

**ARTIST:**

Richard Long

**THEME: Nature**



**TITLE, DATE, MEDIUM AND DIMENSIONS:**

*A Line in Japan*, 1979, sculpture; photograph colour on paper, 862 x 1218 mm.

**IMAGE OF WORK:**



日本での線  
A LINE IN JAPAN  
MOUNT FUJI 1979

Digital image courtesy of Richard Long / DACS, London

**ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS:**

**(b) Formal elements, styles and their effects or contributions to meaning**

- This colour photograph shows a view of a dark rocky ridge on top of a high mountain that peaks above a layer of clouds. On the ground can be seen a straight line of carefully laid out stones that recedes along the ridge at a perpendicular angle to the picture frame. Below the photograph on the off-white paper mount are five Japanese characters, which are translated

on the two lines below: 'A LINE IN JAPAN', handwritten in red pencil, and below this 'MOUNT FUJI, 1979', handwritten in graphite pencil.

- The photograph documents a temporary sculptural work made by Long on top of Mount Fuji in Japan. The work involved placing small rocks from the surrounding area into a straight line of roughly uniform width that stretched for several metres in length. However, Long has explained that he had originally intended to create a different work, indicating how working directly in a landscape can be affected by conditions that are out of the artist's control:  
*"The sculpture A Line in Japan (1979) came about because my original idea had been to make a map work recording a circular walk around Mt Fuji, following the snow line. However, as there was no snow on the mountain at all when I arrived, I had to follow a different idea."*  
(Cited in Tufnell 2007, p.33.)

**(c) Concepts relevant to the theme:**

- Land art, minimalism, conceptual art

**CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS:**

**(a) How the works were influenced by the work of earlier or contemporary artists/architects**

- There seems to be a parallel to non-Western and ancient cultures, where nature is used as part of a social or cultural context. E.g. earth mounds, pre-historic ritual paths.
- The geometric shapes, lines, circles etc as well as Long's practice of walking seem not dissimilar to ritualistic immersion with and understanding of nature.
- However, Long is wary of stressing direct affinities between the work he makes and prehistoric art: *"I actually hate that approach to my work. It is very academic. I was interested in landscape art long before I saw Stonehenge. You have to consider Stonehenge and all the circles in Britain, they came about from a completely different culture, for different reasons. They were social, religious art. They were made by society. I make my work as an individual. There are enormous differences."*
- Long studied at St Martin's School of Art, London in the sculpture class of Anthony Caro. Although Caro was a modernist sculptor who didn't have much time for conceptual art, he was influential as he literally took the sculpture off the pedestal, bringing it into the space of the visitor.

- Other conceptual artists may have impacted his work too like US land artists who created major so called earth works, like Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. But important difference is that Long's work is generally very subtle, often modest in scale, and ephemeral rather than heroic. He is not after a huge impact on the landscape.
- "Nature has always been recorded by artists, from pre-historic cave paintings to 20th century landscape photography. I too wanted to make nature the subject of my work, but in new ways. I started working outside using natural materials like grass and water, and this evolved into the idea of making a sculpture by walking."

**(b) How the works were shaped by social, political and technological contexts**

- Postmodernism – turning away from modernist dogma concept of heroic artist
- Conceptualism – idea more important, visual art can be illustration of concept, denying the notion of skill
- Minimalism – this refers not only to the sparsity of material and form but also to the anti-fine art definition of the sculptor
- Land art and environmentalism – sensitivity towards nature, harmony with surroundings rather than humanity's domination of the natural world
- Anti-authoritarian attitudes of new generation, political awareness – even if work not obviously political, subtext is to overthrow existing high-art notions. Anything can be art, and art can happen anywhere – performance, happenings, land art all born out of that mind set

**(c) How works by the chosen specified artists and architect were influenced by their experience of nature**

- *A Line in Japan* has affinities with other straight line sculptures by Long such as *A Line in Ireland* 1974 (Long's first stone line made in a landscape, reproduced in Fuchs 1986, p.54) and *A Line in Bolivia* 1981 (Tate T03298). Created directly in the landscape from materials in the vicinity, these sculptures are intrinsically perishable in that they are subject to constantly changing natural and human conditions. Long has explained:

*"I come to some mountains and I move some stones around and then I disappear. The mountains are changed, some stones are in a different place. But who has moved them and*

