WHAT BLIND PEOPLE CAN TEACH SIGHTED VIEWERS ABOUT ART

Jenni Lauwrens

The University of Pretoria

Jenni.lauwrens@up.ac.za

Jenni Lauwrens is an Associate Professor in the School of the Arts at the University of Pretoria where she teaches Visual Culture Studies. Her research focuses on people's multisensory experiences of art and visual culture. In 2022, she published *Embodiment and the Arts: Views from South Africa* (ed) and is currently co-editor of the journal *Image & Text.*

Abstract

While sight and hearing have been privileged in the philosophical formulation of aesthetics, the significance of touch to the experience of art has not enjoyed much attention at all. In order to displace sight and reinstate touch as a viable mode of engagement for the interpretation of visual art, this article reports on a study in which blind individuals and sighted people who were blindfolded were interviewed about their experiences of artworks. The participants were invited to touch selected sculptures in South African artist, Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet* (1990 – ongoing) installation. The main aim of the study was to investigate the nature of the tactile aesthetic experience elicited by these sculptures when they are handled and not seen. Secondly, the study aimed to reach a deeper understanding of how tactile engagement with art enriches the experience, meaning and power of the work for both those who can and cannot see. Through the investigation it was revealed that visual art can forge a bridge between individuals with and without blindness.

Key terms

Art museums, modern aesthetics, art for the blind, *Blind Alphabet*, aesthetic touch, haptic confidence

Introduction

Living with blindness does not prevent someone from being interested in art; examples of visually impaired photographers, painters, sculptors, and installation and performance artists

abound. While visual art is often considered to involve mainly the visual sense, artists who are visually impaired point out that their artworks involve multiple senses. For instance, the American photographer, Peter Eckert explains that even though his art is purely visual in nature, he uses sound, touch and memory combined with his mind's eye when taking a photograph (in Heard, 2020:302).

In attempting to answer the question: what can blind people teach sighted viewers about art, this article reports on the findings of a study in which I interviewed blind people and sighted people who were blindfolded in order to understand their experience of selected sculptures.[i] The sculptures they were invited to touch form part of South African artist Willem Boshoff's installation *Blind Alphabet* (1990 – ongoing), which was exhibited at the Javett Art Centre at the University of Pretoria (Javett-UP), South Africa in 2021. The main aim of the study was to investigate the nature of the tactile aesthetic experience elicited by selected sculptures when they are handled and not seen. Secondly, the study aimed to reach a deeper understanding of how tactile engagement with art enriches the experience, meaning and power of the work for both those who can and cannot see. As I will show shortly, the study revealed that art can forge a bridge between individuals with and without blindness.

In order to contextualise the study, I begin by discussing the changing status of touch in art museums, aesthetic philosophy, and in art for the blind with a specific focus on the South African context. Thereafter, I describe *Blind Alphabet* and the opening of Boshoff's retrospective exhibition *Word Woes* (2021), where selections of the installation were exhibited and which provided the impetus for the study. Thereafter, I examine the participants' tactile experiences of selected sculptures and describe the ways in which engaging with the sculptures haptically affected how they were interpreted. In the article I weave together selected responses from the participants with insights about the nature of touch (and aesthetic touch in particular) gleaned from tactile artists, blind writers and academics, as well as historians and anthropologists of the senses.

In and Out of Touch in Art Museums, Aesthetic Philosophy and Art for Persons with Visual Impairments

Touch in Art Museums

For the contemporary museum visitor it is perhaps surprising to discover that the earliest museums of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries allowed visitors to handle the objects

on display. There were a number of reasons for this, as David Howes (2014:260) explains. Handling objects was considered a useful way to learn about them and, it was believed, enhanced their aesthetic appreciation by providing access 'to forms of beauty unavailable to the eye' (Howes, 2014:260). Moreover, it was hoped that touching objects brought one closer to their creators. Some museum artifacts were even thought to possess the power to heal and it was believed that touching them would lead to better health (Howes, 2014:260). However, since the mid-nineteenth century, touching the objects displayed in a museum has not generally been condoned (Candlin, 2010). Changing perceptions about the value of and need for touch in understanding and appreciating museum objects was the main reason behind eradicating this sense from the public museum. At the same time, the formation of 'the *institution* of the artwork as an object of contemplation' (Rees Leahy, 2012:4 emphasis in original) gave rise to particular forms of bodily comportment being either condoned or prohibited in museum spaces. Visitors were educated in new ways of 'walking, looking, sitting, and speaking' (Howes, 2014:261) when appreciating art. As a result, the public museum was turned into a space that promoted 'ocularnormative civility' (D'Evie and Kleege, 2018) whilst institutionalizing its resistance to touch.

Since the rise of the modern art museum in the late nineteenth century, it is not at all uncommon to find signs that read 'Do Not Touch' placed strategically near artworks. In addition, the presence of security guards, barriers, cameras and sensors ensure that visitors refrain from touching or even getting too close to an artwork. Of course, for practical reasons, art museums cannot accommodate unrestricted touch since their function is to preserve and protect fragile and valuable objects. Recently, however, some museums have begun to invite visitors to handle selected materials in their exhibits albeit under close supervision. While some of these exhibits are aimed at sighted viewers, many are designed for blind people. In the United Kingdom (UK), as Fiona Candlin (2004:72) points out, since the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, museums are legally required to provide physical access for persons with visual impairment. In the United States (US), as Georgina Kleege (2018:1) notes, antidiscrimination legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, have led art museums to provide touch and audio tours for blind persons. Unfortunately, in South Africa there are no art museums that consistently cater to the needs of people who are blind.[ii] And, despite the incentives for offering more accessible exhibitions in the UK and US, these attempts have sometimes been demeaning to people with low vision, ineffective, and generally limited (Kleege, 2018:2; Candlin, 2004). The dominance of the visual and the

prevailing skepticism around touch persists in these spaces. This attitude owes much to the status of touch in Western philosophy and the conceptual framing of what constitutes a proper aesthetic experience. In the following section, I briefly reflect on the status of touch in aesthetic philosophy.

