The edge of comics

Felipe Muhr's *Blindsight*: excavations into comics and vision

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In his essay, 'To See and Not See', first published in *The New Yorker* on May 10, 1993, neurologist Oliver Sacks describes the condition of blindsight as follows: 'Visual signals are perceived and are responded to appropriately, but nothing of this perception reaches consciousness at all.' Blindsight, also known as implicit sight or unconscious sight, shows how seeing is not merely an issue of sense perception and how seeing needs to be *learned*.

Interrogating sight

One of the central themes informing Felipe Muhr's *Blindsight* (2016) is the problem of seeing after blindness. This is already evident in the book's epigraph, a brief, 1694 description of the writer William Molyneux's thought experiment by his friend and philosopher John Locke: Molyneux asks whether a blindman who has learned to differentiate between a cube and a sphere through touch will be able to recognize both objects if he were miraculously able to see again. For Locke the answer is no. Seeing after being accustomed to **blindness** often translates into the problem of processing unfamiliar forms. This in turn destabilizes the certainty attached to the act of seeing. In *Blindsight*, this interrogation of seeing and the presumptions that feed into it are juxtaposed to the process of relearning how to see in order to *draw* – a process that entails seeing differently and eliminating many of the presumptions surrounding visual cognition.

In keeping with this concern of learning how to draw, *Blindsight* also incorporates certain 'blind drawings' in their various stages, as in the case of the repeatedly drawn curtains and the artist's feet (fig. 1 & 2): blind drawings are used to train artists to better coordinate the drawing hand with the seeing eye. The artist is encouraged to draw while looking at the object and not the paper. Circumventing the process of correction and evaluation, this method encourages a more fluid drawing practice. One could say that the blind drawing exercise makes the artist *half blind*: the artist perceives the object but not their graphic rendering of it. The ironic tension between blindness and seeing is tied to another aspect in *Blindsight*: the possible forms of visual and narrative abstraction. This essay tries to map out how *Blindsight* problematizes seeing, how abstraction reflects this problematization and how these two elements can contribute to our understanding of both post-comics and comics in general. *Blindsight* opens with a roughly drawn circle, black against a white background followed by a white one against a black background: the rough rounded outlines introduce the themes of learning to draw and to see (including the

different ways of seeing). The interplay between black and white backgrounds alludes to negative space, the space that surrounds an object and is unoccupied by it, and the role of light as a necessary condition for seeing. Already these two circles with their interplay of black and white spaces point towards the prior **knowledge** informing vision and how the drawn two-dimensional object undergoes oscillating translations from a three-dimensional reality to a two-dimensional support. Equally unpredictable translations and interpretations take place as the viewer or reader sees the image. These opening circles are both concrete and abstract; they resist total abstraction through the whimsicality of the unevenly drawn outline and, if we look closely enough, a snippet of a word sneaks into the white outline of the circle. *Blindsight,* as a whole, entails careful viewing, re-viewing and being surprised. These surprises include subtle *détournements* of expectations as with the larger than life sized drawings of hands that seem realistic but turn out to be conglomerations of inner and outer perspectives. (fig. 3 & 4) Additional surprises encompass plays on form, space and depth.

The opening circles eventually transform into a retina which gives way to abstract panels, teasing the tension between space and form and light, all inextricable and mutually dependent. Although panels and frames come and go in *Blindsight,* they remain present in their absence for, very often, *the page becomes the panel*. Although comics are often considered as time translated into space, the presence-absence of panels in *Blindsight* throw such a simplistic translation into question: a panel is a constellation of both time and space whereby neither allow themselves to be pinned down; they are, instead, in constant flux. We see this in the three blind drawings of a knotted curtain (fig. 5), each of which is fully framed except for the last one, where the lines are dissolved, leaving the curtains in blank space. The blind drawings of feet test the 'blind' reconstruction of form with the motif of feet, various versions of which overlap each other to form one, continuous form that unfolds in space, and certain kinds of time – the time of drawing in particular – but not necessarily 'reading time'. Since the panel is very often freed from the limits of the frame, the sequential relationships it takes part in are malleable. First displayed in a gird of 9x6 images (*Exit Lines*, FIT Gallery, New York, 2015), selections of pages from *Blindsight* have been displayed in diverse formats.[1] While such a display alone allows for different readings, the order of the images displayed also opened up reading and viewing possibilities since it was not necessarily identical to the order presented in the book: as a result, temporality, sequence, narrativity and storytelling possibilities are all shaken out of complacency and, like a **kaleidoscope**, made to form new shapes with every 'shake' or look. Such a malleable, mutating form emphasizes the fluidity and changeability of sequence, which also extends to narratives constructed through fixed series of images. *Blindsight* is a comic, but also an art

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[1] As a set of ten images, with two rows of three images and one row of four images during the Kaunas Graphic Biennale in 2017 and, most recently, as a grid of 7x7 images topped by three extra images on the top and on the bottom at the Gallery Posada del Corregidor in Santiago in 2018.

installation, calling for *seeing* rather than reading. It is also a meta-comic in that it interrogates and deconstructs seeing, how it works and how it is learned. In the book and on the wall, Muhr's images alternate between framed and frameless panels, and between single and multiple panels. Similarly hovering between abstraction and figuration, the images combine the simplifying forms of caricature, a step towards abstraction, with more experimental modes of figuration, a mark of the avant-garde.

