

Re-orientating the Mind's Body: Perception Without Vision in a Visual World

Alexandra Makhlouf

0607636H

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

School of ARTS

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This auto-ethnography serves to document a particular moment – that of finding myself having to navigate the social and material world after becoming blind; in essence, it is a record of how I had to ‘re-orientate the mind’s body’. In making sense of my new positionality, I was aided by thinkers from many fields, ranging from affect theory, to Crip theory, to cognitive neuroscience. While learning to navigate everyday life, it was also necessary to understand if and how I could continue in my artistic practice, a visual practice without vision.

This dissertation and the accompanying - and integrally intertwined body of work - presented for the MA Fine Arts degree begins with a brief framing text that reorients the reader in anticipation of what it means to encounter a higher degree submission that invites a challenge of expectation. This expectation is that of the MA Fine Arts being presented with the assumption of the visual mode being primary and, concomitantly, a particular set of conventions being followed. And it is this expectation that is displaced and, in doing this, an original premise for reading and engaging the submission is offered.

The submission traverses both conventional academic writing and also that which can be described as a textual viscosity emerging from an emancipated conception of the notion of sight and what it means to be involved in visual enquiry. I write concurrently in an orthodox academic manner and assert a form of writing that emerges from the theorising that takes place in the interstitial spaces of the senses. This is what determines what might seem to be the unconventional use of font size, grammatical structure, spelling, creation of phonetically generated word presences and unorthodox formatting that the reader will engage in the dissertation. These presences are intentional and attempt to deliberately disrupt. This disruption is integral to a form of rigour that produces imaginative innovation. As such, the 'written' dissertation invites a recalibration of sensory acumen as it asserts itself as a text to be read and seen (and felt) outside the conventional ableist etiquette of reading such a document. In doing this, I pose questions of the hegemony of vision in the English language and Western culture and encourage a reciprocal conversation with the reader that amounts to a shared disruption of perspective. That which is seemingly opaque is surfaced as both potentially aseptic and generative of a tactical disobedience that punctures bounded thinking.

Deeply imbricated within the above approach is the autobiographical - an autoethnographic form of qualitative research that produces the conditions for self-reflection and intellectual probing.

What is recorded here is an exploration undertaken at what is, I think, the most challenging time in my life so far; an almost constant tumult of fear, frustration, anger but also the immense delight that comes with discovery and the feeling of connectedness to everyone that has helped me find a way to some type of homeostasis.

In this dissertation, I invite to reader to accompany me into the strange world I have found myself in, into what at times feels like a space parallel to that in which people without disabilities live but which is, in reality, exactly the same space we all inhabit. It is a space in which the very fact of 'being' is both limiting and freeing.

This context or positionality is the very fire in which we are wrought and just as I was and often still am, perturbed by my own treatment and that of other people with disabilities. I suspect as a result of feeling angry and vulnerable, ironically causing another type of 'blindness'.

Having come out of that time of change, scarcity and uncontrollable anxiety, for the most part I don't see the world and other people as 'things' to defend against but as loci for connection, building and healing. In this I think that intersectionality can be useful and even necessary because there is far greater likelihood of broadly increasing inclusivity the more people are involved and the more people there are who stand to

benefit. This would, in the way that Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses it, transform current power dynamics which take the form of hierarchies into something different and more inclusive.

What might come to feel like a dizzying cycle of orientation and re-orientation can be reframed as a part of learning to be, of being open to all the things that life might present, both welcome and unwelcome experiences, sometimes with raging anger and sometimes with equanimity.

These are my views as they may incorporate bodily experience, auto-ethnographic writing and the notion of intersectionality. The latter, however, while a term I appreciate the value of and hold as an unimpeachable concept in critical humanities, was not a concept I focused on in my dissertation or raised. Rather, I focused deeply on personal experience, and what my own blindness may 'look' like via text and the painted surface: a process of intimate disclosure.

Ontologies

I was sitting at a desk in my studio almost two years ago staring carefully at a piece of paper that I very definitely couldn't see.

The combination of the summer heat and the heat of my determined grasp started to melt the oil pastel in my fingers. Back then, I had naively decided that the textured surface of the pastel paper with the oily weight of the pastels would be perfect for painting with: I could feel my way around the image.

I was disavowed of this idea before very long. I had planned to map the scars that had so thickly and protectively formed on my cornea. This blanket that covered almost everything in the same safe whiteness, shielding the surface of my eye from any further trauma also all but erased any functional vision. It should have been apparent that just as it was almost impossible to switch from a visual paradigm to one of touch when navigating physical space, it was going to be just as difficult to expect this when navigating a two-dimensional surface.

It wasn't that I couldn't imagine what the final picture would look like; there was a disconnect between the idea in my mind or memory and my usual means of feedback, my eyes.

That first failure was disheartening and it took me a long time to attempt to make any more images. In fact, it would be another year and a half before I found a way into making.

My relationship with failure had to reflect an earlier place. It became more resonant with that my infant self, falling to walk, eating everything, trusting everyone. When I had the luxury to be open, I would learn how to be in the world, how to interact with it and all the objects in it.

This was difficult and frustrating because everyone wanted to protect me from further harm. I was also determined to fail as little as possible since I first became blind. Failure was a threat to my very sense of self. I needed to prove that I was capable to myself and the people around me, an attitude probably informed by internalized stereotypes of disability.

I desperately wanted to be in the world, rushing and crashing [as I often did]. The interaction with things - both physical and abstract - feels hard and real. These things leave scrapes and bruises.

I still, almost five years later, repeatedly crash into the same things. My cupboard door, bathroom door, the corners of tables, cars, steps, potholes, gates, chairs, art, work, dogs, bags, bed, legs, seas, plants, poles. One day,

I will eventually learn the relation between things, how to move my body in space, even the keys on a computer keyboard

letting go the line

People often ask me how I make art with, on days when my eye is particularly inflamed, almost no sight. I am still trying to figure this out and don't know if I will come to any solid conclusion about this. As for the 'how', well, almost everyone can make a mark on paper with their eyes closed or open. I can even picture a scenario where a person isn't physically able to make the mark themselves, they could direct another person or even a computer to do so. This is also aside from the fact that 'art' encompasses far more than only paintings and drawings.

Why then have I chosen to work predominately in a medium like drawing? Drawing lines that I cannot see is surely a self-defeating enterprise. It seems, at least in part, that I am attempting to situate myself in these traditions in an effort to 'see' myself in them and the wider [art] world.

These are also places where I used to feel the most comfort, plains of paper that I could traverse with marks or brushstrokes, spaces to practice freedom and control that I didn't find in other experiences.

I am still undecided as to whether I should completely eschew this line [of enquiry, of work, of expression, of pen and charcoal] or whether it is something to follow.

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There is something about paper that I find
Paper carries a record of action, interaction, experience. It is
The charcoal I've used will rub off over time How long until the paper returns to
blindness?
Palimpsest
Wax tablets
Derrida
Elkins
Etc.
Why is paper bleached white

The paper has tooth
Lines without paper Paper without Line

Migration electro-magnetic
Linear narrative
Linear Time
Margins
Bordersboundaries
Line thread labyrinth
Vectors
Intersections
Also see Sara Ahmed [2006], Tim Ingold [2015]

Some of the lines we follow and why we take them are invisible. It is sometimes only in retrospect, after going over these again and again that they become visible. I used a combination of methods to distress paper like folding, crumpling and tearing. This was a way to become familiar with the paper, to understand its materiality in an intimate way; to experience it more fully as an object even without any marks on it. It was a way to observe the effect of my body on the world without seeing it.

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Another technique that I have used to try and orientate myself on the picture plane is to use the shapes of my body.

[everyone?] orientates themselves with their bodies.

The contours allow for a fairly reliable outcome providing that I get the angles between my fingers or the crook of my knee the same. I am not trying to invent a formula for making an artwork, figurative or otherwise. I still want to make use of chance and perhaps the way to find myself in in art and art-making is to use my own body in the process, not only writing about my body, not into written text but also into visual language.

Making becomes a conversation between several participants or:

[in] *The Object Stares Back*, James Elkins suggests that all drawing has something to do with blindness. Elkins asserts that the visual artist relies on touch at least as much as on sight and that this reliance simulates an experience of blindness. He also represents blindness as the polar opposite of vision, as a complete void, a force to struggle against and overcome: A drawing also begins in blindness, with a pure white sheet. At the moment when the artist sets pencil to paper there is nothing to see, and the first mark is made in isolation and framed by

emptiness. As the pencil travels along the page, it always moves into blindness, leaving behind a narrow path of vision. Unless the entire page is covered with marks (and in the history of drawing, it is rare to find an image that is principally marks, where the marks have won out against the blank page), the drawing exists mostly in blindness. A small fraction of the sheet will be marked out, like paths through a wilderness, and the remainder will be a trackless surface. A drawing is an expression of a dialogue with blindness, and the most beautiful drawings are beautiful because they show it is sometimes possible to win that battle and produce a form out of nothing. ³ Here, blindness is initially the purity of the blank sheet of paper, but it rapidly morphs into a trackless wilderness. Then the dialogue with blindness becomes less a mutual exchange than a life and death battle that must be won. Beauty in art only occurs when the artist is victorious in this mortal combat. [Kleege, 2018, np]

I submitted my first application for a Masters degree in 2014 but had to defer my enrolment because of some unknown trauma that had very suddenly made the world blurry.

