

Chakila L. Hoskins  
Professor Zeeuw  
Ethics and Visual Representation  
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How do we Ensure Art Accessibility for the blind and visually impaired?

### Abstract

This research looks at ways to enhance art accessibility for the visually impaired (V.I). There are not many museums, galleries, exhibitions that provide programs or even exhibit art made to touch. It will examine Art Education for the Blind, Inc. (AEB) founded by Elisabeth Salzhauer, whose mission is “to make art, art history, and visual culture accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired.” Other sources to be examined are art museums such as Kelowna Art Gallery in Canada, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), that each provides such accessibility via Braille labels, large-print booklets, touch and audio tours, and AEB’s tactile representation. An article titled *Art for the Blind-Art a GoGo* by Kathleen Lang speaks about these programs and talks about how AEB program works. This paper will also study artists such as Roy Nachum and Lee Brozgol. Nachum is an artist who incorporates poetic messages in Braille into his oil paintings as a way for the visually impaired to appreciate his work. Brozgol teaches ceramics to a group of students with visual impairments ranging from high partial to full vision loss.

I would like to interview a visually impaired individual to get their experience, if any, in an art museum. I will ask questions pertaining to ways that they would feel more welcome in an art setting. There are some V.I. who are also hearing impaired, therefore I will examine ways to incorporate other senses in art form.

## Introduction

There are over 10 million blind and visually impaired individuals residing in the United States; 1.3 million of them are considered “legally blind.” The term *legally blind* does not essentially indicate complete blindness. About 80 percent of people who are legally blind have some vision remaining (The Chicago Lighthouse, 2014). Generally, when most people think of visual art, they do not think of the blind and visually impaired, for the term *visual*, typically means to “see”. What people fail to realize is that those who are blind and have visual impairments enjoy art just as much as individuals with sight. Unfortunately, when it comes to museums, art galleries, and other visual art settings, the blind and visually impaired community is often excluded. So how can we ensure art accessibility for the blind and visually impaired? We can ensure art accessibility for the blind and visually impaired by a combined approach which consists of a range of media, communication tools, programs, and tours.

There are four terms used to describe people with visual impairments: *partially sighted*, *low vision*, *legally blind*, and *totally blind*. Partially blind indicates some degree of visual problem, where, in some cases, special education is needed and received. *Low vision* is a severe visual impairment that applies to all persons with sight who are unable to read periodicals at a normal viewing distance, even with glasses or contacts. *Legally blind* indicates that a person has less than 20/200 vision in the better eye after the use of corrective contacts or glasses, or a field of vision of less than 20 degrees in the better eye. *Totally blind* students learn through Braille or other non-visual media (Wikipedia contributors, 2014).

In the visually impaired community, there are individuals who were either born without vision or lost sight gradually due to diseases such as glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration, cataract, diabetic retinopathy, near-sightedness, or retinitis pigmentosa. Other known causes of blindness or visual impairments are related to a stroke, head trauma, eye or traumatic injuries, or complications while giving birth. In order to better understand the types of difficulties the blind and visually impaired community face when entering a visual setting such as art museums, I conducted three interviews with persons who are blind. Charis Austin is a client advocate and Casey Dutmer is a volunteer/advocate at the Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Michelle Visscher is a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and Certified Vision Therapist for the Bureau Services for Blind Persons.

Both Austin and Dutmer were born blind due to a condition called *Retrolental fibroplasia* (RLF), which is now known as *Retinopathy of Prematurity* (ROP), whereas Visscher was not. Visscher lost her vision 24 years ago after giving birth. This was due to a form of Retinitis Pigmentosa which was never formalized or diagnosed. Each of these individuals has similar views and experiences when it comes to visiting art museums.

One stereotype that the blind are faced with is that many people don't think that the blind are able to enjoy art or even watch television. Dutmer says, "It's kind of like what other minority people face, in the sense that because you're different....they don't believe that you do the same things, or are interested in the same things" (Dutmer, 2014). They are also faced with the fact that people are often afraid to use the words "watch" or "see" when speaking to someone who is blind.

When it comes to art, Austin, Dutmer, and Visscher each enjoy it but they are not always offered the opportunity to gain the full experience of art when visiting museums.

When asked about her view about art accessibility for the blind and visually impaired, Charis Austin's response was, "I'm so used to art not being accessible that I don't think about it" (Austin, 2014). Casey Dutmer says that he does not go to museums very often because "most everything is in glass and unless you have a good describer of what's going on with the exhibit, what it looks like, the color, and what it represents, it's not really a lot of fun.....Most of the time what we imagine when people tell us what we see is different than what it really is" (Dutmer 2014).

Although Dutmer does not feel that it is an unreasonable request to call ahead in order to schedule a tour for a group of blind people, Dutmer feels that some of the museums, except for those in larger cities, have a kind of "negative attitude" (Dutmer, 2014). Austin shares that she has had the same experience with the Van Andel Museum. She sensed an attitude when speaking with a Van Andel Museum representative who told her she needs to call 2 weeks in advance. It is understandable to call and schedule a tour for a large group, such as a school, be it a group of sighted individuals or blind and visually impaired individuals. However, a few blind or visually impaired people should have the same opportunity as a few people who are sighted, and that is to be able to go to a museum and experience art without having to make arrangements.

