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Orienting through Blindness:

Blundering, Be-Holding, and Wayfinding as Artistic and Curatorial Methods



Fig. 1. Fayen d'Evie, Troy McConnell, Sophie Takách and Prue Lang, with Bryan Phillips 2016. [...] {...} [...] *Handovers and Translations (work in progress)*. Photo Pippa Samaya

Prologue

This is a story of handovers and translations between and among bodies, human and material. It is a story told through blindness, with a vibrational narrative that will blunder amongst macro propositions, with intermittent be-holding of sensory recollections. To

blunder is to stumble blindly, a method I deploy to structure (or unstructure) writing, thinking and corporeal improvisation. Via a useful semantic doubling, stumbling may refer to a staggering or pitching movement with lurching shifts in perceptual perspective, or an unanticipated discovery. A method for grappling with the intangible, the unknown and the invisible, blundering allows for uncertainty, tenuous threads, and peripheral distractions, while also affirming wayfinding through blindness. Within this essay, blundering and beholding not only texture the narrative, but also recur as thematic content as I trace their emergence within my artistic and curatorial practices as performative strategies generated through blindness. I insert a hyphen in 'be-holding' to announce a reclaiming of the etymological root of 'beholding', before the term's co-option as ocular observance. In Old English, *bihalden* denoted deep regard or to keep hold, the conjoining of *bi-* 'thoroughly' and *-halden* 'to guard, to preserve, to maintain, to take care'. As performed within my practice, be-holding implies close attention, by thoroughly regarding, handling, holding.

Prior to the encounters detailed here, my artistic and curatorial practices were grounded in painting, writing, and publishing. It is only recently that questions posed by blindness and art have led me towards performance, choreography and movement. In the spirit of blundering, I claim my ignorance in these fields as a navigation principle, which has prompted me to reach out to dialogue and collaborate with others. Through a succession of ephemeral frameworks of contact, from informal conversations to collaborative exhibitions, I have stumbled upon ways that blindness may activate attentiveness in audiences, destabilise performer-spectator conventions, and offer methods for the documentation and conservation of performative artworks through embodied recall. This essay will trace a few fledgling propositions, as I nudge blindness away from segregated accessibility policy, shepherding it instead towards generative artistic practice and curatorial thinking.

Before we begin, a clarification is necessary. Traditional conceptions of blindness have been moulded by generations of ocular-normative philosophers and writers who have exoticised blindness as an eternal darkness. The term "ocularnormative" was coined by David Bolt to describe the perpetuation of ocularcentric epistemologies that equate seeing with knowing, and visual perception as the norm for gathering knowledge (2016, 18). As detailed by Bolt in *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, blindness as total blackness, as unrelenting nocturnalism, was cast historically in binary opposition to spiritual illumination and Enlightenment reason. Once culturally internalised as a state of terminal dependence and not-knowing, blindness became accepted within literature and film as a narrative prosthesis for helplessness and despair, and as a rationale for suicide. In psychoanalysis, blindness was deemed suitably horrifying to be theorised by Sigmund Freud and others as a symbolic stand-in for literal or figurative castration (Bolt 2014, 51–53). Incrementally appropriated through the misconceptions and biases of the ocular defensive, blindness entrenched metaphorically as synonymous with ignorance, indifference, neglect, with an unwillingness or incapacity to perceive or understand, with uncontrollable impulse (a blind rage) or a lack of consciousness (a blind stupor, blind drunk) (18–23).

Yet a fundamental flaw has girded this curious semantic and metaphoric trajectory. Physiologically, blindness rarely equates with total darkness. As Jorge Louis Borges writes, “one of the colors that the blind—or at least this blind man—does not see is black ... I, who was accustomed to sleeping in total darkness, was bothered for a long time at having to sleep in this world of mist, in the greenish or bluish mist” (Borges 1999, 474). A diagnosis of blindness may implicate a multitude of perceptual variations, from the tunnelling focus of late-stage glaucoma, to the peripheral attentiveness of macular degeneration, the luminous fog of cataracts, or the camouflage-like fragmentation of retinopathy. Poet Stephen Kuusisto relates his sensorium of blindness through retinopathy thus:

Ahead of me the shapes and colors suggest the sails of Tristan’s ship or an elephant’s ear floating in air, though in reality it is a middle-aged man in a London Fog raincoat that billows behind him in the April wind. He is like the great dead Greeks in Homer’s descriptions of the underworld. In the heliographic distortions of sunlight or dusk ... [p]eople shimmer like beehives. ... walking alone at dawn, the morning light [is] like stained glass. ... This is glacial seeing, like lying on your back in an ice cave and staring up at the cobalt sun. ... My eyes dance in a private, rising field of silver threads, teeming greens, roses, and smoke. (Kuusisto 1998, 5)

As Borges and Kuusisto intimate, blindness and visibility need not be mutually exclusive. Rather, blindness introduces a complexity and diversity of embodiments and relationships to perception, imagination, and consciousness that offer an array of alternatives to the ocular standard of 20/20 vision. However, due to the pejorative metaphorical associations, it is not uncommon for blindness to be rejected as a descriptor by scholars, including Bolt, when writing of their experience of non-normative vision. Others, like Kuusisto, have reclaimed the identity of blindness, despite its problematic terminological history, in a defiant challenge to ableism. As a person with unstable low vision, I locate myself within this latter group, but via a terminological inversion that displaces the conventional notion of blindness as a loss or impairment of visual faculties. To retrieve the agency of blindness, the definition I carry instead as we blunder onwards is blindness as a mode of perceiving that, to a radical extent, makes tangible the limits of normative constructs of vision, impairs ocularcentrism, and destabilises 20/20 cultural paradigms.

