



Towards a Multisensory Experience

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I am a visual artist and an art pedagogue. These two things still define my personality and my life, although I lost my vision over twenty years ago. I have a rare subtype of MS called NMO which has destroyed my optic nerves. My left eye is completely blind. With my right eye, I can distinguish light and darkness, as well as strong contrasts through a haze of grey fog. My world is one that is misty, out of focus, and tinted with grey. It is like watching the world around me through a frosted window. My world has no colours, but they remain vivid inside me. When I could still see, I graduated as a Master of Fine Arts and worked as a painter. This has provided me with the foundations for working as an artist and an art teacher today.

The Prison of the Visual

The world around us is a constantly changing visual kaleidoscope. It fills our minds and grabs our attention with a constant stream of new things, forever reforming itself. Our visual sense is very dominating, and our other senses tend to get overshadowed.

As I started to lose my vision, my other senses took on a larger role. Losing a sense is always a major crisis, and so it was for me. At first, I thought I could never paint again and could not work as an art teacher anymore. It felt utterly impossible. I am a very visual person. Much of my memory also depended on my sight. Suddenly I was in a situation where I could not enjoy all the beautiful things, not to mention being able to locate things easily and quickly with just a glance. I could not even enjoy food at first, since I could not see what it looked like. I realised how much even the sense of taste was connected to sight.

Tactile Brushes

One summer day at our summer cottage turned out to be a pivotal moment in my artistry. The elements of nature around me penetrated all my senses in such an overwhelming way that I had to start painting. I had tried painting a few times,

but that only made me depressed and frustrated. I could not even tell if there was paint on my brush unless I touched it. Despite this, I set up my painting kit and put the liquid-like gouaches in their jars with the help of my husband. As I was trying to grasp something I needed, I accidentally put my finger in a colour jar. This moment turned into an image lodged in my memory. I can still feel the sensations of the moment. With my finger in the cool paint, I suddenly realised I had my own tactile brushes, my fingers! It was as if a heavy cork had come off the top of my head as I realised this. I started to paint with my fingers, which I continue to do to this day. I had found a way to make painting accessible to me. I began my journey towards a multisensory experience, and that journey continues to this day. My fingers tell me the consistency, direction and emerging form of the colour, and the texture of the surface. Nowadays, I work mainly with acrylic paints, as they suit the way I paint. They dry fast and painting can be quite quick if I wish. Acrylic paints can be applied in thinner or thicker layers, they can be mixed with a non-slippery cover, and they are water-soluble. I use primary colours when painting. I mix the other shades myself. This way I get a feel for the shade I have mixed. In addition to primary colours my palette includes black and white, as well as silver and gold.

A Multisensory Colour Experience

When I had gotten back in touch with my own art, I also rediscovered the teacher in me. Of course, I was a different teacher from what I was when I still could see. I learned this in a concrete way during the first course I thought since I became blind. I taught a course on colours for visually impaired students, some of which had been blind from birth. I had to abandon all the helpful teaching materials that had been created previously. The contact with colours had to be established through other senses. No materials were available for this. I developed a colour wheel you could touch, where the primary and secondary colours felt different in their

temperature. There were, for example, cool satin fabrics, warm fleece fabrics and a more neutral cotton fabric.

On one course, we used to start the day always with a colour picnic. We sat in a circle on the floor, and there were different objects in the middle of the circle that set the tone for the sensory themes of the day. There were things to smell, to touch, and sometimes even to taste that referred to different colours, for example green herbs and red berries.

Sometimes I had picked music that could depict a certain colour and we moved to it. For orange and red, I brought Oriental music. Moving to it inspired movement that was swaying, twirling and flame-like. This in turn recalled the warmth of fire and its different shades of colour. At the same time, emotions and memories began to surface: Midsummer bonfires, roaring fireplaces, candles during Christmas time. In a moment, a bridge was formed across different senses, creating a connection with memories and emotions and forming a multisensory colour experience. One thing that was particularly memorable was when a student who was blind from birth shared their impression of the colour red. To them, it was the sticky sensation of strawberry ice cream melting in their hands.

From Impossible to Possible

When teaching now, I also need an assistant who can see. It has been important to me to have assistants who have a degree in fine arts, and with whom I can collaborate seamlessly. I have taught many kinds of art courses and workshops for all age groups, and for both people who can see and for participants with different sensory limitations. One of the most inspiring teaching and learning experiences was an art workshop I taught for participants who were both deaf and blind. One would imagine that this kind of course would be impossible due to the many limitations. I had my assistant who described to me all the visual things. Nearly every participant had their own interpreter who communicated with them in either sign language,

or tactile signing if they were completely blind. In this workshop, too, we approached colour in a multisensory way. Acrylic paints were distinguished by using fine sand as a non-slippery cover, and by adding drops of scented liquids to them. Drops of lemon juice for yellow, orange juice for orange, cool menthol for blue. When I went round guiding the participants, my assistant first had to describe to me what was going on in the painting. After this I gave instructions on, for example, how to mix a certain shade of colour or how to produce a certain brushstroke.

