

Writings for the sighted skin

Anna Dot

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The white canes in Pieter Brueghel's painting floated in the middle of the abyss. As if the hole into which the blind guide falls had swallowed absolutely everything except this; the sticks. The extension of the hand, a tactile tool.



Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1568). The Blind Leading the Blind

To you.

Look, I don't know if it happens to you too, but I've had tired eyes for a long time and it's getting harder to write every day. My sight is bored of having to jump from luminous support to luminous support to observe images, read texts, and thus communicate with you and everyone else, or acquire the knowledge that should allow me to move forward in life (from orienting myself around the city and going shopping to having a job). Writing is becoming an increasingly difficult exercise because every day I find it harder to read. My eyes get tired at the same time as my legs, feet, hands and sometimes my whole body claim me life, stimuli. If I don't give this to them, I feel like they swell, shrink, get heavy. Sometimes, they have fallen asleep moving into deep nightmares that threaten me with images of paralysis.

One of the things I would like is to be able to communicate with you in writing but in darkness. That our sight should not make any effort to be able to reach each other. The braille alphabet is based, in fact, on the nocturnal writing system that Charles Barbier invented in response to Napoleon, who called for a method so that soldiers could write and read important messages without the need for light. Most keyboards in our computers also allow us to type with our eyes closed thanks to the two dashes protruding from the F and J keys to indicate where the index finger of the left hand should be placed (on the F) and the one on the right (on the J). Once these fingers are on these letters, just drop the rest of your fingers on the side letters, and your thumbs on the space bar to have your whole hand correctly placed and from there jump your fingers keystroke to be able to type. For the most part, this note you read I wrote it from the balcony of my house with my eyes closed or projecting my gaze towards the trees coming out of the hill beyond.

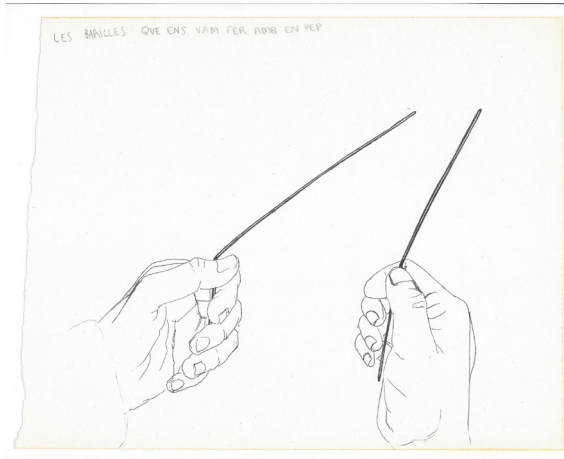


Ejnar Nielsen (1905). A blind girl reading.

And from here, from the balcony, watching the screen is of little use. We all know the effects of the sun on screens. And that makes me believe even less that there is something good in this tendency to illuminate everything. Or don't you think, too, that we, humans, have dedicated ourselves to illuminate everything, to put (artificial) light on things? Take the night bus one day. Light everywhere. Sleep on a mountain. Light in all the atmosphere around you. And this really makes me suffer. I suspect sensuality and restlessness are in danger. Seeing the image of a body can give you specific sensations, okay, but think: what about the sensations of discovering this image in the dark, not by sight, but by touch? And what makes you hear certain sounds in the middle of the night? The image of a feather is one thing, but what about the sensations it produces when it gently caress your cheek? We see the world full of visual signs that we can read, but I wonder: what does the world tell us if we understand all its elements as the letters of a tactile writing? What would happen if we turned off all the lights, closed our eyes, and rediscovered the world as a palpable system? Would we also learn to detect with the hand all that is invisible, as the two characters in the Egyptian Tarot's presentiment card seem to do?



Or like saurians, with their pendulums, crossbows and rods?



If we closed our eyes forever, perhaps some of the things we have would no longer be useful to us and we would need to find new ways to move around spaces and recognize each other with non-visual clues. In April 2017, Mar Serinyà guided a group of people on a completely dark night walk that began in Torroella de Montgrí, at the height of the Ter bridge, at four in the morning, and it reached Gola de Ter, where the same river flows a few kilometres further down, about six o'clock. In a dark night, no one wore headbands and we walked in silence, touching each other, crossing a rural area. On the right, the river; on the left, fields. The sound of the footsteps of those in front allowed us to guess what the path that was ahead - fortunately, flat and in a straight line. Smells, noises and changes in air temperature described the landscape around us. The presence and movements of the other walkers were of essential importance in the individual and collective movement.

Not at all we walked alone in nothingness. The bodies of others protected and guided one's own, while one's own had to protect and guide those of others. At times you were at the core of the group, letting yourself be carried away by the movement of everyone else and without even having to think; and at other times, utterly unforeseen, you found yourself concentrated at one end, pushing subtly and supporting.

