

Some Thoughts on Touch Art

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Man has mainly used his vision to perceive, to communicate and to learn. Generally, people with eyesight are accustomed to receiving information by seeing and as a result they are more sensitive in connecting vision and thoughts. For example, when we see falling leaves, we associate them with the advent of autumn. Seeing red will lead to the association with Lunar New Year festivities or things Communist. Memories are also elicited easily through the sense of taste and smell. Some food or smell evokes childhood memories. Through hearing and listening, a song or a piece of music can bring strong memories and thoughts of the past. What about the sense of touch? It seems that touch triggers far less memories than by seeing something. Although we may miss the touch of the hands of our loving mothers or the bodies of our lovers, in general, touch does not always lead to special or profound feelings. Undeniably great works of art have mostly aimed at appealing to the eyes and/or the ears. In terms of visual art, there is a general rule most museums and galleries share: “do not touch the exhibits.” With music, theatre and dance, we just use our seeing and hearing faculties.

Painting, music, theatre and dance are all related to the human senses. There are many reasons why the artists create their artworks. It can be for communication, expression of their views, self-enjoyment or the pleasure/provocation of the audience. No matter what medium he/she uses, the artist utilizes his/her most heightened and developed sensitivity to create, and the audience appreciates with their senses. Regardless of the artists' difference in their capacity for tactile sensations of everyday life and objects around them (the wood sculptors and ceramicists probably have great sensitivities toward the materials they use in their artworks), they rarely think of

making touch art! Presumably this is a manifestation of an inertia that leads to an acceptance of visual dominance in the arts.

Starting from the “Third Hong Kong Touch Art Festival”

In 2015, the Centre for Community Cultural Development (CCCD) organized the “Third Hong Kong Touch Art Festival.” It was the largest touch art festival yet in Hong Kong. (The First and Second Festivals were held respectively in 2013 and 2014. A group of artists also organized an outstanding touch art exhibition at the Hong Kong Visual Art Centre in the last century.)

Why does CCCD organize touch art festivals? Touch art is often associated with the blind or visually-impaired. Touch art festival organizers will invite them to present their artworks and to visit the exhibition. Sometimes a number of workshops will be organized specifically for them, so that the blind or visually-impaired can participate in the creation of touch art works.

As early as in the 1970s, Hong Kong people had been paying more attention to the rights of people with disabilities. Harry Fang and Marion Fang from the rehabilitation sector, Oscar Ho from the visual arts community, Bernadette Tsui from the theatre community and others worked together to set up the “Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong.” Its mission is to promote the idea that “people with disabilities should have equal opportunity to have access to, participate in and enjoy the arts.”¹ The organization strove for fair opportunities for persons with disabilities to study and create art. On the other hand, it is also believed that people with disabilities should be given opportunities for individual professional development so that their artistic talents can move towards excellence.

Today, the participation of persons with disabilities in the arts has been well accepted by the rehabilitation sector. Almost all organizations providing services to the disabled incorporate arts activities in their service scope. Some agencies, such as the “Tung Wah Group of Hospitals,” “St. James’ Settlement” etc. also provide training in the arts. They even establish their art institutes. They have cultivated some excellent potters and weavers.

To create equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in the arts, “Art Accessibility” has been advocated. The United Nations’ *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* stipulates that all persons with disabilities are vested with full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and that their inherent dignities should be respected. Articles 9 on

1 http://www.adahk.org.hk/?a=group&id=about_adahk. Accessed on May 6, 2016.

“Accessibility” and Article 30 on “Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sports” purport that signatory member countries of the *Convention* should ensure persons with disabilities to enjoy access to cultural activities and cultural sites in accessible formats. The notion of “Art Accessibility” is to provide a platform to promote such equal rights. There are two aspects to “Art Accessibility”: facilities and services. Examples of barrier-free access facilities include ramps for wheelchairs and access to cultural sites for the mobility-impaired. Examples of services include provision of subtitles and sign language interpretation for the hearing-impaired, and provision of audio description and tactile representation of two-dimensional art works for the visually-impaired.

Music is the art form in which the blind or visually-impaired people are most frequently involved. Many of them like to sing or play musical instruments. Some have formed bands (such as “Happy Lutherans,” “Cheers” etc.), others Chinese orchestra troops. They get involved in the theatre, dance and even in performance art. As for touch art, it is not very common. There are some fans, such as Cheung Wan-ching who is a member of the “Lutheran Club for the Blind.” One agency that often organizes touch art activities is the Parent Resource Centre of the “Hong Kong Society for the Blind” (HKSB). From time to time the group invites glass artist Ko Bin-lin to facilitate touch art workshops for the blind/visually-impaired children and teenagers. The products of the workshops are displayed at the “Community Arts Resource Centre in Sham Shui Po” in the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, where visually-impaired youth works as docents. HKSB social workers and parents have recognized the making of touch artworks as a highly suitable activity for the blind/visually-impaired children and teenagers. At her workshops, Ko Bin-lin introduces different tactile materials and the participants welcome such knowledge. She also gives much thought to create her touch artworks for the Festival.

