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# CHALLENGING VISION IN VISUAL ARTS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

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**ABSTRACT**

*This conceptual article is anchored on critical phenomenology to challenge the monopolisation of visual arts by the sense of vision, thus depriving visually impaired people of aesthetic value beyond ordinary cognitive faculties. In this study, we discuss the forms of painting, drawing and sculpting defined as Visual Arts referring to appreciation only by vision; thus, excluding the visually impaired as unable to appreciate or create by sight. This exclusiveness has dominated and directed art aesthetics and ethics, allowing aesthetic criteria research projects and educational curricula to be established and, conventionally, maintain their static existence unchallenged. Furthermore, vision exclusiveness limits creative thinking and artistic inspiration. This article demonstrates the need and importance of broadening students' artistic conceptualisation of inclusiveness in Visual Arts by exploring three fields of humanities education, i.e., academic, educational and sociocultural. The article challenges established stereotypes by introducing innovative approaches and opening alternative channels of creative and critical thinking in higher art education. From a sociocultural viewpoint in the South African context, the analysis questions the validity of certain firmly rooted stereotypical concepts about art values and standards by encountering the visually unimpeded and impaired. While the research broadens students' artistic conceptualisation of inclusiveness in Visual Arts, it simultaneously promotes the concept of hephapreneurship (hepha+preneurship), a neologism inspired by the Greek god, Hephaestus, protector of arts and crafts, himself handicapped. The term does not draw attention to the inabilities of persons with visual impairment, but their creative abilities through encouragement and motivation. By direct and open exposure to the problem, the research promotes the importance of arts education as a challenging platform for interaction between two, by definition, opposed realities.*

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, hephapreneurship, infinity design process, inclusion, Visual Arts, visually impaired.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Certain art forms, such as painting, drawing, sculpting, and even filmmaking have been traditionally defined as Visual

Arts,<sup>1</sup> referring to their appreciation exclusively by sight; therefore, one human sense, vision. Thus, by definition, both theoretically and in practice, the visually impaired are *a priori* excluded from any visual art form, as unable to appreciate by sight. The exclusiveness has also set the foundations on which art aesthetics and ethics were built, successfully developed and conventionally established. It is on and around these factors that globally ethical principles, aesthetic criteria, research projects, educational systems and pedagogical curricula have been established and diachronically maintained an unchanged and unchallenged existence. Simultaneously, from an educational viewpoint, this very vision exclusiveness has set crucial limitations on creative thinking and artistic inspiration, both essential factors in developing art creativity.

In this context, this research challenges the rationality of certain firmly rooted stereotypical perceptions about art values and aesthetic standards by an educational encounter of two, by definition, opposed social groups, the visually impaired and unimpaired. Motivated by this quest, this article demonstrates the need for and importance of broadening students' artistic conceptualisation of inclusiveness in Visual Arts. The study itself can be considered as a relevant paradigm of a conceptual research, which aims at broadening the scope of educational thinking by linking established concepts with different viewpoints in a constructive way. Therefore, the study approaches its objective from three different, yet interlinked, viewpoints: 1. academic disciplinary problematic, 2. educational multiliteracy training, and 3. *hephapreneurship* inclusive sociocultural approach:

1. From an academic and strictly critical viewpoint, Jennifer Lauwrens (2007: 56) has accurately identified the seriousness of the disciplinary problem visual arts faces globally and in South Africa. In her words, "... it has become increasingly evident that art history has largely been thrown into **disarray**, leaving its practitioners polarised in the debate concerning the scope of [the] object of study – visual art – and the methodological assumptions that have traditionally underpinned its strategies. It may now even be suggested that the identity of the discipline of art history is in a much-needed state of transition. This statement is moreover true in the South African context”.
2. Referring to inclusion, teachers or designers are urged to approach as closely as possible the *Others'* worldview and experience their realities by first comprehending other people's lives, needs and values. In the South African context, referring to *design*, Steyn (2019: 156) states that “the conventional understanding of design is presently in the process of a collective mind shift towards a more **inclusive** platform both professionally and artistically”, translating to a great need, first, for more and broader design literacy, second, for re-evaluation of established theories and viewpoints, and third, for closer to reality educational methodologies and approaches.
3. In line with the ongoing sociocultural reforms in South Africa, Maximus Sefotho and Liesel Ebersöhn introduced the term *hephapreneurship*, a neologism defining a framework that encourages, motivates and optimises the abilities of persons with visual impairment. Beyond this form of impairment, *hephapreneurship* promotes transformative social justice to foster positive and meaningful existence, such as that found in experiences of persons with visual impairment when they enjoy creating art and receiving feedback about their creations (Sefotho, 2015: 1).