Among their many similar views, Austin, Dutmer, and Visscher each feel that museums should have more objects to touch in order to gain a perspective of shape, size, and other elements. Dutmer says, "Our imagination is about what is described because we aren't necessarily good at shapes or putting things into shape" (Dutmer, 2014). In other words, when it comes to large objects, the blind are not able to touch the entire object at once; therefore they would have no concept of its shape. Austin suggests having access to a smaller version or *Marquette* of larger sculptures, such as the Calder or the Giant Horse

at Meijer Garden. Visscher recalls being in a group on a tour at Meijer Garden where they were allowed to use their cane to detect the height of the giant horse sculpture. She exclaims, “Through touch you can gain an idea of the dynamics and size” (Visscher, 2014).

There are a lot of art events and other things that the blind and visually impaired communities do not get a chance to experience because they are not necessarily publicized or they are not informed about it. Austin, Dutmer, and Visscher would like more opportunities to experience the art through touch, very detailed audio description, and interactive art. Michelle Visscher suggests that “For certain displays we could wear gloves to be able to touch the artwork leaving no fingerprints or residue (Visscher, 2014). Art accessibility in museums, galleries, classrooms, etc can help break social barriers and provide social integration, in which “all different disabilities can enjoy the diversity of art” (Visscher, 2014).

To have “sight” or to “see” means more than seeing by the use of eyes. It is also a mental perception or concern and the ability to discern or understand. In other words, sight is an opportunity for observation, which is not limited to the sense of sight. Those who are unable to see have the ability to use sound, smell, taste, or touch in order to perceive and observe. Museums, galleries, etc. can provide programs that incorporate each of the five senses to accommodate all people and all disabilities including the blind and visually impaired. Some examples of ways to provide these services are through Audio description for sound, tactile art and touch tours for the sense of touch, and multi-sensory tours/workshops to include all five senses.

When it comes to viewing an artwork, most people with sight view the artwork for a few seconds and then look to the left or right of the piece for an artist statement or

description. *Audio description* is a method of converting visual information into speech. It was invented in 1989 by the late Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl and her late husband Cody (The American Council for Blind, 2014). Audio description or video/visual description refers to additional narration track intended primarily for the blind and visually impaired consumers of visual media such as television, film, dance, opera, and visual art. In museums or visual exhibitions, audio described tours can be used to provide access to visitors who are blind and visually impaired. Given proper training, Docents (Tour guides) can incorporate audio description in their presentations.

VocalEyes is a “nationwide audio description charity, providing access to the arts for blind and partially sighted people” (VocalEyes, 2014). Through audio description VocalEyes’ mission is to work with the blind and partially sighted community to increase engagement with the arts. In a theatrical piece, painting, or environment there are visual elements that a blind or partially sighted person might miss. Audio description captures these features, giving a clear and detailed narrative.

“VocalEyes was established in 1998 through a National Lottery grant, awarded by Arts Council England to assist theatre venues and producers in meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted audiences”(VocalEyes, 2014). Successive project funding has allowed VocalEyes to develop its work into areas such as museums, galleries and heritage, architecture, contemporary dance, and audio description for young people.

- All our work is founded on a bedrock of ongoing research and consultation with experts in the field as well as our blind and partially sighted audiences.
- Currently an Arts Council revenue client, VocalEyes is the largest organization offering comprehensive description services nationwide, working to ensure the highest standards of delivery and promoting increased access provision at every opportunity. By the summer of 2013, VocalEyes had described over 1,500 performances at over 100 different venues throughout the UK, collaborating with theatres to increase their audiences and maintain a high standard of services to blind and partially sighted people (VocalEyes, 2014).

The sense of touch can be of great assistance to those who are visually impaired. Blind individuals depend on their sense of touch for perception, much like those with sight depend on their vision. However, there are not many museums, galleries, or visual exhibitions that allow visitors to “touch the artwork”, which leaves the visually impaired at a disadvantage. The “no touch” rule is logical and essential in order to preserve the artwork for many generations. But where does this leave the visually impaired? How can they experience the art? Elisabeth Salzhauer Axel is one individual whose objective is to find ways to make art, art history, and visual culture accessible to the blind and visually impaired.

Axel’s grandmother was a gifted artist who loved art and began to lose her sight. Axel and her grandmother would continue going to museums together and noticed the lack of spaces and services for blind, visually impaired, and disabled people. She explains, “I was appalled that this could happen in NYC, with all our wonderful museums, cultural riches, and openness to diversity, and I knew I had to do something to change this situation!” (Salzhauer Axel, 2005).

