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The Material and Symbolic Potential of Nature in Britain since the 1960s

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Since 1960, in Great Britain, the relationship to nature has been manifested in the work of artists, sculptors and photographers who survey the wildest or least urbanized parts of the island. They do not appropriate the representations of the landscape through classical topography, they do not change the terrain through the same processes as American land art, but they experiment with the island's natural space according to a *genius loci*. If the artists intervene directly in natural space with the help of plant elements, they do not refuse to transpose their experiences and display in galleries and museums which allow them to extend the visibility of their creation. The British natural space became an everyday environment, a physical space, a site, and a tool in the English landscape tradition, the rise of sculpture and the development of conceptual practices. Since the 1960s, we have seen the development of artistic practices linked to nature. Ian Hamilton Finlay developed his *Little Sparta Garden* near Edinburgh, Richard Long surveys the paths of southwest England, David Nash rarely leaves Blaenau Ffestiniog, in North Wales, Chris Drury works close to home in Sussex and Andy Goldsworthy nurtures his work in Penpont, in the south of Scotland.

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Importance of British Places

Since the 1960s, we have seen the development of artistic practices in Britain linked to island nature and referring to the importance of place.[1] Ian Hamilton Finlay delved into the garden tradition and developed a kind of remote land art laboratory, entitled *Little Sparta*, near Pentland Hills, Stonypath Farm (1966)

in the south-west of Edinburgh in Scotland. He makes the viewer aware of the natural space by referring to neo-classicism through a revival of the garden tradition in a contemporary environment. The references to neo-classicism are visible in the cohabitation with modernity that he developed in *Little Sparta,* his true Arcadian laboratory, referring to Sparta and showing the rigors of Sparta as the values of Arcadia as set out by Ovid. Started in 1966, and of course often returned to as an experienced Arcadia, *Little Sparta* is known now as the garden of his life. He worked with stone breakers, men of letters, artists and poets to deal with different themes such as the relationship with nature, antiquity, neo-classicism, the French Revolution and the Second World War through no less than 270 works. He revisited the art of the gardens of Ermenonville in France reknown thanks to the 18th-century author Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Leasowes, the English historic landscape. *Little Sparta* involves a relationship to poetry but also to neo-classical philosophical thought around poem-objects, aphorisms, fragments perceived in the form of inscriptions that come to cohabit with the plantings of the garden. The garden was built on the model by the English poet and landscape gardener William Shenstone and his *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening,* published in 1764, who offered a new picturesque division on landscape gardening.[2] Ian Hamilton Finlay also demonstrated an interest in the 17th-century landscape painting of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Gellée in *See Poussin, Hear Lorrain*. This stone panel allows one to appreciate the landscape of pool, trees and grasses. It is referring to Claude Lorrain's paintings that delivered the rustling of leaves, while Nicolas Poussin's landscape paintings accentuated the tranquility.

Richard Long's art has been a physical experience of natural space that he has been experimenting with since 1967. He does not feel close to the monumental practices of American Land Art, even though in 1969 he took part in the Earth Art exhibition organised at the Dwan Gallery[3] he admitted valuing a more modest practice close to Italian Arte Povera. He was an actor in his approach and was not satisfied with the aesthetic reception of his work. In 1981, he went to Bolivia with the artist Hamish Fulton, but he has mainly travelled to places he knows best, such as Dartmoor in south of England, which is an hour's train ride from Bristol, where he was born and where he still lives today. Richard Long is always on the move

1 Ian Hamilton Finlay (with John Andrew), *See Poussin, Hear Lorrain*, ground plaque, Portland stone, 1975

but is not a nomad. For him, Dartmoor is a prototype landscape "or an archetypal place: on a larger scale landscape in Scotland, Lappland, Alaska, the American prairies and treeless mountain areas have similar characteristic" (Fuchs, 1986, 75). The presence of Dartmoor in his work has been recurrent since the beginning of his work such as in *A Snowball Track, Bristol*, 1964. Place names recur such as Great Gnat's Head, West Dart River, Longfor Tor, River Tavy. We see the places the artist loves, it is a rather empty area and not very attractive, that appeals to him because of its remoteness from urban life. Dartmoor is, of course, an area rich in history, with human artefacts such as cairns, quarries, old roads, etc., and it is this presence that he celebrates in his work of mud, water and stone.