1 Note that term Visual Arts correspond to *Εικαστικές Τέχνες* (both in ancient and modern Greek), implying the technical ability/skill of copying or portraying (as mentioned in Platon: Pl, Sph 235d (Liddell & Scott, 1968: 484) or providing a visual representation of a conceptualised image or idea and the world in general (Mpampiniotis, 2002: 556, 1759). For a critical analysis of the current terminology on visual arts and its impact on the present direction of the subject itself, see Lauwrens (2007: 1–9).

In this multi-layered context, we challenge the notion of aesthetic appreciation only by vision<sup>2</sup> as applicable to both interacting communication participants, visually impaired and normally sighted, both creator-artists as senders and both as receivers by asking:

- Does one need to see to appreciate a visual artwork?
- How can one aesthetically experience artwork through other senses?
- Can creative thinking broaden its spectrum through inclusive reflection by direct participation and communication between We and Others?

## 2. THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALISATION

### 2.1 The infinity of aesthetics

Structured around aesthetics and from a humanistic viewpoint, the theoretical framework summarises origin, nature and developing aesthetics in Visual Arts. Relevant views and norms are assessed and applied in the context of sociocultural educational adjustments referring to revisiting aesthetics, social inclusion and committee involvement in South Africa.

In the Middle Ages, aesthetic standards were founded on integrated criteria inherited from antiquity and concepts rooted in the Christian religion's metaphysical teachings, best articulated by Saint Augustine (354–430 CE) and mainly in Italy (Mouzakes & Savvides, 2007). Aesthetics in Byzantine art, according to their theocratic worldview, were a blend of aesthetics established by the Greek Fathers of the Church and those set by the fifth-century author known as Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagites and his Neoplatonic philosophical concepts (Maras, 2008:). The medieval theory on aesthetics, in both Eastern and Western Europe, was built on brightness, proportional harmony and the concept of *pankalia*, including Christian moral standards. The perception of beauty was conceptualised around three factors of artificial form, namely perfection or integrity, which rejected anything incomplete as ugly, proportion, which imposed harmony and consonance and splendour because beauty was associated with brilliant colours. Beauty was experienced through sensations aesthetically evoked by luminous brightness or lively movement (Huizinga, 1954; Tatarkiewitz, 1970; Eco, 2004; Hatzaki, 2010; Mariev, 2013). Accordingly, if an aesthetic perception is defined as an activity of the mind created by immediate apprehension of a sense, beauty should be identified with a mentally experienced, emotional pleasure.

The intertwined history of religion and art significantly influenced the developing criteria of aesthetics, which spread to other sociocultural fields of humans. Represented in archetypes and cultural stereotypes, they have influenced and shaped worldviews, sometimes with destructive consequences both individually and collectively. While concepts about brightness and splendour have been associated with sun, light, purity and hope, their opposites, darkness and blackness, were linked to night, insinuating depression, sadness and even ignorance. The eternal conflict between day and night, happiness versus misery, and good against evil are often expressed through symbolic representations, either in dreams or artistic imagery (Jung & Von Franz, 1979).

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2 Based on the exhibition *The Blind Astronomer* by the South African artist, Berco Wilsenach, Lauwrens (2019) critically examines established assumptions "about the primacy of vision in Western science and aesthetics... the relationship between touch and vision, and touch as an aesthetic experience". Compare Berco Wilsenach, *The Blind Astronomer*, an exhibition to Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet Project* (Boshoff, 1996).

Throughout centuries of evolution, aesthetics could be grasped and formed from one period to another according to its time and interaction with its contemporary sociocultural circumstances and influences. Nevertheless, next to its assumed flexibility, features, such as hierarchical distinctions and aesthetic criteria,<sup>3</sup> have persisted and maintained their stereotypical power of space and time moving between two equally strong dynamics, subjectivity versus objectivity. In this context, humans can be certain of the subjectivity of one's emotions in front of artistic creation and the boundless efforts of the artist to physically define the indefinable or represent the invisible (Eco, 2009). The limitations of human sensibilities and the inability to grasp objects greater than the actual reality are experienced when weighted against the infinity of the sublime and universe. Yet, holistically, the history of aesthetics can offer a sensation of the essence of infinity. To describe the eternity and immeasurability of emotions and sensations artistically evoked regarding time and space, Eco (2009: 17) defines the infinity of aesthetics as "a sensation that follows from the finite and perfect completeness of the thing we admire". This feeling opposes the sentiment one experiences in front of the innumerability of the stars in the universe, which is a "form of representation that suggests infinity almost physically, because, in fact, it does not end, nor does it conclude in form".