As a museum educator Salzhauer Axel felt that there were ways to bring art to blind people, and “learning about, appreciating, and creating art would improve and enrich the lives of blind people as it does for sighted people” (Salzhauer Axel, 2005). So in 1987, Axel founded *Art Education for the Blind* (AEB). AEB’s goal is to provide and promote the tangible benefits of art education, museum visits, and art making for children and adults with sight loss giving them equal access to the world’s visual culture and the chance to be involved in the life-enhancing power of art.

AEB has partnered with museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Miami Art Museum,

Victoria and Albert Museum in England, and the Musée du Louvré in France. The museums are provided with art, tactile books, and educational programs that are accessible for their blind and visually impaired visitors. One example of the art provided is AEB's *Tactile Representation*, which is art that uses tactile patterns consisting of vertical lines, basket weave, solid, horizontal lines, solid-rough, and dots. Examples of these patterns, lines, and other icons can be found in AEB's series *Art History Through Touch and Sound: A Multisensory Guide for the Blind and Visually Impaired*. Other publications of the AEB are *Art Beyond Sight: A Resource Guide to Art, Creativity, and Visual Impairment* (book published by AEB and AFB Press) and *Art Beyond Sight. A Demonstration of Practical Techniques for Teaching Art to People with Visual Impairments* (video produced by the Museum of Modern Art and Art Education for the Blind, narrated by Meredith Viera).

Audio description is also a great tool when it comes to movie theatres. As I stated earlier, one of the stereotypes for the blind is that people do not think that the blind "watch" television. In fact, they do "watch" television and enjoy "watching" movies. Charis Austin and Casey Dutmer expressed how they enjoy going to Celebration Cinema in Rivertown Crossings Mall, located in Grandville, Michigan because they have a couple theatres that provide audio description. According to Austin, they provide headphones but her and her friends always bring their own.

Other forms of tactile art that are being introduced are with the use of Braille. Contemporary New York based artist, Roy Nachum, explores the boundaries between visual and non-visual perception. He is an artist that believes that art should be accessible to all individuals. He paints subjects whose "vision is obscured" (Nachum, 2012). Nachum's works are meant to be inclusive and often executed with the participation of those who are blind. In Nachum's *Blind* series, the artist completes a well rendered



painting, blindfolds himself and paints a gestural layer over his painting. He does this by using only touch to guide him as he physically touches the subject while blindfolded.

Nachum taught himself Braille and inserts messages or poems in Braille relief. Using a palette knife, he sculpts the poems in Braille as a background for his paintings. He does this with the intention to stimulate sensations in the blind audience. Nachum's *Fire* series consists of interactive and collaborative works. In this series Nachum textures each solid canvas with Braille. Each canvas has a frame that the artist has burned to charcoal. "As the unsighted collaborators run their fingers from burned frame to painted Braille, evidence of the actual physical contact leaves a trail of "painting" marks and gestures" (Nachum, 2012). Through Nachum's works he encourages touch and interaction "believing that human interaction keeps the work alive and breaks the barrier between the viewer and the "sacred object" (Nachum, 2012).

Multi-sensory tours and workshops provide an increased opportunity for individuals with vision loss to engage with art. Emma Stein and Robert Waters are two individuals who have created such tours and workshops. Emma Stein is a Director of a Contemporary art gallery in Chicago, IL. Stein has three close relatives, who are affected by the retinal degenerative disease, Retinitis Pigmentosa, including her mother who has been legally blind since before Stein's birth. Stein says, "Growing up with a visually impaired mother who is also an activist for disability rights, I have always been aware of the struggles and limitations that people with disabilities face on a daily basis" (Stein, 2011).

Over the years Stein has become gradually aware of the inaccessibility of the art world for the visually impaired. She feels that "steps need to be taken to create awareness in the art community about the serious accessibility problems the art world faces as a series

of practices, traditions and experiences that revolve entirely around vision” (Stein, 2011). So Stein began taking her own steps by creating the project, *PLEASE TOUCH THE ARTWORK*, a multi-sensory art exhibition that makes art accessible to the visually impaired. The exhibition uses form through the senses of touch, smell, and sound. Emma feels “it will help set a precedent for accessibility reform in American art institutions and send an important message to the visually impaired community that engagement with art objects is not limited to the sighted” (Stein 2011). The exhibition substitutes the visual experience with similarly significant, non-visual interactions, making it an engaging experience for everyone.

There are many reasons for art to be taught to blind people. Sighted and blind people can both benefit from the critical thinking and language skills provided through art history. The making of art can serve as a tool to build self-confidence and self-awareness. When asked the question, “Do you feel that teaching art to blind or visually impaired should be priority?” Michelle Visscher’s response was, “Yes, because it’s a part of our everyday experience to touch, feel, and identify. It gives exposure to what the creative and objective looks like, such as pictures on walls.” (Visscher, 2014). With this statement in mind, I wanted to find artists who felt the same as Visscher. One artist I observed was Robert Waters.

