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Visual impairment, photography and art

Book section

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Visual Impairment, Photography and Art: The nature of understanding realistic two-dimensional images by experientially learning through photography

Abstract

Three genres of photographs created by visually impaired people are discussed. The analysis focuses on the notion that two-dimensional art works can be understood more readily through experiential learning. The article concludes that whatever their level of vision, visually impaired people have shown their understanding of visual concepts through photography, and that sighted people can gain an understanding of the social and perceptual worlds of visual impaired people by reading their photographs.

Introduction

This article addresses the following two questions: How does a visually impaired person work with a realistic two dimensional image? How have genres of photography by visually impaired people evolved? The primary aim of this discussion is to contribute to the debate on art and aesthetic education for people with visual impairments through the experiential learning of photography and two-dimensional image creation. Hayhoe (2012, 2013) finds that there has been scant investigation of these issues and their relevance to a general understanding of the role of experience of art as a whole for people with visual impairments. In this article, it is argued that such a debate can inform inclusion in the education of visual culture, a notion stipulated in a number of international laws such as the UK's Equality Act (2010) and the Americans with Disabilities Act, Amended (2008). The secondary aim of this article is to contribute to a broader debate on the nature of the visual arts, art education and visual culture, as it questions the idea that learning about such concepts is premised primarily on visual perceptions alone (Hayhoe, 2013). In this article these issues are investigated through three genres of photography – tonal photography, vivid colour photography and human awareness photography - created by people who studied photography through unorthodox means. Before discussing the three genres, this article continues by addressing the context of blindness and aesthetics.

The context of what we understand about blindness and photography

The received wisdom of philosophers such as John Locke, George Berkeley and Denis Diderot during the time of the enlightenment and psychologists such as Max von Senden, Geza Revesz and Richard Gregory during the 20th Century has been that a blind person should have no interest in the visual aesthetics, as an understanding of their sight is gained through tactile substitution, often referred to as cross modal transfer (Hayhoe, 2003). Visually impaired people, this traditional argument goes, have no vision or at least their vision is so impaired as to be unworkable and so they will never see the fruits of their labour or be able to understand the work of others (Hayhoe, 2008a). It has been argued that the reasons for the illogical development of this argument is complex but mainly relates to an understanding of blindness as an abstract intellectual idea, rationalised and greatly reduced to an oversimplified concept by academics and institutions in order to make intellectual functioning easier or to prove religious and political points (Hayhoe, 2008a). Thus it is arguable that much of what was felt to be common sense by much of our world was actually a prejudice based on the lack of thought and ability of academics and those who led our cultural development, which has led to passive exclusion of people from institutions such as museums, galleries and websites (Hayhoe, 2013).

Despite these barriers, photography by visually impaired artists is fast developing new genres in the field of contemporary art. Where it may have been considered to be a wildly optimistic statement to say this only a few years ago as no one considered photography as an art for visually impaired people, in the following discussion the argument is made that this understanding is one based on the unique qualities of tone, texture and the subjects of these photographs.

Furthermore, the notion that a completely blind person might want to create an image of what they have experienced through their touch, taste, sound or smell and project it on a flat visual image to give to friends, family or peers is also now slowly beginning to be understood (Barry,

2006). This also gives us a much greater understanding of what all of us are, whatever a person's level of vision, and of what we want to communicate even given our wildly differing perceptions and diverse understandings of art. This issue is now discussed further below.

New genres of photography developing through the experience of visual impairment

Three genres of photograph in particular provide illustrations of aesthetic and intellectual forms of the work of visually impaired artists. These genres are now discussed in the sections below.

Tonal photography

The first genre is the black and white studio and landscape portfolios being developed by blind and visually impaired collectives, either working in small geographic areas, such as the Seeing With Photography Collective (2013), who are based in New York, US. What the viewer can get most from this groups' work is a sense of depth in the tone used in the photographs, something that is perhaps surprising for these who see the world primarily in full colour.

Research has shown that the process of this difference first-hand by observing a female student with achromatism (total colour blindness) studying for an A Level in Art at a school for the blind in Worcester, UK (Hayhoe, 2008b). During this study it was observed that her art work aesthetically reflected a different character of perception that went against what had previously been described in educational theories on blindness (Hayhoe, 2008a); i.e. she actually saw better in a dark room under infra-red light than many sighted people did whilst using similar equipment. Furthermore, she also found that because she could not see colour her understanding of tone was more defined, more detailed and richer, a little like a person who relies on different aspects of the weather becomes more aware of the differences in clouds or wind directions. This is how her project was recorded.

“After a great deal of discussion, [her work] turned out to be a black and white photography project focusing on the subject of people’s body parts—an exercise she had begun during her holidays. At first she chose this subject as she became fascinated with photographing people’s hands, but then she found that these photographs often appeared to compare people’s wrinkled skin to tree bark—she remarked on this in particular on more than one occasion.

After these initial experiments, Anna said that she persuaded her friend and then her mother to have their hands photographed—she was particularly pleased with the photographs of her mother’s hands, as they were older and more wrinkled. When I asked why she liked this texture more than others she had worked with, she answered that it was their tonal qualities. This topic, she said, permeated other work on this subject too.”

(Hayhoe, 2008b: pp.125-126)

This finding was mirrored in Oliver Sack’s (1998) discussion on a colony of achromatics on the tiny and remote Pacific atoll of Pingelap where consanguineous marriage was inevitable, who saw the local landscape better than the sighted population as the sun set. In such cases the perception of tone was far more intense for people with no recognition of colour, making the experience of contrast far more important in photography. Such an outcome is most apparent in many of the black & white images seen in the collections of visually impaired collectives, although the different use of shade is also noticeable in a number of the colour photographs by the same artists in these collections too. In these circumstances the artists are again experiencing colour purely as tone, and therefore see more enriched qualities than the subtle variations that fully sighted people notice.

