



**I'm not blind, but my eyes are! A look
behind the scenes of puppet theatre.
Hear, feel, smell, read, explore,
and discover.**

**A unique puppet theatre project for visually impaired
people of all ages in Aruba.**



A 'sunchi' (kiss) in Aruba.



Red lip pillow (velvet).

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The Italian Pulcinella wearing a half mask. Hand puppet.



Touching a must

The unique, multilingual travelling exhibition entitled 'Touching a must', which can be viewed in the Puppetry Museum (*Poppenspe(e)lmuseum*) in the Dutch village of Vorchten (in the province of Gelderland), but also on location, makes the international world of puppet theatre tangible for blind, partially sighted, and sighted people. 'Hearing, feeling, smelling, exploring, and discovering' is something every puppet theatre visitor should be able to experience. For many, a look behind the scenes of a puppet theatre after the show is the most memorable part. For blind and partially sighted people, hearing and feeling - and, in this way, discovering - is the only way for them to 'see' things. Unfortunately, museums are usually strewn with many - sometimes too many - 'do not touch' signs.

The world of the visually impaired

As museum director and curator, and as a puppeteer, over the past three years I have conducted an in-depth study involving the world of the visually impaired. For this purpose, I have done research with institutions and organisations for the blind, such as Bartiméus, the Koninklijke Visio expertise centre, the Christelijke Bibliotheek voor Blinden en Slechtzienden (CBB) library, the Bibliotheekservice Passend Lezen (BPL; a customised reading service), Transkript (a Flemish support centre for people with a reading impairment), as well as with other experiential experts. It was a highly informative tour through braille and plain text (large-font format/printed letter), and along tactile embossed drawings on swell-touch paper. Misunderstandings were clarified: for instance, a blind person in the test group interpreted the tactile illustration of the French hand puppet Guignol with his swinging braid to be an elephant with its trunk - not an illogical conclusion if you practise some 'flip thinking'.

A white stick fitted with GPS

One of the sources of inspiration for the exhibition was the late Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, who was a Remonstrant minister, a professor of European culture, and author of the Dutch book *Een witte stok met gps*. She was also blind, knew all the ins and outs of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and showed a great deal of interest in my plans. On the basis of her own experiences, she described in her book the world of the blind. This motivated me, as a creator of puppet theatre exhibitions, to do things better. When we met in the museum, she touched and recognised a hand puppet that resembled me - extra recognisable because of the beard and glasses. She did not need to feel the 'live version', because she had already heard who I was by listening to my voice; the blind use other senses for 'looking'.



Donations, support and cooperation

The project for the blind could be realised with the generous contributions and support of Mondriaan Fonds, de Groningse Blindenstichting, the Dutch province of Gelderland, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, CBB, BPL, Familiefonds Hurgronje, Ieders Museum, Transkript, KF Heinfonds, Ars Donandi, Fonds Sluyterman van Loo, Stichting St Nicolaas Gasthuis, Rabobank, Meindersma Sybenga Stichting, Janivo Stichting, Dr. C.J. Vaillantfonds, Katholieke stichting voor blinden en slechtienden, Innovatiefonds De Friesland, Het Nieuwe Stadsweeshuis, IJsselbosch Foundation, Johan Georg Godlieb Bosch en Anna uyt den Bogaardstichting, Stichting Contact Theater Collecties, Theater Gnaffel, and many others.

Katrijn's kiss

The result is not just an exhibition but is a total experience: a way of making the iconic figures of folk puppet theatre recognisable for the blind by means of a wide range of objects, such as hand puppets, rod puppets and rod marionettes, marionettes, shadow figures, Jumping Jacks, wayang figures from Indonesia, and crockery with a tangible portrait of Jan Klaassen (the Dutch Mr Punch) with his name in braille. There is even a photograph of the Dutch visual artist Erwin Olaf, who comes to life through a graphic and tactile illustration, and can therefore be 'seen' and felt by blind and partially sighted people. The exhibition also includes a feel, smell, read, and listen book in four different languages entitled: 'De kus van Katrijn' (Dutch), 'De tút fan Katryntsje' (Frisian), 'Katrijn's kiss' (English), and 'Der Schmatz von Gretl' (German). Katrijn - who wears a lavender-scented bonnet - is looking for a groom, and she approaches many European counterparts of the old-Dutch puppetry character Jan Klaassen with the question: 'Will you marry me?'

