

sculpture

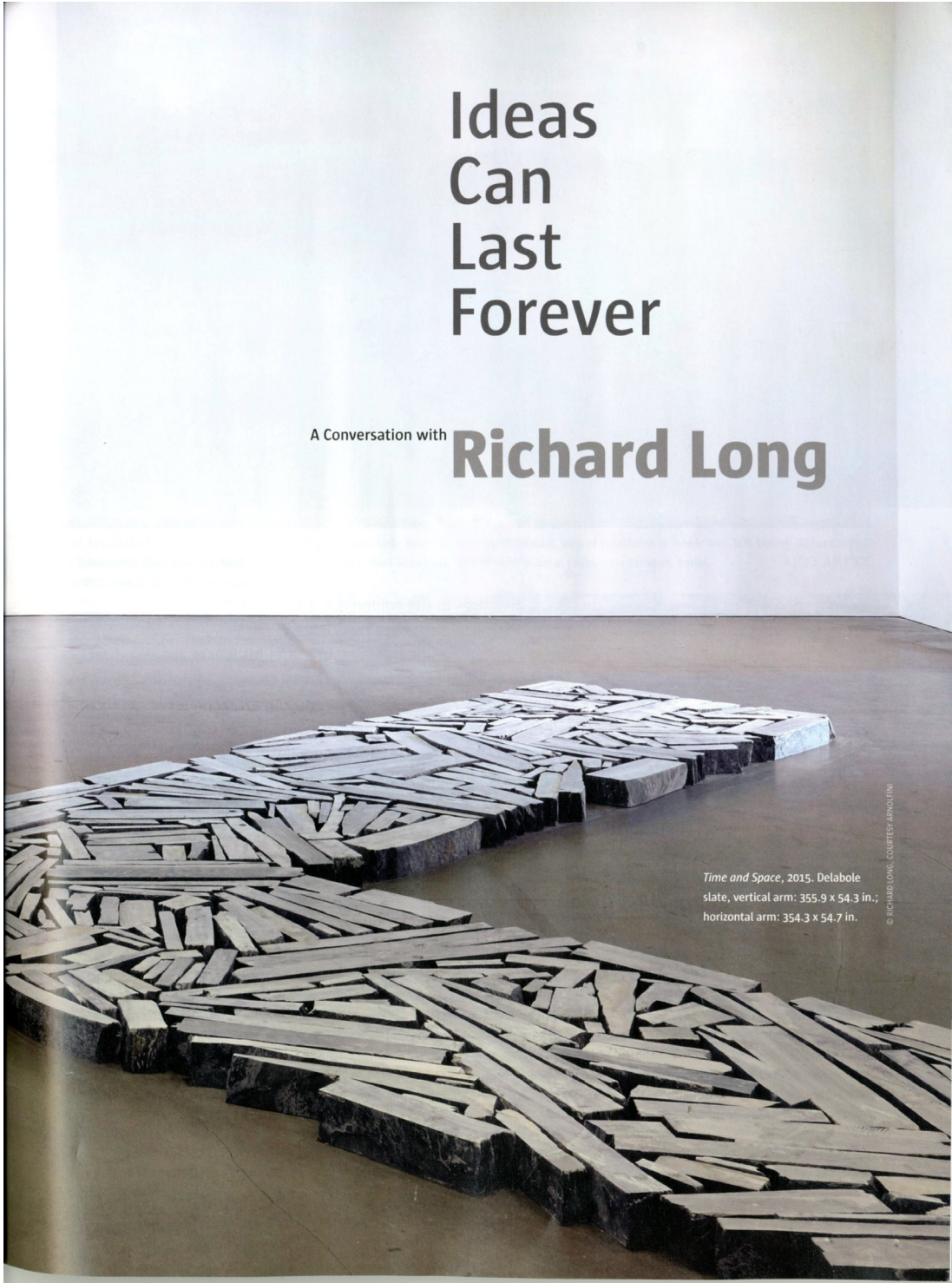
Cole, Ina, "Ideas Can Last Forever: A Conversation with Richard Long," June 2016



Ideas Can Last Forever

A Conversation with

Richard Long



Time and Space, 2015. Delabole
slate, vertical arm: 355.9 x 54.3 in.;
horizontal arm: 354.3 x 54.7 in.

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BY INA COLE

Boyhood Line, 2015. Limestone, view of work at The Downs, Clifton, Bristol.

