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The Philosophical, Political and Religious Roots of Touch Exhibitions in 20th Century British Museums

Simon Hayhoe

Keywords:

blindness, disabilities of sight, touch, tactile, museums, galleries, exhibitions, access, enlightenment, philosophy, schools for the blind, pedagogy

Abstract

This article examines the philosophical, social and cultural roots of touch exhibitions in British museums during the Twentieth Century. The theory and practice of these exhibitions was influenced more by cultural tradition, and political and social guidance, than by the needs of the majority of people with disabilities of sight. In particular, a theory of the use of touch was derived from pedagogies developed in schools for the blind, which were themselves influenced by a philosophy of enlightenment from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This pedagogical and theoretical approach does not serve people with disabilities of sight well. The study concludes that touch should only be used as one of a number of multimodal approaches to museum access, and people with disabilities of sight should be considered according to their individual needs.

Introduction

Why do British museums focus on touch exhibitions for people with disabilities of sight, when the majority of this population in the United Kingdom have partial vision (Access Economics 2009) [1](#)? Furthermore, why is there so much emphasis on Braille labelling and literature for people with disabilities of sight in British museums, when it is estimated that 95 percent of this population do not read Braille (RNIB 2012)? In this article, I address these questions by arguing that these practices are the result of social movements and cultural traditions in British museums during the twentieth century, and that these are still to a large extent guiding philosophical and psychological theories that have stereotyped people with disabilities of sight. In addition, I argue that the theory of access for people with disabilities of sight in Twentieth Century British museums often mirrors the political and economic trends of school art education in Europe from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In this article I also contend that these social and cultural trends have led to a dogmatic belief that handwork, touch and vibration should be the main, and in some instances the only, medium of communication of arts materials and artefacts for those with

disabilities of sight in museums. This has not served museum visitors well. Scientific theories about individual disabilities have in part developed independently of the reality of disabled populations, and are affected by external factors such as religion, economics and politics relating to the societies in which these theories develop. Using such frameworks is an epistemological model of disability.

This article has three aims: to inform access policy for museums, arts councils, other funding bodies and practitioners in the field of access to arts and cultural heritage for people with disabilities of sight; to begin a debate on the nature of studies that inform museums, art education and an understanding of the concept of blindness; and to inform ideas about access to cultural institutions for people with disabilities of sight. The article is timely as it comes in the wake of the UK Equality Act, 2010, that states a legal right to access, amongst others, cultural institutions and education for people irrespective of their disability, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. This article is also timely in an international context, as it can inform policy in the wake of bills and amendments to other countries' legislations, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act 2008 Amendments.

The evidence presented comes in the form of a literature search of primary and secondary source material in the field of museums, education and the studies of disabilities of sight, with its discussion divided into four separate sections: an analysis of the context of philosophical and psychological theories of blindness and touch; a discussion on the development of institutional art education in Britain during the twentieth century, as an illustration of its development and strategization in relation to cultural access; an analysis of access to museums for people with disabilities of sight in Britain during the twentieth century; a conclusion and proposed recommendations for future research and practice in museums.

The context of the philosophical debate on touch and blindness

In the early years of the 21st Century, researchers in Britain continue to discuss theories of touch and exclusion in museums, and analyse the role of touch in increasing the understanding of artefacts (Chatterjee, MacDonald, Prytherch & Noble 2008; Candlin 2003, 2004, 2008). Although Candlin (2006) has discussed the role of touch in support of sight as well as a primary mode of perception, in this body of work there is little mention of the number of people with disabilities of sight that rely on touch over vision, and thus why it is of primary importance as a tool of access. Similarly, despite the inclusion of people who do not rely on touch as their primary sense, the development of research into verbal descriptions as a tool of accessibility (Hillis, 2003a, 2003b) and new forms of multimodal exhibitions which examine perceptions holistically in the UK (Hayhoe 2012), a survey by Hillis (2005) for the RNIB observes that touch exhibitions and Braille are still largely prevalent.

These theories and practices contrast with the statistical findings of a study by Access Economics (2009) for the Royal National Institute for the Blind in the UK. This study observes that the most prevalent conditions causing disabilities of sight are those that produce distorting impairments to vision but not blindness. Furthermore, the report of this research also observes that many of these conditions are those that are prevalent in the later years of life — the most prevalent condition is Aged Related Macular Degeneration, which accounts for over 50 percent of sight impairment in the UK. This study also observes that a significant majority of people in the UK with disabilities of sight in 2008 are past retirement age (65 years for males and 60 years for females)

and a significant majority of people who are blind and visually impaired have mild or moderate impairments - of males below 40 years old, for example, only 2.9 percent are considered blind, and of females in the same category only 2.1 percent are considered blind. Thus it appears that the significant majority of people with disabilities of sight in the UK still have some usable vision, live most of their lives with visual culture and importantly still have what has been referred to in previous studies of blindness and cognition as a largely visual memory (Sacks 2011; Hayhoe 2011; Lowenfeld 1981); i.e., much of their conscious memory is in the form of visual images.