Temporality, especially the issue of representing time and temporal experience, is probably best captured by the many blind drawings and other representations of movement, such as the endlessly turning, fidgety cat. (fig. 6 & 7) In many ways recalling modern artist's fascination with movement and their experimentation with it - consider for instance Giacomo Ball's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* from 1912 - the repetition of the cat within the page and across pages resurrects the issue of capturing movement that chronophotography sought to resolve. Movement is a historically loaded artistic obsession. As a graphic rendering of time and movement, repetition is distinctly modulated by *difference*, in line with Deleuze's famous problematization of identity, which is articulated on the axes of difference in repetition. Recognition entails learning through **repetition**; knowledgeable seeing entails repeated seeing and recognition of relevant difference: how many variations can one have of a cube and when does it stop being a cube? When does a cat disentangle itself from its preceding and future movements? Temporal experience, the transformation of objects and the maintenance of boundaries between objects capture the complexity of sight and seeing. It is in these moments that *Blindsight*'s shy, subtle protagonist peeks through the images...

Channeling subjectivity through objects: from sight to touch

In Muhr's *Blindsight*, we often see and try to understand visual impulses with the fresh eyes of a shy and fluid protagonist, partially inspired by Sack's patient, evocatively named Virgil. Virgil became blind at an early age and acquired sight after forty years thanks to a new diagnosis and a successful operation. However, this ability to see was not the blessing his entourage assumed it would be. Even after the operation, Virgil remains an 'exile from spatial reality'.[2] This does not mean that he is removed from reality, only that his world is composed differently. Before his operation, as Sacks points out, Virgil 'was a touch person through and through', 'deeply at home in *the world of touch* in time'. Touch remains Virgil's portal for accessing the world. This explains, at least in part, the fascination for objects in Muhr's book, which indulges in fixations on specific objects and their various transformations, through switching to negative space or through different versions of blind drawings. The focus on the possible absence of what

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[2] Here Sacks quotes from Marius von Senden, author of *Space and Sight*, based on his dissertation submitted in 1931. The English edition was published in 1960.

is normally *fundamental* for comic artists and readers - sight - can be seen as the generative principle in *Blindsight* as in the case of the negative spaces, the author begins with **negativity** or even a negation of comics' basis - reading by seeing - to lead us through a questioning of seeing through comics tools and through touch.

For the newly seeing Virgil in Sack's article, objects capture the 'unexpected vicissitudes of appearance' that mark his visual experience. The object transforms and moves according to the perspective from which it is viewed but also with each movement, if it moves, as is the case with a cat or a dog. After his sight-restoring operation, Virgil was in fact unable to distinguish between his cat and his dog, both of which were **black and white**... We find this confusion in *Blindsight*. We also find a catalogue of objects Virgil continues to rely on after his operation to *learn* the forms of animate and inanimate objects by touching their miniature versions. In other words, Virgil was *seeing through touch*. These found objects evoke the Surrealist practice of creating art from the everyday and the aleatory. They also form a personal archaeology for *understanding forms*. Art and subjectivity coalesce just like abstraction (the concretization of an idea) and figuration (the concrete form). The juxtaposition of the concept and the content of what is seen with the actual object – such as the opaque form of the cabinet and its contents (fig. 8 & 9) – captures the connections between seeing and knowledge and the deconstruction of knowledge. Lukas Wilde suggests that 'comics not only represent things, situations or worlds in singular ways, but are primarily objects of knowledge – conceptual entities.' *Blindsight* reflects such interrogation of knowledge, in turning objects inside out, reversing the spaces they occupy and adopting and dissolving the device of the panel.

Blindsight has an abstracted protagonist: abstracted because we never encounter his physical form, who exists essentially as an idea and through allusions to that idea, and who only in part mirrors Virgil and seems to embrace seeing in the end, instead of rejecting the world of sight for the world of touch. In opting for a subtle protagonist who seems to be learning and struggling to see, *Blindsight* tests the occularcentric nature of conventional comics. This traditional focus on the visual has been questioned by Ian Hague. Hague proposes considering comics through the lens of *performance*, which also entails accounting for its materiality. This **performance** can be said to have several, varying and mutating versions: the artist performs as storyteller, but also as protagonist and the potential or ideal reader. The reader performs potential versions of the comic and the comic in some ways performs with the reader. It is therefore in many ways a *writerly* (*scriptible*) text. Barthes introduced the term *scriptable* to highlight the difference between literary classics and the more experimental modern and postmodern works which encourage the reader to explore possible meanings: 'the writerly text is *ourselves* writing'. This is comparable to Umberto Eco's notion of the open work (*opera aperta*). It does not, however, imply that the

author is completely absent. Instead they are to be found between the lines or, more specifically, in the line and the act of drawing that it is a result of. Philippe Marion terms this complex interaction between the artist's persona, subjectivity and the drawn line *graphiation* (cf. Baetens 1996). Writing about abstract comics, Aarnoud Rommens proposes considering graphiation as 'an index of the communal' (Rommens 2019). The particular and universal coalesce in abstract and abstracting works such as *Blindsight*, where the narrative can be described as non-sequential.

