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IMAGINE a place photographed by those who cannot see

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Her actual research deals with collaborative art practices in educational contexts involving a cultural diversity under a socially engaged art perspective. She has been a reviewer of several journals and currently she is part of the Editorial Team of an open journal *Artes plásticas, estética y diseño* published by ULL. Her Ph.D dissertation was focused on the relationships between photography and blindness by designing accessible photography methodologies and later on inclusive initiatives around visual interpretation. The results of all these educational and research experiences have been published in several articles and shared at National and International Conferences.

Keywords: photography, blindness, visual imagery, inclusive pedagogy, time.

Palabras clave: fotografía, ceguera, imaginario visual, pedagogía inclusiva, tiempo.

Introduction

This visual essay is the result of a project entitled An imaginary place for those who see and those who are blind carried out within the Complementary Actions program of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Complutense University of Madrid. This proposal integrates an exhibition and a seminar for Fine Arts students and also open to those people who might be interested in the topic. Our role as organizers of the initiative was to engage participants in a proposal for a collective interpretation of blindness photography based on our exhibition. So, an inclusive project was collaboratively developed by the author and participants in which sighted and blind people work in the photographic creation and interpretation of an imagined place. Based on the experience of Peña (2014c), blind people describe an imagined place through photographs created by themselves. Photography, as Lemagny (1999) points out, connects us with the imaginary, regardless our visual condition. Bavcar (as cited in Mayer-Foulkes, 2005), a well-known blind artist, explains how photography represents traces of what we imagine, and a blind person who imagines is capable of internally representing an external reality. So, arousing the curiosity of the visual world that surrounds us and connecting it with the imaginary that blind participants possess is one of the first goals. In this workshop (Peña, 2012, 2014a, 2014c), we asked the blind participants to imagine a place they travelled. Initially we wanted them to share their memories of those trips and then we would work step by step on each photograph. Their pictures became photographs because we had worked with their memories, and memories were indeed visual internal representations the blind persons had about these places. All the photographs created by each participant were turned into visual narratives evoking exotic

places. All were part of an exhibition of the project *An imaginary place for those who see and those who are blind*.

We started our seminar visiting this exhibition of photographic narratives created by a group of blind people, and it was also our first step towards opening a dialogue about blindness and imagery. Afterwards, sighted participants are offered a comfortable sofa so that they might imagine, as if dreaming, and describe one imagined place portrayed in the photographs. Audio description (AD) becomes another form of visual representation that connects with the imaginary, while providing an inclusive approach to understanding visual creation from blindness. Kleege and Wallin (2015) propose other inclusive uses of AD from a pedagogical approach emphasizing the expressive potentiality of visual description.

While sighted participants of this seminar were describing their places, the author was involved in creating her own narrative through the camera. The length of each description determines how long the camera shutter remains open in each photograph. The author's interest lies in creating connections between time and what is visible through the camera.

In our earlier experience (Peña, 2014b, 2014c), blind people used photography as a visual trace to describe an imagined place, just as Bavcar (as cited in Lemagny, 1999) does. Conversely, in this project, sighted participants use oral description to create a sensorial representation, rather than use only their visual sense. It is intended that all people involved, regardless of their visual condition, are aware of the need for this imaginary as a precondition to creation. Everyone plays an active role as creator giving meaning to the project, while enabling us to become aware of other ways of understanding visual creation from an alternate visibility.

Introducción

Este ensayo visual es el resultado de un Proyecto titulado *Un lugar imaginado desde la ceguera*, realizado en el marco del programa de *Acciones Complementarias* de la Facultad de Bellas Artes de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Dicha propuesta integra una exposición y un seminario dirigido a los estudiantes de Bellas Artes, así también abierto a aquellas personas interesadas en el tema. Nuestro papel como organizadora de la iniciativa consistió en generar junto a los participantes una propuesta sobre la interpretación de fotografía desde la ceguera basándonos en la exposición. De este modo, llevamos a cabo una propuesta inclusiva y colaborativa en la que tanto la autora como los participantes se involucraron. En ella los participantes como las personas ciegas trabajaron en la creación fotográfica e interpretación de un lugar imaginado.