Richard Long's practice involves walking great distances in the wilderness, then pausing to make works referencing natural and cosmic phenomena experienced along the way. He uses walking, therefore, as both medium and measure, and his works act as a direct response to the world in which he lives. This way of working offers the potential to make sculpture anywhere and at any time, free from the constraints that can otherwise arise with producing art. Long leaves a mark or arrangement within an ever-shifting elemental terrain that exerts its own laws of regulation over the end result. This is his way of expressing ideas about time and space, and what it means to be human when removed from the cacophony of contemporary life. Long is considered one of the most important artists of his generation, and he has sited sculpture on all five continents, as well as in many of the world's most significant galleries and museums.

Ina Cole: *You were born in Bristol, where you continue to live and work and where you recently made Boyhood Line. Although you travel the globe to make work, is a personal sense of place important to you?*

Richard Long: Yes it is, and Bristol has been important in that sense. *Boyhood Line* was placed along an existing footpath, and the shape took its form from the way that people walked to and fro across the grass over the years. I partly chose the location to have good sight lines and later realized it was only 50 yards from where I made *Snowball Track*—which was my first landscape sculpture—and 100 yards from where I made *England 1968* four years later. So, that whole territory—the plateau on the Avon Gorge, the gullies, the screes, and caves—was my testing ground for the early works.

IC: *In a sense, Snowball Track set the scene for works such as A Line Made by Walking and Rainbow. It seems you found your*

artistic language at a very young age and that this early experience still sustains your practice.

RL: I was still at the West of England College of Art in Bristol, but I wouldn't say it set the scene: one has lots of insights with hindsight. *Snowball Track* was my first sculpture using the materials of the place. At that time, I was also interested in rainbows, and I'd followed a big rainbow in the Great Rift Valley, Kenya, which became part of this idea. By using colored powders to make *Rainbow* on the banks of the River Avon at low tide, I brought foreign material to the place so you could argue, technically, that it wasn't as pure as *Snowball Track*. As an art student, I was trying many different things, like all young artists do. I guess there came a point toward the end of my time at college when I realized the world outside was more interesting than the world of plaster casts and drawing classes inside the studio. Tides, weather, and places offered me far more potential to engage with the world.

MAX McCULLURE, © RICHARD LONG, COURTESY ANTONINI

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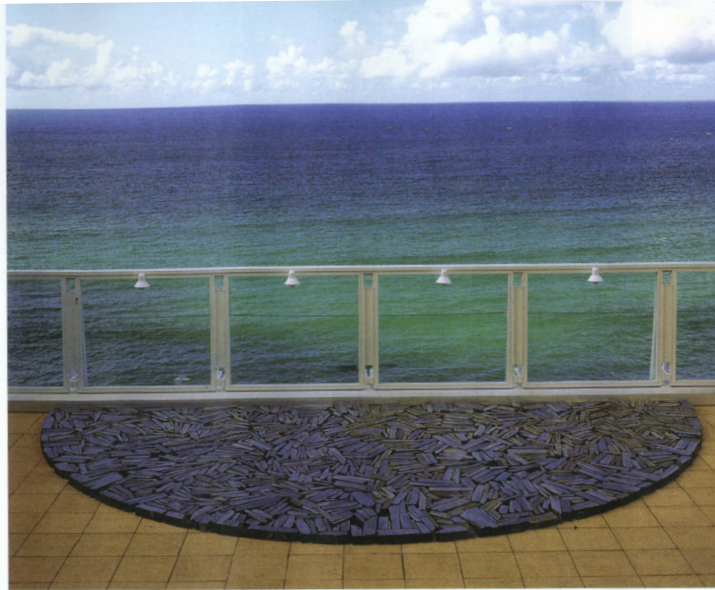
IC: Can you trace these interests back to your childhood? Sometimes when one looks back, the strands of early activity seem clearer and can be followed right through life.

RL: I'm a product of a happy childhood, there's no question of that. I was a city boy, but all of our family holidays were in the West Country—visiting my grandparents, who lived on the edge of Dartmoor in Devon, or youth hostelting with my father. In a way, I've just followed my childhood pleasures into my professional life; I've made things I used to do as a kid part of my work—bouncing stones across rivers, building cairns, playing on the beach with pebbles. Even while growing up along the towpath in Bristol, I was amazed at how the river was sometimes so full and at other times completely empty. That was a great physical dynamic, a phenomenon that fascinated me. Yet simultaneously, I had the ambition to make art in new ways.

