***Marking Blind***

**Curated by Amanda Cachia**

There is a saying: “I have to see it to believe it.” We live with the illusion we know the world through our eyes. I think in a way we are all blind or blinding ourselves. Sight is a dominating sense and we don’t realize how much it conditions the systems, institutions and relations we implement. It keeps us in many ways from nourishing a broader more complex and diversified view of the world. I’m interested in looking at the backside of things, where we don’t usually look, and [so trying to] break the dominating perspective.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What new knowledges can be gained from working with and through blindness, where the other senses might offer an expanded perspective of the world? How is visual impairment marked by contemporary artists, both physically and conceptually? What can the markings created by blind and non-blind artists tell us about the way that the blind person experiences art, and in turn, how might these works mark the blind subject? This online exhibition showcases the work of four contemporary artists, Raphaëlle de Groot, Robert Morris, Carmen Papalia, and Alice Wingwall, who all have different relationships to blindness and visual impairment, and includes drawings, photography, video and mixed media. Each of the artists explores these questions, where they offer us an opportunity to consider art-making through this new lens. The project spans extant and newly commissioned multi-sensorial works that attempt to explore what the visual, tactile and aural qualities of blind-based art-making might look like, feel like, and sound like, received through the challenging filter of cyberspace as the primary mode of engagement.

In some instances, the work is based on the artist’s direct personal experience with blindness, while in other artworks, the artist purposefully blinds oneself in order to induce the state of not seeing as either a means of achieving new experimental conceptual and physical outcomes for and in their work, or to enlist heightened awareness of other bodily schema. This project necessarily touches on how certain portrayals and representations of blindness mark the blind subject in both invigorating and more complex ways. Thus there is an also attempt to re-imagine and re-invigorate the perceptions and assumptions of work conceived by and about blind subjects.

In an attempt to step outside the ocularcentric nature of curatorial and artistic work at large, the work in this exhibition grapples with the possibilities of empirical knowledge, and what the tactile and aural realms might offer this discussion. This will be especially challenging in light of how the internet is a platform that primarily demands the bias of vision, where the receiver of the work relies on sight more than any other sense. How can we experience sound, and much more obscurely, touch, through the vortex of technology like cyberspace? It is a rather well-known and obvious solution to consider blindness through alternative sensorial realms that are regularly “overlooked” in visual culture, (indeed, many organizations and scholars have dedicated their careers to such logic) but how can we push beyond the assumptions that the blind person can experience art more effectively and satisfactorily through simply their supposed “enhanced” hearing and touching capacities? The work in this exhibition attempts to venture into unknown territories that demand alternative articulations of language, the senses, perception, phenomenology, ability, and affect, in order to arrive at powerful, even transformational constellations of marking blindness with renewed agency.

This online exhibition also aims to employ a methodology of creative access, where access will be simultaneously considered as both a practical and conceptual tool for the enjoyment of a full spectrum of users, including and especially those who are blind or visually impaired. Each artwork is accompanied by standard audio description produced by Arts & Disability Ireland, but several of the works – particularly those that are the newly commissioned pieces by Raphaëlle de Groot and Carmen Papalia – also explore access from their own idiosyncractic perspectives.

For instance, in de Groot’s work, which evolves from heterogeneous contextual research, situations of encounter, and responses to experience, the artist has created a video study. It was shot in the backyard of a house in a small fisherman’s village in Florianopolis, Brazil, where over a period of six to eight weeks, the artist collected miscellaneous detritus and rubbish found on the streets and on the beach during her daily walks. She also collected the paper bags that came from the grocery store with the bread and pastries she bought. The video is a study of these collected materials but also, through these materials, the video ultimately becomes a documentation of the place and the life that she discovered while she was temporarily living in Brazil. De Groot engages in a performative action conglomerating these materials on her head. They gradually obstruct completely her sight as she creates a blind mask over her head. The artist says, “I can’t see through the mask and the mask is made without me seeing what it looks like.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This action is a recurring gesture in de Groot’s public performances. She calls it an exercise that she repeats with variations and different degrees of complexity. In this particular study executed especially for *Marking Blind*, it is the first time that the artist explores unmaking the head or mask as much as making it.

