From Allen Carlson to Richard Long: The Art-Based Appreciation of Nature

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Abstract. The question I ask in this paper is whether some works of art could teach us to aesthetically appreciate nature. The first part of the text presents the current debate in analytical aesthetics on appreciation of nature, and examines Allen Carlson thesis that only natural sciences, and not art, teach us to appreciate natural beauty. Carlson argues that natural sciences as biology or ecology show us nature as it is, making possible an objective aesthetics of nature, while art only projects subjective ideas on it. The text examines the arguments raised against this thesis by different authors, some of them defending a cognitivist position and some a non-cognitivist one.

The second part analyzes Carlson's rejection of art, and focuses on his reasons for rejecting landscape painting. Carlson argues that landscape painting distorts the true character of natural environments because it frames and flattens environments into scenery. He claims that aesthetic appreciation of nature is not a matter of looking at views from a distance, as we contemplate pictures in a gallery, but it is being involved in the environment, moving through it, and not only looking, but hearing, touching, smelling.

The third part proposes the work of Richard Long as an art that cannot be rejected by Carlson arguments. Land art was born at the same time as philosophical aesthetics of nature was renewed by Ronald Hepburn after a long time of oblivion, and we can find some affinities between Carlson's critiques to landscape painting and some land art works, like the art of Richard Long. Long explores natural environments in a new way, and it is argued that his art can teach us to aesthetically appreciate nature.

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The question that I am going to address in this paper is whether some works of art, that is, some human creations, in addition to the aesthetic and/or artistic value that they may have in themselves, are able to teach us to aesthetically appreciate that which we have not created ourselves: nature. To put it another way: whether some works of art could help us to appreciate natural objects, phenomena and particularly environments in more detail, in greater depth, and with increased knowledge. Or alternatively: whether art can be a good guide for contemplating the beauty of a beech wood on a sunny April afternoon, a Mediterranean beach in winter, a storm in the Pyrenees in the dead of night, or the night sky.

The context in which I am going to address this question is that of the debate concerning the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, which is taking place at present in analytic aesthetics. I start the paper by presenting an overview of this debate, to then move on in the second part to pose the question, and in the third part to try to answer it.

I. The Current Debate

As is well known, when philosophical aesthetics was founded in the 18th century, the two main objects of reflection were art, on the one hand, and nature, on the other. For a whole century, both for the British Enlightenment thinkers and also for Baumgarten and Kant, the concepts of beauty and the sublime were applied indistinctively to works of art and to natural objects, phenomena and environments. Furthermore, in discussions concerning whether aesthetics is a sphere of knowledge, or regarding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, it was the norm to combine examples of paintings and poems with nightingales, flowers, waterfalls, mountains or storms.

However, at the beginning of the 19th century, Hegel broke this balance when he claimed that a landscape painting has a philosophical interest that the natural environment that inspired the painting will never have. Such a hierarchy was based on the idea that a landscape painting is precisely the natural environment after it has been processed by human consciousness, and thus transfigured by reason and freedom. The natural environment and the painting may both be beautiful, but the painting is

not just beautiful, it is also a form of knowledge. Moreover, according to Hegel it is not just any form of knowledge, but rather art is one of the three forms of the Absolute Spirit; together with religion and philosophy. Thus art is a way to approach Truth.

That Hegel should conceive of art as a form of knowledge similar to philosophy was, without a doubt, a step forward. However, in order to defend this idea Hegel did something that he did no really need to do: he reduced aesthetics to the philosophy of art. The price for this was paid by the aesthetics of nature, which was radically expelled from the discipline.

Hegel's proposal was a success in academic circles and led to the aesthetics of nature taking on a marginal existence at best: outside the universities, and far removed from textbooks and scientific debates. In Europe, the aesthetics of nature was only pursued by those authors who maintained a rather eccentric relationship with academia, such as Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, and who argued in favour of a much broader aesthetics that was able to encompass the most diverse aspects of reality and of human life. In the United States such a broad concept of aesthetics was not defended by academic philosophers, but rather by authors such as Henry David Thoreau, naturalists such as John Muir or forestry engineers such as Aldo Leopold. Finally, it was in the 1960s and 1970s, within the context of the emergence of ecological consciousness and the questioning of the authority of academic institutions, that the aesthetics of nature returned to the academic fold and at last recovered its place at the universities, at conferences and in scientific journals. In continental Europe the person behind this recovery was Theodor W. Adorno, while in the Anglo-Saxon world it was Ronald Hepburn.

Since then, within analytic aesthetics a discussion has sprung up that considers natural objects, phenomena and environments. Within this tendency some authors have emerged as real specialists in the aesthetics of nature, such as Allen Carlson, Arnold Berleant, Emily Brady or Thomas Heyd. However, the arguments have also attracted ecologists such as Holmes Rolston III or Baird Callicott, theoreticians of everyday aesthetics such as Yuriko Saito, or philosophers of art such as Noël Carroll. The great philosophical question at the heart of the debate is: what does aesthetic appreciation of nature consist of? It would be a parallel question alongside this other one: what does aesthetic and/or artistic appreciation of works

of art consist of? However, while in the latter case there already exists a well-founded and long tradition of reflection, in the case of nature we find ourselves with a much younger discipline, and we must make an effort to avoid being drowned out by the dominant arguments in the philosophy of art.