*how it looks, that is not the important part. The only important thing is that the stones have been moved. They are visible but invisible as art.” (Cited in Tufnell 2007, p.85.)*

#### **DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES:**

##### **(a) Materials, techniques and processes**

- Always uses natural materials, in a very simple way, without specific or obviously artistic skill. Objects or elements are often merely arranged or placed or manipulated, not ‘created’ in the sense of fashioning something new from the material
- Outside works are very ephemeral, could sometimes be mistaken for natural or accidental
- Gallery works minimal, temporary

##### **(b) The relationship between materials and meaning**

- Materials relate to the idea of minimal interference and instead making a subtle link between natural environment and human nature, needs and cultural practices
- Materials are to be respected and used and shown without changing their characteristics, intrinsic form and shape, e.g. clay not used to make pots but to splatter on the wall or stones not connected with mortar to build a structure but simply placed on floor

#### **WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES:**

##### **(a) Practical and aesthetic functions**

- No practical function
- Aesthetic function is not to beautify, illustrate or represent but to communicate idea of close relationship of artist/human being and nature
- In the text and map works the viewers are to imagine and complete the work in their mind

##### **(b) Detailed knowledge and understanding of at least one critical text that discusses the chosen specified artists and architect: their works, contribution and influences**

- **Critical Texts:**
- Critic William Malpas has noted that ‘the line of stones is photographed from one end, the lower end, so the line stretches up the mountain, into the mist. Like the Himalayan line [*A Line in the Himalayas* 1975, Tate T12035], the Mount Fuji line emphasizes the sense of the infinite. The religious/Romantic reaching up into the heavens’ (William Malpas, *The Art of Richard Long*, Maidstone 2011, p.273). Art historian Rudi Fuchs has compared the ‘slender and open’ composition of the stones in *A Line in Japan* with Japanese calligraphy, a

connection which is reinforced by the Japanese characters written below the photograph (Fuchs 1986, p.135). The carefully spaced stones of the sculpture also draw associations with Japanese rock gardens, in which spatial aesthetics are crucial. Long recognises these comparisons, saying '*there are some parallels between Japanese art and my work, because nature is our common condition*', acknowledging that his interest in nature is not bound by time or national boundaries (cited in Tufnell 2007, p.106).

- Some critics, such as Anne Seymour, have drawn attention to the affinities Long's practice has with Japanese Zen Buddhism, from the artist's interest in simplicity to his desire to work in the present moment (see Anne Seymour, *Richard Long: Old World, New World*, London 1988). However, although Long learnt about Zen Buddhism early in his career, he has remarked that he does not see it as a 'big enlightenment', and that his work and Zen philosophy share 'just a sort of coincidental sensibility', noting that the state of mind required to meditate is also suitable for viewing his work (cited in Tufnell 2007, p.79). Claire Wallis

**(d) Significance of original location/display/setting**

- The original is a temporary sculptural work made by Long on top of Mount Fuji in Japan. The work involved placing small rocks from the surrounding area into a straight line of roughly uniform width that stretched for several metres in length. As always this action was a solitary activity not witnessed by anyone. The original work might not exist anymore in its physical form.

**(f) Impact of subsequent environments and settings on audiences**

- However, the meaning of the original work is contained in the photograph which Long took to document it. It is carefully composed and printed and titled and has become the only visible record. Each time it is exhibited the journey and action are called back into the mind of the viewers.

- **Bibliography:**

- Denise Hooker, *Richard Long: Walking the Line*, 2002 759 LON
- Clarrie Wallis, *Richard Long: Heaven and Earth* 2009 RIC LON HOA
- Clarrie Wallis, *Stones, Clouds, Miles, A Richard Long Reader*, STO CLO HOA
- Michael Lailach, *Land Art: The Earth as Canvas*
- Ben Tufnell, (Ed) *Richard Long. Selected statements and interviews* 2007

Also:

- **Adrian Searle** 'Written in mud' *The Guardian* Tuesday July 10, 2007

- **Sean O'Hagan** 'One step beyond' The Observer Sunday 10 May 2009
- <http://www.richardlong.org/>
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/richard-long-cbe-1525>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/webarchive/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Farchive%2Fomnibus--richard-long%2Fznvvmfr>
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