These statistics are in common with the findings of previous studies. During fieldwork in 1993-4, adults who had been excluded from visual art education in early life — most of whom had passed the age of retirement — actively avoided learning about paintings when visiting galleries and monuments in adulthood, whereas students who had visual art education when younger would often engage with highly visual topics, no matter what their level of visual impairment (Hayhoe 2000, 2008a). In observations of students in schools for the blind between 1999 and 2001, students were seen to be capable of creating colourful visual art to attain academic qualifications; whilst one student who was registered blind gained a place at art college and could compete with sighted students with equality in art tasks, even though she had no colour perception (Hayhoe 2008a). In the course of this research, students who were told they were incapable of certain art tasks would avoid working with modes of art they had been excluded from in previous projects, even when it meant that they would not gain credit for the art tasks that they did pursue.

In later observations of a multimodal course, students from a school for the blind chose to reproduce extremely colourful pieces of glass work and sculptures that were displayed behind glass, even when they were given the choice of reproducing pieces from the touch and mainstream collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (Hayhoe 2012a). This same study also observed that students could successfully lead groups of sighted students in a multi-sensory art task to reproduce these artefacts. Furthermore, more recently guided and independent museum visitors in the United States easily comprehended paintings and art works that were beyond reach, through verbal and written descriptions in the gallery or on the Web (Hayhoe 2012b, in press); given the choice, many of the adults participating in this study preferred to visit galleries independently, and felt socially included in the museum by gaining physical proximity to the art works — partially as they could listen to the discussions of others or use their residual vision in combination with verbal descriptions, in order to study art works in the museum. These findings support DeCoster & Loots (2004) observation that art education for people with disabilities of sight needs to include a significant amount of visual media, as most blind people will relate to this sense more than touch perceptions alone.

So why, given that people with disabilities of sight have been observed to gain from viewing visual artefacts, is there still such an emphasis on touch alone as a tool of access in British museums? Furthermore, why is there also so little emphasis on providing closer visual proximity to art works and enhanced visual information for the majority of people with disabilities of sight?

To begin this investigation, a question the philosopher Locke was posed by Molyneux, first published in the 1690 edition of Locke's (2001) influential *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was analysed. This question asked whether a person who was born blind and had never seen could understand an object if he or she gained sight, and was understood as having particular significance in later philosophies.

There was a considerable political and religious motive for this discussion at the time, as secret unpublished letters show that Locke was also engaging in conversations with Newton, and reveals a broader debate on the nature of light and hallucination. This discussion was designed to cast doubt on orthodox Catholic notions of envisioning angels (Hayhoe 2008b). Newton's involvement in this debate also included secret writings against the Roman Catholic understanding of the Trinity and for gnostic, Arian Christianity, and his support of a born blind Cambridge fellow, Sanderson, who developed his own touch language to develop his understanding of mathematics (Paulson 1987). Locke's discussion also came in an era when Locke, an idealistic Protestant who worked towards uniting the Anglican Church of England's disparate elements, was in hiding in Paris — where the first edition of his essay was published — to avoid arrest from King James II, who was attempting to take England back under the influence of Rome (Spellman 1997). Consequently, Locke used the medium of touch to cast doubt on visions as a tool of orthodox Roman Catholic theology (Hayhoe 2008b).

Locke's debate was supported at the beginning of the 18th Century by the Irish philosopher and Anglican bishop, Berkeley, who conducted a study with a boy who had congenital cataracts removed, in an attempt to test Molyneux's question. In this study, Berkeley asked the boy to identify objects at a distance that he had only touched when he was blind. Although the boy was unable to do so initially, after a short period of handling and then seeing alone he was able to identify the objects accurately (Berkeley 1899). Similar experiments were later conducted with adults by twentieth century cognitive psychologists, such as von Senden and Revesz from the 1930s (Revesz 1950), Gregory (1974) in the early 1960s and Sacks (1993) in the early 1990s.

