**Guest Editorial**

In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates poses the following predicament to an engrossed listener: Imagine that we want to travel from Athens to Larissa, but do not know the way. Should we trust a blind man to tell us the way to Larissa? Legacies of the association of reliable knowledge with sight, implicit in Socrates’ framing of his conundrum, still abound. While misgivings about attributing epistemic or aesthetic credibility to the opinions volunteered by individuals with visual impairment persist, the inequity of the rationale informing them is clearly manifest within gallery environments, for example, where these individuals are expected to take on faith the descriptions, instructions and values presented to them by fully sighted individuals in the name of access. The bias informing these assumptions is exemplified by educational theorist R.T. Allen’s (1987) citing of the case of blindness as a means of justifying his argument that ‘those who lack normal capacities’ embody the truth of the maxim that ‘no one possesses any original authority as a source of truth but only this relative authority in knowing … more than someone else.’ When his subsequent observation -- that ‘what the authoritative person states is itself others’ evidence or reason for belief’ – is considered in relation to Socrates’ question, the intransigence of this prejudice over a period that spans the 5th century BC and the late 20th century becomes clear[[1]](#endnote-1). There are signs, however, that progress has subsequently been made in this regard. The papers collected in this Special Issue of BJVI are highly suggestive that hopes that such change is currently afoot are well founded.

Although the discipline of aesthetics has laboured long under the illusion of its own sociopolitical removal, increased emphasis on identity politics, individual difference, and inclusiveness has prompted widespread misgivings about the long-assumed social isolation and ideological neutrality of the discipline. While recent work within several disciplines within the arts, humanities, and sciences reflects this increased interest in differential and inclusionary aspects of aesthetic perception, the contribution of disability studies to this democratic enterprise resists easy demarcation.

In 2002, Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare observed that disability theorists had been too slow to embrace the radical implications for their discipline that are latent in the postmodern perspective. The decade that has passed since Corker and Shakespeare volunteered their disapproving verdict has witnessed heightened levels of activity by disability theorists and practitioners within interdisciplinary explorations of inclusionary approaches to aesthetics. This activity has generated increased awareness of the potential role of the arts within wider health and well-being agendas, and mounting critical interest in imaginative renderings of the experience of disability. This Special Issue of BJVI, therefore, represents an opportune means to gauge the extent to which disability studies has overcome its earlier hesitancy to involve itself in the contemporary re-politicization of processes of art production and reception, to identify emerging trends in the fostering of innovative and inclusive art education and practice environments, and to take stock of work that remains to be done within this field before it can be meaningfully claimed that individuals with visual impairment have been meaningfully included.

One aspect of the increased critical scrutiny to which traditional universal aesthetic principles continue to be subjected, is an increasingly widespread criticism of the privilege traditionally afforded to vision within art appreciation, the consequent passivity of the spectator, and the under-utilization of the non-visual senses. Environmental aesthetics has also deviated from the motive of furthering understanding and appreciation of landscape and environmental engagement in ways that prioritize the visual as the modality through which our surroundings register their impression. Increasing interest in phenomenology within a variety of disciplines has prompted a gradual displacement of concern for the spectatorial by that for the ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’, while a corresponding burgeoning of interest in medical humanities has brought a number of traditionally remote disciplines into innovative forms of theoretical and experiential exchange in order to probe the interface between disability and art. At the same time, art education institutions and museums and galleries are beginning to assume greater responsibility for the development of inclusive and multisensory learning environments and strategies in order to facilitate inclusive art experiences through greater use of sound, touch, movement, performance, olfaction, installation, and modes of proprioceptive learning. The papers included here, having been submitted from California, Vilnius, Liverpool, Toronto, and the United Arab Emirates, and covering subjects as diverse as dance, imagery, and contemporary advertising, give a useful snapshot of the innovative work being carried out in different parts of the world to ensure the inclusion of individuals with visual impairment within the broader project of enhanced cultural access.

Georgina Kleege’s paper addresses some of the limitations of audio description, as it is widely practiced, as a means of rendering dance performance meaningfully accessible and engaging for visually impaired audiences. In keeping with its appeal for the legitimacy of subjective components of audio description, the paper takes the form of personal reflection from the perspective of a person with a long history of involvement in dance, both as a performer and an audience member, while remaining keenly cognizant of contemporary and historical academic perspectives. A brief comparison of dance to other art forms helps to account for the challenges that are particular to dance and for the ways in which words inevitably fall short of doing justice to the aesthetic significance of movement. The controversial dictum that description of art should be devoid of subjective comment receives particular attention, and the suggestion is convincingly offered that this stipulation can exercise a thwarting influence on modes of engagement that might be derived from approaches to the task of rendering performance accessible that are more in keeping with the creativity inherent in the media to which they relate. Dance critics, choreographers and performers are consulted to supplement the author’s personal experience of dance – as a performer and audience member -- as a means of identifying a range of innovative ways of heightening engagement in dance performance. The argument for the factoring of considerations of access into performance at an early stage, rather than appended after the performance has been fully choreographed by an access professional inevitably positioned at a considerable remove from the vision of the artist, is one that can be applied to a variety of art forms.

