Ways of Not Seeing

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October 6th, 2022
Art in America

In her influential 2017 study *More Than Meets the Eye*: *What Blindness Brings to Art,* Georgina Kleege, a blind writer and UC Berkeley professor, visits the Museum of Modern Art in New York to look at some paintings. When she rents an audio tour, the little handheld device that MoMA provides presents Kleege with three options: there is one program produced for mainstream visitors, another for blind visitors, and a third for children. Like a blind art-loving Goldilocks, Kleege decides to try all three.

She finds that the mainstream audio tour, narrated largely by the museum's curators, is rich with historical and technical descriptions of the works. The children's tour encourages a playful, exploratory approach to apprehending an artwork. But the tour for the blind—particularly when it presents representational paintings—follows the established industry guidelines for Audio Description, offering an "objective" account, in minute detail, of what the painting shows and how its composition is arranged. Kleege points out what any reader or writer of art criticism knows implicitly: this objectivity is a fiction. A good description for the blind, she argues, would incorporate both the historical context and playfulness found in the other two tracks.

The blind or low-vision artist must engage with a related set of issues in the creation of their own work: Are the needs of a sighted audience different from those of a blind one? Should access for the blind be optional, available on a separate track or in the form of a touch tour, or is

there an imperative to integrate it into the mainstream art-viewing experience? Working with minimal or no sight in a sight-dominated field, they must also contend with prejudice and low expectations, and decide how disability itself figures in their work, and their lives. Is blindness a central, generative force? Or an obstacle to be overcome?

To explore these questions, *Art in America* convened a roundtable discussion with four blind and low-vision artists. All based in the New York metropolitan area, they work across disciplines: Rodney Evans is a filmmaker; Kayla Hamilton is a dancer; Emilie L. Gossiaux is a visual artist; and Bojana Coklyat's work encompasses performance and filmmaking. The conversation began with panelists describing themselves. Coklyat said, "I'm in my bedroom, on the floor, 'cause it just felt comfy." Evans described his hair: "short twists on the top, shaven into a fade on the sides and in the back." Gossiaux provided visual background: "I have the flag of the State of California hanging on the wall behind me; it has a big brown grizzly bear on it that I really love." Hamilton reported, simply, "I'm a Black woman. I think that's enough description for this day and age."

ANDREW LELAND A standard question that interviewers put to artists is: how did you become an artist? And one of the most common questions blind people get is: how did you become blind? I don't want to ask you either of those questions. But I do want to combine them, and ask each of you: How did you become a blind artist, or a low-vision artist? Or, if you prefer: what's the first blind work of art you made?

RODNEY EVANS Because there is so much ableism in the industry, especially around vision, I was reluctant to come out as a low-vision filmmaker. I'm Black and queer and was already making work about those aspects of my identity that were putting me in this realm where gatekeepers were thinking about my work as being, let's just say, not commercial. So to be honest, I felt like I was grappling more with being

Black and queer in my earlier work than I was with being low-vision. That was a more tumultuous emotional journey with my family, and it felt like a lot to reckon with in my work.

People in the industry were not helpful. This is before people were talking about access as part of the inclusion conversation. We're barely even talking about that now, but just imagine 12 years ago. Producers and fundraisers were like, "OK, so *that's* why you're walking so slowly on the streets of Cannes. Don't *ever* say that [you are low-vision] in a pitch meeting." I'd be like, OK, duly noted. But after a while, that really started to get under my skin. My vision had deteriorated, and I was questioning how I would function as a filmmaker if I continued to lose vision. That led to [my 2019 documentary] *Vision Portraits*: I wanted to engage in conversations with people who were active, creative artists and were either low-vision or completely blind, who were still making art and thriving as artists. This was a way of understanding my possible path, but also of engaging with the larger blind and low-vision community.

EMILIE L. GOSSIAUX I went blind in 2010, and it was very sudden for me—just one day, I woke up, and I had no vision. That was really traumatic, and a huge change. During that time, I was in the hospital, going through a lot of physical and occupational therapy. But all the while, I was thinking: *Do I still want to be an artist?* I lost my vision as I was about to go into my senior year at Cooper Union, and I really wasn't sure if I had it in me to go back. I wasn't even sure if I could work at the same level as before.