Thresholds of Unfamiliarity

My peculiar relationship to seeing has long been part of the private process of my artmaking, manifesting within my paintings, for instance, in a partiality to micro-textures and fugitive affects. It is only recently, as the degeneration of my functional vision has accelerated, that I have publicly claimed my unstable vision as a central force in my artistic practice. My first foray into blindness as artistic territory was an installation of tactile paintings that I constructed in the foyer space of West Space, a Melbourne artist-run gallery. On a freestanding architecture of reinforced plywood walls, I mounted five framed paintings; abstract compositions that referenced systems of perception and language, created from collaged layers of painted and embossed paper stocks. Four paintings of

another kind were built into the walls; powder-coated steel grates—some solid, others porous mesh—with raw canvas collaged over top. The installation architecture was the setting for oratory performances of two fictional stories dealing with visual assumptions of value, one set in a museum of holograms, the other in an art fair. I had drafted the stories in dialogue with two actors from the Theatre of the Blind, Janaleen Wolfe and Ben Phillips, who I subsequently performed alongside. After the opening performance, our scripts in large print and Braille were left on a sculptural lectern, intended as a cue for future audiences to handle the paintings and architecture through touch.

Informed by readings in tactile aesthetics, from F.T. Marinetti's tactilism to Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer's tactile objects and Yoko Ono's tactile poems, I had evolved the composition of the paintings with touch in mind.¹ I established tactile connections across the surface of the work, painting disparate forms with similar grained, pumice-laden paint. I introduced rhythms of touch through the juxtaposition of paper stocks, in textured shades of white and off-white. I assumed that over the course of the exhibition, fingerprint grease would smear the surfaces of the paintings, and tactile agitation would fray vulnerable edges. However, by the exhibition end, the paintings were barely different to their opening state. Sufficient images of the works were posted online for me to determine that lack of attendance was not the issue. Yet evidently, most people had resisted handling the works, or had touched in a cursory fashion.

I wondered whether inviting a tactile encounter through fictional and sculptural cues had been too obscure or too passive to surmount visual norms of encounter. I thus attempted a more direct approach in a subsequent curatorial project, *The Gravity, The Levity*, a one-day haptic exhibition of sculptural works from the Kadist collection, offered for public handling.² My curatorial collaborators were Devon Bella, then curator of the Kadist collection, and Georgina Kleege, a literary professor who has published on blindness and art. At the opening of the exhibition, I delivered another oratory performance, not fictional this time, but a lecture tracing the cultural history of touch. I transited through taxonomies of touch, tactile amnesia in art historical accounts, and latent stories of touch. I lingered on the introduction of the 1800s codes of decorum that sought to educate the working classes in taste and aesthetics, and that had succeeded in rendering touch as uncivilised, dirty, transgressive. I talked of how tactility insinuates in the making of any artwork, and recalled anecdotes of furtive touch by curators, conservators, and surreptitious art fans. I closed by proposing that perhaps a haptic reading of artworks—including works not normally considered in relation to touch—might offer new conversations on materiality, immateriality, politics of space, gendered politics, migrant politics, intimacy, reverence, fear. Influenced by Deaf poets such as Ella Mae Lentz, some of the refrains of my performative lecture were drafted through American Sign Language, in collaboration with Ravi Vasavan. By choreographing gestural sequences that privileged tactile poetics, my intent was to reinforce intersensory communicative potential, and to experiment with ways that haptic and tactile aesthetics could structure embodied performances of expressive language.

Immediately after my performative lecture, Georgina Kleege invited the assembled audience to join her in a guided touch tour of the artworks. Over the preceding week, we had experimented with handling the four works, and had discovered that each object dictated a specific vocabulary of haptic engagement: tracing, tapping; folding, unfolding, remaking; gripping, pinching, knocking; patting, stroking, rubbing, swaying. As Georgina spoke, she recited our discoveries, and urged the wider group to join with her in the tactile encounter. One man, a vocal fan of accessible art, tucked his folding cane into a waist holster, and followed Georgina's lead with enthusiasm. A smattering of sighted visitors touched the works hesitantly, politely, and then stood back to watch from the margins. Thus, rather than dispelling tactile apprehension, our didactic approach perversely devolved into spectatorship of the blind, the antithesis of our intentions. Again, the issue did not appear to be a lack of interest or curiosity.³ Instead, it seemed that audiences have become so habituated to 20/20 visual cultural paradigms, that it can be a struggle in a discrete event to persuade (or expect) an audience to navigate unfamiliar codes of encounter. My speculative conclusion was that a more radical project of artistic and curatorial interventions was warranted to agitate sensory desegregation, to incite ocular-diverse incivility, and experiment with the performative and participative tensions of inducting audiences into novel frameworks of encounter.

Fiona Candlin examines an instance of tactile handling that offers a counter example to my experiences with a reticent audience (Candlin 2010, 168–83). She describes a 1971 exhibition at the Tate by Robert Morris, in which he presented sculptural structures that, according to the exhibition press release, were “not primarily for looking at, but for pulling and pushing, balancing on and climbing over, through or up” (167). In an interview prior to the opening, Morris described the exhibition as “an opportunity for people to involve themselves with the work, become aware of their own bodies, gravity, effort, fatigue, their bodies under different conditions, objects being moved with a certain amount of resistance” (Candlin 2010, 168). However, the Tate took the decision to close the exhibition early, after only five days, due to “over-zealous participation by some of the more exuberant visitors”, with the curator lamenting that many of the public “were rash and inconsiderate of other people to a degree far above what we expected” (172).

Although the rough handling that marked the Morris exhibition is the polar opposite of my experience of people disinclined to touch, Candlin reached a similar conclusion. The relative rarity of tactile or haptic artworks creates a challenge in how to induct audiences into idiosyncratic behavioural codes of handling. Reflecting on the dynamics at Kadist, it struck me that ocularcentric norms of encounter are so entrenched, it could be argued that an inversion of the concept of accessibility is warranted for tactile or haptic artworks. Accessibility is conventionally constructed as a disability-focused model, including traditional touch tours that are marketed for those who identify as blind or visually impaired. However, in the case of tactile and haptic works, accessibility could be reconceptualised as a broad-based performative and pedagogical construct, awakening or extending the perceptual attentiveness and movement vocabularies of all audiences.