David Nash has his studio in Ffestiniog, in the heart of Snowdonia, Wales, which he discovered and visited in his youth. In the late 1960s, he moved into a former Methodist chapel in Blaenau, Wales, in the heart of the Snowdonia mountains to show how his art is close to nature. In his early years, it was essential for

David Nash to get out into nature, which he did not perceive as an idyllic aspect of the countryside, but as a harsh environment. He has conceived nature as neither beautiful nor pastoral, and he is still seeking to explore the darker side of the plant world. One of his first experiments was to follow a wooden boulder, a spherical shape made of oak *Wooden Boulder,* 1978, which he threw into a stream near his workshop: "Suddenly we were in the presence of this 'existing' boulder. It was my first experience of sculpture through the experience of an inanimate object asserting its presence. I went back to see it for 50 years, taking curators and art critics who wrote about my work. To me it is perfect in its simplicity, size, environment and location. It is the 'touchstone' of my journey as a sculptor" (Melvin, 2018, 6).

He wanted the ball as a sculpture to reach the ocean on its own. That's what the work was all about. In the end, the ball never reached its destination and remained in a pond. It is now interacting with the environment. *Wooden Boulder* made a surprise reappearance in 2013, a decade after its disappearance. But it didn't stay for long. In 2015, after a summer storm and a high tide, it was gone again – and has not been seen since. David Nash also worked on the growth of trees in *Ash Dome*, planted in 1977 in Cae'n-y-Coed. In the open countryside, on the perimeter of a nine-meter diameter circle of flat land, Nash planted twenty-two young ash trees, like promises of pillars. This living sculpture took him forty years to create – the plant dome he aimed for by planting some twenty ash trees in a circle sixty meters in diameter, supposed to evoke a volcano of rising energy. In the troubled times of the United Kingdom (Cold War, political and economic gloom, nuclear threat), the artist's project was a signal to the 21st century, to a future when the present seemed to be preoccupied only with the short term.

In January 1987, Andy Goldsworthy wrote in his sketchbook number 15: "It is as if all my previous work had been a preparation for my coming here" (Goldsworthy, 1993, 143). While he has worked in Japan, Canada, Australia, North America and France, his work in Penpont, Scotland, remains the core of his work and has been since 1986. Even today, it is true that his work is mostly near to where he lives and does not seem to be attached to travel and distant places. Dumfriesshire, in Scotland, is known for its prehistoric artefacts, which Andy Goldsworthy used in numerous references. It shows his attachment to his Scottish home and the impos-

sibility of understanding his work without insisting on the natural environment of its creation. It is here that Scotland is a specific and unique place for his sculptures and it is here that he observes the changes: "When I travel," he writes, "I regret the loss of a sense of change. I see differences, not changes. Change is best experienced by staying put" (Goldsworthy, 1993, 19). The varieties of the Scottish natural environment around the River Scaur, Stone Wood and Townhead Burn are all anchor points that allow Goldsworthy to demonstrate the originality of his sculptures on Scottish soil. He works with the River Scaur Water, especially in winter to create ice sculptures for example in *Icicles, Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire*, 1987 and then *The Wall, Stonewood, Dumfriesshire*, 1988-1989 to remind us of the extensive sheep farming during the industrial revolution in the 19th century. Goldsworthy was interested in making the wall communicate with nature and the current landscape and appeared to show that man is part of nature. Goldsworthy created numerous ephemeral sculptures over a period of twenty years from a dead elm tree that had fallen into a ditch near his home at *Townhed Burn in Dumfriesshire*. By including the dead elm in his work, he gave it new life: "This is the source that feeds everything else. This is the place with the most learning opportunities. I know it best. I know what's under the snow, I know the soil underneath, I know where the most colorful cherry tree grows, where to find the longest stems of chestnut leaves, the black thorns" (Goldsworthy, 1993, 17). Goldworthy is interested in the creative process rather than the finished product perceived as a work of art. Here we see senses develop through contact with the work, the land, and the territory. British places have been part of intellectual experiences and not only objects of contemplation. Penpont has become the artist's workshop for an in-situ experience that characterizes that type of contemporary sculpture. Although these works are different, these artists have in common the transition from the visible representation of the natural world to the presentation of the objects that make up nature. Their experiences and interventions are an integral part of their work.