The meaning of continually organizing touch art activities include:

1. Blind persons lose their vision while their hearing becomes more sensitive. With such an advantage, given access to appropriate learning, training and encouragement, they could become excellent musicians. (Blind people becoming outstanding musicians in foreign countries include Jose Feliciano, Ray Charles etc. In Hong Kong, there are Leung Kau, Po Sun-ye, among others. There used to be two brilliant saxophonists in the “Happy Lutheran Band,” one having graduated from the Music Department of the University of Hong Kong and the other from overseas. It is in the air that the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts will be admitting the first blind student into the Music Department - let us wait and see! Last but not the least, the master *nam yum* singer Du Wun!) By the same token, the blind who has lost his vision develops a strong sensitivity in his sense of touch. We can therefore make some parallel assumptions: if they get the opportunity of accessible learning, training and encouragement, they would become excellent touch artists.

2. People with healthy visibility can involve in touch art also. The seeing artists or normal people can definitely create artworks to be appreciated by the sense of touch. Creating touch artworks will be a challenge for seeing artists or normal people. Nowadays, the five senses are stressed in theater and child education. While we continue to develop the visual arts, it is believed that there is the scope for touch art to be expanded. Other Asian cities have started running touch art galleries, such as “Gallery TOM” in Tokyo and “Rokko Yamanoue Museum” in Osaka, and "Another Way of Seeing" in Seoul.
3. Touch art is an inclusive art. In today’s world, one universal value is “embracing inclusion.” How is inclusion to be promoted? There are different ways. The artistic collaboration between persons with disabilities and the able-bodied is a way long tried-out. The collaboration between the deaf and the hearing has produced very fine theaters. Touch art is also one creative activity which can be undertaken collaboratively by the seeing and the blind/visually-impaired. The seeing artists can create touch artworks with different textures for the blind/visually-impaired to touch - to discover the theme of the artworks and the artistic search and aspiration of the artists. On the other hand, the touch artworks can be created by the blind/visually impaired who have fine sense of touch, to express their innermost feelings. Those touching the artworks can try to feel and understand the ideas that the creators want to communicate.

We encourage inclusion: this means that we would not define others by what they “cannot” but to appreciate what they “can.” Embracing this concept, the visually-impaired and the seeing can become partners in creating touch artworks. These artworks are not just for the visually-impaired to touch and appreciate. The seeing audiences should touch them with their hearts and to appreciate with empathetic eyes.

The collaborative creative journey of the visually-impaired and the seeing is one that explores the different conception and approach to touch. The very strong sense of touch experienced by the visually-impaired is drawn into the creative process. Collaboration in touch art creation is highly practical, as long as there is good communication, mutual encouragement and support. The power of touch art would be beyond the imagination of the seeing.

The “Third Hong Kong Touch Arts Festival” exhibition was held at L0 and L1 galleries of the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre. The two exhibition areas showed the works of some fifty artists and those from six associated workshops. The size of the artworks ranges from five centimeters to six meters. The exhibition invites the audiences to touch, to hear and smell, to handle the objects and to feel with their hearts. In an era where the visual dominates, the audience is encouraged to

explore with other innate senses. The exhibition is divided into several parts: “Touch Me” where a great variety of works could be touched and felt; “New Interpretation” where three-dimensional artworks are created as interpretations of two-dimensional works; “Cross Over” featuring collaborative works by the visually-impaired and professional artists; “Interaction” which calls for audience participation; “Touch arts workshop,” etc.

The essence of some of the artworks cannot be fully experienced by simply watching. For example, *Plot* by Yau Wai-man is a black acrylic board wrapped tightly with a piece of smooth shiny black cloth. Beneath the piece of cloth some cubes are vaguely revealed. By visual experience alone, one would not have attained the experience offered by touch and as a result one would not be able to grasp the meaning of the artwork. But when one touches the cubes, one discovers that beneath the piece of cloth are *mahjong* bricks. The audience is asked to feel the engraving on the *mahjong* bricks to make guesses of the “plot,” which cannot be made sense of simply by watching.

The taste of 2400 km by Chan Lai-heung focuses on the sense of smell. It is made up of seven pieces of globe-shaped object assembled with a dozen of gauze bags. Inside the bags is household spice powder. When the audience come close to the artwork or touch the bags, they pick up familiar smells which bring the artwork and the audience closer to each other. The smell stays on the fingers of the audience and will be carried elsewhere.