I blundered onwards in this direction, gravitating towards theoretical perspectives from choreographic studies and meditation practices engaging somatics. I happened upon an online blog in which choreographer Shelley Lasica had journaled her experiments and discoveries as part of a Synapse residency with the Centre for Eye Research. When observing the movements of dancers with temporarily occluded vision and hearing, she had noted that tactile discrimination became their dominant sense. She also reported on an interview with blind artist and dancer Mickel Smithers, who used “touch, pacing, rhythm and memory, creating a spatial field that he can move in and with others with limited sight” (Lasica 2014). I reached out to Lasica, and we struck up an episodic dialogue. Over iterative sessions, our conversations tumbled through neurological and philosophical constructs of perception and action, blind and Deafblind writings on sensing spaces and reading bodies, and family histories of complicated vision and blindness.



Fig. 2. Fayen d’Eve and Shelley Lasica with Irina Povolotskaya 2016. *Tactile Dialogues* (Vadim Sidur) / Think of the lifetime of this work / Lean into the work, sink into its angles and hollows / If you could turn this monument inside out, what would the interior I feel like? Photo Evgeniya Chapaykina

Tactile Dialogues

Amongst the audience at *The Gravity, The Levity* had been a curator from the Moscow-based V.A.C. Foundation, Katerina Chuchalina, who was developing a research project revisiting the Zagorsky experiment. During the late 1980s, students from Moscow’s Zagorsky school for Deafblind children paid several visits to the studio of avant-garde sculptor Vadim Sidur to handle artworks as part of an experiment in perceptual learning,

led by psychologist Alexander Meshcheryakov. He had proposed that the stimulation of curiosity, through shared action involving objects, might offer the basis for the development of language, social values and conceptual thinking. “Shared action involving objects,” Meshcheryakov proclaimed, “may be the tiny cell from which sprouts the whole of human behavior and mentality” (1979). Chuchalina invited me to contribute a performative work to an exhibition *Human Commonalities*, anchoring the V.A.C. research project at the State Museum of Vadim Sidur.

In the wake of this invitation, Lasica and I shifted our conversations. We experimented with handling artefacts, replicas, and artworks from the collection of the Ian Potter Museum in Melbourne, experimenting with curiosity, angles of encounter, shifts in scale, and tactile narratives. We read translations of the writings of Meshcheryakov and also one of his pupils, Olga Skorohodova, relating her perceptual experiences as a Deafblind woman (2016). Skorohodova wrote of reading hand shapes and tactile alphabets upon her palm, commending expressive hands that could dactyl nuances. She said that it was easy for her to detect falsehoods written through dactyl, for the pace and pressure of touch could betray interior emotions. She also described vibrational strategies of navigation upon entering an unfamiliar building, how she would pay attention to the echoes of her footfall to anticipate and distinguish architectural materials and forms. During her Synapse residency, Lasica had similarly noted that when the dancers’ vision and hearing was occluded, the connection between their bodies and the ground became the essential reference point for navigation, while their attention concentrated on investigating the space through continuous, dense movements. One dancer had remarked, “I need to put myself everywhere to explore all facets of the space.”

At times, my conversations with Lasica were so diffuse that the disparate threads of our discursive blundering seemed irreconcilable. But slowly a set of questions condensed that I felt I could adapt to mobilise public reflection on sensory attentiveness, tactile aesthetics, and movement vocabularies. This set of questions shaped two public performances in Moscow, which I enacted alongside Deafblind poet and actress Irina Povolotskaya, and as required, an English-Russian translator, and a Russian speech-dactyl translator. One of the performances took place in the State Museum of Vadim Sidur, handling sculptural works by Sidur, and a series of bronze objects titled “Prologues to Handling”, that sculptor Sophie Takách and I had created by casting the interior space between two people’s clasped palms. In pairs or small groups, we considered associations, memories and emotional reverberations provoked by touch. We reflected on whether there is comedy in touch, or strangeness, or repulsion, and how we bring weight to bear upon works individually and collectively. Through tactile exploration, we brought our attention to imprints, vibrations and entanglement, matter rearranging, and material histories.

The other performance took place on the outskirts of Moscow, outside the Research Institute for Human Morphology, where a monument by Vadim Sidur was sited, *Structure #1*. This second performance would prove more pivotal in the elaboration of blindness as a performative paradigm, and thus we will attend to it more closely. Before I had arrived in Moscow, I had been sent archival images of *Structure #1* that suggested a monumental

form, rectangular in shape, with a stone facade of interlaced curves, curling around two spherical marbles. Details of the setting were sparse but seemed grand. A few days before the performance, I visited the monument to practice the score with Povolotskaya. We discovered that the area in which *Structure #1* was located had been repurposed as a carpark. The surfaces of the monument were peeling and cracked, and an excavator was parked at one end beside a hole dug for sewerage repairs. The hole was large enough and deep enough for a small crowd to stumble into. The Curator of the State Museum of Vadim Sidur, who had accompanied us on the site visit, was dismayed by the advanced degeneration of the work. He talked of the role that scientists had played in commissioning non-official artworks prior to the 1990s, and the precarious fate of those works after the collapse in funding of the science institutes following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

On the day of the performance, temperatures hovered around 6°C (43°F), with flurries of ice rain. But the hole had been backfilled, and the small crowd that had showed up had been issued with rain ponchos and promised hot tea afterwards, so we gamely launched into a performative experiment in evolving a conversation through touch. We started with attentiveness to the present moment, and sensing the air shift as we moved our feet up and down, an adaptation to fend off the bitter cold. We arranged our bodies as a dialogue circle, one behind another. Treating the back of the person in front as a canvas, through touch alone, we each described what had attracted or compelled us to the encounter and our first impressions of the place. Simultaneously drawing and being drawn upon, we paid attention to the sensations of speaking through touch, and the sensations of embodied listening. We noticed pressure and resistance, and the vibrations of conversation. With Povolotskaya leading, we formed a chain of contact and began to map the space around *Structure #1*, experimenting with angles of approach. The size of the monument created heat differentials, which Povolotskaya navigated to move closer to the surface of the artwork, and to trace the perimeter of the monument. We paused from time to time to form dialogue circles, to develop narratives through touch, evolve tactile vocabularies, and to calibrate the movement dynamics of conversation. We reflected on how the people and objects in that space had shifted and rearranged over the lifetime of the work, as well as what is valued, what matters. We surrounded the work, ran our hands over the scrapes, the cracks and the patches of smoothness, feeling for textural expanses and discontinuities. I asked people to think beyond the reach of their body, to lean into the work, to sink into its hollows. When we stepped back from Sidur's *Structure #1*, our final tactile dialogues centred on what we would take away, and what would be left behind, once we shifted our attention elsewhere.

