

Walking & Marking

A talk by Lucy Couch, Visitor Assistant at Leeds Art Gallery

“We cover the universe with drawings we have lived”

“A walk is just one more layer, a mark, on the surface of the land”

Two works in our Natural Encounters exhibition are a record of an artist walking or marking the landscape, of a particular time and place.

Five Stones by Richard Long, made in 1976. A black and white photograph shows paths left by five stones that have been rolled down the shale slope of a volcano in Iceland. We see five deep indentations left by the boulders, followed by meandering lines of smaller marks formed by these stones as they fall down the mountainside. Like his other works, these depressions down the side of the volcano are ephemeral and will eventually disappear. Perhaps this was a planned intervention in the landscape, or maybe this was more opportunist. Long says ‘I go out into the world with an open mind, and I rely on a degree of intuition and chance.’

Long’s first artwork made in the landscape like this was A Line made by Walking, made in 1967, when he was 22 years old and still studying at Saint Martin’s School of Art in London. Stopping in the countryside as he travelled home to Bristol, he made the work by walking back and forth across a field in a straight line to leave a track in the grass. The resulting flattened grass caught the sunlight in a visible line. All that was left of this simple act is a black and white photograph.

This was very influential for other artists at the time, for the simplicity of its means and how it is recorded, how it was made outside of the studio or gallery environment, and the radical impermanence of the work. We know the line may not be there in a matter of hours after the artist left it. In finding a new way of thinking about making a line, it adds to the long history of drawing. If the drawn line is no longer only made onto paper or canvas, then are we all creating interweaving drawn lines as we go about our everyday lives? In traditional drawing technique the pencil should become an extension of the body, to fully express your gestures. If we draw lines as we walk, then do our bodies become that pencil point marking the surface?

‘For the Inuit as soon as a person moves, he becomes a line’ In seeing the depressed line in the grass made by Richard Long, you can start imagining all the other lines through the world people make as they travel. The definition of a desire line, also called paths that made themselves, is an unplanned path, such as one worn into grass by repeated foot traffic, used by pedestrians in preference to, or in absence of, a designated alternative.

Desire lines make visible this constant line making, making tangible a repeated decision not to follow the prescribed path. As Rebecca Solnit reminds us, 'Walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it.'

Both Richard Long and Hamish Fulton believe in the possibility to always find new ways of walking. Fulton's artwork, however, cannot be created without a walk. He describes himself as a walking artist. In 1973, after completing over a thousand miles of walking coast to coast from northeast Scotland to southeast England he made the decision to choose only walking: that he would make art resulting only from the experience of individual walks.

A view from Goat Fell, A Two Day 56 Mile Circular Road Walk Around the Coast of the Isle of Arran Scotland February 1978. All Fulton's work includes text, like this one that tells us objective details about the walk; time, place and distance. The text is underneath a circular black and white image of a cloudy atmospheric view from the mountain. It does not describe the whole walk but condenses his experience into one visual image. What we see in Arran Hilltops are 'facts for the walker (Fulton) and fictions for everyone else'. The minimal description and bleak enigmatic image leave us to imagine how this long walk around the Scottish island in February might have felt, and visualise the line walked around the circumference of the Island. There is a gap between the image presented, and the long journey it represents. Fulton is clear that the walks themselves are the artwork, and the exhibited objects are simply evidence of that.

As well as arguing that 'walking is an art form in its own right' and undertaking epic long-distance walks all over the world, Fulton also is keen to promote the importance of walking as part of everyday life, 'as a way of transport, a means of protest, a way of linking communities and as a spiritual tool'. In modern society walking is no longer a necessity, but the health benefits of walking are well known. This year the practice of taking regular walks outside in nature has become ever more important, for both our mental and physical wellbeing, whilst coping with the limitations of covid-19 restrictions. Walking is a way to participate in the world and interact with the landscape you move through.

Both artworks were purchased by Miranda Strickland-Constable for the Leeds collection in the 1970s. At the time these were quite progressive purchases for a municipal British gallery. They were among pieces bought by the curator that might have seemed controversial at the time to more conservative local audiences. It was a radical shift to take the art outside the confines of the gallery. Today they represent two artists who have international reputations, yet who talk about their art in a very straightforward way. The art is made in the experience of marking into or walking across the landscape.