This then is the central question: what does aesthetic appreciation of nature consist of? Does it make sense to talk of rules for the correct appreciation of nature? Is it a more spontaneous appreciation than the appreciation of art is? Is it a question of knowledge, or is it rather an emotional question, or is it particularly related to the imagination?

One of the boldest attempts to respond to this question has been made by Allen Carlson, who has constructed a model of aesthetic appreciation of nature that he calls scientific cognitivism. It is one of the most elaborate proposals and Carlson has defended it in numerous articles and books since the 1970s, but it is also being energetically discussed from many different positions, which has placed it at the very heart of the debate.

Carlson defends two fundamental theses: first, that the aesthetic appreciation of nature requires knowledge. This is not a subjective or whimsical matter. Rather, in order to appreciate natural beauty appropriately, one must appreciate nature *qua* nature; that is, one must know it for what it really is. This idea falls within his conception of aesthetic appreciation as cognitive appreciation. To aesthetically appreciate something, whether it be a work of art, an urban setting or a natural environment, always involves knowledge.

The second thesis is that the knowledge of nature necessary for its aesthetic appreciation is provided by natural science, since it is science that can help us to know and understand what nature is. Here, Carlson draws an analogy with art. In order to appreciate the paintings of Pollock or of Remedios Varo, one must know what a painting is, and one must also know what abstract expressionism or surrealism are. Certain knowledge is required which is provided by the disciplines of the history and the theory of art. Likewise, in order to aesthetically appreciate nature, we require natural science, in the sense that in order to really appreciate the magnificence of a whale, one needs to know that it is a mammal and not a fish. In order to appreciate the colouring of a deciduous forest in autumn, one needs to understand why the leaves change colour. Or we could

say that in order to appreciate a mountain such as Montserrat (a deeply symbolic mountain for catalan culture), one must know its geological history. Carlson does not require an extremely high level of knowledge here, rather he accepts different degrees; these include the scientific knowledge at the disposal of biologists or ecologists, the knowledge possessed by an amateur naturalist, or simply a basic knowledge of nature. The important thing is that the correct perspective is provided by the knowledge of the naturalist, and not by religion, or the arts, or literature, or myths.

Carlson says:

> The basic idea of the objectivist point of view is that our appreciation is guided by the nature of the object of appreciation. Thus, information about the object's nature, about its genesis, type, and properties, is necessary for appropriate aesthetic appreciation. For example, in appreciating a natural environment such as an alpine meadow, it is important to know, for instance, that it survives under constraints imposed by the climate of high altitude. With such knowledge comes the understanding that diminutive size in flora is an adaptation to such constraints.[1]

He goes on to say:

> In the way in which the art critic and the art historian are well equipped to aesthetically appreciate art, the naturalist and the ecologist are well equipped to aesthetically appreciate nature.[2]

Defending his point even more vigorously:

> Object-orientated appreciation is objective: it focuses on an object as what it is and as having the properties it has. And, of course, science is the paradigm of that which reveals objects for what they are and with the properties they have. Thus, science not only presents itself as the source of objective truth, it brands alternative accounts as subjective falsehood and therefore, in accord with objective appreciation, as irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation.[3]

[1] Carlson, Allen (2000). *Aesthetics and the Environment. The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture.* London: Routledge. P. xix.

[2] Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit., p. 50.

[3] Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit., p. 119.

One of the reasons why Carlson offers this theory is to defend the idea that the aesthetic appreciation of nature cannot be formalist.[4] To appreciate a forest is not only to appreciate certain shades of green which move in the light causing a pattern of shadows on the ground. To appreciate mountains is not only to appreciate certain precipitous shapes that form a silhouette against the sky in the twilight. It is important to understand what we are appreciating; to go beyond the image or the appearance, and to understand the natural environment, what it consists of, its history, what natural forces formed it, which species live in it, the relations between those species, and so on.

Science offers us categories that allow us to know what we perceive (it reveals the whale to us as a mammal; the sandy strip that stretches across the landscape as a dry river bed; the stone containing a strange design as a fossil that is thousands of years old; etc.). Furthermore, it uncovers order, harmony and unity. In this way it can show us beauty where before we could see none, since we did not understand what we were contemplating.[5]

Carlson hopes, furthermore, that such aesthetic appreciation goes hand-in-hand with an ethical attitude towards nature; an attitude of respect, admiration and a desire to protect. This ethical attitude can only be built out of knowledge. As he summarises it:

> Scientific cognitivism in particular, with its focus on scientific knowledge, which is a paradigm of objectivity, is said to help meet the concern that the aesthetic appreciation of environments is of little significance in environmental conservation and protection, since it is subjective.[6]

Or as he goes on to explain:

> Objectivity secures the connection between our aesthetic judgments and our ethical obligations — between the aesthetic appreciation and the preservation of nature. Consequently, it is vital that it be accepted as a requirement for an adequate aesthetics of nature. An

[4] Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit. Chapter 2.

[5] Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit., pp. 85-95.

[6] Carlson, Allen (2009). *Nature and Landscape. An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics.* New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 18-19.

