

# Reconnecting with the Living Land

## Walking, Rewilding and Contemporary Art Practice

ISABEL MCLEISH

Having grown up in the North West Highlands of Scotland, I have experienced life in a remote and wild place. I spent my childhood walking in the hills, drawing and making sculptures with my hands and feeling connected to the land. Gaelic place-names feature on all of the local signs, and I sense the deep connection to land that is felt by the fishermen, crofters, artists and local communities.

From pre-history to the present day, artists have looked to the natural world for inspiration and used a wide range of media and processes to explore their themes. As hypothesised by Kellert and Wilson in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, our yearning for connection with the natural world is innate: 'Biophilia' is 'a fundamental, genetically based human need and propensity to affiliate with other living organisms.' Secondly, Richard Louv has proposed the notion of 'nature deficit disorder' which suggests that a lack of contact and interaction with green and natural spaces negatively impacts upon our health and well-being due to alienation from the natural world. Similarly, George Monbiot proposes that knowledge of natural flora and fauna is being lost with each generation through 'shifting baseline syndrome.' Monbiot suggests that each generation has a different perception and understanding of what is normal and natural due to the environment that they have grown up in.

In response to this, the notion of 'rewilding' offers a potential solution to the current disconnection and challenges of contemporary culture. 'Rewilding' is a relatively new term, introduced to the dictionary in 2011, with multiple perspectives and interpretations of its meaning. 'Rewilding' can be defined by conservationists as returning captive animals to nature or reintroducing native flora and fauna species to encourage natural regeneration. More recently, 'rewilding' has been considered in relation to humans, exploring how



Isabel McLeish, 2019. *Landbound*. Digital photograph. Image courtesy the artist, © I. McLeish. All Rights Reserved.

we can choose to become more in sync with the natural world. The notion of 'rewilding' both our environments and ourselves provokes questions about where we have come from, where we are now, and where we want to be in the future.

The word 'landscape' is a human construct that can often prove problematic. Isabelle Thomson argues that 'land' becomes 'land-

scape' only through the presence of a human and that 'landscape' is 'a state of mind'. Thomson explains that humans project their own understandings, feelings and perspectives onto the land they experience, and thus 'landscape' is 'humanised'. For this reason, I am hesitant to use the word 'landscape' to describe all the living elements of the Earth (flora, fauna, the land as well as the physical



phenomena such as seasons, tides, moon cycles, and so on) as I do not want to perpetuate what is seen as the human/nature divide.

I feel the need to use an expression alongside terms such as 'natural world' which conveys something more meaningful, and therefore I believe 'living land' communicates an animate and alive world that we inhabit, move through and interact with. My view is that these terms open us up to the intrinsic cycles and rhythms that influence all beings. But what of those who cannot to go out directly into the living land due to a wide range of limitations that they may experience, or that may be placed upon them? Can engagement with the living land be obtained through a mediated experience?

Painter Jackie Morris, along with Robert MacFarlane and Alison O'Toole, recently completed a commission for the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in London featuring illustrations and text on the walls of four floors of the hospital to bring the natural world indoors. The commission was inspired by the book *The Lost Words* by Morris and MacFarlane, which was a response to the current loss of language and declining species. The book featured illustrations and poetic 'spells' designed to be spoken or sung with the aim of encouraging people to rekindle their love of the land through language – and thus inspire them to help protect it.

The element of bringing the natural world inside is significant when we consider the influence that environment has on recovery and overall health as, according to the The National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 'within healthcare, access to daylight, fresh air and natural materials aids healing, restoring the integrity between mind, body and soul'. It will be appreciated that this commissioned artwork may reconnect people with the land through language and imagery, and also positively impact upon the recovery and health of patients. Above all, the healing aspect of this work is what makes it so powerful and inspiring.

Within the living land, meanwhile, Eo Stubblefield's performative dance practice with Anna Halprin explores how dancers can use their senses to feel connected to the living land by listening to birdsong, feeling the textures of plants and smelling the scents of the earth. As Stubblefield explains: 'My hope for both the performer and the viewer is to



**Jackie Morris**, 2018. *The Lost Words*. Mural. Stanmore, London: Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. © The Artist.



**Eo Stubblefield**, 1999. *Still Dance with Anna Halprin*, *Underworld Series #27*. Photograph documenting dance performance. In: Thomas, A., 2012. *Stillness in Nature: Eo Stubblefield's Still Dance with Anna Halprin*. © The Artist/Palgrave Macmillan. All rights reserved.

refine and extend the senses, to fully sense each place, triggering memories deep in the body. They are old memories and yet in their awakening comes the chance to couple again with the land.'

Stubblefield makes clear her aim for encouraging our interaction with the natural world through an intuitive and direct relational response to the land itself and documents these dances through photography or film. The practice relies on Halprin's immediate

response to her environment, whether forest or beach, through Stubblefield's choice to only provide a basic score and no other directions or set choreography. It can be said that the land is the main influencer of the dance.

