

EARTH WRITING as HUMANE ART

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Vado, ergo sum.

This piece of geopoetics is directed towards the abyss of geographical meaning. Etymologically, geography is earth writing. *Geo-*, combination form of the Greek *ge*, denotes the earth, while *-graphy*, combination form of the Greek *-graphia*, denotes a process of writing, describing or representing (Webster's 1989: 592, 616).

Thus ontologically there are two dimensions at work simultaneously in *ge/o/graphy* (Gren 1994: 7). The *earth* dimension refers to landscapes of matter, and the *writing* dimension to landscapes of meaning. In earth writing the two dimensions are always in play together.

Epistemologically, by way of an implicit analogy, the ideas written down here have connections with cultural geography.

The case I wish to put forward is quite a specific one. I will begin by referring to Richard Long, a British sculptor, the nature of whose work can be characterized as "art walking in the landscape." With Long we have certainly come a long way from traditional landscape art as exemplified in landscape painting. His work is an example of "the enormous disturbance in the map of the arts" that Barilli (1993: 64) speaks of. Long takes us back to a landscape as a concrete terrain to be charted with the hands and feet, and ultimately with the whole body, and not only with charcoal and brushes, watercolours and oils. In short, the interest is not in the ways of reproducing the appearance of a landscape by way of painted effects, but in a certain way of re-examining the composition of an art related to landscape.

Long's art takes its form in different media: walks, sculptures, photographs and mud works (Seymour 1991: 7). His walks through the landscapes of the Earth, whether in Mongolia, the Sahara, Lapland or Tierra del Fuego, are recorded either by photographs of sculptures made along the walk from the mate-

rials immediately to hand, or by maps and text, which evoke experiences of time, places and ideas. His sculptures in galleries are made by arranging natural materials that he has found and collected, in most cases wood or stone. His mud works are daubed on the gallery floors and walls with watery solutions of river mud and clay, while his photographs and other works that are shown in galleries take his art from outdoors to indoors.

Long's works can be seen as a part of the Earth Art tradition. The creation of art by and with earth in remote locations and often using ephemeral media has been a visible movement in the art world over the past three decades. It has drawn attention to the landscape itself as a work of art. But here, again, Long departs from the 'mainstream' in the sense of consistently being in the process of interacting with the landscape rather than with the products created (Romey 1987: 452). As the artist says, his preference is always for simple, elemental, natural materials. "Nature is the source of my work. The medium of my work is walking (the element of time) and natural materials (sculpture)." (Long 1998: 10.) Long wants to break away from the Land Art tradition. "For me," he says, "the label 'Land Art' represents North American monumental earthworks, and my work has nothing to do with that" (*ibid.*). He prefers a lighter touch. By working more spontaneously on the surface of the earth and being close to the earth, Long's hands and feet make 'less become more.'

As he emphasizes the importance of ideas, Long is a conceptual artist. And his Art relates to minimalism in its connection with geometry and in being assembled rather than composed (Causey 1998: 181). Long deliberately creates transient outdoor works which seldom leave physical traces at the site of their construction. After documenting the work with black-and-white photographs, he often reconstructs the site in the condition it was before he entered it (Bourdon 1995: 220). In his conceptual art he thus employs a form of expression which tries to abolish the physical as completely as possible. The intellectual process is then shared with the audience by means of photographs and other media that he deems relevant (Lucie-Smith 1995: 183).

In entering the realm of conceptual art, the product (the photograph, for instance) receives value only as a reminder of the line made of the stones in a desert; and the line itself is but an ephemeral trace of a process of walking across the terrain (Romey 1987: 452). In the end, it is the pattern of activity, essentially an art of both sensuous and intellectual patterns, that counts more than the actual

physical product. Long's works become images of his gestures, his bodily existence, and in this sense they are like self-portraits. "[My work] is about my own physical engagement with the world, whether walking across it or moving its stones around" (Long 1998: 10).

There are two dimensions at work here. Earth Art "is to be seen but also felt; it is a phenomenological art of direct experience and not just a perceptual one" (Causey 1998: 176). The continuum of Long's works is from the 'pediscribed' landscape, with total bodily involvement, to more traditional documentary 'scripts' in photographs and other media. Long's use of bodily involvement in the process of his art is also an attempt to settle the dispute between the opposites of body and spirit, nature and culture, and to rediscover intuitively the basic facts of human nature and the positive aspects of our bodies.

Long employs archetypal or primal geometric forms in his works, most notably lines and circles. "A circle," he says, "is beautiful, powerful, but also neutral or abstract" (Long 1998: 11). A circle, moreover, suits the anonymous but human-made character of his work. "Circles and lines are also practical, they are easy to make (fig. 1). A line can be made just by aligning features in the landscape, and it can point to the horizon, into the distance." (*ibid.*) In other words, the preference in the form of the works, as well, is for the simplest and most elemental shapes. The artist shows that simple forms can contain complex ideas.

