

Grasping the Pictures

Right at the beginning of the exhibition there is a sign, "Please Don't Touch the Pictures." It is a well-known admonishment but this time it's there for quite different motives because, as my sighted colleague told me, one has a strong desire to feel the materials. The notice does not, of course, apply to blind visitors. Here we are dealing with tactile pictures – and this is not a contradiction in terms.

We move closer to the first picture with a certain excitement and I ask my sighted colleague what it is. "Lots of nails twisted into spirals and hammered into a wooden panel." I want to feel them for myself and find that what she says is true but notice that there is order in the way the nails are placed. Not a pattern, but rather the typical structure of Braille with its six points, two horizontal by three vertical. Not all of the positions are "occupied." Now that I have recognized the system I don't find it all that difficult to decode the message. *Hitting the Nail of the Head*, I read, stuttering like some first year pupil deciphering their first words with difficulty. (...)

Deciphering is not easy, even for someone with practice but [...] the artist didn't only concern himself with the perceptual possibilities of the blind, but is also humorous in his pictures.

And so, one after another, the pictures reveal themselves to a group of people who normally have no access to pictures. And that the artist thought about the perceptual problems of blind people can also be seen from the guide system installed on the floor of the gallery [...]

One work, completely in blue is made of a kind of corrugated iron but in plastic. On the bottom edge there is a brush glued on. My colleague likes this work very much and, having found the writing, it turns out to be called *Permanent Wave*. [...]

And then suddenly another exhibition visitor joins us. He has found out that he doesn't understand the writing in the pictures and wants to go round with us "so that I don't miss anything," he says with an embarrassed laugh.[...]

I have been in a number of exhibitions and have often had friends describe pictures to me but with one exception – in the Florence where a professor described the pictures in detail with a great deal of knowledge – these descriptions were never able to replace looking at the pictures and they have never “spoken” to me. This was the first time I was included in the “viewing,” an incredible experience when one has not seen a picture for over 20 years. [...]

Eva Papst, Vienna, 1999