Blindsight opens with a circle and ends with a line, a long line that extends across four pages. It is an ensemble of images that holds together on a wall or in the book form, transforming drastically with each change of support. The line is the horizon, which absorbs the vanishing point and which structures visual representations. Both the straight line and the circle are the corner stones of geometric abstraction. 'Abstraction is a kind of loosening up, of letting definitions go to make room for something unanticipated.' Recalling the Latin roots of **abstraction**, *abstrahere* or to withdraw, Rommens suggests that abstraction is 'a kind of 'tactical retreat' from dominant logics'. Indeed, as a partly abstract comic, *Blindsight* evokes new logics: the problem of understanding vision, the possibility to question the basic components of both picture making and comics making. Jan Baetens emphasizes 'degrees of narrativity' and abstraction in comics as 'a resistant mode of reading' (Baetens 2011). The introduction to *Comics and Abstraction* expands on this idea by juxtaposing abstract comics with scholarly texts, a simultaneously radical and productive move, that puts into practice the element of resistance in abstraction described by Baetens:

> (...) abstraction in comics can be defined as the process of challenging normally dominant features of comics—by putting those features to other, less orthodox uses. From this perspective, the analysis as well as the practice of abstract comics raises the issue of how far one can go in questioning the narrative dimension of graphic narrative (...)

While *Blindsight* is not strictly abstract since most of its pages are figurative, the connections between them as well as the content of the images often traverse the frontiers of abstraction. This matches the abstraction of temporality itself and figures the **temporality** of comics, touch (itself realized through materiality) as Ian Hague has shown, and experience. *Blindsight*'s abstraction also reflects the gulf between experience and seeing, between visual and tactile worlds. Such abstraction involves the 'substitution of panel sequencing with anarchic panel-combinatorics to effect information entropy instead of closure or *tressage*' (Rommens 39). In his influential *System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen identifies *tressage* or the braiding between panels and across pages as one of the key narrative techniques of comics. The 'degrees of narrativity' Baetens mentions play out across the many opportunities for braiding stories available in *Blindsight*. They also persist in the mapping and problematization of visual experience.

Muhr's haptic post-comic: the drawn book as a touch world?

Perhaps the term *post-comics* implies interrogating the past of comics and prefiguring possible futures of comics. Post-comics problematize the traditions and the possibilities of the comics medium. This excavation unfolds in Muhr's *Blindsight* not only on the level of the form, as suggested above, but also on the central dialectic of seeing and not seeing that is hinged on the process of learning to see. Given the background of Virgil's struggling encounter with vision and his experience as a blind man, it is not surprising that the haptic has a strong presence in *Blindsight*. Although this *hapticality* might not be apparent to the cursory beholder, it acquires several manifestations: the centrality of the hands, the small objects that serve as gateways to understanding their real-world counterparts, the textures of the different images (the fabric of the curtains, the cat's fur). Hands are both objects of wonder, as with the partially inversed hands mentioned above, and tools of inquiry, as when they examine a salt shaker from every angle, hide it from sight and uncover it. (fig. 10 & 11) **Touch** forms the membrane through which Virgil continued to access the visual world. It remains an indispensable, if often overlooked, means of accessing all art. 'Touch and sight have an interdependent relationship' Ian Hague reminds us. Moreover 'it is arguably touch that *connects* us to […the] world most definitely, dispelling illusions and concretizing our notions of the spaces we inhabit'.

While Hague focusses on comics incorporating different materials and digital comics to discuss the sense of touch, *Blindsight* captures an instance where touch – unexpectedly, subtly – establishes its importance. This importance is concretized precisely through the uncertainty of the visual. The uncertainty alludes to Virgil's struggle to process what he saw but is also generated by the play with potential comics forms that characterizes *Blindsight*: the careful, open braiding that provides multiple opportunities for interpretation through the diverse panel and page arrangements but also by flexing the concept of the panel and its framing - see Ahmed 2016 on the concept of openness, which transposes Eco's concept of the *opera aperta* to comics. Perhaps this is what post-comics try to do: subvert, or at least bypass, our expectations related to comics to point us towards **the 'other' of comics**, the aspects that are often taken for granted or outright barred because they challenge conventional reading practices. It would nevertheless be wrong to read *Blindsight*, and I imagine other post-comics, as simply subversions or rejections of conventional comics. They are, as this brief reflection on *Blindsight* hopes to show, better understood as interrogating what makes comics work and how they function and as *explorations* of what they can still do. In inciting new forms of knowledge and experience through comics, post-comics simultaneously call for, and point towards, new ways of understanding comics at large. *Blindsight* thrusts us, in the words of Felipe Muhr, to 'the edge of comics'.

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