

Lubbock, Tom. "Richard Long: Walks on the wild side" *The Independent*, June 2, 2009,
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/richard-long-walks-on-the-wild-side-1694454.html>



Richard Long: Walks on the wild side

Richard Long's photographs are evocative records of his journeys, but sometimes they can be more like postcards than art, says Tom Lubbock



What went wrong with Richard Long? He started so well. In 1967, when he was 22, he took a train out of London, got off where open country began, found an empty field, walked up and down in a straight line till a trodden-down trace appeared in the grass, took a photo of this mark, then went back to town.

A black-and-white photo, *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), was the resulting work. It's a classic piece of conceptual art, severe, economical, dense. A human presence is represented by a straight man-made line. A stretch of space marks a length of time. A transient footprint is preserved by a photographic trace. The picture shows a defined event, a contained place, and a distance is set up between the walker's there and then, and the viewer's here and now.

And he could have stopped, then and there. A Long retrospective opens at Tate Britain tomorrow, and as it demonstrates, this single, beginning work holds everything that his later works reiterate. What went wrong was that Long went on – and what he had to do in order to go on, was making walks and making them into something that looked like art. Long's work has become habitual, with

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no major changes in his practice from then to now. From the off, his artistic solutions were formulaic.

This isn't quite how Long himself sees it. "I often think, if I had just made *A Line Made by Walking* it would have been a good work in its own right. But the fact that I've repeated or continued that idea for many years... that's part of the life of that work... *Walking* has enabled me to be an artist potentially anywhere, and in a very free and simple way." It certainly has. But then Long's long career has not been exactly free. It has depended on an art world which has certain values – a world that has equated repetition and simplicity, not with dullness or vacancy, but with dedication and rigour.

Over the past 40 years, Long has made a series of walks – goodness knows how many – sometimes in his native land of Dartmoor, sometimes in the remotest parts of the world. But in whatever continent, his walks are always made according to some scheme – a geometrical plan, a length of miles, a number of days, or something more elaborate: *A Six-Day Walk over All the Roads, Lanes and Double Tracks inside a Six-mile-wide Circle Centred on the Giant of Cerne Abbas* (1975); or *A Cloudless Walk: From the Mouth of the Loire to the First Cloud* (1995). Sometimes Long marks his passage by making an alteration to the landscape on the way – a pile or pattern of stones, say.

And then he brings back evidence of his walks into the gallery. It might be a marked map. It might be a photo, usually black and white, incorporated into a poster. It might be a quasi-poetic text piece, lettered on to the wall, describing the plan of the walk and in very brief notations a sequence of his experiences along the way. *Forest*, *White Butterflies*, *Crossing a Stream*, *Animal Droppings*, *Slippery Boulders*, *Peat Bog*...

Or it might be a load of rocks, carried home (never mentioned how) and arranged on the gallery floor, normally in a circle or a long rectangle, though sometimes in another regular formation. Or a mud-drawing made on the floor or the wall, with mud brought back, perhaps to make concentric rings of handprints, or with flinging hand marks forming a geometrical shape with a fringe of spatters.

Well, as everyone says, Long has revolutionised landscape art. He has transferred its focus from the static eye to the walking body. And he has set the subject at a remove. His laconic text pieces, rock sculptures and mud drawings don't communicate his travels, they only memorialise them. Even his photos are functional and unatmospheric. His works aren't transporting. They introduce another leg of journey – between the walker's experience and ours. And this sense of distance surely has its kick. But how often can you go on getting the same kick?

Most of Long's artistic devices are means of evacuating content. For example, what's the point of those arbitrary schemes, by which a walk is given its shape or length? Their very arbitrariness. His rules remove any historical associations from his paths. Long isn't walking along pilgrim ways. He isn't walking ley lines. He's walking geometry. The rules also keep his choices to the minimum, so the walks don't become a personal response to or expression of the landscape. And they give a walk

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a structure, that makes it into a self-contained composition, an empty ritual. Of course, this is the charm of them. It's a way of walking without getting involved, and making art without trouble. It confers pure order and meaninglessness.

Or turn to the text pieces through which so many of Long's walks are recorded. They're stencilled on to the wall, normally in a plain sans serif font, in capitals. They are set centred in the space. They are in some combination of black, red and white – black and red words on white wall; white and red walls on black wall. Again, the object is a kind of purism. This letter-face is as free of connotations as a letter-face can be. A centred layout is the neutral option. The colour schemes are the most basic.

If you want to see how wall texts can be used in a creative way, both verbally and typographically, there's a room elsewhere in Tate Britain devoted to work by Ian Hamilton Finlay. The Long wall text takes the safest way. Its preferred "poetic" form is, as you'd expect, repetition. And when it departs from its norms, it departs in the most literal-minded manner. The text of *Waterlines* is printed in blue.

Long never plays it safer than in his rock sculptures and mud drawings. Pretty minimalism is the rule of the game, sometimes on a grand and spectacular scale. The centrepiece of the Tate Britain show is an enormous open space, occupied by five rock floor works: three rounds, an oblong and an oval. Slate, flint, basalt: a mass of irregular elements are arranged into a regular geometrical form. Roughness within neatness: it's the rag-roll aesthetic. The mud drawings, with their graceful splatterings, are exactly that.

It makes superb decor. It's all in the best of taste. If they weren't quite so big, you can imagine these simple stone patterns adorning some gleaming plutocrat's apartment; and Long makes smaller versions that do just that. Like his arbitrary walk-schemes, but even more so, this is art without tears. Do you remember when Tate Modern opened, and they had a landscape room in which two Longs were juxtaposed with a Monet? How tame, how inoffensive, Long looked, compared with wild Monet.

And why does he go all over the planet, to desert, to mountain, to river, to arctic? For the traditional reason, it seems: to get away from it all. Wherever Long travels, the messy human world is strangely absent. Whatever might be going on in that part of world, he manages not to notice. Apart from his own interventions, the Earth might be the Moon. His photos show bare nature, uninterrupted even by animals. The Animal Droppings dropped into that text are a surprise. The kangaroo that appears in *A Straight Hundred-mile Walk in Australia* is a real rarity.

In other words, his work is a very pure form of tourism. His view of the world is narrowed to the sublime and the picturesque. It is a postcard vision, from which everything else is removed. We've been here before. The early critics of Romantic landscape art saw the way it was going. William Blake said: "Where man is not, nature is barren." William Hazlitt: "Landscape painting is the obvious resource of misanthropy." Richard Long only takes it further. His radical revision of

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Romantic landscape – the solitary wanderer confronting the unpeopled view – consists of an even more extreme version of its traditional exclusions.

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