In the article *Robert Waters: The Conceptual Art Workshop for the Visually Impaired*, Waters begins with the quote, “In the land of the blind, the visual arts are almost entirely mute. In galleries and museums, artwork that visually impaired cannot see are also prohibited to touch” (Waters, 2008). Robert Waters is responsible for developing *The Conceptual Art Workshop for the Visually Impaired*. The workshop provides an “undiluted art education for the blind in which the nature of the course content — the visual negation

inherent in Conceptual Art (1) — theoretically transforms the disability of blindness into a critical ability” (Waters, 2008).

By making Conceptual art understandable to a community that is often excluded from artistic discussion, the workshop provides its students with innovative strategies for creating and expressing artistic, philosophical and political thoughts in new methods and contexts. The students obtain access to history of Conceptual Art through an audio version of the book *Conceptual Art* by Peter Osborne. Homework assignments are given and discussed in the classes, which further explores Conceptual Art through discussions, and exercises. The students are then able to reflect on the experience of art’s creation and interpretation through all of the senses. This is done when the elements of visual design such as rhythm, balance, form, or line, are taught through connections with hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting.

Waters’ students also go on a field trip to an exhibition of contemporary art. Throughout the course they complete eight projects. One of the projects is a *Blind Contour Drawing of Duchamp’s Fountain*. The students also study the role of the blind in the structure of art history by using Jacques Derrida’s book *Memoir of the Blind*, to discover conflicting concepts of sight and perception. Overall, the workshop provides students with the knowledge, practice and empowerment to pursue creative endeavors, positioning the artistic expression of the blind as a valid and compelling new voice in contemporary visual culture (Waters, 2008).

In Jacques Derrida’s essay *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, Derrida examines matters of vision, blindness, self-representation, and their relation to drawing. Derrida offers detailed readings of a collection of images depicting fictional, historical, and biblical blindness. A passage from the text reads:

For Derrida drawing is itself blind; as an act rooted in memory and anticipation, drawing necessarily replaces one kind of seeing (direct) with another (meditated). Ultimately, he explains, the very lines which compose any drawing are themselves never fully visible to the viewer since they exist only in a tenuous state of multiple identities: as marks on a page, as indicators of a contour. Lacking a “pure” identity, the lines of a drawing summon the supplement of the word, of verbal discourse, and, in doing so, obscure the visual experience. Consequently, Derrida demonstrates, the very act of depicting a blind person undertakes multiple enactments and statements of blindness and sight (Derrida, Naus, Brault, 1993).

### Disability Theory in Relation to visual impairment

In Jonathan Hsy’s essay *Blind Advocacy: Blind Readers, Disability Theory, and Accessing John Gower*, Johnathan Hsy recovers an aspect of the literary reception of medieval poet John Gower (d. 1408): nineteenth-century anthologies created for the benefit fo the blind, including James Wilson’s *Biography of the Blind* (1838) and William Hanks Levy’s *Blindness and the Blind* (1872). Gathered by supporters in search of challenging the public downgrading of individuals with disabilities and change attitudes toward blind people specifically, these collections position Gower as part of a well-known history of accomplished disable artists. The writers in Hsy’s essay compiled stories by and about blind people who achieved great deeds as scholars, poets, and musicians in an effort to advocate for the blind. In Hsy’s essay he explores this uncommon moment in literary response history to follow three related arguments:

First, I demonstrate that Blind reader reception of Gower enacts a key step in modern (nineteenth-century) disability activism.<sup>5</sup> Compilations narrating the lives of blind people fostered a community of self-identified Blind people and their allies, and anthologies of blind lives sought to improve both the material and social conditions of people with disabilities. Second, I examine how Gower’s blindness poetry gives modern readers new access to the wide flexibility of *medieval* perceptions of visual impairment. Gower’s poems—composed in Latin and revised over time—rework longstanding literary conventions regarding blindness, disassociating social stigma that attaches to certain types of

embodied difference in medieval culture and stressing instead the potential to thrive and create with one's blindness. Third, I explore how the transformative ethos of Gower's blindness poetry reorients social attitudes toward blindness in the past and in the present. The medieval poet's blindness poetry anticipates and readily engages with activist oriented modes of contemporary literary criticism and media theory, and Gower's verses about composing as a blind writer open up new ways of acknowledging the ethical valence of aesthetics and poetic form within the field of disability studies (Hsy, 2013, p.1, 3, & 8).

Gower has the ability to redirect essential critical methods to literary texts via disability theory by dealing with the attentive idea that blind readers and writers utilize as they appropriate the blind.

While there are many larger cities that have already taken the steps toward making art accessible to the blind and visually impaired, there are still many smaller cities that lack these accommodations. Through audio description, AEB's tactile representation, tactile art, touch tours, and multi-sensory workshops, many visually settings can break the stereotypes and barriers that prohibit the blind from participating in our visual world. Teaching the making of art and art history to the blind and visually impaired community should be a priority because "art can serve as a catalyst in addressing many practical issues that blind people face today including Braille literacy, social integration, mobility skills, and employment" (Salzhauer Axel, 2005). Charis Austin put things into a different perspective for me when she said, "How would it be if we gave you everything in Braille, or in 4pt or 8pt type?" (Austin, 2014). It made me think, what if our world was full of Braille with no translation? What would we do? How would we feel? I imagine that we would feel much like those who are blind and visually impaired feel now, excluded.