As hot tea was dispersed, people chatted—via translations amongst Russian, English, Russian sign language, and Russian dactyl—about touch and personal space, the weathering and material erosion of the work, financial decay, and climatic shifts, political and ecological. Observing other bodies passing through the parking lot on their daily business, someone remarked that most people seemed to ignore *Structure #1*. However, through our tactile dialogues, we had insisted on a concentrated focus on the artwork for a specific moment in time. Our attentive touch had reprised the etymological root of the word 'behold', to thoroughly hold, guard, maintain, preserve. I realised that a performative

form had been generated that offered an approach to documenting a moment in the lifetime of an artwork, and for marking shifts in the affective structures, relationships, materials, ecologies and politics that surround that work. I began to claim be-holding as a methodology for myopic readings of artworks, and for embodied archiving.⁴

Reorienting Choreographic Objects through Blindness

Amidst my theoretical blundering, I had persistently circled back to William Forsythe's installations of choreographic objects that draw public audiences intellectually and physically into movement encounters. In a short essay outlining the logic and principles of his approach, Forsythe (2011) draws on two perceptual systems: descriptions of inner vision by blind French resistance fighter Jacques Lusseyran; and haptic and cognitive manipulations by blind mathematical topologist Bernard Morin, the first person to visualise the eversion of a sphere. Indeed, other than an introductory quote attributed to Rene Magritte, Lusseyran and Morin are the only external sources that Forsythe turns to in his succinct essay.

Forsythe turns to Lusseyran and Morin after posing the question: "What else, besides the body, could physical thinking look like?" (Forsythe 2011, 91) He introduces Lusseyran first through "his inner sense of vision which enabled him to see and manipulate forms and thoughts ... a boundless mental canvas or screen which existed 'nowhere and everywhere at the same time'" (91). Forsythe then comments that Morin described his envisioning of the eversion of a sphere in a similar manner. Building from the two examples, Forsythe introduces his central proposition: "And so it is with the choreographic object: a model of potential transition from one state to another in any space imaginable" (91). He elaborates that,

Lusseyran's inner vision enabled him to see topographies and project strategic movements of groups of people. Morin saw an event in the space of his mind that he then translated with haptic skill into sculptures and subsequently into the universal yet somewhat hermetic language of mathematics. (91)

The inference is that, by detaching ocularity from vision, Lusseyran and Morin were able to transcend normative perceptual confines, allowing them to manipulate and act on internal imagery with outward effects. Forsythe's argument has been quoted liberally and sequentially here to emphasise that his references to Lusseyran and Morin are not minor or tangential in the development of his argument.

Yet given the brevity of the text, his excavation of their positions is still cursory. Forsythe does not include bibliographic references within his essay, but there are two likely candidates that we can draw on to nuance his telescopic argument. First, an article published in the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* includes an interview with Morin about the clay models he developed to assist sighted colleagues to visualise his proposal for the eversion of a sphere (Jackson 2002). To evert a sphere is to turn it inside

out, through a process of continuous deformation, without any rupture or creasing of the surface. The relative difficulty of Morin's sighted peers in visualising transitional phases of a sphere eversion suggested to Morin that ocularity can impose a dimensional stranglehold over imaginative perception and action. He claimed that his advantage lay in what he called a space-like imagination, that allowed him to mentally visualise and manipulate disparate perspectives at the same time: "One thing that is difficult about visualizing geometric objects is that one tends to see only the outside of the objects, not the inside... By thinking carefully about two things at once, Morin ... developed the ability to pass from outside to inside, or from one 'room' to another" (Jackson 2002, 1248). Morin's clay sculptures were designed to activate spatial be-holding, operating as sites for tactile pedagogy and haptic discourse, rather than merely visual schematics of his inner imagination for ocular apprehension: "Our spatial imagination is framed by manipulating objects ... You act on objects with your hands, not with your eyes. So being outside or inside is something that is really connected with your actions on objects" (Jackson 2002, 1248).

Forsythe's quotations of Lusseyran align with passages from the autobiographical memoir, *And There Was Light: The Extraordinary Memoir of a Blind Hero of the French Resistance in World War II* (2014). Lusseyran writes of his blinding during childhood a classroom accident, when one arm of his spectacles pierced his right eye, and his left eye went blind through sympathetic ophthalmia. Upon his return to school, he was given a slate with cube-shaped holes, and a set of steel cubes with braille characters on each face. He learned to manipulate the cubes "with a soft clicking," and could soon count as fast as his classmates. After a few months, however, Lusseyran realised that he no longer needed the slate or steel cubes. He discovered that in blindness, he could conjure and shape intangibles—names, figures, objects, geographical abstractions, invisible geometries—more adeptly than his sighted classmates, unimpeded by their memory lapses and hesitations. Lusseyran had developed the capacity to visualise complex mathematical arithmetic on an inner mental screen:

This screen was not like a blackboard, rectangular or square, which so quickly reaches the edges of its frame and has to give way to a useless piece of wall ... My screen was as always as big as I needed it to be. Because it was nowhere in space it was everywhere at the same time, and to manage it I only had to call out "Attention." (Lusseyran 2014, 33)

Within his memoir, Lusseyran discusses the intoxication of the limitless transformations that can be indulged within one's interior imagination, which he likens to hallucination: "Blindness works like dope, a fact we have to reckon with. ... I have known this bewitched world, and have often withdrawn there" (39). He counts himself fortunate that the temptation to dwell in heightened interiority has been offset by another urgency, "that of contending with things ... investigating the contours of objects and space, and mixing with people" (39). Indeed, since neither Lusseyran nor Morin abandoned the physical world for the purely speculative, they provide Forsythe with a pathway out of the mental imaginary for his choreographic objects theory. They demonstrate how radical idea-logics may be

instantiated in the real world, with non-marginal—even ground-breaking—effects. Forsythe’s final mention of Lusseyran and Morin reinforces the latter point: “Their quite substantial bodies, put into action by the force of their ideas, left very discernible traces of those ideas in the real world; from nowhere to somewhere, not everywhere, and no longer exclusively within their bodies” (Forsythe 2011, 91).