Touch and Modern Aesthetics

The etymological root of aesthetics is the Greek word '*aesthesis*', which means sensation or perception by the senses (Osborne, 2000:1). Aristotle understood aesthetic experience as having little to do with intellectual experience and attributed 'an independent non-intellectual cognitive value to the senses' (Osborne, 2000:2). Apart from awarding a special value and significance to sensory experience, however, Aristotle also formulated a hierarchy of the senses, from most to least important. Vision (along with hearing) was categorized as the noblest sense – because it gave access to 'sensibility' – while touch occupied the lowest position. Jonathan Rēe (2000:57) explains that for Aristotle, touch and taste should be treated with suspicion because they tempt us 'towards debauchery, drunkenness, gluttony and lechery'.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Alexander Baumgarten elaborated on the meaning of aesthetics, thereby laying the foundation for the philosophy of modern aesthetics. By denoting aesthetics as 'the science of the sensory knowledge of beauty' (Osborne, 2000:2-3), he was in essence following Aristotle's interest in sensory experience as a distinct kind of experience. However, working in the rationalist tradition, Baumgarten was only interested in the senses he deemed worthy of study and this was based on whether or not the sense in question could be equated with reason (Duncum, 2005:11). Following Baumgarten, Immanuel Kant later formulated aesthetics as mainly a cognitive experience involving a combination of sensory perception and the faculty of understanding. Developing a contemplative, detached attitude would give rise to the disinterested pleasure distinctive of proper aesthetic experience. In the twentieth century, Clive Bell (1914:3) linked aesthetic experience to the peculiar emotion that is aroused by the formal visual structures of 'significant form'. In this way, the theoretical senses of sight and hearing came to be privileged above the sensuous and sensual senses of taste, smell and touch in the development of a philosophy of aesthetics. Moreover, aesthetic experience came to be hinged upon a suitably detached and disinterested (universal or transcendental) subject who can

make judgements about beauty from the requisite spectatorial distance (see Lauwrens 2018:17). The place of this objective spectator was cemented in the institution of the modern art museum where the eye – and not the hand, nose, or tongue – enjoyed a position of honor and power.

As already hinted at above, the 'private' (Pallasmaa, 2005:24) senses of touch, taste and smell were neglected in the history of modern aesthetics and there are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, these so-called 'lower senses' require 'physical contact' and 'emotional intimacy' and, so it is assumed, they cannot produce critical judgements about aesthetic experience (Diaconu, 2006). Sight, understood as being the least bodily of the senses, distances us from the corporeal, and because it supposedly provides access to the truth, is welcomed into the realm of critical reflection and the contemplation of art. Secondly, the intimate senses of touch, taste and smell, it is presumed, cannot produce art 'because they deal with ephemeral stimuli and consume their objects' (Diaconu, 2006). If touch was relegated to the lowest position in the sensory order that has dominated Western aesthetic philosophy, and assumed to be unable to produce an aesthetic experience at all, how might we challenge these assumptions and reinstate touch as a viable mode of aesthetic appreciation?

Art for blind people

Despite touch being sidelined in the philosophy of aesthetics and in the construction of the modern art museum, some artists have been interested in advancing touch as an aesthetic experience. Filippo Marinetti and Marcel Duchamp are among a handful of twentieth century artists who espoused an art based on the sense of touch to counter the prevailing hegemony of vision in art discourses of their time. More recently, global arts practice reveals a fascination with blindness. What Caroline Jones (2016:xi) refers to as a 'trope of blindness' entered biennales in the 1990s in artworks created by sighted artists. Some of these artworks may only be touched by visitors with visual impairments, while others depict people with low vision exploring objects through touch. Still others are exhibited in completely dark spaces to emulate the experience of blindness.

In South Africa, Willem Boshoff and Berco Wilsenach are prominent artists who have made artworks specifically for a blind audience. Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet* (1990 – ongoing)

utilizes Braille text so that blind people can access the descriptions of the sculptures in this installation. In *Die Blinde Astronoom (The Blind Astronomer)* (2013), Wilsenach explains the night sky to people with low vision by using Braille text in star charts carefully engraved onto large glass panels (see Lauwrens 2019). The meanings of both installations are only available to people who can read Braille. While Wilsenach's star charts may be touched by sighted viewers, only those who can read Braille fully understand what the sculptures are all about. Boshoff goes even further by altogether prohibiting sighted viewers from seeing his sculptures. In this way, both artists displace sight and draw attention to other modes of sensory experience in art appreciation.

According to Jones (2016:3), when artists solicit 'visceral experience' and 'multimodal sensation' in their work, their intention is to challenge empowered spectatorship and the ocularcentric dominance of the institutional framework of art. In other words, their reference to sightlessness is, on the one hand, political: it aims to highlight multisensoriality as a source of knowledge as opposed to the privilege usually given to sight in the experience of visual art. On the other hand, sighted artists' fascination with blindness might merely serve to highlight the importance of sight and perhaps even produce pity for the sightless. The sighted audience of *Blind Alphabet,* who may neither touch nor see the sculptures, are left feeling deprived of any aesthetic experience at all. Exhibited as several rows of black mesh boxes, the scene is reminiscent of a graveyard (Boshoff in Marais, 2021) connoting loss and mourning, which are common assumptions made about living with blindness (Kleege, 2018:51). In a similar way, *Die Blinde Astronoom (The Blind Astronomer),* which is usually exhibited in an almost entirely dark room thus rendering the illuminated glass panels luminescent and visually striking, produces pity for those who cannot see it. The *nature* of aesthetic touch, one might conclude, is not given high priority in either of these artworks, which are mainly experienced by sighted individuals anyway.[iii] That the audiences are mainly sighted is understandable given that people with visual impairments would not ordinarily visit an exhibition of visual art (unless a special tour is arranged), especially in South Africa where tours of art for the blind are not a common occurrence. The neglect of touch in these tactile exhibitions reflects Jones's (2016:34) view that, despite the global interest in the artworld to include touch in artworks, a general 'haptic agnosia' still exists around tactile aesthetic experience.[iv]