Consequently, artists, both as senders and receivers, can communicate the essence of infinity either by sense or feeling and in measure with their conceptual abilities; therefore, the broader these intangible abilities are, the greater the objectivity of the artistic creation and its closeness to cosmic dimensions. Thus, *mutatis mutandis*, in the South African sociocultural context, the importance of seeing the world from different angles and the need for developing multilateral skills, have gained momentum in terms of reviewing, reassessing, revisiting and restructuring the nation politically, socially and in our case, educationally. In this context, awareness and inclusion are subjects of focus.

## 2.2 Inclusiveness in South Africa

After abolishing apartheid and implementing democracy in 1994, the collective thinking in South Africa gradually and steadily entered a process of changes, involving politically, socially and culturally all levels of the country's stratification. The development of a different form of patriotism and the sentiment of father/mother country belonging has put in motion a process for a collective national identity based on loyalty, solidarity, and fraternity among a heterogeneous and culturally multifaceted society. Consequently, established definitions of nationalism, as the following one, could not qualify the requirements of the reformed South African nation and articulate its diverse aspirations.

Nationalism is a state or condition of mind characteristic of certain peoples with a homogeneous culture, living together in close association on a given territory, and sharing a belief in a distinctive existence and a common destiny (Whitton, 1972: 749).

Therefore, characteristics, such as homogeneous culture, close association, and a common destiny, even if they were not always jointly present (Heller, 1981: 1505), could not accommodate the structure of the new South Africa nor reflect its multifaceted sociocultural context suitably characterised as the rainbow nation. During development of a meaningful democracy in a well-integrated, multi-racial and multi-cultural society, pressure for changes of

3 Advocating in favour of fundamental changes and adjustments to the discipline of art history, Lauwrens (2007: 133) states: "Firstly, in many instances, the discipline of art history **continues to be directed** by a belief in the universality of aesthetic response; and secondly, notions of hierarchical distinctions, as well as the chronological development of style, continue to govern its analytical procedures" (own emphasis added).

a multiplex nature and in multiple fields led to reconsideration, re-evaluation and re-orientation, imposing dynamic restructuring. In this plethora of challenges, the essence of aesthetics also entered a route of transformation. In this setting, socio-culturally and technologically pressed, aesthetics, in its own right, must trace its course of changes, adjustments and reforms by turning its academic focus to local South African artistic creations from a different viewpoint.

### 2.3 Academic disciplinary problems

Culturally and technologically motivated South African aesthetics studies face an ambitious aim, namely, to adjust its evaluation standards and aesthetic criteria by broadening its focus for a more inclusive view. In her critical analysis of the traditional aesthetic criteria in Visual Arts and its limitations, Lauwrens (2019: 330) stresses the need to reconsider the validity of the “Western hierarchical distribution of the senses” and move away from the established elitist order of vision → hearing → smell → taste → touch.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in response to calls for reforms, Lauwrens (2007: ii) rejects the traditional art historical methodologies as unable to accommodate the technological image-making advances. Labelled as art history visual culture studies, she proposes this innovative approach as the most suitable to build the required inclusive aesthetic standards to critically analyse and accordingly assess the ideological functions of images conceptualised and produced especially through technologically artistic creativity. According to Lauwrens (2007: 121–123), “art history visual cultural studies ought to be viewed as an endeavour that can spark debate and critical thinking about naturalised concepts”.<sup>5</sup> To understand the recognising of the South African artist Jackson Hlungwani and his work *Adam and the birth of Eve*, Lauwrens explains that when his sculptures “became” art, in other words, when art dealers recognised the economic potential of these works (in 1984), an assumed notion of what was “art” presumably was immediately affected. Lauwrens (2007: 124) furthermore states: “When objects move into the consumerist realm of art objects, they are immediately perceived, understood and experienced in a different way, which, once again, inevitably becomes the ‘natural’ way of looking at these works”.

