

Lynda Cronin *EchoSense*

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Lynda Cronin EchoSense ANITA EUTENEIER

The expression “seeing is believing” illustrates the common misconception that visual art has to be seen to be appreciated. For the blind, the equivalent of visual representation can be made virtual when parlayed with other senses, especially that of touch. My former partner, a keen art lover who is blind, offered many insights gained through his tactile encounters with art.

His interpretations were insightful, and often could not be experienced visually. Once at a visit to New York’s Museum of Modern Art, we explored the museum’s serene outdoor sculpture garden. As he felt the undulating and changing surfaces of Picasso’s *Goat* (1950) he discovered a two-centimetre-wide strip of tubing situated at the rear end of the goat. It was, he concluded, a representation of the creature’s anus.

How persons with visual and auditory disabilities perceive art has been the driving force of Lynda Cronin’s artistic practice for more than 7 years. In her sculpture and installations, Cronin employs a range of technological approaches to articulate a sense of sculptural form, providing a level of interactivity that engages a diversity of viewers, including the blind and the deaf. Cronin’s interest was sparked by her artistic collaborator, the late Ineke Standish, whose husband was blind.

“We were both interested in making contemporary art that could be experienced through a multi-sensory encounter, in which the public would activate senses other than just the visual,” Cronin said in a recent interview.

Cronin and Standish began art instruction workshops for the blind and the deaf and observed the ways in which these individuals’ dominant sense responded. “I noticed one boy in our workshop who became very concerned when his hands became encased in clay,” said Cronin, “I understood this to

mean that the sensitivity of touch was diminished.” Through the process, Cronin discovered that persons with sight and hearing impairments had very similar aspirations, involvement, and interest in art to the sighted and hearing.

In 1997 Cronin and Standish exhibited *11+3/4* at Ottawa’s Karsh-Masson Gallery. The installation included plaster casts of their collaborators’ hands speaking sign language and plaster trees marked in Braille. *Bywash 1832* (2000), currently installed in Routhier Community Centre, Ottawa, pays homage to an historic estuary in Ottawa, and contains glass impressions of the feet of the artists’ blind colleagues. The piece incorporates Braille and is accompanied by a Braille brochure. *Applause* (2001), which Cronin describes as a “silent form of celebration” in sign language, includes photographs of deaf individuals signing and is installed at the Canadian Hearing Society in Ottawa.

Meeting and working with blind individuals, Cronin and Standish were often amazed with their skillful navigation of the world. They began researching the latest devices to aid the visually impaired, which employ ultrasound technology in ways similar to the sophisticated echolocation technique used by bats. Recent studies show that human touch can perceive objects distant from the body in ways similar to echolocation, where bats emit high-frequency sounds and listen to the echoes from targeted objects to determine their size, form and surface texture.

Her latest work is *EchoSense* a new media installation by the Ottawa-based artist exhibited at Carleton University Art Gallery in Spring 2003. The culmination of a work that Cronin and Standish began together, it explores the parallels between two often-misunderstood worlds — those of bats and the blind, particularly the sophisticated means of communication and navigation both employ.

Upon entering the lofty spaces of Carleton University’s High

Gallery, named for its expansive and grand 18ft ceiling, Cronin’s installation is barely visible in the low and diffused lighting. The installation consists of two sculptural forms placed three meters apart on the gallery floor. A polished steel cone bears the image of a flying bat incised on its cold rounded surface. The second

ducers that emit bursts of ultrasonic sound and receive echoes that trigger the sensors and activate the lights/sound for a fixed time. Visitors are encouraged to touch both pieces, providing a kind of forbidden pleasure that goes against the usual admonishment of “look but don’t touch” in museums and galleries.



sculpture is a grey rectangular fibreglass box (152 x 91 cm) with low-relief sculpture of tiger moths — the bat’s favoured prey — enlarged to show details.

The box takes on a photographic quality when illuminated. This happens when an ultrasonic motion sensor situated within the box triggers a fluorescent light. A similar sensor in the steel cone causes a digital player with speakers to begin a soundtrack of recorded sounds from a bat cave — chirpy bat talk, trickling water, howling winds. The experience for the viewer simulates the natural worlds of the bat and is key to the work’s meaning.

By simulating echolocation in an artwork, Cronin creates an intriguing symmetry between the gallery and the natural worlds. The simulation is produced using trans-

ducers that emit bursts of ultrasonic sound and receive echoes that trigger the sensors and activate the lights/sound for a fixed time. Visitors are encouraged to touch both pieces, providing a kind of forbidden pleasure that goes against the usual admonishment of “look but don’t touch” in museums and galleries. But experiencing art through alternative sensory exploration is increasing as an aging population faces diminished sight and hearing. At the Reading Museum in England, visitors can touch tactile representations of sections of the Bayeux tapestry. Soon the blind will have access to a monumental work on the history of art produced by Art Education for the Blind, a New York-based organization whose mandate is to make visual arts accessible to the blind and visually impaired. Developed and tested by a team of art historians, educators, and developmental psychologists, the 22-volume series on the history of art is told through tactile pictures and atmospheric sound components. With its dynamic experience available to an inclusive audience, *EchoSense* may well find its way into a future volume. ←

LINDA CRONIN,
EchoSense, 2003.
Photo Courtesy of the
artist.