

## A SHIFTING OF THE SENSES

In 1749 Denis Diderot wrote in his now famous *Letter about the Blind*<sup>1</sup> (significantly subtitled *For the Use of the Sighted*), that a blind person is able to live in a world without imperfections. The problem of his blindness and the wish to heal it are, in the main, the problems of the sighted. Diderot, theoretician of a mimesis threatened by blindness, even knew how to compose a love letter while blindfolded. 'I write without seeing', he wrote in a letter to Sophie Volland in June 1759, 'I continue to talk to you without knowing whether I am forming the letters. Wherever there is a blank, read there that I love you.'

Naturally words themselves, as something spoken, are invisible. They exist as acoustic phenomena more strongly anchored in time than in space. They are born of not-being-able-to-see, a circumstance which these pictures for the blind and the sighted take into account in that their 'titles' are only readable as Braille symbols and are integrated into the picture themselves as touch-mediated messages. This conceptual gesture leads directly to the centre of the continually recurring and problematic difference between the sayable and the 'seeable', between the visible and the invisible, between experience and memory.

The materials with which Tim Sharp works tempt one to touch but only blind visitors to the exhibition are allowed to give way to this impulse. This unusual handling of the picture surface gives access to raw and smooth wooden plugs, cotton-covered buttons, dangling stones, pigment-filled glass vials, bent nails, glued on saw dust and over-painted sandpaper. The surface multiplicity can be experienced by some with the finger tips and by others through the eyes. The almost square pictures are positioned and dimensioned so as to be fully and easily ascertainable by the blind. In time the objects so 'read' will take on a patina commensurate with this tactile use of the art, simultaneously serving as an index for the for another, 'second' sight.

The idea behind the integration of this 'other' sight into painting has more to do with imagination than with perception. There are, without doubt, correspondences in literature. For example, in Hervé Guibert's novel *Les Aveugles* begins with an allegorical description of a carnival of the blind.

The guests at a masked ball wear rustling but colourless costumes and formless masks and capes which are not intended to represent people, but rather the forces of nature. In the

midst of this inconceivable ballroom there is a blackboard on which is written - 'Costume obligatory'. Guilbert's raises the question: who can read this message? And which of the guests can be visibly exposed as having no costume? The emphatic difference between the imagination of the reader and the sensual experience of the figures in the novel which is indicated here is also to be found as a basic premise in Sharp's abstracted painting. Materiality and surface take on a different value to where the picture is merely visually readable. The viewer is called upon to re-think the position from which his imagining and viewing takes place.

At the centre of series is the sense of touch, which, compared to the sense of sight, only correlates as a form of pictorial perception in a limited way and is an almost radical questioning what pictorial representation is. Today, more than ever, the tactile links areas of art, science and technology. In a wider sense it also concerns the relationship of body and picture which, in an accelerated form since the nineteenth century, determines our experience of all media - from railway and telegraph to cinema and digital image media. It is significant that the Braille characters present in the pictures—incidentally the invention of a cabinet-maker for his blind son—are based on a system of raised points which is related to binary-system punch cards. They are readable (in part and for the initiated) with the eyes. However, they are frequently transformed into a kind of secret code, a ciphering which is only to be differentiated through touch. Some of the pictures indicate more or less explicitly this connection in their titles or form. *Sinn / Sense, Unsinn / Nonsense, Botschaft / Message* are, for example, key terms in the principles of coding. The picture *Schneebblind* (*Snow-blind*), in shades of white and at first glance irregular, is more than a diagrammatic representation of a specific case of loss of sight. The apparently chaotic collection of buttons of different sizes and degrees of brightness can be associated with a word picture such as 'white noise', with a signal jamming as used by secret services, with re-coding binary oppositions. *Camouflage* and *Tarnung*, the titles of two further works are, in the end, the clearest indication of the ambivalent concepts of picture and writing which, meanwhile, have also been occupied by the modern technology of war.

Often the six point system of Braille is visually accentuated in pictures such as *Heavy Snow*, where weighty buttons press white-painted cotton and indicate a framework. The cotton surface functions here as a skin into which an object is pressed. Sometimes the writing is only revealed by touch. Here the visible form (for example, splashes of colour) and the sayable (from the touch perceivable) surface represent two clearly differentiated and independent systems of perception. The invisible at any rate, and this much is clear, is more

than just hidden from the eyes. To the logically irreconcilable layers of the *Invisible* Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup> counts the tactile or kinaesthetic along with the sayable and the currently-not-seen. That which the blind can sense and touch is something which escapes the sighted even if they are Braille literate. Pictures such as *Invisible Message* and *Unsichtbare Botschaft*, (shellac and pigment on cotton) take the eye captive due to their optical scattering and do not allow the Braille letters to be guessed at, even under closer scrutiny. These pictures reveal their 'invisible', though sayable message, only through a second, different form of 'viewing'. We can agree with Jacques Derrida (extending the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty) that in this context there is a trace of *absolute* invisibility. He says: 'In order to be the opposite of visible, the (invisibility) cannot take place somewhere else, neither can it constitute another form of the visible such as that which has not yet appeared or that which has already disappeared the spectacle of which would awaken monumental ruins of reconstruction, a collection of memories or recollections. This not-visible does not qualify a present, latent, imaginary, unconscious, hidden past phenomenon somewhere else whose non-appearance is of another order.'<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean, then, when someone sighted selects blindness as the subject of his art? Jacques Derrida takes the position in his treatise on Blind Memorabilia<sup>4</sup> that the blind can also - in the sense of foreseeing- see. One of his hypotheses on the subject of the blind rests on the transference of the viewpoint of the perception - 'The drawing *from* a blind person is a drawing *of* a blind person.'<sup>5</sup> Thus with the idea of the writing of the blind one could include blind writing that can become an unreadable cipher in the sense of Diderot's love letter.

