



Echo Valley / A Guiding Dilemma

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DAN SHIPSIDES - Touchstone landscape text 4

[Home](#)***Landscape and memory: Landscape [4]***[CV & contact](#)

You lost your sight 15 years ago.

[Statements](#)

Totally 15 years ago – but I was partially sighted for quite a number of years before that.

[Bibliography](#)

So this is something that intrigues me – to what extent is the memory of seeing things still there?

[Projects](#)

Hardly at all Dan. I would have to say – hardly at all. It's a bit like if you went to Paris 15 years ago. It probably made an impact at the time – but you wouldn't now remember the details. You might remember the Eiffel tower – but it might not be actually what you saw – it could be the Eiffel tower you've seen on TV or postcards or whatever- but probably not what your actual experience of seeing it was.

So if someone is describing a rock or tree to you.....

Well it depends on how good their description is – and it depends on what they want to let me know. A lot of landscape descriptions are very tedious – because you – well I - really don't care what it looks like.

But the thing, for me, about sight is – the actuality of what things look like isn't important – but that's not to say that I'm not still acting from the perspective of a sighted person. And that gets in my way lots of time because I'm not allowing enough time and patience or adaption to take place to recognize the full fact that I don't see. So I often approach things from, not consciously, but from a sighted position. You know if you look underneath what's going on – you'd say this guy's behaving as if he could see.

But the force of the sighted person you were still remains - up to a point - unless you have the adaptability and patience to say – just hang on - being blind actually changes the way you do things.

That's interesting because I hope that as an artist, time, adaption or invention – creative invention and patience are what's needed to approach place and experience beyond just terms of sight. It's problematic and probably not possible in a complete way.

And you see, my work place is set up by me for me and it works really well. I can move around very freely and quickly. And that's freedom where I don't actually feel blind in that situation and environment. But if I'm in a situation where I don't know the environment and I'm dependant on someone to guide me and so on for too long – or it's difficult then I would feel.....blind

...blind's not the right word because you shouldn't feel blind. You know, blind is just a fact.

You see this is the problem with the whole issue thing – it becomes - blindness isn't actually, what's the word, it's not an objective term. The word blind and blindness has actually got far more powerful meanings in terms of ignorance – a more prejudicial meaning than the actual term itself.

Which is why a lot of people are very hesitant to ask “are you totally blind?” They'll use other terms because in society the term blind is rarely used to mean actually blind. You know “blind faith”, “blind drunk” – if you listen to the radio I would put money on the next time you hear the word blind used it won't mean what it actually means - it'll have a prejudicial meaning to it. Blind as term of disempowerment.

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Senses and perception

I started the project with an idea or notion that using someone who didn't have sight and looking at the way they experience place through climbing – might give me a way of exploring the other senses in a stronger way – as if we neglected our other senses because of sight – and that there was a way of being more aware of a narrative of the other senses. But I realised that this was flawed in various ways but especially because, whilst being blind obviously does change things, there's no reason that you would be able to feel or hear or experience in a more 'extra' way than anyone else.

That's right – no that's right.

It was a naive notion that someone who has a different perspective or engagement with the world might have a different or heightened capacity. But it really isn't like that.

The only thing that is different is that you have to use the clues from the other senses.

Everyone else gets the same clues, its just means that you're making your decision – if you have to make a decision – based on those clues and not sight.

And that's a limited body of information – so your decisions certainly are no better – they might be adequate – you might get enough information from your ears, underfoot, tactilely - to actually tune you in - but likely it's not enough information or quite what you want.

So this means acting out your decisions is a bigger deal - you have to make your decisions work.

That relates a bit in a way to something we discussed earlier in the project – this was after a session climbing indoors. It was something about - whilst you might not find every hold there, the ones you do find you have to use to your best ability – whereas someone with sight can see all the holds and has more options. Whilst your options were less you were using those options very well. I was surprised that you were doing climbing moves which were, for a novice, quite technical and strong - whereas I know a novice sighted climber would have generally found an easier option and therefore climbed at a lower technical level. So you were climbing at a higher level sooner than most beginners – because you had to rely on the clues that you had and make possibly better use of them.

That's interesting to hear.

In the end, it's about using the clues you do get - as best you can. It doesn't mean you have superhuman skills. We're all the same we just get more or less clues – it's about how you use them.

[Link back to Void exhibition](#)