My intention in applying to study towards a Masters in Fine Arts quite soon after my vision deteriorated was a deliberate attempt to use art-making as a trellis, a means of discovery in and with blindness.

My first instinct was to make work about blindness; about my new and different state of being. Eventually, I decided that it would be far more interesting to explore visuality from the perspective of someone who is continuously forced to confront the constructed-ness of the process of seeing. I began thinking of it as exploring visuality 'through the back door'.

I have now come to realise that in the beginning I wanted to make work not only about blindness but work that was accessible to people like me. If anything is clear, it is that blindness, or disability in general, is so varied that if I were to make accessible work, that it would probably only be accessible to me. Perhaps this is what I was looking for from the outset: a way in to the visual arts for *myself* after the visual aspect of the world was suddenly locked or hidden from me. Where just a short while before, my vision, functional but limited as it was, allowed me to 'possess' the world, at least as far as my gaze could reach. I couldn't see it but the visual world still existed, so tantalizingly close that I imagined that I could touch or smell it. Although it is far from impossible to sense the complexity of the world without sight, it is, in reality, no matter how interconnected the senses are, one cannot 'see' without eyes

It took me a long time to start making work because I felt stuck. I found it difficult to discern my place in the everyday and in the Fine or Visual Arts. As was evident by my First Failure with oil pastels, I still thought like a sighted person, in a practice usually undertaken by sighted people for a sighted audience.

If I were to continue making work, I would be doing this with extremely poor vision - nothing close to what the average person would think of as seeing, between five and ten percent or what is known as being legally blind. Despite the discord I felt at the start of this exploration, I chose to continue to use visual media and methodology: I do not think that it would be beneficial or interesting to completely disregard visual media - we live in a progressively more visual-centric culture - albeit my own experience in and of this is modified.

I couldn't suddenly change from a predominantly visual to any other sensory mindset. If this process ever happens it will more likely be a matter of dimming of a switch rather than flicking it off immediately; a type of forgetting.

The mechanics of drawing and painting are to me fairly fixed ie. layering of marks with varied media – paint, objects, light.

The audience will probably be predominantly sighted but it should in some way be accessible to visually impaired people. [technology]
See later, Manzotti

Making art without vision, then, would mostly involve a very conscious letting go of the visual feedback loop or giving up a certain amount of control over the aesthetic outcome. Accepting blindness in order to leap into creativity is also a demand that I ask of the reader by deciding against providing images of the artwork; a forced disorientation.

In my previous work the feedback loop played an important role in drawing figurative work and in drawing from observation: it meant that I could put down two-dimensional marks in a relation to each other without having to remember exactly where on the picture plane they sat which would be an extremely difficult task to perform by memory, especially if one were to take a break while working.

In beginning to explore alternative ways of making art, I found it very difficult to find a manner of working that I was happy with; I tried several mediums but nothing really worked. I tried imagining the image that I wanted to create, then drawing what I pictured using oil pastels, chalk pastel, acrylic and oil paint, clay, performance and sound.

When I had functional vision, I had developed a fairly robust visual language and was comfortable in a particular way of working. This language, of course, wasn't especially useful with my current level of vision. I have been cognizant of this from the outset but I nevertheless repeatedly tried and failed to work in the manner that I was used to. I became frustrated and despondent. I developed a type of 'writers' block' but for artists.

>>>>Moving outside of one.self>>>>>

The beginnings of a resolution to the block started when I began working with first year Fine Arts students on a printmaking project entitled 'Finding Another Way'. I had forgotten how challenging the first and second year of a Fine Arts degree can be. Learning how to construct an image can be an extremely challenging and at times, frustrating endeavour. In many ways we were in the same space, both trying to feel out the boundaries of the Fine Arts degree and the Visual Arts in general. It is a strange space that offers vast possibilities for experimentation but that also has seemingly invisible but solid rules. I was reminded that it is of pivotal importance that the artists allow themselves to work through vulnerabilities, to get tangled in scribbles and stuck with thorny marks; to allow for unreserved failure from which remarkable learning can occur. After spending so long frantically trying to prove that I could still do things well, perfectly even, in an effort to retain some sense of self-worth and sovereignty over my own body, I was reminded of the importance of making mistakes and learning from them.

Constructing an effective image can be an uncomfortable process in the beginning. Generally, first year students have not engaged in close reading of enough images nor have they explored widely enough working with different visual languages in order to find their own. I have far from mastered the art of image-making but in my experience it is only over time that these are developed. When one is proficient enough in these, image-making becomes intuitive.

A close reading of images often starts with looking at an image and separating it into formal elements: line, colour, tone, texture and shape are a few of the elements that make up a composition. Depending on how these are drawn, they can evoke different emotions. For example, line can be fugitive, energizing or can give orientation to the viewer. A two-dimensional surface can be treated as a flat plane or by adding a few selective lines or tones the surface will be given the illusion of depth. The way elements are placed onto the surface, ie. the relation between elements, can start to build tension and balance and again, like individual elements, are affective.

Where then,,,, does that leave me? I can no longer read images made by others or even my images in a reliable way with my eye. I am even more attached to and interested in materiality than I was before my vision altered.

Materiality is the most immediate way I can connect to the world. I would work with paper, glass, board instead of smell or sound. Whatever I would make would be affected by the state of my vision on a given day where I am sometimes dancing,

sometimes stumbling in the space between seeing and not seeing, understanding and confusion, touching reality and grasping for reflections.

I have found several aspects of visuality interesting through my experience of disability. Visibility and invisibility, orientation in space, 'seeing' with the brain [?]. Always trying to gather information [if it is a thing to be gathered].

In the process of adjusting to living with altered vision, I am driven to understand, to gather as much information as possible. I am aware of my constant search for information, afraid that I'll miss something. The pursuit of the 'the' looms like a long, disassociated shadow that is always out of reach of my wandering fingers. It is there so it must be attached to something solid.

Looking in the mirror in my bathroom, all that I could see of my reflection was the olive green haze of 70s tiles on the wall behind me. I assume that the absence of the reflection of my own body was due to the particular configuration of scars on my cornea.

Strangely fascinating

I couldn't see myself in a space that I was so used to being in, my space. I knew that I was there but on some level it felt that I wasn't. Looking in bathroom mirrors is one of those 'sighted' habits that I continue to perform automatically even though I can't see myself or even whether there is a mirror in front of me.

Often if I can see a couple of visual elements, my brain will have to fit and fill in missing information in line with what I expect from an environment or situation. This doesn't always work to my advantage for example, if I can see the brown of a kitchen cabinet, I assume that the door is closed because it is usually closed and when I move closer and reach to open it, I end up hitting my head on the door which is in fact open and closer than I expected.

Stereotype

Shape of things

Walls

Outlines

Uninterior

terior

My first excursion into a public space was at a small, relatively quiet mall: my sister wanted to try a new juice shop that had just opened. Walking in, I felt as if I could smell and hear everything. **Everything** was separate. Every trace trying to lead me back to the action that caused it. I was borne into chaos and the world was too full. It was like an orchestra conducted by a vindictive noise musician and my brain couldn't find any order in it. As if it weren't obvious enough that blindness meant that any order, sense and understandable narrative were left in the realm of seeing. This was

further illustrated when we bought our juices. They were a combination of red fruits but it tasted like all the possible red things. It might have been the shock of so many different flavours after a bland diet, the sunlight after only prolonged darkness, or all the medication but my body could not hold it all and promptly expelled the offending juice. I realized that it is important to become fluent in the language of all the senses so that I could ignore the less important details. In the juice shop too much of the external had passed the floodgates of the internal and equilibrium could only be restored once the surplus of information was purged.

I haven't yet learned the rhythm of the tumult of the liminal. My eyes cannot fix onto any one thing nor have my hands grasped onto any one thing - there is nothing that I can hold onto while I conceptualise this new way of being because the world continues as it always has - from chaos to chaos. Before, there was at least the illusion of a consolidated picture.

David Eagleman discusses the importance of editing [Neuroscientists have differing views on this, later>>>]. When learning to see, it is through practice that we learn exactly what to ignore and only really see what is relevant. Of course, this leads to many inaccuracies. What seems to be non-sensical self-deception is actually necessary. If we did not edit all the stimuli that invade our brains through our senses the chaos would engulf us. The editing of information is pivotal to our being able to create narrative experience that we can understand. [Eagleman, 2017, np]

Editing implies being able to control not only what we pay attention to and what we ignore but also how much external information permeates our bodies. Without due notice, the eyelids might not shut tight before violence imprints itself onto our memory, we might not recoil from an unwanted touch, close our ears, block our noses . The body can't separate itself from the world.

This conceptual repositioning of my body in relation to the world/
the confusing exchange of inside and outside/
the experience of my body from my own point of view and how as seen by other people.

The sometimes-feeling of strangeness that arises when the way one's body is regarded by society suddenly changes, especially when it doesn't feel like one has changed from the inside. Of course, the way we see ourselves isn't exclusively shaped by our own experiences, separate from the outside.

[THE Blind – social position. AAND. Theres More: Discovering my SUPER!CRIP]

On a hot and dry December morning, my cousin and I headed to a small farmer's market just outside Johannesburg. I don't have much occasion to leave the city so I was excited to experience a change of environment. When we arrived, everything seemed novel. The unfamiliar sounds were alarming at first, so outside my sphere of

experience as to appear to have no referent. My cousin assured me that it was only the sound of donkeys braying. The strange violent-sounding exclamations were, apparently, normal.

