

David Johnson

Beauty and the Blind: There's Far More to Seeing Than Enters the Eyeball

Part of the Making Space for Art series, organised by the Centre for Visual Cultures and Royal Holloway Picture Gallery.

Giuliana Pieri: Good evening, everybody. I'm really glad that there's so many of you, and I'm particularly so pleased as usual to see all the very dedicated volunteers. They work with Laura MacCulloch, our college curator. Laura can't be here tonight. I just wanted to give you a little bit of a background about this lecture series called *Making Space for Art*. It's been going on now for one-and-a-half years.

Laura MacCulloch, myself – Giuliana Pieri, head of the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures – and Professor Eric Robinson, who is one of my colleagues in the department, started the series a year ago with some funding from HARC, Humanities and Arts Research Centre. They liked us so much at HARC that they gave us some funds to continue the series. We're really delighted.

The series has been brilliant for us because it's allowed us to bring on campus lots of curators mainly. Today, it's a slight new departure for us because one of the things that we always wanted to do was to engage with the idea, the kind of physical but also kind of symbolical, a metaphorical idea of space and a space for art.

We've explored art in very different ways with a variety of people and people representing very, very different institutions as well. It's very good today that we've got the visual artist, David Johnson, who has already, as you will hear in a minute, collaborated with one of my colleagues from the school. We were very lucky also to have one of his works on campus. It'll be, I'm sure, an incredibly enriching and interesting talk. Again, I think, pushing the boundaries a bit more of what art means for us and what is the space for different interpretations of art and what is the interpretation of art in itself. I'm just going to introduce my colleague, Dr Hannah Thompson. She will be acting as respondent to David's talk. She will introduce David and also how she met David and what are the synergies between David's work and her own research.

Hannah Thompson: Thank you. Thanks, Giuliana. I'm really, really pleased that David's been able to join us today. In June 2015, I co-organised an International Conference and Micro Arts Festival on-campus called Blind Creations. As part of that event, we had six artists exhibiting their works on-campus in the management building. David brought along some of his small works. As part of the event, we also commissioned him to produce a large-scale art installation called *Too Big to Feel*, which you can see in the picture behind me.

It was originally installed just outside the Founders building for the duration of the conference. It then remained for the Magna Carta Celebrations. Now, the college has it on a permanent loan from David. It's moved because of the building work. Now it's behind Founders, on the slope below the hockey pitch. Today, David re-sprayed it. It's looking absolutely gorgeous because it was looking a bit weatherworn. Also, because the domes,

there are 18 giant concrete domes, they haven't been moved since September, so the grass has grown round them. They look a lot more like they're growing out of the ground than they did.

David presented his work at Blind Creations. As a result of that, he secured Arts Council funding to deliver, along with myself, a paper and a workshop at the Trans Cultural Exchanges Conference, which is happening in Boston in a couple of weeks, which is I think there are 600 artists attending. We're talking about ways of making art more accessible to disabled viewers or spectators, but also talking about ways of making disabled artists more--making their work more visible.

David, as part of that visit to Boston, the Arts Council is paying for him to go to Montreal to do a pop-up exhibition. He's also going to New York, where he's meeting with people from an organization called Art Beyond Sight. David and I ran a teleconference in October along with several other speakers from Blind Creations. It was a telephone conference, but with people calling in from the States. That was run with Art Beyond Sight. All of this activity is really ongoing and it started because of the college commissioning the piece for the conference.

Today, I'm going to basically hand over to David and he's going to talk you through what he's going to do this afternoon. Thank you for coming, David. Over to you.