Walking on the British Soil

Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, both from Saint Martin's School of Art in London, experiment with the English landscape, but without the same sensibility as the American Land Art artists, and since they do not modify the landscape, they index their sculptures on their walking ritual (Malpas, 2013, 209-223).

For Richard Long, walking is both a representation and a means of marking, as shown in *A Snowball Track, Bristol*, 1964, which shows a path formed by the rolling of a snowball. He photographed the track and not the snowball as in *Ben Nevis Hitch-hike*, 1967, where he photographed his route from London to Ben Nevis, Scotland in six days. In the same year he photographed the best-known *A Line Made by Walking, England*, 1967. This photograph shows the trace on a lawn of his trampling as he walked back and forth, causing the grass to disappear. It questions our relationship to the world and to ecology since it has left no lasting trace in nature. The art emphasizes the experience of natural space without emphasizing man and a form of domination over nature. Through a meditation this photograph reclaims the links with nature in a primitivist way of thinking and the line of the walk replaces the line of the drawing. Long did not work on the surface of the paper but rather with the surface of the earth. He becomes part of it and can appear as the fourth dimension. It is this inclusion that he emphasizes in his walks, which are organized according to a precise itinerary based on a geometric shape, a concept, a landscape, the link between different elements such as coasts, mountains, rivers, and natural phenomena. Richard Long does not recognize a hierarchy but he knows that places differ in their approach to walking. In diverse cultures, the path is both physical and symbolic, something that is seen and not seen. It is a pilgrimage, a search for truth. For Long, walking is a universal activity that allows us to interact with the world and puts the body in the spotlight.

For his part, Hamish Fulton has defined his unique work by walking and he almost never intervenes in the landscape (Malpas, 2013, 228). He leaves no trace of his walks except through photography. For him, walking has a cultural history. It is an individual activity that allows us to interact with the world. Walking leads to new perceptions, new experiences. Hamish Fulton takes a picture or writes a text as he did with *Boulder Shadows, 1995*. Emerging in the late 1960s

alongside artists including Richard Long and Gilbert and George, Hamish Fulton's work began to explore new possibilities for sculpture and for a direct relationship between landscape and art, shifting the focus on to the experience of the landscape. With influences ranging from American Indian culture to the subject of the environment itself, Fulton began to take short walks and take photographs to document the experiences of these walks. The perishable value of the artwork is part of the work, of its rarity, while at the same time using the materials of the natural world make the work alive and assumes its finitude. In the case of plant art or Earth art, the materials used are entirely natural (branches, rocks, foliage, hay, mud, etc.) and perishable.