Someone told us that the birds, in their very long flights, are also organized this way and can have moments of rest in the middle of the trip. And once here we can ask ourselves: where is the body in contemporary spaces governed by visuality?

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa wrote about this or something similar in the book *The eyes of the skin*, which shows how most contemporary architectural works are intended to be turned into a magazine or instagram image. They end up being cold places for the body, and hardly habitable. On the other hand, the pair of Polish artists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński argued that sculpture and urban design orchestrate the movements of our bodies in a system of values and productivity inherent in capitalism. In cities it is very clear how spaces are designed to encourage the generation of productivity and consumption habits, right? Starting from here, and considering that an art exhibition also goes through a process of space design, I wonder: how can we design an exhibition that orchestrates movements for the visitor's body focused on discarding sight as the main sense and making touch be what guides perception? What if I stop thinking of you as a spectator, who will walk through the space of the gallery standing and looking frontally everything that is hanging at an average height of a meter and a half, and instead I think of you as someone that has a body, that can move through space in different ways depending on what is there?

In the early 1970s, Muntadas made some experiments in this direction. He was preparing spaces and inviting some people to discover them. The condition was that they should do so with their eyes closed, through what the artist called "the senses" -taste, touch, smell-, on which he wrote:

The fact that the sense of hearing and sight have been artistically developed (sculpture, painting, music ...) does not mean that the SUBSENSES cannot develop and leave their state of atrophy.

*The development of the SUBSENSES can create for us the possibility of a new aesthetic*¹

¹ ALONSO, RODRIGO, ed. 2002. Muntadas. Con/Textos. Una antología crítica. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Simurg/Cátedra La Ferla (UBA), p. 361.

And to give you an idea, Alexandre Cirici described the “Experience number 2”:

A barefoot man and woman with their eyes covered and their ears closed, are placed in a paved courtyard and surrounded by other walls, with the only suggestion of sharpening their senses of touch, smell and taste. Walking through the cement, they are asked for the discovery of materials laid on the ground: textiles, straw, reeds, papers, which cause a desire to follow their traces.

It was fatal for both people to find, sooner or later, this stimulus, and to respond to it. It was also fatal that, in this automatic obedience, they found and recognized each other as man and woman, by touch, smell, and taste.

Eight minutes was enough to reach the end of the experience.²



Frame of the video MUNTADAS: EXPERIENCIAS subSENSORIALES 1971-1973 una documentación de Muntadas/Bonet 1991-2009. Image: Courtesy ARXIU/AM.

While we do it to play, all this, and to discover other forms of perception, it is clear that there are also those who live it as a normal feature of their existence. Helen Keller has been known in history for that; for having been diagnosed as deaf and blind when she was just a baby and for having learned, thanks to the work of her teacher Anne Sullivan, to communicate and live in a world designed from vision. In *Aparador#5* organized by Anna Pahissa at Múltiplos in July 2017, Aimar Pérez Galí recommended Keller's book *The world where I live* (2017 [1904])³, emphasizing a phrase from the author: “Every cell is a vibroscope.”

² CIRICI, ALEXANDRE. 1971. “Muntadas i l'art tàctil”. Serra d'Or, 15 d'octubre 1971: 65.

³ Translation by Dolors Udina, published by Viena Edicions. The original version was published in 1904 with the title *The World I live In*.

And Keller visited Martha Graham's studio and felt the movement of the bodies around her.



Helen Keller surrounded by a group of dancers and Martha Graham at Graham's studio, 1954. Image: Perkins School for the Blind Archive.

Every cell is a vibroscope. And in 1913 the Museum of Natural History in Sunderland, England, organized the first guided tours for the blind.

Image:



Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums.

Each cell is a vibroscope. They didn't say it with these words, but it seems to me that this is also how the blind characters who star in the play *The Blind* (1984 [1890]⁴), by Maurice Maeterlinck, lived, who all of a sudden find themselves alone, disoriented, in the middle of an island. They have lost their guide and are trying to find out where they are and how to get home from the feelings they have: "I feel the coldness of the moon in my hands", "The voice resounds as if we were in a cave", "There the stars; I feel them,", "I feel like we're in the shadows", "I feel the flutter of wings around me!"

However, "Writings for the Seeing Skin" is not about blindness or not seeing. It is an attempt to activate new choreographies for our bodies in the space of art. Choreographies that are not necessarily guided by sight and that revive the hand in our orientation in the world, in the recognition of the other and in our own expression.

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⁴ Translation by Jordi Coca, published by Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona. The original version was published in 1890 with the title *Les Aveugles*.