David Johnson: Thank you Hannah and thank you everyone for coming along. I'm very pleased to be here to be able to talk about one of my favourite subjects, my art. And what I would like to commence with however is something slightly unexpected, I'd like everyone here to sort of be slightly involved with this event this evening. I would like you to participate, if you would, in a workshop that I'm going to run with you and I'd like you each to accept from me a lump of plasticine and every lump that I hand out is of the same size and what I want you to do, probably, while I talk throughout the next for 40-45 minutes, I wanted you to make, if you would figure a human figure, the only stipulation is that you should try and use all the plasticine that I give you. So nothing left over please. And it's, it should be humanoid, it doesn't matter about gender, shape, clothed or unclothed, I don't mind, just produce something that springs to mind as you work with the material. I don't know, but most of you have used plasticine at some time in the past, I quite like it as a medium. It's very pliable and you need to work it a little bit to warm it up, so you probably need to knead it for a bit to get it smooth.

It is an oil product. So, it does leave a little sort of smeary deposit on your hands, but it should wash off easily once we finished. Anyway, at the end of the talk, I'm going to gather all the figures together onto the double table over there, put them in the circle, all facing inwards and then you get to go up and say 'Ooh, isn't that lovely.' [laughter] The point, however, of the piece really – which is a lot of what my art is about – it's about collaboration. When I do my work, I always use helpers at various stages in the process of what I do.

So, what we're going to do this evening is sort of mirroring that we're all going to be

contributing in equal parts to the end results. So, in equal amounts: every figure is going to be the same size and they're all going to be pointing in the same direction.

I hope. So. When you make them, think about the direction that they will suggest by their pose or their position, it could be a nose, you know, a prominent nose that's pointing forward, it could be a hand pointing forward, or just a pose suggests forward looking. So, as I said, at the end of it, we're going to set them out in a circle and they will express that idea of all working in the same direction all working together and collaborating in equal parts to the overall effect.

So, without further ado, I'm going to hand out the lumps of plasticine; they are all wrapped in cling film; Would you mind handing them round? Sorry about the cling film, folks. You'll have to peel that off and get working away.
So thank you, Hannah.

Hannah Thompson: I forgot to say that as part of Blind Creations, David ran an art workshop with plenty of our blind and sighted delegates. It was clay rather than plasticine, wasn't it?

David Johnson: We used clay; I think plasticine was offered but most people went with clay.

Hannah Thompson: We did the workshop right at the beginning of the conference and then throughout the 3 days we displayed all the figures, all the shapes so that it became the seventh exhibit at the conference.

David Johnson: Yeah, some interesting experience. Yeah, So I'll carry on talking. So yeah. How many people have we got here now, 14? So that's great. We've got enough plasticine to go around. If anyone feels like doing another one, the second one, the more, the merrier, because it's a crowd. I want a crowd of figures at the end. It should look quite good. I think, you know, on the table. So the more the merrier. So anyway, I shall just carry on them. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to start off by talking a little bit about *Too Big to Feel*, the installation that's on the site here, and then I'm going to go on and talk about my other pieces and my art process and the thinking behind what I do and I'm going to try and illustrate what I talk about with pictures from my laptop here. Please excuse things if they go wrong on that front because me and technology have an interesting and sometimes difficult relationship but it should be okay.

So, to start with *Too Big to Feel*. Yes, this piece actually derived really from something I've been doing for a very long time, which is casting. I do quite a lot of casting often in plaster or concrete, I became interested in casting the inside of quite ordinary things: bags are something I used to cast a lot in fact, on the table to my right, where I've got some examples of my smaller pieces, one of them is two casts the inside of bags, polythene bags, a couple of pointy things somewhere, there we are, on that bit of Perspex. I think there are two; Yeah, I've called them citrus corners. They're black, largely black I think. And the points have been painted with quite luminescent colours, and they're set on a perspex square. And hopefully the reflections of the points are reflected in the Perspex.

So these casts are made by dropping plaster into a polythene bag, and then once it's set, turning the cast upside down. So the top of the cast becomes the bottom of the piece. Hence the points; the point is a corner of the bag. So I became rather obsessed actually with this idea of casting bags and things.

