

Clinical & Refractive Optometry

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Blind With Camera Photography by the Visually Impaired

The Blind With Camera project may sound paradoxical and one may wonder about the reason for featuring it in a journal dedicated to optometry. However, the science of the human eye and visual art by the blind share an important element in common: overcoming constraints relating to eye health.

In early 2004, by chance I picked up an old issue of a photography magazine from a street vendor in Mumbai, a metropolis of India, and came across an article on Evgen Bavcar, an accomplished blind photographer based in Paris. My passion for photography led me to contact Evgen Bavcar over the Internet, with the result that I was profoundly influenced by his work and philosophy. I engaged myself in self-study on blindness and visual art. In the process, I came in touch with several blind photographers and blind artists around the world, and people working toward providing new insight regarding the blind and their artistic expression.

I decided to start a workshop on photography for the blind, but it was not easy to surmount the obstacles of endless queries, questions and doubts. Finally, the workshop was launched in January 2006 with nine participants between the ages of 15 and 50, with various ages of onset of blindness, and various types of sight loss from complete blindness to low vision.

My "visual-centric" interaction with the participants opened the floodgates of their intriguing world, as they described their home, school or workplace, faces of their loved ones, new places they visited, favorite movie stars, TV shows, cartoon characters, the color of sky and grass, and much more. I was amazed to find so much sight at the heart of their blindness; all they needed was guidance and a sense of purpose in communicating their mental images outward as a form of self-expression. The workshop approach was to trigger visual thinking, to enhance mental imagery formation in the participants, and to use the camera as an extension of "self" to explore the visual world, gaining deeper insight while recording their imagination and point of view.

To help them explore new visual language, I rarely shared with them the rules of photography (the way we know it) and what makes a photograph good or bad (the way we judge it). Instead, the focus was on their life experience in relation to visual realities around them that can be captured to communicate new visual content and meanings. We visited art galleries to conceptually understand what the artists were trying to convey through their work. We also saw plays and films in order to gain an understanding of the synergy between dialogue and visuals on stage and on screen.

Touch, sound, visual memories of sight, the warmth of light, and cognitive and intuitive skills are used by these students to create mental images before they determine how to take a given picture. It's a creative journey through an unknown path, exploring ways to reach new visual destinations. Over the period of one year, thousand of pictures were taken during workshop sessions. As the workshop evolved with time, I could see the illuminated new world of the blind photographer's inner gallery. These inner galleries then became the "Beyond Sight" exhibition which has been displayed at the best of the mainstream art galleries across India.

Beyond Sight was an "inclusive" exhibition, using raised touchable pictures, Braille notes, visual aids, and descriptive tours as ways of accessing photographs by the visually impaired audience. The project and exhibit were the first of their kind in India, and received an overwhelming response. They offered an entirely new perspective to the sighted population, demystified blindness, sensitized people, and corrected the public perception of visual impairment, leading to the realization that diminished senses do not have to mean a diminished life. Proceeds from the sale of prints went to visually impaired photographers, who gained a new-found a sense of pride in their accomplishments, and increased self-esteem and confidence.

The success of the Blind with Camera project is a testament to the conviction that with faith, anything is possible. It reminded me of a quote by American photographer Walker Evans, "The blind are not totally blind. Reality is not totally real."

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Partho Bhowmick is a photo-essayist and an independent researcher on art by the blind. He lives in Mumbai, India. To view pictures taken by the visually impaired photographers and to learn more about the Blind with Camera project, visit www.blindwithcamera.org.