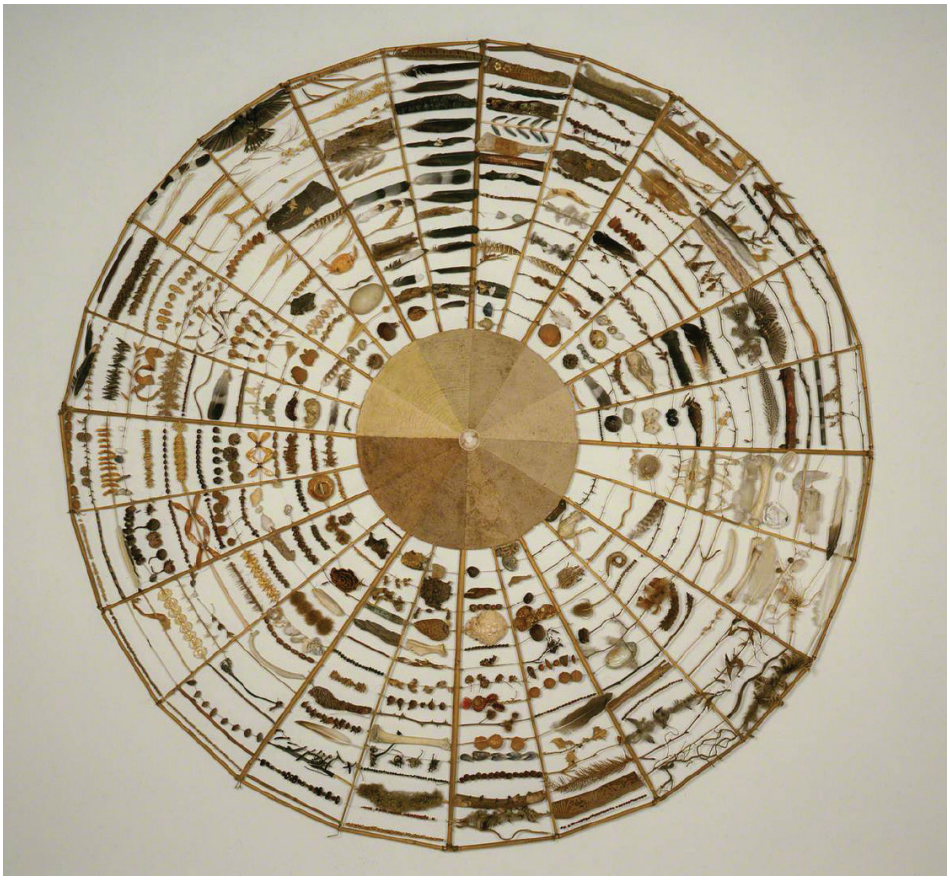
These installations then evolve over time until they decay, which often makes it an ephemeral work. These installations do not depend on the primacy of form, as is the case in the tradition of monumental sculpture but they leave a large part to organic materials.

Goldsworthy's works try to re-establish the link between nature and art by showing us almost materially the elements that constitute it. Nature goes beyond the landscape and the countryside. Everything comes from the Earth, from the soil. He does not add anything that is not already present on the ground and uses either what he finds in nature or in the green spaces of cities. From 1994 to 1996 he worked with and on an oak tree near his home *Capenoch Tree*, 1996. It was an oak tree with one of its branches growing parallel to the ground, which he used to make sculptures. During these two years he photographed his work from the same angle because he was especially interested in changes. The meaning conveys that the tree is a bridge between earth and sky and participates in death and regeneration. This is a kind of mediation that puts the links with nature back in the spotlight, because since ancient times trees have been perceived as having a soul. In fact, we know that Celtic and Germanic tribes venerated trees. The French historian Alain Corbin explains that: "The plant is more persistent than the ruin, because it is alive. The tree is then the symbol of longevity; it is the witness of history, and by its form it possesses a vertical energy which interests the sculptor" (Corbin, 2013, 28). In a more varied way, Goldsworthy is also interested in its leaves, whose colors, from green to orange to bright yellow, serve as a colorama. He can animate them in different forms. Andy Goldsworthy uses shapes such as the serpentine line and

the black hole to capture our imagination with forms that suggest a vital energy. In *Low wall highlighted* with snow in winter and wool in summer Scaur glen, Dumfriesshire (January and July 1996), the wool is displayed on a stone wall in reference to late 18th-century enclosures. Aesthetically, the wool somehow illuminates the verdant nature. But Goldworthy works with wool as a material, reminding the viewer of the animal and the history of its introduction to Scotland during the Highlands Clearences from the 18th century in Scotland.[4] David Nash chose the tree, the wood as his material of predilection. He began burning wood in 1983, charring it to preserve it. In such manner, the plant becomes by way of a chemical reaction mineral, carbon. At the same time, he highlights both the form and the material. His tools are water, fire, axe, auger, chainsaw, pencil, chalk, and camera. He also created *Vessel and Volume, Variation of tones*. In another way, Chris Drury is also interested in basketry. In *Medicine Wheel*, 1983, he created a calendar collecting 365 found objects such as feathers, corn, beans, pebbles, and rabbit skin presented in a circle in the shape of a mushroom. It has at its very core twelve segments of paper, one to represent each month, made of mushroom spores created as a print from their pulp (Dury, 2004, 17-19). Mushrooms can feed you, kill you, cure you, or even make you see visions and as such they are also a human metaphor for life and death and regeneration. Drury's first main venture into environmental art, *Medicine Wheel,* took a year to make: 365 items collected, one a day, by him or friends collated and threaded like a fine spool, became a tangible record of the changing seasons in the English countryside and emotionally difficult times within Drury's year, as his wife and children separated from him (but did return) and his father died. The wheel is 230 centimeters in a circular diameter and eight centimeters deep, divided into twenty-four segments, with approximately fifteen pieces contained in each section to offer a meditative view. There are driftwood, feather, bones, willows, skulls, seeds, pebbles, fur, flowers, wool and berries amongst many other natural ethereal items.