Vibrant colour photography

The second genre of art also provides different aesthetic information, but also shows robust colours in its images, a factor that has found to be of the utmost importance to those who still have tiny amounts of vision and are not achromatic (Hayhoe, 2012, 2008b). Many of the artists that fall into this category are more reliant on the simplicity and contrast of the colour in order to provide perceptual information beyond that required by the more understated colour images preferred by most sighted people. It is the strength of these colours that are needed to amplify what little vision they may have left. This appears to be a contradiction for many who view these works without the experience of blindness, as they assume that blind and visually impaired people appreciate less or no colour at all. However, in reality this need for vivacity is an absorbing quirk of a separate world with a rich and varied sensorial experience, where colour difference is hard to determine and these forms of art are more likely to teach people with sight something of what it is like to have compromised vision.

This difference in the use of colours by some with visual impairment was also highlighted during observations made during previous research with those viewing and creating art works. In one project in particular, a mixed group of visually impaired and sighted school children were taken around the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK, in order to find artworks that they could reproduce, each emphasising the non-visual senses as much as they did vision (Hayhoe, 2005, 2012). During this course, the students were initially shown around the museum by a guide who immediately assumed that the visually impaired students would only want to know about pieces they could touch. Surprisingly to the guide, however, after the tour the students immediately went to the glass gallery where everything was untouchable because it was made with very delicate, brightly coloured glass reflecting light in a myriad different ways. Eventually two of the three pieces chosen by the students for reproduction during the project were from this collection.

Examples of art work featuring the intensity of colour needed by people with extremely low vision have been seen in the work of a number of photographers exhibited in an exhibition entitled Sight Unseen at the California Museum of Photography in 2009 organised by Tony Diefel's organisation of the same name (McCulloh, 2009), and those seen in the work of many of the photographers working with Blind With Camera (2013). This phenomenon is also very apparent in the work of photographers such as Tim O'Brien's Collective, Blind Photographers' (2013). In this portfolio there is an interesting contrast between the dark backgrounds, the subtle blending of other strong dark colours and those in which lights are used to stand out from the darkness, providing a contrast and a neon distortion. Examples of the latter are particularly visible in the works of Kanchan Pamnani (Blind With Camera, 2010a) and Pranav Lal (Blind With Camera, 2010b), with pictures mirroring the distortion of the perception of light of someone with their particular forms of visual impairment. This is also seen to be applied most effectively in Blind With Camera's Painting With Light series (Blind With Camera, 2010c), in which the dark background is set against moving lights funnelled through a camera on night mode.

Human awareness photography

The third genre of art work is produced during exercises involving novice photographers who are blind or visually impaired, the vast majority of whom are school aged students. Each of these students are given a simple camera without adjustable parts and asked to take pictures of different elements of their everyday lives. This form of project began in San Francisco with a school project again pioneered by Tony Deifell (Seeing Beyond Sight, 2013) in 2002, but has now been replicated by many schools and other educational institutions worldwide, and by organisations such as Blind With Camera's study of life in schools and colleges in India (Blind With Camera, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c) and in PhotoVoice's examination of what it is like to be a visually impaired person in England (PhotoVoice, 2013).

This work, standing apart from the previous two genres, goes beyond an aesthetic realm and takes the camera into the world of politics, storytelling and social justice. They do not use expensive cameras or equipment set up by trained technicians, whose images are designed for high end exhibitions or commissions, they are generally produced with inexpensive or disposable cameras which take simple images that reflect the scenes and everyday lives of their users; making their images an anthropological study of their day to day existence, like the sociological methodology after which PhotoVoice is named (Mitchell, 2011). In this way, image taking is less a matter of the cognitive difference between visual impairment and sight, but a social narrative about the excluded reality of the camera user. To put it another way, they take the viewer not only into the senses of the photographer but also into the social and cultural world of the circumstances that their impairment prescribes and that these artists live within. A particular example of this genre is Blind With Camera's series on the life of Rahul Shirsat (Blind With Camera, 2009d), a totally blind student of the project with a visual memory. His work was guided by his hearing, a sense that fired his visual imagination to understand the scenes around him, and included sights of stair cases and visually impaired students sitting on the highly polished floor of their school, the experience of his local underpass and the cold vibrating sound of concrete steps through his legs and cane.

Conclusion

In all three of these genres, the art work that is produced is not just fascinating to people who are visually impaired, but are also intellectually, physically and socially illuminating to sighted people. This is due in large part to the subjects of these photographs that, although at first appearing to be mundane, take on a fluidity and a sense of movement through a carefully organised environment. It is this element that is reflected in the education courses of Blind With Camera and their college of photography specifically for blind students. The images that he has

collected from this project show an unimaginable world of institutionalisation and groups of friends, contrasts of dark insides with baking hot outsides, shadows, small intrigues and longings.

Perhaps what is most impressive about the images, compositions and ideas projected in many of these works, however, is the participants' lesser regard for what have been regarded as the formal rules of composition or subject choice. This is a group of students who have previously had little or no training in art forms of any type and so can take pictures with an abandon that gives the viewer a new perspective both on what it is to be visually impaired and also what it is like to have different, raw and untutored conventions and expectations. If these three genres are to be appreciated to their fullest therefore, it is perhaps these elements of the recent world of photography by visually impaired people that those studying this form of art will take with them most.

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