So I took about two years off from school. From 2010 to 2012, I was at a blind boot camp in Minneapolis called Blind Incorporated. I was already thinking about other occupations I could explore, like cupping, massage therapy, something more tactile. A career trainer there talked to me about museum accessibility, which was becoming an important field. He

encouraged me to visit touch tours in the Minneapolis museums. I did a lot of research on my own, and my vision of the things I could do started to expand.

My career trainer also forced me to take a ceramics class. Back then, I didn't think of ceramics as an art form. At Cooper, no one made ceramic art; it was considered more of a craft, really. I got myself to a ceramics studio once a week, and that's when it started to really click for me. I took ceramics classes in high school, and I really hated it. I just wasn't good on the wheel or at hand-building. But I really got into feeling and manipulating the clay, and started thinking about shape and form and concept again. So the moment when I became a blind artist was just the moment I started making art again, you know?

BOJANA COKLYAT I started losing my vision in 2007, 2008. I stopped painting for a little while as I lost my vision—the whole "how are you going to do this?" When I started painting again, I learned to adapt. I painted larger; I painted thick black lines to help me map things out. I was still trying to paint as I would have as a sighted artist, trying to hold on to this ableist idea of what art should be.

In grad school [at New York University]I attended the Disability/Arts/NYC Task Force Bootcamp, with Simi Linton, Kevin Gotkin, and other amazing organizers and creators. [Artist] Carmen Papalia was there, and he really influenced me in thinking about how I can make art in a way that is informed by blindness, that uses my blindness as a creative force. I started to explore how access can be a tool for expression, creativity, and innovation. It wasn't until then that I really felt like the artwork I was making was actually informed by my blind identity. Previously, it was just, like, I'm trying to adapt so that sighted people get it.

LELAND Can you think of a specific artwork that was a turning point for you?

COKLYAT I started to research the jobs that blind people had had in the past, after the New Jersey Commission for the Blind suggested I work tending a vending machine. They said I could start with that, and then I could work up to a convenience stand. Those both suggested really low expectations of what blind people could do.

In the beginning of the 20th century, one common job was broom-making, so I did a performance piece where I made old-fashioned brooms. I made several with long wooden sticks, getting the twine, and then learning how to bunch up the different pieces of that cornstalk material into these brooms that blind people would have been making. I was thinking about how society views blind people, how it thinks about our competency and ability to contribute.

KAYLA HAMILTON A clear moment for me was Dance/NYC's "Dance. Disability. Artistry." conversation series. At one of the town halls, I heard a Black woman, a wheelchair dancer, speak—her name was Alice Sheppard. I had never seen someone, a Black person, in the dance field name their disability so boldly. That gave me permission to do so as well. I remember saying to myself, "Oh… I see myself. I'm not bugging. This is a thing! And I can do this too." It allowed me to see myself because I could see myself in her.

LELAND Can you describe the first piece you made after you had this revelation?

HAMILTON The first piece I made… I wouldn't call it a fail. It was one of those situations where the impact did not match the intent. It was called *Nearly Sighted* [2017]. I commissioned solos from five Black female choreographers. I interviewed them, and then their interviews were woven

in between their dances. I had eye patches for the audience to wear during the performance. The show was fine. But I quickly realized, after being in more community with other disabled artists, that I was simulating my disability, and that it was not OK.

So I tried again. What was it that I really wanted the eye patches to bring to the performance? The next work was called *Nearly Sighted: Unearthing the Dark* [2018]. That was when I began to be a lot more curious about how I can use Audio Description creatively. I went into more cultural institutions and listened to the AD there. I started intentionally putting the AD on for Netflix shows and asked myself what was there, what was missing? What would make this experience more enjoyable for me personally? I started thinking about what we lose by having sight. So with the AD in *Unearthing the Dark*, I explored what would happen if I just did the same movement over and over again, but gave folks all these different descriptions, different ways of being inside that movement. I started playing with race—naming race, naming the body, naming the tone of how description is being delivered. I was naming whether the move was highly technical, and experimenting—a cat-call can be AD, right? I'm grateful to the first *Nearly Sighted*, because if I hadn't made that mistake, the urgency around figuring out what I needed to do to de-center sight as dance's primary mode of consumption would not have been there.

LELAND I'm curious about everyone else's relationship with AD. Emilie, I know you've worked at the Met giving tours, and that some of your artwork ends up living behind glass, so AD is the only way for blind people to access it. What's your relationship with AD in the context of visual art?