Jan Klaassen and his European cousins

Jan's cousins all have their own personal objections to marrying her - even her husband-to-be, who cannot find his clogs. After all, one cannot get married without clogs! Guignol has no laces in his shoes; his friend Gnafron the cobbler has no cork in his wine bottle; the Hungarian Vitéz László has no sausages in his frying pan (which smell of cloves); and the Italian Pulcinella (the forefather of many European clown puppets) does not like the idea at all. He refers Katrijn back to Jan Klaassen, who, by now, is wearing clogs (wooden shoes, as a blind child told me) and has buttons on his coat. All's well that ends well. Applause!



Felt-fabric audio book

The puppetry scenes in the felt-fabric book have been created from a variety of contrasting fabric textures, supplemented with different materials, scents, and texts in combined script (braille and synchronously running plain text), spoken text, an applause button, and music by Luigi Boccherini: 'La musica notturna delle strade di Madrid' - Night Music of the Streets of Madrid ('Minuetto dei Ciechi' - The Minuet of the Blind Beggars). Realisation and implementation of the tactile audio book pages: Birgit Tomesen and Otto van der Mieden.

Source of inspiration: illustrations by Elsje Zwart.

Fundacion Arubano di esnan Visualmente Incapacita (FAVI)

For two days in July 2019, I presented 'Katrijn's Kiss' to a small, varied group of adults and children in Aruba: a performance initiated by the FAVI, a foundation that provides assistance and guidance to visually impaired and blind persons. The clients and staff, who spoke excellent Dutch, were highly enthusiastic, and considered it marvellous that I wanted to present 'Katrijn's Kiss' to them. Everybody indicated that they want me to come back in April 2020, and possibly also for 'Mira Nos' - a cooperative venture between five foundations for the blind and partially sighted in Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao (the ABC islands), as well as in Surinam and the Netherlands.

Traditional puppetry stories and the spider Anansi

The Jan Klaassen character originated during the seventeenth century. Jan is an ordinary lad from Amsterdam, who has a way with words and a good sense of humour. Those who do him an injustice can count on a scornful remark or a good beating with his stick. Street puppet theatre with hand puppets is the most common form of puppetry involving Jan Klaassen. The traditional puppetry stories of the Dutch Jan and his wife Katrijn are similar to those of the spider Anansi (called 'Nanzi' in Curacao, Bonaire and Aruba), who is a figure of legend, a fibber, and a smarty-pants that always manages to get out of trouble, mainly by taking advantage of others' idiotic behaviour. I really enjoyed - with the approval of my Aruban audience - comparing the adventures of 'our Jan' with those of this mythical animal character, who is on good terms with supernatural powers, and brings people both good and evil.



Aruba

The Aruban visually impaired live all over the island, but most of them are located 'pabou di brug' ('below the bridge', or in the vicinity of Oranjestad, the capital of the Dutch island of Aruba). Aruba has a total population of about 300,000, and the island is not much bigger than the Dutch island of Texel. About 3,000 residents are visually impaired, 115 of whom are completely blind. There are more visually impaired women than men, which is partly due to the ratio of men and women in the population. Papiamentu is the language most commonly spoken by about 78% of the Aruban blind and visually impaired, while others have Spanish, English, or Dutch as their mother tongue.

Senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling

Although seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling are commonly regarded as senses, I discovered that some participants also appeared to have some kind of sixth - deeply spiritual - sense. This is extremely important to them, because it enables them to 'sense'. One visually impaired person told me, 'We have five senses, but Indians have six. My father and others also feel with their souls. You see with your eyes. If I close my eyes and use my feelings, I am also able to 'see'. If you shake someone's hand, you give a lot of information that does not need to be expressed in words. Just the touch is sufficient and says all you want to say'. Participants also told me about the role of visualisation in compensating for a loss of vision. Some of them were able to see before they became blind or partially sighted, and are therefore able to visualise things they hear, smell, feel, and even taste, particularly if someone else provides up-to-date information with it.

