

Beyond the Visual

Audio guide

**HENRY MOORE
INSTITUTE**

Stop 9. Track 2.

**David Johnson, *Inhibition: Beyond the doubt of a shadow*
2025**

A table and four stools, like you might encounter in a café. The table and stools have black linoleum tops, and polished bent plywood legs. It's a very ordinary situation, but perhaps unexpected in a gallery. You might walk past and think 'Why is this here?' 'Is it an artwork?' 'Can I sit at this table?' We momentarily forget that this is an exhibition that overturns the convention 'do not touch'. An architect or design nerd might recognise that the table and stools were designed by the Finnish modernist architect Alvar Aalto in the 1930s. But this wouldn't explain 'why' it is here.

This is clever; it plays on our expectations of behaviour in a gallery. And then, if you do sit down, you start to feel under the table, to the surface that even non-blind people can't see. But they can touch. What are these things underneath? There are lumps that feel squidgy. Chewing gum? Urgh! It's like being back at school. Is this the art piece?

In fact, they are made of silicon, but being pink and white they resemble – and more importantly, feel like – chewing gum. Little stalactites on the underside of the table. The artist is playing games with us, surely, evoking memories. And while the bits of discarded 'chewing gum' form a kind of irregular pattern towards the edge of the table, if we delve further under, into the shadows, we might – if nudged – recognise that the

lumps form characters of an over-sized braille. And the braille, we are told (because even the braille readers amongst us struggle to decode the message), spells out the word 'inhibition'. A kind of hidden language. Which, of course, braille is, even for many people registered blind. And the artist, as a braille user, enjoys the perversity of an oversize braille that echoes the initial refusal of the object to be 'read' as art.

Now everybody's feeling underneath the table, and the work has become a kind of performance piece. It gathers people together, as a place to sit in little groups, to rest and exchange ideas and share experiences, even with complete strangers. We are accidentally touching each other's fingers whilst reaching under the table, which is both funny and awkward. Inhibitions are being challenged in the shadows. The artist is using ordinary, everyday things that go unnoticed, but making them extra-ordinary. As some of us know, if you rely on touch to find your way to a table, you have to feel for where the edge of the table is, and, through proximity, where your stool is relative to the table, which often involves touching the underneath of tables more than a sighted person would. Lifting the stools to move closer, to feel that proximity, we begin to notice that each stool has a lump of chewing gum between each of their curved plywood legs.

If you can get over that initial revulsion, you keep wanting to press and deform the silicon lumps. And while the fact that it is a facsimile of chewing gum takes away the retch-reflex, it does engage memories of school desks, doesn't it? And it has a multisensory aspect we haven't talked about yet. The smell, oh yes, the smell. I thought I smelled something. So what is that smell? It's kind of minty.

End of Stop 9, Track 2.

This is a transcript of an audio guide produced by Henry Moore Institute for the exhibition *Beyond the Visual*, on display from 28 November 2025 to 19 April 2026. For more information visit henry-moore.org/beyond-the-visual