

# Blind Artist Self Portrait and Materiality in Stop-motion Animation

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**Abstract.** This essay analyses touch as an essential element in blind artist artworks which is strongly related to the stop-motion animation technique. In their practice, some blind artists incorporate touch as the essential part in the process of making and viewing their art or self-portrait. In cinema, incorporating touch also has been applied by filmmakers to heightened other senses than visual and audio to bring viewers and film closer. In this essay author discussing how the element of touch in the artworks related to the touch in the stop-motion animation technique. The work of *Tactile Dialogues* (2006), and *Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror* (2007).

## 1. Introduction

As part of the haptic, touch is an essential aspect for a blind artist to create and experience art [1]. Blind artists such as Keith Salmon and Aaron Mac Peake bring the audience engaged closer to their art piece by implementing haptic sense in their practice [2,3].

In cinema, haptic senses have mainly appeared in the discussion of the relationship between senses and the embodiment of sighted viewer through a screen, as can be seen in the theory of haptic visuality, cinematic tactility, and embodied cinematic experience [4–6].

exploring touch elements in stop-motion animation is worth discussing. It can be pushed further as an alternative strategy in addressing visual disability issue in cinema.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Blind Artist Self Portrait

The self-portrait is a genre of art, where artist expressing their self-representation into their art piece. In her book *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, Kleege discussing examples of self-portraits where blindness is a theme of work. [3]

Kleege and Butchin give examples of how blind artists capture moments and express their feelings, experiences, or memories [2,3]. For example, as a landscape painter, Keith Salmon is no longer relies on his vision in capturing inspiration for his painting project. Instead, Salmon uses the sense of audition and kinesthetic perception to capture space. Having a limited vision, Salmon can absorb the experience of places. According to Salmon, painting is not about how beautiful the view of places, it is more about the experience of feeling, about how weather and light are changing, about the sound of

silence [2,3]. With the help of auditory experience, Salmon relies on his kinesthetic percepts to get “the sense of the thoroughly dynamic world ” [1].

For blind people, the sense of touch informs about the shapes of things and gives the knowledge of the objects performing the knowledge. The *Disordered Eye* video (2020) shows a blind participant attending an art workshop held by the Royal College of Art. These participants were asked to touch 3D printed, scanned life models before creating drawing and sculpting. Butcher highlights the distinct process where blind participants do not need to see an object before creating a drawing or sculpture [2]. By not distracted from visuals, blind artists are freed from the “prison of visual”, which makes them able to express what is going on in their mind by touch, feel, and thought. Similarly, as mentioned by Arnheim, hands’ versatility enables artists to put some complexity on artist work that is considered” worthy of mind’s sophistication” [1].

### *2.2 Touch in film making*

The essentials of touch and kinesthetic senses have been explored in the world of cinema to bring the audience closer to the film. Like other mediums of art, some films have a rich tactile characteristic that requires the viewer to activate their haptic sense to engage with the film. Laura U. Marks conceptualizes haptic visuality terms, which contrasts with optical visuality. It draws from other sensory experiences, especially touch and kinesthetic. In haptic visuality, the viewer’s body is more involved in the process of seeing compared to the use of optical visuality [4].

Marks (2000) also explained how haptic visuality is the opposite of the Renaissance perspective as the progenitor of the cinema’s optical image, which addresses the distant, distinct, and disembodied viewer[7]. Haptic visuality suggests that the viewers dissolve their subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image. As it refers to Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenology, Cinematic experience stresses the interactive character of cinema viewing, which suggests that the viewer participates in the production process of the cinematic experience and shares and performs cinematic space dialogically, rather than witnessing cinema through a frame or window [4].

Haptic visuality relates to the medium’s materiality at several levels, including recording, editing, and the projection or transmission medium [8]. For example, In the use of a film medium, a haptic quality can be achieved by doing physical manipulation directly to the film, such as scratching the emulsion and optical printing on the recording level. The source of haptic elements in a video or computer editing can be achieved in many ways, such as the constitution of the image from a signal, the video’s low contrast ratio, or video decay. Electronic manipulability has also become one of the essential sources of video tactility. Using analog synthesis and digital effects, video makers can experiment with the disappearance and transformation of images [4]

According to Marks (2000), The enlightenment thinker reinforces the hierarchy of senses, which positions senses based on the distance of senses from the body and intellect. This hierarchy puts visual and audio senses in a higher position than smell and touch, which are considered bodily and less intellectual. Having the ability to enable the viewer to involve the body in the process of seeing, the filmmaker often uses the element of materiality in their film to critique the social hierarchy of senses [7].

### *2.3 Touch in stop-motion animation*

Materiality in Stop-motion animation not only can be seen in the texture or surface of the object. There are many elements that able to bring the film closer to the audience. Souza has been discussed the issues of materiality, fabrication, tangibility, and tactility of some stop-motion animation using the theoretical approach of haptic visuality [4], cinematic tactility [5], and embodied cinematic experience [6]. Some material elements in stop-motion animation seem similar to some blind artist artworks especially in employing the artist’s touch.

