



Blindness and Visual Impairment at the Art Academy

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Abstract: What does it mean if you are visually impaired or blind, yet you want to study at an art academy?

What does it mean if you are visually impaired or blind, yet you want to study at an art academy? I know this from the other side—as a teacher at an art school who is not perceived as visually impaired, but must always wear his glasses. I teach art philosophy at LUCA School of Arts in Ghent. My doctorate was about blind and partially-sighted artists in Europe from the 17th century on, and the question of what this has meant for both art history and the philosophy of art.¹ After this theoretical exercise, I guided blind and visually-impaired art lovers through the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels.

Since my colleagues at LUCA were aware of the fact that I had worked in this field, they sought my advice in 2006 when a visually-impaired young woman applied to study drawing. I affirmed that there should be no problem, since comparable examples abound. I told them about Dario Malkowski, who became blind as a young soldier in 1944 and was the first blind art student at the art academy in Leipzig, East Germany during the fifties. Before this, professional art teachers had already helped blind artists to establish their practice, like in the case of Jakob Schmitt, who became blind during the First World War. Fritz Haussmann accepted him into his sculpture class at the School for Applied Arts in Mainz, Germany. After this, Jakob Schmitt began to run his own studio, as the art historian Hans Körner, who still teaches at the University of Düsseldorf, has described very well.² While these

are mostly individual examples, much more structured approaches for helping visually-impaired and blind artists were developed during the nineties (twentieth century), especially in Great Britain, where the Royal National Institute for the Blind has supported such initiatives as a matter of cultural policy.



Figure 1: Jonathan Huxley

So, on the one hand, you have the individual force of young visually-impaired and blind artists—like Jonathan Huxley, who was one of the lucky twenty students, who in 1989 were accepted to start studying at the Royal Academy in London, from a competitive pool totalling four hundred candidates. On the other hand, you have a national policy to establish a legal and conceptual context to support individual initiatives that address issues like accessibility, discrimination, and the mindset of visibility via information, publication, etc.

With so many blind and visually-impaired artists, a welcoming climate for them is necessary. In this sense, the most impressive examples are artists like Jonathan Huxley, who studied painting in London, and Flavio Titolo, who



Figure 2: Jonathan Huxley

studied sculpture at the University of the West of England in Bristol, from 1990 up till 1993, and continued working in the studios of the school up until 1995. Why do I mention these examples?

First, they both focused completely on the arts. Visual impairment or blindness—as in the case of Flavio Titolo—is a formative condition of both their art experiences and their particular practices, yet it hardly dictated how they experience and make art, nor did they use it as a label to draw attention to their work. Blindness is just one of many conditions. Although they could have made an issue of this, it rather figured as part of a wider range of issues. To describe this more concretely, the style in which Jonathan Huxley works is in some sense related to his impaired vision, but it hardly illustrates his sight. Like every style, it demands its own coherence (see figures 1-3). And this coherence is one that proves very fascinating for sighted viewers, as well. So the reception of his work is based on this coherence, rather than on a different medical condition of sight—on different ways of seeing. Modern Art is more about generating new ways of seeing than about mimetic orders,

more about offering new possibilities for painting the sky, than dictating that the sky be painted in blue to look realistic. When Huxley studied at the Royal Academy, *the circle*, of late nineteenth century painter Walter Sickert, was still in place. It was used to position artists at the so-called perfect