Other important aspects of this work are the video and sound capture, and the editing of the final piece. The action is recorded from three view points: one is a capture from the artist’s forehead, another is from her hand ,and the last one is from a cameraman. The two first are blind view points. There is no eye behind the camera framing the action, as the devices, which also record audio, are strapped directly onto de Groot’s body. The study then also becomes one of the beautiful sensorial experience of the actions she is performing on herself - the image and sound recording devices probe this experience up close, almost from within, as if they were parts or extensions of her skin, hands, ears and eyes. Once recorded, this type of “internal” viewpoint allows the artist to see the experience, to look at it as material form. The record can never substitute the lived experience, but in this case it simulates it. From a subjective perspective the study is also an attempt to measure and qualify (characterize, describe) the difference between the recorded images and sounds from within to the artist’s own physical and sensorial memory of the experience itself.

Finally, de Groot describes the editing of the piece as like a study within the study, or a study of the study. She says, “I wanted the viewer to gradually travel between the various view points, be in the eyes that are not seeing but yet visualizing, be in the skin that is sensing and feeling, be in the ears. I also edited it from my own blinded perspective, wanting the viewer to experience blindness through sight.”[[3]](#footnote-3) De Groot was able to get a sense of how to structure or frame such an exploration through the helpful exchanges she had many years ago with visually impaired and blind people for a project called *Blind Man’s Bluff (Colin-Maillard)* (1991-2001). For that project, de Groot had collected many descriptions and accounts from visually impaired people about their way of seeing and constructing a mental image or map of what is around them. She says,

One thing that struck me comparing their mode of perception to mine is how we seemed to function in reversed ways. They added up many fragments of information to then construct a general outward picture, whereas I seemed to simply see a general outward picture. To note details, and get more out of that picture, I would need to work my way in. I felt in the end they always saw more, and that my sight was lazy. All the choices I made to edit the piece were about trying to reverse the perspective and bring the viewer in a different mode of perception, one that might be closer to the blind. At the same time I was thinking of the viewing experience of a blind person. This is why I included black or non visual moments in the timeline and gave great attention to the audio components. You will note that if you watch the video with headphones.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The work by Robert Morris in this exhibition might be considered as a precursor of some sorts to what de Groot is also exploring. Morris began work on the first group of *Blind Time Drawings* in 1973, which comprised ninety-eight sheets. The subsequent groups, up to the latest series, are less comprehensive, but the ensemble constitutes one of the largest bodies of works created by an artist blindfolded. In the first instance the titles describe the way in which the drawings were made: with closed eyes. Through the use of a mixture of graphite or powdered pigments and oil, Morris left traces of his fingers and hands on the paper. Bringing these works close to the genre of the “task performance,” each drawing was based on an assignment of tasks which were previously defined and written out at the bottom of the sheet afterwards. Dating from 1976, the *Blind Time II* series diverged markedly from all the others. For this sub-ensemble, Morris recruited a woman who had been blind from birth, she made the drawings under his direction. The following series *Blind Time III* (1985) –*Blind Time VI* (2000) then evinced different traces of orientation by keeping the overall same operational procedure of the first body of work. While the works of the last series, *Blind Time V* (1999) and *Blind Time VI* (2000), relate to the artist’s past and to events in his personal life, the drawings of *Blind Time (Grief)* (2009) articulate the artist’s anger and frustration with the political establishment and the post 9/11 crusades lead by the US which represent a collective disillusioned state of mind and a sense of war weariness.[[5]](#footnote-5) For *Marking Blind*, five drawings are included from Morris’ *Blind Time (Grief)* series.

Similar to de Groot, Morris has been interested in the conceptual and physical outcomes to be gained from a temporarily blind state. He too believes that the West is obsessed with the idea that to know reality through space, place and objects must be analogous to visual perception. Morris started making his *Blind Time* drawings in the wake of Marcel Duchamp’s trajectory, where he famously devalued and thus stigmatized what he called “retinal” art, and traditional painting was abandoned.[[6]](#footnote-6) Both de Groot and Morris had, and continue to have, a long-standing relationship to blinding, and while neither of them identify as blind, they have both worked intimately with individuals or groups who are blind or visually impaired. In his writing on Morris’s work, Donald Davidson has suggested that the reason for Morris’ long-term interest in the blinding process was his “ambition for, and search to find, a basis for drawing other than straightforward representation on the one hand and the nonrepresentational on the other.”[[7]](#footnote-7) What can be seen with closed eyes? Can what we see through closed eyes be different to what the blind person sees? Kenneth Surin talks of how Morris’s vision becomes substituted for tactility, haptic and proprioceptive awareness, which is what he now has left at his disposal, and that Morris was curious to learn what happens to vision itself when this substitution takes place.[[8]](#footnote-8) Further, Morris was also curious to learn what happens to the very nature of painting, which typically relies on vision for its ostensible successful execution. Surin says that a process of denaturalization occurs between depiction and that which is depicted, given this sequence is ruptured by the blind state. Surin goes into a detailed discussion on how the foundation of modernism itself might be reconsidered through Morris’s work. He says that blind painting “destroys the very possibility of … unity and immediacy that are the hallmarks of modernism,” and that we must consider instead what lies beyond modernism.[[9]](#footnote-9) Surin’s words suggest that the act of art-making in and through blindness offers both a destabilization of painting, modernism and art history itself, which has much potential for transforming the typically reductive position of the blind subject.

