

No stone unturned

Thrown out of art school for 'precocious' experiments involving snowballs, he went on to find international success - and controversy - with his avant-garde landscape art, using rocks, sticks and his own footprints.

The Guardian 28 June 2003 Nicholas Wroe



In the winter of 1964, Richard Long was a student at the West of England College of Art in his home town of Bristol. With snow lying on the ground, Long went up to the Downs, where he rolled a snowball down a slope, nudging it to follow the gentle contours of the terrain. Although he then photographed the irregular line he had created, this was not with a view to exhibiting the picture. The work of art was the track itself, and the fact that it would inevitably soon disappear was an integral part of its composition.

Shortly after Long completed this exercise, the college authorities requested a meeting with his parents. Life drawing was still the staple of art students'

training then, while more avant-garde work took its cue from pop rather than conceptual artists.

"I'd been doing a lot of experimental and environmental work," Long explains, "digging up turf in a disused garden and pouring plaster into the holes. So it was a natural progression to make the snowball track. After that I realised that even just walking leaves a track. But they thought I was too precocious. They told my parents they were chucking me out because I was mad."

Even today, his work can provoke howls of outrage. But as the critic Rudi Fuchs noted in a catalogue essay accompanying Long's 1986 show at the New York Guggenheim museum, what was remarkable was "how close Richard Long, barely 20 years old, already was to what was to become his 'language'".

The underlying principles that underpinned Snowball Track would feature again and again throughout his career: the intimate linking of the work to the earth, the physical intervention of the artist, the impact of time. They are preoccupations that have contributed to a body of work that is today represented in every major museum of modern art in the world.

His early reputation depended on sculptures made in the landscape in and around Bristol. "But even though I knew I was doing these really interesting and original works, in my naivety I only took one rudimentary photograph with one negative. It wasn't until a few years later, when art was being reinvented, that I realised that the photo itself could be a work of art and presented as such.

I thought of those early works as public freehold, not owned by anyone, but just out there. Then I began to see there were different ways to present my art; through a photograph, a walk, a sculpture or a text. "Long's next key work was his 1967 *A Line Made by Walking*, in which he repeatedly walked back and forth over the grass in a London park until he created a distinct line.

The idea that a walk itself could be a work of art soon followed and Long began his continuing programme of increasingly epic walks in wildernesses all over the world. He would drag the heel of his boot in the earth or kick some wood or stones together, creating simple lines or circles in the natural environment which would then be photographed and exhibited. He then began to mark his routes -spirals, circles, straight lines - on maps that could be shown in a gallery.

He would record events encountered on the way as text: arrows marking changes in wind direction, the names of rivers crossed or sightings of

clouds. He constructed wood and rock sculptures on the floors of galleries as well as leaving patterns of muddy footprints and handprints on the walls. Almost four decades on, Long's art remains challenging. The archaeologist Colin Renfrew has written about the process of coming to terms with Long's work, saying that it "obliged me to enlarge my own definitions of what art might be".

He talks about Long's "meticulous precision", how "carefully judged" the work is and its impact on the viewer. "What I find remarkable is the presence of the work in the gallery," writes Renfrew. "You are very much aware that it has been made, with great deliberation, by one man working alone. Everything that Long does is the product of simple human intentionality: it records his presence and his actions."

One walk involved taking a stone from Aldeburgh beach in Suffolk and leaving it on Aberystwyth beach in Wales. Long then reversed the process and carried another stone from Aberystwyth back to Aldeburgh. There was another walk of 121 miles in three-and-a-half days from the mouth of the Loire to the first cloud he saw, and another between the three Avon rivers in England. (Long has subsequently discovered there is a fourth River Avon and so may return to this project.)

The text accompanying his Aldeburgh-Aberystwyth walk, a single sheet of paper framed and designed to be hung, tells us nothing beyond the facts that he carried the stones and walked 626 miles in 20 days. "They are authentic," he says. "I have done them and the texts are the residue of a factual event. On the other hand, I realise that they are not about proof. They are perhaps incidental proof of being there or seeing something. So I try to make the walks work on the level of a good idea even if someone doesn't believe I did it or it never happened. It has to work for unbelievers as well."

Long's influence on other artists is highlighted by a contemporary, Roger Ackling. They first met in the late 60s on the roof of St Martin's School of Art in London where Long studied after leaving Bristol. Long was blocking and then unblocking the drains to leave water stains on the roof.

"That seemed pretty interesting," recalls Ackling. "Then he took me on the bus to Epping Forest. We climbed this pine tree and looked down at strips of hardboard he'd laid out in a square that you could only see from up the tree. The idea that anything could be art seems old hat now, but it was very important and in terms of making things possible for other artists, Richard occupies a high position."

