

Glimpsing Beyond Sight: The Vision of the Beyond Sight Foundation through the Lens of the Blind

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Abstract

The notion of conveying visual information through static images might initially appear paradoxical when considering individuals with visual impairments. However, it is indeed feasible. To challenge the prevailing dichotomous thinking patterns that tend to associate concepts primarily with visual representations, Partho Bhowmick, the founder of the Beyond Sight Foundation, has undertaken the remarkable endeavour of training a team of visually impaired individuals as proficient photographers. In 2004, Partho Bhowmick encountered a photography magazine from a vendor in Mumbai. Within its pages, he came across an article featuring Evgen Bavčar, an acclaimed blind photographer based in Paris, renowned for his exceptional work. Inspired by Bavčar's artistic accomplishments, Partho embarked on a mission to impart photography skills to visually impaired individuals across India. Following nearly two years of meticulous independent research on the intersection of art and blindness, Partho Bhowmick established "Blind With Camera" in February 2006, initially enrolling a single visually impaired student in Mumbai. Subsequently, this pioneering initiative

has cultivated and expanded, extending its reach to more than 1,500 visually impaired individuals both within India and abroad. A substantial number of these individuals have not only developed the capability to independently capture photographs but have also assumed roles as trainers, and a select few have even undertaken commissioned photography assignments. “Blind With Camera” stands as a groundbreaking initiative, marking its distinction as the first of its kind in India. It has extended its footprint globally, with branches established in the United Kingdom, Singapore, Malaysia, and Greece. Since 2009, it has functioned as an integral project under the aegis of the Beyond Sight Foundation. This article serves a dual purpose: it endeavours to chronicle the diverse range of successful projects undertaken by the organization and simultaneously challenges conventional notions concerning human capabilities. In doing so, it seeks to dismantle the barriers that often impede individuals in their pursuit of exploration.

Keywords: Photography, Blind, Beyond Sight Foundation, Discourse, Art.

Eyes are physically natural lenses, but culturally taught

(Oliveira 12)

The phenomenon encapsulated by Glauce Oliveira’s insightful statement, “The eyes are ‘physically natural lenses, but culturally taught’”, constitutes a fascinating intersection of biology and culture, inviting profound exploration. This research article delves into the intricate relationship between our biological visual apparatus and the cultural context in which it operates. While our eyes function as universal natural lenses, capturing and refracting light to form images, it is the cultural teachings and norms that act as potent filters, significantly influencing how we perceive and interpret visual

stimuli. This interplay between our physical eyes and cultural upbringing permeates various facets of human existence, including aesthetics, symbolism, spatial awareness, and artistic expression. By unpacking this phenomenon, we aim to shed light on the profound impact of culture on our visual experiences and deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics between biology and society in shaping human perception.

The intersection of blindness and visual art constitutes a captivating and multifaceted realm within the broader domain of artistic expression. This dynamic juxtaposition challenges conventional assumptions about the intrinsic connection between sight and visual creativity, offering a profound exploration of the human capacity to transcend physical limitations. Blindness, characterized by the absence or impairment of visual perception, invites a reevaluation of the fundamental relationship between the sensory, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of human experience. Visual art, traditionally considered a primarily sight-dependent medium, confronts its own boundaries as artists with visual impairments engage with materials, forms, and ideas to convey their unique perspectives on the world. This scholarly inquiry embarks on a comprehensive examination of the intricate interplay between blindness and visual art, encompassing historical and contemporary perspectives, the creative processes of blind artists, the sensory dimensions of their work, and the transformative potential of this intersection to expand the horizons of artistic expression and human understanding. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the profound capacity of art to transcend physical constraints and offer new avenues for perceiving, experiencing, and appreciating the world, while concurrently challenging normative paradigms of artistic production and reception. Blind visual artists like John Bramblitt, Esref Armagan, Sargy Mann, and Lisa Fittipaldi have left an indelible mark on the art world by subverting established norms and redefining the

boundaries of artistic expression. Through their exceptional creativity and resilience, they challenge the conventional belief that visual art relies solely on the sense of sight. John Bramblitt's textured paintings, Esref Armagan's three-dimensional works, Sargy Mann's memory-driven art, and Lisa Fittipaldi's tactile compositions collectively underscore the profound potential of art to transcend physical limitations. They invite viewers to experience art on a multisensory level and encourage a reevaluation of the traditional paradigms of artistic production and appreciation, proving that creativity knows no bounds, even in the absence of sight.

