



ANTONIA HIRSCH

Double Blind

PUBLIC
ART
vancouver



About the Work

Double Blind, Antonia Hirsch's large-scale artwork in the atrium of the north building on the Broadway Campus of Vancouver Community College (VCC) is not, at first glance, an easy read. As a formal presence, it lacks the kind of heavy "materiality" expected from public work; the formal heft of iron, bronze or steel gives way here to a luminous collection of convex acrylic security mirrors that protrude, bubble-like, from concrete walls. The materials — the kind one might find in any number of security-conscious convenience stores — hint at the artist's larger project: to make visible overarching systems of control and exclusion.

The work is a disjointed reflection. In descending layers, the mirrors spell out a four-storey Snellen eye chart — that familiar series of letters that many of us recognize from routine eye exams — as enormous braille letters. The domes present a formal conundrum — they remain unreadable for people without sight, and, for those that can see, the array at first appears as a random association of dots, vague punctuations unable to express. In the words of the artist, it is an "eye chart for the blind," and this sensory inconsistency brings us to a far-reaching conclusion that the work refers to a more widespread cultural invisibility.

Above Dome detail, *Double Blind*, 2008. Photo: Photo Technic

On a basic level, the work reveals the inaccessibility of mainstream communication for the blind and relates to VCC's programming for visually impaired adults. *Double Blind* brings into relief cultural exclusions that most take for granted. A plaque next to the sculpture explains in braille the concept behind the work, and while developing the piece, Hirsch had ongoing consultations with students, staff and faculty in VCC's program for the visually impaired. The work "makes visible" the situation of not seeing — and the implications of exclusion in a place of higher learning, with its promises of knowledge, social interaction and professional advancement. The fact that students of VCC's School of Health Sciences might learn about "double blind" medical trials during their studies makes an additional connection between Hirsch's eye chart and the activities and pedagogies going on elsewhere in the building.

More generally, the work poses questions about "seeing" as a means of control. The convex security mirrors make an explicit reference to the links between sight and power; those who have the wider view preside over those who, in their visibility, might be "counted." One is reminded of Michel Foucault's writing on the Panopticon — an architecture that allows for a seemingly all-seeing vantage point — as a tool to enforce power, and it seems fitting that these mirrors reflect the goings-on in an institutional hall of windows, balconies and open sight lines. Thus, *Double Blind* elevates the surface of the mirrors to a reflection of consciousness: our realization that we are watched, and that, as we ascend staircases and sit in classrooms, we are also watching.

In this way, *Double Blind* doubles back on itself, making systems of power visible through the obfuscation of clear meaning. With a series of sensory dead-ends, pointed cultural associations and a canny awareness of surrounding architecture, Hirsch has created a piece that reflects our own reality back to us — but with insights that do not sit on the surface to be seen.

— Vanessa Kwan

Vanessa Kwan is a Vancouver-based artist and writer.

Opposite Installation view of *Double Blind*, 2008. Photo: Photo Technic



About the Artist

Antonia Hirsch is a Vancouver-based artist whose practice has consistently engaged with systems — geographical, financial, architectural and social — that underwrite our most basic understandings of the world. Working in a variety of media, Hirsch's work has often been sited publicly, and the artist has exhibited work at the Vancouver Public Library (*Anthropometrics, Vol. 1*, 2006) and on the massive LED screens at Robson and Granville Streets in downtown Vancouver (*Vox Pop*, 2008). In these, as in her gallery-based practice, Hirsch questions the often invisible hierarchies of culture and knowledge by relating them to more familiar territory: the scale of one's own embodied experiences. In previous works, she has reconfigured world maps to reflect statistics of annual rainfall, the metric system to the length of an arm, or mass spectacle to the function of a single audience member.

Above Antonia Hirsch wearing the *Double Blind* T-shirt multiple.
Photo: Photo Technic

The City of Vancouver's Public Art Program incorporates contemporary art practices into city planning and development processes. The program supports excellence in art making of many kinds — by emerging and established artists, in new and traditional media, from stand-alone commissions to artist collaborations. The program is part of the Cultural Services Division and oversees the development of public art opportunities throughout the city. Projects at civic buildings, greenways, parks and other public spaces are funded through annual civic capital budgets. Private sector projects are funded by developments in the rezoning process. Learn more about this and other public artworks in the Public Art Registry at www.vancouver.ca/publicart; subscribe to the Public Art Listserv at the same site to be notified of upcoming artist opportunities.



Double Blind was commissioned by Vancouver Community College as part of their participation in the City of Vancouver's Public Art Program. *Double Blind* is accompanied by a T-shirt multiple that is available at the VCC Broadway Campus Bookstore. The T-shirt echoes the installation's conundrum with the Snellen chart rendered on the front in braille using reflective foil and again on the back using raised letters in the same colour as the T-shirt fabric.

Coverpage Installation view of *Double Blind* in the north building atrium on the Vancouver Community College Broadway Campus. Photo: Colin Griffiths



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