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# Art Accessibility for the Blind and Visually Impaired

To See or Not to See, There's Still an Imagination



# Quick Facts on Blindness and Visual Impairment

- There are over 10 million blind and visually impaired people living in the United States ; 1.3 million of them are considered “legally blind”.
- Approximately 10% of people who are blind read Braille; the rest either read enlarged print or rely on audio options to access printed material.
- Some people may be able to read print but may be unable to see people coming toward them on the other side of a hallway because of “tunnel vision” or loss of visual field.
- Some might have “night-blindness” or difficulty seeing in certain lighting.
- Some visually impaired people may have lost their central vision and must view things using their peripheral or “eccentric” vision.
- Some people who are visually impaired only have “light perception,” which means that they are unable to see shapes, colors and details, but can detect changes in lighting.

Working with Someone who is Blind and Visually Impaired | The Chicago Lighthouse

- <http://chicagolighthouse.org/programs-and-services/employers/working-someone-who-blind-or-visually-impaired>

# Types of Visual Impairments

- Partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, or totally blind
- Born without vision or lost sight gradually

# Causes of blindness and visual impairment

- Glaucoma
- Age-related macular degeneration
- Cataract
- Diabetic retinopathy
- Near-sightedness/far sightedness
- Retinitis pigmentosa

# Other causes of blindness or visual impairment

- Head trauma/ injury
- Eye injury
  - Sharp objects, grit, or other particles

# How Do We Ensure Art Accessibility for the visually impaired?

- 1) Audio, Auditory, Audio description
- 2) Tactile art
- 3) Objects for blind or visitors who have low vision
- 4) Website Accessibility
- 5) Tours

# Audio, Auditory, Audio description

- **Audio description** is a method of converting visual information into speech
- According to *American Council of the Blind*, **audio description** was invented in 1981 by the late Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl and her late husband Cody.

# VocalEyes

“nationwide audio description charity, providing access to the arts for blind and partially sighted people”

“The heart of our mission is to work with blind and partially sighted people to enhance engagement with the arts, through audio-description.”

<http://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/default.asp>

# VocalEyes Services

- **Audio description** captures the visual elements of a theatre piece, painting or environment that a blind or partially sighted person might otherwise miss and describes them in clear, vivid language.
  - Performing arts, visual arts, and architecture audio description,
  - Audio description training and audio describer/venue resources



# VocalEyes

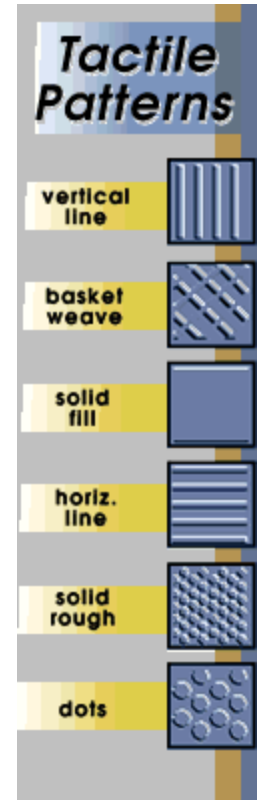
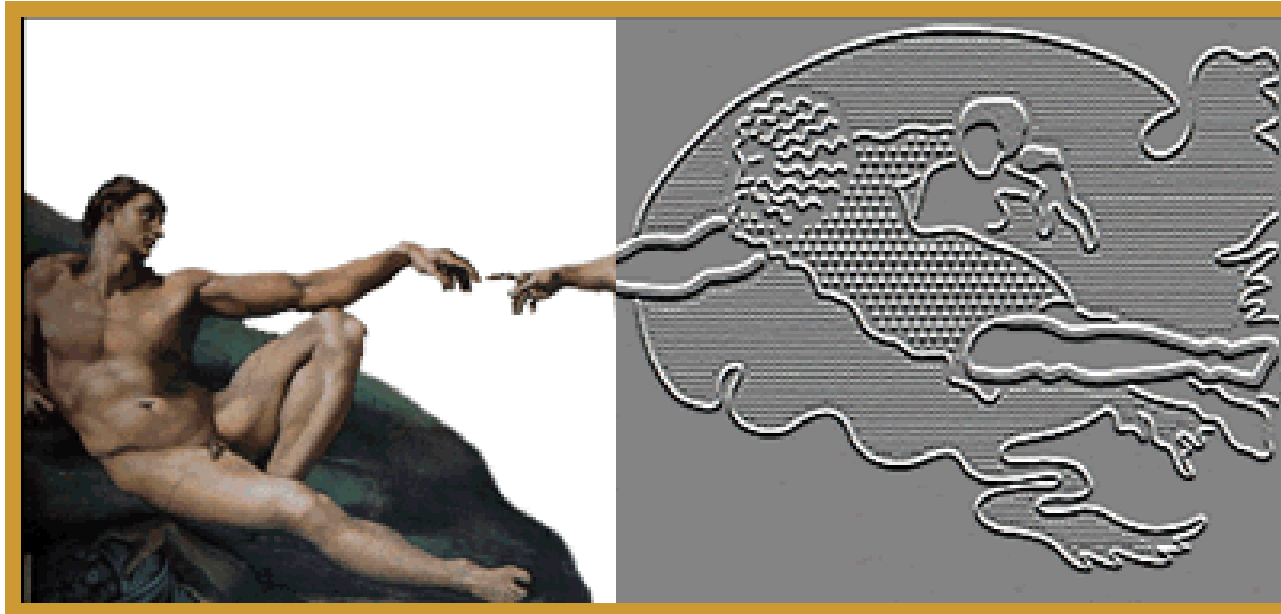
## Visual Arts Audio Description