However, it strikes me as interesting that Surin also assumes that within a state of blind art-making, one cannot be equally “unified” or “immediate.” This might only be applicable to those persons/artists who can see, and once sight is temporarily removed from them, they lose this ability to be “unified” and “immediate.” Certainly, from one who is congenitally born or acquires permanent blindness later in life, language like this may not only be inapplicable, but it can also be untrue. This points to not only how there has been little scholarly attention to the creative marks made by someone who is born from birth within art historical discourse (even though I understand Morris did work with someone who was blind during one of his *Blind Time* series), but it also points to how our discourses might need to be completely reoriented towards a new ontological framework. Indeed, I have rarely encountered exhibitions that juxtapose work by blind and non-blind artists side by side, as though it was somehow taboo to mix these two worlds. Further, the language that is used in some descriptions around Morris’ process references notions of “constraint” and how the blinding process somehow carries with it certain degrees of “pathos.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This is the ongoing popular mainstream perceptions of blindness, where it still carries a certain degree of stigma stemming from a fear of the other, or a fear of what would happen and what is “lost” if blindness occurs. But how does this language sit with work by artists who identify as blind, and who thus live in a permanent state of blindness or visual impairment? I believe that artists like Carmen Papalia and Alice Wingwall challenge these associations, where they suggest that instead of thinking of blindness as “disabling,” it might actually enable, and open a window for new epistemologies of knowing the world. Unlike de Groot and Morris, these two artists in the exhibition both identify as blind and/or visually impaired.

Carmen Papalia's complex work, which takes the form of participatory public projects, explores the topic of access as it relates to public space, the Art institution, and visual culture—as the artist's own access is defined by a visual impairment. Papalia invites the participant to explore the possibilities for learning and knowing that become available through the non-visual senses, and to trust in the revelatory practice that is non-visual interpretation. Through exercises in trust and blind orienteering, participants discover new geographic contours from which to develop a sense of place. They begin to consider looking as one of the many ways to engage with and interpret their surroundings. The artist says, “I design experiences that allow those involved to expand their perceptual mobility and claim access to public and institutional spaces. Often requiring trust and closeness, these engagements disorient the participant while introducing new modes of orientation that allow for perceptual and sensorial discovery. Each walking tour, workshop, collaborative performance, public intervention, museum project and art object that I produce is a temporary system of access—a gesture that contributes to a productive understanding of accessibility. As an open-sourcing of my own access, my work makes visible the opportunities for learning and knowing that become available through the non-visual senses. It is a chance to unlearn looking and to take ones first few steps into a non-visual world.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

For *Marking Blind*, Papalia has developed a new series entitled *See For Yourself* (2015). The project is based on the artist’ own personal experience of having his friends offer visual description in a gallery / museum setting, and the realization that Papalia enjoys visual description as a mode of interpretation when viewing artwork since it is an open model for access that plays out through a relational exchange between two people. Papalia says that this is a far more connected and embodied experience than the visual experience of art. It shows how a complex embodiment is a liberatory space from which a multitude of points of orientation may be realized. Thus, for in this project, the artist attempted to illustrate the creative process that is visual description in the museum. He commissioned seven participants to write visual descriptions of significant, art-historical, two-dimensional works. Following this, he then invited another seven participants to make two-dimensional visual translations based on those descriptions. Each artist that produced a visual translation was only given the written description to work from—the artist and title of the artwork from which it was derived was kept secret so as not to influence the artist’s approach. When displayed, the description serves as an alternate title for the artwork that it describes, and the visual translation stands alone as the piece itself. The fourteen participants that the artist chose to select include a complex network of support: they are, in essence, a diverse sample of Papalia’s close friends, mentors, family members, those that the artist himself has mentored, and those that the artist is in community with. The visual describers (those who contributed the text-based portions of the project) include Harrell Fletcher, John Muse, Taryn Goodwin, Janet Whyte, Vivian Lantz and Doris and Mario Papalia. The visual translators (those who contributed the image-based portions of the project) include Jason Sturgill, Rozzell Medina, aly d., Thor Polukoshko, Jordan Martinn, Bruce Ray and Heidi Nagtegaal.