Diana Raudoniene’s paper addresses a number of themes related to the roles of the different senses in the creation and perception of images, and analyses the consequences of its findings for the involvement of individuals with visual impairment, and for the assumed hegemony of vision within the domain of image creation and appreciation. All of he questions addressed are highly relevant to the task of furthering knowledge of the aesthetic experiences of individuals with visual impairment, making the theme of the paper tally with the objectives of this Special Issue. An insightful overview of existing work in this field prefaces an extended consideration of the multi-faceted interface between sensory perception and creative activity within the context of an historical overview of investigations of the relationship between memory, vision, and the non-visual senses. The yield of this historical overview is then usefully condensed and brought to bear on a contemporary case study of a blind artist.

David Bolt critically addresses a contemporary advertising aesthetic by tracing its lineage through a brief commentary on the nature of disability imagery in twentieth century Anglo-American advertisements, before devising a practical tool for the critical analysis of advertisements, composed of five criteria: distortion; alterity; disclosure; segregation; and inclusion. Although significant advances on the treatment of disability in this medium are identified, the paper finds that the particular advertising campaign under review – Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ – is informed in a number of ways by the ableist aesthetic and ocularcentric approach which characterised many disability-related advertisements of the last century. The paper relays observations that are likely to generate further discussion and draws attention to features of contemporary advertising campaigns that will surely prove universally unacceptable. Contemporary debates on the criteria according to which distinctions between favourable and unfavourable images of disability might be drawn and around ways in which this distinction differs in the cases of images of individuals without disabilities, seem destined continue for some time. While the same can be said of discussions surrounding the issues of representativeness, accuracy, and selected disability representation, it is difficult to imagine how the inaccessibility of advertising in various media -- including the inaccessibility of campaigns that purportedly represent an affirmative rendering of particular disabilities to individuals with those disabilities – might be defended.

John Kennedy brings drawings of a couple waltzing, a guitar player, and a samba band, created by a woman totally blind since early infancy, into imaginative service as instruments with which to probe the issues of aesthetics, lines and perspectives, and metaphoric forms as they are manifest in raised-line drawings. The observations volunteered in relation to the capacity of individuals without sight to produce sophisticated pictorial renderings of self-selected themes, the tendency of these depictions to betray realistic and metaphoric qualities, the innovative denotative functions assumed by line in such images, and their incorporation of perspective, will undoubtedly surprise readers without extensive experience of visual impairment and art. Such readers will find this paper eminently comprehensible, however, because these observations are delivered with a clarity and approachability that belies the complexity of the themes, capacities and experiences explored.

Simon Hayhoe’s paper provides a number of valuable insights into the art experiences of students at a School for the Blind, with particular emphasis on their learning experiences, motivations, and preferences for different forms of art engagement. The important distinction between active and passive forms of exclusion is particularly well observed and supported. Although these themes have come under increased critical scrutiny over the past decade or so, their inclusion in this Journal represents a new and welcome departure for BJVI. Part of the relevance of this particular paper lies in its illustration of the relevance of grounded theory to investigations of the art engagement experiences of individuals with low vision. In this way, the paper links neatly with the review of a monograph on grounded theory that appears elsewhere in this issue.

The reference, within Simon Hayhoe’s paper, to research he conducted with visually impaired participants in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art takes me back to 2007, when, as an attendee of an Art Beyond Sight conference held in that institution, I listened to Caro Howell, then Head of Education and Public Events at Whitechapel Gallery, London, advocate the role of academic research within art access provision. Having just completed my doctoral studies on aesthetics and visual impairment, in the process of which I became increasingly mindful of the widespread impatience with theory that I still occasionally encounter in my current access facilitation endeavours, these sentiments seemed to me to represent a lonely but welcome theoretic voice emanating from within a din of perfectly unresponsive grind. That impression was misinformed then and it would be even less pardonably entertained today. In my work with art institutions across Scotland, I encounter on a daily basis an increased collective recognition that if we are to do justice to the aim of fostering imaginative and critical reflection on access practices, professionals working within this field need to entertain a broad and informed conception of the inclusive opportunities afforded by diverse art forms.

Aesthetic theory has an important role to play in the promotion of this goal through the stimulation of reflection on the long-embedded assumptions and traditions that shape relationships between art institutions and their visitors. The role of theory in this regard is not to concoct workable prescriptions from afar in the hope that access practitioners might elect to implement them. Theorists and practitioners need to cultivate a symbiotic interrelationship that effects a considered and functional fusion of their respective endeavour and complementary resources. Emphasis on ‘reasonable adjustments’ and appropriate materials rather to the exclusion of value questions, on how to improve performance and how this improvement can be measured, at the expense of informed deliberation on why performance needs to be improved, precludes the development of meaningful understanding of differences and similarities and full awareness of how these (dis)continuities might be approached in effective and engaging ways. The papers collected here, reflecting contemporary concerns within the fields of disability theory, art education, practice and access, socio-cultural commentary, and literary criticism, make a distinct contribution within their respective sub-territories. Taken as a whole, these contributions are suggestive of a collective recognition that the collapsing of traditional dichotomies between theory and practice, conception and execution, heightens the prospects of a history of often inadvertent though ultimately incapacitating assumptions within aesthetic theory and the wider cultural domain being rigorously subjected to fruitful and progressive forms of interdisciplinary interrogation.

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1. R.T. Allen (2007). ‘Because I say so!’: Some limitations on the rationalization of authority, Journal of Philosophy of Education, 21 (I), 15-24 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)