This view applied to Hlungwani demonstrates the need for thorough examination and analysis of artworks, no matter from which perspective, but regarding the interaction between creation, creator and sociocultural context. It must also be noted, that placed out of “the consumerist realm of art objects”, Hlungwani’s sculptures have been examined by various scholars (Schneider, 1989; Maluleke, 1991; Nettleton, 2009), focusing on his artistic creativity within its socio-cultural context. Therefore, knowledge of the African traditions and ideologies, such as the Tsonga, Venda, Lemba, Zionism and Ethiopianism, is an essential factor to define or even understand Hlungwani’s Africanism and his metaphysical visions.

### 2.4 Educational multiliteracy training

Concerning education, in the analysis of *Teaching and Learning Dynamics*, Abrie, Blom and Fraser (2016) explain how building a new state-nation has led to reconsidering and re-evaluating previous theoretical views, standpoints, methodologies and educational approaches in South Africa. Concepts, beliefs, convictions, principles and perceptions have been individually and collectively challenged and driven towards a different sociocultural context, where integration

4 Artist, Willem Boshoff created 338 sculptures, hidden in boxes that could be readable only by touch. His *Blind Alphabet Project*, “re-establishes the integrity of touch as a socially viable catalyst for interactive discourse. It sets up touch, in favour of sight by enabling, if not ennobling the state of blindness, and by disabling the sense of sight” (Boshoff, 1996).

5 For more on arts-based research see Leavy, 2009.

has replaced segmentation and inclusiveness replaced exclusiveness. Justifiably, thus, in South Africa,

...social inclusion should be at the heart of every discourse given the history of apartheid so deeply entrenched in the social fibre of the country. Specifically, social justice issues should be emphasised in the training of career guidance practitioners at all levels. The curricula should be social justice conscious (Sefotho, 2017: 28).

## 2.5 *Hephapreneurship* inclusive sociocultural approach

Having identified the need to include disability in education curricula and the benefit of mainstreaming development programming, the importance of *hephapreneurial* skill development in educational training has been noted. The term *hephapreneurship* is inspired by the mythical Greek handicapped god, the protector of arts and crafts, *Hephaestus*, whose mythical skills are marvellously illustrated on a 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> CE *Shield of Achilles* and discussed by Eco (2009). The approach itself is defined as

a process of fostering positive and meaningful existence anchored on subsistence entrepreneurship of differently-abled persons and underprivileged persons, which is founded on the ethos of career choice/construction, towards transformative social justice and change (Sefotho, 2015: 3, 6).

This approach's strength lies in viewing disabilities as a source of motivation in developing other capacities, rather than considering them as shortcomings in human existence. "Disabled" people, thus, should be regarded as differently-abled persons to partake in the development process locally and globally (O'Neill, 2011). Although still somewhat controversial, the term differently-abled is now extensively used under the banner of politically correct language (Smith, 2008; O'Neill, 2011; Mitra, Shukla & Sen, 2014; Chhabra, 2016; Gan *et al.*, 2016; Ayachit, & Thakur, 2017; Barclay, 2017; Muster, 2017; Chandrakanth & Reddy, 2019; Jayathilaka, 2020; Leshota, & Sefotho, 2020).

Persons with visual impairment also have talents and abilities they want to share with the world. In their ways, they create art and equally appreciate it through touchable compositions (Mühleis, 2015). Instead of seeing art, visually impaired persons perceive it through tactile and other means, challenging the status quo about the name and semantics of visual arts. Current awareness and production of art by visually impaired persons falsify Visual Arts or rather disrupt the notion that art can only be visually appreciated. Many examples of artists with visual impairment exist, save that they are supported to display their abilities without prejudice (Mühleis, 2015). Other examples include photography by visually impaired artists and are fast developing new genres in the field of contemporary art (Hayhoe, 2015). Szubielska (2018: 5), working on an educational and artistic project in Poland on individuals with sight impairments, notes that "Paradoxically 'the experiment' proved that the visual arts can help normally sighted people to see the world of persons with visual impairment". Thus, art by visually impaired persons must be encouraged for them to use it to communicate their world to the rest of society.

If we accept that for inspired motivation, creative thinking has traditionally relied on mythology, history and mostly religion, the South African sociocultural context, viewed and analysed through its aesthetic value system, must find its proper place regarding art history visual culture studies, art scholarly research and pedagogical sociocultural approaches in education.