In 2016, I travelled to the Biennale of Sydney to experience two installations of choreographic objects by Forsythe. One of the works was titled after Lusseyran’s description of inner vision, *Nowhere and Everywhere at the Same Time, no. 2* (2012). In a warehouse space, plumb bobs dangled at regular intervals, suspended from aluminium frames that moved in programmed formations, powered by compressed air cylinders. Visitors were invited to move through the field of pendulums via an instruction sheet, augmented by oral encouragement from invigilators. Sighted visitors who took up the invitation adjusted their bodies to avoid the swaying pendulums as they navigated through the field; the shifting formations of plumb bobs thus structuring potential action. However, it was difficult to conceive of how a visitor with non-normative vision could engage in the movement encounter. A cane would have caused mayhem, while the pace and unpredictability of the swinging pendulums resisted navigation by echolocation. Moreover, if read aloud to a blind visitor, a qualifying clause on the printed information sheet effectively rescinded the initial invitation: “*You are invited to move through this field of pendulums ... but try to avoid touching them*” (original italics).

The second work, *Towards the Diagnostic Gaze* (2013), was more modestly scaled. A feather duster rested on a sandstone shelf, which was engraved with the text “HOLD THE OBJECT ABSOLUTELY STILL” (original capitalisation). If a sighted person lifted the duster, a shadow of the object would become apparent on the sandstone, and no matter how steady their hand, visual inspection of the shadow would betray its fluttering feathery edges. At first approach, the staging of this work might seem inviting to a blind person: instead of insisting on spectatorial distance, touch is endorsed, and the exhortation to engage haptically is extended via tactile lettering. However, the reveal of the work relies upon an ocularnormative visitor, whose diagnostic visual gaze could be expected to be activated during the normal course of an encounter. Thus, across Forsythe’s two Biennale of Sydney works, despite invocation of a conspicuous blind hero, direct allusions to Lusseyran’s infamous conception of non-ocular inner vision, and invitations to tactile or haptic encounters, in each case blind access was ultimately denied. (Note here that the conventional segregation of a touch tour is forcefully flipped.)

Not all of Forsythe’s works manifest such acute tensions, and indeed, several have experimented with occluded vision or visual instability. For instance, *Endless House* (1999) made use of mobile screens to partition the performance space, which Roslyn Sulcas commented on when recalling her experience of the work: “because no single spot allowed full vision, a subtle pressure to keep moving prevailed in order to try to comprehend the initial bewildering, diffused action” (Sulcas 2011, 13). Elsewhere, Forsythe has played with transient shafts of light, sequences at the periphery of the stage, and architectural panels that fragment or block visual apprehension. During the development phase of *I Don’t*

Believe in Outer Space (2008), Forsythe directed his dancers to blindfold themselves and memorise the layout of their apartments, in order to produce movement material “that didn’t have a specific aesthetic, but had specific orientations” (17). Still, in each instance, strategies of blindness or moments of impaired vision were ultimately subsumed within broader performative frameworks that have privileged ocular spectatorship.

Forsythe closes his essay with the utopic aspiration that embrace of choreographic objects, as an alternative site for considering the instigation and organisation of action, “would draw an attentive, diverse readership that would ... champion the innumerable manifestations ... of choreographic thinking” (2011, 92). His optimistic appeal led me to wonder whether the diversity of the readership of choreographic objects could be extended by stripping spectatorship from manifestations of choreographic objects, and removing the presumption of an ocular viewer. What would it mean to tumble Forsythe’s emphatic conceptual malleability back upon his flagship proposition, and reorient his theory through blindness? Early in his essay, Forsythe had declared that “the introduction ... of technological substitutions that reveal previously invisible facets of the practice is key to the development of procedural strategies” (90). What procedural strategies might emerge from a reconceptualisation of choreographic objects attentive not to the previously invisible, but to the obscured, to the concealed, or the perpetually invisible?

Thinking back to the experimental sessions at Kadist, where each artwork invited a different kind of touch or movement, it struck me that, from a critical position of blindness, any artwork can be understood as a kind of choreographic object. A touch tour could be reconceptualised as an encounter between a haptic be-holder in motion and spatiotemporal arrangements of choreographic objects. Usually, touch tours have been treated as segregated post-facto public programming, but now the generative and performative potential of a touch tour could be released. A touch tour could now be approached as a site for embodied interactions at nested scales: discrete, individual encounters with singular artworks; micro and macro relationships between and among multiple artworks and bodies in motion; the control or liberation of movement pathways through and around an exhibition site; and contextual and structural specificities, especially spatiotemporal, ecological, and political. Theories of complex embodiment could also be enfolded, building on André Lepecki’s notions of choreopolitics, to consider entanglements in the tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive potential of artworks and bodies (Lepecki 2013, 13–27). Proprioception is alerted here, in part to caution against clamping a repositioning of choreographic objects through blindness to physical insistence on contiguous skin contact. Instead, proprioception and echolocation, for example, could open new idea-logics for encounters with objects, or performative mapping of the material densities and architectures of exhibitions.

Within his essay, Forsythe proclaims that “a choreographic object, or score ... acknowledges the body as wholly designed to persistently read every signal from its environment” (2011, 91). The propositions I have outlined offer a creative counter position to the ideology of ability embedded in the framing of a body as wholly designed to persistently read every signal. Yet Forsythe then declares that he has made this comment

with reference to Lusseyran and Morin “to introduce the manifold possibility of our practice” (91). I suggest that the conceptual tension here sharpens the radicality of blindness. If perceptual variations and instabilities are acknowledged and destigmatised, then complex concepts of embodiment—including blindness—may extend the theory and artistic instantiations of choreographic objects, with unfamiliar bodily, spatial and social configurations.⁵

Tanya Titchkosky, a professor of social justice education, proposes embodiment as “that intermeshed place where the meaning of the human is made, unmade, and remade” (2012, 89). Through a close reading of Audre Lorde’s “Eye to Eye,” Titchkosky observes that an array of cultural processes conspire to treat disability as a signifier of limits or ends to the body. She suggests that by investigating the subjective and intersubjective assigning of peripheralities, we may learn something about interpretive relations to embodiment, and how individuals and communities define humanity. Thinking of Forsythe, through Lusseyran and Morin, a consonant but inverse argument can be raised. By reconceptualising peripheralities as critical positions, generative of new paradigms and methodologies for practice, we may reach beyond inhibiting definitions of humanity. Oriented through blindness, an exhibition setting may be structurally everted, refigured as a topology now less bounded by normative biases, invoking new forms of choreopolitical resistance and transformation.