Ankie Fok’s work pays homage to Chinese painter Qi Baishi with sculpture. She turns a two-dimensional painting into a three-dimensional piece, using wood to give a new interpretation of the vitality and agility of the shrimps in Qi’s ink paintings. Ankie tries to resonate with Qi Baishi who declared that “the wonder lies in between likeness and unlikeness. Too much likeness is kitsch. No likeness is deceit.” The audience can touch the shrimp sculpture to feel the different segments of its sleek body and to feel the life of a living object.

Seeds of Life (Plate 1) is a collaboration of artist Chan Pak-kin and Mimi Yan (with visual impairment), although the artwork is constructed by the artist alone. The two spent a month to get to know each other. Mimi was asked to use a word to express her feeling of the day and she was also asked to teach Chan daily a word in Braille. The basic unit in the Braille system is a cell of six dots, raised or not. In the process, if there was a mistake in Chan’s Braille writing, six dots would be embossed to indicate the incorrect sign. *Seeds of Life* utilizes sheets of white paper as the medium of creation. It is made up of many small sheets of white paper put together. When the audience slowly touches the curved lines made up by the dots, he will discover that the curved lines are all made up by six raised dots, resembling the shape of a six-petal flower. The artists try to use the piece of work to communicate that “everyone is just like a germinating seed bursting out of the ground, growing up via every little mistake.”



Plate 1

Chan Pak-kin and
visual-impaired Mimi
Yan. *Seeds of Life*. Photo
courtesy of CCCD.



Plate 2

Mo Lai. *Put Colors on My
Body: Rainbow at Night*.
Photo courtesy of CCCD.

Pakistani Nadeem visited the Third Hong Kong Touch Arts Festival several times. He suffers from congenital Retinitis Pigmentosa which left him only with 10% vision. He likes most *Put Colors on My Body: Rainbow at Night* by Mo Lai (Plate 2). Nadeem has difficulties in distinguishing colors. So when he painted the artist with a certain color, who in turn described objects of and associations with the color, Nadeem felt like entering a world which has never been so colorful to him. He has not been informed of the details as he began touching the exhibits, so it became a process of exploration. Different materials brought him interesting sensations. There was once when he was touching a human sculpture. Through the process he came to the realization that the sculpture was that of a female body and Nadeem was lost in how he should react. He is in general afraid of physical contact because in his everyday life when he accidentally bumps into other pedestrians, he would always be seen as deliberately provoking. However as he took part in the “Touch • Dance” workshop, where the dance movements were mainly physical contacts, he found himself less intimidated by touching others. The workshop helped him develop a positive evaluation to the touch experience.

Some of the works at the Third Hong Kong Touch Art Festival are stationary. It takes audiences’ participation to bring out the true meaning of the works. In addition to touching with the hands, some artworks can be touched with different body parts. *Bells of the Zen Circle* by Hoi Chiu encourages the audience to participate and feel. The work occupies an area of five meters by five meters. Inside the space hang eleven brass tubes of varying length. When hit, the tubes yield different sound. There is a tactile path on the ground winding through the space. The artist prepared a “big-headed Buddha” mask for the audience to wear over his head. Protruded from both sides of the mask are two white plastic sticks. When the audience walks along the tactile path with the mask on, holding the two plastic sticks with his hands, he would hit the brass tube to trigger sounds in addition to what the plastic sticks create. He can even improvise a piece of music and dance along.

There was audio description for every exhibit at the Festival, to which the visually-impaired can listen while touching the works. Two visually-impaired persons have been invited to describe their touch experience of some of the exhibits. Their description was recorded and made available to the audience. (Plate 3) The background of the two describers is different: one’s blindness is acquired and the other was born with visual-impairment. Their description brought different perspectives to how the artworks could be appreciated.

The Festival ran workshops in Macau and Hong Kong before and during the exhibition. (Plate 4) One of the workshops, “Sensory Box,” started with sound: the participants listened repeatedly to a few segments of music, intended to bring about life-memories and inspire imagination. Then with the sensation of touching different materials, feeling the temperature and listening to the



Plate 3 (left)

Touch experience description by the visually-impaired. Photo courtesy of CCCD.

Plate 4 (right)

Pre-exhibition workshop of the “Third Hong Kong Touch Art Festival.” Photo courtesy of CCCD.

sound they make (for example the jittering sound generated by cellophane, the warmth of woolen strings or the lightness of feather), workshop participants move on to create touch artworks that expressed their minds. Touch art workshop methodologies can be truly diversified. The “Sensory Box” approach described above is one developed by Wong Wing-fung. Other artists like Yeung Sau-churk Ricky, Raggae Siu, Ko Bin-lin, Chng Seok Tin utilize different materials and methods to explore how touch art might be created. Their methods could become artistic directions for the development of touch art.