> aesthetics of nature that cannot support grounds for preserving that which we find beautiful is not worthy of consideration.[7]

Carlson's theory has been defended by authors such as Holmes Rolston III or Baird Callicott. However, it has also been the object of a range of harsh criticism. We could categorise such criticism in the following way:

1. He is criticised for his strict normativism, in contrast to which his critics suggest that there is not just one model of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, but rather there can be a range of ways to appreciate it. This is a claim that is made by various authors, although one of the most consistent defences of it is that made by Malcolm Budd, who argues that within the aesthetic appreciation of nature it is not possible to talk of models. Budd claims instead that it must be recognised that there is an enormous degree of freedom and spontaneity.[8]

2. Carlson is criticised for having a conception of the aesthetic appreciation of nature that is purely cognitive; one that ignores other human capacities. Noël Carroll, in contrast, offers a model based on an emotional response to nature, and furthermore defends that an aesthetics based on the emotions is not purely subjective and whimsical, but rather that it also has an objective element, since it is possible to judge emotional responses as appropriate or inappropriate.[9] More extreme points of view claim that the aesthetic experience of nature is an experience of immersion, of engagement, in which the distance between the subject and the object disappears, according to Arnold Berleant[10]; or the experience of a mystery, whose nature it is impossible for us to comprehend, as Stan Godlovitch proposes[11]. However, the boldest alternative developed so far is that which defends

[7] Carlson, Allen (2009). Op. Cit., p. 47.

[8] Budd, Malcolm (2002). *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[9] Carroll, Noël (1993). "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History", in Kemal, S.; Gaskell, I. (eds.) *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 244-266.

[10] Berleant, Arnold (1992). *The Aesthetics of Environment.* Temple University Press.

[11] Godlovitch, Stan (1994). "Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics", *The Journal of Applied Philosophy,* VII, pp. 15-30.

the role of the imagination. Ronald Hepburn developed it briefly[12], and at present Emily Brady is constructing a rich and complex theory, for which she distinguishes different types of imagination (associative, metaphorical, exploratory, projective, ampliative and revelatory).[13]

3. Those critics who accept that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is cognitive, criticise Carlson's narrow view of what knowledge is and call for the inclusion of forms of knowledge other than scientific knowledge, such as art, literature, local narratives, myths, folklore, and in general different forms of culture. This is where we encounter Yuriko Saito[14], or the position that Carlson himself considers "a more extreme view"[15]: Thomas Heyd's Many Stories model.[16]

4. A more general criticism of Carlson's position is that he creates a false opposition between science and art. Carlson maintains that science is the road that leads to objectivity, while he considers art as something purely subjective and unrelated to knowledge. Such a vision of science and art is highly contended. Brady and Heyd are two of the authors who have developed this criticism.

Now that I have briefly given this overview of the debate by way of an introduction, I am going to consider the question that interests me here.

[12] Hepburn, Ronald (1966). "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty", in Williams, B.; Montefiore, A. (eds.) *British Analytical Philosophy.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. See also: Hepburn, Ronald (1996). "Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination", *Environmental Values*, 5, pp. 191-204.

[13] Brady, Emily (2003). *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[14] Saito, Yuriko (1998). "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms", *Environmental Ethics,* 20, pp. 135-149.

[15] See Carlson, Allen (2009). Op Cit., p. 136.

[16] Heyd, Thomas, (2001) "Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories About Nature", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41, pp. 125-137. See also Heyd, Thomas (2007). *Encountering Nature.* Hampshire/Burlington: Ashgate.

II. Could Art Teach Us to Aesthetically Appreciate Natural Environments?

As we have already seen, Carlson's reply is no. While natural science can teach us, because it helps us to understand what it is that we are contemplating, art cannot do so because it does not show us nature as it really is: nature *qua* nature. I will now consider this in a little more depth.

When we ask this question, the majority of us think above all of landscape painting, and that is precisely the artistic genre that Carlson concentrates on: does landscape painting teach us to appreciate nature?

Our culture permanently offers us images of nature, whether they are paintings or photographs. Some of them are images of objects such as stones or plants, but the most common subject is the landscape. From the great paintings by Ruisdael, Constable, Turner, Corot or Bierstadt, through to the photographs in the *National Geographic*, or postcards, posters and calendars, landscapes are present in many of the spaces we inhabit. We should also add to the list: travel guides, tourist agency catalogues and adverts, particularly for cars and wine. Landscape paintings and photographs are a central element in our culture, and they influence how we see and experience nature to a great extent. When we go out to visit a natural environment which we have previously seen images of, whether paintings or photographs, we search out those images. Later we return home with more photos, which will in turn shape our memories. We picture nature through them. However, the question is whether landscape paintings or photographs teach us to appreciate nature itself or whether, in contrast, they show us nature through a filter that impedes us from appreciating it as it really is.[17]

What Carlson suggests is that in our culture we have inherited two opposing models of the aesthetic appreciation of nature: the model of the landscape painting and the model of the naturalist. The former emerges from the western tradition of landscape painting, and became theorised with the concept of the picturesque in Europe in the second half of the 18th century, thanks particularly to the work of the theoreticians William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight. The latter model emerged

[17] A similar problem would be raised by the nature we see on television and in the cinema, but it leads to another type of questions, which I cannot enter into here.

in the United States in the 19th century, led by Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs, among others.