Handovers and Translations

The building that houses Gertrude Contemporary’s Glasshouse gallery was constructed during the early years of the colonial settlement of Melbourne, on swamplands that would later become the inner-city neighbourhood of Collingwood. The original glassworks—proclaimed as the first in Victoria—closed mysteriously after just a few years. The building was taken over by a candle-making factory, which did not last long either, forced out by local protests over the fumes of boiling, rancid fat. (The conflict attenuated in an 1856 newspaper editorial “The Right to Be a Nuisance” that pilloried the owners’ defence of their right to stench the neighbourhood.) The building was then repurposed as a tannery and boot-making factory, which survived for several decades, until the chain of industrial occupation was ultimately disrupted by gentrification, culminating in the architectural renovation of the ground floor Glasshouse gallery. This history of handovers from one venture to another, with shifting inflections in material transformation and recurring tensions over the politics of space, reverberated in a performative exhibition that I initiated in late 2016 at Glasshouse, titled [...]{...}[...].

The exhibition was conceived as an experiment proceeding from blindness, one that would begin with artists with experience of blindness, and then evolve through a sequence of handovers of a mutating installation, amongst a complex web of collaborators and an intermittent public audience. When the first group of collaborators convened for the inaugural working session, the space was near empty, other than a collection of steel joints and poles and a temporary water bath, where sculptor Sophie Takách was soaking kangaroo rawhides. Artist-writer Troy McConnell and I initiated the session by mapping

the gallery, describing our perceptions of the tactility of the architecture, and temperature shifts as we moved around the space. Through assisted clenching and unclenching of his hands, McConnell then dropped the “Prologue to Handling” bronzes onto a damp hide attached with S hooks to a steel armature. He also clenched and unclenched a smaller scrap of rawhide, stained with tread marks from his wheelchair that McConnell had directed be pushed back-and-forth over top at rapid speed. This smaller scrap of leather fell to rest, dangling, about a steel joint. Throughout the sculptural process, McConnell and I sustained a descriptive conversation, while Takách hovered nearby, tightening or torquing steel joints, twisting hides, testing tensions, wetting and wringing skins. As we worked, sound artist Bryan Phillips recorded vocal utterances and the vibrations of materials as they were prodded/pinged/squelched/dragged, while photographer Pippa Samaya documented ephemeral moments of touch and handling.



Fig. 3. Troy McConnell, Terry Foley, Bryan Phillips, Sophie Takách and Fayen d'Evie, 2016. [...] {...} [...] (work in progress) / Shared action involving objects / unclasp / skin(s) / torsion. Photo Pippa Samaya



Fig. 4. Fayen d'Evie, Troy McConnell, Sophie Takách and Prue Lang, with Bryan Phillips 2016. [...] {...} [...] *Handovers and Translations / Shared action involving objects / clasp / skin(s)*. Photo Pippa Samaya

After our bodies had been removed from the gallery, Phillips composed a sound work from the vibrational recordings of our sculpting process, responding to my provocation that we retrieve audiodescription as a generative artistic medium, rather than a post facto accessibility service. We installed the sound work with spatialised dynamics, mounting the left and right speakers at opposite ends of the gallery. Recall that Forsythe had referred to Morin’s translation of his topological manipulations, not only into sculptural form, but also into “the universal yet somewhat hermetic language of mathematics” (2011, 91). Language—whether inscribed, vocalised or codified—introduces a third site for manifesting choreographic idea-logics, triangulating the choreographic object and a body-in-motion. Thus, Phillips’ sound work not only introduced more complex sensory reverberations into the evolving installation, but could also be understood as a provocation for movement improvisations and choreographic thinking.



Hear the audiodescription sound work composed by Bryan Phillips for [...] {...} [...] here:
<https://soundcloud.com/user-268559723/handovers>
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Offering the sound work in this context, we passed the gallery over to Prue Lang who had worked closely with Forsythe as a dancer and as a choreographer. She inherited a sparse installation: the vibrational audiodescription work; the sculptural assemblage from the first session, with joints locked to prevent structural collapse; an assortment of steel rods, joints, and hooks that could be used to extend the existing assemblage or to construct new armatures; and an expanded inventory of wet and dry rawhides. Lang worked with three professional dancers over several private sessions, listening to the audiodescription work, investigating the sculptural forms, and developing choreographic scores. Intermittently, Sophie Takách and I would adjust the installation, adding or subtracting steel poles, rewetting hides, expanding or contracting the range of torque, locking or releasing steel joints to alter the responsiveness of the installation. Note that prior to our handover to Lang, we had removed the “Prologue to Handling” bronzes from the gallery, but their presence was still palpable within the installation. The weight of the bronzes had deformed the damp rawhides, imprinting the volume of each bronze through simultaneous negative and positive casting, since each textured shape could be encountered from either side of its host hide. Like Morin’s description of space-like imagination, both the interior and the exterior surfaces of the objects could be handled at the same time. Volumes had been translated—literally—into tactile interior/exterior skins.