A 'sunchi' in the ABC islands

I asked the participants whether - if I were to return - I should present the puppet show in the Papiamentu language. Although 'sunchi' ('kiss') sounded very nice, they preferred the Dutch-language version. I hope my journey to the ABC islands and Surinam will materialise one way or another in the future. This trip to Aruba was a private affair, and was undertaken on my own initiative and at my own risk. The Dutch Performing Arts Fund (*Fonds voor de Podiumkunsten*) was unable to participate in the project. Their strange answer to my enquiry was that Aruba is not 'abroad' but is a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and therefore a contribution towards transportation costs was not possible.



Activities in the Puppetry Museum and elsewhere

Although the unique puppet theatre project was designed specifically for the blind and partially sighted, it is also a useful, enjoyable, and more than informative outing for every visitor and participant, sighted or otherwise. Fortunately, over the past two years I have been able to show a few things for the visually impaired at the Puppetry Museum (open and private activities in Vorchten) and during one of the Johanniter* summer weeks (Lemele), but also to young people at Bartiméus (Zeist), to pupils of the Koninklijke Visio (Rotterdam), to members of the Oogvereniging (Utrecht), to visitors of Tresoar (Leeuwarden) and the Schierstins (Feânwalden), to visually impaired people at home and in various other locations. In a manner of speaking, it opened the participants' eyes, and also stimulated other senses. As one blind person said to me, 'Otto, I'm not blind, but my eyes are!'

* The 'traditional' Johanniter holiday weeks are meant for older people with special care requirements and their caregivers. The Johanniter Order is a chivalric and nobility-oriented order of Protestant-Christian origin, founded in 1099 as the Order of Knights of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem. Membership is limited to members of the Dutch nobility.

Information

For more information, see:

<http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/blinden.aspx> (Dutch, Frysian and German: spoken text, music, films, interviews and a wide range of documents with illustrations and photos), and

http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/blinden_EN.aspx (English: spoken text, music, films, and a wide range of documents with illustrations and photos). See also:

<http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/pdf/ArubaNL.pdf> (Dutch text) and <http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/pdf/ArubaEng.pdf>.

Appendices

Appendices: atmosphere and impressions of the project for the visually impaired (tactile audio book 'Katrijn's Kiss' and a presentation with a few traditional hand puppets), an activity for people of all ages at Aruba/FAVI and on other locations.

POPMUS - Otto van der Mieden. Vorchten, The Netherlands (31 July 2019).



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www.geheugenvannederland.nl/poppenspel2

Appendices



FAVI Entrance (Oranjestad).



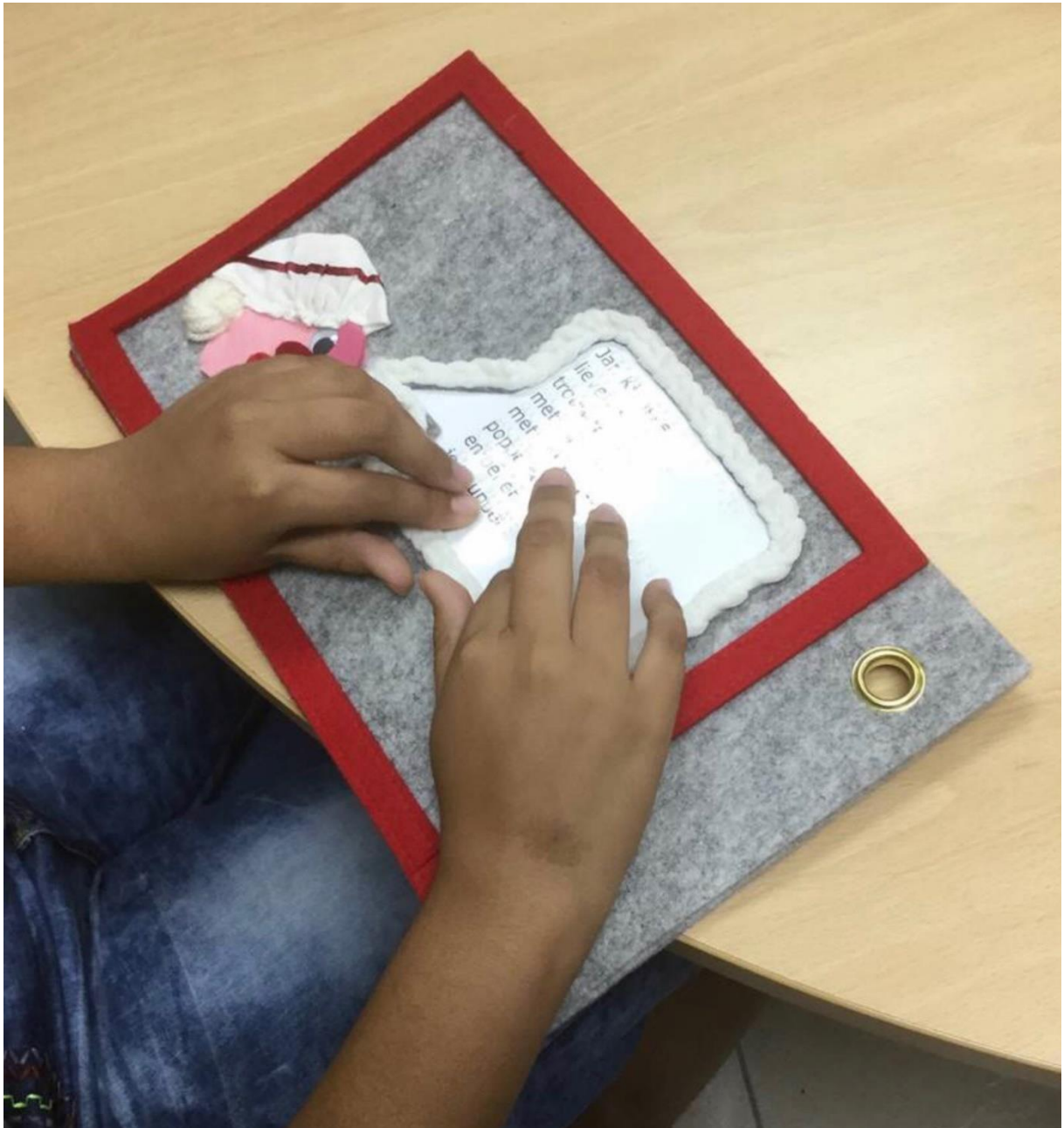
Page of the tactile audio book: puppetry scene with Guignol.