## 2.6 Inclusiveness in design literacy

For its completion, any design project relies on the creative, problem-identifying and solving functions of the brain regarding decisions on presentation and functionality of products, environmental and service issues, sociocultural value systems and aesthetic norms. Consequently, the three main interwoven forces motivating and sustaining a design process are imagination, inspiration and most importantly, freedom of expression, which has been broadly practised and highly appreciated since the establishment of democracy.

In line with these reforming strategies, Cassim (2013: 190) questions the traditional design educational approaches in South Africa and promotes direct engagement of students with the current socioeconomic and environmental issues of the country by focusing “on the design (problem-solving) methodologies that are taught and, subsequently, employed by students as part of their design training”.

Furthermore, because of globalisation and the claim that more people and societies should be more design literate, the provincial and conventional understanding of design in South Africa has been engaged in the process of a collective mind shift towards a more inclusive platform, both artistically and professionally. This broader sociocultural shared awareness has developed multiliteracy approaches in education. Subsequently, the importance of multiliteracies and the concept of design as a creative tool in transformative and innovative learning have gained momentum. Furthermore, calls for fundamental changes have motivated higher decision-making education authorities to use design curriculum structures, principles and data in the planning and structuring curricula for other teaching subjects as well (UMALUSI, 2019; Eriksson *et al.*, 2019).

In the South African new orientation and adjustment context, academically, educationally and socio-culturally, the creative design process has earned momentum in education particularly to bring theoretical, ideological and abstract concepts closer to reality (UMALUSI, 2019; Eriksson *et al.*, 2019). In the framework of this need, especially from a pedagogical viewpoint, the idea of voluntarily engaging art students in an awareness experience was born. The purpose was to:

- a. enhance their worldview through the consciousness of the Other regarding empathy, objectivity and sensibility, all essential for the successful completion of any art project and process; and
- b. challenge any conventional and subjective thinking in education among art students and, by expansion, society.

In education, this different line of thinking intended to enhance the creative possibilities of Visual Arts through a direct exposure to accurate information on the unknown *Other* using an innovative approach. Thereby, a group of pre-service teachers would experience relative conditions and problems, analyse them and work methodologically towards their solutions. Therefore, to broaden their artistic imagination and enhance their conceptual ability, these Art Education pre-service teachers were faced with a challenge, which, because of its unusual nature, became a highly tempting task and extremely appealing innovativeness by putting to test their creative and critical thinking. However, to further challenge established norms and perceptions, the visually impaired, in turn, were invited to display their artworks, breaking prejudices and stereotypes built around “inabilities” than “different abilities” regarding people with visual impairments (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Blind jazz music band, “2 of a kind plus” entertaining the audience at the opening of the exhibition. Available at: [https://www.up.ac.za/humanities-education/news/post\\_2734033-i-shut-my-eyes-in-order-to-see-annual-art-exhibition](https://www.up.ac.za/humanities-education/news/post_2734033-i-shut-my-eyes-in-order-to-see-annual-art-exhibition)

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This article used the qualitative and interpretative art-based methodology (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017) crafted on exhibitions as knowledge generating activities (Bjerregaard, 2019). According to Rolling (2010: 104), “Arts-based inquiry is grounded in arts practices rather than the sciences and is well documented in its ability to alter the ‘methodological turf’, such as accommodating visual impairment in Visual Arts”. The ontological and epistemological perspectives of art as practice lend themselves to subjective interpretations and creativity in meaning-making. The axiological or ethical issues surrounding exhibitions are still under-researched and little guidance is available (Huang & Chiang, 2007). Specific to art-based research from exhibitions, it is recommended that ethics should consider dimensions such as serviceability, education, environment and marketing.

Because of the originality of this project, for its realisation, the researchers relied on the interlinked application of two opposing methods: the one referring to the hazards of innovation and the other to the established exclusiveness of Visual Arts. According to Rogers (1983: xviii), an innovation highlights a new alternative or alternatives, and most importantly, new means of solving problems. However, as tempting as it might be, innovation generates uncertainty. Any hesitancy, reserve or doubt automatically causes fear of risk and holding one’s comfort zone position; thus, indecision. To overcome this stage of hesitancy, during the contextualisation process, students were introduced to the concept of *hephapreneurship* by highlighting abilities over disabilities.

