

Blind Contour Drawings

An Habla Best Practice

by Kurt Wootton



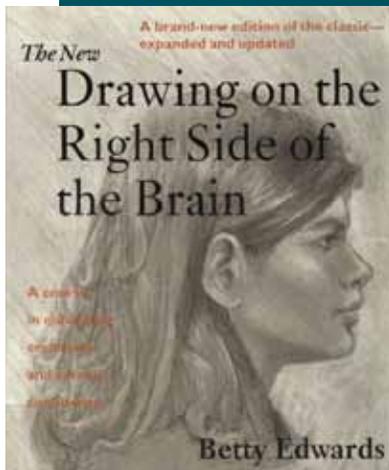
Introduction

The visual arts practice of Blind Contour Drawings was first introduced by Kimon Nicolaides in his book *The Natural Way to Draw*, published in 1941. Contour Drawing was popularized further in Betty Edward's *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (Fig. 1). Originally published in 1979, Edward's book describes how we can move from what she calls "left-mode" thinking (previously associated with logic and analysis) to "right-mode" thinking (involving intuitive, spatial, and non-rational characteristics). Since the time this book was written, we've discovered that the brain is much more complex and that our processing of information is distributed across many different parts of the brain. As neuroscientist Kara Federmeier explains, "It takes two hemispheres to be logical – or to be creative."

Nonetheless, Edwards' fundamental premise is that we often censor ourselves too much when we are engaged in creative tasks. In art making, we must recover what we may have lost since childhood—that sense of seeing the world again with fresh eyes.

The essential idea of Blind Contour Drawing is for the artist to draw the “edges” or “lines” of an object without looking down at the paper. Attention is focused only on the object itself. By not looking at our paper, we do not judge whether our art making is “good” or “bad.” We simply must continue through the activity until the end.

Although the activity in itself is effective on its own, it can also be combined with classroom content or texts. I’ll first map out the general process and then provide some examples of how we’ve found bridges between this visual arts activity and more linguistically-based experiences.



Betty Edwards's *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (Fig. 1)

Procedure

Supplies

- Sheets of paper. Generally letter-size paper works well. (Copy paper will do, but for exhibits use higher quality drawing paper.)
- Masking tape
- A pencil (We’ve also used china markers of various colors.)

Mini-lesson

1

Begin introducing the concept with a brief presentation (no longer than three minutes) explaining the basic activity and showing examples of Blind Contour Drawings. (Many examples can be found quickly by typing “Blind Contour Drawing” into a search engine).

Set-Up

2

Each student will tape a piece of paper on the table with one small piece of tape in each corner so that the paper doesn’t move during the activity.

Directions

3

Instruct each student to select an object in the room to draw. While staring intently at that object, the student will draw the object *focusing on the lines outside and inside of the object*. They will draw the object on the piece of paper in front of them without ever looking down at the paper. The student’s eyes should remain on the object the entire time (Fig. 2). Begin with one of the outer



lines—or contours—and work from line to line, not just on the outside of the object, but capturing the details inside the object as well. A few critical directions include

- Focus on the activity. Do not talk with your neighbors.
- Keep the pencil working the entire time. Try to keep your pencil moving, working from line to line. If you accidentally remove the pencil, without looking at the paper, begin again from where you left off.
- Resist the urge to look at your work until the allocated time is up.
- It will feel uncomfortable and strange at first. Resist the urge to stop or give up because it feels silly.

Modeling

4 Begin by placing a piece of paper on the wall. Explain the basic directions above and then model the activity by doing it yourself while talking the students through your process (Fig. 3). Betty Edwards explains,

In my classes, I demonstrate Pure Contour Drawing, describing how to use the method as I draw—if I can manage to keep talking while I'm drawing. Usually, I start out all right but begin trailing off in mid-sentence after a minute or so. By that time, however, my students have the idea.