Although it is sighted viewers that mainly experience both *Die Blinde Astronoom (The Blind Astronomer)* and *Blind Alphabet*, these artworks nevertheless provide an ideal opportunity to explore the nature and qualities of touch, especially in its aesthetic dimension. The study I report on here explored what individuals with visual impairment can contribute to the existing discourse on Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet* installation. Whilst the work has already been extensively analyzed (see Campbell, 2018; Swanepoel, 2014; Van Eeden, 1997), no-one has yet investigated the nature of the tactile encounter with this installation. It is my contention that, instead of merely highlighting the ocularcentric nature of the institution of art and its emphasis on vision, *Blind Alphabet* can contribute to knowledge about tactile aesthetic experience thereby further 'developing the concept and practice of aesthetic touch' (Driscoll, 2020:2) about which 'next to nothing is known' (Driscoll, 2020:3). In the next section, I briefly describe the installation and provide an outline of the study.

Blind Alphabet in Context

Boshoff began working on *Blind Alphabet* in 1990 which, by 2021, consisted of almost 400 wooden sculptures. The artist collects obscure words and, over many decades, has compiled several dictionaries for his own use and research. *Blind Alphabet* is a three-dimensional conceptual 'representation' of some of these words, which all relate to forms or shapes. Having begun with the letter A in 1990, in 2020 the artist completed the letter L.[v] The sculptures are contained in black boxes made of steel mesh designed in such a way that a sighted audience is allowed only a fragmented view of the wooden objects inside. On each lid, the explanation of the word represented by the sculpture is printed in Braille text on an aluminum sheet. The boxes are placed on black pedestals arranged in parallel rows with a warning sign reading 'Don't Touch' placed strategically nearby in case sighted visitors are tempted to open the lids and look inside. Therefore, no-one is allowed to view these works. It is only blind people that may touch the lids, read the Braille, and handle the sculptures.

In 2021, sections of *Blind Alphabet* were exhibited at the Javett-UP as part of Boshoff's retrospective show titled *Word Woes*. Curated by Heléne Smuts, the exhibition included 90 sculptures from the letters A, F, G, H and L in the *Blind Alphabet* series. This provided the ideal opportunity to conduct research on the nature of the tactile aesthetic experience afforded by the installation.

Methods

The study was designed around a number of questions relating to tactile aesthetic experience, some of which I have reported on elsewhere (see Lauwrens 2022). The two main questions I address in this article are: how do people who cannot see *Blind Alphabet* describe their tactile aesthetic experience of it?; and what meanings emerge through the tactile aesthetic encounter with *Blind Alphabet*? Sighted individuals who were blindfolded were also invited to participate in the study. Over a period of a month I conducted 13 interviews during which a blind person was paired up with a sighted person who was blindfolded. Both participants were interviewed about their tactile encounter with a selected sculpture in the letter L series.[vi] Setting up the interviews in this way meant that the blind participants had an opportunity to share their tactile expertise (and their proficiency reading Braille) with others (and not only the interviewer) in an intimate setting where a great deal of time was spent on listening, reflecting, and discussing. Seven sculptures displaying a variety of shapes, forms, patterns and textures were selected for the study. I asked each participant to closely describe the temperature, texture, weight, size, material and smell of each sculpture. They were encouraged to notice the different ways in which they were touching the sculptures, which parts of their bodies were touching which parts of the sculptures, and what associations and meanings emerged whilst handling them. In this way, the participants were required to slow down and notice the peculiar haptic features of the sculpture before trying to recognize what it might represent. Since the study centered around the tactile aesthetic encounter with *Blind Alphabet,* it is useful to first delineate how such an experience might be defined, bearing in mind that, as I have already shown, the philosophy of aesthetics has not been very helpful in such an endeavor.

Aesthetic Touch

While empirical research in psychology (see Delogue et al., 2021) and the neurosciences (Gallace and Spence, 2011) have attempted to put a finger on the nature of touch as an aesthetic mode, for the purpose of this study, I found more value in anecdotal reflections by artists who ask their audiences to touch their artworks. Bonnie Kemske and Rosalyn Driscoll are exemplary among artists who maintain that touch offers a valuable dimension to the art experience and who, consequently, create artworks in order to expand on what we know about tactile aesthetics. Kemske created ceramic sculptures from clay that was moulded

against her own body. After inviting audiences to touch, hold and even hug these sculptures, she asked them to describe their experiences (Kemske, 2009). Likewise, Driscoll's practice is informed by feedback collected from people who engage haptically with her works. She uses a wide variety of materials for her sculptures, including rawhide, steel, stone, wood, and rope – all of which are selected for their peculiar haptic qualities. Over many years, Driscoll has interviewed blind, partially sighted, and sighted adults and children, ranging from seasoned art lovers to 'people off the street' (Driscoll, 2020:4). According to Driscoll (2020:2,4), listening to how others describe their tactile experience of art contributes to what we know about 'the language of touch and the somatic senses'.