A partir de la experiencia de Peña (2014c) personas ciegas narran un lugar imaginado a través de fotografías que ellos y ellas mismas crean. La fotografía como apunta Lemagny (1999) nos vincula con el imaginario que tenemos en nuestro interior, independientemente de nuestra condición visual. Bavcar (citado en Mayer-Foulkes, 2005), como artista ciego reconocido, explica como la fotografía representa la huella de aquello que imaginamos y cuando un ciego imagina es entonces capaz de representar interiormente una realidad externa. Despertamos así en nuestros participantes ciegos su curiosidad hacia el mundo visual desde ese imaginario que poseemos. En aquel taller previo (Peña, 2012, 2014a, 2014c) pedimos a los participantes ciegos que imaginaran un lugar al que habían viajado. Con esos recuerdos queríamos que compartieran los recuerdos sobre aquellos viajes y posteriormente trabajar paso a paso con cada una de las fotografías que crearon. Sus imágenes se convierten en fotografías porque previamente trabajamos en aquellas representaciones internas que las personas ciegas habían imaginado sobre sus lugares favoritos. Todas aquellas fotografías creadas por cada uno de los participantes se transformaron en narrativas visuales que evocaban sus lugares exóticos. Estas narrativas visuales fueron parte de la exposición del

Proyecto *Un lugar imaginado desde la ceguera*.

Comenzamos el seminario visitando la exposición de las narrativas fotográficas realizadas por las personas ciegas, lo cual fue el punto de partida para abrir un diálogo sobre la relación entre imágenes y ceguera. Posteriormente, a los participantes que ven se les brindó un espacio confortable para que así fuesen capaces de imaginar como cuando uno sueña y narrar como sería ese lugar que imaginado retratado en las fotografías. La audio descripción (AD) se convierte en otra forma de representación visual que conecta con ese imaginario que tenemos todos y todas, al tiempo que brinda un planteamiento inclusivo de entender la creación visual desde la ceguera. Kleege y Wallin (2015) proponen otros usos inclusivos de la AD desde un enfoque pedagógico destacando la potencialidad expresiva de la narración en relación con las imágenes. Paralelamente y mientras cada participante describe sus lugares, la autora crea también su propia narrativa a través de la cámara. La duración de cada descripción determina el tiempo que el obturador permanece abierto en cada fotografía. La finalidad que persigue la autora es establecer vínculos entre el concepto de tiempo y lo que visible a través de la cámara fotográfica.

Si en la experiencia anterior (Peña, 2012, 2014b, 2014c) las personas ciegas utilizan la fotografía como huella visual y táctil para narrar un lugar, tal y como Bavcar (citado en Lemagny, 1999) lo hace. En este proyecto, se pretende que aquellas personas que ven, utilicen la descripción oral para crear una representación sensorial inspirada en las fotografías realizadas por las personas ciegas. Todas las personas involucradas, sin importar de su condición visual, son conscientes de la necesidad del imaginario como condición previa a la creación visual. Cualquiera puede adoptar un rol como creador/a aportando significado al proyecto, al tiempo que permite concienciarnos sobre otros modos de comprender la creación visual desde otra visualidad.



Figure 1. The place where blind people photographed each other.



Figure 2. Four blind people posing and photographing in an imaginary place (J.M. Villanueva, G. Moya, J.L. Andrés, M. Monasterio) (from left to right).