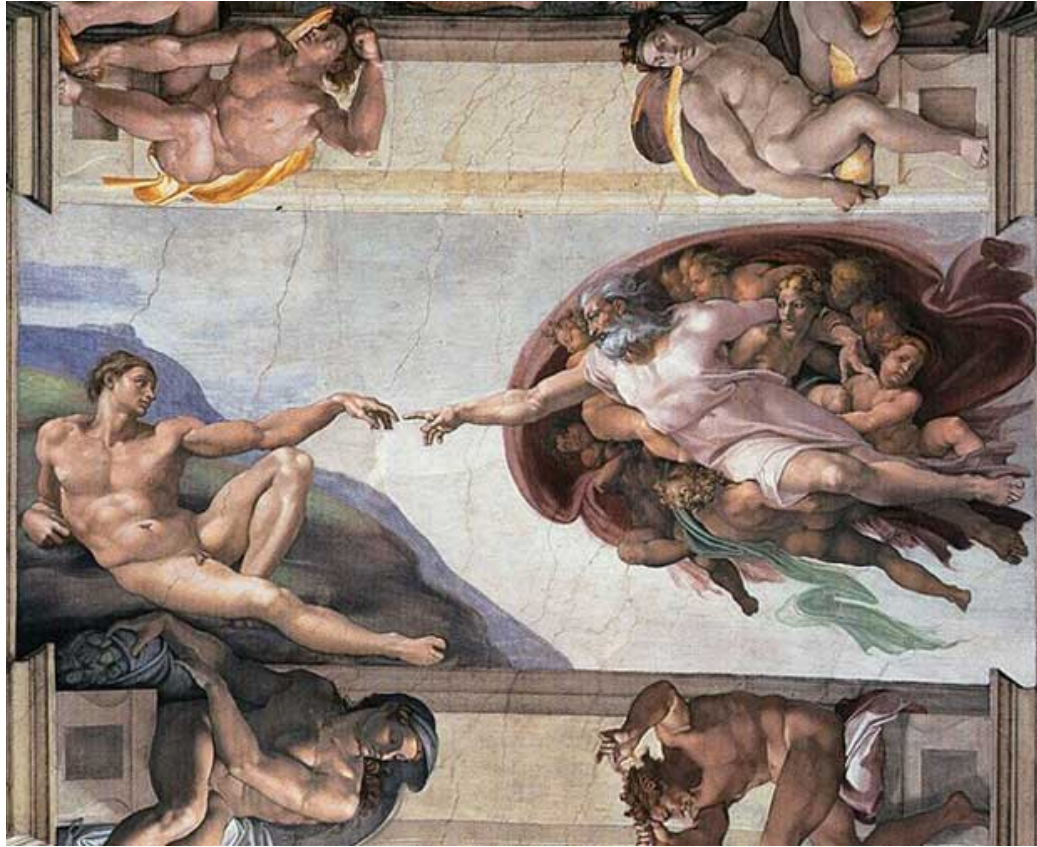


<http://vocaleyes.co.uk/default.asp>

# Tactile Art

- AEB- Art Education for the Blind



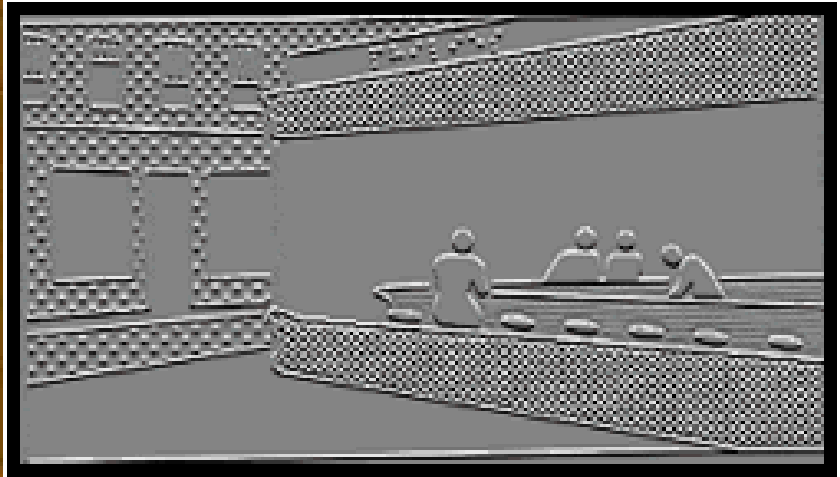


Michelangelo, *Sistine Chapel ceiling*, 1508-1512

# AEB's Tactile Representation



Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil paint,  
Art Institute of Chicago Building