Page of the tactile audio book: puppetry scene with Jan Klaassen and his wife Katrijn.



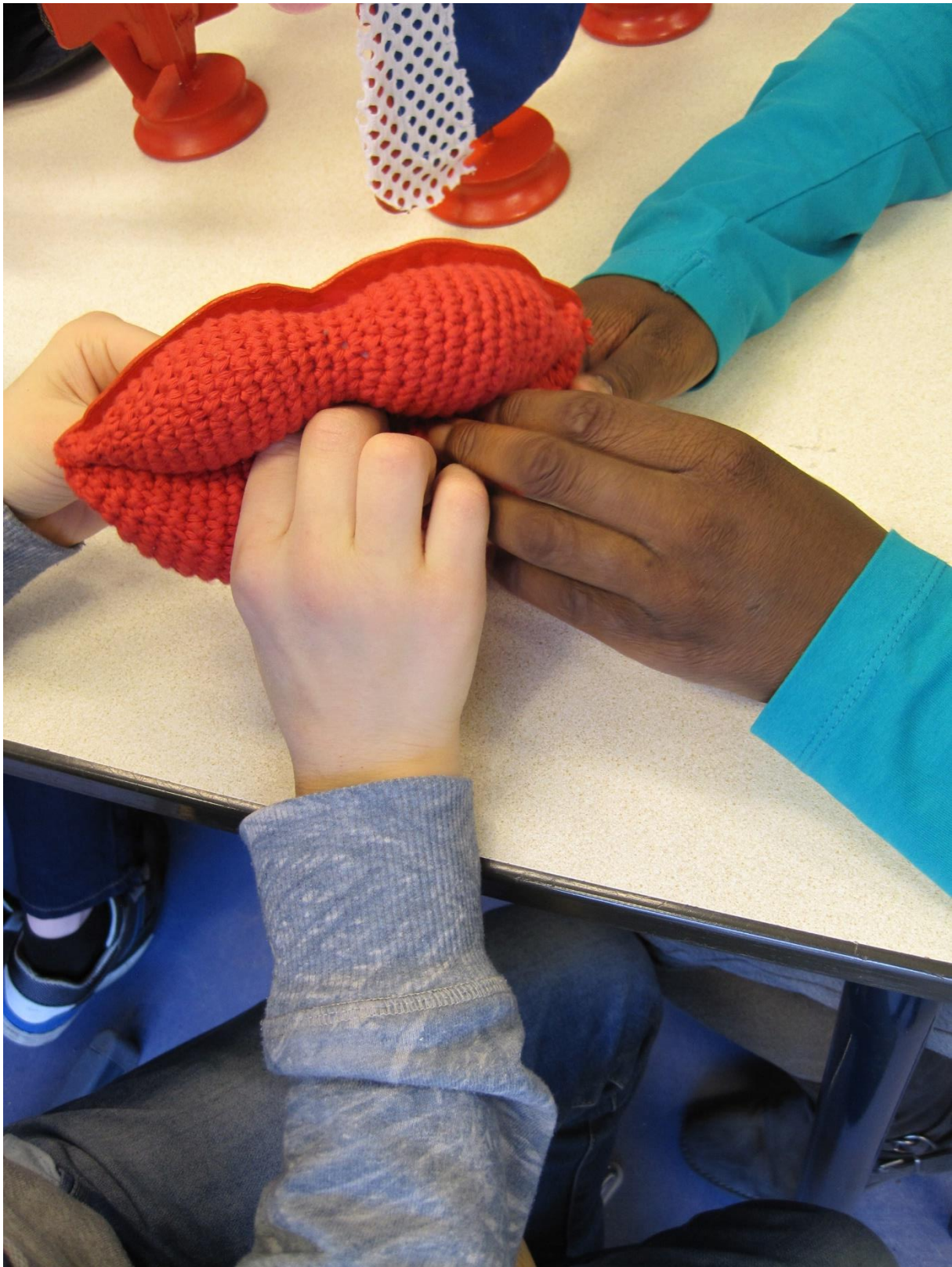
VAVI participant holding a page of the tactile audio book: puppetry scene with Jan Klaassen and Katrijn.