Unlike typical dance practices, there is a focus on stillness, as opposed to movement, and as Stubblefield explains, 'a dance does not have to be about movement. Be still. Respond microscopically. A dance is the breath made visible – just breathe, be still.' Dances can move away from established practices which celebrate high energy and busy movement in favour of slower, more meditative practices that help us use our body and senses to reconnect with the natural world. As Halprin points out, 'there is always some kind of movement, even in stillness. That's how nature dances.'

Stubblefield's practice reminds me of the kind of intimate and deep experience Nan Shepherd described when sleeping outdoors in the land: 'The mind grows limp; the body melts; perception alone remains. One neither thinks, nor desires, nor remembers, but dwells in pure intimacy with the tangible world.' She writes in *The Living Mountain*. The walker, the dancer – the human – has immersed themselves in the land and *become* part of it.

Walking as an art practice has the power to strengthen our connection with the living land through the engaging activity of walking. Best known for this is Richard Long who did much to forge a place for walking to be viewed as art within contemporary art practice. Long's piece *A Line Made by Walking*, made when he was a student, involved walking along the same stretch of grass repeatedly in a meadow on the outskirts of London. Prof. Tim Ingold observes that 'he has not cut the line with his boots, nor has material been deposited'. Rather, it is the sole presence of a human moving through the land that creates this work. The footprints are the residues of this repeated movement, as MacFarlane explains. Long's 'legs are his stylus, his feet the nib with which he inscribes his traces on the world.'

Equally, *A Line Made by Walking* becomes more poignant when we consider that the work not only explores human interaction with the living land, but also time passing, due to the ephemeral and transient nature of this work. Ingold argues that 'footprints [...] have a temporal existence, a duration, which is bound to the very dynamics of the ground to which they belong.'



In his sculptural piece titled *A Circle in Scotland*, reminiscent of ancient stone circles, Long created a work whilst on a walk. *A Circle in Scotland* symbolically revealed the cycles of nature by constructing a circle out of a continuous line of stones. This placement and arrangement of the stones highlights the interaction and relationship between artist and material, walker and land. Anne Seymour notes that there is a difference between 'placing' and 'kicking stones to form a line [...] The artist plays his part and nature plays hers.'

Accordingly, Seymour highlights that there is an interaction between the living land and the walker, each with a role and influence. The land provides the material and the walker leaves his trace. Long chooses to intentionally leave a more permanent trace of his presence in the land through his placing of stones and rock. It can be said that Long's stone works, such as *A Circle in Scotland*, illustrate a creative, playful and respectful method for engaging with the land. As Seymour points out, 'Long's touch has always been famously light.'

Long uses his body and natural materials to create his artworks, therefore, highlighting the forces and cycles of the land in the same way that Nan Shepherd described how 'one walks among elementals.' In my opinion, Long's decision to work so closely with the land's materials reinforces this notion of time passing and the transient nature integral to the land itself.

Hamish Fulton – a 'walking artist' – is known for following the principle of 'leave no trace' in his practice. He maintains that the 'walk is the work' and creates large-scale wall works from his photographs and notebooks as a record of the lived experience. In a similar way to Long's *River to River*, Fulton's *WILD ROCK* is a slick and refined text-work which brings attention to natural elements found in the land.

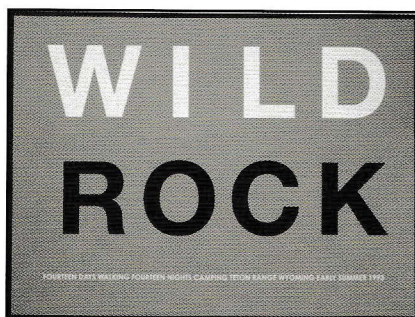
Long and Fulton use the cycles of the land to inform the timing or duration of their work. In Fulton's text and photographic piece, *The Migration North*, the 'circular walk' begins at the summer solstice full moon. It can be appreciated that walking practices can respect the environment and be 'in tune' with the land, using its cycles as structure for the walk. Additionally, Fulton points out that 'each walk marks the flow of time between birth and death', thus reinforcing the durational and ephemeral qualities of a walk and life itself. Like Long's practice, the idea of transience and time passing is key to Fulton's walking art.



**Richard Long**, 1967. *A Line Made by Walking*, Image: 37.5cm x 32.4 cm. Photograph and text. Tate Britain. © The Artist/Tate Britain. All rights reserved.



**Richard Long**, 1986. *A Circle in Scotland*. Photograph and text, 87 x 129 x 4 cm. (above) Lisson Gallery. © The Artist/Lisson Gallery. All rights reserved. Below: **Hamish Fulton**, 1993. *WILD ROCK*. Wall painting. John Webber Gallery. © The Artist/John Webber Gallery. All rights reserved.