And I went big with the idea and I devised a sort of tabletop with a hole in it. And then I suspended polythene sheets from the edges of the hole and poured plaster and concrete into this hammock of polythene, and it produced a huge, well, a large dome shaped cast once you reversed the cast. So the top of the cast became the bottom, and when I produced the first one of these, I immediately thought about Braille and very large Braille. And that's where *Too Big to Feel* comes from. There are 18 enormous concrete casts that have been suspended the other way up in polythene hammocks in this sort of tabletop with holes cut in them.

And one of the interesting outcomes which was so unexpected was that the weight of the water and the concrete pulls down on the polythene; the polythene stretches and ripples and strains against the force of the concrete. So you get these sort of stretch marks around the edges, that quite vividly, I think, express the forces at work and the weight of the water and the concrete. So when you reverse the dome, it looks as if, I think, or at least that's the idea, it looks as if, the concrete has been pushed up from below. So part of the idea of *Too Big to Feel* is that when you look at it, it's supposed to look like these sort of strange fungal growths growing out of the ground.

I'm not sure it quite succeeds in that, but I think apparently the grass is growing around these domes now and it looks a little more like that. Not so much from the stretch marks but from the grass. So that that's how the piece developed, that's its history. But another big part of it of course, is that it is braille, it's very big Braille. I lost my sight completely in my early thirties. At that point, I decided I ought to try and learn braille, which I don't know, , I think Hannah is trying to learn Braille herself and it's a difficult thing to learn in middle life, like any skill it's harder to learn later on. Children that learn Braille seem to lap it up really quickly, but I did learn it and tried to get my braille speed reading up, which is still very slow and will probably always remain so.

So I became interested in Braille itself as a way of accessing literature again and books and reading and writing so it became a source of access for me. And it's really this idea of the accessing of meaning for people who are otherwise you know deprived or restricted access that lies behind *Too Big to Feel*: the Braille is too large for a blind person who reads Braille to understand, it's just too big to feel.

And of course Braille itself is a mystery to non-Braille readers, the meaning behind Braille remains obscure to people who can't read braille so on many levels it is a source of mystery an enigma. And *Too Big to Feel*, really expresses that mystery, that enigma I hope quite dramatically. So it's about layers, not of meaning but of mystery really. I suppose that's the sort of thinking behind it. I don't know whether you all know that the actual words that that are written in the Braille, in *Too Big to Feel*, here there are two words: 'seeing red' which is a bit of a sort of joke about expressing anger or frustration about lack of access or limited access to meaning.

So, whereas I don't lie awake at night with my frustration and anger, it's still a source of frustration to me. Things like the internet and books in general are still an area of limited access for blind people and myself. So, I think there is still a way to go on the, on the road to open access to many things for blind people.

Yeah, as Hannah said earlier, it seemed to fit in and resonate quite congenially with the themes of the conference. So collaboration, as I said earlier, is a key part of what I do and I my next picture shows my friend and I setting up the installation back in the summer.

I'll just try and find it. [noise from screen reader] Sorry that's rather loud, I'll try and turn it down. Okay? So can you see this? Yes, so that's James, my friend. We brought the domes down in the back of the van, just before the conference and spent a happy few hours setting it out in front of the Founders Building.

We had to set out a sort of framework in tent pegs and string and then set out the braille to the mystification of passers-by. And but you know, the point is I I couldn't have done that without James's help, I can't do a lot of what I do without assistance, which I found actually initially years ago when I started a source of frustration and at times of embarrassment.