Rawhide had been proposed by Takách as a sculptural material partly in response to the historic use of Glasshouse as a tannery, but also because the rawhide is able to transition from a supple material, which diverse bodies can manipulate through micro or macro movements, to a rigid sculptural document of the labour, exertion, and physicality of handling. The steel armatures similarly echoed the site’s industrial past and functioned as a mutable skeletal structure. References to handovers and translations amongst

industrial/animal/human bodies reverberated through the development of Lang's choreographic scores. As she later recalled,

I had been exploring the metal parts of the structure like they were my own joints—twisting, rotating, manipulating them with the resistance they required from my muscles—then in turn allowing these structural articulations to inform my body's organisation and folding/unfolding/re-organising strategies ... I tried to wrap/curl/slide my arms and fingers around and along the metal framework. I began to explore the 'infrathin,' that heightened state where the suppleness, elasticity and warmth of my own skin/body seemed to 'meld' with the rigid, cold, surfaces of the metal. From here I made a careful transition from the metal hook to the animal hide. My fingers absorbed the texture of this new material pulling and pushing the thickness of this other skin, recognisably different from my own. This other skin was dead—losing its cellular elasticity in a slow process of hardening, becoming brittle. I wanted to bring it back to life; manipulate it, pull it and push it until it became more malleable, compliant with my body, but also empathetic and complicit.

By the official opening of the exhibition—which represented the third phase of handovers, now to a public audience—Lang had developed a 20-minute choreographic score for four dancers. She invited the gathered crowd to sit or stand anywhere in the gallery space. The looped audiodescription work played in parallel, but was muted for a five-minute period during one sequence of the performance. Amongst those in attendance was Troy McConnell, who had returned to experience the evolution of the installation and the choreographed performance. Photographer Pippa Samaya had also returned to document the occasion. Her contributions introduce the problematic of handling images through blindness. Whereas a binary conception of blindness might disavow visual documentation altogether, I suggest that a less clichéd understanding of ocular diversity, more attuned to the complexity of blindness, may generate new methods of witnessing and archiving performance. Interlacing the theories of Roland Barthes, James Elkins, and Susan Sontag, photographic records are always fugitive, partial, and hallucinatory.⁶ From blindness, I propose that we can resist the ocularcentric conspiracy that endorses discrete photographic images as the dominant archival memory of an ephemeral performance. Through an epistemology of hallucination, photographic images can be approached not as documentary evidence, but as conversational prompts that may activate a thicker description of an ephemeral performance, by allowing for multiplicities of descriptive memories, counter-memories, and embodied re-readings.

Within [...]{}[...], I experimented with transfiguring image description—a conventional accessibility strategy for blind audiences—as a discursive method. Consider the following descriptive texts from Prue Lang and Troy McConnell, who each chose an image to describe from the opening performance, out of a set of documentary images of relational contact and interaction from throughout the Glasshouse experiment. McConnell's description took the form of a conversation with disability support worker Terry Foley.

Caption for an absent image. An ephemeral moment in the opening performance of {...}/.../ {...}. Image description by Prue Lang: “I instructed the performers to focus on the materiality of the space. The metal, hook, hide, wall, floor, fabric, skin, flesh, hair... While we sensed the spectators in the space, an interaction between the spectator and the performer would only occur if the performer decided to extend their material investigation into the spectator (surface of a shoe, brushing of clothes, texture of hair, tracing a chair, sharing of a wall surface, etc). I eliminated communicating with the spectator through a text, eye contact or body language ... The spectator was simply a part of the materiality of the space in which our physical thinking transpired.”]//

Caption for an absent image. An ephemeral moment in the opening performance of {...}/.../ {...}. Image conversation between Troy McConnell and Terry Foley: “Troy is on the left of the picture sitting with the hide on the frame. There is a male dancer in a long sleeve, white top, dancing and laying on the floor, with his right arm extended on the floor above his head pointing. He has his left hand on his hip. There is a woman sitting on the floor, with her elbow resting on her knee, half cross legged and looking upwards. There is a person sitting on a chair against the far wall, with legs crossed and one hand in their lap. The person has their chin in their hand while their elbow rests on their knee.” Troy’s comment: “There is a spectator who looks from the body language that they are deeply pondering or may be judging. I was experiencing it from two points of view, as the artist and as the spectator, as the dancers moved around me.”]//

As the image descriptions infer, from the sensory perspective of the dancers the choreographic score deprivileged spectators, directing a material equivalence between human bodies, sculptural objects, and architectural textures. Yet, as implicated in Troy McConnell’s remarks, from the sensory perspective of the audience the choreographic performance reasserted spectatorship, even for those with blindness. At times, a foot could be heard scraping across a floor, or the thud of a dancer slumping against a wall, and some within the audience received a fleeting touch from a dancer, or experienced proprioceptive awareness of near contact. However, most of the performative movements—like the Forsythe manifestations—could only be apprehended visually. Earlier I proposed an inversion of the concept of accessibility, shifting to models that activate attentiveness and extend the movement vocabularies more broadly. For sighted onlookers, the opening performance certainly offered a glimpse of the intricacy and intensity of tactile and haptic intervention possible when moving attentively within the exhibition topology. But in the wake of the opening, a question vexed me: how could performative movements of one person (or group) be experienced by a second person (or group) in ways that would more radically displace spectatorship? Although this question is yet to be resolved, some possible wayfinding principles would emerge as the durational exhibition unfolded.



Fig. 5. Fayen d'Evie, Troy McConnell, Sophie Takách and Prue Lang, with Benjamin Hancock 2016. [...] {...} [...] *Handovers and Translations* (work in progress) / Shared action involving objects / clasp / skin(s). Photo Pippa Samaya



Fig. 6. Fayen d'Evie, Troy McConnell, Sophie Takách and Prue Lang, with Benjamin Hancock 2016. [...] {...} [...] *Handovers and Translations*. Photo Pippa Samaya

After the public opening, our policing of private working sessions versus public hours dissipated and the handovers became less discrete. Lang, Takách and I were usually present in the space along with a fluctuating tide of others, including professional and student dancers, artistic and curatorial peers, and a diverse public. I often assumed responsibility for inducting new visitors into the liberated codes of behaviour, avoiding didactic instructions. Instead, modelling possibilities of encounter through my own handling tended to provide sufficient legitimation for visitors to approach the installation structures with trans-sensory curiosity. Performer-audience distinctions eroded as visitors tapped, stroked, pushed, pressed, clanged, kicked, flicked, folded, and twisted the sculptural forms. Around and amongst us, Lang and her dancers continued their physical explorations. Lang progressively decentred the performative actions, dispersing dancers throughout the gallery, but also outside to the entrance foyer or even across the cobbled laneway, investigating materiality just beyond, or just behind, any normative line of sight.