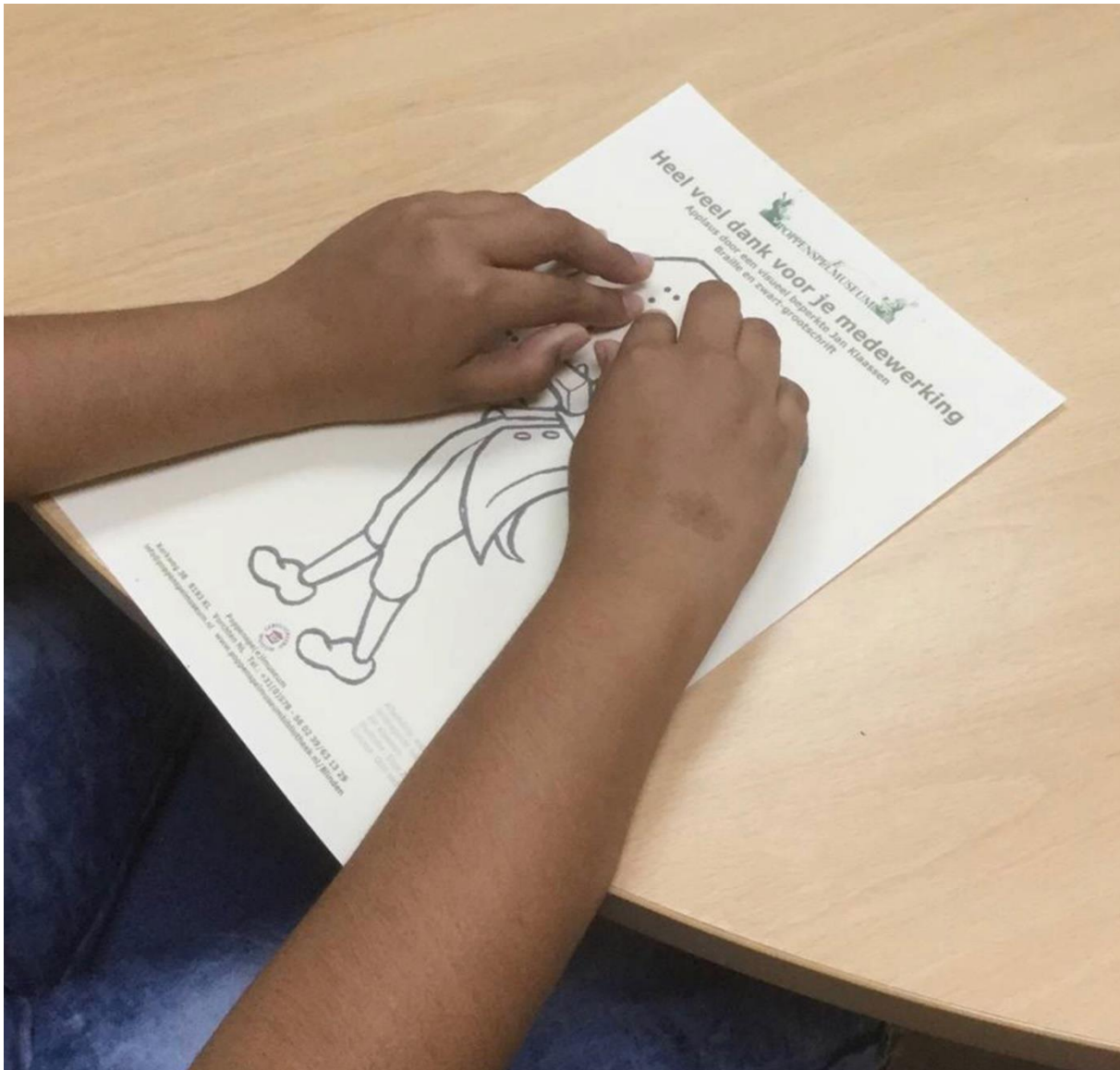
Page of the tactile audio book: Katrijn with a speech bubble.
Text in combined script - synchronously running plain text
(printed letter) with braille.