The two models were already contrasted by the naturalist John Muir at the end of the 19th century, as we can see in his writing: "A Near View of the High Sierra".[18] At the start of the text, Muir introduces himself as a naturalist who knows how to survive alone in the wilds of nature. Muir tells us that he is studying the glaciers that shaped the landscape of the High Sierra, in the Yosemite region. His clear and precise language, while at the same time being exciting, demonstrates to us that he has studied the geological history of the area, that he knows the paths through the mountains, and that he knows the names of the animals and plants that live in those parts. The story goes on to tell of his encounter with two painters who wish to capture the beauty of the place, and for whom he amiably offers to act as a guide. The painters travel the mountains, which are new to them, and in the middle of so many wonderful places they find nothing that they can paint; that is, they do not find a landscape, a scene, a view that they can frame in a picture, or that would respond to an artistic ideal. Finally, after several days of searching, the painters find their landscape, a scene they can paint, and they mount camp on the spot. Muir leaves the artists in their camp, and goes of again on his travels. Through several magnificently written pages, Muir tells us of his route. He describes the fascinating places he passes through, he shows us how he continues to study the mountains as well as relating his observations of the vegetation, and he tells us of past perils, of the tiredness and of the cold. Three days later he returns to the camp where he left the painters, and he finds them frightened at having been left alone in the wilds of nature without knowing what to do until he came back.

The text proposes an irreconciliable dualism between two different ways to aesthetically appreciate nature: on the one hand, the model of the naturalist who studies, knows and admires nature, as represented and defended by Muir himself. On the other hand, the model of the landscape painters, who are depicted here as people who attempt to copy something that they can only see the surface of, a mere image, the colours and the

[18] Muir, John (1894) "A Near View of the High Sierra", in *The Mountains of California*, New York: Century. Reproduced in: Carlson, Allen; Lintott, Sheila (eds.) (2007). *Nature, Aesthetics and Environmentalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

forms, without having the capacity to understand it.

Carlson follows on in this tradition and states:

> Concerning the art-based approaches, it is argued that they do not fully realize the serious, appropriate appreciation of nature, but distort the true character of natural environments; for example, the landscape model recommends framing and flattening environments into scenery. The problem, in short, is that they do not acknowledge the importance of aesthetically appreciating nature, as a leading aesthetician puts it, 'as nature'.[19]

According to Carlson, through the depiction of a natural environment, landscape painting reduces it to something else. He bases his analysis on painting, but the same ideas could be applied to a great extent to photography. These are the ways in which painting reduces a natural environment:

- Landscape painting consists of looking at an environment from one specific point of view that is located outside that setting. Therefore, it places the spectator at a considerable distance from the setting, from where there is a panoramic view, but the detail is lost.
- It reduces the environment to an image (it does not capture the sound, smell, taste or feel).
- It reduces the 3-dimensional environment to the two dimensions of the plane: to a surface.
- It places a frame around something that does not have one.
- It freezes the action, when in reality nature is in permanent change.
- It reduces the environment to its formal qualities (shape, line, colour, texture, balance, harmony, symmetry and composition, instead of showing the natural characteristics of the environment, the forces that go to make it up, the creatures that live in it and the relationships between them, among other details).
- In short, landscape painting reduces an environment to a scene, a view.[20]

Carlson says:

[19] Carlson, Allen. (2009). Op. Cit., p. 9.

[20] See Carlson, Allen (2009). Op. Cit. Chapter 1, especially pp. 6-9. Chapter 2, pp 26-28. See also Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit. Chapter 3.

> The model dictates the appreciation of the natural environment as though it were a series of landscape paintings. Following in the footsteps of the picturesque, it requires dividing nature into scenes, each to be viewed from a specific position by a viewer separated by appropriate spatial (and emotional?) distance. It reduces a walk in the natural environment to something like a stroll through an art gallery.[21]

So, landscape painting or photography do not show us how to really appreciate a natural environment, because they transform it into something different. To be able to experience and appreciate a natural environment we must enter into it, travel through it, walk around it, receive information with all five senses, and especially know it, participate in it and interact with it.

> Aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment is not simply a matter of looking at objects or 'views' from a specific point. Rather, it is being 'in the midst' of them, moving in regard to them, looking at them from any and every point and distance and, of course, not only looking, but also smelling, hearing, touching, feeling. It is being in the environment, being a part of the environment, and reacting to it as a part of it. It is such active, involved aesthetic appreciation, rather than the formal mode of appreciation nurtured by the scenery cult and encouraged by photographs, that is appropriate to the natural environment.[22]

Carlson argues that it is natural science that teaches us to appreciate nature as it is, while art transforms nature into something else. However, we can reply to Carlson by saying that landscape painting is just one very specific type of art. Just because that artistic genre cannot teach us how to aesthetically appreciate nature does not mean that no other genre could do so. What I would like to defend here is that there is a better candidate: land art.