Eventually I was grateful for distinctive sounds like this for providing orientation. In some places where there are no strong smells or sounds it can feel like I am walking on a hamster wheel, endlessly moving. This was paralleled in my drawing and painting practice where it was useful to have the furrows made by determined pen lines, or the high contrast made by an agglomeration of black marks, in order to have a rough understanding **of positionality**. Even bits of detritus that embossed the little mounds of their shapes on the papers' surface became fortuitous markers of place. Having said this, although the paper was large, it was not so much larger than my body that I struggled to find the edges.

The market was quiet, with more stallholders than patrons. Before the air of disappointment and discomfort properly set in, a woman came up to us and asked me if I am blind. She seemed to have some difficulty in saying the word 'blind' and from her intonation tried to imbue it with as much significance as she could. I replied in the affirmative, hesitant about what was to follow.

She apologized profusely for having asked the question; I'm still unclear as to whether she was sorry for me or somehow sorry about having reminded me about the state of my vision, like I would be thrown into an existential spin. Hugging me before she left, she commiserated that at *least* I wasn't deaf and that she was glad that I was still alive. I was hitherto unaware that death came as a direct result of blindness.

I was taken aback by her comments but probably the only depictions of blind people she has seen are from books and television, a rather poor likeness, as discussed by Georgina Kleege in her books [2018]. Sunaura Taylor also briefly discusses disability as human-interest story:

In these narratives disability is nearly always seen as a personal tragedy. Disabled people are supposed to find the courage to overcome their own personal limitations through strength of character rather than by overcoming discrimination and oppression. This has been dubbed the "super cripp" narrative by many disabled activists and scholars. Anything a disabled person does, no matter how mundane or remarkable, is seen as amazing and inspirational, from getting married, to going to school, to simply leaving the house or not wanting to kill themselves (or even the fact that they do want to kill themselves). This narrative does not inspire other disabled people to participate in their communities and demand equal rights but instead motivates an able-bodied audience to work harder and be more grateful. Through this lens, disability becomes a hyper-sentimentalized version of the familiar capitalist narrative of the poor man lifting himself up by his bootstraps.[2017, np]

The above does not characterize a typical encounter but it does illustrate a wider discomfort in the way that I relate to people and objects and how they relate to me. Even the relationship between my body and the paper, the drawn mark and my eye are altered. These interactions are strained, fraught with frustration as well as discovery

and gratification. Most notably, moving the paper off the wall or the desk makes it easier for my whole body to interact with it, most inconveniently when I walk into or trip over, crumple and tear the edges

Although I have always been disabled to some degree, it didn't affect my life to the extent that it has since I became blind in November 2014. My current experience is different because where before I could, if someone wasn't looking too closely, blend into the crowd of 'normality', now I experience a strange contradictory type of overexposed-invisibility. This idea has been explored in Crip Theory [the meeting of Queer Theory and Disability Studies]. It is further complicated when applied to blindness because of the visual denotations of 'visibility' and 'invisibility'. I mostly feel the effects of invisibility when, on a daily basis, in South African media - written media, television, radio etc. – the experiences of those affected by marginalization or discrimination because of their class, race, gender and to a lesser extent sexuality, are reflected but usually disability isn't even mentioned, even in passing.

This is not a uniquely South African problem and has been the case across many forms of media and countries. In his foreword to 'Crip Theory' by Robert McRuer [2006], Michael Berube notes that this omission may, in part, be that

Indeed, for many reasons, disability (in its mutability, its potential invisibility, its potential relation to temporality, and its sheer variety) is a particularly elusive element to introduce into any conjunctural analysis, not because it is so distinct from sexuality, class, race, gender, and age but because it is always already so complexly intertwined with everything else. Matters become still more complicated when disability is mobilized—so to speak—as a trope within what Robert McRuer (following Michael Warner, following Erving Goffman) calls “stigmaphobic” sectors of identity communities. When that happens, you find people scrambling desperately to be included under the umbrella of the “normal”—and scrambling desperately to cast somebody else as abnormal, crazy, abject, or disabled.” [in McRuer, 2006, np]

Space, Invisibility and Stigmaphobia meet scarcity

Invisibility disappears if you are in good company. My difference disappears when I am around the other disabled people that I know and the difference moves to the background [also see Ahmed 2006] but

**I feel the most inconsequential and invisible when other people
who have been marginalized by society don't [want to?] see me
or acknowledge me
erasure and exclusion**

I know that I am also guilty of not seeing the nuance in other and othered
people and groups.
Because of my position as a middle-class white woman

-an able-bodied black woman sounded almost ecstatic that because I am
suddenly disabled
'that white people must feel pain'
that now I can begin to know the pain and exclusion that black people
have been subjected to for centuries

I cant know
There is too much nuance, too heavy a frame
It is the same pain but the process and mechanisms are too different maybe
'It matters how we arrive at the places we do.' [Sara Ahmed, 2006, np.]

On campus

I was on my way to the disabled restroom, the only other places to go if I
continued in this direction were the male restroom or the wall.
I had only just started using my cane I had been walking from a faraway parking
lot I had a sighted assistant
The situation was desperate
But someone else walked into the toilet after throwing a glance my way, I was
told
All the anger all the times able-bodied people have discarded me the
doorclosinginmyfacetakingdisabledparkingwalkingintomelikeimnotthereALLTHEPI
TY
Just exploded
I went so close to the door and confronted [him?them?]
They exploded back No one had told me that the disabled toilet had changed
into a toilet for gender neutral people, and according to the sign ANYone. NO
DISCRIMINATION here, or, according to the sign, please give preference to
disabled people
But they didn't see me
No discrimination>
Was I meant to run up to the other disabled toilet. Was there even another one
in the building I should just have gone to the female toilet but was I ready for

more of the bruising collision that the unfamiliar throws? The head ones are the worst, the others don't really matter. Except the knee ones. No. NO.

Why! can't I let other people have the space if I so badly want room? It can't only be a room of one's own
Daring is caring

it was resolved, after a while,
by and with people who were on steady ground,
where I BUT

The disabled restroom was already gender neutral, but for people with mobility problems

There are so *very very* few places I fit and now they took another one away
Scarcity

Of funds, and space and acknowledgment and forethought

Several female bathrooms have been changed into gender neutral bathrooms,
other disabled ones have too

One male bathroom has been changed last time I checked

Universal design?

I have chosen to work on a large scale because I want my work, the extension of myself, to take up space. Working on this scale also allows me to situate myself on the paper while making the work. The large size begins to evoke a landscape that perhaps situates other people in the work even if this is in a very uncomfortable or disorientating way.

Sometimes, I actively avoid places where I don't feel welcome or comfortable. Before I got my guide dog, these feelings mostly came out of the built environment. Things changed when I got my dog. Her presence presented people with a new way to make me feel unwelcome either explicitly or implicitly. Animals and people are segregated all over the world with some exceptions. Not only to we recognize a hierarchy of being but also of boundaries between our bodies. Animals are seen as dirty carriers of disease.

These feelings are mirrored in my paintings on glass. The double-glazed glass is mostly transparent but still takes up space. Networks of cracks hover in the middle of the glass, suspended fragility waiting to fall apart. At first glance, the opacity of the paint and glue makes the forms appear to be floating in space, seemingly placeless.

Looking, **body<>bedroom** as par ergon, the 'cave?'

My eyelid was in spasm for several months and my lids and lashes. Scratched against my cornea. For this duration. This resulted. In constant and excruciating pain. This injury, although relatively insignificant, constricted my whole body. If the experience of it had not suffocating I might have thought of it as being exquisite. I don't think that I have experienced another sensation so completely. For a short time it possessed me and I hardly slept or dreamt or thought of anything else. I made as few unnecessary movements as possible, it even hurt to breathe. The damage to my cornea caused me

to become very photophobic and for this reason I stayed in my bedroom in as complete a darkness as I could conjure. I was at the mercy of the tiny traces of light whispering around the place where my curtains met the wall. I didn't want to interact with anyone during this I was tethered to the world by podcasts, television and audiobooks; Plato's cave. was so complete.

After several months, my doctor injected Botox into the muscles around my eye and finally the spasm had subsided the scarring over my cornea was very thick. This helped with photophobia because light couldn't penetrate through the scar. But I couldn't see because no light could penetrate. Even through this almost opacity I could still sometimes sense movement then as very slowly as the scar thinned I could see areas of more light and less light reflections then tones.

I have had various operations to try and improve my vision since 25 November 2014. My eye is even more inflamed and the scars even thicker than usual for months after these and it is unclear after each operation what or if I will be able to see. After several months I begin to first see light, then movement, reflections, then tones, then certain colours. It is always in this order and even with these few formal elements [I have not yet been able to distinguish fine detail such as line] I can sometimes use these clues to create form.

On the occasions that a colour has returned to me after a long absence, it almost feels like my brain pops with electricity. One day, I was sitting in the sun and I don't remember what object I was looking at but it's particular shade of green seemingly appeared out of nowhere. At the very same instant I involuntarily thought of my sister's green childhood desk, an apple and a tart taste in my mouth. I also couldn't stop staring at the colour even though it was a colour that I had seen many times before and ignored it many times before; after not having seen it for so long, I was transfixed, reminiscent of how a baby appears mesmerized when looking at a bright and colourful object.