The early work of Tony Cragg, who first made contact with Long in the early 70s, can be seen as an urban counterpart. Instead of using driftwood or

stones found in wildernesses, Cragg made floor sculptures out of discarded plastic bottles. More recently, the minimalist work of Martin Creed has applied a similar approach to office detritus with his crumpled-up sheets of A4 paper.

Andy Goldsworthy's ephemeral work with ice, twigs and giant snowballs is also strongly evocative of Long. But not everyone has been convinced. One criticism sees Long as part of a widespread British knee-jerk response to the unruly and uncontrollable world around us. Long's nature is not real and untamed, goes the argument, but is made picturesque and domesticated.

The critic Brian Sewell, reviewing a major exhibition of Long's work at London's Hayward Gallery in 1991, observed that "as sculpture it may seem whimsical, but as interior decoration it is superb". Tim Hilton, reviewing the same show for this newspaper, laid out a more comprehensive charge sheet, claiming that Long's work "does not engage in the here-and-now struggle to create art that makes sense for our time and condition".

Hilton complained that Long, "far from society and its petty concerns", paid no attention "to the life, the ecology or the peoples of the land he traverses", before asserting that, "Long's photographs are often of beautiful places, but by today's standards they are ignorant."

More fundamentally, Hilton felt that the work had reached a dead end. "Long has not the context in which he began, nor has he a new one. In their various ways his conceptual comrades have changed their art, their interests, their responses to the world. Long hasn't."

When Long was invited to create a piece in Lincoln Cathedral in 1990, the critic Peter Fuller argued that his work "is symptomatic of the loss of both the aesthetic and the spiritual dimensions of art. He shows little trace of imagination, of skill, of the transformation of materials. Seen in contrast to the greatest achievements of the British tradition in art, Long's relationship to the world of nature is simply regressive."

The philosophy professor John Haldane of St Andrews University, who has known Long for 30 years and holds one of the most significant private collections of his work, says this is a misunderstanding. "Some people say that a Richard Long is a Richard Long, but in fact that is only true in retrospect. If one saw his work in 1973, '83, '93 and now, you couldn't, on the basis of the 1973 work, have identified the 1983 work as being by Richard Long. He does always come up with somewhere else to go, but he so dominates the new work as a method and imprints his own character upon it that it quickly becomes 'a Richard Long'."

And the work has had its share of official approval. He was on the inaugural Turner prize short list before winning the award in 1989 and represented Britain at the 1976 Venice Biennale.

Did he feel co-opted by the establishment? "No, it didn't feel like that at all although I was obviously proud to be asked. I got a kick out of doing it, but I also think the British Council and the Arts Council need people like me to give them credibility. So I always think I'm doing them a favour if I do anything with them. I'm half-joking, perhaps."

Three years ago, for the opening of Tate Modern, one of Long's huge mudworks and a circular stone floor sculpture were housed in the same room as one of Monet's equally vast water-lily paintings in a section called Landscape/Matter/Environment.

It proved one of several controversial juxtapositions among a set of highly contentious curatorial decisions that had chosen thematic links over chronology. Adrian Searle, the Guardian's art critic, described it as the most "glaringly awful moment" in the gallery. "The perceptual field of the Monet and the all-over effect of the Long wall-drawing have nothing useful to say to or about one another. What does Long's red slate circle, down on the floor like a miniature mountain range, have to say for itself? Suddenly, it is a stone water lily. This is crass."

But Long was happy enough. "We're both artists and we both deal with nature," he said then, and today still admits to having been flattered. "It was an amazing situation to be in. But why not? And because I was still alive I even had the first choice of wall."

Long was born in Bristol in 1945. He has a younger sister, Madeleine, and brother, Martin, and says that while there are no other artists in the family, both his father, who was a teacher, and mother were liberal people who supported his ambitions.

"They decorated the house when I was about 13 and let me do this great big drawing on the wall of snow-capped mountains which they kept up for about three months before they wallpapered," he says. "And I used to go to the university film club with my mother to see avant-garde cartoons by Bob Godfrey. My mother was very wise-up to things like that and I think that my work comes out of a happy childhood in a way. It doesn't come out of angst-ridden hang-ups and frustrations or disasters."

He says there was not a specific moment when he decided to be an artist. "I was drawing and painting all through my childhood and so I took it for granted. It was always my language." At his infant school he had his own

easel and would get in early to paint and at secondary school he was the school artist.

"They let me paint a mural in the dining hall, which is still there, and I'd do all the scenery for plays. I'd take great pride in making a log cabin with a few dabs from a six-inch brush." After just one year in the sixth form, Long moved to art school, but says that despite the subsequent stir he caused there, he remembers himself as rather conventional.