But over the years, I came to terms with that. I actually quite enjoy that collaboration. I actually started to use other peoples' input in a positive way and so for instance, choosing colour. Because I once saw very clearly and in my childhood and teens I used to paint and draw avidly, I even went to art school for a year before my sight started to deteriorate too much and so I've got a very clear sense of colour and when I think of the pieces I want to create, I have a very clear sense of the colours that I want to produce as the end result, but of course I'll never know those colours in reality or in that level of reality but the colours that I see inwardly are very, very real and very, very vivid. And as life goes on, they become more and more vivid. I've found that, I go to a lot of audio description events in galleries, mainly in London but in other places as well. And the world of audio description in art, is a growing and wonderful world and I found that the more I went to these events and listened to people, often very articulate and eloquent people talking about art, the colours they were talking about, came to me, came back to me with tremendous strength and vividness. It is quite exhilarating to listen to people talking about paintings that I remembered from when I could see. And remember those colours and the colours are still fabulously real to me. So anyway, the point is when I'm thinking about colours, I talk to my assistant about the colour that I want, and then they help me choose colour. And what I find interesting is in fact, they choose the colour because I can't check it.

I can't check it against what is in my head; I have a very clear idea of what it is that they've chosen, whether it's right or not I'll never know. I find that really interesting. So, on the tips of those corners, the citrus corners, as I call them, I've got a very clear idea of what they might look like because I discussed at great length with my assistant what I wanted. So yeah. Collaboration is a big thing. So I think now I'll move on from *Too Big to Feel* to my other pieces that I produced, and my art practising in general.

So I'm going to change slides now with the help with this thing. [speaking from screenreader]

Citrus corners are up there on the screen. I hope, I think there should be quite a lot of the examples I've got on the table. I think there's a shot of 10 or so, on a huge black tile. Yeah. And I think this is a shot of the corners being exhibited at an exhibition in London that I was invited to show at. It was a show called *Sense and Sensibility* and it was commissioned by a perfumery, and they were promoting a new perfume, and they wanted blind artists, to come up with ideas sort of inspired by their perfumes. It was sort of, citrus – bergamot was the active ingredient in their perfume, so we all have to respond to that and citrus corners was my response.

So that's a shot of that. The next shot is the same idea but in a different context [noise from screenreader]. The voice of God is still with us. We'll just have to live with God [laughter from audience; screenreader]

White Corners. This is a shot of a load of these corners and they are all white, this is a loaded, so it is corners, no white. And they are laid out on a huge black background, and this was just one sort of manifestation of the idea of these inverted casts of the inside of bags.

And the thing that struck me when I did this was the fact that I think the corners look as though they are emerging from the ground, there's the tip of something bigger underneath. And again, this is a kind of a recurring theme in a lot of what I do: the idea that what you see – and this again is going to resonate with blindness or partial sight – you get very much a part of the whole. You only see a little bit. And as you lose your sight, you get less and less. But you know from memory what's missing but you're just seeing less and less. And it struck me that's really the case for everyone.

You know fully sighted people only ever get partial view of truth or the world. You know? we only, we have any ever, see the tip of an iceberg. So, these pieces I suppose reflect that idea and *Too Big to Feel* is about that, as well.

You're seeing the enormous lumps of matter emerging from the ground and they suggest something maybe rather malevolent or at least uncertain beneath the surface, which is rather unsettling. So these are, these are loans of white corners emerging from something. Lots of tips of lots of icebergs.

Lots of hints about something below the surface: we know not what.

[screenreader]

There should be here a shot of lots of pigs emerging again, from something and in this case I think it is a plaster base cast from a large lasagne dish, and I set, I'd like to say I cast the actual pigs but I'm afraid this is a collaboration with a toy shop, a toy animal supplier. I found this marvellous place near where I live that supplies, wholesale, plastic animals to toy shops. So I raided their warehouse once and bought a load of plastic pigs, and they were all the same.

They were sort of these plastic animals, hundreds of them, stamped out from some factory in China. So, I bought these pigs and they are all the same, because they are cast from out a mold, you know, and so I cast them, I set them in this plaster at different levels, emerging as it were from whatever you want to make it.

I playfully or worryingly maybe think of it as a kind of post-apocalyptic situation where the only thing left on the planet are these mutant pigs emerging from the mire, you know, other people have thought it looks like pigs coming out of a cloud. But anyway, however you interpret it, I find it a rather unsettling piece myself because the pigs are identical. And they've got that sort of automaton, dehumanised quality about them: I find them unstoppable and destructive and malevolent and horrible. And I really don't like it at all. But again it's the idea of things emerging but again was done in collaboration.