The limited colour palette that was visible to me coupled with close movement meant that my brain had some visual input to work with, and things organized themselves into blurry entities separate from the space they move in. On some days when my vision was better it felt like I was in an analogue TV. I couldn't see enough detail like line and graded colour or shadow for things to appear three-dimensional. This effect also only lasted a short time because my brain knows that I am in three-dimensional world

Colour and light were never at the forefront of making work before but having experienced seeing almost nothing at all and then seeing a little I realise that so much can be gleaned from a small amount of information: swatches of colour can be lighthouses. I can't really see if my use of colour is successful in terms of how the colours complement or contrast each other that they help to orientate me in some way. This begins to happen in the paintings I have made with egg tempera after the fact of

making. Even in my strange looking, the blurry paintings are also emotional placeholder or lighthouses, objects that can live outside of my body, a way to feel more in control of my boundaries; an intentional extension of the interior.

It seems that the conversation between our brains and our senses is really for the purpose of creating perspective; it helps us to create stories about ourselves and our place in the world, as separate entities, as subject and object, or so would the predominant and enduring view in neuroscience lead us to believe.

Vision especially, helps to bolster the myth that there are boundaries between our subjective selves and the world around us, that we are contained beings with minds distinct from everything that is not within us.

In the beginning, I was unsettled by, nauseated by the feeling of boundarylessness. The looking way of distancing was gone so I had the sensation of openness, even the boundary of my skin wasn't at the fore. It felt like waiting, an inertia, expecting some kind of change

When I am drawn back from a daydream I often find myself staring at lights. Their cool or warm brightness refracted into beads of pinkish-red bluish-green

He doesn't dwell on scientific explanations of seeing for very long but in the introduction to his book, 'Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought', Martin Jay states: 'The infant, it is sometimes argued, experiences a synaesthetic confusion of the senses without vision fully differentiated from the rest.' [1994, np]

Although it doesn't fit in retrospect, I thought of myself in this way when I was new to blindness, as a toddler, having to relearn how to understand the world, having to use all my senses [which do sometimes get confused].

I don't experience 'proper' synaesthesia, it's a more active process, using associations and metaphors as I try to contextualise the things I'm experiencing. In this way, new environments are understood by multimodal means.

V.S. Ramachandran and E.M. Hubbard suggest that this is in general how our brains work:

It has often been suggested that concepts are represented in brain maps in the same way that precepts [like colours or faces] are. One such example is the concept of number, a fairly

abstract concept, yet we know that specific brain regions [the fusiform and the angular] are involved. Perhaps many other concepts are also represented in non-topographic maps in the brain. If so, we can think of metaphors as involving cross-activation of conceptual maps in a manner analogous to cross-activation of perceptual maps in synaesthesia. If this idea is correct, then it might explain the higher incidence of synaesthesia in artists and poets. [Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001, p. 17]

To further the idea that metaphor is a universal means of understanding, Ramachandran and Hubbard write:

Another example of a 'synaesthetic metaphor' found in everyone is the use of the word 'disgusting'. We say this in response to unpleasant smells and tastes while at the same time raising our hands up and scrunching up our noses (Darwin showed that even a newborn infant would do this — suggesting that it is 'hard-wired'). The olfactory bulb projects to the orbito-frontal cortex, and olfactory and gustatory 'disgust' is almost certainly mediated by this part of the frontal lobes. But why do we use the same word, 'disgusting', and make the same face in response to someone whose behaviour is morally disgusting [e.g., a drunk making an unwelcome sexual pass at a woman]? This is unlikely to be coincidence since it is cross-cultural: The Tamil phrase for moral disgust means 'he smells bad' and the French word 'dégoûtant(e)' (used for social situations) literally means, 'bad tasting'. We would argue that this usage emerged because moral and social disgust is also mediated by the orbito-frontal cortex; i.e., it is yet another example of cross-wiring or even of the same brain map being used for two seemingly unrelated functions [given evolution's tendency to be opportunistic in using pre-existing hardware]. [Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001, p. 22]

One of the metaphorical examples they cite later in this passage is "a loud shirt", i.e. a shirt with many colours and bold patterns. Metaphor is a more concise and precise way of describing something to me: drawing on my visual memory, it's much easier to understand the concept of "a loud shirt" as opposed to someone describing every little detail in the shirt.

Perhaps then, all it takes to see is language – some kind of structuralist KEY
Georgina Kleegge also discusses how metaphor may be employed in how a congenitally blind child might begin to understand colour from what she is taught, through metaphor and association [2018].

In the same way that forms in a drawing can be suggested by just a few well-placed marks or how form [or emotion] can be suggested through rough brushstrokes instead of using outlines, talking around a thing implies a type of blindness but a type of blindness that allows for creativity. Associations make for a kind of feeling around a thing, discovering clues about its connotations:

If I were to describe a green pear to someone who has never seen one, I could start by explaining that it is a fruit, from which they may deduce that it is an organic object, that it has seeds, if they are or have ever been sighted, I could communicate the shade of green by comparing it to other green things; I could describe the shape by either tracing it on the person's back with my finger if they were in front of me, or by using

words eg. it has a rounded bottom which curves up and around, a parabola with a narrower width than the bottom. I could also talk about the shape by explaining the somewhat problematic way it is used to describe women's bodies. I could say that the flesh of the pear can vary from soft to firm, slightly sour or very sweet depending on the variety and ripeness. I would also consider recounting how the fruit is remembered in my autobiography: how my grandmother served fat slices of the peeled pear after lunch and how, while it looked unappealing - with its pale, off-white colour almost blending into the white plate, if it weren't for the slightly browned spots where it had begun to oxidise - it tasted soft and sweet and a little grainy. The stickiness it left on the tips of my fingers and my grandmother's warmth, final tributes to the golden summer as it was blown away by the autumn winds.

In this way, a person could begin to understand a thing without ever having observed it. This way of describing could be even more useful when explaining more abstract things like emotions or an abstract artwork.

[ORIENTATION]

Disability has been a very disorientating experience for me. Having rounded the baffling parabola that is 'legal blindness', I am forced to rethink and rediscover my place in space and in society. In the grey of neither completely blind nor sighted I am isolated, stuck in the in-between of mirrored reflection and real object.

I have found many moments of intersection between my own experience and that of Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* [2006]. The book explores how bodies are situated in space and place, how orientation, particularly sexual orientation, in conjunction with phenomenology.

Ahmed, a feminist writer and independent scholar, quotes Kant and Heidegger in her formulation of queer orientation. Whereas Kant relies on directionality, ie. left & right, up & down, East & West, etc., Heidegger has a different view, as cited by Ahmed: 'I necessarily orient myself both in and from my being already alongside a world which is 'familiar'' [Ahmed, 2006, np]

This reflects my having shifted from being in a familiar world to an unfamiliar one [or rather, that the world is still familiar, because it's still the 'same' world, but now through my having to experience it from a different perspective, it has become unfamiliar].

The uncertainty resulting from this leaves room for a new orientation or way of reacting to and experiencing the world; Beau Lotto talks about how too much uncertainty is bad, our brains can't deal with too much of it, people generally move away from uncertainty: "Think of the feeling you often have when walking through a familiar forest at night as compared to during the day. At night you can't see what's around you. You're uncertain. It's frightening..." [Lotto; 2017, np]

The uncertainty I felt having to navigate space without vision does cause anxiety. But it also provides the possibility for the development of a new way of navigating, one which doesn't necessarily use a visual map. As Ahmed states: '... getting lost still takes us somewhere; and being lost is a way of inhabiting space by registering what is not familiar: being lost can in its turn become a familiar feeling. Familiarity is shaped by the 'feel of space or how spaces impress' upon bodies.' [2006, np].

Although I didn't necessarily feel comfortable about the process of art-making in itself, the brushes and paints and all the implements of mark-making became the familiar elements that showed me where to turn:

If we are in a strange room, one whose contours are not part of our memory map, then the situation is not so easy. We can reach out, but what we feel does not necessarily allow us to know which way we are facing; a lack of knowledge that involves an uncertainty about which way to turn. At the same time our intimacy with rooms, even dark ones, can allow us to navigate our way. We might reach out and feel a wall. That we know how a wall feels, or even what it does (that it marks, as it were, the edge of the room) makes the dark room already familiar. We might walk slowly, touching the wall, following it, until we reach a door. We know then what to do and which way to turn.' [Ahmed, 2006, np]

Is familiarity necessary for making? If it is then how much? Mostly. When starting on a new body of work, too much familiarity will just produce more of the same. Even shifting perspective just a little bit needs and produces some strangeness, some perplexity.

My studio on campus was far from home and I never really felt comfortable in the space, never became familiar.

I waited a long time for the studio and told myself that I couldn't make work without a space. It was an excuse because I was hesitant, maybe scared, I didn't know if I could

make work at all. When I moved in I only made work that I felt disconnected from. I didn't want to go there, it wasn't a place of making, it was the place of the first failure that I couldn't see past. I didn't know how to work through the discomfort.

