

Touch Me by Stanley Kunitz Interpreted for Inclusion

by
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In my younger years I would test my dad's eyesight. I would grab a sharpie, sketch out the first word that came to mind, and hold up the lightly tinted loose-leaf paper. A pause would ensue, he would squint and then say the word aloud. As the years went by, the results changed. I would grab a sharpie, sketch out the first word that came to mind, and would have to bolden the lines of the text and increase the size. Even so, the words were illegible to him. I continued with this until all attempts failed and I ended the project. But in other ways unrecognizable to me, I continued. A couple of years later, I started art school and devoted ample amounts of time to design, drawing, and typography. During the summers and long weekends spent at home, I would run my concepts and ideas by my Dad who was always observant of the art world growing up. My adolescent design skills, at the time, were prone to subtle line marks, colors, and expressive typography, and these, along with sketches, could not be seen by him. I started viewing the art and design world through a filter, continuously realizing that the low contrast, subtle decisions I was making were intangible to my Dad. I began to wonder if the art and design world was inaccessible to people with visual impairments. If no one was going to make the effort to bring two worlds together, I would.

Before the summer of my sophomore year, the concepts I approached in my design never crossed with disability activism, most likely due to the sense of normality I had at home with a Dad who never achieved anything less than success. That summer I had the opportunity to become the Accessibility and Education Intern at the Cooper Hewitt Museum and became aware of disability culture and the lack of inclusion in our society. My internship at Cooper Hewitt lead to an internship at VISIONS Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, where I was able to obtain the position of Social Media Associate. It was there that I witnessed a stigma-free atmosphere; a senior center where laughter, community, storytelling, and friendship was the foundation; not disparity, nor disability, nor social class. As I was attending art school and working at VISIONS, it became obvious that there were many aspects that did not cross between the two worlds. The participants of VISIONS were not going to museums, galleries, or film screenings like I was. Is it because they had a visual impairment? Was there really no place for people with visual impairments in the art world? This was when I really started dreaming of a bridge and brainstorming ideas. The first step was to prove that visual art and design need not exclude people with visual impairments, so I searched for precedents that were inclusive.

When discussion about art for audiences who are visually impaired comes up, tactility and texture are the main elements usually discussed. Instructors for the blind make sure to emphasize the use of contrast with textures to ensure the user is experiencing different feelings as they move their hands across a work of art or design. I found that inclusive visual art classrooms distribute expanded material sets that include pipe cleaners, waxed yarn, glue guns, and paint for students who are visually impaired. There are also art pieces

that implement and utilize some of these materials. John Bramblitt's textured paintings overlay different textures in strategic places throughout a painting that arise from the seemingly uncontrolled process of layering paint. As someone who is conscious about the lack of tactility in art culture, Andrew Myers combines a multitude of elements including a marked use of depth and variety of materials. In the Cantor Fine Arts film, *Please Touch the*



Figure 1 Andrew Myers, *George Wurtzel*

Art, Myers discusses his tactile screw painting of George Wurtzel, a blind woodworker. In these pieces he secures screws, at different depths, in a piece of wood and then paints over them. By doing this, he allows users who are blind to touch his piece and feel Wurtzel's profile from the lower depths of the eye sockets, raised hair,

and varying depths for the wrinkles in his shirt. Simultaneously, Myers is appealing to audiences who are sighted by painting the screws that form an accurate portrait of Myers. Another artist, Chris Downey, uses architecture to promote inclusivity. Downey went blind decades after already succeeding in a career in architecture. As he describes in his TED Talk and other videos, Downey's blindness allowed him to see the world in a new way. He continues his work as an architect and uses his knowledge and skill to create spaces that are inclusive to people with visual impairments. This includes using elements like raised strips on the floor of large spaces to guide those with white canes, utilizing materials that create specific sounds when using a white cane, and much more. Carmen Papalia combines performance art and writing to criticize and question blindness, the white cane, and the art world. In *A New Model for Access In the Museum*, Papalia describes the experience of being on a museum guided tour filtered by his tour guide's own experiences, knowledge, and descriptions. He also questioned the sterile atmosphere museums uphold, which also makes them less accessible for people with disabilities; automatically excluding them from touch, games, and art as a means for a playful experience.