Strengthened by the students' positive response to *hephapreneurship*, four stages of the innovation-decision approach were firmly and decisively applied:

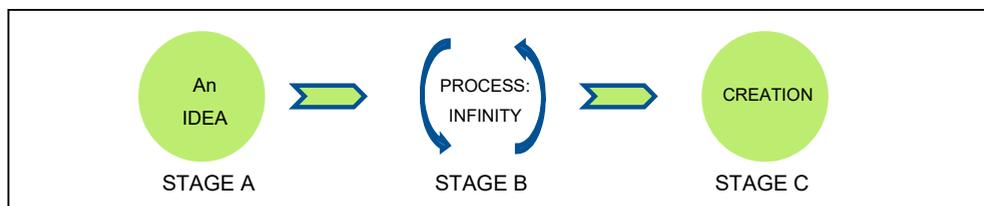
1. Encountering innovation through clear and precise information
2. Decision-making: choosing between accepting and rejecting the innovation
3. Assimilation: integrating the inner acquired data with new information
4. Outlet expression: the productive manifestation of the integrated inner intelligence

### 3.1 The issue of risk-taking

Designers and artists are creative thinkers and, as such, work in a territory where nothing is clear; no right or wrong answers exist and the next step is uncertain. Consequently, designers and artists are risk-takers with confidence because they trust to learn from failures rather than successes (Steyn, 2019). Simultaneously, this is also the stage where creative thinking occurs, as the mind explores the unknown and ideas are often formed as concealed messages, codes, and art, often as symbols. As Jung explains, a symbol holds specific meanings (apart from the obvious meanings) that are unknown and hidden from us. "As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason" (Jung & Von Franz, 1979: 20).

### 3.2 Towards realising the Visual Arts project

For realising the innovative creative thinking project, a fair balance had to be maintained between positive factors and negative influences by identifying the subject matter and aim of the experience through a careful and controlled introduction to the innovative approach and risk-taking exposure. Based on three versions of the design process (Steyn, 2019), the action project has developed through three distinctive stages.



**Figure 2:** Three basic stages of the design stage

Stage A: The idea

Stage B: The process

Stage C: The creating stage

From artistic and educational viewpoints, the design process (Figure 2) has three basic stages: A = IDEA, the embryonic stage of a design; B = PROCESS as the active part of the design referring to the middle stage, leading to execution; and stage C = CREATION. Following the South African Design Curriculum, the design process (Figure 2: stage B) ends before the execution stage (stage C), i.e., before creating a prototype or final product (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011a). Similar to the Design Curriculum, the Visual Arts Curriculum defines the developmental process as one to first "explore different approaches to generating ideas", then "critically engage with own experience of the world through the exploration, manipulation, and interpretation of signs and symbols drawn from a broader visual culture"

and realising the concept to “document and critically evaluate the process of conceptual development” (DBE, 2011b: 32, 34, 36).

However, realising a concept (i.e., design innovation) is not mainly about the idea and product concepts, but equal emphasis should be placed on the middle testing stage B, where designers and artists can improve their concepts by testing, breaking, experimenting, evaluating, and re-making products and artworks. Therefore, it can be regarded as an infinity stage because it allows for an infinite number of repeats and continuation to occur, where risk-taking is an ongoing developmental stage. The infinity design process is based on original ideas and prototype projects, inviting students to redesign how they usually design their final artworks.

### 3.3 The infinite stage

The process is ideal because it coordinates stages A and C and allows the risk-taking phase to be included in the finalisation stage. The middle stage B is labelled the infinity process, emphasising the ongoing course of the making and testing of the relevant product before its final presentation (or the solution to a pre-problem). The role of the infinity stage in developing creative ideas and their realisation is critical because it aims at an infinite number of constructive relative attempts and a better-planned continuation. This infinite stage approach has proven its validity in practice, first because it secures the coordination between stages A and C and, second, it accommodates the element of surprise regarding risk-taking, critical for successful outcomes in the context of the design teaching-learning targets (Steyn, 2020).

To challenge the notion of aesthetic appreciation for the practical application of the art module, the first task was given to students to create artworks to be experienced through different senses. The brief's title was I shut my eyes to see. These artworks would be displayed at an exhibition specially created to raise awareness of the blind and visually impaired. Regarding inclusivity, this creative space would similarly become a platform where artworks made by visually impaired learners were to be exhibited. The outcome was far less impressive than expected; as the prospective teachers, by excluding vision, focused on producing artworks to be experienced through only one sense, **touch**.

