

Haptic modes of engagement in Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet*

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ABSTRACT

Created for people with visual limitations, Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet* (1990 – ongoing) has already received extensive critical attention. Surprisingly, however, this literature has overlooked how those for whom the installation was created, experience and appreciate it. This article reports on a series of interviews with people who are blind or have vision loss, and people who are sighted and were blindfolded. The participants in the study were invited to explore and then describe their experience of selected sculptures in the letter L series, which is the latest addition to *Blind Alphabet*. The research demonstrated that the different sculptures solicit different tactual exploration by the participants thereby revealing insights about the sculptures that are unavailable to sight. Furthermore, *Blind Alphabet* solicits haptic, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive interactivity from its blind and blindfolded audience. This whole-body, multisensorial engagement, in turn, activates memory, affect and the imagination. In this way, *Blind Alphabet* foregrounds the body as the locus of perception, thought and consciousness and demonstrates the role of the senses other than sight in shaping the experience, understanding, and meaning of artworks.

Keywords: blindness, art museums, aesthetic touch, whole-body hapticity, *Blind Alphabet*.

Published by



Original research

Corporeality / Sensoriality / Materiality: Body-centered interpretations of
South African art

Tracing an outline

Willem Boshoff's installation *Blind Alphabet* (1990 – ongoing) is a three-dimensional dictionary created for people who are blind.¹ At the time of writing, the dictionary comprised 400 wooden sculptures that each represent an obscure word that describes various forms and shapes.² These objects are not meant to visually mirror the words they represent, but rather to refer to them imaginatively and conceptually through their tactile qualities, in other words, their texture, shape, form, and weight. The sculptures are stored in individual black mesh boxes each with an aluminium sheet on the lid that provides an explanation in Braille. The boxes are placed on pedestals of equal height and are exhibited in several rows. This arrangement allows a visitor with low vision to easily navigate their way from one box to the next as if they were reading one page after another in a dictionary. When taken out of these boxes, the sculptures are small enough to be held in the hand which means that a partially sighted person could easily explore their contours and textures if given the opportunity to do so.³

Whereas a great deal of research has investigated *Blind Alphabet's* conceptual underpinnings (see Jones 2016; Swanepoel 2014; Van Eeden 1997), academics have not paid any close attention to the ways in which blind people experience this installation. This is, perhaps, unsurprising since an embodied experience of the installation is only available to blind individuals and no blind academics have written about Boshoff's work so far. By continuing to ignore blind people's tactual experiences of *Blind Alphabet*, however, scholars have ironically contributed to the dominance of the visual in their analyses of an installation that purports to challenge this very issue (Van Eeden 1997; Willem Boshoff 2020). It is my contention that this installation provides the ideal opportunity to expand on existing knowledge about touch as an aesthetic experience. Questions that have not been addressed in the research on this artwork include: what forms of engagement does *Blind Alphabet* solicit in those who may touch it? What embodied and experiential knowledges rise to the surface when *Blind Alphabet* is experienced haptically? How do the testimonies of those who may touch but not see *Blind Alphabet* contribute to knowledge about, not only *Blind Alphabet*, but the haptic experience of art more generally? In short, what does *Blind Alphabet* reveal about touch as an aesthetic experience?

In this article, I begin, as many other scholars have, by briefly setting out Boshoff's aims and intentions with this work. Thereafter, I discuss the changing status of touch in art museums by pointing out how touch has been discriminated against.

I focus here on the institutional processes that have denied not only tactile but also embodied engagements with art more generally. I then describe a study that took place at the Javett Art Centre at the University of Pretoria (Javett-UP), South Africa in 2021. I report on the findings gathered from a series of interviews conducted with people who were allowed to touch selected sculptures in *Blind Alphabet* without being able to see them. The interviewees included blind people and sighted people who were blindfolded. I dig deeper into the data by focusing on three themes that emerged during the analysis: a) tactile intelligence: ‘living with your hands’; b) whole-body tactility; and c) the activation of memory and affect through hapticity. In making these arguments, I draw on anecdotal evidence from blind authors (Keller 2009; Kleege 2018; Magee & Miligan 1995), research conducted by artists whose art invites tactile engagement (Driscoll 2020; Kleege 2018), and philosophical accounts of the varieties of touch (Patterson 2007). By focusing on these themes as well as evidence gathered from the literature review, I am able, finally, to draw some conclusions about touch as an aesthetic experience.