Of the experience in developing this work, Papalia says that numerous visual and narrative styles have been captured in the series: “Of course, when you leave creative license in the hands of others you never know what you're going to get—but that reflects the process of visual description pretty well I think. Also, since each piece is a reflection of the aesthetic practice of the participant who made it, the subjectivity in visual description comes through too.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The irony that is attached to this project is that the visual translations of the visual descriptions are still rendered inaccessible to Papalia, as his only entry point into the works was by hearing visual descriptions of them by his partner, Kristin. Upon hearing Kristin’s descriptions, Papalia said he was surprised by the results of the images – some were predictable, he says, while others made him laugh. Despite Papalia’s decision to invite his family, friends and colleagues to create images that might not be readily available to him through vision, the artist describes the critical entrypoint into the work in this way:

…in some way, I know the work as an insider too—since I have personal relationships with everyone who translated and since I can recognize their personality in their process / approach. One description (of Van Gogh's *The Night Café*) was written collaboratively by my parents and it was translated into this

non-literal colorful marker line drawing by my radical educator / feminist artist friend…Heidi Nagtegaal. It's exactly what I thought she would make of it given her process & politics. Then, Kristin's 3 year old niece Vivian Lantz described *Woman Before a Mirror* by Picasso and my friend aly d. illustrated it quite literally in her kid drawing comic-book style. Then there are the artists who made their translations specifically for me (with inside jokes and all) and who made visual choices that would offer a particular experience to me as a viewer through visual description… like my good friend Rozzell Medina, who slipped a Canadian flag into his parody of *The Raft of the Medusa*! That piece is most certainly intended to get a response from me!! Rozzell’s translation helped me realize that there are a lot of relational dynamics playing out in this series. Its a big mess of trust, negotiation and disconnect but it all connects back to a single point—an experience of the original work itself.

The project becomes a very poetic sequence, through-line and/or layering of complex description after description. There is a type of meta-access at play, given that Papalia both begins and ends with visual description (first through text, then concluding with audio), and sandwiches an image in the middle. At some point, it becomes easy to get lost amidst all the various modalities of access – a confusing and yet energizing bundle of words and images, particularly given Papalia’s work is also accompanied by the standardized audio description of the images commissioned by Arts & Disability Ireland for this online exhibition. Either way, the visual image at the half-way point of the sequence becomes one prong in the layering that isn’t necessarily more important or more informative than the other components; rather it is one component of Papalia’s journey through images. Through *See For Yourself*, one comes to observe an experimental study of the relational exchange of access that is both requested, and consequently provided, through translation. This project might also lead us to understand the potential for unexpected and mutual connection through the very practice of access itself.

Alice Wingwall works with the juxtaposition of images. In her photographs, photomurals, site-specific installations and film, she brings together compositional elements, memories and associations. The spatial arrangements, evocative prints and words that she creates have a very distinctive presence. In Douglas McCulloh’s curatorial essay in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists*, Wingwall is quoted as saying, “For a blind person, making a photograph is a choice, a radical choice, a political move. I was tired of people saying to me, ‘How can you take a photograph when you can’t see anything’? And I think they weren’t asking me, they were telling me – ‘How can you do this? It’s unthinkable.” Well, I can do it. What I say to them is that the image starts in the brain.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Wingwall’s process of creating “marks” with her photographs might also be thought of as an internalized stain that stems from her brain, which is then projected out into the imagination of Wingwall’s camera lens. Wingwall must give some control over to the subjectivity and will of the camera itself, where the thrust of her hand movements grasping the camera will direct the focus point of the lens, and the timing of when the picture is snapped. Indeed, while a mark might be suggestive of spontaneity, for Wingwall, a mark is wrapped up in a complex relationship around cognitive, physical and sensorial exchanges which work together to produce her photographic oeuvre. The act of taking photographs becomes sensorial when Wingwall will feel the heat of the sun in order to get a sense of the strength and direction of the light source, and she may similarly sense the reflected light radiating from her subject.[[14]](#footnote-14) The photographer’s experience in the process of taking a photo is also similar to Papalia’s in terms of the act of viewing imagery as a type of collaborative exchange. She often relies on colleagues or her husbands to describe what they see through her camera lens as a type of visual description. In turn, Wingwall will share her “mind’s eye” image with the collaborator, finding ways for both the camera and her “mind images” to match up. Thus, Wingwall is interested in making compositions of not just what she says in front of her, but also eventually what she didn’t see in front of her. She chooses from big compositions that she imagines exists, which she then photographs.