Another stalwart in this domain of visual art is Evgen Bavčar, a Slovenian photographer and writer who is widely acclaimed for his remarkable work in the field of visual arts. What makes Bavčar's photography particularly exceptional is that he has been blind since birth. Born in 1946 in Slovenia, he lost his sight due to a medical accident shortly after his birth. Despite this profound visual impairment, Bavčar has not allowed his disability to hinder his artistic expression. Bavčar's work primarily revolves around black-and-white photography, and his images often convey a strong sense of tactile and sensory perception. He has an uncanny ability to capture the essence of his subjects through touch, sound, and memory, offering viewers a unique perspective on the world. His photographs explore themes of blindness, sensory experience, and the boundaries of human perception. Bavčar's work challenges conventional notions of photography as a purely visual medium and invites viewers to engage with images on a more profound and multisensory level. In addition to his photography, Bavčar is also an accomplished writer and philosopher, and his writings often delve into the philosophical and existential aspects of blindness and human existence. He has published several books, including *In Praise of the Blind* and *What Is a Blind Photographer?* Throughout his career, Evgen Bavčar has received numerous awards and accolades for his pioneering contributions to the

world of photography and art. His work continues to inspire and provoke contemplation on the complex relationship between perception, disability, and artistic expression. In an article penned by Douglas McCulloh titled *Shot in the Dark: Blindness and the Zero Point of Photography*, McCulloh recounts his encounters with Evgen Bavčar, highlighting Bavčar's minimalistic approach to photography. Bavčar, McCulloh notes, carried with him only three essentials: a flat rectangular package, a compact digital camera, and a vivid mental image stored within his private gallery of thoughts. For Bavčar, these were the sole requisites, as he drew upon the emotions in his heart and the soundscapes in his mind to create art. Bavčar's approach to art, he asserted, was more deeply rooted in conceptualization compared to many other artists.



Fig.1: Evgen Bavčar, the blind photographer



Fig.2: Image captured by Evgen Bavčar

Evgen Bavčar has been a source of immense inspiration for many people, Partho Bhowmick, is one such person, whose encounter with the former in Mumbai, led to the establishment of Beyond Sight Foundation, the pioneer of blind photography in India.

Beyond Sight Foundation: Genesis and Evolution

In the early months of 2006, Partho Bhowmick initiated the Blind With Camera project in Mumbai, inspired by his encounter with the accomplished blind photographer Evgen Bavcar, who resided in Paris. This endeavor followed years of dedicated research into the intersection of blindness and visual art. Through the photographic workshops organized by the Blind With Camera project, individuals with visual impairments were empowered to harness their non-visual senses for capturing images. The fundamental goal of this initiative was to demonstrate that the creation of photographs transcends the realm of visual perception and can be as successfully crafted within the mind as through the eyes. Over the course of time, the efforts of the Blind With Camera project coalesced into the Beyond Sight exhibition, which embarked on a journey across India and various international destinations. The Beyond Sight exhibition embodies the essence of inclusivity, offering a diverse array of features designed to facilitate access and enjoyment for visitors with visual impairments. It encompasses tactile images for touch, Braille footnotes, large-format prints, visual aids, and guided descriptive tours, collectively enriching the experience and enabling visually impaired individuals to engage meaningfully with the exhibited photographs.



Fig. 3: The Logo of Beyond Sight Foundation

The works stemming from this project have found a platform in esteemed venues such as NCPA Mumbai, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath Bangalore, India Habitat Centre New Delhi, Academy of Fine Arts Kolkata, Kala Ghoda Art Festival Mumbai, and Kala Academy Panjim Goa. Additionally, the project's genesis and development have been presented and discussed at prestigious institutions like IIT Mumbai, IIM Ahmedabad, and the Azim Premji Foundation in Bangalore. Notably, in November 2010, the project's creations were exhibited at the DaDa International Disability Art Festival in Liverpool, the Nehru Center in London, and several other cities across the United Kingdom. The Blind With Camera project stands as a pioneering initiative in India, representing a trailblazing endeavor. In 2009, recognizing the project's transformative potential, the Beyond Sight Foundation came into existence. This foundation was established with the aim of extending and deepening the societal impact of art education, artistic practices, and ensuring equitable access to art for individuals with visual impairments.