Getting to grips with *Blind Alphabet*

While the sculptures in Boshoff’s *Blind Alphabet* are easily accessible to blind audiences – if they are invited to an exhibition of the work, that is – sighted viewers are not permitted to open the boxes. As is usually the case in art museums and art galleries, a sign placed nearby reads: ‘Don’t touch’. Sighted viewers are thus denied access to the installation: they may neither see nor touch the beautifully crafted objects inside the boxes and, even if they could read Braille, they are not permitted to touch the Braille text on the lids. For the sighted perceiver, the row upon row of black boxes is thus remarkable in its inaccessibility with the scene being described by the artist (cited by Marais 2021) as reminiscent of ‘a silent graveyard’. The sighted audience, all too familiar with the regulations of the art gallery, would normally instinctually obey and survey these tombstones from a distance. However, blind people who visit the exhibition are oblivious to the instruction that they may not touch the work, and – usually during specially arranged events – they open the boxes and touch the sculptures inside.

Whilst each sculpture in Boshoff’s morphological dictionary represents a complex investigation between ‘signifier and signified, between word, concept and image’ (Van Eeden 1997:32), they are herme(neu)tically sealed off from sighted viewers (Van Eeden 1997:32). The sighted viewer is left “in the dark” unless she is accompanied by a blind person who can read the Braille definition of the word and show her the sculpture inside the box. Upending the conventional regulations about

who may see and experience artworks in a museum or gallery, a blind person now has the upper hand. Boshoff describes his installation as an indictment against the art establishment where sighted ‘intelligentsia’ are usually considered to have superior *insight* into the meanings of artworks (Willem Boshoff 2020:[Sp]). Put another way, *Blind Alphabet*, it has been suggested, disables sight and enables – or rather *ennobles* – touch in aesthetic experience, challenging the dominance of sight in aesthetic experience and in art criticism overall (Van Eeden 1997:32).

Don’t touch!

Indeed, the senses other than sight are not usually welcome in modern art museums. Exceptions occur only with video works that include sound or when museums and galleries open special sections to touch – as in “touch exhibitions”. However, sensory museologists, have shown that the hegemony of sight in museum spaces was not always the norm (Candlin 2004; Howes 2006). Early museums often allowed visitors to pick up, handle, and smell objects (Howes 2006:169). It was only from the 1800s onward that touch was evicted from the museum to educate the allegedly ‘unruly’ working classes in the proper experience of art (Candlin 2004:77).

The ocularcentric bias of art museums since the nineteenth century can be closely connected to discourses about sensory perception that were already circulating in the popular imagination at the time. The earlier development of modern Western philosophy and, especially, objective scientific discourse from the seventeenth century onward, played a significant role in what is often – though not unproblematically (see Jay 1988) – referred to as the ocularcentric paradigm of modernity. According to this paradigm, the seen is conflated with the known through vision-centred concepts and methods. For instance, the Greek verb *eidōs* – meaning *to see* – is the foundation of the English word *idea* (Jütte 2005:36).

The development of natural history in the seventeenth century emphasised close visual inspection and observation which, it was maintained, facilitated the accurate, objective, and rational description of specimens. Michel Foucault (2003:144) notes that in the Enlightenment, facts and proof were considered attainable mainly through vision:

Observation, from the seventeenth century onward, is a perceptible knowledge furnished with a series of systematically negative conditions. Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible any analysis into distinct elements that could be universally

acceptable. The sense of touch is very narrowly limited to the designation of a few fairly evident distinctions (such as that between smooth and rough); which leaves sight with an exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof.

Thus, our ways of understanding the world are deeply embedded in a paradigm that has privileged sight above the “other” senses. Hans Jonas (1954:507) has convincingly demonstrated why sight became the ‘noblest’ sense. Because clear vision is dependent on distance, sight has been regarded as the handmaiden of objectivity whilst smell, taste, and touch – the alleged “proximal” senses – have been denigrated as mostly irrelevant in the Western epistemological regime (Jonas 1954:519; Diaconu 2006:1).⁴ Touch, in particular, was relegated to the lowest rung on the sensory hierarchical ladder. Deemed to be the lowest of the senses in the Judeo-Christian tradition, touch is linked with the vices that pave the way to hell (Jütte 2005:80). Associated with sensuality, sexuality, and the emotions (in stereotypical thinking about the senses, that is), touch supposedly cannot provide the intellectual distance believed to be necessary for aesthetic experience (see Candlin 2004:82). On the other hand, in the realm of fine art, sight is undoubtedly the sense that reigns supreme. As Boshoff (1997:36, emphasis in original) argues, fine artists, art historians and art critics depend on sight; they ‘pretend to know how to *look*, and how to draw the highest semiological and visual satisfaction from that *looking*’.