On campus, I always seem to be placed in a studio with a window that doesn't close. I only figured out it was open near the time I had to move out but finally there was an explanation for the colder-than-outside ambience in winter and the strange, persistent particles covering the objects that I brought in to try and make the place comfortable and familiar. They were sort of like sand particles but felt larger. Parts of the outside, of the seemingly impenetrable and intimidating city had been coming into the space, trying to make me familiar all along.

The space where I make work needs some aspect of familiarity on either the actual structure of the buildings or in the people or other objects in it. More accurately, there needs to be familiarity in the way I relate to these things.

I came to make my charcoal drawings on large pieces of paper. I could not comfortably work on the paper in my studio so I ended up unfurling the large rolls my bedroom floor where I could more easily rearrange the furniture.

Making work in this, the place where I spend most of my time, the place where I do most of my living and having access to food and a restroom that is only mine [things which are not afforded to most people where I live or in the world], was extremely important I'm producing work.

Where before my bedroom was a space of stillness and waiting, it became a locus for action.

I laid out the paper on my floor like a carpet. Crouching low down, with nose almost touching the paper, I began to trace parts of my body onto the paper. A compass not of northsoutheasterstuodoenleftright but just of finding and being. I wasn't trying to draw a type of map, nor was I trying to index objects in an ordered way. Lines sometimes traced the parts, especially of my hands and feet. I coloured in the Vs in the spaces between my fingers and as I repeated these marks and actions they began to resemble a mutilated compass rose, it's pointed petals scattered and useless.

Tracing pens and pencils and sticks and rulers, fixed lines struggle to make an eyehold. The tracings provide some relief, a place to dock and stop a while with the help of visual anchors. But the other marks nest and flee and tangle, broken and splintered Rorschach tests.

I think of the marks in these sometimes violent terms. It feels strange to make abstract marks that seemingly float on the paper. It feels strange to make marks that aren't part of something, figurative. It is true that the marks can and do exist this way on the paper but knowing that I am not drawing anything but the marks themselves makes me feel uneasy. My intention was to orientate myself in art-making, in specific mediums

and contexts. I made the work and the work will be exhibited. I sat on the artwork and traced myself onto it. I left traces of my movement and self in marks and skin cells. I wandered around the paper with the charcoal and sometimes pen. All of these separate interactions may have served to orientate me in a particular space in time. They have probably also orientated me in visuality but relative to my own self they have failed, almost entirely, in orientating me in the work after the fact. I can read the finished piece as a sculptural object, as a dusty piece of paper with some slight, random embossing but not as a two-dimensional image.

I can only orientate myself in the world that exists for me i.e. in a relative way. I can observe the two-dimensional images through other means. These observations are separate objects in themselves. I could observe the artwork through a sighted viewer's description, or through a three-dimensional print. There could be ways of interpreting the work through sound or even smell and taste; one could smell or taste a drawing, or certain elements of it be interpreted in audio, olfactory or gustatory ways eg. an abstract painting evoking a sense of chaos could be represented by a salad containing contrasting flavours. These new objects arising from interpretation could appear to be disconnected from the artwork. Alternatively, the different elements in a painting could be coded in a specific way eg. a thick, vertical brushstroke could be signified by a particular musical note/smell/taste. These particular examples may seem abstruse but what I'm trying to illustrate is that there is more than one way to observe, understand and experience something; these faculties do not disappear when one cannot see something.

It is hardly surprising that there is confusion around what blind people can and can't know; perhaps it comes from the conflation of the words 'see' and 'understand'. Georgina Kleege [1999] and Martin Jay [1994] discuss quite comprehensively connotations and implications of what it is to 'see' and the hegemony of vision in the English language and WESTERN culture so I won't explore this in too much detail here. The phrase 'I see' often means 'I understand' and 'I'm so blind' is uttered when one has made a mistake, where one has not understood. As Kleege and others make very clear, having impaired vision does not equate to impaired understanding.

If seeing does indeed mean understanding, then I see quite clearly. Furthermore, where my right eye used to be [I wear a prosthesis] the idea that the opposite of seeing is blindness starts to fall apart. I don't have any sensations related to seeing here. No light, or dark, or movement, no memory even of ever having seen with it. The very idea of not seeing or blindness when applied to my right eye feels just as ridiculous as having a blind shoulder or thigh. I can still create work because I understand the cause and effect of dragging charcoal along the surface of paper even though I can't actually see the resulting mark. Seeing is not necessary for understanding and to an extent, understanding is not necessary for seeing.

There is also a distinction between vision and sight, [Kleege, 1999], between, seeing and looking

For me, I need certain **conditions for looking** and seeing optimally

Lowered inflammation

The angle of light

Location of light

Contrasting colours

A place I've been before

Affect

Anxiety

Does everyone need certain conditions to look or see?

Perspective spectator distance

Reflection

Difference

'I've seen you use your phone'

Judging by the literature [see Kleege 1999 and 2018] and personal experience, people with any residual sight are not blind enough

They try to catch you out

They are uneasy when they don't know how much of them you can see

They don't know where to place you

In finding my orientation while making drawings, charcoal allowed for swift movement over the paper, a satisfying scratching and scraping, whispering and sometimes squeaking. Every small touch leaves something but the heavy marks change shift, and rub easily.

To feel the difference between the world and the paper the marks search for the edges but the marks fall off if they aren't careful and the dust goes everywhere and Bonnie she doesn't think it's anything to walk all over.

While all the things around us are made of inconceivably tiny parts, there is a feeling of fullness and wholeness. My laptop is on the desk on the floor on the foundations on the compacted sand on stone and deeper; it touches the air in the room and my body and breath and thoughts and actions.

My lived experience aligns with Manzotti's theory again: the action of making the work, my thoughts, my body, the charcoal kind of the other things were one object

In her essay titled 'Out of Blindness', Gladys Swan relates a story about Russian filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein:

[He] describes the process by which an experience becomes image and can thereby be given form... For instance he describes the confusion the streets of New York City evoked for him with their numerical designations. At first, visually, 42nd Street is a succession of theatres and office buildings. But, after repeated experience of and on the street, they fuse into an image. [Swann, 2005, p. 20].

This reiterates the notion that familiarity and repetition are conducive to forming an understanding of spaces.

What objects do I align myself with? I know that certain things are there the sky, the ground which underfoot and then things that I can feel or touch or hear or smell or taste but there is a constant stepping back to make sure that what I am interpreting is as true in the world as it is in my head. I'm almost convinced that this is a symptom of a recent blindness rather than a permanent way of being. Disorientation has to give way at some point?

Before I could think of disorientation as a thing that could fade, or could become familiar, I went on an outing. I was desperate to walk freely instead of the frustrated tentative steps I took around the built environment usually surrounding me walked around a path at a nature reserve. We were experiencing a drought so all the grasses and trees had a similar dead hue. The landscape presented itself as a brownish, yellowish blur with a bit of blue on top, these were the only blurs, no further details made themselves known, apart from the crunch of death underfoot. I remember scattered birdsong but no particular or even vague smells. I held onto the elbow of my sighted guide and we made our way in the heat. Because I couldn't see any distinguishing features, our walk became a confusing impression of moving on a hamster wheel. Even the conversation we were having didn't make the experience less strange

Tracing my body onto the paper, a compass not of northsoutheasterstuodoenleftright but just of finding, an illusion of situatedness.

The tracings are not my body

They are not ordered

Tracing pens and pencils and sticks and rulers, fixed lines still won't make an eyehold. But perhaps at worst a Rorschach blot. Tracing frottage etc. are searching for a trellis Searching for likeness, for quotes, cutting of experiences that are and are not my own

The act of making work can also be away orientate oneself in time:

Making
As
Marking
Time

On days that I see less, or days on which the weather is overcast, it is difficult to understand the passing of time. It has happened that I have lost several hours or even full days to daydreams. I know, of course, that ours of time are not really lost and I was physically affected by them even on a molecular level but it's easy and even tempting to drift into a prolonged daydream without a visual anchor.

I was reluctant to start working with clay or indeed as sculptural medium primarily because it seemed almost expected, along with the other all too often suggested 'you should get into music' upon hearing my condition. A visual artist without vision.

Despite my reluctance I did start to work with clay separate from my fine arts practice, making functionalware. I came to realise its value not necessarily for the final product but for the process making as marking time.

The more intensely I worked with the clay, the more the grains of sand reminded me of those passing through an hourglass. Broken or unsatisfactory vessels are recycled. In pools of water, the forms that I spend so many hours making become an almost homogenous layer with the clay eventually settling down to the bottom of the container, displacing the water, which at first cloudy with smaller and lighter sand particles, becomes clear.

Blindness will lose its shine
It will become quotidian

Ahmed quotes Merleau-Ponty's example of a blind man using his cane and how the cane stops being a cane and becomes a part of the user; an extension of his motility so much so that it loses its objectness. I cannot say that I ever stopped experiencing the cane as a cane. It is true that it facilitated movement in so much as I didn't necessarily have to rely on the presence of another person to get around. For me it was difficult to forget the phallic thingness of the cane when it often caught on the university's uneven paving and jabbed back into my lower extremities. I also decorated my cane with coloured elastics in an attempt to moderate peoples' perception of me.

One use I did find for my cane that was productive in a way that worked *with* my body came from affixing a large piece of charcoal to the end of it. I drew my path along one of the charcoal drawings.