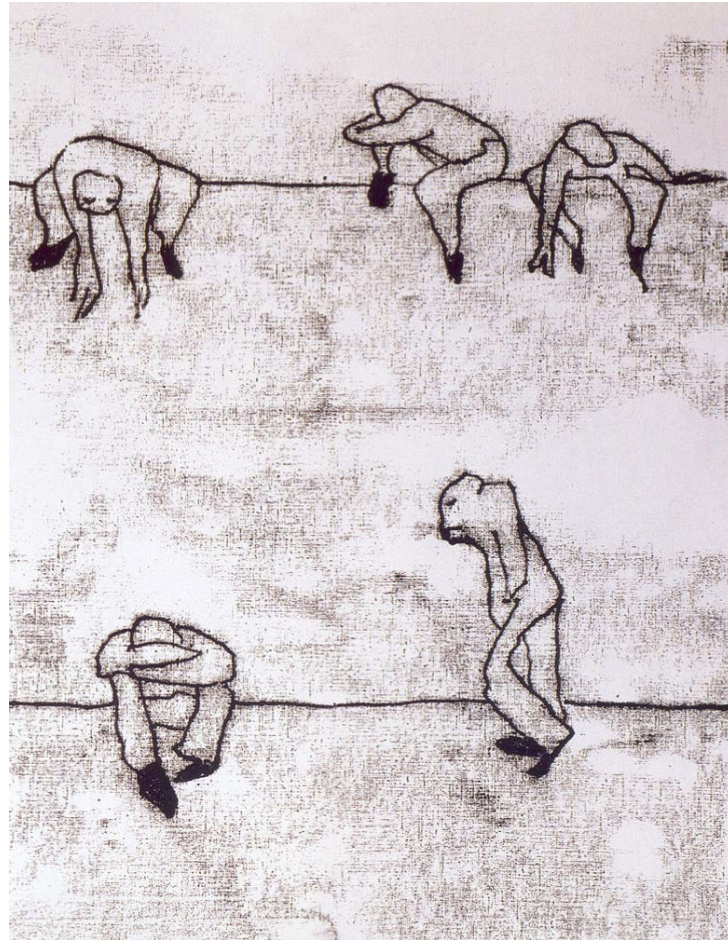


Figure 3: Jonathan Huxley

distance to the model when drawing a nude. The circle made particular sense when one combined a geometric perspective with optical laws, like in the renaissance. Such an approach requires that each artwork be a static whole. Contemporary critics are less focused on metaphysical concepts like wholes, etc., so the perfect circle is rarely used. When there is no reason anymore to favour the whole—which combines optical laws with geometric perspective—there is less reason to see and paint like this, so one can paint in visual dynamics as the impressionists, or in spatial experiments like the cubists, and so on. These days, it is more about the dynamics of seeing with, and within, the arts, so long as the images are coherent. This is the direction that Jonathan Huxley's fascinating paintings take us.

So this was the first reason why I consider Huxley and Titolo good ex-

amples for visually-impaired and blind artists. Regarding their art school studies, their attitude was in the right place concerning the arts. Given contemporary emphasis on conceptual terms, all artists, whether sighted, visually impaired or blind, share the same complexity regarding the dynamics of art. As I noted, contemporary art is not about a static whole, but about a perceivable coherence, a coherence that is not necessarily fixed by a line, but can be marked by an open horizon. The second reason why I like their examples of studying art, is a practical one. To reach this artistic coherence, every artist has to find their own way. Flavio Titolo became blind at twenty-one years of



Figure 4: Flavio Titolo

age due to a car accident, so he already had a lot of visual experience. This experiential stock stayed important for his notion of art, which has a visual dimension. At the same time, he could not work visually on his own, so he had to find a more practical way for a blind person to work. He began to make drawings with tape, touchable compositions. He worked with tape on stones, to hammer abstract nets out of it (fig. 4). When in 1992 he was selected for the International Sculptor Symposium in Larvik, Norway, he chose a stone in the dimensions of two meters sixty high, two meters twenty wide and two meters deep. After touching the surface and nerves of this massive



Figure 5: Flavio Titolo

stone, he decided where he would lay the tape to hammer abstract nets out of it (fig. 5). The artwork, title *Aria* still stands in a public space by the sea in Ulla, Norway (fig. 6). Because of its huge dimensions, it is visually striking, even from great distances. Given the context of Scandinavia with its tradition of stone engravings, one might interpret the net imagery as abstract, rudimentary signs. At the same time, such a strong material body, covered in a tactile net, inspires viewers to touch the wrought stone. Yet its huge dimensions makes it impossible to experience it physically by touch alone. You would have to touch the stone for days on end, just like Titolo did. Further on, you might take notice of the title of the piece, *Aria*, an Italian word for air, atmosphere, wind, shine, song, etc. *Aria* is a huge and heavy stone, as light as atmosphere, untouchable in its whole, but present to the skin, in the hand, a surface, landscape, a longing. Poetic associations abound, as one experiences this highly ambivalent work, for sight as well as for touch.

In addition to being blind, Titolo established a technique true to the practical needs of his art, an art that is meant to be shown via sight and touch, as well as an art that is made with the knowledge of visual possibilities and tactile mastery. In this manner, we have two aspects: first the notion of the arts, second the practice in the arts. A visually-impaired or blind art student shares the same contemporary notion of the arts. But in Titolo's practice, he sometimes needs different ways to make his material, his techniques, his