[screenreader]

This is called Golf Braille. Now any Braille readers here will know why. Are there any Braille readers here apart from Hannah? No? But it should say the word golf in braille in what we call grade one Braille.

This is because each symbol each Braille cell represents one letter; with grade two Braille, you can have one cell represent a syllable or a prefix or a suffix or part of a word, but this is one cell per letter. So the first letter is g and then o and l and f and the words are made with golf balls.

So the pieces speak of what they are and I've got a sort of second generation version of that piece on the table here which I've just finished, actually recently, and it's at the back of the little display at the front here. And it's, you'll see that there are three egg boxes cast out of plaster, and in the egg boxes I've actually got eggs, which I rather like, but they are concrete eggs.

So again that is Braille and it says 'eggs' would you believe. So it's simply a braille piece and a big part of Braille, of course, the whole point is that you touch it, it is a tactile language, So you are encouraged to touch my pieces, all my pieces, I encourage people to touch them. But particularly the Braille pieces, so *Too Big to Feel*, I think we are hoping that the sign with it says 'Please Do Touch'. There is so much art in galleries and museums, which is, you know, it's restricted to the curators, they are keen for people to avoid touching them. And there's a big campaign to get more art that can be touched in galleries, in museums, it's getting better.

I mean, when I first started going to the Royal Academy summer show, there were about three or four pieces you could touch. Now it's around 30 or 40 because if you if you ask most artists whether they mind people touching, they don't mind at all, in fact they often want people to touch their art.

It's the curators that are reticent about people touching, for curatorial reasons, you know, anyway, my eggs and golf pieces are designed to be touched.

And the next one is [screenreader]

This is another piece from the *Sense and Sensibility* exhibition I mentioned earlier, where the corners were shown. I think this should be a picture of an enormous stalactite with me standing next to it, and this this I made from expanded polystyrene, it's hung from the ceiling, I hope it shows the point of the spike just not touching the ground. Just a couple of centimetres off the ground and it points at half an orange. I don't know if you can see that detail from this shot. It's a half of a real orange with real juice oozing out onto an ordinary bathroom tile.

And the stalactite was cut, the shape of the stalactite was cut for me by a factory that makes expanded polystyrene and then we covered the spike with hessian and then covered that with paint and with gravel mixed into the paint, and so it's very tactile pieces and I don't know you can see from this photography but around the stalactite is a sort of vein of orange, bright orange running down it in a spiral, I think there's a double spiral, a double helix going on, and it's a very different texture to the surface, the general surface used, which is quite rough. So it's all about touch and strangely enough inaccessibility again: because it's so big and tall you can't, if you're blind, you can't actually feel beyond your height, your own reach which in my case is quite high, I can reach about 8 feet high but that that piece is three metres high. So once it was up on the ceiling, I couldn't touch, I couldn't feel beyond a certain height, so I just had to remember what was beyond what I could touch, you know.

So again, it's about what's beyond what you perceive? In my case touch and your cases, beyond what you can see. So again, it raises that question about evident truth, partial knowledge, which is kind of a recurring theme, but it was also in deference to the perfumers, it was about the distillation, the essence of something. I've called this *the essence of time*. Stalactites take, you know, millennia to form; they are a kind of time capsule, aren't they, they express thousands probably millions of years of development there in one object; they are like a time capsule hanging on the ceiling so that side of it was quite interesting to sort of think about as well.

So, hence the name, yes, time is the essence.

So yeah. So that's that. It is still somewhere in London.

[screenreader]

The next one is an interesting one. You might all run out screaming at this one. This is called 'Rosie One'. And this needs to be listened to; it is an audiovisual one.

I'm going to put it up on the screen in a minute, but I'm going to get my computer to describe it as well. And it's going to be very loud because we can't turn this damn thing down. So I won't play the whole thing because it is very long and you'll probably all go mad, so I'll just play a little bit of it.