Land art emerged at exactly the same time as the rehabilitation of the aesthetics of nature took place: the 1960s and 1970s. Both land art and the recovery of the aesthetics of nature are fruit of the same historical context,

[21] Carlson, Allen. (2009). Op. Cit., p. 28.
[22] Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit., p. 35.

where, among others, we can identify two central factors: the emergence of ecological consciousness, and the questioning of the authority of traditional institutions. The aesthetics of nature was fuelled by criticisms of academia, which had become trapped in the same old recurrent arguments and had neglected the real problems. Theodor W. Adorno, for example, demanded that philosophy come down from the giddy heights of the more abstract questions and consider subjects such as pain, pleasure, sex, death or the landscape itself. He literally asked for a materialist philosophy, in the sense of thinking of the earth, nature, animals, and the human body. Likewise, land art was fuelled by criticism of the institutions in the art world: the museums and galleries, the market, the collections. These were criticisms that had already been heard in other movements (such as conceptual art or *Arte Povera*) and that denounced that works of art were conserved like mommies in the white cells of the galleries, far removed from life and the flow of time. Against this backdrop, a group of artists founded the land art movement by creating their work in the middle of natural environments, often in areas that were very far from any cities; in deserts or on mountain tops. They called for an art that was performed in the middle of nature, created specifically for each environment and inseparable from it: site-specific. Moreover, they told their audience that if they wanted to see it, they would have to make the long journey to the site; they required the experience, the adventure, going out into the real world and experiencing it. Their works were not frozen in galleries behind thousands of security measures; they were abandoned outdoors in a lake, a forest or a desert so that they were transformed with that environment.[23] In this way they called for an art that once more came into close proximity

[23] As well as the works created for specific natural environments, land art also generated from the start works for galleries. Most of them consisted either of documentation of works created in natural environments, or of specially created works, many of which had as a central idea bringing natural materials into the exhibition halls: earth, stones and mud. In relation to this see the major retrospective exhibition of Richard Long in the Tate Britain in spring 2009. Some of the artists developed their own ideas regarding the relationships between these two different kinds of works, particularly Robert Smithson. I cannot deal with this question here, but it has been widely explored by historians of art. See Tsai, Eugenie; Butler, Cornelia (eds.) (2004). *Robert Smithson.* Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art. See also Kastner, Jeffrey; Wallis, Brian (eds.) (1998). *Land and Environmental Art.* London: Phaidon.

with life, with nature, that recognised its own impermanence, in a gesture in which prehistoric art rumbled like a distant echo.[24]

Land art works maintain a relationship with nature that is the opposite of the traditional relationship between landscape painting and nature. Works of land art do not take nature to art via mimesis, representation. Quite the opposite, they take art to nature; they are installed within nature. Furthermore, unlike landscape paintings, which were autonomous works that could be hung on any wall, which should be contemplated independently of the environment in which they were placed, works of land art were created for a specific environment, and they strike up a dialogue with their surroundings and interact with them. They are not closed within themselves, but rather they point at and highlight what can be found around them. They are works that look out from themselves. Land art emerged precisely because some artists, in the 1960s and 1970s, believed that after a secular tradition of landscape painting, it was necessary to find a renewed relationship with nature. So, in land art, we can find criticism of landscape painting that is really very similar to that raised by Carlson.

Going to see a piece of land art is quite unlike going to see a landscape painting in a gallery. Going to see these works is at one and the same time visiting both art and nature, art in nature, art in a dialogue with nature. Therefore, it would make sense to ask whether this type of art is able to teach us to aesthetically appreciate nature.

Unfortunately, Carlson has not seriously considered the questions raised by land art. He has only briefly considered some works from the early years of the movement; monumental and polemic works by Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and by the couple Christo and Jean-Claude. He severely criticises them for altering aesthetic qualities of the natural environments in which they are set, and he accuses them of being an aesthetic affront to natural beauty. However, Carlson does not consider other forms of land art that are less aggressive towards their environment and philosophically very interesting.[25]

[24] Lippard, Lucy (1983). *Overlay. Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory.* New York: The New Press.

[25] Carlson, Allen (2000). Op. Cit., chapter 10, pp. 150-161.

III. The Art of Richard Long and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Natural Environments

Of all the artists producing land art, Richard Long (Bristol, 1945) is undoubtedly one of the most interesting. His first works, such as *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), in which he walked through a meadow several times until his footsteps traced out a line in the grass, marked the start of a career centred around understanding walking as an art form. His early works were also the start of what we can call British land art, which differed greatly from its American counterpart. American land art is an exploration of the large, open, often deserted spaces of the Western USA; it transfigures them with ambitious works of considerable size that are provocative and polemical. These works are often constructed with the help of engineers and geologists, together with the use of lorries, cranes and industrial materials. Such were Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977). This way of working continues today through artists such as James Turrell and his work *Roden Crater*, which is still under construction. In contrast, British land art, as represented by the work of Long, but also of Hamish Fulton, David Nash or Andy Goldsworthy, is characterised by an exploration of the landscape of the British Isles from a minimalist, prudent and ascetic attitude.[26]

The work of Richard Long is based on a single fundamental idea: walking through nature understood as art. He does not produce his works by painting on a canvas, but rather by going out and tracing out paths on the ground with his footsteps. As he himself puts it:

> I have in general been interested in using the landscape in different ways from traditional representation and the fixed view. Walking, ideas, statements and maps are some means to this end.[27]

He first walked through the landscapes of his infancy in the area around

[26] These profound differences have led some artists and historians to discuss to what point all these works make up a single movement, but I am not going to enter into that discussion here. See the confrontation carried out between the art of Robert Smithson and that of Richard Long by Tufnell, Ben (2006). *Land Art.* London: Tate Publishing.

[27] Long, Richard (1980). Reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). *Selected Statements and Interviews.* Tufnell, Ben (ed.). London: Haunch of Venison, p. 21.