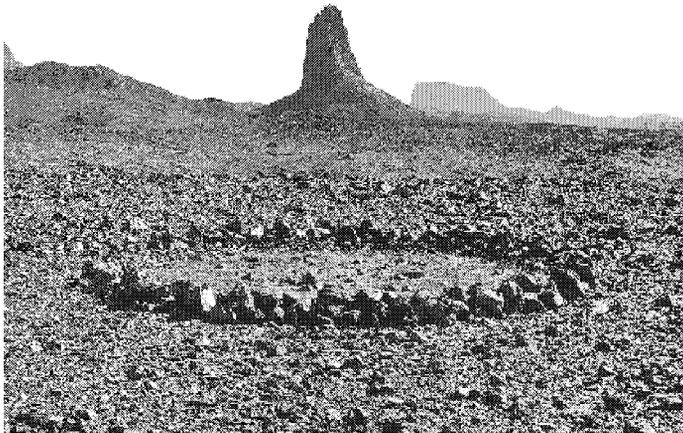


Fig.1. "Sahara Circle 1988" (Source: Long 1998).

"A circle is more contemplative, more focused, like a stopping place, and a line is more like the walk itself" (*ibid.*). With reference to these words I would like to

attempt a more far-reaching interpretation of Richard Long's landscape art. To me, Long is also a theorist. The argument for this view is an etymological one: "The word theorist or any of its close derivatives is never used by the ancient Greeks to refer to participation in a religious festivity in the hometown. From the beginning the theorist has to journey beyond the boundaries in his own city. From the beginning the theorist must move beyond the known territory into the new." (Jager 1979: 236.) Jager even notes that if we want to understand ourselves better, we perhaps should not direct all our attention to the mind, but rather we should rediscover the mysteries of our feet (*ibid.*: 253). This, I think, is what Richard Long is doing. In the unpainted landscape he is writing the earth theoretically by his art of walking.

Within the sphere of journeying there reigns an awareness of passing. Every experience, every sight and touch, is coloured by an awareness of leaving the place behind. "To move from the sphere of dwelling to that of journeying means to shift from an emphasis on ground to an emphasis on background" (*ibid.*: 253–254). Ground ushers in a vertical world, background a more purely horizontal world. Background frees the wanderer from his/her original bond with the ground and therefore from a reverence and a practice which would complicate his/her progress.

These questions belong to existential geometry. A line is an expression of motion and hence of space, whereas a circle is an expression of shelter, and hence of place. Space is motion, place is rest. We may write as follows:

space: expansion
→ journeying
place: constraint
→ dwelling

Seen through etymology, we can contrast space with place by noting that space refers to something that allows spreading or progressing, something that yields to an expansionist effort, allowing speed, and makes it possible to achieve expansive feelings and hope. In contrast to this, place refers to a site of inhabiting. In this sense it is as something that permits growth, expansion and freedom, whereas place becomes a 'room,' a constrained and designated location. Space means outward-spreading motion without the friction of walls, while place has

the character of a concretely won habitation or enclosure (Jager 1976; Walter 1980–81).

In Long's journeying and dwelling, the lines and circles maintain a dialogue (fig. 2). The basic figure of his art is made up of an alteration between place-making stops and space-allowing movement, between circles and lines, between inward-directing rooms and outward-spreading horizons, circumscription and opening up. The nature of existential spatiality, in connection with existential temporality, can be pointed out in more geometrical terms. "The transition from the time of dwelling to the time of journeying can be understood as the transition from a round to an oval" (Jager 1979: 253). In the extreme case, however, the oval comes to resemble a straight line. "When the oval collapses into a straight line, when this transition has been fully accomplished, then the journey loses its original rhythm and becomes fugue" (*ibid.*). Yet, from the human point of view, journeying must always retain a circular character. Human life takes place in a dialogue between circles and lines.

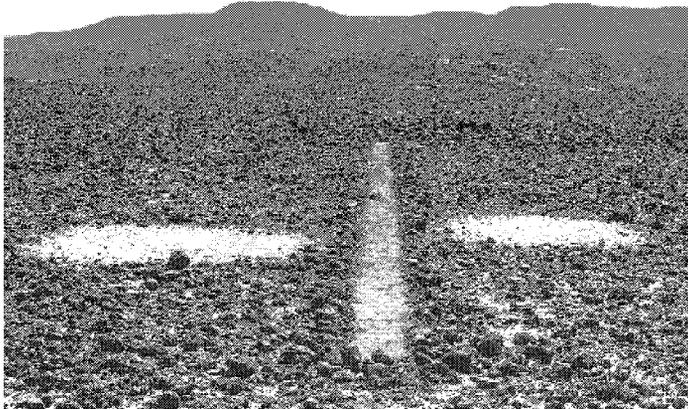


Fig. 2. "Crossing Marks the Sahara 1988" (Source: Long 1998).

To conclude, we now have circles and lines, which speak in a minimalist manner of writing the earth. These circles and lines refer to the dialectic of movement and rest, space and place, openness and enclosure. The enclosing circumference is made with the hand, the opening line with the feet. The landscape is lived in a bodily sense, but constructed conceptually.

In this dialectic the stones of nature become the cornerstones of culture. "Regardless of when and where, there is a stony ground in every culture, a cul-

tural meaning in every stone" (Olsson 1998: 13). In the walker's landscape, on the sides of the 'predscribed' line, two untouchable limits can be imagined (Olsson 1993: 284). One limit contains the utterly opaque stones of nature, the other the entirely transparent meanings of culture. The former limit is the imagined realm of pure matter, and the latter the imagined realm of pure spirit.

The kinaesthetic human touch leaves a trace on the landscape in between.

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