Locke's question also influenced the critical works of the French philosopher and art critic, Diderot, and became an element of his later essay, *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* in the 1740s (Diderot 2001). In this *Letter*, Diderot also challenges Catholic orthodoxy through material philosophy, showing that blind people can have an alternative, understanding of life without the medium of vision. The *Letter* contains Romanticist influences (Paulson 1987), and is the first work of the French Enlightenment to openly discuss the notion that blind people can understand art works, and therefore beauty, through touch. Thus beyond the British and Irish enlightenments, touch is seen as a political and religious challenge to the orthodoxies of the era, and are a founding element of a broader, enlightened debate. Diderot also openly questioned conventions not just of blind people's understanding of touch but of sound and taste too; although like his predecessor's work, the focus of his *Letter* is premised on touch as the over-riding perception for the blind. "*He (sic.) [the blind man] judges beauty by touch — that is easy to understand; but what is not so easy to grasp is that his judgement is influenced by pronunciation and the sound of a voice.*" (Diderot 2001, 154).

In the 20th Century, philosophical debates on the issues raised by Locke, Berkeley and Diderot became the tool of phenomenologists, and following the example of these earlier philosophers, this new generation of conjecture still continued to describe people who were totally blind and had no visual memory. For example, in the 1940s Merleau-Ponti (2002) relates touch to mobility in *The Phenomenology of Perception* by discussing the relationship between the vibrations of a blind person's cane, the proximity of objects and an understanding of distance from the outside world; i.e. he conjectured that a blind person's world is nearer as his or her touch only extends to the

end of his or her cane. In the 1990s Nagel (1991) continued this theme in *Mortal Questions*, likening a blind person's adaptation to detect and understand vibrations to that of a bat, a creature born wholly blind. Locke, Berkeley and Diderot also influenced a correspondence debate in the latter years of the 20th Century between Magee & Milligan (1998), which is published as *Sight Unseen* — Milligan himself had a disability of sight. This debate and the works of these earlier philosophers continue to influence art works in the twenty-first century, most notably in Britain through the theatrical art installation entitled *The Question*, designed by Extant and the Open University (Rolfe, 2010), which was staged wholly in the dark and navigated by a vibrating tool called The Lotus.

The Educational Context of the Nineteenth Century.

The use of these philosophical studies by Locke and Molyneux, Berkeley, Diderot, and Newton's prodigy Sanderson became the foundation for the earliest article proposing institutional education for students with disabilities of sight. The article, entitled *On the Education of the Blind*, was published in the influential Edinburgh *Magazine and Review* in open letter format in 1774, much the same as Diderot's *Letter* earlier - drawing on this theme, the author also gave himself the pseudonym Demodocus (1774), the wise blind poet in Homer's ancient Greek tale, The Odyssey. In base of these earlier philosophical arguments and assumptions about blindness, Demodocus wrote that touch is an essential tool for providing academic, musical, liberal theological and poetic enlightenment, as well as petitioning an understanding of the mental abilities of people with disabilities of sight. Thus the article refers to a politically liberal understanding that people with disabilities of sight are intellectually and spiritually equal to their sighted peers, in a manner similar to Diderot's material philosophy. Thus, as he proposed of music instruction,

"Let, therefore, his head and his hands (if I may use the expression) be taught to go pari passu. Let the one be instructed in the simplest elements, and the others conducted in the easiest operations first. Contemplation and exercise will produce light in the one, and the promptitude in the other. But, as his capacity of speculation, and powers of action, become more and more mature, discoveries more abstract and retired, tasks more arduous and difficult may be assigned to him."
(Demodocus 1774, 685)

In accordance with the liberal politics of Demodocus and the works of these earlier philosophies of touch, three identifiable scholastic movements that governs the way that touch is used with students with disabilities of sighting institutional education were formed, in order to enlighten students and stop them from begging, as they had become known for throughout Europe (Hayhoe 2008b). In Britain the influence of these movements overlapped both in time and political influence, and was constructed of four basic pedagogical elements that were prevalent at the time: religious morality, training to provide a living, enlightenment and personal expression. These elements combined to form distinct social movements in France, Britain and Austria in the latter years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century, and guided the pedagogy of European and North American schools for blind students.

The first such school was a royal institution founded in Paris by the translator to King Louis XVI, Hauy, in 1784 (Paulson 1987). Thus its politics were religiously and socially conservative, although it employed the beliefs of Diderot and his intellectually liberal

philosophy. The founding of the school was followed by an article of Hauy's (1889) pedagogy published in 1786 and dedicated to the then king of France, in which he again cited and built on the ideas of Locke and Berkeley, and emphasised the writing of Diderot. However, because of his political connections, Hauy's writing subsumed Diderot's political beliefs and instead interpreted them as religiously pious rather than materially enlightened; and therefore the teaching of the bible, ethics and the moral employment of touch was emphasised in his pedagogy. The primary medium of this education was a touch language for the promotion of literature that was to later influence one of its students, Braille (Paulson 1987), although students were also taught a form of hand craft to provide a living after finishing their education. By teaching his students thus, Hauy conjectured, they would be religiously enlightened, be less likely to beg in the streets and also provide the fully sighted population a greater understanding of blindness — the latter was as Diderot proposed (Hayhoe 2008b).