In a culture obsessed with visuality, sight is considered the most reliable sense in the acquisition of knowledge and in achieving “insight”. This assumption is exemplified in often used phrases, such as “I see”, “do you see what I mean”, “my perspective”, “my point of view”, “my outlook” and a “worldview”. Blindness, on the other hand, is often deployed negatively in metaphorical language as the ‘opposite of sight’ (Davis 2019:65). Examples include “being blind to the truth”, “turning a blind eye”, “the blind leading the blind”, being “blindsided” or driven by “blind rage”, as well as the idea of a “blind spot”. “To lose sight of” something means that rational thought or logic has failed. Moreover, although we may *lose* sight, apparently we never *gain* blindness (Kleege 2018:9). Blindness is thus negatively associated with lack, loss, and darkness, whilst sight is commonly thought to provide clarity and access to a wealth of knowledge.

The lower status given to touch in the experience of art has resulted in a general ‘haptic agnosia’ (Jones 2016:34) about touch as an aesthetic experience. One of the reasons for the lack of knowledge about tactile aesthetics is because, whereas visual experiences of an artwork can be corroborated and compared with those

of others, somatic experiences are often so vague and usually unconscious that they remain unspoken because they are difficult to articulate in language. It would appear that *Blind Alphabet* attempts to address the limited vocabulary on aesthetic touch. After all, the sculptures may only be handled by blind audiences who serve as expert guides – or ‘cryptaesthetes’ (Boshoff 1997:37) – and facilitate viewers’ access to the works.⁵ Thus, the powerplay between sight and touch in the museum space is, seemingly, subverted. And yet, the academic attention given to the work so far has, strangely, not given a voice to those for whom the work is intended. Moreover, how can an artwork that, for the most part, prevents tactile engagement from its primary audience – who are in any case sighted visitors – enoble touch? If sight is dethroned, what (and how) does this artwork teach its audience about touch (as opposed to sight) in aesthetic experience? This combination – insufficient knowledge about tactile aesthetic experience, and an apparent indifference to the experiences of blind people and the meanings *Blind Alphabet* elicits for them – was the inspiration behind a study that attempted to address both issues.

Grasping the study

The study was carried out at Boshoff’s retrospective show *Word Woes* held at Javett-UP in 2021. Curated by Heléne Smuts, the exhibition included 90 sculptures from *Blind Alphabet* from the letters A, F, G, H, and L respectively. Blind and sighted volunteers participated in 13 interviews that were carried out over a period of one month.⁶ Whether blind or sighted, all of the participants in the study expressed an interest in art and were, therefore, potential visitors to art museums even though some had never actually visited one before.⁷ Purposive questioning aimed to generate knowledge about the nature of a tactile encounter with selected sculptures in the installation. Seven sculptures from the letter L series – the most recent addition to the installation – were used in the interviews.⁸ Based on their diverse forms, textures and shapes, it was hoped that the selected sculptures would provoke a range of tactile experiences. The following sculptures were selected for the study: *Labriform* (Figure 1), *Lacertine* (Figure 2), *Lachrymiform* (Figure 3), *Lagotic* (Figure 4), *Lapilliform* (Figure 5), *Lecotropical* (Figure 6), and *Loculed* (Figure 7).



FIGURE **N° 1**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Labriform*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.



FIGURE **N° 2**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Lacertine*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.



FIGURE **N° 3**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Lachrymiform*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.



FIGURE **N° 4**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Lagotic*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.

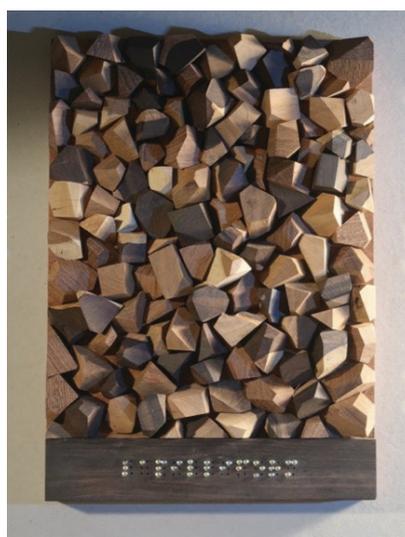


FIGURE **N° 5**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Lapilliform*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.



FIGURE **N° 6**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Lecotropical*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.



FIGURE **Nº 7**



Willem Boshoff, 2020. *Loculed*. Wood, steel, aluminium. Photograph supplied by the artist.