Bristol and the River Avon, but he soon started to create his works all around the planet, principally in unpopulated natural environments that are often difficult to access. His relationship with nature is that of one who passes through it, who recovers old, little-used paths or who opens up new ones. It is the relation of a person who experiences nature following rivers, climbing mountains and sleeping in the open. His vision of nature is not, therefore, the static and framed image that landscape painting offers, to be hung in a gallery; rather it is the experience of continuous change that walking provides.

> In the mid-sixties the language and ambition of art was due for renewal. I felt art had barely recognised the natural landscapes which cover this planet, or had used the experiences those places could offer. Starting on my own doorstep and later spreading, part of my work since has been to try and engage this potential. I see it as abstract art laid down in the real spaces of the world. (...) I like the idea of using the land without possessing it. (...) A walk marks time with an accumulation of footsteps. It defines the form of the land. Walking the roads and paths is to trace a portrait of the country.[28]
>
> My walks are about real time, or distance, or materials, not about an illusion in paint of a fixed view.[29]

As well as walking, Long performs actions and creates sculptures for which he uses only his own body and natural materials. They may consist of transferring water from one river to another, of spilling water on the ground, of moving small stones, of arranging stones in the form of a line or a circle, of tracing out the shape of a circle or a spiral in the earth with his feet. They are actions or sculptures that barely alter the place, that do not add anything external to it: they are ephemeral, and nature will erase all trace of them in time. Long says:

> You could argue that *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) is the ultimate Arte Povera work, it's made of nothing and disappears to nothing. It has no substance, and yet it is a real work.[30]

[28] Long, Richard (1982). "Words After The Fact". Reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p. 25.

[29] Long, Richard (1985-1986). "Interview with Martina Giezen". Reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p. 87.

[30] Long, Richard (2009). *Heaven and Earth*. London: Tate Publishing, p. 172.

Long distils the experiences of his walks in what he calls "Textworks," texts that remind one of the art of the haiku: brief and ascetic, but capable of suggesting with considerable force the experiences, the emotions and the ideas of his walks. Long also offers us photographs of his sculptures, although the real importance is not in the photograph itself, but in its power to evoke.

> A sculpture feeds the senses directly at a place. A photograph or text feeds the imagination by extension to other places.[31]

Taken as a whole, his work is an accumulation of walks that he has performed across the five continents, sculptures of stone or earth, Textworks and photographs. The repetition over several decades of the same models, with variations to suit each specific environment, lends his work remarkable personality and internal coherence. Richard Long's works are easily recognised as having their own language, just as one recognises the paintings of Pollock or Rachel Whiteread's casts of negative space. However, his latest works never fail to surprise. Long remains faithful to the same language as always, only to reveal to us time and again that his language is as limitless as his imagination is.

His art is simple, ascetic, sober and elegant. There is no mysticism or sentimentality in it, neither are there messages of any type. As opposed to the usual tendency in contemporary art, where works are surrounded by complex theoretical discourse and by public appearances made by the artists, Long has written very little about his work, and he has never written about other artists. So the power of his work emanates from the work itself; not from the theories that could support it.

Let us then consider the question at hand: can art such as this teach us to aesthetically appreciate nature? I believe we have sufficient reasons to answer in the affirmative.

Firstly, Allen Carlson's criticism of landscape painting is not relevant to the work of Long; quite the opposite. Long's work could be understood as a response to those very criticisms; as a demonstration that it is possible for art to show us nature without deforming it in the way landscape

[31] Long, Richard (1985). Reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p. 29.

painting does. Long's is an art that consists of entering into nature, passing through it, experiencing it in three dimensions, with all five senses, getting to know it, exploring it and living it.

Secondly, John Muir's comparison between the naturalist's model and the artist's model, which Carlson inherits, does not apply to Long either. Long's art brings together both the knowledge of the naturalist and the aesthetic and artistic sensitivity of one who knows how to admire and reveal natural beauty. Therefore, we could even say that in Richard Long the models of the naturalist and of the artist are reconciled.

Thirdly, the criticism levelled by Carlson at Smithson or Heizer, whom he accuses of transforming the aesthetic qualities of natural environments and of making aesthetic affronts to natural beauty, does not affect the work of Long either; Long's attitude towards nature is one of great respect. Not only do the small changes that he introduces not damage the environment (changes such as drawing a circle on the ground or rearranging stones) but they will disappear completely soon after completion. Furthermore, the act of leaving footprints points to something very important: it belies the illusion that it is possible to pass through nature without altering it. Human beings walk this Earth, and our footsteps always leave footprints and open up pathways; and this is fully compatible with the moral determination not to damage natural environments, but to protect them.

Thus, the different criticisms that Carlson has levelled against certain forms of art, in order to defend his view that they do not teach us to aesthetically appreciate nature, do not affect the work of Richard Long. So now let us consider whether such work can really teach us to appreciate nature and if so, how.

Firstly, Long's work is not simply his walks; rather it is an invitation to walk, as the appropriate way to aesthetically appreciate nature, or even as a way to live nature. What Long says to us is that knowledge and admiration of natural beauty are achieved by going out and walking through it. He defends the personal and individual experience; the journey, the adventure, the knowledge that one gains along the way. He defends the effort necessary to walk for hours every day, the capacity to be alone in the heart of nature, and also the knowledge of how to walk with others.