The stop-motion animation technique was utilized in many experimental animation projects because of its limitless possibility of using any objects to be manipulated on each frame to create a moving effect. During the stop-motion animation process, touching becomes the important aspect in manipulates the object. According to Souza, The stop-motion technique might enable viewers to evoke their memories about touch when they see a particular object or material [9].

Stop-motion animation practice often uses clay or fur material because of its plasticity, which easily leaves traces of the artist's fingerprint during the animating process. It is believed that by leaving traces while manipulating objects, the animator imprinting his/her experiences of the world into the objects [9].

### **3. Blind Self Portrait Case Study**

Two artworks created by the blind artist will be discussed to analyze the touch element employed by the artist that similar to the touch element in stop-motion animation. The first artwork is *Tactile Dialogues* (2006) created by Fayen D'Evie, in collaboration with Sophie Takach. The second artwork is *Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror* (2007) by Aaron Mac Peake.

#### *3.1 Tactile Dialogues (2006)*

Fayen D'Evie, in collaboration with Sophie Takach, creates a series of works requiring the audience to use their sense of touch to engage with the artworks. In *Tactile Dialogues* (2006), D'Evie cast the negative space created when two persons are clasping hands. Wax and bronze material retain the line, creases, and pores of two palms. Every time the works were distributes to others, the shape of the object will be changed. By handling the object, the audience is expected to experience the appealing heft, variety of texture, and bronze scent [3].

#### *3.2 Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror (2007)*

*Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror* (2007) is part of *The Gong* project series (2007-2009) which was inspired by a Gong object from Tibet. In this series, Mac Peake cast the gong out of objects that bring the memory of loved ones. In *Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror* (2007), the gong was cast to reproduce an abstract shape of the artist's head and shoulder using bronze material. To fully engage with the artworks, the viewer is required to see a distorted reflection of themselves on the mirror-like surface of the object. Once it struck, the gong will emit a prolonged note which oscillates slightly as the piece swings in the air [3].

### **4. Discussion**

#### *4.1 Tactile Dialogues (2006)*

The idea of casting traces of hand gesture and surfaces to the wax and bronze material In *Tactile Dialogues* (d'Evie and Takach, 2017) is similar to the haptic element shows in the material of celluloid film strips such as demagnetized and scratches as it reflected more meaning gain from the audiences among which it circulates [7]. In stop-motion animation, traces of the animator such as fingerprints or inconsistency of furry surfaces also often appear on the screen. In the *Darkness, Light, Darkness* (1989), Švankmajer not only left his fingerprints but the process of constructing objects also can be felt by the viewer. This expressive materiality is also considered as the "presence of the artist". By leaving traces while manipulating objects, the animator imprinting his/her experiences of the world into the objects [9]. We can also find this kind of quality in notables blind painters artworks, such as the blurriness of objects outline in Degas's paintings, which is considered "layer of meaning" in the art [2]

#### 4.2 *Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror (2007)*

The handmade process of creating an abstract shape of head and shoulder using bronze material in *Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror* can be associated with the objects-making process in stop-motion animation such as puppets, sets, and lighting which mostly are handcrafted. This quality is believed as appealing to the sense of touch. In handmade processes of the puppets, set, or lighting, the artists employ their sensibility and experience of the world to the objects which are considered as a process of “giving life to the particular material being” [9].

In *Blind Narcissus Invent his Own Mirror*, Mac Peake is not only giving life by employing his experience through the handcrafted process. Displaying objects at the perfect level, which attract the viewer to engage closer to the works can also be considered as a “giving live” process. Without the viewer’s participation, this object is meaningless, unable to message through distorted reflection or share memories through elegiac sound.

In Stop-motion animation, the animating process becomes the essential process in giving life to objects. Purves indicates this process as the “tactile pleasure”, where animators engage with the handcrafted object [10]. Jaggedness caused by the low frame-per-second rate at the screening became a unique characteristic in stop-motion animation, allowing viewers to engage with the process between the frames. This essential process affirmed by Norman McLaren in his quotes: “What happens between each frame is more important than what happens in frame” [11].

Employing these processes, both mc Peake’s installation and stop-motion animation are evoking touch materiality through the surface or texture that invite the viewer to connect closer or to participate, as mentioned by Barker as “beg to be a touch” [5]. In the film, being touched by cinema means it comes close to the viewer, occupies viewer spheres, and share things with the viewer: “texture, spatial orientation, comportment, rhythm and Vitality” [5].

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussed artworks by the blind artist have employed touch as the main elements both in the making and viewing process to convey their emotion and experience. To experiencing these art pieces, to connect with the artist, the viewer needs to use their hand or haptic sense other than visual and audio senses. This touch element, which is also utilized in the stop-motion animation technique can be associated with how blind artists express their feelings and experiences through tactile artwork, such as giving life to objects, bringing objects closer to viewers, and imprint artist’s experiences to the objects. This touch quality in stop-motion animation might need to be explored further as an alternative to moving image practice which can convey visual disability issues.

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