Having a guide dog means that even when the rest of the world looks blanketed in ethereal fog, I can reach down and the movement of her bones under her soft fur. On these days when I can see almost nothing, touching another living body helps move me closer to an embodied experience of the world, to something tangible and solid where I would otherwise feel untethered. Bonnie [my dog] allows me to navigate space in a more mindful and present way. Contrary to popular perception, guide dogs protect their humans from obstacles but cannot telepathically lead the way; the human part of the unit must know roughly the route they are taking. She has also helped to orientate me in social situations - where people may have seen a blind person they now first see a cute dog. Sunaura Taylor mentions a similar experience with her service dog: 'Bailey did come to provide an unexpected service for me: he became my mediator to the outside world. [...] Bailey would attract much of the attention that used to be directed

toward me—the stares, the uncomfortable looks, the awkward questions.’ [Taylor, 2017, np]

If it happened that I did not carry my cane [before I received Bonnie] and wear my dark glasses, my **blind paraphernalia**, people did not realise I was blind. I realized that there is a performative aspect to disability, just like any other identity. Perhaps this is why it is sometimes difficult to see the nuanced intersectionality of identity if it is not constantly demonstrated. If people see nothing different or out of place they assume the pattern continues. Taylor notes that ‘Many invisible or less visible disabilities go unnoticed by people in their daily interactions because most people presume abledness in others. Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer writes, ‘If it is this difficult to ascertain who is ‘disabled,’ then it is likely equally difficult to determine who is ‘non-disabled’ or ‘able-bodied.’ [2017, np]

Unchange becomes ordinary.

Anything different presents as abnormal, a break

Normal things populate the normal

Built environment is a theatre for the normal:

‘Ableism encourages us to understand one technology as normal and another as specialized. We are so used to technologies and structures such as steps and staircases that they become almost natural to us. But curbs are no more natural than curb cuts, and blinking lights no more natural than beeping sounds.’ [Taylor, 2017, np]

At the moment of disability everything seems queer.

No object seems normal or straight.

Not even one’s own body.

Ahmed discusses Kant’s idea that a person cannot orientate themselves but if they know the left from right side of their body this is way of knowing which way to turn Heidegger uses the same example of a blindfolded man but thinks of orientation as more a matter of how familiar the world or the room is; one can orient oneself alongside this space or place.

We know where things are in a familiar space, what to expect to touch when we reach out. [2006]

The search for something embodied something real. That my vision is not something that I can rely on to provide the semblance of something real undoing seeing

See James Elkins HOW TO USE YOUR EYES [2000]

Seeing and being visible or exposed can make us too aware of difference and can lead to feelings of unfamiliarity and disorientation.

Show and tell

One of the first group activities I remember from pre-school, from the age of about 3 to five years of age was 'Show and Tell'. Each child brought an object which was sometimes passed around or sometimes just displayed and a story was told about the object which considering our age was probably a few words but I soaked it up with all the curiosity of a child. I loved this mode of storytelling but now only connect it to a more negative experience which was repeated over time.

Probably in the name of openness and instead of shame and hiding I was made to show my fingers and sometimes my toes to people the joints near the tops of my thumbs are fused which means they are bent at strange angles

Children at school heard about me

Different is new and interesting and everyone come quickly see!

They used to come up to me and ask to see my hands

-What happened? Everyone always wants to know how, perhaps to avoid that direction where one, the WHOLE one, gets lost?

I learned so early to sit on my hands, to hide them in my sleeves, learnt how to turn them just so and make the strangeness appear normal

My maternal grandfather, either at fault of being unable to think outside the paradigm of his time or through some other fault tried to make me promise on several occasions that I would get my fingers and toes 'fixed' to look normal because it was

not good for a woman to look like this.

The time that *sticks* nauseatingly *close*: he held me in a tight and sweaty [loving?] hug,,,,,, more like a vice - grip. He made me promise and although I protested I eventually gave in and promised to do as he said just to escape. Things stuck.

When I was very young - about two - I was at pre-school and we were taken outside to make a memento out of clay we were supposed to put our handprint into a clay disk. Even though I was so little and almost new I *knew* the danger of showing my hands the looks and questions that I would get I had learnt from early to sit on my hands or if the season was so generous I would hide my hands in the long sleeves of a jersey. I refused to go outside. Eventually the teachers took the other children outside and just as I thought I had escaped someone came back to get me. I don't remember if I cried; I remember the unrelenting sun sun, ever present, searing my eyes. I remember being so scared and trying to escape but my small hand was nevertheless firmly pushed and rolled into the slab of clay. It sits hidden in a draw, as it always has since that day.

Again now,

in finding my own way onto the page, through tracing I make that same impression on my own terms, deciding to be visible.

Remembering as creative act

See Sharlene Khan on biolithography.

Events that are remembered and replayed so often become real even if they are not. I'm not sure at what age they tried to fix my fingers I don't remember a lot from that time. But there is also a

lot that I do remember, special and deep furrows that I have remembered into my brain. It is easy to move into the in-between space where I am here and the are decades are immaterial: they evaporate or cannot touch this part of being. The waiting room where I was seduced by a toy where objects could be moved along wires but could never escape their circuits. The **operating theatre** where I was held down by several people but fought against their hands for what seems like an eternity. The impossibility of the memory of cold sharp **steel** cutting into my notyetanaesthetizedstillsquirming body. The words pouring from the mouths of medical personnel. Eventually being overpowered by disembodied hands and what felt like my whole face being covered by what smelled like to my naïve mind, what could only be poison. Grasping for the words to tell my mother what had happened when I woke up but finding them so very far away or perhaps not there at all, the indescribable pain in the weeks that followed and the probably inevitable failure of the operation when while playing I knocked my toes back into their own natural deformed state.

Hands and fingers are used to point, to signal directionality. When the creases in our hands and fingers are cut and scarred, when our lifelines are interrupted, our lines become

crooked. We may have to change direction. Even if we manage to correct or adjust our course, the folds and scars remain; every interaction leaves a residue. In the coming acquainted with paper, after folding and crumpling it, I made those areas of tension visible by passing charcoal over them.

Also see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson STARING: HOW WE LOOK [2009]

The **B**lind Artist; the seated artist

I have been warned about becoming labelled as a 'blind artist' as opposed to 'an artist who is blind'.

Is this because we value the identity 'artist' more than the qualifier 'blind'? Or can a blind artist only make one type of work, perhaps sculpture? What other qualifiers are too stark before roles that can add capital value: black, queer, woman, etc. It seems that it is too jarring to have these qualifiers made visible, too jarring for...who?

It is almost an ubiquitous experience that when I walk into a room, I am offered a chair, even if it is the only chair in the room. It so happens that I often prefer sitting to standing so I oblige. But this is only a momentary respite. Chairs are offered out of good will to women, the elderly and to people with disabilities.

What are we signaling to people in these groups when we offer them chairs? We want to make them or ourselves more comfortable but why? Is this for some perceived weakness or exhaustion that must be as a result of their condition?

Chairs have many connotations there are many types:

thrones,

designer chairs

office chairs

offering up a seat on the bus

chivalry

comfort

discomfort

being stationary

waiting rooms

rocking chair

wheelchairs

being chair

rocking chair

out of the way

controlled

electric

It has happened many times that when I put a cup of tea down it seemingly disappears. I find it eventually because objects come suddenly and rudely back into being when they are unwittingly knocked over.

Nature of existence, Descartes, Bohr etc.

Scientists and philosophers have often interrogated blindness in thought experiments when writing about theory of mind and perception. Historically, blind people in hypothetical instances and also in physical experiments [Kleege, 2018]

This has, in most instances, been through an uneven power dynamic where the experience of the blind subject is not taken into account. Georgina Kleege discusses the artwork of blind artists as a method of self-writing, as a way to 'challenge and

possibly dismantle the image of blindness previously embodied in the mythological figure of the Hypothetical Blind Man' [Kleege, 2018, np]

I find this relationship between blind subjects and neuroscientists\philosophers particularly interesting and hope to interrogate this more in the future. While I could, justifiably, only give a phenomenal account of blindness and talk through the process of art-making without considering theories found in philosophy or neuroscience, indeed, my primary concern has always been art-making, I am drawn to these theories. Perhaps this is partly because I identify with and have empathy for the 'Hypothetical Blind Man' and his position and partly, I must admit, because I have internalized the supposed authority of science. I am aware of the attempts to move disability from a medicalized framing to a much broader one.

THE Blind and scientists and philosophers are always already entangled and even though I will read philosophy and science in a very different way than would someone familiar with those fields, perhaps something creative can come from a position of disorientation, a possibility discussed by Ahmed [2006] in her reading of philosophy as someone outside the discipline.

For the moment, I will glance very briefly at some theories, particularly for their potential to help me reframe my understanding of myself in relation to the world and art making,

The predominant theory of mind is the internalist model. Here, visual perception is not a straightforward process of the eyes sending images to the brain: it is instead a much more complicated process in which the interior models we've formed from previous experience play a large role in our understanding of what we see. This interior model informs not only how we see, but what we see, the perspective from which we view reality which we experience as a narrative; it is consciousness.

The interior model has been studied by neuroscientists who agree on the following point given by Beau Lotto: 'Our five senses are like a keyboard to a computer – they provide the means for information from the world to get in, but they have very little to do with what is then experienced in perception. They are in essence just mechanical media, and so play only a limited role in what we perceive. In fact, in terms of the sheer number of neural connections, just 10 percent of the information our brains use to see comes from our eyes. The rest comes from other parts of our brains...; (Lotto, 2017) The "rest" that Lotto talks about here is essentially the aforementioned previous experience.