Touch art asks the audience to temporarily suspend the visual element in art. It creates space for the artists and audience to contemplate. Though living in a visually-dominated era, we can, through touch, attain more artistic imagination. At the same time this would promote and refine the sense of touch, one of the five senses. Touch art is not only meaningful for the blind/visually-impaired, it has great potential for development. The artists (whether blind or seeing) will be creating more touch art. So it is necessary and important to discuss the aesthetics of touch art. The following discussion aims to start a discourse on the subject.

The aesthetics of touch art

There are two different groups of people with visual-impairment: one group is those born blind and the other group acquiring blindness or visual-impairment over the course of life. They both live in a world of darkness.

Seventy-year-old Chng Seok Tin is a well-respected Singaporean artist. In 2005, she was awarded the highest honor of the cultural medallion.² Last December, she was the honored guest of the Third Hong Kong Touch Art Festival, speaking at a seminar and facilitating workshops. Seok Tin became almost completely blind as a result of an accident and her diversified and multi-dimensional artworks invite thoughts and perspectives on the aesthetics of touch art.

We use the phrase “touch art” to refer to the artworks which can be touched and are touched to appreciate. To touch is to stress the use of the hands, to feel the objects and the feeling so arisen. That is to say, what is felt is the shape and the texture of the artwork and not its color, lines, or its composition on the two-dimensional space. As such, the contents of touch artworks must be communicated by touch. A poster or a photograph will not fit into this category.

Plate 5

Chng Seok Tin,
Let It Go. Soft sculpture.
Photo courtesy of CCCD.



² See <http://www.nafa.edu.sg/showcase/awards/cultural-medallion/profile/chng-seok-tin>. Accessed on April 26, 2016.

The works of Chng Seok Tin displayed as touch art allow the audiences to touch with their hands and appreciate with their minds. They feel the different materials and shapes. They also can freely contemplate or imagine on the basis of the titles of the works. But basically many three-dimensional works of Seok Tin are for people to appreciate with sight because she was not born blind. She maintains the ability to consider the color and shape of her works. She can actually decide whether her works are to be viewed or touched. In late October last year, among the exhibits of the “Wuhan Chinese Inclusive Art Exhibition” were ten pieces of Seok Tin’s paper human sculpture. Those artworks were put into plastic boxes for the audience to view, whether from a distance or at close proximity. However when the same pieces of work were displayed in the Hong Kong Touch Art Festival, they were to be touched for appreciation. Seok Tin is almost like a seeing person – when creating three-dimensional works, she can take two different approaches: creating from the point of view of visual artworks or that of touch artworks.

Or alternatively we can posit: before Seok Tin lost her sight, she would have accumulated basic aesthetic experience of the arts and she would be using a set of visual language to appreciate artworks. So when Seok Tin turned blind, she could follow the same approach to “appreciate” art. She continued to be vested with the memories and the impressions she had before and she still possessed the idea of what constituted visual beauty. When she touched her works, she would recreate her visual experience of the past based on their textures and shapes. To Seok Tin and those who were not born blind, their touch experience could be construed as visual.

What then about the world of touch for those born blind? What is the world of darkness to them? They never saw colors but they could smell, hear and touch the textures and shapes of objects. Touch art then would be based on these three senses and one should not impose onto them the language of visual experience. Those born blind learn about the artworks with touch. Through the texture (coarse or smooth), the nature of the materials (hard or soft), the temperature (cold or warm), the shape, the smell and the sound (if there is), certain imagination will be conjured but the imagination will not be constructed in visual concepts. It would be solely “touch.” When these massive “elements of touch” are in the mind of the person born blind, he/she would utilize these elements to imagine a “picture,” a “situation,” a “space.” Those who are sighted will not be able to use any visual languages to describe the “scene” or “landscape” because it does not belong to the visual arena. Therefore this imagined space can only be experienced by those born blind. If they could command or are sensitive to the use of words, their writing of such experience would be poetry. Poetry is a space developed with the greatest imagination – there would not be physical realities; it is abstract; a fluid and changing world which is difficult to describe. The touch gives rise to certain ambiguously blurred imagination and this is the very special aspect of touch art. When the world of darkness is made up of temperature, texture, shapes and special qualities of the materials, odor and sound, any description that utilizes a language based on the world of visual

images must be polluted – because this would obstruct the free and unrestrained surfing of the blind persons in darkness. Therefore, we should let them start from touching the artworks. Their feelings of the touch will flow, unleashing an imaginative power surpassing those who are sighted and proceeding to construct a poetic world of their own by themselves.

We must seek to develop an alternative language to express the boundless imagination. This is exactly why the aesthetics of touch art is to be further explored.

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