I want you to just listen to it and look at the screen and you'll, hopefully get why I called it Rosie One. So, just have a listen.

So you see there that we've got a page full of zeros. I'm going to set my screen reader to read.

[screenreader]
[laughter]

Well. I won't put you through any more. Unless you want to. I actually find it quite hypnotic. Have you all heard why I called it 'Rosie One' or 'Rosie'?

[audience discusses]

The zeroes meld into each other. Yes, Well, that's right. That's right.

Zero. zero ze Roze, Rosie. Listen again. Don't take my word for it. I'll just do a little burst. Listen to it with new ears. So listen, rather than listen for zero, listen for Rosie, and it's using exactly the same phonetics. It's just, you're gonna click the brain into Rosie.

[screenreader]

So it's that thing of meaning embedded deep within this piece; it's actually only an A4 word document full of zeros, so there is a beginning and an end and about three-quarters of the way through, I put a one in, just to be different, you know. So if you did listen to most of it you'd hear a 'one' pop up. My assistant suggested putting halfway through, 'this is so fucking boring', but I didn't let her do that.

So this is about again perception, I suppose, in a way, isn't it? You can, with your brain, with your mind, you can realign, reconfigure is a buzzword, isn't it, you can reconfigure what is going on internally. You're not changing what's on the screen, but you are changing how you perceive it. By the way you're thinking about it and lots of thinkers have addressed this idea of different ways of construing the world. Wittgenstein did a lot of thinking about this. He called them 'construals', and lots of artists did this. And I've got an example here, this is a visual version of something exactly analogous to this.

It's a visual version of the audible, I'll just show you this. And you may have seen this before it's called the duck-rabbit. Yeah?

[screenreader]

So you can look at that either as a duck or a rabbit and you can flip between the two by – I can't remember how you do that visually – but by sort of shaking your head or something and looking at it again; it's kind of how you focus. So it's directly analogous to how you listen to zero. You can either listen to zero as Rosie or zero and I just find that interesting, you know, and you can do it with all sorts of things; the clicks of a metronome that are equally

accented, you can put your own accents on them with your mind. So it's the same sort of thing, you can impose a formality or a structure on something that has no structure.

So duck-rabbit, a construal.

How are the figures going, by the way? Are they happening?

[Comments from audience]

Standing is fun; sitting is good too. As long as there's a strong sense of direction.

[audience chatter]

We are drawing to a close here. There is just one final, fairly recent piece that I want to introduce to you, which is on the table in front here. And it's a series of casts in concrete of the inside of a very disposable coffee beakers or tea beakers, the sort of thing you buy for a gathering when you don't want to spend too much money so you buy these throwaway plastic beakers. So I cast the inside of them. I leaned a coffee / tea spoon in the mug, and I had a different level of concrete for each one as you can see where they descend, from, I thin, left to right and then they are placed on a square of black Perspex. So each one is kind of identical. It's supposed to be identical. Although Hannah, to my horror, as she was helping me set them out, told me that one of them is a very different colour to the others.

[audience chatter]

Anyway, they are supposed to be sort of identical in all respects other than the level of the coffee or whatever, you know, tea or coffee. . So I've called the piece 'Timelapse' because it's sort of like frames of a film of the same thing showing a slightly different time. So are they the same thing or are they nine individuals, or are they nine identical things? Those are the sort of questions I raise – I don't answer them so it's an exercise in a playing with that idea. And this one again, I like people to touch it but at the moment it's a bit delicate because they're not fixed to the base – that's something I've yet to do. So if you do want to touch them, could you do it with care?

So yeah, as the coffee diminished in quantity, the spoon is revealed in all its glory, in all its ordinariness. So the less coffee you have the more spoon you get. So I'm not sure what the progress is, whether it's from left to right or right to left, you know, you construe it as you wish.