For the interviews, a blind individual was paired up with a sighted individual who was blindfolded. Both individuals were asked the same questions about aspects of their tactile experience of the selected sculpture. Once each participant's individual responses had been recorded, they were invited to discuss their experiences with each other.⁹ While the individual sculptures invite blind people to first read the Braille text on the lid of the box before taking out the sculpture, for this study – which focused on tactile and embodied engagement – the intended meaning of the work/word would have mediated the participant's experience. For this reason, the blind participants were only invited to read the Braille text after they and their blindfolded companion had both explored the sculpture without any knowledge of what it was intended to represent.¹⁰

The main aim of the study was to understand touch as an aesthetic experience by closely analysing people's sightless, tactile interaction with the selected sculptures. Taking a phenomenological approach, interviews were used to produce rich descriptions of the somatosensory event. I asked participants to describe the temperature, texture, weight, size, material, and smell of the sculptures. They were also asked to describe how they were holding and touching the sculptures, which parts were more interesting than others, and how the sculpture made them feel. They were also asked what associations came to mind when touching the sculpture. The interviews were videographed, transcribed and analysed in order to identify patterns and variations in the way the participants handled the sculptures and described their experiences.

The participants' gestures, the position of their bodies in relation to the sculptures, and which parts of their hands returned to which parts of the sculpture all strongly informed the analysis. The following themes emerged from the analysis: a) tactile

intelligence; b) whole-body tactility; and c) the activation of memory and affect through hapticity. These themes are discussed in more detail shortly.

The investigation into aesthetic touch took place at a time when touch was highly regulated, thoroughly compromised, and, one might even add, demonised in many parts of the world. Since the beginning of 2020, and up until the time of writing, countries across the globe have responded in different ways to the rapid spread of the deadly severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV 2), commonly referred to as COVID-19. Since mid-March 2020, the South African government imposed regulations such as compulsory mask wearing, social distancing, and the use of hand sanitiser in public spaces. Handshakes have been replaced by the “elbow-bump” and hugging is discouraged. COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the lives of people living with visual impairment. For various reasons, they are at a higher risk of contracting the virus than people without vision loss (see Senjamin 2020). Among these are their dependence on touch when going about their daily activities and the need for personal assistance means that social distancing is not easy to maintain (Senjamin 2020). Despite the risks involved in conducting the study, all those who volunteered were eager to participate in the project.

Digging into the data

This section begins with a discussion of exteroceptive (cutaneous) touch by focusing on what the embodied intelligence of the hands, fingers and skin revealed about the selected sculptures. Thereafter, I discuss how the sculptures solicited whole-body, multisensory interaction from the participants. The role of interoceptive (inner) touch in the construction of associations and meanings is discussed thereafter. Each of these subsections opens with selected “evidence” drawn from the interviews. While the study revealed some differences in the blind and sighted participants’ tactile exploration, bodily comportment, and confidence (or lack thereof) when exploring the sculptures, in this article it is not my intention to compare the way in which blind and sighted people handled them. Instead, here I am interested in how both groups reported on their sightless experiences in order to advance knowledge about the tactile experience of the sculptures under investigation. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees I use their initials, and for clarity, the title of the sculpture being referred to.

a) Tactile intelligence: 'Living with your hands'

It's a very small difference, but there definitely is a difference in texture there. (JE, Lacertine)

I don't feel the difference in texture. (MdT, Lacertine)

It's a small difference, but it's definitely noticeable. But I first actually thought it was intentionally,... you know,... that [this] was sanded more, polished more, while the others were left intentionally a bit more rough. (JE, Lacertine)

But it's actually a different type of wood. (JL, Lacertine)

Yeah. (JE, Lacertine)



FIGURE N° 8



A participant explores *Lacertine*. Screenshot by author.

This conversation took place while the participants explored *Lacertine* (Figure 8). While the participant with low vision felt a difference in the texture of the sections made from white oak and partridge wood, the blindfolded, sighted participant had not noticed these different textures. Their conversation shows that a person with low vision might be more sensitive to the varied tactile qualities of the objects they touch. Whilst touch may not always be more sensitive in blind people than in the sighted, as Georgina Kleege (2018:10) points out, blind people are undoubtedly acutely aware of their tactile engagement with the world. Hellen Keller (2009) describes the importance of her hands in the following way:

All my comings and goings turn on the hand as on a pivot... The hand is my feeler with which I reach through isolation and darkness and seize every pleasure, every activity that my fingers encounter. With the dropping of a little word from another's hand to mine, a slight flutter of the fingers, began the intelligence, the joy, the fullness of my life.