The patronage of Louis XVI and funding from his admirers was ultimately to be the downfall of the institution after the French revolution in the 1790s, as its original pedagogy was felt to be too linked to *bourgeois* thought (Paulson 1987). As a consequence, in 1791 the institute was taken over by allies of the revolution to work for the state, and was forced to adopt a stronger emphasis on mechanical arts. After being listed as politically undesirable in the 1790s, Hauy resigned from his institute and left France to travel to Russia via Vienna in the early years of the 19th Century. Although his pedagogy was felt to be too politically contentious in Russia, Hauy influenced education for the blind in Austria. In Paris, meanwhile, the institute became more related to training in manufacturing by its new principal, Guille (1819), who greatly admired what had become the British pedagogy of mechanical arts.

As in France, the pedagogy of the first institutions for people with disabilities of sight in Britain — which were termed asylums — was strongly related to the politics of its era. However, as the founders of the first institutions sought independent funding for their foundations and were largely non-conformist Protestants or those with radical political views — generally allied to the anti-slavery movement and supporters of the French revolution (Hunter 2002) — they developed a more radical pedagogy of touch in line with the enlightenment taking place in France. Although they were also influenced by the philosophy and politics of Diderot, the pedagogy in these institutions was primarily based on touch for what it termed mechanical arts — basket weaving, sewing, caning chairs, etc. - in order to employ students and raise funds (Hayhoe 2008b); and were in accordance with a religious belief that hard, hand work could be a means to salvation (Weber 2001; Bristol Asylum 1800; Liverpool School for the Blind 1849). Thus those that they sought to enlighten were termed the *indigent blind* and many asylums adopted this term in their title.

"[Of] the indigent blind, by far the greater have lost their sight in infancy, and it is unhappily too often the case, that the entire neglect of education added to their infliction, not only renders them examples of extreme ignorance, but lays the foundation for incredible habits of idleness and disinclination to mental and bodily exertion." (Bristol Asylum 1838, 3)

In Austria the first institution was founded in Vienna by Klein, a devote Roman Catholic with conservative religious and political beliefs, in the late 1790s. Although he was greatly influenced by the liberally enlightened ideals of Hauy — when Hauy visited Vienna on route to Moscow after leaving the Paris institute (Paulson 1987) — Klein's interpretation of his pedagogy was more in line with orthodox Roman Catholic ideals,

and he believed that people with disabilities of sight could use touch to develop themselves socially and emotionally in line with conservative religious doctrine. Thus Klein's first student, Kleinhans, was taught to sculpt crucifixes — an art he became famous for in the early years of the nineteenth century (Revesz 1950) — and in 1836 Klein published an article which stated that employing blind students' hands in educational work as opposed to leaving them without an occupation would prevent them from becoming prone to masturbation, which he saw as an immoral habit.

"[The] blind person who cannot be stimulated by vision and who is thus used to gaining pleasure from feeling objects is more liable than others to involve himself in the vice of masturbation that weakens the body and soul. Exercise and occupation can prevent this most effectively... Wooden animals and similar play things he will enjoy no less than any other children and at the same time he will exercise his hands while playing with them." (Klein 1981, 157).

In Britain an initial tactile academic system — although initially conceived through Sanderson's mathematics — that would later inspire museum courses took its pedagogy from the liberal enlightenment of Diderot, Demodocus and Hauy. This form of teaching was introduced into Britain in the late 1820s through a member of the Anglican clergy, Taylor (1828), who was persuaded by the notion that intellectual development through touch was a more virtuous labour than the mechanical arts. This pedagogy also began gaining support from philanthropic members of the community beyond their original non-conformist Protestant foundations, who were increasingly funding the older asylums (Hayhoe 2008b). Although it never replaced the mechanical arts as the primary work of these institutions, there is evidence that a number of earlier institutions came to realise the academic potential of visits to museums, gardens and zoos for the study of science in this period. For example, a sketch of the Bristol Asylum (1854) in the middle of the Nineteenth Century talked about touch visits in support of its students' experiential education, again emphasising touch as the medium of learning.