He had always liked walking near his grandparents' home on Dartmoor - in a neat prefiguring of his later career, his parents had met at a rambling club - and enjoyed sport. Unusually for an art student, he played rugby and cricket well into his 20s for teams in local Bristol leagues. "I played cricket for a small architects' firm and enjoyed the matches as well as being completely anonymous in this other world. While I'm not an athlete, I obviously do keep fit and it's important to me as I use my body in my work."

Roger Ackling says Long was not a typical art student. "The usual St Martin's student would be covered in paint or oil and looking very masculine," he says. "Richard looked more like a boy you might meet at a youth club." But Long always had an artist's sensibility and recalls thinking it interesting that the secondary school you attended in Bristol depended not on location, but on which bus route you lived on. "I've always thought that other way of looking at the city would appeal to a conceptual artist."

After he was asked to leave art school in Bristol, he worked briefly in a paper mill dealing with timber ships from Poland, where he remembers "making a lot of crumpled paper sculpture". He was accepted on to a vocational sculpture course at St Martin's in 1966 where fellow students included George Passmore, Gilbert Proesch (Gilbert and George), Hamish Fulton, John Hilliard and Ackling.

Long says the main St Martin's sculpture course, under the influence of star tutor Anthony Caro, "was almost like a school of mannerism. Everyone would be using fibreglass or welding metal. I really wasn't interested in that. I'd be making sand gardens and water sculptures on the roof. I exchanged about two sentences with Caro all the time I was there and on our course we were allowed to get on with our own thing. I took my art out of the studio and realised that there was this whole world of reality out there which had far more potential than welding metal together."

So when a student recommended Long's work to the German gallery owner Konrad Fischer in 1968, Long says he was gratified but not surprised. "It was bloody interesting and original. I was in Ireland and sent some sticks in the post from a tiny post office. On the strength of those sticks Konrad offered me a show in Düsseldorf. Everything came together really fast."

Dorothee Fischer, Konrad's widow, recalls that "many art-world people were in Düsseldorf at the time and they liked his work immediately. It was very interesting and he still has a very good reputation in Germany. He is well known as an important artist."

Long says he received very little support from the authorities at St Martin's "but after doing the show with Konrad I began to meet people like Carl Andre and Josef Beuys. I fell into the international avant garde and I did feel like I'd come home. I had to leave England to find my peer group and all my early exhibitions were abroad. When I first showed at the Lisson gallery in London it was a strange experience because everyone spoke English."

Andre became an early supporter of Long's work and says today that his "admiration for him is immense. Richard Long is the master artist of the earth taken as a living entity. His wit is as sly as a samurai sword." It was after Andre had taken some of Long's photographs - "they were just chemist photographs in a Henri Winterman cigar tin" - to New York, that Long was offered his first show there by the dealer John Gibson in 1969.

Gibson says "there was a lot of work around dealing with land, but Richard dealt with it in a completely different and very beautiful way. The extreme avant-garde art world then was just a small coterie of artists and dealers and critics. But they were all very enthusiastic and Richard was a very ambitious young man."

Long acknowledges that he has been fortunate in being able to live off his art from the outset. "I was amazed that someone bought that first show. It was a line of sticks on the floor. I knew what I was doing was important but I had no idea it would be commercially viable. But I learned from that first trip that if you are selling something interesting, then someone, somewhere will be interested enough to buy it."

John Haldane says that while Long was psychologically strong, even as a young man, "that strength has become more explicit as he has got older. People think he's this romantic idealist who goes off into the wilderness for weeks at a time and probably wouldn't know how to sign a cheque or whatever. Well, he's not like that at all. He's very practical and tough and I wouldn't want to be, for instance, a curator that messed him around."

An example of this fiercely protective attitude to his work came in 1994 when, as part of a favourable introduction to a catalogue of Long's exhibition at the São Paulo Biennial in 1994, critic David Sylvester compared Long's work with that of "pre-Dynastic Egyptian vessels", "the English surrealists such as Paul Nash and Henry Moore", as well as Caspar David Friedrich and Jasper Johns.

Long insisted Sylvester's essay was left out of the catalogue. "He was a great writer on art," explains Long, "but he just didn't get my work. It was a classic case of an urban intellectual who didn't have a clue of what it was to walk in the Andes or getting wet in thunderous rain on a Scottish hillside."

Long says he came back from that first show in Düsseldorf with £250 in his back pocket. "That was a lot of money and it got the ball rolling. This was the beginning of cheap airfares and with that money I was able to fly to Africa in the summer of 1969. I made a sculpture on Kilimanjaro and I wrote to the Guardian telling them that I thought the highest sculpture in the world was a newsworthy thing, but I never heard from them."