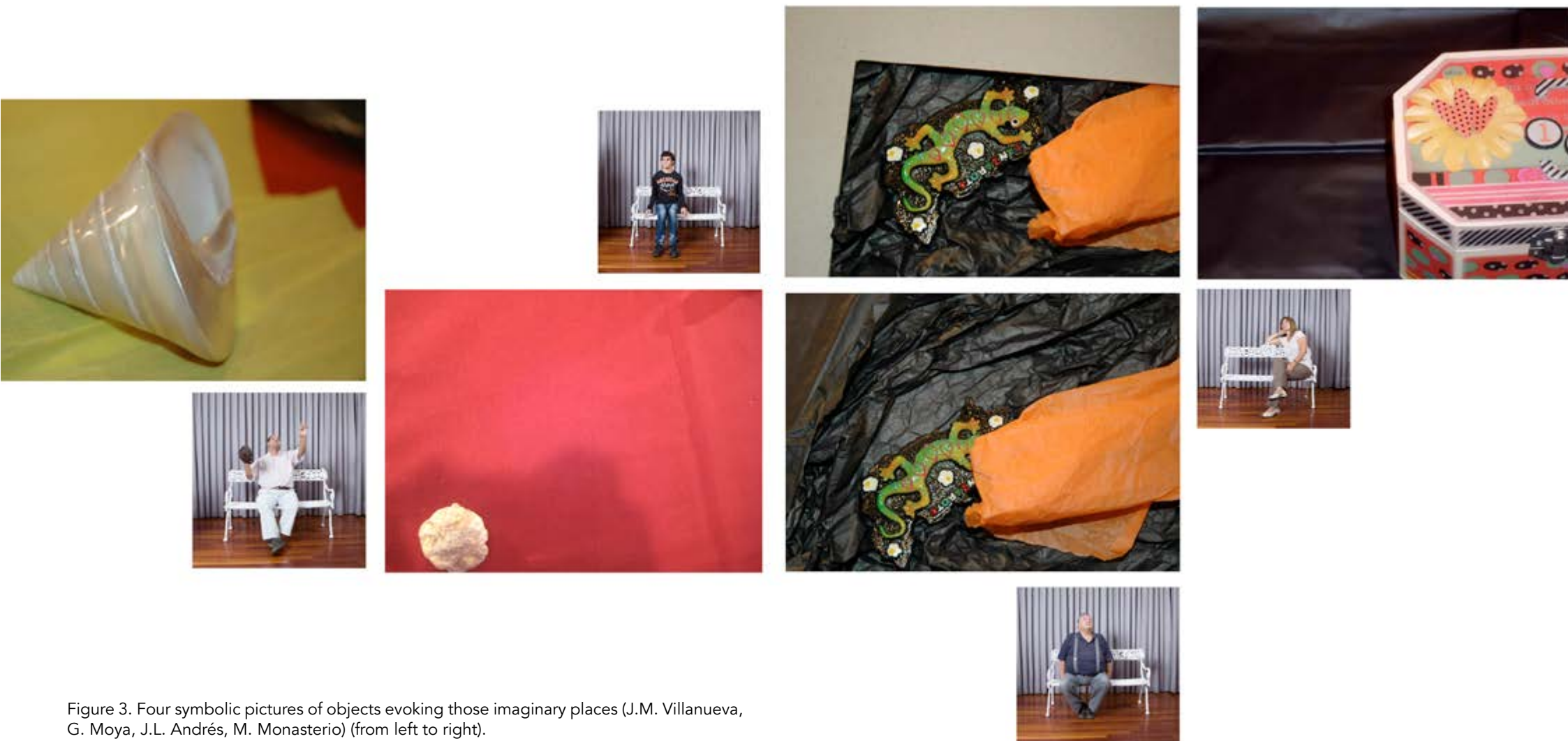


Figure 3. Four symbolic pictures of objects evoking those imaginary places (J.M. Villanueva, G. Moya, J.L. Andrés, M. Monasterio) (from left to right).



Figure 4. The place where sight people described being at these imagined places.

01:10

I like Chema's photographs because... He said he set all of the pictures in a cheerful way, so I try to place myself in that position of the images.

I like it because you see something... something interesting in the background. I imagine there are boats and maybe you are lying on the beach seeing the horizon while you see the boats that sail trying to reach the horizon.

I imagine myself lying on the beach, with the sea in front of me, some mountains around, and you may sink your hands in the sand and feel some seashells on your hands.