Getting to grips with the language of *aesthetic* touch means attending to the qualities and effects of textures, forms, shapes, patterns, and spaces and the 'relationships between [these] parts' (Driscoll, 2020:3). For renowned author Helen Keller (2009), an aesthetic tactile experience involves the combinations of all these qualities, which affect an object's 'eloquence to the touch'. Just as aesthetic looking is different from everyday perception, aesthetic touch is different from 'functional, habitual ways of perceiving' (Driscoll, 2020:3). Aesthetic touch, therefore, involves focusing on the 'sensory qualities' of an object 'rather than practicalities' (Driscoll, 2020:3). It requires a deliberate awareness of the varied tactile qualities of an object and a sustained search for the relationships between each part.

Aesthetic Touch in **Blind Alphabet**

Asking participants to describe the temperature, texture, weight, size, material, and smell of the sculptures drew their attention to the sensory qualities of the sculptures and to notice their 'eloquence to the touch'. Whilst Kleege (2018:10) maintains that 'touch in the blind is not necessarily more sensitive than touch in the sighted', my investigation revealed that the blind participants noticed subtle differences in texture more easily than their sighted blindfolded companions did. Moreover, whether or not the tactile qualities of an object elicited pleasant or unpleasant sensations was idiosyncratic even among the blind participants. Tactile aesthetic experience is personal, and not an outcome of the detached objective position of a supposed universal subject (as modernist aesthetics would have it). Two examples will demonstrate this point.

Figure 1a and 1b: Willem Boshoff. 2020. Lacertine. *Wood, steel, aluminum. Photograph supplied by the artist. Video still by author.*

Figure 1 shows a photograph and a video still, side by side. The left-hand photograph shows a wooden sculpture titled *Lacertine*. The sculpture consists of a sleek, elongated, rectangular, wooden base that twists slightly at each end to form a backwards S-curve. 14 triangular prisms jut out of this base, with each prism comprising six smaller triangles made from light white oak and dark partridge wood. Metal pins, punched into the wooden base at one end, provide the title of the sculpture in Braille. This shape measures approximately 40 cm in length and 15 cm in width and can comfortably be held with two hands. The video still on the right shows a person holding *Lacertine* at waist height in her left hand, whilst the fingertips and palm of her right hand caress the triangular prisms.

Whilst exploring *Lacertine* (Figure 1), one participant with low vision could feel the difference between the textures of the white oak and partridge wood; the darker partridge wood sections felt smooth and the lighter white oak sections felt rough. The blindfolded sighted participant was surprised to hear that there was any difference at all. Moreover, the participant with low vision was more interested in the empty spaces between the triangular strips which, he noticed, grow larger at the ends where the sculpture curves. He described these spaces as ‘barren’ and as eliciting ‘a feeling of emptiness’ (JE, *Lacertine*). The blindfolded sighted participant did not comment on these spaces at all.

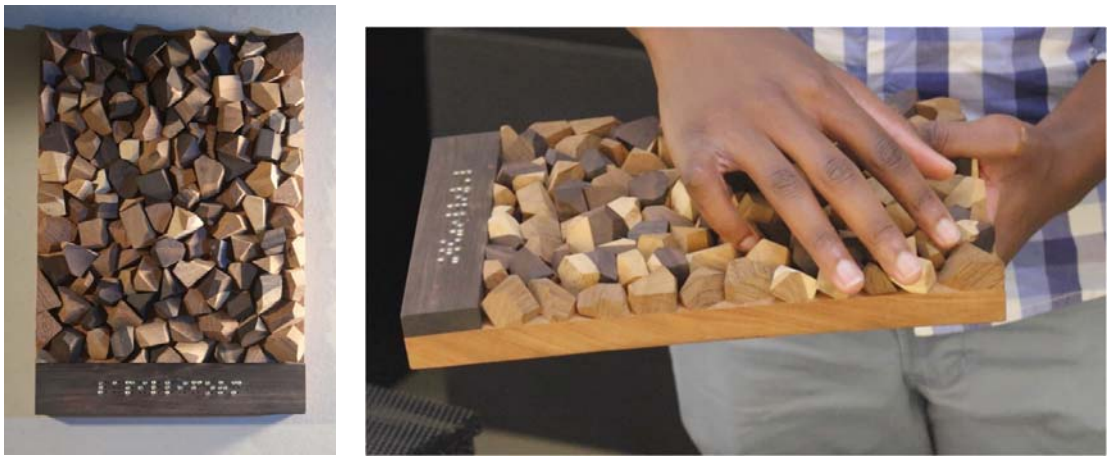

Figure 2a and 2b: Willem Boshoff, 2020. Lapilliform*. Wood, steel, aluminum. Photograph on the left supplied by the artist. Video still of the right by author.*

Figure 2 shows a photograph and a video still side by side. The left hand photograph shows a sculpture titled *Lapilliform.* It is rectangular and consists of a solid piece of thin wood as a base on top of which a number of small, irregularly shaped pieces of wood are glued close together. These pieces have jagged edges and, for some, might resemble small stones. To one side of the jagged pieces there is a narrow strip of polished wood onto which the name of the sculpture is punched in Braille with metal pins. The different parts of the sculpture are made from leadwood, partridge wood and zebrawood, also known as African ebony, and vary from dark to light. The video still on the right shows a person gently stroking the jagged forms with his fingertips.