David Eagleman takes this point further by saying: 'Detailed expectations about the world - in other words, what the brain guesses will be out there - are being transmitted by the visual cortex to the thalamus... So, at any moment, what we experience as seeing relies less on the light streaming into our eyes, and more on what's already inside our heads.' [Eagleman, 2015, np]

Although not a philosopher, Ahmed, favouring something closer to an enactive-cognition model, says: "... things make an impression upon us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things. Merleau-Ponty makes this point directly when he suggests that 'the word perception indicates a direction rather than a primitive function'. Perception is a way of facing something." [Ahmed, 2006, np].

In certain contexts where I've been before, I can almost imagine the rough map of a place – which goes back to the quote by Sergey Eisenstein [cited by Swann, 2005] and the idea of familiarity. Where my preconceptions of a place and the environment have met, my expectations formed by previous experience help me to "see" the place

Seeing here is closer to understanding, seeing is mediated through familiarity

My body is the instrument with which I perceive the world I can perceive my body but I can't see it - is seeing believing?

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Riccardo Manzotti posits what he calls a radical theory of mind-object identity: Spread Mind Theory. This theory builds on existing enactivist and externalist models [where our conscious experience is dependent on objects external to our bodies, where objects are taken to mean people as well as things] to where, broadly speaking, the 'mind', body and environment are inseparable objects spread over time.

Manzotti's theory provides an interesting reframing of consciousness that is seems far more simple than the current widely-held speculation [that consciousness is emergent]. I have chosen to include this theory even though it contradicts some of the framing that I have used throughout the rest of my dissertation. In a similar way to how Ahmed has used phenomenology.

The contradictory effect this may have reflects the disorientation, dissonance and confusion that I have felt over the past few years, starting with the worsening of my vision. Notably, I did not realise [naively, perhaps] that the other theories that I was using as frameworks had names especially when it comes to internalism [that the world is odourless and colourless and everything that we experience is created in our own minds] because they are so embedded in current dominant discourse, there only appears to be one way where there are actually many.

He calls himself a physicalist, that is, all that we experience, including dreams, can be found in the physical world. Therefore, he is against a dualist Cartesian way of thinking: there is no distinction between subject and object, everything is an object

- A is equal to A, an apple can only be an apple etc.
- All physical objects are subject to physical laws eg. relative velocity, cause and effect etc.
- Causes cannot be separated from their effects.
- Therefore; objects are scattered over time and space so every cause is dependent on the existence of a further physical object
- Bodies, including brains and even experiences are physical.
- **Experience is equal to an object**, that is to say, our bodies are not equal to a pencil, for example, but our experience is, for when internalists look inside our brains they cannot find a pencil [or consciousness], only correlates of this
- We, ourselves being objects, exist in space relative to other objects.
- Brains, made up of neurons and chemical reactions are transducers for these causes.
- Memories, dreams, hallucinations are resonances of past experiences
- Objects exist in space therefore they must also exist in time; the two cannot be separated.
- 'Subjectivity' is actually a particular collection of objects, of resonances.

So: Our brains, bodies, 'minds' and the objects we interact with are spread over time; they are part of a causal chain.

For a long time, neuroscientists have looked at the brain trying to find the thing we call consciousness, trying to find the picture of the apple we are thinking of but all that they find is what is physically there – the actual cells that make up the brain, chemical reactions etc.

'An entity exists only if it is the actual cause of some further effect. This means that the conditions for the existence of something are not absolute but are relative to some further physical system' [Manzotti, www.thespreadmind.com , 2015]. So, causes cannot be separated from their effects. An example he uses is of a key: a scrap of metal is only a key insofar as it is relative to a lock or insofar as it unlocks the lock, if it doesn't do this it is just a scrap of metal. [Manzotti, www.thespreadmind.com, Step 3: Existence is relative 2015]. [books as word-tombs]]. Here, Manzotti is referring to a literal key, not the metaphorical key that an artist or poet might see in a scrap metal. The metaphorical key is a separate object that is equally as real. The metaphorical key would also be a scrap of something else if it could not be used in this metaphorical way.

Instead, our experience of an object is not in our minds, it is in the world;

our experience is the object.

Manzotti further explains that the reason that we might have different experiences is more to do with our physical position in space and time. This is because our bodies and brains are objects too and so exist in space and time like any other object. The way individuals might relate to an apple will be different because of all the other objects we have encountered previously; it's all relative. [see as understanding, perspective]]]]

Even something like colour is relative: '...bananas are only yellow *under a certain light*. Change the light and the banana might look green.' [Manzotti in Manzotti and Parks, www.nybooks.com, *The Colour of Consciousness*, 2016, www.nybooks.com]

Much like in the example of the apple, the 'traditional internalist theory of consciousness is that colour happens in the head and the world is colourless and odourless...[but when we are looking at a colour and scientists look at the brain they only find correlates of colour or consciousness, not these things themselves [...]. To us color seems to be an external reality, not a subjective delusion' [Manzotti in Manzotti and Parks, *The Colour of Consciousness*, 2016, www.nybooks.com]

If these things did not come from our interactions with objects in the world we would be able to dream an original colour. This is also why someone who is congenitally blind does not and cannot dream about colour because they have not sensed it in the world with their eyes. They can learn theory about colour and even how other sighted people experience colour from poetry etc. and what colours are usually associated with eg the sky, trees, rocks etc. This doesn't necessarily diminish the feeling or experience of colour through poetry as opposed to a mechanical sensing of colour, it is just noting that there is a difference.

Memories, hallucinations, dreams of things do not necessarily prove the existence of a mind, they are instead resonances of our experiences of these things; '...our bodies and brains are at the end point of a causal process, that can be very brief, or interminally drawn out. But we, our experience, are at the origin of the process, not the end.' [Parks in *Dreaming Outside Our Heads*, Manzotti and Parks, 2017, www.nybpps.com].
[[[getting back colour]]]]

Despite his use of the Hypothetical - and actual - Blind Man/Woman [he is open to discussion on this point], I am drawn to his theory because it brings me closer to what I am doing or experiencing: making an artwork and the artwork are the same even if I can't see what I'm doing and even when not seeing can make the world feel empty, there is no such thing as nothing.

Existence needs observation. In bumping into objects as often as I do, I am very aware of **materiality AND PHYSICALITY OF THE WORLD**

There are so very many objects, no emptiness.

Touch

Description

My understanding of my sense of touch has become slightly different than it was before. I'm not quite clear on how to express my experience with words yet, in much the same way I'm still trying to process the nuanced and different ways I am now using all of my other senses. I have never much liked the sensation of being touched. Where people have expressed, either directly to me or from what I have read in novels, joy or excitement at an intentional touch, I experience something close to revulsion and panic. I don't, of course, feel this way all the time especially with those that I am familiar with but it is only on the very rare occasion that I will voluntarily show affection through touch. I am referring here to a very particular kind of touch: it is not the momentary almost non-existent touch of a stranger as you pass each other on a busy street or mall. It is also not the feeling of being crammed into some form of sweaty public transport. I am referring to an intentional kind of touching.

When I used a white cane and my mobility was quite frankly terrible, especially in new places, I often had occasion to experience this intentional touch. I live in a city [Johannesburg] that has very poor infrastructure - good compared to the rest of South Africa but not wealthier countries - but it is full of very helpful people so when I get lost I am never lost for very long; somehow there is always someone there to help me. At these times, help is appreciated and wanted. Other times it doesn't seem like I have a choice in the matter. People wordlessly come up behind me and take my arm proceeding to drag me in the direction that I am headed [or the direction that they think I'm going in] and it only becomes clear whether they will speak to me a few seconds into the interaction.

Although sometimes alarming, this is better than the alternative methods I experienced for example I have twice been dragged along by the end of my cane. The first time this happened it was around the time of a spate of violent murders of women. The man who assisted me very obviously wanted to help but I suspect that the murders and the storm of media debate around the issue made him hold back a bit where he may previously have taken my arm. This seems like conjecture but when two older women witnessed the spectacle they were wracked by convulsive giggles and offered to help me. Despite the absurdity of the situation they cited the murders as a reason for intervening, I must note that they would probably have helped me any other day because as I have heard many times before 'women must help women'. These types of interactions and conversations with a male friend of mine who is blind make me suspect that the experience of disability is gendered, like almost everything else, but this does need more investigation. Sometimes people [mostly men] hold my hand or wrist too intimately. It would seem easy to tell these good Samaritans to let their arm fall to the side so that I can use my cane in one hand and tap their arm if I lose the appropriate orientation but I become trapped in the always already present unequal power relations and other issues of gender and age trap me in silence.

When other people see me, they mistake what is admittedly slow, clumsy and sometimes confused figuring and orientating for hopeless distress and disorientation. Sometimes when people think that they are doing me a favour by helping me, I feel that I am actually doing them the favour by letting them feel useful. This is one of the ways I **secret back power;**

a type of vulnerability is draped onto me by others and is in turn assumed by me. Pity is a heavy shawl to shrug off. There is an implicit power relation where I am not the actor but the thing acted upon; the package clumsily and heavily conveyed to its destination. It is not easily being able to ascertain someone's intentions from their body language when you can't see it. It is the intimacy of touch, the forced familiarity too quickly won so that there is no time for trust to form. It is also the fear of offending, the same fear that some people have when first approaching me. It would be far easier or all involved if I expressed how I would like to be assisted. In a way, we are both using each other in order to in act our identities.