Long flew out to Nairobi on the night of the first moon landing and while in Kenya married his girlfriend, Denise Johnston, whom he had met at art school in Bristol. "We were on the equator and I had the idea that each of us should stand in a different hemisphere," he says. Johnston went on to work with pottery and ceramics and later became an art teacher in Bristol. They divorced three years ago but have two daughters, Betsy, who lives in New York, and Tamsin, who works with autistic children in Bristol.

Long is now in a relationship with the writer and art historian Denise Hooker but lives alone near Bristol in a converted schoolhouse close to the Severn estuary. He says he doesn't expect to be living in Bristol for the rest of his life and doesn't necessarily have to live there for his art.

"But I suppose it has suited me and I'm one of the few artists to live where they were born. Every good artist is first and foremost a local artist; Andy Warhol was a local New York artist, Gilbert and George are local artists. But because these people are good they have made it internationally. So whether I like it or not, I'm grounded in being a Bristol or West Country or even an English artist. You don't set out to be those things, but 30 years later I can't deny I'm part of an English tradition of landscape art."

Because he came out of the 60s, is from the West Country and works with natural, even elemental, materials, he has occasionally been bracketed as some sort of new-age artist. "But my art doesn't come from that mystic, druid standing-stones stuff," he protests. "In fact, I didn't see Stonehenge until I was about 19 and I'd made my first circles by then. Sometimes things aren't quite what they seem."

His relationship with the earth is more a practical and personal one. As a child he often played on the banks of the Avon and one of his earliest memories is of making mud pies at home. He still takes bags of Avon mud all over the world with him to complete his work. "Whether it's walking or using mud on my feet or hands, my art is about physical capacity, even though it is not figurative."

He says he travels very light on his walks, carrying only packets of dehydrated food from California - "so much better than the stuff you can get in England" - and so the only limitation on his journeys is his own body and a supply of water. "And the importance of water feeds into the work so mud was always there, that liquidy pathway between stones and water."

While the ideas behind Long's art and his walks are vital to an appreciation of them, he has never strictly been a conceptual artist, although he sees himself as part of the generation of minimal and conceptual artists that emerged to see off pop art in the late 60s. "My generation was partly a reaction to pop art," Long explains.

"We went a bit beyond that and discovered interesting things that weren't necessarily coming out of pop culture. But pop art is always something that reinvents itself and so the Young British Artists are another generation of urban artists making art about popular culture, recycling everything. All that YBA stuff is in some ways pop art recycled and while most art in the western world is like pop art, there has always been another part of the art world which is about landscape and nature."

That said, he has no illusions about the purity of the places he walks in. "Dartmoor is a wilderness, but I know it is a man-made landscape," he says. "What I do in the landscape takes its place with all the other human and geographic history that has been before. I've no romantic idea that I'm going to some virgin untouched part of the planet. The places I go to are generally empty because that suits my work which is about space and distance and time and simplicity."

He says his approach, travelling light and mostly alone, means no matter where he is in the world, he rarely gets involved with any bureaucracy and can pass through "as if I was almost invisible".

"Even though a lot of my work takes place in the landscape, the gallery is the conduit for bringing my work into the public domain. I've always made work that was designed to be shown indoors and for me a gallery is a place to share whatever I'm doing. It could be a sculpture on the floor, a photograph of a circle made in the Andes or a text.

"People ask 'why always circles and lines and walking?' But I think the cumulative effect of following one idea through my life adds greatly to it. If an artist finds a language that is rich enough, it can sustain itself. And every walk is a different experience. Every place is different like every stone is different and every splash in my mud works is different. And every walk does demonstrate an original idea. It is possible to go on walking in endless and original ways. But," he breaks off, "you must realise that what I say about my art just comes with hindsight. The work always comes first. And in

the end the work itself is far more important than anything I can say about it."

Richard Long

- Born: June 2 1945, Bristol.
- Educated: West of England College of Art, Bristol 1962-65; St Martin's School of Art, London '66-68.
- Married: Denise Johnston 1969 (two daughters Betsy, Tamsin), divorced; current partner Denise Hooker.
- Some exhibitions: Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf 1968; John Gibson Gallery, New York '69; Lisson Gallery, London '73; Venice Biennale '76; Guggenheim, New York '86; Hayward Gallery, London '91; Guggenheim, Bilbao 2000; Tate St Ives '02.
- Work in permanent collections: Tate Modern, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- Some publications: South America 1972; Countless Stones '83; Walking in Circles '91; Walking the Line 2002.
- Prizes: Turner 1989.

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