Mostly the instructions were tactile signed to the participant from hand to hand. My assistant also drew on my back to describe the paintings in progress. Drawing on the participants' backs was also used to describe the paintings. This workshop was a brilliant example on how the nearly impossible could be made possible and the end product was a marvellous colour adventure! For years, I taught a painting course where some participants were visually impaired, and some could see. The strength of the group was the interaction and sharing of experiences from diverse backgrounds. People who had been blind from birth shared their feelings and impressions raised by the painting process, while seeing participants described the paintings and thus added to the impression. In many of my courses, seeing participants were also able to try painting with their eyes blindfolded. The experience was often liberating and brought a new depth to their expression. I have also had art sessions with people with amnesia. A multisensory way of working, with an emphasis on memorable experiences, was an essential approach with them, too. Different scents, tactile sensations, or, for example, a familiar button, piece of wallpaper, or music could unlock their minds, releasing a torrent of memories.

From Description to Experience

Description has become an important part of the way I work. It enables one to enjoy art. When I paint, I constantly create the picture in my mind as well. During the process, an impres-



sion is formed of the piece. This impression is further enhanced by descriptions of it by people who can see. After going blind, my paintings have often incorporated poems that I have written. These poems help to explain the feelings and impressions I went through while painting. Words and pictures complement each other and help the viewer connect with the painting. In my own art exhibitions, I have used, in addition to verbal descriptions and poems, also music, sound design, movement, and dance to describe my pieces. All this has helped open the world of my paintings to both people with sensory limitations and ordinary exhibition visitors.

Guided tours to art museums with audio description are very important in making art accessible. Through description, the piece is born again in the mind of the visitor. The experience is always different, depending on who is describing the piece and on the visitor's mood.

The experience is different for all of us at various times. The most important thing is that art somehow touches the person experiencing it, brings up emotions, memories, and memorable sensory experiences.

Intuition Bridging Impressions

When sight is no longer available, a new kind of passage is opened to the inner world. I have noticed how the inner voice, intuition, has grown more significant. Sometimes I wonder if intuition is our sixth sense. Or is intuition a bridge connecting different sensory areas, enabling a multisensory experience? I have had several experiences of transferring knowledge without me being able to explain in any way how it happened. During one exhibition project, I collaborated with a musician. They played the kantele in my workspace as I was painting. We inspired each other in a dialogue of music and picture.

Many times, they were thinking of a certain shade of colour while improvising and let their playing channel that. After a while, when they came to look at my painting, that shade had appeared on the canvas. This was bewildering.

A very dear art project to me was 'Katseen takana' ('Behind the Eyes'), which was a collaboration with the photographer Leena Louhivaara. In this project, the experiences and interpretations of a certain place, by one who could see and one who had lost their vision, were brought together. One pair of pieces was born as Leena photographed me on the smooth cliffs of an archipelago. The cliffs were full of stripes that looked like liquid had been poured across them. My own sensory experiences of the place were transferred into my painting. We were surprised to find running colours reminiscent of the stripes on the cliffs in my quite large painting. As I was painting, it had always been very important to me to retain the running colours that filled the inter lower section of the painting. No one had described the cliffs to me on the photo shoot. I believe that we absorb so much more information of different kinds than we are aware of all the time.

On the Fountain of Creativity

In my own work, the process of painting itself is central. The feelings, memories, and sensory experiences that it brings up guide the way I work. The multisensory experience is always

different, and sometimes even a surprising adventure within the inner space. The inner space often feels like it is the core of life, which is only thinly covered by external things. In a multisensory creative process, we are constantly on the verge of something new and yet undiscovered. Something is being created in the inner space and it crystallises as a piece that exists outside us.

There is a legend about Sibelius that he often carried with him a small box filled with moss gathered from the woods near his dear home in Ainola. All he had to do was take a sniff of the moss, and the sensory experiences of his home woods came flooding wherever he was. He could hear the song of cranes and swans, feel the forest earth under his feet, and sense the energy of nature. The sensory experiences helped him tune his senses to the composing process.

I believe that the experience of a creative process is the same regardless of sensory limitations. The deaf Beethoven could hear the music in his mind, and a physically disabled person can create a dance choreography. The creative potential of humans is enormous and largely unstudied. The joy of realisation in a creative process as something new and unique is born is always a miraculous event. Something emerges from nothing, something novel and undiscovered. Somewhere in that space, a fountain of creativity is welling up. It grants us its renewing waters as we open our senses to it. ●

Exercises

Exercise 1

In their article, the writer who became blind describes how all the visual ways in which to experience art had to be replaced by methods that utilise other senses. These included the seeing assistant describing the pieces verbally or drawing them on their back. Describe a painting to someone by drawing it on their back. What is the composition like, what types of strokes and brushwork are used? Describe the intensity of the brushwork by varying your pressure on their back. You can also describe the elements of the painting by the direction of your strokes, and with different tapping or whisking motions, or with rhythm.

Exercise 2

Play Chinese Whispers in your group but with movement. One person starts a short sequence of movements which another person watches. The rest keep their eyes closed. The one who saw the movement repeats it to the next person. The sequence can also be described verbally in a whisper. Finally, you can watch or describe the original sequence together. Think about how it changed. Why did the message change, and at which points did it happen?

Exercise 3

Think about the sense of smell. Do you have any powerful sensory experiences related to smell? Share your memories related to smells. Could they be used as a basis for brainstorming a performance or a work of art?