

Elements of Drawing Blind

For Ruskin, drawing well was largely a matter of seeing accurately, and art's most important role was to reveal the truth. The readers of *The Elements of Drawing* were taken on a slow, painstaking course in seeing meticulously, and handling pencil and brush delicately, these perceptual and technical requirements being continuously interleaved with lessons in ethics. Only a quiet, contemplative life, away from the noise and distractions of the modern town, would foster artistic skill alongside an appreciation of beauty and truth.

At first glance, then, Susan Pui San Lok's performance, *Elements of Drawing Blind*, looks like an outright attack upon the Victorian arbiter of morals and beauty. Lok was blindfolded as she listened to the first part of Ruskin's book on a tape-recording, drawing and writing what she could of his exercises and exhortations in marker pen on rolls of acetate draped over an overhead-projector. These commercial tools are elements of a world that Ruskin abhorred; to draw without seeing is a useless, perhaps corrupt, enterprise; and drawing at speed (say, completing an exercise in the time it takes to read out the instructions) should only be attempted by those long-schooled in slow, careful study. Surely the results can only be careless, confused or false.

There is another disturbance: Ruskin sometimes envisaged his reader, a young lady of leisure who adds drawing to her accomplishments at the piano as part of her education into a Western tradition of high culture that may (if we are fortunate) have the power to save civilisation from the coarsening influences of industry and commerce. Lok, whose family and upbringing lie between Hong Kong and Essex (both renowned in popular lore for their avaricious and philistine inhabitants) sullies the whiteness of this culture. Her art school training may have provided her with some no doubt heavily diluted dose of Ruskin but this must be triangulated against another set of cultural allusions. How do we read the references behind the scroll, the blindfold, or the display of the artist herself, unseeing against the white gallery walls?

Behind this clash of values lies, if not an affinity, something else. *Elements of Drawing Blind* opened up a strange, vertiginous perspective between the certainty and prescriptiveness of Ruskin's instructions and the present condition of art. There are passages of *The Elements of Drawing* that few contemporary readers can encounter without laughter, but that laughter may rebound against them in their reflex disposal of art as a vehicle for beauty, truth or ethics. There is a curious allure to Lok's marker-pen on acetate drawings, especially in their overlapping as they roll off the projector, or are seen in transparent book pages; to seeing Ruskin's well-honed phrases scrawled out like hurried graffiti; to the shapes and figures that struggle to emerge coherently from the tangle of lines. While there can no longer be any faith in a single perspective of truth, or in cultural superiority, the blindfolded artist suggests that the blindness conferred by one viewpoint also offers a particular vision, and that the passages between different viewpoints are not always blocked, but may be illumined by provocations such as these.

--Julian Stallabrass