The participant with low vision was very interested in each jagged 'stone' and spent a great deal of time examining each piece using slow deliberate movements. He found the pointed parts of *Lapilliform* 'beautiful' and said that he liked the way it felt (SM, *Lapilliform*). On the other hand, the sighted blindfolded participant touched those jagged forms cautiously commenting that they felt 'uncomfortable' and 'sharp', exclaiming 'ouch' as she touched them (MD, *Lapilliform*). She was hesitant to touch the jagged parts at all 'because some of the points hurt' (MD, *Lapilliform*). Overall, it was the unevenness and the disorderliness of these parts that were unpleasant for her. She returned frequently to the smooth part of the sculpture – the back and the small strip below the jagged forms – and caressed this piece with her thumbs. Her visually impaired partner merely brushed over the smooth strip quickly, preferring to return to the sharp bits which made him 'curious to know what it is' (SM, *Lapilliform*). He examined these parts repeatedly with his thumb and forefinger because they

offered a more interesting experience, stating that 'I have never touched something like this before' and was determined 'to figure out what it is' (SM, *Lapilliform*). From this example it would seem that the blind participant was more willing to touch what was unfamiliar – potentially harmful, even – and found pleasure in the variety he found in the jagged wooden 'stones', while his sighted partner was hesitant and perhaps too afraid of what her fingers did not understand. In both examples, the curiosity and willingness of the visually impaired participants to touch and explore as a means to understand was striking. Their confidence in touching meant that they were more attuned to the subtle tactile varieties of the objects they explored than their sighted, blindfolded partners were.[vii]

Haptic confidence

The fact that the blind participants were far more adept at exploring objects with their hands than the sighted participants were, was evident from the moment they took the sculptures out of their boxes. The blind participants explored the sculptures in ways that the sighted participants did not, leading to a closer awareness of the objects' distinctive and peculiar qualities. For instance, to determine the weight of the sculptures under investigation, the blind participants used a number of approaches, including holding the sculpture with only one hand, leaning it on their chest and bicep, gently throwing it in the air, and vigorously moving it up and down and from side to side. One of the blind participants put his fingers into the holes on one of the sculptures, holding it in one hand like a bowling ball. After resting the sculpture on his hip and thigh, he determined that it weighed about the same as a 1 kg bag of sugar. To determine the material it was made of, another blind participant hit a sculpture first with the palm and then the base of his hand, while another knocked on it listening to the sound that emanated from it. Yet another participant smelt the sculpture, burying it right up against his nose and cheek. These intimate, haptic connections with the sculptures – which involved whole-body exploration – led to comparisons being made with the memory of other objects the participants had already encountered elsewhere. Once again, their close bodily connection with the sculptures denied the possibility of the ideal distance presumed to be necessary for intellectual aesthetic experience.

The sighted, blindfolded participants were cautious when taking the sculptures out of their boxes and then hardly moved away from the box whilst answering the questions. In fact, probably because they had previously seen the configuration of the whole installation, these

participants all stood facing the box and not the interviewer. The blind participants clearly had more confidence in their own ability not to drop or damage the sculptures, and usually turned away from the boxes to face the interviewer. Holding the sculptures close to their bodies, the sighted participants carefully cradled them in the same way they might hold a baby. They handled the sculptures as if they were precious objects while the blind participants were more relaxed, comfortable and confident in handling them. For the participants with low vision, these were not invaluable treasures to be experienced from an aesthetic distance; instead they understood them as objects available for whole-body haptic exploration and appreciation.

'Hapticity' might then be a more appropriate term to explain the way that the participants with visual impairment experienced *Blind Alphabet.* While tactility denotes passive contact, hapticity involves action. Haptic perception is the 'umbrella term' that describes the body engaged in 'a combination of contact and movement' (Driscoll, 2020:2). Encompassing the feeling of touch, temperature, pain, movement, and force, the haptic sense gathers information about the conditions of the body in relation to the immediate environment. All of these factors were part of the encounter with the installation for participants both with and without visual impairments. However, while all experience is multisensorial, crossmodal and transmodal, the blind were more aware of information obtained through their entire bodies. The reason that touch has been neglected in aesthetic interpretation may then have as much to do with the complexity of the tactile and haptic sensory system as with the mode of physical contact and somatic involvement that touch enables. Despite its complexity, however, touch – as well as the other senses – can enrich aesthetic appreciation and increase the meanings of an artwork. Learning from persons with low vision, the sighted should slow down, become curious and self-confident and attend to their multisensory encounter with an artwork. Moreover, the sighted might learn from the blind to explore not only what is pleasant to the touch, but also that which they might initially find to be unpleasant, disturbing and dangerous.

Aesthetic Touch and Meaning-making

As I have already noted above, whereas sight has (problematically) been referred to as the ideal distance sense, touch is an intimate sense that requires close contact. This intimacy, however, is not an impediment to aesthetic experience, but gives rise to an enriched

understanding of an artwork. The significance of touch in aesthetic meaning-making relates to the nature of the sense of touch itself. Before the eyes and ears have developed in the human embryo, the tactile system is already becoming functional (Montagu, 1986:4). Touch has therefore been referred to as 'the mother of the senses' (Montagu, 1986:3). Moreover, as Juhani Pallasmaa (2005:10) puts it 'all the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense'. Not localized to only one organ, touch is perceived through the whole skin, the largest sensory organ in the body through which all our senses are connected. However, touch is not only 'skin-deep'; touch receptors are also found beneath the surface of the skin. Penetrating the skin, nerves and bones, tactile stimuli may press on the whole body, leading anthropologists of the senses to describe touch as both the 'deepest sense' (Classen, 2012) and as a complex – or 'manifold' (Paterson, 2007:1) – sensory system. Metaphorically speaking, one may be 'touched' by what one sees, hears, and smells even though one has not literally touched these things. Reaching deep inside the body as well as deep into one's past, touch conjures up infinite metaphorical associations. These associations are shaped by personal likes and dislikes as well as the values and attitudes about touch that are learnt over time in particular social and cultural contexts (Classen, 2012:xi). Therefore, while touch is universal, it is also deeply personal, leading Kemske (2009:326) to maintain that touch is 'our most direct, least intellectualized, sense'.