So, I've not much to say in summary – just that that's my art. Thank you for letting me talk to you about it. I hope I've tried to explain the themes that I think are in there and the things that interest me and it only remains for me to say interesting remains for me to say, I can't wait to see the figures.

Has everyone finished? How are we doing for time, Hannah?

[discussion]

I thought the figures would be the last thing we do, so if you'd like to put them on the table in a circle, as best we can.

Hannah: I didn't know that you did art with your screenreader, and I think 'Rosie One' is my new favourite. It is a bit like *Too Big To Feel*; this technology is generally only used by people who need it and you have made it much more wide-spread.

[discussion]

David: Yeah, that just reminded me that there was a chap whose name escapes me. He's trying to market audio-described films to sighted people because he thinks by adding an audio description to a feature film's ordinary soundtrack, he thinks it provides an enhanced experience of the film if you have an audio described track as well as the soundtrack.

And certainly, when I've been in the company of sighted people listening to audio-described films some people have often found the audio description has helped. Others don't like it, but some people do.

[discussion]

[questions from audience]

Yeah. Yeah, if you are talking about colours in particular; my sense of colour of course is only about memory. I see nothing now. And yet I have a very strong sense of colour. And as I talk to other people about colour and also just think about it, you know, on my own, that sense of colour, that sensory experiential phenomenological aspect of colour is very much with me, you know, very strong even though it is gone in the physical sense.

So, talking to others about the way they are experiencing colour is a very important part of the way I experience colour now even though, I can't, as I say, check it out or provide any sort of third-party evaluation of what I'm seeing what I'm sensing. But my sense of green is a very strong green thing within me, but yeah, I think it must memory.

There is this thing called synaesthesia, isn't there, where one sense or all the sense just kind of sort of talk to each other and one sensory stimulation can suggest another sensory experience and, again, I mean I am susceptible to that experience in that way, so that's one route that people are sort of trying to go down and I've looked into that as well, myself, you know the idea, if you give someone for instance, I've seen this done in an art gallery. If you give someone a hot water bottle, a red hot water bottle with hot water in it, to a blind person, they'll get some kind of other sensory sense of the redness of the hot water bottle, because it's hot and some people think the colour red suggests heat. The sound of the trumpet is supposed to suggest red to some people. I think of it, if somebody said trumpets to me or I listened to a couple, I think of that sort of gloss, you know, the shiny glossy metal that they are made of; so that kind of synaesthetic response is one way, which I think varies a lot from person to persons as to how that sort of works.

But I think the other senses are... luckily, my other senses are intact so you know my sense of touch, hearing, smell and taste are reasonably okay so I use those a lot. I like using materials and to play and get a keen sense of the material itself; working with it; cutting, shaping, doing what I can. That is a big part of the experience of making things, just exploring the different qualities of different materials.

[questions]

I simply suppose... I think we were in an art shop looking at the different colours in the rack of paints. She was trying to describe as best she could the different properties of the colours that we were looking at and we agreed on one of them, just by comparing one with another; her description to one compared to another, and me saying, 'to me from what you're saying, the words, you've chosen to describe that orange or that yellow is what I want, that's fine. Whether it is or was, it doesn't matter does it? I suppose there's a there's a degree of trust maybe in her words that she's choosing, to get some way towards some kind of actual description of the colour. I don't know. It's very much a... it's very difficult; an inexact thing that I'm not sure I would want to spend too much time dissecting.

[question]

Yeah, well it's just a very exciting and growing part of my life and because there are the more progressive ones moving if forward, with bigger budgets as well more and more, developing, employing people to provide audio descriptions for their exhibitions and so I just go along to as many as I can.