Within the graphic design world, the most evident tie to accessibility is 3D typography. As I was exposed to motion graphics and 3D software, I came across a surplus of three-dimensional (that is to say the illusion of 3D-) and thus hypothetically tactile typography used for bumpers, posters, signage, and more. As I was viewing these, I couldn't help but think that this is the type of work that should be 3D printed or constructed with metals and wood and created in a way that would be accessible to the visually impaired community.

Rather than fabricating 3D typography and making them accessible, most designers simply hint at/create the illusion of three-dimensional work in a two-dimensional space to further engage viewers. I was introduced to Kurt Schwitter's work, however, and he transforms spaces with typography, architecture, and sculptural elements. This was where my interests lied. With 3D type I can make words via typography available to people in the visually impaired community, both for aesthetic, tactile engagement, and informational purposes. Beyond the scope of my project, 3D typography could be a perfect means for a person who is visually impaired to access directions, event details, advertisements, literature, and poetry. This information usually comes on billboards, posters, flyers, and signs that are not visible to all audiences. The next question I would approach is how can type and information be gained through touch outside of braille? According to the National Public Radio, The National Federation for the Blind, "estimates that today only one in 10 blind people can read braille." For this reason, I decided to explore communicating beyond the use of braille.



Figure 2 Kurt Schwitter's, *The Hannover Merzbau*

With all these thoughts, observations, and findings swirling in my head, I decided I wanted to build an enjoyable, light, and engaging gallery space that was not only inclusive to people with visual impairments but also appealing to people who are sighted. To be as inclusive as possible, it would be great to try to communicate to both populations, who in this space could socially interact and allow for pre-ordained stigmas to dissipate. With this in mind, typography and sculptural elements became the main tools I would use to achieve this goal. I was creating works that are engaging, tactical, and expressive through touch, appealing to both sighted and visually impaired populations. I needed a concept for this gallery space, so I looked to literature and found a poem titled *Touch Me* by Stanley Kunitz. This poem expressed emotional highs and lows that I, and I'd think most human beings experience. I chose the excerpt, "Words plucked out of the air, under a gunmetal sky, and like a child, marveled to hear so clear. Remind me who I am." I used this text throughout three different gallery spaces and explored various ways typography, space, and text can be accessible to people with visual impairments.

I keep using the term “people with visual impairments.” Many people do not know what that means, so let me provide context for that terminology before getting back to my project. Visual impairment or blindness is a spectrum. The National Eye Institute contains many film simulations where one can see the difference between having glaucoma, which is described as tunnel vision, macular degeneration, where central vision is hindered, retinitis pigmentosa, where a genetic condition hinders peripheral or central vision, and many more conditions. Some conditions allow the person to see light, color, blurriness, or shapes, while some others are completely blind and see “nothingness,” as described by resource website, thoughtco. Recognizing that light, color, and high contrast is accessible to some people that are visually impaired, I decided to include those elements in my gallery space.

To fully describe the spaces I designed, I’ll divide the elements used into four categories.

1. Creating tactile metaphors



Figure 4 Gallery 1, "words plucked"

The first design decision I made in these gallery spaces was to use type in a metaphorical way in relation to the meaning and potential meanings of the poem and to go beyond my previous efforts with type as a metaphor by using the three-dimensional space to open up those metaphors even more. I used crucial words and phrases from the poem as the basis of “scenes” to create diverse atmospheric spaces. In my first interpretation of the poem, gallery space 1, I take the word plucked, extruded it in low relief, and rotate it so the descender of the p dips below the platform as the rest of the word tilts upwards as if it is being plucked off the platform. In the second interpretation, gallery space 2, instead of emphasizing, “plucked,” I emphasize, “in the air,” placing the phrase on platforms that are at an elevated, yet reachable height to appear as if the phrase is floating. The words also zig-

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Figure 3 Gallery 2, "plucked out of"

zag to ensure the viewer/reader can read the text with their hand(s) and experience it without blocking words and structures.