Although a 50-millimeter lens renders an image close to what the human eye sees, Wingwall is fond of using wider lenses and panoramic cameras that warp the image and represent her newfound inner vision of the world. This camera has to move through space from left to right, and it takes six images and stitches them together. The outcome of Wingwall’s use of the panoramic camera is evident in her two photos, *Wingwall Marches On, Triumphantly,* (2010) and *Thumbs Up at the Grand Hotel (in Lund, Sweden),* n.d. In the first image, Wingwall’s moving body enters the left side of the image and moves across to the right side on a sandy beach backed by a clear blue sky. In the second image, we again observe Wingwall’s body at left, although it is now her arm and her hand that is moving and split up into six images, as though it were on slow-animation, giving a thumbs up towards a high-class hotel in Sweden.

In Wingwall’s third image, Untitled, n.d., we see Wingwall, although this time we see the top part of her head leaning down, gazing intently towards the white table top before her, her left hand perched over the edge, feeling around. It is as if Wingwall is searching for something, as she has an intense look of concentration on her face. Or perhaps she is simply enjoying the feel and the touch of the surface of the table. The image is mysterious and even strange, as it is hard to discern what is going on, and what Wingwall is actually doing. As already outlined, Wingwall’s sensations of touching and feeling become an important part of her experience of being-in-the-world. Many “visual” artists have sought to supplement or replace vision with experiences of touching, hearing and smelling in order to counter the ocularcentric nature of art history, and to provide the limits of knowledge through vision alone. Wingwall’s modalities for capturing images through cognition, memory and touch illustrate this trend, and seem somehow more compelling for the fact that Wingwall comes with a certain agency through her blindness. In other words, more than a visual artist, Wingwall can speak of the compelling new avenues of sensorial and especially tactile knowledge and how can this be powerfully applied to photography, from the embodied subjectivity of one who is blind, and from also one who has been blind for some time.

*Marking Blind* does not serve to debunk basic romantic and/or reductive myths and repeat scientific truths about the reality of blindness and how blindness and visual art can be conducive to one another. But this exhibition nevertheless aims to suggest that there are many more shades of grey in blindness and art than meets the eye. Ultimately, each experience of seeing, whether blind or not, is completely subjective and personal, offering us even more opportunities for a rich palette of knowing the world through the blind mark generated through diverse creative acts.

1. Amanda Cachia interview with Raphaëlle de Groot, February 16, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Morris, *Blind Time (Grief),* SPRÜTH MAGERS BERLIN, November 12, 2010 - January 08, 2011, press release, <http://www.spruethmagers.com/exhibitions/274@@press_en> Accessed August 15, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jean-Pierre Criqui, “Drawing from the Heart of Darkness: Robert Morris’s Blind Time” in *Robert Morris: Blind Time Drawings, 1973-2000,* ed. Jean-Pierre Criqui, Centro Per L’Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert Morris, “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts after Doing Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson,” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Summer, 1993), 619. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kenneth Surin, “Getting the Picture: Donald Davidson on Robert Morris’s Blind Time Drawings IV (Drawing with Davidson)” in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 101, Issue 1, Winter 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Carmen Papalia artist statement, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Email exchange between Amanda Cachia and Carmen Papalia, February 15, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Alice Wingall in Douglas McCulloh’s “Shooting Blind,” in *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists*, UCR/California Museum of Photography, University of California Riverside, 2009, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alice Wingwall on *KQED Public Media for Northern CA*, <http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=4133>, Accessed February 19, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)