"Various visits to the Zoological Gardens, and examinations by touch of some of the tamer animals, have frequently been sources of high enjoyment, and the impressions obtained by books and stuffed skins corrected." (Bristol Asylum 1854, 8)

The introduction of an intellectual philosophy of touch by Taylor was followed by the creation of the British and Foreign Society for Improving the Embossed Literature of the Blind (BFSIEL) - this would later become the National Institute for the Blind, and then the Royal National Institute for the Blind (Thomas 1936; Wolf 1992) — and Worcester College for the Blind Sons of Gentlemen in the 1860s, which was the first school to include sighted students, offered a purely academic education and emphasised university entry for its students (Hayhoe 2008b; Craze 1972). The BFSIEL became particularly influential throughout Britain and was founded by a surgeon, Armitage, who had developed a disability of sight after a medical training, and had previously been educated in Paris. Thus, influenced by Hauy's conventional interpretation of Diderot's materialist conjectures, Armitage's theory of pedagogy emphasised tactile literature, a more formal music education based on tactile notation and the enlightened development of students with disabilities of sight; all in addition to the traditional training of mechanical arts, in a new wave of institutions, the first of which was the Normal College and Academy of Music for the Blind (NCAMB) in 1871 (Wolf 1992).

NCAMB was co-founded by a politically radical American teacher named Campbell, who was also influenced by Hauy and Klein's methods at the Perkin's School in Boston, US (Illingworth 1910; Hayhoe 2008b), where continental forms of tactile education had been reinterpreted in much the same manner as prescribed by the original Protestant enlightenment in Britain, and Diderot's ideals of materialism (Hayhoe 2008b). Thus the exercises promoted by the school featured touch and object handling in order to develop an understanding of the natural world around its students. For example, similar to Klein's earlier article, its *Annual Report* from 1883 (Normal College 1883) promoted touch education in the non-school environment, as its students were preparing for formal education. In this discussion, parents were encouraged to provide an opportunity for exploration and creation through the use of hand tools to fashion artefacts and, echoing Diderot, develop a tactile knowledge of beauty through artistic production.

"I have known a blind child who constructed mountain ranges, mud forts, cottages - in fact, a whole village, with a church, shops, and ordinary houses; even modelled men and women, invited them to a party, and then to mud pie and cakes..."

When walking with them [children with disabilities of sight] we should speak of everything we see, and, when convenient, place their hands upon whatever interests them. Any objects will do for a lesson - a fountain, a sign, a tree, a bird, a horse, beautiful fleecy clouds, the gathering storm; the returning sunshine, the springing grass, or the opening flowers; all will furnish topics for the most interesting stories to the little blind listener, who can measure the length of his area about him (sic)." (Normal College 1883, 55)

Evidence of this philosophy of touch was also encouraged in the classrooms at the NCAMB in the late nineteenth century. For example, an article on the school from 1891 in *The Strand Magazine* (Salmon 1891) reported that students were given garden plots to tend. Following these classes, students were then encouraged to mould in clay what they grew. Summoning the language of the earlier era of enlightenment, Salmon described this form of exercise as being equivalent to the enlightenment of the students and that art and nature be recreated through touch in a practical curriculum; although this time Protestant religious philosophies had been superseded by Diderot's earlier notions of a material philosophy of touch.

"In this room is a glass case containing some clay models of pea pods, butter cups and other things that grow which one would imagine they could never really grasp in detail - every one executed by the pupils of the college. Even a small dog has not proved beyond the powers of these modellers..."

'Give the blind man in his fingers an equivalent for his eyes, and the darkness in which he lives is dispelled.' On this condition, the Normal School at Norwood is a veritable creator of light." (Salmon 1891, 568)

The influence of Campbell's (1901) interpretation of touch as materialism was also evident in a paper he delivered to an international conference in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this paper he took the opportunity to reinforce his new emphasis on the marriage of the academic and vocational properties of arts, expressed in their methods of teaching through touch. Here he appeared to break with

Klein's religious ethic and harkened back to Diderot and Demodocus, as he focused on unambiguous academic rigour and made no mention of aesthetic or emotional development. In the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, although there were dissenting voices from some on the continent (Pablasek 1873), the older, religiously founded asylums, institutions and colleges in Britain were also increasing the academic content of their tactile curricula (Hayhoe 2008b). This was especially noticeable where it diminished its vocational educational content (Bristol Asylum 1887).

So how did these pedagogies affect the access to museums in Britain in the twentieth century?

The foundation of British theory in museum touch exhibits

As discussed in the previous section, the first access to monuments and public institutions for people with disabilities of sight was developed by Klein in Austria in the early years of the nineteenth century, during visits to Catholic churches (Hayhoe 2008b; Revesz 1950); ironically in the manner discussed by Demodocus and Diderot. In Britain, these notions of the use of touch for handling were then used to teach in the manner of the materialist and Protestant philosophies, particularly through informal visits to private and zoological gardens (Bristol Asylum 1854; Normal College 1883). Despite this use of informal access to these institutions, however, there is no record of access to museums and galleries until the early twentieth century, when inclusion was provided by using museum exhibits as tactile pedagogical tools rather than places for general access to artefacts and exhibitions. Thus the first recorded establishment of museum access was the inclusion of a museum in the new school building of Newcastle Upon Tyne's school for the blind in 1905 (Wagg 1930).