The next word in the poem is “under” and it completes the line, “gunmetal sky,” which conjures gloomy days, weather and emotion, and dreariness. Throughout all



Figure 6 Gallery 2, "under"

three spaces I played with the term “under” in ways that physicalize being underneath something, drowning, or being dragged down. In the second interpretation, I submerged the different letters of the word under different heights into a solid colored square to appear as if the word is

drowning/going underneath the structure. This can be seen and felt due to the extrusion of letters. The hand feels the text move downwards, and at an angle, only to discover a square structure instead of the rest of the letter. In the third interpretation, gallery space 3, the word under is turned upside-down as to allow the remainder of the sentence, “a gunmetal sky,” to sit on the bottom side of the text yet still be legible to the eye and to the hand that sees/reads.



Figure 5 Gallery 3, "under a gunmetal sky"

2. Joining Languages to Remove Barriers

The next aspect of this project was joining both braille and the English language. In the research phase of my project, I learned that braille is considered by some to be a “dying language.” A mere 10% of people with visual impairments use braille. So I decided early on that I was not going to use braille. Rather I would create typographic environments that used the English language, which of course uses an alphabet derived from Latin characters. While presenting my work in critiques and to various people, I received many questions about using braille. As I thought

further, I recalled the many seniors at VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired who used braille, students who were being taught it, all the train stations



Figure 7 Gallery 3, "under"

that had braille directions, elevators that used braille on the buttons, and the ongoing discussion within the community about braille-printed books and printers. Though my emphasis in this project employs English-based typography, I decided to find a way to also incorporate braille since one of my goals remain inclusion and accessibility. I recalled wall text that incorporated both the English language and braille during the Senses exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt Museum and wondered how I can further that approach by using more dimensionality. I recognized that there would be two modes of interpretation, the sighted user who would use their eyesight to gather information and the visually impaired user who would need touch to gather information, with a full range of impairments and sightedness and reading and writing system capabilities within those groups. When it came to designing in the braille language, I extracted color and increased the depth. When it came to designing in English, I used bold appealing colors and decreased the depth. The opposing features for each audience allowed these elements to be combined. This ensured that each user had easy access to the information required to experience and interpret the poems in the rooms within the exhibition.

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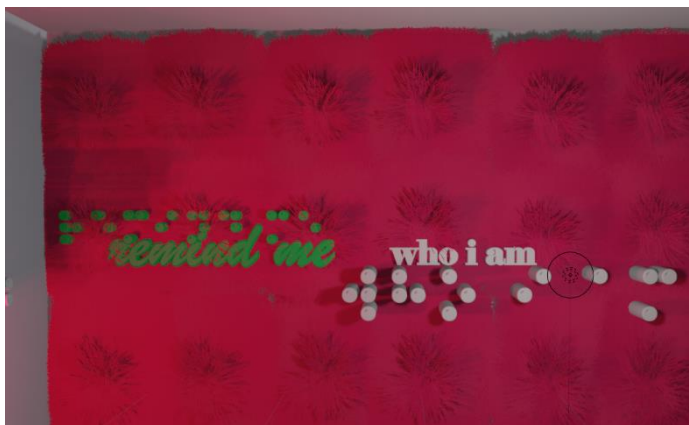


Figure 8 Gallery 3, "remind me, who i am"

My approach to designing braille sometimes involved metaphorical and expressive approaches. In this example, both the English and braille are submerged within a fluffy and pillowy material to evoke a search for clarity, whereas, "who I am" extends beyond the fluffy structure and its transparent color contrasts

with the fuchsia structure. In another instance, the braille and English texts “marveled” are surrounded by light to add a shimmering effect and fascinate the audience, due to it being the only place in that interpretation that had colorful lighting.