*Hopper's "Nighthawks," left,  
and our tactile representation, above.*

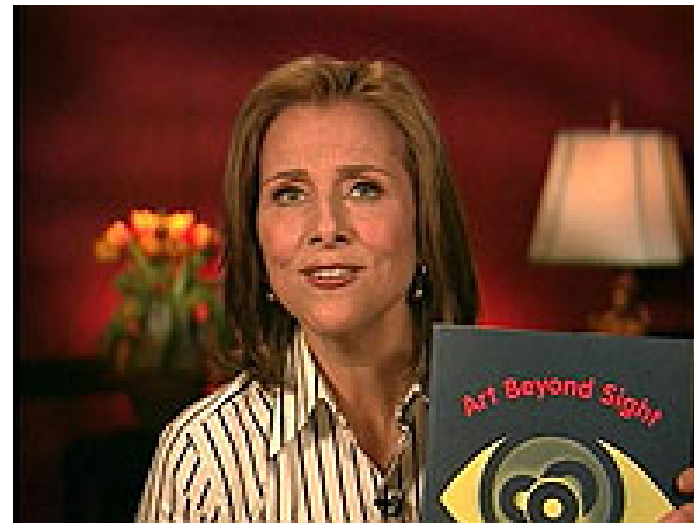
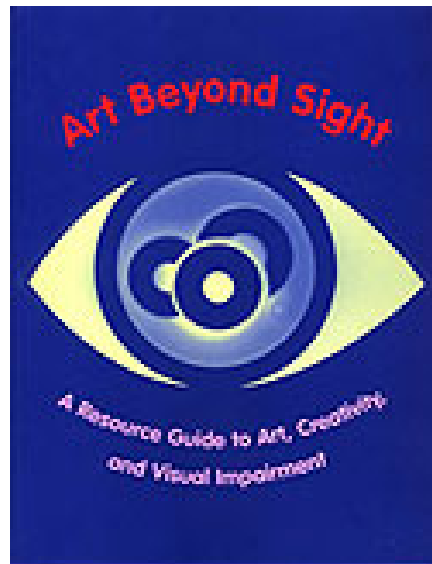
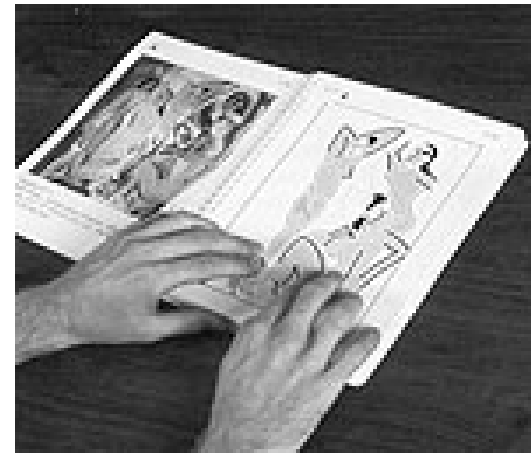
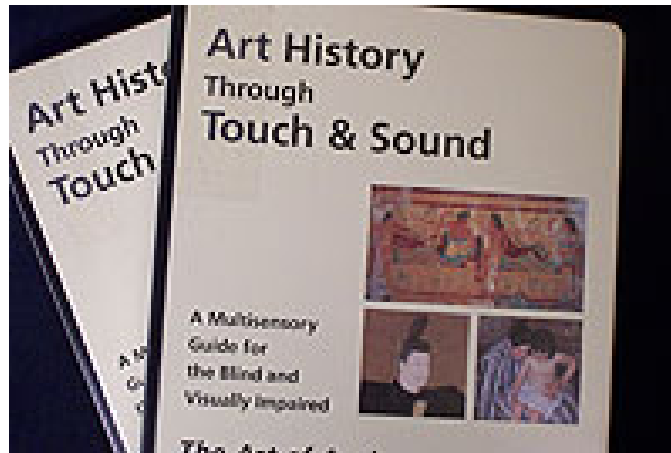


**Esref Armagan demonstrates his technique  
at the reception honoring his work.**

<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/sidebar/aboutaeb.shtml>

# AEB partners with Museums

- **Museum of Modern Art,**
- **Metropolitan Museum of Art,**
- **Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Philadelphia**
- **Miami Art Museum,**
- **Victoria and Albert Museum in England**
- **Musée du Louvré in France.**