VAVI participants with a tactile audio book and several hand puppets.



The kiss, table puppet object.



Jan Klaassen: tactile illustration. Illustration on swell-touch paper with text in plain text format and in braille.



A VAVI participant with a hand puppet resembling the bearded museum director and puppeteer Otto van der Mieden, and the traditional Dutch Katrijn character as a hand puppet. Jan's wife Katrijn is wearing a bonnet.



A VAVI participant with a hand puppet resembling Otto van der Mieden, the museum director and puppeteer.



A VAVI participant and museum director and curator Otto van der Mieden with a hand puppet that resembles him.



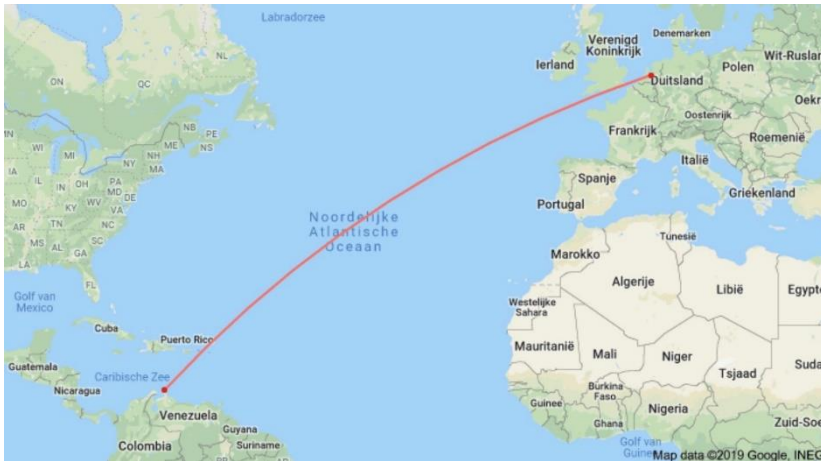
A VAVI participant with a Jan Klaassen hand puppet.

Also refer to:

<http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/pdf/ArubaNL.pdf> (Dutch)
and to <http://www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl/pdf/ArubaEng.pdf>
(English text version).

Picture on the front cover: visually impaired, bespectacled old-Dutch puppetry characters. Jan Klaassen, the Dutch cousin of the English Mr Punch, is wielding a club. On the right you see Jan's wife Katrijn (the equivalent of the British Judy). She is waving a carpet beater. The figures also refer to various other distinctive leading characters from the tragi-comic nineteenth century folk puppet theatre, including the German Kasperl and the French Polichinelle. These comic archetypes, with their oh-so-recognizable homely ups and downs, in reality turn a mirror onto their esteemed audience. Illustration: Elsje Zwart. Concept: Otto van der Mieden; topographic map of Europe and South America with Aruba.

ABC islands and the Netherlands.



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