IC: You were taken on by Konrad Fischer in 1968, and most of your early exhibitions were abroad rather than in the United Kingdom. Did you have more empathy with artists like Carl Andre and Joseph Beuys than with the British avant-garde?

RL: In my last month at St Martin's School of Art, I got a letter from this guy I'd never heard of, asking me to do an exhibition in his gallery. It was Konrad Fischer. It didn't come completely out of the blue, however: a fellow student at St Martin's had already exhibited in Europe and had put my name forward for a group show in Frankfurt in 1967. So, I sent a bundle of sticks over with instructions of how to make the sculpture for this group show. Konrad was an artist himself, and just on the evidence of seeing that one work, he offered me a show in his Düsseldorf gallery a year later. But that's Konrad for you. He was great; he had a fantastic nose for art. After my opening, he said to me, "There's this manifestation down in Amalfi in Italy; a new art movement called Arte Povera. Why don't you get on a train and go check it out," which I did. So that opened up a new world of Italian artists, who all became interested in my work.

I was recognized abroad at least two or three years before people took an interest



Above: *Slate Atlantic*, 2002. Delabole slate, view of installation at Tate St Ives, U.K. Below: *Berlin Circle*, 2011. River Avon mud, view of installation at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.



in my work in Britain, because the art world at that time was dominated by the Anthony Caro school of welding sculpture. In some ways, the British art world was independent and insular, but as soon as I went to Düsseldorf, I found a parallel world of experimental practice, like Joseph Beuys, whom I met for the first time in 1968. I found a much more avant-garde art world in Europe, and I also met other artists like Carl Andre. He took my work back to New York, so the next show I had after Düsseldorf was there. All the support in my early days was from other artists who found the walking and the lines in fields

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Sculpture July/August 2016

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Above: *A Circle in Antarctica*, 2012. Photograph documenting work in the Ellsworth Mountains.
Left: *A Line in the Himalayas*, 1975. Photograph documenting work in the Nepalese Himalayas.

fly to Nairobi for almost nothing. Being out in the world makes me optimistic; the world's a vast, empty place, and nature is very strong.

IC: *When you're in a massive, open expanse with only the sky above and the ground sweeping out for miles in front of you, your response seems to be to make something minimal and primarily influenced by the natural geometry of what you see.*

RL: I'd say I bring the geometry of an avant-garde, minimal artist to the place I'm in. I bring the intellectual baggage of an artist from the Western world to a place in the middle of Mongolia, for example. But then, when I'm in that place, I use the materials of the place. Every work in the landscape is absolutely a meeting place of who I am and the topography, characteristics, and beauty of the place. Every place in the world is different, so even though I might be repeating circles, every circle is different. The archetype of the circle emphasizes the cosmic variety of everything, and this gives it its power, beauty, understandability, and resonance.

IC: *You take what the landscape offers, in a sense.*

interesting. I had photographs of the work—like *A Line Made by Walking or England 1968*—which I took to Düsseldorf and Italy, so the medium of the photograph was very important in spreading the word.

IC: *You then went on to travel across every continent on earth, seeking unoccupied terrain in which to make work—mountains, deserts, shorelines, grasslands. Some of these landscapes are breathtakingly spectacular.*

RL: Wild, empty landscape—that's my love. Every sculpture I make is an emotional response to being there at that moment. It doesn't make me unique, but maybe I was one of the first artists to somehow use the world as one place. I was just trying to seize the potential of the grandeur of the world by going to these big empty landscapes, because that's what the world looks like if you seek it out. Theoretically, I felt that I could go anywhere as an artist to make art. Also, I'm of a generation for which it was possible to do that with hardly any money. For example, I hitchhiked across Route 66 and bought a ticket to

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Sunset Circles, 2006. Adobe bricks, view of work in Agadez, Niger.

RL: And it offers so much. I've discovered a fantastically rich territory to make work—meaning the world and everything in it. It's like when I made a flint line in Roche Court near Salisbury: during the couple of days I was there, a half-tame buzzard was hanging around. It turned out that I was in its territory, so I called the work *Tame Buzzard Line*. Everything's useable.