The student's eyes should remain on the object the entire time (Fig. 2)



Explain the basic directions above and then model the activity by doing it yourself while talking the students through your process (Fig. 3)



At this point you might have students display all of their images (Fig. 4)



Instead of drawing an object in the room, participants created a portrait of their partners (Fig. 5)

Other Applications

The Process

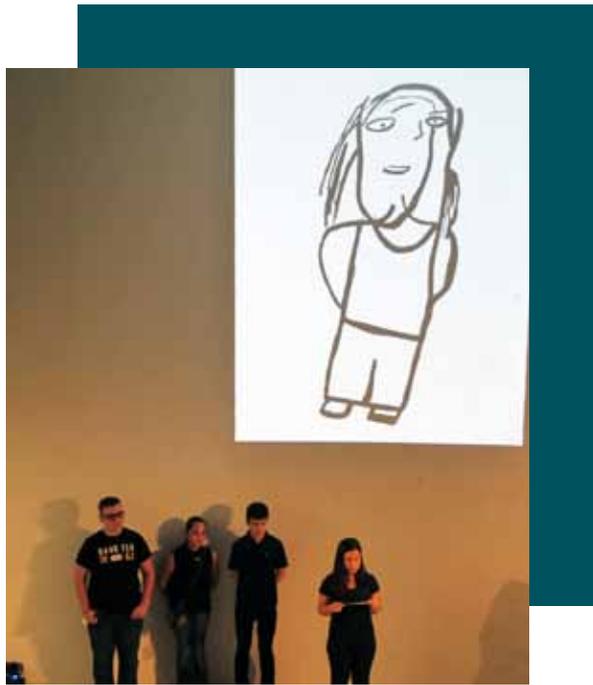
- 5 Ask the students to hold their pencils in the air. Set a timer for at least five minutes. As students' endurance builds you can increase the length of time. Tell them with pencils in the air to select an object and look at it. Feel the paper with one hand, then place the pencils down, and begin. *Do not look down at the paper.* During the activity, coach the class in general to draw all the details of the object, to go deeper into the object and to see details they didn't first notice. If they feel as if they've done everything they can with the object, let them move to what lies around the object.

Reflection

- 6 When you say "stop," the students will quickly look down at their papers and let out a great deal of laughter and begin having eager conversations. This is perfectly natural (and wonderful) so let them talk with their neighbors, laugh together, and celebrate their work. At this point you might have students display all of their images to create a compelling exhibit (Fig. 4).

Objects in the Room. In Betty Edwards's description of the activity, she asks the students to draw their hands. Cynthia Weiss, at the Habla Teacher Institute in Mérida, México, adapted Edwards's process by asking participants to draw objects in the room. This gives students choice and, when all the drawings are combined, forms a kind of meditation on "place."

Portraits. At the Teacher Institute, Cynthia then asked participants to choose a partner. Instead of drawing an object in the room, participants created a portrait of their partners (Fig. 5). Habla teacher Jessica Gilliam used this idea of portraits in her English class at Habla. Her class was reading the short story "On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning" by Haruki Murakami. After reading the story, Jessica placed students in pairs. Each student had to interview



What resulted was a humorous gap between the “real person” on the stage, the projected abstract portraits, and the “100% Perfect” descriptions (Fig. 6).

his or her partner, and then write a profile depicting that person as “100% Perfect.” Jessica then had them draw Blind Contour Drawings of each other. During the end-of-the-semester performances, they projected the portrait of the student on the wall while the student’s partners read the written description of that same student. What resulted was a humorous gap between the “real person” on the stage, the projected abstract portraits, and the “100% Perfect” descriptions (Fig. 6).

Childhood Memories. At another Habla Teacher Institute, Chicago artist Robert Possehl used Blind Contour Drawings in a very different way. During this week we examined the concept of “wonder” and the relationship between childhood and memory. The facilitators took the teachers through a variety of performance activities asking them to remember moments from childhood. Robert then had them move through the Blind Contour Process, first having them draw an object in the room. He then asked them to close their eyes and walked them through a visualizing activity where they pictured a magical childhood place. With eyes closed, Robert asked them to draw on the paper, but this time drawing nothing in the tangible world, but rather what was in each participant’s mind’s eye. These drawings became the first page of a book-as-art-object that each participant created by the end of the Institute (See Fig. 7).

Much appreciation to Cynthia Weiss for introducing us to this practice and for continuing to invent various applications of Contour Drawings in our classrooms and institutes.



These drawings became the first page of a book-as-art-object that each participant created by the end of the institute (Fig. 7).

REFERENCES

Edwards, Betty. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A course in enhancing creativity and artistic confidence*. Penguin, 1979.

Lombrozo, Tania. "The Truth About The Left Brain/Right Brain Relationship." NPR, December 2, 2013.

Murakami, Haruki. "On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning" in *The Elephant Vanishes*. Vintage, 2010.

Visit www.habla.org to find more Best Practices or to learn about them first-hand at Habla's annual Teacher Institute in Merida, Mexico.