The significance Keller gives to her hands and fingers was reiterated by one of the participants with low vision who told us that he lives with his hands. The hands, fingers and palms are thus integral vehicles for acquiring information about the world if one cannot see.

Mark Paterson (2007) distinguishes between two broad modes of touch: *exteroceptive* and *interoceptive*. Exteroceptive touch refers to what is felt on the outer skin. This form of touch is direct and concerns the sensations we experience in our everyday 'tactile-spatial' encounters with the world (Paterson 2007:2). To draw their attention to their exteroceptive tactile engagement with the sculptures, participants were asked to describe its texture and temperature. They described the texture of *Labriform* as 'grainy', 'smooth and polished', and 'raw' and *Lacertine* was described as 'pointy,' 'angular', 'ripp[ed]' and 'sandpapery'. One participant described *Loculed* as 'smooth and rough and fibrous'. The texture of one sculpture was often compared to that of the other sculptures the participants had already felt. They also related textures to something else; for instance, *Loculed* was described as 'like polished tree', *Lapilliform* 'like a beach...by a rock pool' and *Labriform* was described as feeling 'like something velvet or furry to some extent and...you can feel the dust.'

But the hands are only one of many organs of touch; touch receptors are found all over the skin and throughout the inner body. Pressure and vibrations stimulate mechanoreceptors, thermal receptors register temperature; kinaesthetic receptors record movement and nociceptors respond to pain (Driscoll 2020:2). Touch, therefore, involves contact on the outer skin – the largest organ of the body – as well as what we feel in the inner organs and includes our bodily movement. Interoceptive touch, is the term that describes this inward-oriented mode of touching. Thus, it is more accurate to refer to the *senses* of touch – in the plural – and to recognise that touching involves more than our hands. The involvement of the tactile receptors over the whole body became apparent when participants compared the temperature of the sculpture with that of the room. Interestingly, in her investigation, one participant connected texture with temperature stating that:

...it's very cold where it's smooth. It's even colder where the metal is, but then it becomes warm where it becomes textured...and then the holes are another temperature, and then the rims of the holes are another temperature. So I think the temperature is influenced by the texture of the sculpture (SS, Loculed).



FIGURE N° 9



A participant examining *Lapilliform*. Screenshot by author. (SM, *Lapilliform*).

The different sculptures we analysed solicited different tactual explorations by the participants. Rougher textures solicited slower hand movements while smoother textures resulted in faster movements. *Lacertine* encouraged delicate tracing movements with the palms and fingertips. *Lachrymiform* provoked a protective movement with the whole hand with one of the participants cradling the sculpture against her stomach. *Lapilliform* encouraged one blind participant to carefully squeeze each individual outcrop with his fingertips, as if trying to obtain as much information about each piece as possible (Figure 9). *Lecotropical* encouraged swift movements with the whole hand to begin with, and then, because the whole sculpture was smooth and rounded, less movement later on. Because *Labriform* consists of two parts that easily separate, participants touched them slowly and methodically, being careful not to drop them.

b) Whole-body tactility

The size, I would say it's probably the size of my stomach..., or my torso, or maybe no...it's probably bigger than my head. And I would say about the size of my belly, my torso. (SS, Loculed)

I can feel the smooth part and then here I can...[hear] it's rough. (NM, Loculed)

...the sound [of] the plates on each other...tells me it is made from wood. (JE, Labriform)

Whereas looking at an artwork requires that we focus only on what is visible to our eyes, the above examples demonstrate how *Blind Alphabet* solicits a whole-body, haptic perception from its audience. By tapping on and even smelling the sculptures to determine the material they are made from, by moving them up, down and around, and by examining them in relation to their own bodies and their immediate

environment, the participants explored the sculptures through all of their senses. The auditory and olfactory were combined with the multiple senses of touch (including proprioception and kinaesthesia)¹¹ to make sense of the sculptures.

It was noticeable that the blind participants were aware of how sound provided information about the material the sculptures are made from. They used a variety of techniques to “listen to” the specific tonal quality produced by the sculptures: from tapping with the base of the palm and the fingers, to knocking on them with their knuckles. People with visual difficulties are consciously aware of the sensory features of their environment. One of the blind participants explained that when walking past a palisade fence or a building, there is an audible vibration emanating from those structures that ‘you sort of feel’ more than consciously hear (JE, *Lachrymiform*). Although ‘it’s nothing you pay attention to,...your body...understands that and even though I can’t feel or see it,...I know there’s a building there. And the palisade as well, as soon as you move past the palisade, it makes sort of this waving sound...’ (JE, *Lachrymiform*). Sounds, therefore, assist blind people in mapping their environments. This is not to say that sighted people do not hear these sounds. Instead, the blind ‘have developed potentialities that the sighted have also been endowed with but do not develop because they have less need for them’ (Magee & Miligan 1995:98). In the same way, smell is an important sensory modality that helps a blind person navigate her environment. Most of the participants welcomed the opportunity to lower their masks and smell the sculptures. It was interesting to observe how one blind participant pressed *Lagotic* right up into his face and onto his nose, turning the sculpture around in order to smell its different parts.