IC: *Your text works often seem to summarize the stimuli that pervade your senses when you're walking through a landscape. Words are always chosen and positioned very carefully.*

RL: Of course, like I choose my stones and my places carefully. The text works are another strategy I have for making my work. They're usually about a very particular idea: *Slate, Granite, Sandstone, Limestone, Chalk* is about the geology of a route; *Lifedeath* identifies what is living and dead on a walk; *Human Nature Walk* depicts human intervention versus the animal kingdom; and *Tsunami Walking* was a commission to commemorate the tsunami in Japan. The text works often describe a walk, an idea about a walk, or the story of a sculpture. If I'm carrying a stone in my pocket and placing it on the road as I'm walking from day to day, it's more practical to tell its story with words than to photograph it.

IC: *Some of your walks take weeks to complete, yet the act of making a sculpture, or marking the terrain, can take as little as 30 minutes. It's clear that you get immense pleasure from your practice—the physical act of walking, the sheer freedom of being outside, the feel of the natural materials—but can you describe how it actually feels?*

RL: That's such a big question. To explain it is the wrong way to look at it, but if I'm doing a lot of wilderness walking, I very much believe in being open to instinct, to chance. I could do a long walk and not find a place to make sculpture at all, yet another walk—like in the Sahara—yielded many sculptures. It's emotionally sat-

isfying to be on a long walk—with all the hardships, the camping and the campfires—and it's similarly pleasurable to make sculptures along the way. When I was in Antarctica, it was like being on the moon except it was white. It was one of the most unique places I've been to—absolutely lifeless, with not one minute little insect.

IC: *When you're camping, do wild animals ever become inquisitive?*

RL: I once woke up in Lapland and found the footprints of a bear around my tent. It had been a snowy night, and he checked me out. But that doesn't bother me. It's just what happens sometimes.

IC: *Clearly you've always survived these incidents.*

RL: Well, there was one terrible moment. I was walking in East Africa, and suddenly some lions ran toward us from out of the grass. I really thought that was it. There were two of us and a guide with a gun, but there was no way he would have gotten the gun off his shoulder in time. But the lions weren't charging us; we'd just surprised them, and they ran through us. Luckily, there were no males among that particular group; they were all lionesses. Even so, it was a heart-stopping moment, and in retrospect, it was stupid to go walking in the bush.

What you see in my work are the things I've chosen to edit from my experiences of walking, but I've been traveling around the world for the last 40 years and have many amazing anecdotes. If I was a writer, I'd be writing stories, but because I'm an artist, I'm showing you the sculptures I make along the way or the ideas I have in the text works, which are a simplification of the rich experience of a walk. But as you can tell from the photographs, I do see interesting things along the way. I stay in amazing little taverns or get given tapas if I stop and have a drink on a road walk in Spain. Many incidental human occurrences happen on a road walk that don't come into the work. There's a long history of travel writing and landscape photography, so it interests me to be in the landscape as an artist, doing things that haven't been done before, discovering new ideas about movement, time, and space.

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Left: *Red Gravity*, 2015. Red clay, 154 x 450 in. Above: *Bristol 1967/2015*, 2015. Plastic, 260.4 in. diameter. Below: *River Avon Mud Crescent*, 2011. River Avon mud, installation view.



IC: *On a practical level, is it difficult to find guides to take you to these distant places?*

RL: Not really. When I went to the Antarctic, I used a company in Spitsbergen that does Polar expeditions. You have to get permission first because of the dangers: you can't go everywhere because there are deep crevasses. On the first day, I had to learn all the safety procedures of being harnessed up. It's a mistake to think I do everything alone. Many walks are done alone, but I've done other absolutely great walks with Hamish Fulton or with a guide.

IC: *There's a photograph of A Walking and Running Circle in Warli Tribal Land, India, which shows a group of children chasing each other around the work. This is quite unusual because the incidental human occurrence, as you put it, remains in the photograph. How did this interaction come about?*

RL: It was the end of the harvest in Maharashtra, and they'd cut the paddy and burnt all the chaff, which left fields of black ash. Being the opportunist I am, I started walking in a circle to make a white circle in the black ash. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw these

village kids watching me, fascinated, but they were too shy to come close. Then, when I'd finished, I stood back to take photographs, and the kids all came up to the circle and spontaneously started running around it. I made the walking circle and they made the running circle, hence the title.

Quite often, I make a work I think is finished, but then something happens that makes it much more interesting. In Mexico, I once made a water line along a footpath, and just before I took a photograph of it, there was a snowstorm. All the visual characteristics of the place changed, and the photograph shows what the work looked like after the snowstorm. That's an example of how the landscape works are open to the natural vagaries of change and chance.