Even a gentle or reverent touch can, with enough frequency, leave a physical trace; a thin film of oil from the skin, a blemish, or eventually, it can weather mountains and create singing stones. It is the first sense we possess as burdgeoning fetuses.

I wanted to explore the idea of 'stickiness' and the need to gather as much information as possible through the use of wood glue. I poured the glue onto large sheets of plastic and painted into it with black ink to see if I could document touch. The ink spreads slightly, leading just further than the margin of my touch making space for itself in the glue. When the glue dried I peeled it off the plastic. When it was cold the glue turned into rigid sheets but especially when it was warm the sheets became malleable and soft and began to take the shape of whatever I was resting it on, becoming a layer of skin.

Touch is indeed a useful sense but it also has it's downfalls. I was invited by the curators of an exhibition entitled 'Touch' part of the Turbine Art Fair in 2017 to explore the paintings by touching them and speaking to one of the curators and several artists. After a few hours of doing this, I was almost on a high. I was engaging in a conventionally forbidden activity, touching paintings in a gallery space. It was also the first exhibition that I had been to since my level of vision dramatically declined. My absence from any kind of exhibition or gallery space was partly because I felt somewhat unwelcome - I couldn't partake in what these spaces exist for; spaces for visual spectacle, both in terms of the art that is enacted within and enclosed by their walls and the ritual of looking and looking while looking.

After the elation subsided I came down from the high quite quickly. I realized that the most useful information that I gleaned from the experience came from the verbal descriptions of one of the curators and even more tantalizing details if the creators of the paintings were there. I was hopelessly disappointed that the feeling of dry oil paint was absolutely nothing like what the look and feel of wet oil paint promised. Through touch, almost every painting that I encountered only revealed an unpleasant rough, dry, crumbly texture not unlike dry, cracked heels in the middle of winter.

In this way my experience does resonate with Manzotti's theory where existence needs some kind of observation. One of the ways I can more fully experience something is through eating:

Consuming the loop:

Food has always played an important role in my family and a few years ago I taught myself how to cook. This type of making started to be more satisfying. The act of preparing food took on a different significance for me when I became blind. It was the first activity that I performed as well without vision. Unlike baking, there is more leeway in cooking in terms of deviating from fixed ingredient ratios. Elements can

be manipulated cooked or prepared in several ways, amounts of ingredients altered, layering and ordering of ingredients all influence how we experience the resulting meal.

The process of preparing and assembling food bears a lot of similarity to the process of art-making or, probably, any making.

I felt a greater sense of control in cooking rather than art-making because the cycle of making and consuming felt more complete. When I make art that loop I have created cannot satisfactorily be completed. The experience of making can sometimes feel empty, two-dimensional, even boring.

The objects I make or the marks I put down are lost.

If you cannot perform your identity in all its nuance and variability

If you cannot have a tangible effect on the world

Without falling into nihilism

What is the point?

While the verbal description by the curator was sufficient in providing an understanding of the visual image and at times intentionality, I most benefited from talking to some of the artists. To my frustration and impatience, describing their work is a very difficult thing for an artist to do. I can relate to the discomfort this activity can provoke, having engaged in the art-making process for most of my life. Words seem extra, get in the way of an artwork but they are useful in bringing the reasons for aesthetic decisions to the front of the mind, simultaneously invoking criticality. Why certain formal decisions were made do they work conceptually. Does the visual language speak to the ideas being explored?

Georgina Kleege writes extensively about description; this is the main focus of her essay entitled 'Blind Imagination: Pictures into Words'. She discusses her experiences of people describing images and artworks to her; she prefers to ask individuals for descriptions separately, otherwise their descriptions tend to influence each other. If they use similar adjectives to describe an object or thing, she thinks of this as coming as close to universal truth as she can get. When someone is describing a face to her for example, it is helpful for the person describing the face to concentrate on what makes the face different from other faces, e.g. if the person has a prominent nose. She also considers peoples descriptions to say more about them than what they are describing. While talking to a friend of hers – a filmmaker – about description, her friend mentions how directors put a great deal of thought into creating a scene, paying attention to every detail. They moved to the topic of the fairly recent development of audio description for film and theatre, and the filmmaker suggested that there is just too much information to get through – these descriptions couldn't possibly describe everything in every scene. Kleege replies: "If a picture is worth a thousand words, I'd settle for a hundred, even ten or twelve." [Kleege, 2008] She draws a distinction between the amount of information necessary for understanding and superfluous details that can ultimately prove distracting. For her, a useful description is only one on a "need-to-know" basis, as per her example in the article: "At the bus stop I may ask

someone to read the number of the approaching bus, but never for a description of the advertisement on its side." [Kleege, 2008, np].

It may be assumed that the only way to describe something is to create a mental image. Martin Jay cites Rivlin and Gravelle, who assert that: "The ability to visualise something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental images... The link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization can be quite startling." [Jay 1993, np]

Kleege, however, advances this idea with the following contention. When describing things or phenomena, it's not always necessary to create a visual or mental image for someone to understand something. Other senses may be just as useful in the act of describing when a description is being given to someone without vision. She recalls a story told to her by a friend attending a group mobility class: when they encountered a T-junction, the instructor asked whether everyone knew what a T-junction was. One of the students who'd been blind from birth had never experienced the 'T' of the Roman alphabet, having only ever learnt brail. The instructor was able to explain to the student by drawing a 'T' on their back, essentially foregoing a visual description for a tactile one. At this point, the student was fully able to understand the concept: "... he [the instructor] was inviting him [the student] to re-orient his mind's body in space, to transform his body into a map of the terrain that surrounded him." (Kleege, 2008)

Jay does then corroborate this view: "There is therefore something revealing in the ambiguities surrounding the word 'image' hello, which can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena." [Jay, 1994, np] Sometimes, my own perception is influenced by other people's descriptions. I'm interested in the act of describing and the interplay between visual memory, verbal description, and expectation. Previously, I mainly used an internal model based on visual memory, but now, I have to integrate new memories to update the internal model. This process has to be completed with my other senses and the input of other people.

**I noticed with some dismay, as do many people
when they first become blind, the apparent
immediacy of vision compared to all other senses.**

It is true that sometimes things are silent. Sometimes things must be acted on to in order for their presence to be experienced. Without sight there is a certain proximity that is needed for the discovery the external. If this proximity is not possible and a landscape cannot be surveyed from a distant vantage point what happens to the idea of a landscape or view.

Sometimes other senses can reveal things which cannot be seen
the smell of a polluted river
the distant sound of distant sirens

With sight there is and must be directionality. Orientation. I am specifically talking about human senses as they are unassisted by technology except for glasses and hearing aids because at this current moment they don't result in super-ability: they are unlike drones, unlike flying in an aeroplane and having an aerial view. There are some accounts of blind people who have learned to echolocate. They reveal how the development of this new skill allows for a type of seeing or sensing their environment.

The idea of a 'view'

Standing still and watching a view of something pleasant - it is framed or not framed.

Tradition of landscape painting owning the land.

Can I own the land?

It seems that 'owning' land, the desire to to be part of a place, a true imagined belonging.

Landscape paintings imply a type of blindness: you cannot see beyond the frame, everything captured, still, dead, preserved,

Books are word tombs encapsulating a strange kind of death, the framed view, contained worlds, they only come alive again when they are read

they have many incarnations in our heads but they are fictional from the start.

In exploring and expressing my experience through art-making and presenting these explorations in the form of an installation, the work exists as an extension of myself; a new and separate body through which my experience resonates and can be experienced by an audience.

The installation, which consists of pieces of writing from my dissertation, the large drawn pen and charcoal pieces, pastel and painted pieces. Some of these are hung on the walls, some lie in the middle of the floor, partially rolled up, some pieces are scattered haphazardly on the floor near the walls, some bent and crumpled, seemingly discarded sculptures. The glue 'skins', in the middle and to the side of the room, draped over plinths suggest something hidden and at the same time something present. Viewers are sometimes anchored by the writing and sometimes disorientated by this seemingly chaotic installation of the work. They may be able to find the traced forms, only to be distanced by strange combinations of colours. The searching and movement communicated by the mark-making in the work propels people forward. Viewers can navigate room by walking in a loop on a path between the objects in the middle of the room and those to the side and on the walls, adding to the ever-growing, ever-moving collection of objects and surfaces

Making work as moving through and with blindness has given me a space, a platform, a quasi-orientation, perhaps a straight line off an oblique angle [Ahmed 2006].

Trying on different paradigms [eg. Spread Mind Theory] has given me perspective but only insofar as I think and look forward. The constant shifting even of how we

conceptualise ourselves, our minds and our place in the world and the universe has changed so often that where looking back should be contained and safe and sure it is, instead, dizzying.

'Ocular-eccentricity rather than blindness, it might be argued, is the antidote to privileging any one visual order or scopic regime. [...] Rather than calling for the exorbitation or enucleation of "the eye," it is better to encourage the multiplication of a thousand eyes, which, like Nietzsche's thousand suns, suggests the openness of human possibilities.' [Jay, 1993, np]

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