The significance of the whole body in the various haptic encounters with *Blind Alphabet* was unmistakable. All the sculptures encouraged kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, whole-body interaction as the lids of the boxes had to first be removed, then the sculptures had to be taken out, and the participant had to find a way to support them comfortably whilst analysing them tactually. All the participants related a sculpture’s size (is it comfortable to hold in one hand or not), weight (how does it compare to other objects they have held before) and temperature (how does it feel in relation to the room, or to other parts of the sculpture) in some or other way to their own bodies. One blind participant held *Loculed* confidently, like a bowling ball, to determine its weight (NM, *Loculed*) (Figure 10). Similarly, by holding *Lagotic* in his right forearm he could compare its weight to a one kilogram bag of sugar that he often holds in the same way.



FIGURE **Nº 10**



A blind participant holds *Loculed* like a bowling ball. Screenshot by author. (NM, *Loculed*).

It is commonly accepted that our experience of the world is always the result of the ‘never-ending integration’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002:271) of all the senses. When encountering the selected sculptures without being able to see them, the sighted participants became aware of how the auditory, olfactory, and tactile sensory modes were involved in how they made sense of what they could not see. Both blind and sighted were compelled to tap into the intelligence of their whole bodies in their quest to better understand what they were (be)holding.

c) Under the skin: Touch, affect and memory

It scared me at first because it was a lot sharper than the first object...It's like you're grabbing into a box [and] you don't know what you're going to get...[there's the] fear factor, of course. (MdT, Lacertine)

*It makes me feel like I'm carrying a weight and it makes me feel heavy. It makes me feel like there's a growth or something. So, I also associate these holes with some kind of growth deformity or some kind of fungus, I don't know what...Maybe when I go down that route, [I associate it] with a bit of disgust. (SS, *Loculed*)*

*I don't know. Something about it feels like I'm not supposed to put my hand in it. (MdT, *Lecotropa*)*

Apart from the physical sensations associated with interoceptive touch, this mode also includes the metaphorical, the affective, and the emotional. Touch, in its interoceptive modality, can be deeply “touching”. As Paterson (2007:1) explains, interoceptive touch is ‘receptive, expressive, and can communicate empathy’. In analysing the experience of what is present to touch (texture, temperature, weight, and so forth), what is absent (feelings, emotions, affects, memories, and so forth)

also become apparent (Paterson 2007:24). Whether consciously or not, inner and outer worlds meet through the interlacing of physical and emotional touch.

Participants became aware of the inward-oriented nature of affective touch when asked to describe how the sculpture made them feel and what it reminded them of. Some forms and textures elicited fear and disgust: *Lacertine* scared one participant owing to its sharp angles, and two participants expressed disgust and repulsion in reaction to *Loculed* and *Lecotropal* respectively. One participant found the holes in *Loculed* simultaneously pleasurable and revolting (Figure 11). In these examples, the contact between flesh and object reached deep into their core. On the other hand, touch can also be deeply comforting and therapeutic, evoking pleasant memories and associations. One participant explained that *Lapilliform* and *Lecotropal* reminded her of places she had previously visited: an aunt's shop and a nature reserve, respectively. Touching these sculptures thus tapped into the participants' past experiences and affected them deeply. In a sense, the sculptures "touched" the participants, reaching below the (exteroceptive) surface of the skin.



FIGURE **Nº II**



A sighted, blindfolded participant cradles *Loculed* close to her body. Screenshot by author. (SS, *Loculed*).

As the first sense to develop in the womb (Gallace & Spence 2011:572), touch has been described as 'the deepest sense' (Classen 2012) because it stimulates memory and activates the imagination. The anthropologist, Ashley Montagu (1986:3) confirms that '[the skin] is the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our first efficient protector...Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth'. Not only is touch considered deep because it stimulates memory, but also because it elicits complex metaphorical and cultural associations that have developed over time. For instance, we use ritualised forms of touch when we greet others, show compassion, or establish bonds between ourselves and

other people. And, what is regarded as acceptable and unacceptable touch at certain times is continuously renegotiated according to our values, beliefs, and attitudes. As a crucial mode of embodied existence, touch (in both its exteroceptive and interoceptive modalities) is multifaceted and open to a variety of interpretations as expressed by everyone that participated in the study.

