acceptance that representation is particular to the individual, and cannot be strictly contained within a set of rules. As I have shown in my thesis each person who is "registered blind" has a very different understanding of what the environment is actually like for them, and while every effort can be made to clear up misperceptions, it must be accepted that imposing a set of visual references which only exist in part for a visually impaired person and not at all for a blind person, can only bring the two views into conflict.

In practical terms, the more that is known about art, in what ever media, produced by visually impaired and blind people, the more integration can be achieved. The gap between mainstream visual arts can be further bridged, by making more casual visual experiences available. For example, the use of audio recordings to explain exhibitions, the organising of space so that exhibits are comparable and allowing people to touch work, I believe furthers this process a long way. This I think is very important. For me personally, I have a good aesthetic appreciation of painting and sculpture, but what would really bring this alive for me, would be if I could touch the sculpture.



## CONCLUSION

The author is not alone in his mind but the blind community. The author is not alone in his mind but the blind community. The author is not alone in his mind but the blind community.

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My one hope for the future is that there will not be the emergence of a blind and visually impaired or disabled art culture, but that visual impairment and blindness can be accepted as another way of appreciation, and not seen as a handicap to appreciation.



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