Reception of Nature

Some sculptures still exist today only through photography and not through the object itself; this pushes the viewer to enjoy a new experience. Exhibition spaces are challenged as these artists choose to intervene directly in a natural space.



2 Chris Drury, *Medicine Wheel*, mixed media, 1983

For Ian Hamilton Finlay, the garden cannot tell a story without the words of concrete poetry that appeal to the visitor. These sentences make the place even more mysterious because the walk is not easy to get to and nature changes with the seasons. An admirer of the 18th century, he often referred to the French revolution and especially to the way it changed our way of seeing the world. The English landscape historian Dixon Hunt recalled that in Finlay's dictionary published in 1986, we read: "Revolution, n.a, scheme for the improving of a country; a scheme for realizing the capabilities of a country. A return. A restoration. A renewal" (Hunt,

2008, 114). His garden studies the lessons of history and the need to reinterpret history. As the natural garden is constantly reinvented and reworked, it is the ideal place to study the past. Destructive forces can give birth to better things.

Goldsworthy uses only photography without a filter – indeed he uses analog film. An everyday object is used to describe and record his ephemeral creations. Photography is for him an instinctive medium. This technique, whose process has become routine, allows the work to remain alive, while the sculpture implicitly degrades according to the weather and the seasons. The artist captures the brevity of his action to bear witness to the harmony experienced. *Shap Beck Quarry Fold,* 2001, was part of the *Arch in Transhumance* project conceived between 1997 and 2007 to retrace the transhumance route between the south of Scotland and Cambria in the north of England (Goldsworthy, Craig, 1999). At each stage, the arch was rebuilt, using red Locharbriggs sandstone from Dumfriesshire, photographed and dismantled to be built again in another location. The aim was to achieve the construction of the lost folds. The arch marked the point where the enclosure was found to be. In Richard Long's work we see that art becomes a series of words and a series of maps that allow him to make walking an art. His works are structured by relationships and have a purpose. Since the 1970s, these descriptive processes have fed the viewer's imagination on a different level from the contemplation of the photographic image (Tiberghien, 2012, 230). He notes his observations, his feelings, the names of places, the duration, and the distance. In *A Walk by all Roads and Lanes touching of crossing an imaginary circle, Somerset England*, 1977, he recorded the roads he had taken and inscribed them on a map produced by the British Ordnance Survey (ed. Wallis, 2009, 43-47). The works show time, space, distances, routes, etc. and describe his walk in a pictorial way. His acts become symbolized by a geometric form and shows the difference with his experience of walking. The walks change dimension and appear as a cursor moving on the paper. Some of his works are simple writings, and texts summarizing his walk: the place, the day, the duration, even the winds. This is what we call concrete poetry that he articulates in different forms, in lines or in circles. The articulated words become a sculpture as they have turned into an experience in themselves in the way they are handled. Chris Drury is also using vellum paper cards that he sews

together because of his interest in basketry making. He interweaves the maps and links two territories together *Tuscany and East Sussex*, 2019, woven maps and watercolor.