But even if tactile perception is reflexive and pre-reflective, it is certainly not fuzzy, incomprehensible or inarticulable. When a slow, deliberate and reflective approach is taken to tactile experience (as we aimed to do in this study), associations are made and new meanings are discovered. As Keller (2009) notes, 'imagination crowns the experience of [her] hands'. As she feels the different parts of an object or a space, her mind, which is already 'full of associations, sensations and theories', puts them together to form an impression (Keller, 2009). In our study, one participant with low vision explained it as follows: 'I think the first thing I do as I explore is I try to visualize what I'm feeling ... so ... I ... sort of explore all of the outline of it and try and get like a mental image of what this is and then try and match that to something that I know' (JE, *Lachrymiform*). His statement confirms that when an artwork is touched and not seen, the body becomes the locus of meaning-making; the place from which the intellect takes its cue.

Although under normal circumstances a blind visitor would read the Braille text on the aluminum lids of *Blind Alphabet* before taking the sculptures out of their boxes, in this study

I deliberately postponed the reading of the text until last. The descriptions would have influenced the participants' tactile explorations of the sculptures and would, no doubt, have focused their sensory, emotional and intellectual awareness in a particular way. As a result, throughout the interview, the participants had to rely on their imagination to make sense of what they were touching.

After drawing their attention to the qualities of the forms, shapes, textures, patterns, spaces and the relationships between them, I asked the participants if they associated the sculpture with anything or if any images came to mind as they were handling it. One of the participants thought that *Lacertine* felt like 'water perhaps', 'like it could be waves' or 'something reptilian, like scaly skin' (JE, *Lacertine*). One sculpture was described as 'like a small jewelry box' or 'a suitcase maybe' (JE, *Labriform*) and another reminded the respondent of 'some kind of pumpkin' or a 'container for fruit or grain or water' (JE, *Lachrymiform*).

A few participants indicated that the sculptures evoked deeply personal memories of objects, experiences and even smells from their childhood. One explained that a sculpture smelled like beetroot and took him back to his youth (NM, *Loculed*). The same sculpture reminded another participant of playing under acorn trees as a child (SS, *Loculed*). This association, she remarked: 'just made me happy' (SS, *Loculed*). Similarly, another participant also noted that touching the smooth parts of *Lapilliform* made her feel 'content and ... happy' (MD, *Lapilliform*). This sculpture conjured up the memory of the 'smoky' smells in her aunt's shop where wood is extensively used (MD, *Lapilliform*).

After hearing what the sculptures were actually meant to represent, there were mixed reactions. One participant found that the intended meaning of the sculpture was 'just a new meaning. It wasn't as personal' (MD, *Lapilliform*). Her partner, on the other hand, upon hearing the meaning of *Lapilliform,* declared that 'Now it makes sense' (SM, *Lapilliform*). After hearing the description of *Labriform*, a participant exclaimed: 'Wow .... The description adds a lot more depth to the experience. So ... knowing what this is representing ... allows me to experience it in a totally different way .... and it ... sort of draws my attention to specific areas' (JE, *Labriform*).

The point of course was not to determine whether or not the respondent's associations were 'correct' or at all similar to what the artist intended. Rather, it was to allow the participants –

by focusing on touch, smell and hearing – to let their imaginations wander 'into the borderlands of experience' (Keller, 2009) and to be guided by their somatic experiences. These deeply personal associations would never have come about if the boxes (with the hidden sculptures inside) were displayed to viewers for visual engagement only. A visual encounter with an artwork often takes place so quickly that viewers hardly take the time to ponder and explore what they are seeing (see Smith, Smith and Tinio, 2017:77-85). When she was allowed to look at *Loculed*, a sighted participant said it was 'very different to what [she had] imagined' (SS, *Loculed*). Because the imagination plays such a powerful role in tactile aesthetic experience, engaging with the sculptures in this way evoked responses that would be inaccessible – and unimaginable – through eyesight alone. Blind people can teach the sighted to slow down, pay attention to the subtle qualities of an artwork, and let their imaginations wander.

Forging a Bridge Between Blind and Sighted People

At the end of the interviews, I encouraged the participants to ask each other questions about the experience. This, I believe, is where the main value of the study lies in motivating for the development of accessible programs for persons with visual impairment in art museums in South Africa. During the study, all the sighted participants expressed an interest in learning more about living with blindness, reading Braille, and the assistive technologies that persons with visual impairments use. In one conversation, a blind participant informed his sighted partner that 'it is much easier to read something with your hands' and to understand what you are reading 'than listening to it ... [on] ... a laptop ... [that] reads for you. But when you are reading it with your hands, you understand it ... better' (SM, *Lapilliform*). Moreover, he stated that '… it is always nice to share actually because ... I am so willing to let people know about how a blind person lives, yeah, I'm so willing …' (SM, *Lecotropal*). This sentiment was reiterated by all the blind and partially sighted participants.

Beyond teaching the sighted about the aspects of visual art that they may overlook, this study revealed the way in which an artwork might act as a bridge between persons with and without vision impairments. Through reflection and dialogue, the sighted came to understand the many ways in which persons with blindness are excluded in everyday life. For example, in response to one of our questions, a sighted participant said that: 'It almost feels like I'm now let in on a secret and I'm now sort of part of something else, I don't know, something that I'm

not supposed to be part of because it is restricted [for] sighted people' (MdT, *Labriform*). Her blind partner commented that 'generally people who can't see feel like that ... about most other things' (JE, *Labriform*). Overall, the blind participants were grateful for the opportunity not only to touch the artworks, but to be *included* and heard. One young man said that it made him 'feel [like a] special person' because '... as blind we are [usually] excluded' (NM, *Loculed*). Another said 'this feels like a lot of special attention is given to my personal experience of this art ... like someone's really listening or, you know, trying to get my attention' (JE, *Labriform*). People who would not usually speak to each other shared their lived experiences by connecting through art. In this way, *Blind Alphabet* has the potential to forge bridges between blind and sighted people. This is precisely what Boshoff hopes *Blind Alphabet* might achieve but, as I explained earlier, it is unfortunately a rare occurrence.[viii]

Conclusion

There is far more that can be said about the tactile qualities of the sculptures discussed here and I have done so elsewhere (Lauwrens 2022). This article has focused on the meanings that were elicited by the tactile aesthetic engagement with selected sculptures. I aimed to demonstrate that, owing to their tactile curiosity and haptic confidence, blind people have a great deal of bodily knowledge to share with sighted people when engaging with art through touch. The study showed that blind people can teach sighted viewers to be curious, brave and self-confident when touching unfamiliar, unexpected or perhaps even unpleasant textures and shapes of artworks. In this way, they can teach the sighted to relinquish the conventional notion of the artwork as a precious object to be explored from an intellectual distance.