Fig. 7. Fayen d'Evie, Troy McConnell, Sophie Takách and Prue Lang, with Harrison Ritchie Jones 2016. [...] {...} [...] *Handovers and Translations*. Photo Pippa Samaya

In the closing days of the exhibition I began to experiment with blundering as a choreographic method for (de)structuring movement. With a white and red identification cane in hand, that I had recently been issued and have not yet mastered, I blundered around the gallery space. I tapped the cane back and forth, scanning for material obstacles that might alert me to the location of one of the sculptural armatures. The TAP (left) TAP (right) TAP (left) TAP (right) of the cane provided an acoustic description of the pace and direction of my movements, the resonant vibrations of any materials struck, and the echolocation signatures of other bodies, objects, and the architecture of the space. Lifting the cane off

the ground and holding it in both hands, I traced the angular relationships of the poles of the sculptural armatures. The scrape of aluminium on steel signalled the vector and percussive intensity of motion, layering the looping audiodescription work and mutating the sonic topology. Earlier I argued that peripheralities can invoke new forms of choreopolitical transformation, refiguring exhibitions as sites less bounded by inhibiting norms of human expressive and communicative capacity. Treating the cane as an angular prosthetic in three-dimensional space, I realised that I could not only span distances beyond my normative reach, but also transform the movement dynamics and choreographic potential of my body. With my cane in hand, I could propose a performative response to the question, "How does a straight line feel?" Further, I had stumbled upon a performative structure that could be sensed vibrationally by a dispersed audience, and not predominantly through spectatorship.



Fig. 8. Fayen d'Evie, Troy McConnell, Sophie Takách and Prue Lang, with Harrison Ritchie Jones and Louella Hogan 2016. [...] [...] [...] *Handovers and Translations* / Shared action involving objects. Photo Pippa Samaya

This essay closes as a provisional narrative. As I have traversed exhibitions, conversations and myopic readings, lurching across successive thresholds of unfamiliarity, my perceptual perspective has continuously reoriented through blindness. Though I find myself still on uncertain ground, several methods have coalesced to texture the performative and transformative potential of blindness, in particular, blundering, be-holding, and wayfinding through blindness. Wayfinding here encompasses strategies for sensing, locating, navigating, remembering and recalling, not least, via the angular prosthetic of the cane. To date, I have tended to approach these methods as distinct, but as I move beyond this fledgling stage of research, I shall pivot to interrogate the performative possibilities of their

interweaving, as well as deepening conceptual and visceral exploration of their nuances. As this narrative has related, blundering implies kinetic motion and diffuse attention, while be-holding introduces moments of pause and concentrated attention. Blundering recalls Lusseyran's expansive and boundless topology, while be-holding evokes the intensive intimacy of Morin's handling of clay models of spherical eversion. Blundering disturbs ocular discrimination between sculptural, human and architectural bodies, while be-holding insists on thorough regard of the material at hand, thus reasserting difference. Intertwining both, wayfinding through blindness privileges vibrational modes of performing and sensing, and in so doing, agitates spectatorship and erodes the ocularnormative segregation of interiors and exteriors, performers and audiences. I close therefore on the precipice of a new proposition that, modulated by wayfinding, blundering and be-holding may tension the dynamics of a performance, structuring (or unstructuring) the temporalities, densities, and choreopolitics of perception and attentiveness, language and movement improvisation, intersensory translations and radical peripheralities.

Notes

1. Readings on tactile, haptic and sensorial aesthetics include Jan Svankmajer (2014), Pierpaolo Antonello (2013), Jennifer Fisher (2002), and Heather Tilley (2014).

2. The four sculptural works included within *The Gravity, The Levity* were *A meditation on the possibility... of romantic love or where you goin' with that gun in your hand*, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton discuss the relationship between expressionism and social reality in *Hitler's painting* 2005 by Daniel Joseph Martinez; *From a Whisper to a Scream* 2005 by Juan Capistran; *Untitled (Grate I/II: Shan Mei Playground/ Grand Fortune Mansion)* 2012 by Adrian Wong; and *Third Realm* 2011 by Jompet Kuswidananto.

3. Several attendees requested to be involved in future events, and indeed, subsequently participated in curatorial and dialogue experiments transfiguring audiodescription as an artistic and curatorial medium. One participant published an essay connecting our event to a reflection on contemporary haptics (see Haug 2016).

4. Myopic reading can be understood as an extreme form of close reading or handling, be-holding fragments of ideas, and hallucinating speculative connections amongst and beyond those fragments. In *Rootprints*, Hélène Cixous says this: "I owe some of the most fantastical hallucinatory experiences of my childhood to my extreme nearsightedness: vanishing streets, substitutions, metaphorization and metonymization of the world and of people. And above all the need—indissociable from my very nature, from my way of seeing and thus of thinking—to go see everything very very close up so as to see, ... hyperattentive to details, my approach as a scrutinizing ant, my sensitivity to the least sign. ... my myopia is like my writing: these are fertile congenital disabilities" (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 1997, 89).

5. Carrie Sandahl pursues a similar position in an essay agitating for the radical potential of the phenomenological experiences of disabled bodies to transform the aesthetics, use and configuration of theatrical space (2002).

6. The potential for blindness to generate methods for witnessing, archiving, and recalling ephemeral performance are the subject of my current research, and beyond the scope of this paper. To foreshadow my nascent propositions, my argument has evolved through myopic readings of James Elkins' (1997) argument concerning blindness as the foundation of vision, Roland Barthes's (1981) diagnosis of a photograph as a shared hallucination and an effigy of the photographic subject, and Susan Sontag's analysis that "the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering" (Sontag 2003, 89). These will be read together with Lusseyran's writings on hallucination, and Rebecca Schneider's (2001) essay on archiving and the reverberations of performance, which was written partly in response to Peggy Phelan's (1993) positions on performance, ephemerality and disappearance.

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