Furthermore, his work forges a link between the human being and na-

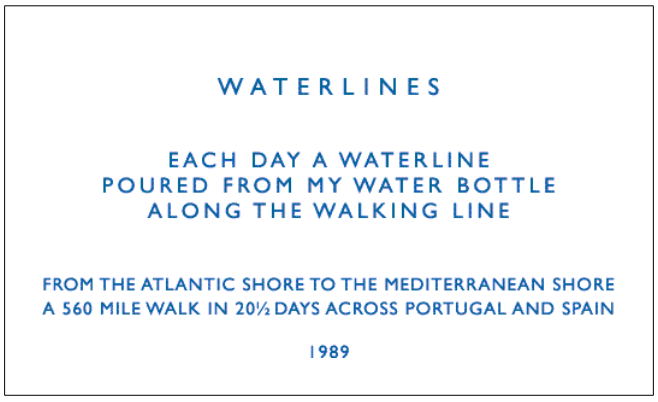
ture, and offers a simple and powerful metaphor for human life. Our life consists of leaving footprints on the earth; footprints that minutely alter a place, but which the wind and the rain will erase sooner or later. In this way his work allows us to see at one and the same time both the most material and also the most ephemeral aspects of our existence.

> My work has become a simple metaphor for life. A figure walking down his road, making his mark. It is an affirmation of my human scale and senses: how far I walk, what stones I pick up, my particular experiences. Nature has more effect on me than I on it. I am content with the vocabulary of universal and common means; walking, placing, stones, sticks, water, circles, lines, days, nights, roads.[32]

Secondly, Long's work is an exploration of the materiality of nature and of the human body. The nature that it reveals to us is not just an image. Long experiments with the characteristics of the most basic natural materials: earth, stones, mud, water, and how they are related to each other. His work contemplates the encounter between the materiality of the human body and that of nature.

> My work is about my senses, my instinct, my own scale and my own physical commitment.[33]

For example, we can find works that explore the encounter between the different elements, between water and earth, as in *Waterlines*:



[32] Long, Richard (1983). Reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p. 27.

[33] Long, Richard (1980). "Five, six, pick up sticks", reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p.16.

Thirdly, the footprints that Long leaves on the earth are not chaotic or shapeless; quite the opposite. Long shows himself to be an heir of the most ancient of artistic traditions when he becomes an explorer of shape; and just as he studies the most basic natural materials, he also studies the fundamental shapes. In this way many of his works use the straight line, the circle or the spiral. Through these shapes Long studies symmetries, equilibrium, relationships and rhythm. In this sense, Long has inherited a very traditional concept of beauty, but one that has been transformed by the revolutions of abstract and conceptual art. It is just that Long presents these fundamental shapes in an extremely innovative way.
For example, Long explores shape by giving his walks a determined shape. Many of them trace out specific drawings on a piece of land, as in *A Ten Mile Walk* (1968) where he walked in a straight line for ten miles across the Dartmoor landscape. Others are performed to specific rhythms, as in *Water Walk* (1999), where Long walks across England and Wales successively carrying water from certain rivers to others. Some of his works are based on comparisons or repetitions, as in *Transference* (2003), where he repeats the same sequence on a walk in England and another in Japan.

Long also explores shape via his stone or earth sculptures that are abandoned at some deserted site, such as *Gobi Desert Circle*, which he made using stones in Mongolia in 1996, or *Whirlwind Spiral*, which he made using his feet on the ground in the Sahara in 1988. He also uses his Textworks as explorations; they so often play with symmetries and contrasts, with unexpected enumerations or rhythms. As he says in his brief text "Five, six, pick up sticks":

> I like to use the symmetry of patterns between time,
> places and time, between distance and time,
> between stones and distance, between time and stones.[34]

However, these patterns and this rational order that Long recognises as the human element that he places in nature, are not an imposition on an environment, rather they are a dialogue with each specific environment.

[34] Long, Richard (1980). "Five, six, pick up sticks", reproduced in: Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p.15.

> It is the way you show yourself as a human being, to make a kind of order in the natural world. I can't disagree with that. I suppose my work is a meeting place of the natural world and natural materials and my human sensibility at the place I happen to be.[35]

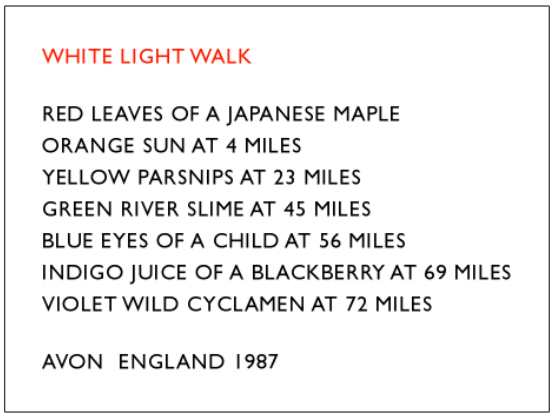
Finally, the most interesting aspect of Long's work is that it is not closed in on itself. His work belongs to the place where it is carried out and it opens up to that place: it enters into a dialogue with the place itself and interacts with it. Even more so, his works are like arrows aimed at the setting in which they are located and inviting us to contemplate it, to admire it and to experience it. Long says:

> If you put a circle down in any place in the world, that circle would take up the shape of that place. In other words, every place gives a different shape to a circle. The circle becomes like a thumbprint. It is absolutely unique. It is that place and no place is like another place. So a circle fixes a place in a very classical way.[36]