Andrew Wilson has written that the walk itself is the art, and what follows in galleries is always in reference to the walk that has preceded it. Fulton makes this clear as 'no walk, no work' and that 'an object cannot compete with an experience.' Walking and movement practices encourage a sense of interconnectedness and unity with the land, and as Richard Sennett argues, when immersed in an activity we are 'absorbed in something, no longer self-aware, even of our bodily self. We have become the thing on which we are working.' In doing, we become. Equally, walking is a verb; it is a form of 'doing' and we move *in* and *with* the land yet walking can also be a form of 'being'. After all, as Lee Craigie explains, we are 'human beings. Not human doings'.

In addition, writer Jay Griffiths argues that 'walking always encourages the walker to be fully present and in time with the rhythms of the earth. For the earth itself is a walker', rotat-

ing and moving all the time. Movement and immersive practices bring the performer or walker back into the present moment through direct engagement with the land, *feeling and sensing* their connection through movement. Truly, the walker becomes an expression of the land itself.

Furthermore, as Nan Shepherd observed, after walking for hours, she could 'discover most nearly what it is to *be*. I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life.' In the same way that Griffiths believes that, through walking, the land 'is inwritten into the human being [...] the walker enters the world and the



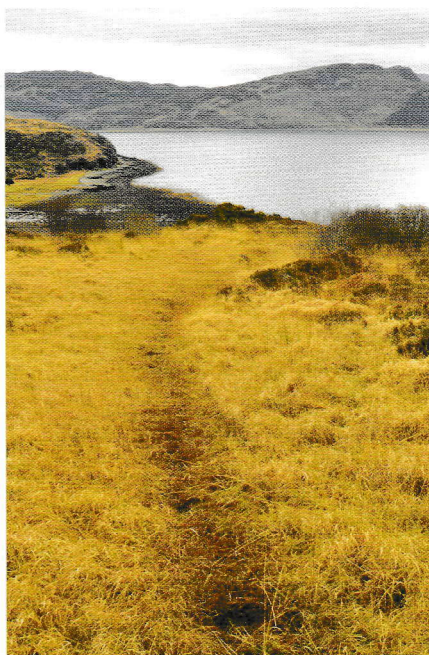
world the walker', Shepherd and Griffiths make clear the profound relationship between the walker and the land, and how the act of walking facilitates this process.

These immersive practices encourage me to reflect on my own experiences of being in the land. I have walked barefoot in the mud, moss and heather on the hillside behind my family home, enjoying the feel of the ground beneath me and sensing the smells, textures and feel of the land. On walks in the hills which I know so well, I am reminded why I go into the land in the first place. I yearn for the open hillside, the space to walk, think and breathe with the land, to be completely myself in a moment in time. I wholeheartedly share Shepherd's belief that: '...often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him.'

In my opinion, there is a reciprocal relationship between myself and the land. We leave our own mark and trace on each other, neither quite the same after the experience. My work titled *A Line Made by My Family Walking* shows a stretch of hillside that myself and my family trace our footsteps and presence in, as we walk in the land each day, for example. In conclusion, direct engagement with the land, whether it be through dance or walking, as illustrated here, enables both the artist and the viewer to better understand their place and relationship with the living land. *Being* in the land enables a person to *sense* and *feel* their deep connection, as we know that 'going out' is actually a way of 'going in'.

**Note:** This text is an edited extract from Isabel McLeish's *Rewilding: How can Contemporary Art Practices help us to reconnect with the living land?* For the full text and references, please visit [www.bit.ly/McLeish-Rewilding](http://www.bit.ly/McLeish-Rewilding).

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**Isabel McLeish**, (above) *Truncated*, Stoneware, 2019, 100 cm x 60 cm x 8 cm. Image courtesy the artist, © I. McLeish.  
**Isabel McLeish**, (left) 2019. *A Line Made by My Family Walking*. Digital photograph. Image courtesy the artist, © I. McLeish.



**Isabel McLeish**, *4 hours 43 minutes*, Pen on Japanese paper, 2019, 110 cm x 95 cm. Image courtesy the artist, © I. McLeish. All Rights Reserved.

**ABOUT THE WORK** - 'My work explores how people can reconnect with the land through art. I choose to use natural or recycled materials that have low environmental impact. My work considers the relationship between the human body and trees, specifically how they both breathe. Through the creation of physical and tangible artworks and by utilising natural textures and forms, I hope to encourage the viewer to reflect on their own bodily connection to the land (*Truncated*, 2019). In the work titled *24 Hours 46 Minutes* (2019), the durational drawing documents my breath in a tree-ring-like form. Tree stumps on the grounds of Gray's School of Art were chosen as the basis for the initial outlined shape of each drawing and then every line following this are my own inhalations and exhalations marked down on the paper. The small gaps reflect the switch between an inhaled or exhaled line and notably, the lines became longer, the more immersed and meditative I became.' **Isabel McLeish**.