GOSSIAUX I love touching things, but descriptions are usually more important for me. Even if I'm touching an object, whether it's art or clothing or furniture, I really love hearing descriptions. I have a friend who I prefer going to see shows with, because I know I'll enjoy their descriptions.

Description varies from person to person, as does audio description on TV, which has gotten much better. I remember watching *Blade Runner 2049* [2017] and being so disappointed with the awful description! There were even parts of the movie that were totally silent, and I wondered, why don't they describe the *scene,* what's going on? So I prefer having a conversation with somebody over listening to something like an audio guide.

COKLYAT A lot of people who are going to read this aren't necessarily going to understand how Audio Description is steeped in tradition. There has been so much gatekeeping: only certain people can be trained a certain way to do Audio Description, whether we're talking movies, TV shows, or in a theater or a museum. It can be a dry and compliance-based approach, which doesn't necessarily evoke the creative or artistic intention. It's merely a description, and a description is not an art experience in and of itself. It's a means to some kind of access; it's an accommodation; but it's not an equal experience. For so long, it's been *sighted people* who have decided what Audio Description should be and how it should be approached.

EVANS I got introduced to Audio Description through verbal description tours at museums. I was thinking about potential places where I could film with the photographer [John Dugdale, in *Vision Portraits*]. But as I began talking to people within the blind community about the documentary, they were, like, "Whatever you do, just don't do one of those god-awful Audio Description tracks." I was, like, what do you mean? And I kept hearing, "They're terrible! They lack emotion. Figure something else out." Around then I went to a talk by Georgina Kleege, and I got up the gumption to ask her "do you have any advice for a filmmaker who wants to make an Audio Description track that doesn't suck?" She basically said: stay involved, make it a part of your creative process. Don't let them finish the film and then send it off to someplace where you have no input. That led me into an

amazing creative collaboration with this Audio Description vocalist and writer named Erin deWard.

COKLYAT Rodney, I know that many filmmakers, even some who work in disability, don't show their films with Audio Description.

EVANS I do.

COKLYAT But you haven't always. Sometimes people show their films with open Audio Description [as part of the default soundtrack], and sometimes they don't, including yourself. Why do you think that is?

EVANS It depends on whether I know that it's going to be a completely blind or low-vision/ disabled community that I'm showing the work to.

COKLYAT But if it's a creative part of the film, why take it out?

EVANS Because it becomes redundant to people who are sighted, who can actually absorb information visually that is being stated on the Audio Description track. And it takes away a certain ability for the film to breathe.

GOSSIAUX My [sighted] boyfriend, even when he's not watching a film with me, loves to turn Audio Description on, because he feels like it helps him notice more than he would otherwise.

COKLYAT I think we really need to push back against this resistance to open Audio Description. We have to disrupt the norms in film. Blind people so often get the fucking shaft when it comes to movies. Maybe if we start working on it together, collectively, and thinking about it as a creative element, that could start to shift things for people. It's not just for blind people—it's for everybody.

GOSSIAUX Yeah, it becomes an aesthetic part of the whole film.

COKLYAT It can be helpful if there's even one person in the audience who's blind or low-vision, or somebody who's 80 and doesn't know to ask for Audio Description. When we're picking and choosing—"OK, well, we know a blind person is going to be here, so we'll make sure we do this tour for them"—we're siloing blind people.

LELAND It's worth pointing out that not all blind people like Audio Description. One of the subjects of Rodney's film, Ryan Knighton, told me that he prefers watching some shows, like *Breaking Bad,* without AD because he can follow the action and wants to appreciate the sound design. With some shows you may not want audio description, like*Jeopardy.*

HAMILTON I love *The People's Court.* No AD needed for *The People's Court.* It's just drama.

COKLYAT I agree, but I push back a little bit when we say "this one person says they don't want Audio Description." Good for them! But when we have been fucking oppressed and disregarded and dismissed in education, employment, *and* media *and* the arts *and* in every other place? To say we don't need this accommodation that we have fought for? Not everybody likes Audio Description, OK. Not everybody thinks that every single law that's passed for equality is important either. Especially if you're making a movie for blind people, I think it makes sense to show that film in a way that is honoring blind people.

EVANS If you're only making films for the blind community, then yes. But that's not the only audience that I'm making films for.

LELAND I'm curious about how blindness fits into your lives as artists. Is blindness an obstacle that you're working to overcome? Is it a framework with which you think about the world? Is it an incidental characteristic or a central, defining one? How does it shape your work?