Although it is true that sighted people are not usually allowed to touch artworks in museums, in many countries touch tours are available for blind and low sighted visitors. When these tours are held during a museum's normal opening hours, sighted viewers ought to embrace the opportunity to listen to the accounts of people who may touch the artworks. Their confidence allows people with blindness to hone in on subtle differences in texture, temperature, size and shape, which can contribute to the meaning-making potential of an artwork. In the case of *Blind Alphabet,* the tactile encounter adds a multisensory dimension to the narratives of these works which is missing from the research on the installation thus far. This encounter enriches the meanings of the sculptures by adding layers that were previously not only "unseen" but also untouched and unrecorded. By paying attention to knowledge

generated by the participants' embodied engagements with selected sculptures, the study demonstrated the potential of *Blind Alphabet* to add to the discourse on the nature of aesthetic touch.

In this article I have offered a few suggestions as to what blind people can teach the sighted about art based on a relatively small study that was conducted on a limited number of sculptures. Although the study was small in nature, the results showed that blind people are interested in learning about art, and can contribute to the production of knowledge about artworks. Their interest in art suggests that there is a need to make art exhibitions in South Africa accessible to people with visual impairments; museologists, curators and art critics should pay attention to this need. Institutional structures and museum display practices require fundamental changes to enhance access, especially for the blind, to these spaces. Where legislation and funding that advocates for inclusivity in art museums is lacking, such as in South Africa, the onus is on researchers and practitioners of the arts to develop programs that give the blind such access. In a country like South Africa, where funding for the arts is limited, researchers at institutions with art collections could develop such inclusive programs in their own backyard, so to speak, that could be made available to wider audiences with visual impairment.

But it is not enough to simply make artworks accessible to blind visitors. It is also necessary to acknowledge the value of their tactile investigation for expanding what is known about specific artworks. Listening to blind people's descriptions of their haptic experience of an artwork will assist in expanding what is known about the nature of tactile aesthetic experience. Moreover, when those who work with the display of art take the important contribution of touch in the experience of art seriously, the ways in which art objects are documented, analyzed and valued will also need to be reconsidered. These processes ought to take into account what knowledge is produced in the intersection of the visual and the tactile aesthetic experience by listening to the contributions of those who are experts in aesthetic touch.

Finally, when art exhibitions are designed in such a way that they include blind people, they will provide opportunities for connection between people who would not normally interact with each other. When people with visual impairments and sighted viewers are encouraged to discuss artworks with each other, art becomes a vehicle for understanding between people

whose lived experiences are different from their own. When we listen to each other's experiences of artworks, art becomes a vehicle for transformation by forging bridges between individuals with and without blindness. This is demonstrated by the comments of those who participated in this study and could be extended to individuals who might participate in programs where such interaction and exchange is encouraged. It is hoped that the findings reported on here will remind museum practitioners that developing inclusive programs for the blind and visually impaired will serve the art sector and the community well. Such programs will no doubt contribute toward individual and social well-being, empowerment and inclusion fostered through art.

Acknowledgements:
My sincere thanks to Willem Boshoff and Heléne Smuts for their generous support of the study. I wish to thank Willem for the visual and textual material and the permission to use the photographs of his works. I also extend my gratitude to Javett-UP for allowing me to conduct the interviews on days that the museum was not open to the public. Finally, I thank the University of Pretoria for providing financial assistance to carry out the research.

REFERENCES

Bell, C. (1914). *Art.* New York: Frederick A. Stokes.

Boshoff, W. (1997). Aesthetics of Touch: Notes Towards a Blind Aesthetic. *Image and Text,* 7, 36-41.

Campbell, K. (2018). Philological Reversion in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Sand Writing and Alternate Alphabets of Willem Boshoff. *Philological Encounters,* 3, 524-549.

Candlin, F. (2004). Don't Touch! Hands Off! Art, Blindness and the Conservation of Expertise. *Body and Society,* 10(1), 71-90.

Candlin, F. (2010). *Art, Museums and Touch*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.

Classen, C. (2012). *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Delogu, F., Gravina, M. et al. (2021). Tactile Beauty is in the Hand, But Also in the Eye of the Beholder: Interaction Between Haptic and Visual Experiences in Aesthetic Judgement. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts,* 15*(*4), 725-734. doi.org/10.1037/aca0000327.

D'Evie, F. and Kleege, G. (2018). The Gravity, The Levity: Let us Speak of Tactile Encounters. *Disability Studies Quarterly,* 38(3). doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6483.

Diaconu, M. (2006). Reflections on an Aesthetics of Touch, Smell and Taste. *Contemporary Aesthetics,* 4(1).

Driscoll, R. (2020). *The Sensing Body in the Visual Arts. Making and Experiencing Sculpture.* London: Bloomsbury.

Duncum, P. (2005). Visual Culture and an Aesthetics of Embodiment. *International Journal of Education through Art,* 1(1), 9-20.

Gallace, A. and Spence, C. (2011). Tactile Aesthetics: Towards a Definition of its Characteristics and Neural Correlates. *Social Semiotics,* 21(4), 569-589.