According to the plan, the students were to experience the essence of their task themselves through an organised visit to a school for the blind and visually impaired. Upon arrival, before being introduced to blind children, the students were informed about different vision problems. To complete the process of awareness through direct and actual participation, the student pairs, one blindfolded and the other as the assistant, worked as a team finding their way through the school corridors. Each pair had to switch roles afterwards. By this direct involvement, students experienced the challenges that visually impaired people face and, most importantly, were forced to depend on their other senses. Consequently, the students decided to revisit their original creations (stage C) with changed ideas and concepts; therefore, they had to revert to stage B, the process itself. They had to redesign their final artworks from another conceptual viewpoint. Having themselves been the Others, in terms of empathy, objectivity and sensibility, all essential factors were considered and illustrated in their re-creations. Genis (2019) duly stressed the importance of contextualising an existing design artefact within the specific sociocultural situations of designers themselves.

## 5. OUTCOMES

The major strength of the above-analysed project has been to demonstrate how innovative practical engagement and applied inclusiveness can channel creative thinking towards positive and constructive outcomes. Experienced through a reformed conceptual framework, innovative approaches and using different senses, these outcomes refer to three aspects of the realised aim.

### 4.1 Academic

The infinity design process is based on ideas, prototypes and some artworks of the students. The proposed design approach was recently published under the title *Meaning-making in design: a practical approach to exploring multiliteracy* (Steyn, 2019: 153–173). Furthermore, at the opening of the art exhibition, Maximus Sefotho announced the new Advanced Diploma in Visual Impairment offered by the Centre for Visual Impairment Studies at the University of Pretoria, aimed at training pre-service teachers across study spheres to also teach visually impaired learners.

### 4.2 Educational

The morning before the exhibition, a team from the Living Lab for Innovative Teaching at the University of Pretoria videotaped the art education students while they were setting up the artworks for the opening. During the evening of the exhibition, attendees could watch the time-lapse video of how the exhibition was put together, allowing for other types of sensations or sensory feelings. The exhibits were viewed in virtual reality, where the real surrounding time-lapse video was blended with what the viewers saw in digital content generated using computer software. Exposing the communication problem and the direct involvement of the art creators (senders) and receivers (public) took the theme of the art exhibition a step further. People were led to look at artworks as an integrated part of an artificial, 3-dimensional environment, where dreams and imagination were interacting with the physical world in virtual reality.

As for the design students, the element of direct exposure inspired them to enter the risk-taking process with greater confidence because they could restructure their previous works using a different line of thinking and create artworks that were experienced and appreciated through other senses in a public exhibition (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Artworks experienced through other senses. Available at: [https://www.up.ac.za/humanities-education/news/post\\_2734033-i-shut-my-eyes-in-order-to-see-annual-art-exhibition](https://www.up.ac.za/humanities-education/news/post_2734033-i-shut-my-eyes-in-order-to-see-annual-art-exhibition)

### 4.3 Sociocultural

Concerning the public, the aesthetic value of the artworks was far less important than the experience gained through the unfamiliar viewpoints of the created works. Furthermore, the relevant exhibition of the works by both visually abled and impaired students led to public awareness, understanding and comprehension of physical conditions and the possibilities of a different social existence. The students created spectacles that visitors could test to experience the following degrees of blindness:

1. Peripheral vision problems or tunnel vision, meaning a lack of a normal, wide-angle field of vision, even if the central vision is intact
2. Central vision loss or macular degeneration
3. Possible eye problems linked to albinism, including astigmatism

### 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, three fields of education (academic, educational and sociocultural) met under one common target, inclusion. The encounter highlighted the need for reforms and demonstrated the way for implementation. Visual Arts as a visual discipline must be challenged and debunked from established principles, the exclusive aesthetic value system and elitist approaches, which can disable the able. Since Visual Arts are about insight rather than sight, it must be inclusive for those who think artistically and who can creatively express feelings other than visually. Therefore, during this study, we challenged established aesthetic standards in artistic creations through inclusiveness and sharpened teaching and learning critical thinking in art through innovative approaches and more accurate decision-making and problem-solving choices, be it of ideas, viewpoint, theoretical frameworks or methodological approaches. Educationally, the applied unconventional practical approach has enhanced artistic creativity through direct participation and tangible interaction between the art creator (sender) and target (receiver). Most importantly, by direct exposure of all participants to the given problem, this study also promoted the importance of arts education as a challenging platform for the interaction between, by definition, socio-culturally opposed groups in South Africa.

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