Putting a finger on aesthetic touch

*I really love...how smooth it is, and then the metal bumps on the side, and then that in contrast with the top...The bumps on top feel like they almost mimic these holes, and so I like how that works. (SS, *Loculed*)*

*I first like figure...the shape out. And then the texture. The way it feels is how I can tell that it looks good. (SM, *Lecotropical*)*

*And of course, in these holes I also want to spend a lot of time, not because there's a lot of texture there, but because you can go inside and play around. And...the holes have different depths, which is interesting. (SS, *Loculed*)*

Considering the ways in which the participants investigated the sculptures through the intelligence of their hands, how the works solicited a variety of whole-body somatic sensations in each individual, and the associations that emerged when the participants realised that some of the sculptures “touched” them deeply, allows me to draw some more precise conclusions about touch as an aesthetic experience. Just as aesthetic sight requires a particular mode of viewing and experiencing, aesthetic touch requires an awareness of the range and subtleties of haptic experience. Living with their hands makes blind people acutely conscious of the tactile qualities of their environment, lending them an intimate understanding of aesthetic touch. When blindfolded, sighted audiences can learn to rely on the intelligence of their hands and access insights about artworks that are unavailable to sight, such as texture and temperature, as well as their size, weight and shape in relation to their own bodies.

For Rosalyn Driscoll (2020:3) aesthetic touch means touching ‘to explore textures, forms, and spaces for their qualities and effects’ as well as the ‘relationships between parts’. Variety is an essential ingredient in the objects that evoked a pleasurable tactile aesthetic experience. One blind participant was excited by the unexpected contrasting metal bumps on *Loculed* and appreciated its array of different temperatures. *Lecotropical* is an oval shaped, extremely smooth, rounded form, that resembles the shape of a neck pillow one uses when travelling. While it might appear visually pleasing, those who examined this sculpture disliked its

smoothness. One sighted blindfolded participant said, 'it's too smooth' on more than one occasion whilst caressing the sculpture. When asked if he likes anything about the sculpture, her blind partner replied that 'I only like this part because there's Braille' (SM, *Lecotropical*). Later he commented: 'Yeah, I'm touching [this one] very fast, because there's nothing complicated [on] it. So yeah, my hands are moving very fast because...the only part that I'm curious to know is probably this one [*touches the Braille*] (SM, *Lecotropical*) (Figure 12). Keller (2009) confirms that 'unstraight' or disordered lines are often more 'eloquent to the touch' than straight, ordered lines for their variety sparks interest.



FIGURE N° 11



A blind participant finds the smoothness of *Lecotropical* uninteresting. (SM, *Lecotropical*). Screenshot by author.

To reach a sense of what aesthetic touch might entail, Driscoll (2020:3) finds it useful to compare aesthetic touch with aesthetic sight. Whereas we can quickly take in a vast visual field within a few seconds, it takes time to explore an object through touch. Sight usually moves instantaneously from the broad to the particular. This is different for touch which usually begins with the particular and then moves from one detail to the next gradually constructing an overall impression. Saccadic eye movements allow the sighted to very quickly explore a visual field (Driscoll 2020:13). But exploring an artwork with the fingers and hands involves slow, deliberate, flowing movement. Overall, seeing requires less effort than touch since we are usually not even aware of the visual process involved in building a whole impression. Vision and touch clearly have very distinctive temporal and spatial qualities and effects.

What is considered important when evaluating an artwork *visually* – the focal point, the foreground and the background – are experienced differently through the fingers and hands. Unlike vision, touch allows a more ‘evenhanded exploration of every part’ with all the parts being treated ‘with equal interest’ (Driscoll 2020:15). In this way, touch turns our attention to details and relationships not accessible to sight. It is the quality of the textures, temperatures, shapes, sizes, and lines as well as their combinations that arouse their tactile beauty. While the arrangement of the different colours of the leadwood, partridge wood and zebra wood in *Lapilliform* create an interesting visual patchwork, the participants’ attention was drawn to the individual shapes of each pointed piece of wood (Figure 9). The variety of angles is hardly noteworthy to the eye.