EVANS It's interesting to think about the difference between my first and second features. In the first [*Brother to Brother,* 2004], I was mostly behind the monitors, paying attention to the actual frame and camera movement. And in the second film, [as my eyesight changed,] I kind of let that go. Instead, I stood right next to the actors. Because film sets can be so laden with equipment, there's always the potential for me to bump into something. I had to be self-advocating and tell the crew, if you're putting the monitor next to me, I need you to say, "Hey, Rodney, the monitor is to your left." But it actually helped me to just focus on directing the actors and the emotions and what was taking place in the scene, and not worry about things like lighting and how a piece of equipment might be hanging. This drew me closer to the actors and to their performances, and I think they felt more seen by me.

LELAND The way you describe your process sounds almost like a kind of tactile filmmaking: you're coming closer, rather than keeping the scene at a distance.

EVANS Yeah, absolutely.

GOSSIAUX I think a lot about what materials I can feel and quote-unquote "see" clearly, that let me visualize the marks I'm making, the details I put into a sculpture. With oil painting, I found out that I hate using a paintbrush when I make my work. I really like touching the paint and feeling where I'm putting it. But oil paint is really toxic. So I asked myself, what kind of paint can I touch? It doesn't even have to be an art material; it could just be food. Basically, when I think about blindness, I think about solving problems.

COKLYAT Anytime you're not thinking like the majority of the people who are making art, you're thinking in more innovative ways. Like, you're

painting with food—that's awesome. You maybe wouldn't have thought about that otherwise, right?

GOSSIAUX Yeah.

COKLYAT As Liz Jackson, this amazing disability design advocate, says, "We [disabled people] are the original lifehackers." We find other creative ways to get things done. And it's similar with art: disability can bring innovation that everybody, not just other blind people, can enjoy—because you're doing things differently.

HAMILTON It's a challenging question for me because I feel like blindness is everything, and it's nothing. Every day I wake up and take the eight eye drops that I have to take, and every three months I see the doctor that I have to see—if I said I woke up and felt good about that shit every damn day, I mean, that would be a lie [*laughter*]. Sometimes this shit fucking sucks. I do feel like it's something that I'm overcoming. The acceptance of progressively losing [eyesight]—of not knowing how you're going to be in the world the next morning—it's exhausting. It's also just another aspect of Kayla.

And you can't complain. I mean, I don't always feel like there's a space to name the challenges. Because when you do, some folks are *awwwww*. And I'm, like, no, no, no—hold on. I'm killing it. You know? I'm out here! So it's a *both and.* It isn't only hard, but to ignore the challenges—that'd just be a lie.

COKLYAT For so long [we've all faced so much] pity, and heard blindness stories about tragedy and overcoming. Now there's this backlash, where it's, like, *we are not going to talk about that at all*. But there are so many nuanced stories in between.

GOSSIAUX I have a question. It's something I'm not sure about. I read an article that mentioned me alongside other artists who were part of a group show, and they used "blind artist" in front of my name. No one had ever used that terminology with me before. And it's true—I *am* a blind artist; I'm blind, and I'm an artist. But, I don't know, it was hard for me.

HAMILTON That's an aspect of you, right? But it's not all of you.

COKLYAT It's sensationalizing.

EVANS It's an essentializing identifier.

GOSSIAUX Exactly! It made me feel uncomfortable. [I'm not making] *blind* art. It's *art.*

COKLYAT Right. But it's a tricky thing. Because I *would* want to go to a show if I saw, oh, wow, yeah, blind artists! I want that! Representation is important. Yet we know that the curators or marketers [can be], like, "Look what we have! This is different!"

EVANS I've had that issue as well. For me, because I don't identify as blind, I make them change it, because it's actually misinformation. But people do want to see a diversity of perspectives within a program. For this new short I just made, I sent out six or seven promotional stills, and one of them has me in it, with a red and white cane, on a boardwalk, going about my day. The film isn't specifically focused on my blindness, although I do talk about blindness. But a lot of times, that will be the image that gets chosen to represent the film, because I think that programmers want to indicate "we have a disabled artist." I could have chosen not to send that still, but I'm not running away from it.

[Being involved in] that choice is important. My friend in the film is biracial: she's half Chinese and half white. And when we were making the Audio

Description, I asked her, “Do you want to be described as half Chinese and half white?” And she was, like, “Yeah, that’s fine.” So for me, it’s always about going back to that person and asking how they want to be described.