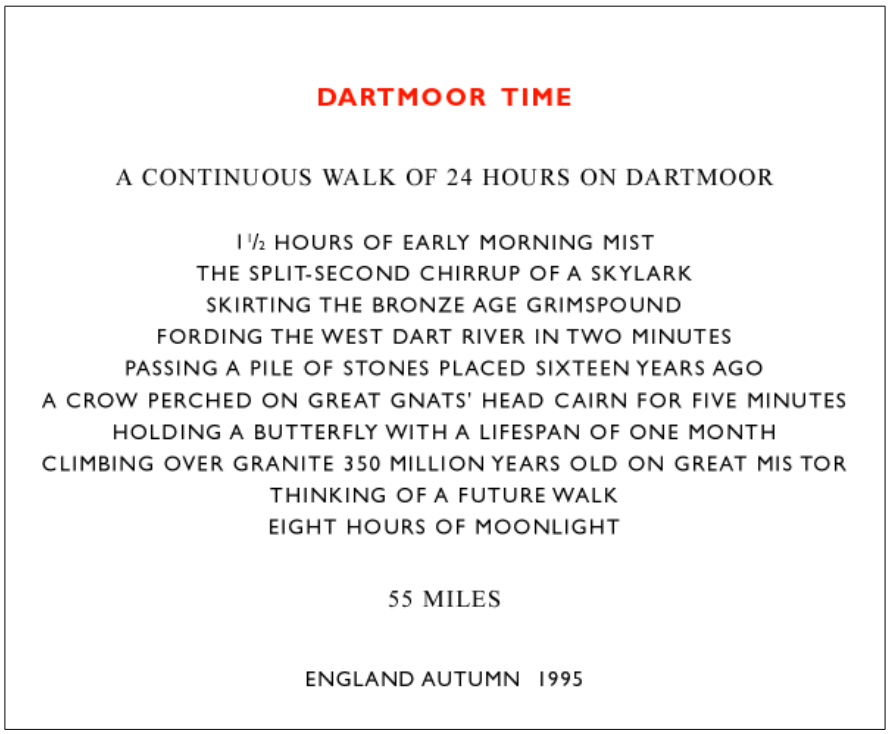
Long's lines of stones draw our eyes up to the horizon; his circles of earth highlight the colour and the texture of the ground. His sculptures invite us to touch the earth and the stones; his photographs to follow paths and to ford rivers; his Textworks to listen to the roar of the wind. They help us to notice the small details, or to see relationships between different elements. They teach us to appreciate contrasts, similarities, distances. They surprise us. They unnerve us. Seeing Long's work fills us with ideas for the next time we go out for a walk. That is the effect of Textworks such as this:

[35] See Long, Richard. (2007). Op. Cit., p. 69.

[36] Long, Richard (1985-1986). "Interview with Martina Giezen". Reproduced in Long, Richard (2007). Op. Cit., p. 86.

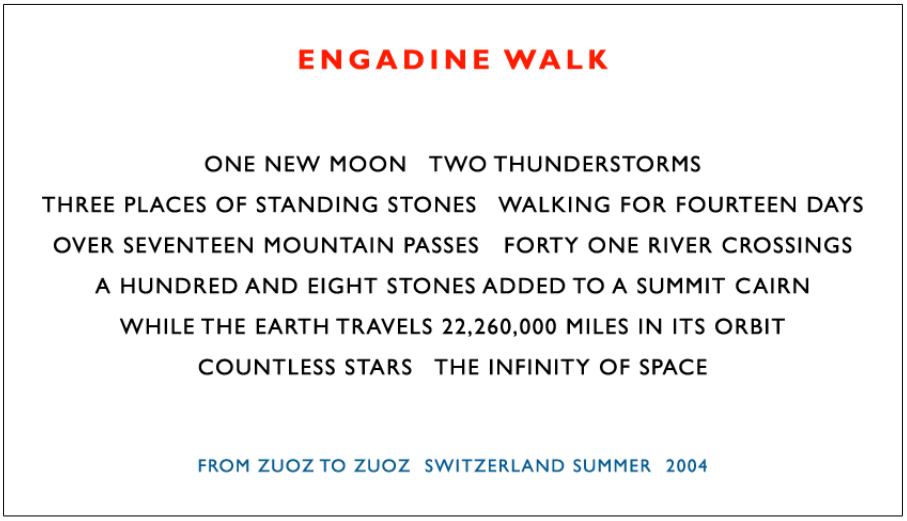


In this way, Long's different works invite us to notice, to admire, and to appreciate different aspects. Some of them help us to perceive the earth better; others, to explore the geography of a territory. In the latter he indicates the different natural sounds that he encounters; in the former he brings our attention to rest on the feel of the different materials. In yet others he talks to us of time and invites us to situate human time within the framework of natural cycles.



In works like these, the time the walk lasts becomes a point of reference for human times and for natural times. I believe that few current works express with such force the relation between human finiteness and the boundlessness of nature. By offering such a contrast, not only do they invite us to admire the beauty and the magnificence of nature, but they also encourage us to understand what we are. Long does not present nature to us as some distant and static image for us to contemplate, rather he shows us ourselves within the nature we form part of and he invites us to walk through it.

For all these reasons, I believe that it is possible to argue that, despite Carlson's criticisms, some works of art do indeed teach us to aesthetically appreciate nature, and at the same time to understand something of ourselves.



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