Art created by individuals with visual impairments embarks on a transformative journey, unlocking their latent potential for creative expression, stimulating emotions and intellect, and nurturing the development of their personalities. This creative process, demanding acute focus of the mind, heightened senses, discernment, insightfulness, and intuitive prowess, also serves as a crucible for cultivating vital social and workplace skills. These encompass problem-solving acumen, unwavering perseverance, adaptability, collaborative aptitude, and adept time management, collectively rendering visually impaired individuals socially adept and more employable. Beyond these tangible benefits, engagement in the arts can yield financial gains and offer avenues for participation in community-based art activities. Moreover, the ripple effect extends to inspire peer groups to explore artistic pursuits. Increased access to art and culture enriches

the visually impaired community, with exhibitions, festivals, discussion forums, and sensitization workshops serving as conduits that bring sighted and visually impaired individuals onto an equitable platform, fostering direct dialogue. This exposure grants the general public new perspectives and insights, rectifying misconceptions about visual impairment and disability at large. Consequently, it bridges the divide between “us” and “them,” fostering increased tolerance and inclusivity within society.

The Exemplars:

Pranav Lal’s journey into the world of photography is a testament to his remarkable ingenuity and determination despite the challenges he faces. Born blind and with limited dexterity in his left hand, Pranav embarked on a unique photographic odyssey in 2010 when he participated in a pinhole camera workshop facilitated by Blind With Camera in Goa. During the workshop, Pranav harnessed the innovative “Seeing With Sound” technology, a transformative approach to visual perception. Equipped with goggles fitted with a camera or a mobile camera, he utilized specialized ‘Voice’ software. This technology worked by translating the visual information captured by the camera into auditory output, creating a distinctive, somewhat robotic sound. What sets Pranav apart is his exceptional ability to mentally decode this auditory output, transforming it into vivid mental images. In his mind’s eye, he crafts detailed visual interpretations of the objects and scenes before the camera. Remarkably, Pranav achieves an impressive accuracy rate of 60% in his visual interpretations, a testament to his honed sensory perception and cognitive abilities. This innovative approach to photography, guided by Pranav’s unique adaptations, underscores the profound potential of technology to transcend physical limitations. Through his work, Pranav not only challenges conventional notions of visual art but also demonstrates the remarkable power of human adaptability and creativity in the face of adversity. His journey serves as an inspirational testament

to the indomitable spirit of individuals with disabilities and their capacity to redefine what is possible in the realm of visual expression.

In 2019, Bhavesh Patel, who has been blind since birth and received photography training through the Blind With Camera program since 2010, was commissioned to capture images using an OPPO mobile phone. He embarked on this unique endeavor guided by audio cues, delving into the realm of photography to unveil truths that extend beyond the limitations of human vision. This marked his second significant milestone in his photographic journey, following his earlier achievement of photographing Katrina Kaif for the LUX Perfume Portrait campaign in 2015. It is noteworthy that Bhavesh received compensation in line with industry standards, underscoring the importance of recognizing and valuing the contributions of artists with disabilities while upholding their dignity.

Photography as a Medium of Mediation: Challenging Conceptions of Blindness, Visibility, and Invisibility

This research article thus delves into the multifaceted role of photography as a medium that not only represents and crystallizes moments in space but also challenges preconceived notions of blindness, visibility, and invisibility within our lived reality. Photography encapsulates not only what occurred but also what was possible to capture from reality. In this regard, a photograph is inherently shaped by the perspective of the photographer during its creation and by the interpretation of the viewer during its observation. These perspectives are socially constructed and involve all five senses, reflecting a vision of the social world that is historically contingent. The primary objective of this article is to contest prevailing conceptions, particularly those related to blindness, visibility, and invisibility, using photography as a means of mediation. Photography, within this context, becomes a vehicle for expressing sensory experiences and invoking a

sense of urgency in both its creators and viewers. It operates as a visual sign, akin to other cultural and artistic languages, deriving its meaning through its intricate relationship with other individuals and perspectives. It not only reflects the ways in which people perceive and interact with the world but also opens avenues for diverse perspectives and senses to emerge. As Susan Sontag astutely observes, photography serves as evidence of the myriad ways in which individuals experience and perceive the world. It beckons viewers to engage with what is seen and often overlooked, shedding light on aspects of reality that may elude conventional perception. In this manner, photography extends the boundaries of our visual understanding, homing in on facets of reality that might remain obscured in a conventional sense or are readily isolated. Hence, photography is deeply embedded in the process of signification and, within the context of this study, is regarded as a form of language. It operates as a dialogical and discursive means of expression created by individuals occupying specific social positions and engaging in a dialogue with the context in which their photographs are created and interpreted.

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