Some of these artists do not refuse to transport their experiences through their works in galleries and museums that allow them to extend their visibility and the reception of their conceptual ideas. They try to escape the museum, the gallery, the traditional exhibition environment as an opposition to the commercial role of art, especially through the lack of durability of the work and a questioning of the academic value, and how to judge the passage of time and the duration. Their works emphasize a timeless value of art that we can see in the exhibition of piles of stones, earth, materials that often degrade or change. Richard Long creates circles or lines made of mud, pine needles, stones, or twigs in the galleries. He combines the conceptual with his attraction to the materiality of the natural world. He makes no distinction between his engagement with natural space and the works he installs in a gallery. He uses natural materials, energy and spatiality that he had in the field. They have a link with primitivism since the circle is the symbol of eternity, of rebirth and an organic form that we find in the work of other contemporary artists. These creations cannot be preserved, so only the photograph remains as a testimony of the exhibition. He takes advantage of the exhibition space to present more concrete works and he says he appreciates both ways of working, outdoors and indoors. There is a non-commercial orientation, but photography brings the place to the viewers (Malpas, 2013, 216-217). In this respect Chris Drury has built cairns and shelters since the 1980s. He is not romanticizing nature, he has no political or moral commitment, nor does he have a religious commitment. He is mainly interested in inner nature, Zen Buddhism, meditation and the consciousness that we can find in outer nature. The cairn marks the human presence, a relationship to a specific territory. It is a fullstop while the cairn is a comma in the journey. While the walk is meditative, the cairn highlights a moment in the walk. He encourages the public to go and see his creations.

Since the 1960s, new studies have been released in the wake of minimalism, conceptual art, arte povera and the reflections produced on the museum, the place of the viewer and the physical engagement of the artist, favoring the rise of

sculpture and working with the land. Artists propose environmental and performance alternatives. They return to the basis of aesthetic experience, namely the link between their bodies and nature.

Unlike land art created in North America, the British terrain has no untouched territory, so artists must work from a natural space full of history. Therefore, in Britain, plant art and its derivatives are not created by bulldozers, but through the medium of the walking artist, and Britain plays a significant role due to its richness in natural spaces. The environmental aesthetic of Anglo-Saxon origin advocates: "The defense and enhancement of natural beauty in the face of the destruction to which it is subjected through industrialisation" (Milani, 2005, 42). This aesthetic separates itself from philosophical literature, the philosophy of art, beauty and the theory of taste and tends towards an aesthetic of the environment. This is obviously connected with English sculpture from Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, and its connection with the landscape tradition.

These works, which are neither rituals nor performances, show how close British artists are to the landscape tradition and the land itself when David Nash said: "I think, Andy Goldsworthy and I, and Richard Long, and most of the British artists' collectives associated with land art would have been landscape painters a hundred years ago. But we don't want to make portraits of the landscape. A landscape picture is a portrait. We don't want that. We want to be in the land" (Grande, 2004, 13).

Since the 1970s, we have seen the appearance of sculpture parks. The English natural space was invested, like the forest of Grizedale (1977), the Forest of Dean (1986) and King's Wood (1993). The link could also be related to the Cold War or the economic downturn where nature here appeared as an escape. We could also see that from a national point of view, these artists were the counterpart of the Young British Artists such as Tracy Emin, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, and to the capitalist art that appeared in Great Britain in the 1980s.

Endnotes

1 We have seen the appearance of new expressions: Land art, Earth Art, Earthworks, Environmental Art and their use is not always very precise. Today, Land Art is American and Earth Art European, but the two are used side by side. But Earth Art refers to the earth as a material.

2 William Shemstone experimented with gardening at his farm in The Leasowes, Shropshire. He divided the garden into three categories: Kitchen gardening, Parterre gardening and Landscape or Picturesque gardening. He stated that the last category appeals to the imagination in scenes of grandeur, beauty and variety (Shenstone, 1764, 125-147).

3 The *Earth Art* exhibition was held at the Johnson's predecessor, the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, in 196. It was the first American museum exhibition dedicated to this new artworks. Conceived by Willoughby Sharp, an independent curator, publisher, and artist, the exhibition presented installations by nine artists: Jan Dibbets (Netherlands), Hans Haacke and Günther Uecker (Germany), Richard Long (Great Britain), David Medalla (Philippines), and Neil Jenny, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, and Robert Smithson (United States).

4 Evictions of the Highland population from the end of the 18th century (Mackenzie, 1991).

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Illustrations

Fig. 1 Ian Hamilton Finlay (with John Andrew), *See Poussin, Hear Lorrain*, ground plaque, Portland stone, 1975, photo: Robin Gillanders, National Gallery of Scotland

Fig. 2 Chris Drury, *Medicine Wheel*, mixed media, 221.5 cm, 1983, Leeds, © Leeds Museums and Art Galleries