Heard, A. (2020). The Value of Sport and Cultural Activities for Learners with Visual Impairment. In M.M Sefoto and R. Ferreira (eds.). *Teaching Learners with Visual Impairment* (pp. 291-320). Cape Town: AOSIS.

Howes, D. (2014). Introduction to Sensory Museology. *The Senses and Society,* 9(3), 259-267. doi.org/10.2752/174589314X14023847039917.

Hull, J. (2001). *On Sight and Insight. A Journey into the World of Blindness*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Jones, C.A. (2016). *The Global Work of Art. World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Keller, H. (2009 [1908]). *The World I Live In and Optimism: A Collection of Essays.* New York: Dover. E-book.

Kemske, B. (2009). Embracing Sculptural Ceramics: A Lived Experience of Touch in Art. *The Senses and Society*, 4(3), 323-345. doi: 10.2752/174589209X12464528171932.

Kleege, G. (2005). Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account. *Journal of Visual Culture,* 4(2), 179-190. doi: 10.1177/1470412905054672.

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

Lauwrens, J. 2018. More than meet the eye. Embodied engagement in *After the Last Supper*. *Art Journal,* 77(2), 8-23. Doi: 10.1080/00043249.2018.1495519.

Lauwrens, J. 2019. Touch as an aesthetic experience. *Journal of visual Arts Practice,* 18(5),323-341. Doi: 10.1080/14702029.2019.1680510.

Lauwrens, J. (2022). Haptic modes of engagement in Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet. Image & Text,* 36, 1-23. Doi: 10.17159/2617-3255/2022/n36a26.

Marais, J-E. (2021). *A Play on Words.* Available at: https://getitmagazine.co.za/pretoria/blog/2021/06/08/a-play-on-words/

Marmor, M.F. and Ravin J.G. (2009). *The Artist's Eyes: Vision and the History of Art*. New York: Abrams.

Montagu, A. (1986). *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*. New York: Harper and Row.

Pallasmaa, J. (2005). *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Paterson, M. (2007). *The Senses of Touch. Haptics, Affects and Technologies.* Oxford: Bloomsbury.

Osborne, P. (ed.). (2000). *From an Aesthetic Point of View*. London: Serpent's Tail.

Rēe, J. (2000). The Aesthetic Theory of the Arts. In P. Osborne (ed.). *From an Aesthetic Point of View* (pp. 57-70). London: Serpent's Tail.

Rees Leahy, H. (2012.) *Museum Bodies*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Sinclair, D. (1981). *Mechanisms of Cutaneous Sensation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, L.F, Smith, J.K and Tionio, P.P.L. (2017). Time Spent Viewing Art and Reading Labels. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts,* 11(1), 77-85. doi.org/10.1037/aca0000049.

Swanepoel, R. (2014). *Blinde Alfabet*: 'n Moedswillige Willem Boshoff Reken Af met Meerderwaardigheid – 'n Neo-Marxistiese Interpretasie. *LitNet Akademies,* 11(1), 292-310.

Van Eeden, J. (1997). *Willem Boshoff's* Blind Alphabet. *Image and Text,* 7, 32-33.

Willem Boshoff. (2020). *Blind Alphabet.* Available at: https://www.willemboshoff.com/product-page/blind-alphabet

[i] The category 'blind' encompasses an array of relationships to vision and a variety of visual abilities. Blindness does not refer only to people who have no vision at all. Rather it includes people who have some form of mild to severe blurred vision. When going about this research, I did not ask the participants to reveal the nature or degree of their visual impairment. Even so, all the participants spontaneously offered this information and, whether or not they had some residual vision, everyone referred to themselves as 'blind'. For this reason, in this article I use 'blind', 'visually impaired', 'partially sighted' and 'people with low vision' interchangeably to reflect the diverse ways in which the participants in the study described their visual disability.

[ii] In March 2022, I asked members of the South African Museums Association (SAMA) for information about museum programs in South Africa specifically designed for the visually impaired. SAMA has over 300 members across all nine South African provinces. The response was telling. While plans were underway to produce Braille signage for artworks at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, and an event for the blind was held at the Johannesburg Holocaust Genocide Centre

(JHGC) in 2019, there was no other information forthcoming about attempts to make South African museum collections accessible to blind visitors.

[iii] Boshoff initially trained blind guides to assist the sighted through the installation (Campbell, 2018:540). In addition, he used to organize tours for blind people who would be transported to the exhibition and be given the opportunity to experience the work. However, Boshoff admits that, because he has to organize these tours himself, with little help from the galleries or museums where the work is displayed, he is no longer able to do so (Boshoff, 2021). This situation unfortunately attests to the general lack of interest in the needs of people with visual impairments among South African gallerists and museum coordinators.

[iv] It should be noted that Boshoff has conducted extensive research on cultural, historical and philosophical conceptions of touch and sight, as well as blindness and vision. His article "Aesthetics of Touch: Notes Towards a Blind Aesthetic" presents an impressive overview of terminology related to blindness, and demonstrates that touch provides a more intimate and rewarding aesthetic experience than sight. Therefore, Boshoff certainly cannot be accused of suffering from 'haptic agnosia'.

[v] Gervanne and Matthias Leridon own the 30 sculptures in the letter L series.

[vi] Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee: HUM031/0721.

[vii] There is far more that can be said about the tactile qualities of the sculptures discussed here as well as others that featured in the study, and I have done so elsewhere (see Lauwrens 2022). In this article I pay more attention to the meanings that were elicited by the tactile exploration of these works and on the conversations that emerged between the blind and sighted participants.

[viii] In the 12 months or so that selections of the installation were exhibited at the Javett-UP, other than the participants in this study and the blind guides at the opening event, I found anecdotal evidence of only one blind visitor to the exhibition.