IC: *Your works are habitually placed in inaccessible locations and often don't have an audience. Sometimes only you see them—and even then, just for a short while, before they dissolve with time and the effects of weather. Yet you do consider longevity, as attested to in your photographs, text works, and artist books.*

RL: Ideas can last forever. Even the stones in the landscape can last forever—it's just that one might not recognize them as a work of art. I've the freedom and the capacity to make a work anywhere I happen to be. As you say, it can be in an isolated and inaccessible place, and it might disappear after a short time, but I hope that's what makes my work interesting. I also make shows in galleries and museums in the middle of cities, so it's not either/or. I put my work in the world in many different ways. I'm not interested in ephemerality—that's just a by-product. With *A Line in the Himalayas*, the idea was to

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make the line and take a photograph to record it, in order to show people what I'd made on that glacier just below the icefall on Everest. The fact that it subsequently broke up and disappeared was logical and natural, but it wasn't part of the idea. The idea was to make it. With *England 1968*, the point was to make a manmade mark in a place that already had a natural pattern of daisies, so I was superimposing my pattern on the existing natural pattern by removing the heads of the daisies. The fact that the daisies grew back afterwards was neither here nor there, because the work had been finished and photographed and the image was in the world as I wanted it to be.

IC: *When you make a work in the landscape, it appears like a microcosm in a vast terrain, yet when that microcosm is brought into the gallery, the reverse is true: it becomes enormous and pervades the space.*

RL: That's true, but you could say that a work in the landscape has the scale of the landscape anyway, so I'm just appropriating the scale of the place. I don't need to make a huge work in the landscape to give it scale. In a gallery, it's more condensed: the work has to have its own independent scale. I really enjoy making enormous mud works on gallery walls, for instance. If somebody gives me a grand space, I can make a grand work, and I use the beauty of great architecture, like the Guggenheim in Bilbao or Tate Britain.

IC: *I watched you make Porthmeor Arc for the curved, sea-facing wall at Tate St Ives. You were up on scaffolding, and I was struck by the intense physicality of the act and how you blocked all peripheral distraction to focus solely on the work at hand. It's as though body and mind were fused into a highly disciplined instrument. Is that level of concentration learned or inherent?*

RL: I have to be focused, and I can't make any mistakes because there are no second chances. I have to be in the zone, which means being very concentrated. It's no different from a musician playing a piece of music. That's not to say what I do is a performance, but it requires a similar level of concentration. When I'm making a circle of stones in the landscape, I'm equally wrapped up in the moment. I'm sure Matisse felt the same when he was making



Above: *Muddy Water Falls*, 2015. River Avon mud, 143.31 x 444.49 in. Below: *Half Moon*, 2015. Red slate, 21.5 x 196.88 x 98.5 cm.



his cutouts. I'm no different than any other artist making a work. It's just a bit more dramatic when you're watching me up on scaffolding. What's important is that I make all my own work. I'm not an industry; I don't have a studio; I don't have studio assistants. I'm not making a value judgment, it's just the way I am. I prefer to make the work myself, whether it's walking a thousand miles or making a fingerprint. It's all based on my strength or even my lack of it. In a way, it's a portrait of me without being figurative.

IC: *You work through a defined sequence of abstract variables—lines, crosses, rectangles, squares, circles, and spirals—forms that take us back to the beginning of time. Are you trying to retain a sense of Paleolithic engagement lost through human evolution?*

RL: Yes, I do feel close to the DNA of primitive man. Using mud with my hands on a wall isn't so far removed from cave painting. I'm leaving a mark and being human, but being human in a new way by adding something to the story of art. But I don't mean it in a literal way. It's like rock and roll; I feel a primitive energy when I'm making a huge mud work or a circle of stones. It's primal, physical, a celebration.

IC: *It's also a tangible way of confirming one's existence in the present. Do you feel able to reach a higher state of being through this process of making?*

RL: I feel like I'm in a state of grace when I'm on a wilderness walk on my own, with just my rucksack on my back and my camping food. I'm mentally free from the stuff of modern life. It's a romantic idea, but it is powerful. It's nice to be able to touch that psychological state once in a while. Being an artist allows me to get to that state of grace, or happiness even.

Ina Cole is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.

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