Figure 6: Flavio Titolo: *Aria*

ideas work. For both aspects, every student needs good companionship, good teachers. In 2006, when the young Birde Vanheerswynghels was accepted as a drawing student in Ghent, theory courses were adapted to accommodate her visual impairment, and—like every artist—she adapted the studio to meet her needs. I cannot say that this always worked perfectly. In my philosophy course, for example, I work quite a lot with texts. So you have to read a lot. Not all of these texts are reworked into audio files. So as much as I could, I offer these texts in digital format, which students access via the computer. Birde could use her special digital program to access them, if she wanted. In the studio, Birde originally decided to work on huge, life-size paper drawings, whose lines she put down using a lath. This reminded me of Flavio Titolo's technique of using tape to draw. It was a useful technique for her; a technique that was obvious for someone strongly visually impaired, but not exclusive to such a person. These techniques—to draw with tape or lath—have been used by others, whether sighted or blind. But because they respond more to the bodily conditions of a visually-impaired or blind person, I was not surprised that only Birde was working this way at our school. Like Huxley or Titolo, she never tried to neglect her physical condition—nor to accentuate it. I supervised her Bachelor's thesis, and artistically she compared her own work and practice to the dark drawings of Richard Serra, Ad Reinhardt, and Willem Oorebeek. She described her way of working with the lath just as a tool, like others who use other kinds of tools. This was the only aspect that



Figure 7: Birde Vanheerswynghels

people who knew her could directly link to her visual impairment. Although she found lines fascinating, her approach indirectly stimulated her interest to explore whether her partial sight could respond to differentiated colours. To be honest, this is speculation. Recently, Birde completed a two-year post-graduate residency at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts (HISK) in Ghent, following her master's degree. For her final show, she presented her recent, very much layered and impressive drawings (fig. 7- 9).

So what does all of this mean for visually-impaired and blind art students or the academies they are working in? Like all art students, they should share a certain contemporary vision on the arts themselves. And like all students, they will have to find their own way to make their work. Moreover, again like all students, they must use their own experience of perceiving in a pro-

ductive way, because perception produces its own differentiation. So how can this differentiation be experienced and presented in coherent forms? This is the general question in which all artists participate. That this question is so



Figure 8: Birde Vanheerswynghels

general does not mean that all artists arrive there the same manner. Here, everyone is participating in it from their very own background, experience, situation, point of view. A sighted, visual-impaired or blind student might differ in their visual perception, but they share touch and hearing as well as the imagination and mind. The most important thing in this discussion is that all participants understand this common problem. The task of philosophy of art and art history is to shape the conceptual and historical background, so that institutions like art schools and academies can guide students in developing their understanding—so that persons in all positions can welcome this

complexity. This enables young people, especially, to experience life's richness in relationship to the practice and experience of art, so as to enliven the spectre of their senses, ideas and imaginations.

Although I began with the conceptual and practical side of visual impairment and blindness at an art academy, I end by stressing that the institutions themselves must strive to broaden their policies of inclusion. Academies are educational institutes. Educational institutes in the European Union are judged and financed today mostly by their output of competitive 'excellence'. In the best sense, an artist is an excellent artist due to his or her work, regardless of his or her specific conditions. Conceptually, you might ask what it



Figure 9: Birde Vanheerswynghels

means to be excellent? In the sense of institutional policies, we must ask who claims excellence, and in the name of what? This claim remains an exclusive move in the competitive struggle for funding. The public's reception of partially-sighted or blind artists is very often concentrated on the sharp borderline between social, or democratic support for a disabled minority on the one hand, and artistic merit, on the other. In the struggle for academic so-called excellence, it is only artistic merit that counts, and rightly so. But this excellence is mainly focused on the art market, because it is via collectors that artworks find their ways into private and public representative collections. Notwithstandingly, an art academy—as an educational institute—has a social and democratic responsibility.

I hope that persons in all positions will encourage this richness and complexity that arises from the dynamics of perception in the arts. You must first keep in mind that there is an ongoing political struggle within the academy, which pits an economically-driven focus on ‘excellence’, which values its contribution to the market and the prestige it will gain for this market, against its social and democratic duty to educate every talent, indiscriminately. And, second, the art student’s only goal should be to become a brilliant artist, on his or her own terms, convinced in the field that exists for their work. This means that those social organizations that support the visually-impaired and blind must continuously remind the art academies of their educational responsibilities to visually-impaired and blind art students, who must also prove the quality of their arts via the market, and into the collections. So you see, there are wonderful examples for this development, as described above. Institutionally, however, it remains a fragile situation, which can only become more stable if visually-impaired and blind artists and art lovers become more integrated in the institutions themselves, as teachers or collectors for example. Those within the institutions have exhibited high standards for their work, achieving whatever ‘excellence’ means, so expecting it of others requires that they be included so that they too know what it is to achieve it.

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NOTES

2. Körner 1984

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