He talked about the way photos are organized like a waterfall. Imagining myself in the imaginary world of Chema, I would like the water to drag me to the sea, that I feel something pleasant, like melting with the sea.

He uses the word "joy," which led me to imagine all of this.



Figure 5. One minute and ten seconds of an interpretation of a photograph (E. Sala) taken by a blind people (J. M. Villanueva).

02:13

The truth is that Gabriel has surprised me by the way in which the seashell took him to such a joyful world. Surprisingly I see again the picture and I agree with him.

Always, when we observe a seashell we have the feeling that it expresses "beauty." Although you have seen one in winter, it takes you to the warm weather of spring or summer. When I was living in Greece I saw a lot of shells there, I keep them very much in my mind. I also think of their sound or, more precisely, the music they have. You may have one at home, they look totally silent, but in reality they would take you to their music. I agree with Gabriel because we are in two different worlds, I have seen them, but he doesn't, although both of us have listened to the sound they make.

Eventually, he says, he wanted to say goodbye to everything. But, you still have the feeling of its music. It's a story where you can't say goodbye even if you want to because it goes on. The seashell is the symbol of peace and joy.

Gabriel took me into a beautiful world.

Thank you Gabriel.



Figure 6. Two minutes and thirteen seconds of an interpretation of a photograph (D. Londo) taken by a blind people (G. Moya).

02:14

The place José Luis leads me to is a very warm place. He explains it with an eloquent image in which he raises his head to see what the weather is like, whether the sun is on his face or not. Then he talked about a garden of cactus and... it must be a fairly dry place.

I loved the way this lizard reaches to the orange lava. There are two sequential pictures that led me to think about the experiments of the avant-garde cinema. It's incredible how this lizard, step by step, gets into the tongue of fire, reinforcing the idea of being at an arid place, full of lava and stone.

At the end he has another portrait with his eyes closed and he says "all good things come to an end" as a premonition that augurs that the end of something pleasant is coming. It has caught my attention quite a lot.

And this is all I can tell about it.



Figure 7. Two minutes and fourteen seconds of an interpretation of photographs (M. J. Ollero) taken by a blind people (J. L. Andrés).

01:46

I'm listening to Monica's song. It's a very soft song, it's very quiet but not quiet-sad, it's quiet-happy. It has like a Habanera rhythm, but a Habanera that instead of pigeons, like all habaneras, has seagulls. Then I imagine it as messenger gulls flying from one place to another. I'm listening to this song and it's flowing like a calm sea, like if you were in a very peaceful ocean, with the waves rocking with the wind in a sunset that's already stopping breathing and melting.

It sounds like a mantra that does mmmmmm, but a mantra that makes good to our soul, makes good to our heart, it makes you relax to your mind and with an almost hypnotic voice that leaves you ... lets you go.

Suddenly, I see on the horizon a very warm light as a dream that is coming. Then I close my eyes and your favorite song is playing inside the music box.



Figure 8. One minute and forty-six seconds of an interpretation of a photograph (P. Cadavid) taken by a blind people (M. Monasterio).