Following this integration of a museum for students with disabilities of sight, there are records of a tentative educational trial of integrated visits for blind visitors to the Natural History Museum, New York, US, from the early years of 1910 (Laidlaw Vaughan 1914). The first published theory on this form of access was then written by Charlton Deas (1913), the curator of the Sunderland Museum, in the *Museums Journal* in 1913. His article described a practice report of a series of courses he had developed in the museum, and was informed by a discussion with a teacher from a local school for the blind, who had found that his students had a particular problem with describing the scale of objects, and particularly those of animals.

Charlton Deas felt that this problem of scale could be overcome through a touch course within his museum, comprising many types of objects, including sculptures, archaeological pieces, natural history pieces, armoury and mechanical models. The children brought to the museum were from the Sunderland council school for the blind, which, after receiving instruction and feeling many of the articles, were given clay and encouraged to create the pieces they had touched. In addition, adults from the local area were invited along, and attended many special lectures in which dialogue was accompanied by tactile demonstrations. As with earlier educators in this field at the time in Britain, Charlton Deas (1913) had a strong, liberal Protestant social conscience, and saw the cause of access for people with disabilities of sight as a political issue. In particular, he was aggrieved that this course was not taken up by other institutions and little funding was provided for its promotion, either locally or elsewhere in the country. The reason for this, he argued, was that access for people with disabilities of sight was thought to be of little political value to the greater society,

as their population remained relatively small and thus commanded little political representation.

"Of course the ideal hope is that a little more time and money can be spared from the requirements of warfare, [and] consideration will be given to the whole question of special provision of opportunity and assistance for afflicted members of the State.... As the blind do not form a collected section, they are not a political force, and so, with their other afflicted brethren, fail to secure a place in the national sun.... However, in the glorious belief that 'the minds of men are widening with the process of the suns,' I submit these proposals to you with the reminder that all progress is individual in the first place, and that if you will be the individual of your own community, you will be helping towards the realisation of the doctrine that 'the highest worship of god is service to man.'" (Charlton Deas 1913, 98-99)

The influence of Charlton Deas' course in Sunderland, along with its Protestant and materialist influences, informed further courses and access initiatives in the UK and US in later years (Laidlaw Vaughan 1914; Bartlett 1955). In a survey from the middle of the twentieth century in particular, Bartlett described the useful place of a pedagogy based on handling objects and the use of museum artefacts in this pedagogy. Like Charlton Deas, Bartlett emphasised the political aspects of access to this educational process in the museum, rather than the formative, emotional process of aesthetic creation. However, in the 1950s there appeared to be little formative theory beyond Charlton Deas' development of access to museums and art galleries. Furthermore, as Charlton Deas feared earlier, because of the limited political and economic representation of people with disabilities of sight, it was noted that access to museum collections in Britain was infrequent and sporadic. For example, Bartlett cited a report by the National Institute for the Blind from 1931 that showed that 39 museums had provided any form of access to their mainstream collections, and that many others had not considered developing such access. Furthermore, on the state of museum education in the 1950s, *"[I]t is clear that no expansion of museum services for the blind is likely unless a strong initiative is forthcoming from the museum world itself."* (Bartlett 1955, 284)

Thus in the middle of the twentieth century, the use and symbolic place of touch turned full circle and became a radicalised political issue again linked with liberalism and the political left — a form of neo-materialist touch linked more to Demodocus and Diderot's ideologies of social and cultural justice rather than high minded ideals of spiritual or moral development by keeping hands busy. Despite the inertia displayed in the British institutes of Bartlett's era, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the development of an overtly political movement of independent living in the US influenced a new wave of radical left wing disability politics in the UK (Barnes & Mercer 2003). Subsequently, left wing local authority initiatives were applied to allow visitors with disabilities of sight to touch exhibits in the galleries of many of Britain's major cities. For instance, minutes from the Association of Metropolitan Authorities from 1975 described the initiative by the left wing Greater London Council to make exhibitions under their influence fully accessible.