I have favourite audio describers, yeah people that I like their style or and I also like using people who are not experts as it were Sometimes people's inarticulateness is revealing, sometimes what they don't say or try and express is just as interesting as someone who is very good with words, can always find the right word or you get people who are just use a different kind of language, you know? One chap I listen to quite a lot, his language is quite streety. He doesn't use long words or technical words, but immediate short words, he compares things very cleverly to ordinary things in life, you know. He'll say things like, you know, that yellow in this picture is a sort of Colman's mustard yellow. Immediately, because of my memory of Colman's mustard, because I remember that, I immediately know what he's talking about that.

Yeah, it's that particularly grey-yellow comes to mind. So sometimes and another very interesting thing about audio description is that it's a process that you go through when you're describing you're going through a process of selection as a describer; you are making decisions about what's important to, what we want to describe what we want to pick out in that painting, or picture or sculpture. We are not just talking about art, it could be a landscape, or a building, but you are making decisions of all the time about what's important, what you think is important to tell your listener. So again, are they right about what..... Those decisions are quite important ones, really and quite often in galleries, sighted people tag along, and listen into the groups of visually impaired people because they want to hear what the describer is selecting from the painting. Sighted people like their minds and their eyes are directed by other people even though they can see perfectly well.

Another fascinating thing about audio description is that very often audio describers say to me gosh, you know, I've been looking at this painting for decades, you know, some very famous and well-known painting but they'll say I have noticed something in it I've never seen before because I described it to you. And I say, wow, I'm – or blind people – are enabling sighted people to see better. And I find that really exciting, that you are helping people see.

[questions]

Yeah, yeah. Oh yeah. Yes, I think it is ambivalent. It's a good second best word. I mean I don't see but when I've you know I've hopefully had a chance to feel some of the figures, then I will kind of see them. I will go away with a very clear image of what you have produced.

And so I do kind of see them. And since I've gone blind, that has grown, that sense of inner vision I suppose. Wordsworth's famous inward eye.

[question]

1:01:50

It is great that you brought that up, that well-known idea of negative space that Rachel Whiteread has exploited so wonderfully, she's run with the idea and produced the most amazing things, hasn't she? And you're right. It is haunting, isn't it? And I think that blindness helps you get that. So many things are helped by a blind look at things, so to speak. There is that sense of the object and the space that it inhabits, I think that is enhanced when you can't see the object because – think about it – I can feel this table, but if I just step back from it by an inch, a centimetre, a millimetre it's kind of gone from my physical world but it remains very strongly as an idea. But the space that it's in is just as powerful an idea as the object itself. And I think when you can see, that distinction is less equal, I think the objects are far more important to the sighted person than the negative space that it inhabits, so I very much try and talk about the space as much as the object. Yeah, very much so. You can overdo the negative space thing. I did think a lot about it many years ago and the process of casting something is all about the negative and the positive, it talks a lot about that. As you are making a cast you are thinking about that all the time.

[question]

So... Yes, yeah, yeah, absolutely. I mean choice of material for me is often down to, well, sometimes it is as boring as what you can afford, or what you can fit in, what works in the context your life. But I prefer— clay I find a difficult medium, I like working with wet clay with my hands.

I don't like using some tools at all. I like to get directly hands on the clay. As soon as it dries, it loses a lot for me because it changes its shape. Hugely I think. Well it shrinks for a start, so you leave something you're happy with and the next day you come back to it and it has completely changed through the drying process.

And so I prefer. I mean, I actually really like plasticene because it doesn't change at all. What you leave is what you get the next day and the next day— So those sort of materials— every material has its own character. And I prefer materials that I don't have to use tools with. So I think it is a little more prosaic my choice because I'm not sure if philosophical" where I do get a bit philosophical is in the thoughts and ideas that I try to express rather than the materials, I know they are part of it but they are the means to an end for me.

Shall we gather the figures?

Once we've put them together and perhaps had a photo you are very welcome to take them away with you, so don't worry about the cling film.

So this is part of you, you become attached to them, or you can do, and that can work against collaboration.

When I make figures, I do get quite attached to them.

[discussion]

Okay. So should we assemble the crowd of figures? What I've really like is for them to be in a circle.

[general discussion / description of figures]