<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/sidebar/aboutaeb.shtml>

# Roy Nachum



1979 Born, Jerusalem, Israel  
2002 Bezalel, Jerusalem, Israel  
2005 Cooper Union, New York, U.S.



# Roy Nachum's *Blind* Series



# Roy Nachum's *Blind* Series



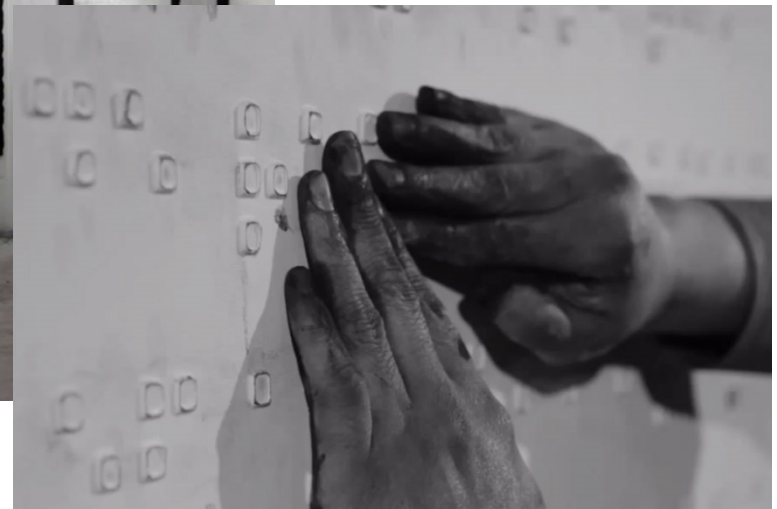
# Roy Nachum's *Blind* Series



# Roy Nachum's *Blind* Series



# Roy Nachum's *Fire Series*



# Objects for blind or visitors who have low vision



- Lee Brozgol, discussing form with his student

# Visions-services for the blind and visually impaired



# Website Accessibility

- Larger text
- Text-based browser
- Screen reader
- Braille terminal



# Tours

- Touch/tactile tours for the blind and visually impaired
- Multi-Sensory Tours/Workshops
  - Emma Stein's *PLEASE TOUCH THE ARTWORK*
  - Robert Water's *Conceptual Art Workshop for the Visually Impaired*
    - References Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind Self: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins (Part-Pris)*

# Emma Stein's *Please Touch the Artwork*



# Emma Stein's *Please Touch the Artwork*

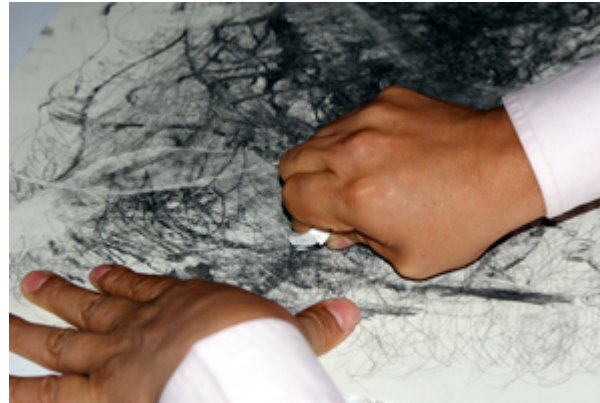
If you would like to view the video titled "Please Touch the Artwork" please follow the link below.

<http://pleasetouchtheartwork.blogspot.com/>

# Robert Waters | Conceptual Art for the visually impaired

- The **Conceptual Art Workshop for the Visually Impaired** provides an undiluted art education for the blind in which the nature of the course content — the visual negation inherent in Conceptual Art (1) — theoretically transforms the disability of blindness into a critical ability.
- The **Conceptual Art Workshop for the Visually Impaired** is both a celebration and critique of Conceptual Art, amplifying the possibilities of both its expression and appreciation while exploring its limitations through a study in accessibility.

# Robert Waters | Conceptual Art for the visually impaired



# Jaques Derrida

- In Jacques Derrida's essay *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, Derrida examines matters of vision, blindness, self-representation, and their relation to drawing. Derrida offers detailed readings of a collection of images depicting fictional, historical, and biblical blindness.
- For Derrida drawing is itself blind; as an act rooted in memory and anticipation, drawing necessarily replaces one kind of seeing (direct) with another (meditated). Ultimately, he explains, the very lines which compose any drawing are themselves never fully visible to the viewer since they exist only in a tenuous state of multiple identities: as marks on a page, as indicators of a contour. Lacking a "pure" identity, the lines of a drawing summon the supplement of the word, of verbal discourse, and, in doing so, obscure the visual experience. Consequently, Derrida demonstrates, the very act of depicting a blind person undertakes multiple enactments and statements of blindness and sight.

*“Touch misses nothing, whereas vision can sometimes miss or misinterpret what is there, By touching you can feel the reality of the piece.”* —Maya Jonas, an observer on a touch tour at the AGO-Art Gallery of Ontario, Kelowna Art Gallery