"GLC asked us [the Association of Metropolitan Authorities] to consider an attendant should be available to places administered by local authorities to help blind visitors in suitable cases to feel the exhibits and hence gain more than by merely hearing a description of the

exhibit." We support this and point out that this is already being done in some places; we would, however, encourage its extension." (Association of Metropolitan Authorities 1975a)

Similarly, in September 1975 the Association of Metropolitan Authorities produced a report for the socialist controlled Merseyside County Council, describing their provision for visitors with disabilities of sight in terms of a debate into the universality of access. In common with its earlier minutes, their report supported the call for a neo-materialist form of inclusion for people with disabilities of sight in museums and galleries. However, mirroring the debate in education during the same period by the committee of enquiry into the education of students with special educational needs, whose personnel and remit had been defined by the incumbent largely socialist national government (Warnock 1978), its discussion questioned whether access should be separated from or integrated into mainstream exhibitions; although again it argued that whatever its conclusion tactile media such as Braille should take a particularly symbolic role in providing a medium of access.

"There appears to be a division of opinion amongst those that work for the blind generally.... some consider that facilities should not be separated from the normal museum context and therefore should involve little more than the provision of Braille labels and leaflets. Others support the idea of providing special galleries arranged for the blind. The local branch of the [RNIB] would be willing to advise on the appropriate approach." (Association of Metropolitan Authorities 1975b)

A consequence of this discussion between the local authorities is that a number of separate special courses and exhibitions were developed to include visitors with disabilities of sight in the 1970s and 1980s, with a number of educational and cultural initiatives symbolically designed to coincide with the International Year of the Disabled in 1981 (Hayhoe 2008b). For example, the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain), London, developed a separate exhibition that included tactile access to some of its more high profile exhibits in 1976 (Tate Gallery 1976), with touch tours featuring sculptures by Moore, Hepworth and Degas. Despite employing a relatively similar format of handling and lectures used by Charlton Deas in 1913, The Tate stated that it had developed a model for future courses (Pearson 1991). The Tate followed this exhibition with a separate one using a similar touch tour format in 1981. This employed touch to educate people with disabilities of sight about the world surrounding them, from the figurative to the abstract, based on an assumption that they had no impression of these issues. The concept of the exhibition again claimed to be pioneering as it led the viewer from the recognisable sculptural figure through the various stages of deconstruction (Tate Gallery 1981).

In the years following the 1981 Year of the Disabled, there was an observable change in the nature of the neo-materialist model of access, in line with the earlier findings of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities. This change mirrored the legal inclusion of students in mainstream schools following the 1981 Education Act, which itself was designed to coincide with the year of the disabled (Hayhoe 2008b). This model included the evolution of a process that overtly included people with disabilities in the access process, either through employment, surveys or commentary. For example, in 1983 The Natural History Museum, London, developed an inclusive exhibition entitled Exploring Woodland and Seashore, which was designed to evoke images of its subject by displaying pieces from several of the museum's departments within reach of visitors, encouraging them to touch. Visitors' comments from this exhibition were

published in the first issue of the British Journal of Visual Impairment, and this consultation included the use of media that the majority of the community could understand (Kirby 1983).

In addition, although concentrated in London, inclusive exhibitions were also planned in smaller galleries and museums in the British provinces that could be experienced by all visitors. Notably the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, held a mainstream exhibition for blind visitors in the late 1980s called Feeling to See (Arnolfini Gallery 1986), whose press release stated that the exhibition was the first "in Britain conceived specifically for the blind and partially sighted as opposed to making existing works 'hands on'." (Arnolfini Gallery 1987). However the commissioning process was still undertaken largely by sighted artists, directors, and curators whose notions of blindness bore many similarities to Diderot's original material philosophy.

"Artists are encouraged to submit proposals which are imaginative in their solution, and which involve a variety of tactile and perhaps auditory experiences. Any materials may be employed through constant and vigorous handling by visitors [and] should be anticipated in the choice of materials and structure." (Arnolfini Gallery 1987)

Similarly, the development of an inclusive political model became prevalent in the Midlands and North of England in the late 1980s in a touring exhibition of sculptures in Leeds and Coventry, through an exhibition called Revelation for the Hands. Like The Tate's earlier exhibition, it included mainstream, contemporary sculptures which were meant to be perceived primarily through touch (Kirby 1988); and therefore the rhetoric of its title echoed the use of touch as the primary perceptual imagery. However, as it followed the new model of inclusion the exhibition welcomed all comers from the local communities to become involved in the project, and information on the pieces was provided primarily through a taped guide, making it again accessible to the majority. Of these exhibitions, Fergusson argued,

"New ideas regarding the function of museums have benefited the visually impaired, even though mostly the changes have not been made with the visually impaired specifically in mind...there is an interest in serving the visually impaired and encouraging them to visit when they leave school." (Fergusson 1987, 52)

Initiatives such as those in London, Bristol, Coventry and Leeds were sporadic, however, and reflected many of the criticisms of the greater system of funding and the development of cultural segregation criticised by Charlton Deas and Bartlett earlier in the century. Unlike the inclusive education movement that developed in the same period, museum education was not guided by national governments and did not save money by cutting funding to expensive schools for the blind (Hayhoe 2008b). Thus the political movement that began in British museums and influenced funding bodies during the 1970s took a further fifteen years to gain recognition in national government, through the publication of a report commissioned by the RNIB for HM Government (Bone et. al. 1993). Borrowing much from the neo-materialist philosophy of educators, the report had many parallels with inclusive education and it emphasised targeting schools; giving official recognition to the place of public arts within formal education programmes. The report also recognised that access provision was provided by education departments in museums rather than curators, and that the intention of the museums was to make visits academic as well as experiential.