Finishing touches

This article was exploratory and speculative and did not aim to draw definite conclusions about the nature of aesthetic touch. Instead, it attempted to understand what forms of engagement *Blind Alphabet* solicits in those who may touch (and not see) it. By paying attention to people’s descriptions of their tactile experience of the sculptures, the research contributed to new knowledge about touch as an aesthetic experience. This included the observation that the intelligence of the hands sheds light on aspects of the sculptures that are unavailable to sight. Furthermore, *Blind Alphabet* solicits haptic, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive interactivity from its sightless audience. This whole-body, multisensorial engagement, in turn, activates memory, affect and the imagination. In this way, when audiences are allowed to touch *Blind Alphabet*, the artwork foregrounds the body as the locus of perception, thought and consciousness and demonstrates the role of the senses other than sight in shaping experience, understanding, and meaning.

But apart from broadening knowledge about touch as an aesthetic experience, this research also facilitated conversations between blind and sighted people. These conversations extended beyond art to the everyday challenges encountered by people living with various degrees of vision loss. Rather than believing the misconception that blindness is a pitiful state of loss, the sighted participants came to understand blindness as a way of being in the world that, although different from their own day to day experiences, is rich and fulfilling.

Finally, this research showed that people with visual impairments are interested in, and would appreciate more access to, art. One participant with low vision said ‘[I feel], well, very special, I guess, like, like someone’s really listening’ (JE, *Labriform*).

A blind participant commented that ‘I can say that...it makes me feel special...As blind...we are more excluded’ (NM, *Loculed*). Another said that, ‘For me it was...so nice for blind people to also have something to do, which...is specifically for us’ (SM, *Lecotropal*). There is, clearly, a need for making art and visual culture accessible to those who cannot see. One of the glaring oversights in art museums in South Africa is their inaccessibility to blind people. Far more research and creativity is needed to facilitate tours in art museums that are tailor-made for blind people. There is much work to be done.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Willem Boshoff and Heléne Smuts for their generous support of this research. Thank you to Willem for the visual and textual material and the permission to use the photographs of his work. 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 funding to carry out the research.

Notes

1. In medical and legal terms, people who cannot see at three meters what sighted people can see at 60 meters are classified as blind (Naidoo *et al.* 2015:3). But there are significant variations in visual ability among those in this category with most people classified as blind having some form of mild to severe blurred vision. Moreover, blindness includes persons born congenitally blind, persons who are partially sighted, and persons who lost their vision later in life and still have some residual vision. Georgina Kleege (2018:4) explains that only a very small percentage of people in the industrialised world are born with no visual perception at all. Therefore, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the categories “blind”, “partially sighted” and “visually impaired”. In the study I reflect on in this article, participants were not asked to disclose the extent of their vision loss. Moreover, those who offered this information spontaneously, referred to themselves as blind even if they had some residual vision. For this reason, I use the terms “blind”, “low vision”, “visually impaired”, and “partially sighted” interchangeably just as the participants in the study did. These terms all refer to the wide variety of visual impairments that people experience and recognises the many misconceptions surrounding what blindness entails. For instance, not all those classified as blind experience the world in the same way, and neither can their experience be described as living in darkness (Driscoll 2020:67).
2. Various institutions own different parts of this massive installation. For instance, Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein owns sections of the letter A while the MTN Art Collection owns sections of the letter B. From time to time, selected parts of the installation are exhibited at various galleries and museums across the globe.
3. Since most art museums are strictly policed by security guards and cameras that survey spectators, blind people would have to arrange with the director or gallerist to touch these works.

4. Along with sight, modern aesthetics considered hearing to be a vehicle of aesthetic beauty (Diaconu 2006).
5. According to Boshoff (1997:37), cryptaesthetes are 'seer[s] or clairvoyant[s] dependent on the senses'.
6. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee: HUM031/0721. All COVID-19 protocols were observed. Participants wore masks, and their hands were regularly sanitised.
7. Although it is commonly assumed that visual art excludes those who cannot see, the testimonials of blind writers and academics demonstrate that the opposite is true. See Kleege (2018) and Keller (2009) for instance. Moreover, see Kleege (2018) for a discussion of selected examples of blind artists and photographers from across the globe.
8. Gervanne and Matthias Leridon own the 30 sculptures in the letter L series.
9. The discussions allowed people who would not normally speak to each other to enter into a dialogue. The blind participants were keen on sharing information about their lived experience of blindness with their partners. Unfortunately, due to limited space, I am not able to discuss these conversations in detail here; however, I do so in a forthcoming publication.
10. I should also point out that only one of the blind participants could read the contracted Braille text used in the sculptures. As a result, I read out the description from a written text supplied to me by the artist.
11. The proprioceptive system is in our muscles and joints and processes information when the body moves. Kinaesthesia refers to the way the body senses motion through the muscles and joints (Driscoll 2020:2).

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