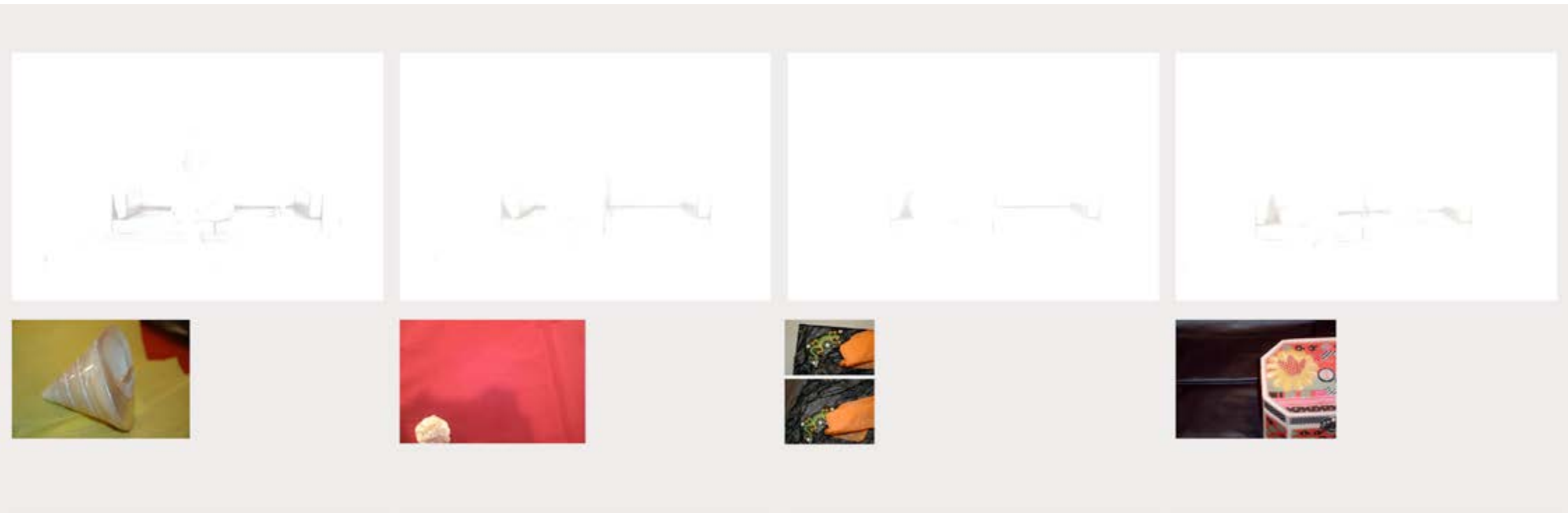


Figure 9. Four sighted people have been photographed during the time spent describing their imaginary place (N. Peña), and below them four visual cites of their pictures are placed. (M.J. Ollero, D. Londo, E. Sala, P. Cadavid).

Conclusions

This project has turned out to be more expansive as it opened up new discourses among all participants. It is worth mentioning that once the narrations by sighted people were done, we decided to share them with the four blind people who made the photographs. During this session they were amazed by the evocative power of their own photographs. Knowing that they communicated ideas through pictures was exciting for them, thus discovering the powerful connection of photography. As one of the blind participants said "Just knowing that I am able to photograph, it looks small but in reality it is a huge step. I never thought I would take a picture again."

Our approach is not to talk about blindness as a disability or as an exotic topic. By contrast, blindness is posed as a new visuality that, according to Peña (2014a), offers other ways of understanding photography from a blind perception that enriches our way of creating images. Nigenda (as cited in Acosta, 2006) suggests that all photographers experience taking photographs without sight; it provides an aesthetic quality and other sensations that might enrich their perspective of photography. Michalko (2010) states "blindness reflects sight and it shows sight to itself, something it cannot see without blindness" (Cool Blindness Time section, para.4). This quote illustrates how blindness is actually another way of perceiving the world as unique and diverse, and may enrich our way of perceiving and understanding visuality. The ability to imagine is inherently human: "if we were not able to imagine first, we would not be able to see" (Lemagny, 1999, p. 52).

This approach requires undoing prejudices about the abilities of blind people for both sighted and blind people. The participation of both blind and sighted participants has been crucial in this project, positioning blind people in an active role as creators, and sighted participants as active spectators creating their own narratives. We must overcome the idea of blindness as an object of curiosity that is analyzed and observed (Thompsonson & Warne, 2018).

To conclude, this project is a single step toward what we might consider socially engaged art (SEA) in which "art" is a vehicle to transform and generate changes that promote a more inclusive society. "SEA, as it manifested today, continues in the spirit of these practices but often expands the depth of the social relationship, at times promoting ideas such as empowerment, criticality, and sustainability among participants" (Helguera, 2011, p. 12).

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