As with education, access to museum exhibits also replicated the problems discovered in inclusive school education. Despite the rhetoric of Warnock et. al. (1978) and the subsequent 1981 Education Act, reflections on the implementation of these ideas systematically stereotyped groups of disabled people and generalised classification and provision (Hayhoe 2008b). Similarly, during the 1990s the charity Living Paintings developed a book of raised thermo-formed plastic tactile pictures of well-known paintings from the National Gallery, London. The learning package also contained a taped narrative of each painting, explaining their scenarios and technical composition, much in the style of a neo-materialist pedagogy. However, although these paintings were understandable by those who developed disabilities of sight later in life, it appeared that only the majority were now considered and people who were born without light perception felt excluded. As one born blind couple commented, *"looking at the painting through touch was both a pleasure and a frustrating experience. Some pictures were relatively easy to read.... while others were practically unreadable."* (Raffray 1990, 61). Similarly, others found the representation of shade through dots confusing. *"I can accept that the faint dots represent darkness, but what exactly does this mean to a congenitally blind person like myself? Can even the combination of tapes and thermoforms really reveal to me the nature of a painting."* (Raffray 1990, 62).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, two questions were introduced: Why do British museums focus on touch exhibitions for people with disabilities of sight, when the majority of this population in the UK have partial vision? Furthermore, why is there so much emphasis on Braille labelling and literature for people with disabilities of sight in British museums, when it is estimated that approximately 95 percent of people with disabilities of sight in the UK do not read Braille?

Perhaps more than any other form of impairment or disability, disabilities of sight have been caught between the religious and political civil wars in Europe that informed the enlightenment (Hayhoe 2008b; Paulson 1987; Jay 1994), and the echoes of this philosophy are still evident in today's access policies and theories. The discussions of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, although not being wholly responsible for its categorizing, still assist in informing and guiding the development of cultural tradition and the historical stereotyping of people with disabilities of sight as completely blind, having no visual memory and being entirely disinterested in visual culture and visual elements of society. Although it was unknown how many people with disabilities of sight fitted this stereotype as no accurate statistics were collected at the time, there is evidence that this was not the main motivation for promoting the legal access of people with disabilities of sight. The founders of the enlightenment who initiated this discussion - in what is now Britain, Ireland and France — were more concerned with the philosophical and scientific notion that someone could perceive without any form of vision, and that this notion challenged Catholic, particularly Roman Catholic, notions of the primacy of sight, and supported less conformist ideas of Protestant Christianity and materialism.

However, as was evident at the end of the twentieth century, this problem was not overcome by simply rationalising the needs of the majority and either denying the need for touch and Braille, promoting solely visual language within its descriptions or relegating touch to a minor role in the perception of people with disabilities of sight. By doing this, British society was in danger of its pendulum swinging too far the other

way, as this simply returned to the problem of isolating and excluding people who were born without vision and had no visual memory. Perhaps part of the problem with the ideology of touching and not touching, therefore, is what Charlton Deas referred to as the lack of real political representation of blind people, and therefore their lack of influence in asking for a solution that meets their individual needs rather than those of a vocal or numerical majority of sighted people.

What is clear, however, is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century there is no simple solution to access, and that equality will not be achieved by blithely following political ideology or the majority of a population if it leaves the remainder of the population un-catered for and unrepresented. Therefore, based on the evidence presented in this article two courses of action need to be considered in the development of cultural access to museums and galleries for people with disabilities of sight. Firstly, significantly more research needs to be conducted into the needs of the whole of the population of people with disabilities of sight, and those who provide access need a much greater understanding of the nature of what impairments are. Secondly, on a practical level there needs to be a more pluralistic rather than perceived majority approach to providing access and education in museums. All forms of visual, non-visual and even enhanced visual media need to be available and accessible in museums in Britain, and British people need to be told they exist. Only in this manner, through what Warren (1994) refers to in education as an individual approach, can we truly say that we are providing accessibility for people with disabilities of sight.

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Endnotes

1. Disability of sight is taken from the definition used by Access Economics (2009) for the Royal National Institute for the Blind as visual acuity in the range (<6/12).

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