While at first glance the paintings are works *for* the blind and the sighted, one can also find 'blind' traces from the artist himself indicative of the act of painting - randomly placed splashes of paint, (not unrelated to action painting) or imaginary calligraphy painted with skilled gestures, a kind of automatic writing with no meaning other than itself, a written picture of its author. How much the physical act of drawing or writing can be transformed by ignoring visual primacy can be shown by the story of Nietzsche when stricken with eye disease. Half blind, he found a way to use the newly invented typewriter<sup>6</sup> differently to his colleagues. He did not attempt to increase his speed of writing, but rather switched from philosophy to literature, from exegesis to the pure, intransitive act of writing.

In his choice of picture titles, Tim Sharp does not only content himself with associations, metaphors, idioms or visual word pictures (e.g. *tabula rasa*, *Schneebblind* (*Snow-blind*),

Pechschwarz (*Pitch Black*) or *Funkelnagelneu* (brand new) and *Heraus mit der Sprache!* (*Come on, out with it!*). He uses phonetically based language games. *I see sand* and *Ich See Sand* are the titles of two abstract works whose materials (corrugated cardboard, sandpaper) have a remarkable iconicity. Apart from this, the colours (beige or carmine red, white and marine blue) indicate sea and sand. One is tempted to continue the series of homophone pairs sea/ see or See/seh as well as to place the 'I' next to the identically sounding 'eye' - 'Eye for I', which leads then to a self-portrait that exists in these pictures.

The pictures are seldom representational but nevertheless use objects or their replicas as something which stands for itself, which underlines the concentration on linguistic games. *Hitting the Nail on the Head*, for example leads one from the normal back to the literal meaning. The picture is a collection of nails bent under heat jammed into red sandpaper and the wood which lies underneath it. Due to the coloured double framing, the structure of the picture reminds one of a circuit diagram. In the case of *Pillow Talk* as well, Sharp takes the title at its word in that blue, red, yellow and white painted, cotton-covered foam-rubber (which is fixed with upholstery nails) is simultaneously a object quotation ( a piece of furniture) and declared to be language (or rather its medium).

At first glance, *Space Exploration*, in common with *Pillow Talk*, does not appear to the viewer as a writing-picture. This, though, is due less to the nature of the material than because of a perspective created by shading, colour and form as well as the distinctly three-dimensional surface on which raised circles and craters (in some instances wave forms) stand out. The associative planetary landscape (for the sighted) apparently functions as a relief for the blind. The paper maché funnels, contrary to their appearance, are regularly spaced and are thus readable Braille letters which, as in a puzzle picture, cannot be made out as soon as the viewer concentrates on the spatial representation.

It is not unimportant to see and feel how the Braille letters in the pictures are formed. Sometimes the form of the individual 'points' exhibit characteristics which connect it with the title of the picture. *Versteinerte Flügel* and *Petrified Wings*, for example, show, in the relatively strict form appropriate to the words, colour-accentuated Braille characters. Here they are plaster impressions of wing nuts, and thus negative as in the case of natural petrification. These wing signs indicate in themselves something which was present, an object which is absent. Sharp shows with this 'double' sign that words are the code of not-seeing.

Memory, a key concept of the invisible, is, like perception, to a great extent determined by the functioning of the senses. Those who do not see memorise in a fundamentally different way to those who do. They process, for example, spatial distance as duration of movement. This transposition causes great problems in those who, after decades of blindness, (re)gain their sight. As Oliver Sacks<sup>7</sup> describes impressively in the case of Virgil who, as a newly sighted person could not differentiate between a dog and a cat. Virgil's 'vocabulary, his whole sensibility, his picture of the world were couched in tactile - or, at least, non-visual - terms'.<sup>8</sup> Soon Virgil, as disappointed sighted person, was in a similar state to Nietzsche who in *Ecce Homo* wrote that his ability to see waxed and waned along with his vital energy. This did not have simple neurological(9)<sup>9</sup> causes. The initial process of learning to see can be compare to learning to speak. Constituting the world anew causes, in particular, radical changes in mental functions and identity. Tim Sharp's pictures bring something of the fundamental difference between two forms of human existence into play. The jump from one world into the other is, from both sides thinkable, from the perspective of one who has newly gained sight. as the psychiatrist and writer Oliver Sacks described, or from the perspective of a person who has lost their sight, as described by Friedrich Nietzsche who died mentally deranged and who described himself as an expert on shadows, as a *doppelgänger*, a someone who with aptitude for the 'second' sight.

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Diderot: *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*, in: Oeuvres Philosophiques, Paris 1965

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l'invisible, suivi des notes de travail*, texte établi par Claude Lefort, Paris 1964, p311

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Mémoires d'aveugle. L'autoportrait et autres ruines*. (Catalogue). Paris: Louvre 1990, p56-57

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida curated an exhibition for the Louvre in 1991. It was titled 'Mémoires d'aveugle'. 'Mémoires' is polyvalent - it means, simultaneously, 'memories' and something that is 'memorable'.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, op.cit. p10 et.seq.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Friedrich Kittler

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Sachs: To See and Not See, in *An Anthropologist on Mars*, London, 1995

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. p132

<sup>9</sup> According to Sachs the 'reading finger' of the blind, for example is 'over - represented' in the tactile area of the cerebral cortex.