3. Implementation of Universal Design Principles

Another main element of these gallery spaces was abiding by universal design principles, initially created by Robert Lawrence Mace. The principles include, “equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, [and] size and space for



Figure 9 Gallery 1, displaying expansive space and floor guides

approach and use.” Abiding by these principles, is a way to try to include the overall disability community. All my interpretations contained doorways that were large and spaces that were expansive enough for people who use wheelchairs, creating, “space for approach and use.” Raised strips, as inspired by Chris Downey, were added to allow people with visual impairments who use a cane to navigate the space and follow the order of the poem without the need for a guide. If the user wants to engage with low physical effort they can. The dual learning systems allow audiences who contain physical and mental disabilities to use eyesight if they would like, which requires less movement. It is tactility, simple language, and playfulness that make it perceptible, yet simple and intuitive. By encouraging inclusion and the dismantling of stigmas in this space it also creates a place where error nor judgment can be suspended.

4. Shared Experiences

The most important element of these spaces, which summarize the entirety of this project, is creating shared experiences for people who are sighted and people who



Figure 10 Room 2, hurtful words displayed

are visually impaired. Administering this included using hierarchy as depth to allow readability for both viewers who are sighted and those who are visually impaired. There were instances where designing braille expressed the same metaphors as when designing with English and creating pieces that can be interpreted with sight and touch. All of these are successful in that they allow blindness to no longer be a determining factor in interpretation, but rather they ensure that the artistic experience a sighted viewer gathers at a gallery is similar, if not nearly the same to the one a viewer who is visually impaired gathers.

Throughout this paper I've discussed how we can include people with visual impairments in spaces that are generally created for sighted audiences, but in many ways I've also created works that introduce sighted audiences to what may be considered the visually impaired experience.

There are instances seen in all the interpretations where I knock down systems used for visual acuity. This includes light and color contrast. By removing these, the sighted user suddenly becomes temporarily visually impaired and is



Figure 11 Gallery 1, "marveled"

forced to get closer to the objects and rely on touch for interpretation. In gallery space 2, hurtful words were added to further envelope the audience in the emotional lows described by Stanley Kunitz. These are the same color as the

structure it is placed on, with low relief and lighting, making it hard to decipher with the naked eye. A sliver of readability is enacted only by virtue of the light source, creating a shadow. This shadow shows the importance of contrast to someone who is visually impaired. In a similar way in gallery space 1, the space transitions from one that is bold, bright, and full of color to one that has low contrast and little lighting. After the words, "like a child," the text becomes the same color as the structures they are placed on. To create a gradient in the phrase, "marveled to hear so clear," the words go slightly past the structure, as half of the x-height is off its base and contrasts with the floor and walls, while the other half leans on the structure of the same color, allowing for minimal readability. The ending lines of the



Figure 12 Gallery 1, "remind me who i am"

poem.

poem, "remind me, who I am," are the exact same color as the wall it is placed on and don't provide elements that are clearly visible, fully transitioning the audience to a place where they may have to squint their eyes, get close and touch the last lines of the

Due to the coronavirus outbreak and social distancing, fully realizing a project which aimed to bring 3D typography, design, and poetry to visually impaired audiences was not feasible, as I wasn't able to have access to 3D fabrication equipment and tools to actualize my designs in three-dimension. In lieu of that, for now, I have created an animation that walks through a virtual representation of the gallery spaces I described and the link is provided below. Being a visual medium, it is ironic and counterintuitive since this is not accessible to people with visual impairments. To immerse them in this digital space, I have added audio descriptions to the video with language that transports the reader/viewer and allows them to dream and imagine a world where everyone can fully experience art, design, and the visual representation of literature. We should not only imagine that world, but we should make efforts to create it. We need to question whether our actions and goals promote or obstruct inclusion. This includes you. We need sighted audiences, visually impaired audiences, children, museum curators, galleries, institutions, and more in this effort because dreaming can only last so long. I hope that this imaginary world that is slowly

manifesting becomes a full-blown reality where my dad and all others can truly feel included in world of art and design. Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/414174215>

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Youtube Film Simulations:

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0RknwWvSYU>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu5ToTfUOok>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGV3PD5sBgM>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWqrnsDtmpU>

Teaching Visually Impaired:

<https://www.teachingvisuallyimpaired.com/art.html>