

**ARTIST:**

Richard Long

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

*Southbank Circle*, 1991, sculpture, Delabole slate, 100 x 1997 x 1997 mm.

**IMAGE OF WORK:**

Digital image courtesy of Richard Long / DACS, London

**ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS:****(b) Formal elements, styles and their effects or contributions to meaning**

- The title refers to the Hayward Gallery on London's South Bank, where it was first exhibited. The slate, from the Delabole quarry in Cornwall, was roughly cut to retain as much of its natural character as possible.
- It is a circle, nearly two metres in diameter, composed of 168 pieces of slate lying close together on the floor. The pieces may be assembled in a wide variety of configurations within the defining form of the circle. Long has specified that every 'stone' should touch the stones adjoining it, so that they all become "locked" together, and stable. The longest stones (and also the thinnest and smallest ones) should be placed within the work and not around the edge. There is an equal density of stone throughout, and overall the work should look balanced and circular'. Bringing together the unevenly shaped pieces of slate in the geometric structure of the circle, the sculpture illustrates a theme common in Long's work, the relationship between humanity and nature. As he has explained, *'you could say*

*that my work is ... a balance between the patterns of nature and the formalism of human, abstract ideas like lines and circles. It is where my human characteristics meet the natural forces and patterns of the world, and that is really the kind of subject of my work'* (quoted in *Richard Long: Walking in Circles*, p.250).

- Composition/shapes: *'I think circles have belonged in some way or other to all people at all time. They are universal and timeless, like the image of a human hand. For me, that is part of their emotional power, although there is nothing symbolic or mystical in my work.'* The shape of the circle appears frequently in his work and is to be seen in a wider cultural context.
- The pieces of cut slate are put on their side so that the surface is smooth and straight, not as occurring in nature in horizontal geological strata.
- Colour of the stone is a dark cool grey.
- Long arranges the shape himself in the gallery when installing the work each time.
- Long often sets up certain rules and principles by which he organises and plans his works.
- The work does not only consist of the visible part in the gallery but also of the experience of the artist in nature which we don't witness.

**(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**

- Ancient civilisations have created structures like stone circles and designed paths on which walking was part of a communal cultural or ritual activity.
- 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."*
- According to Plato the circle is the perfect, most beautiful shape. It symbolises eternity and the universe.
- 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 man'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**

- Long bases his work on walks made outdoors in nature, often in remote locations. The documentation of these walks, which takes a variety of different forms, constitutes the visible manifestation of the artwork, which for Long exists as much in the making of it as in its end product.
- Natural materials are crucial and artists using them, touching soil, picking up stones, splattering mud is essential part of creative process.

**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**

- Stone is one of the earliest materials used by humans to fashion tools, construct dwellings, create monuments and to mark territory. Long has picked up and arranged stones on his walks in many of the world's most remote locations. It is one of his preferred materials and he has said: *'I like the idea that stones are what the world is made of.'* (Quoted in *Richard Long: Circles Cycles Mud Stones*, p.24.) He has commented: *'everything has its right place in the world. There are millions of stones in the world, and when I make a sculpture, all I do is just take a few of those stones and bring them together and put them in a circle and show you ... I use stones because I like stones or because they're easy to find, without being anything special, so common you can find them anywhere ... It's enough to use stones as stones, for what they are. I'm a realist.'* (Quoted in *Richard Long: Walking in Circles*, p.45.)
- For his large-scale stone works Long often selects materials from whatever is available in a stoneyard or quarry near the exhibition site. He draws up a list of instructions from the physical concepts worked out during assembly and produces a certificate when the work is completed. *South Bank Circle* may be installed both indoors and outdoors.

**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 the 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 own 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:**
  - Clarrie Wallis, Richard Long: Heaven and Earth, Tate exhibition cat 2009: "From the beginning Long has always made another category of work for indoor and the gallery spaces...In this way, Long was able to extend the boundaries of sculpture, finding a means to deconstruct space and time and to make sculpture that addresses not only

material and form but also place.” “Long’s work is about his own physical engagement, exploring the order of the universe and nature’s elemental forces. And in this sense it is about being a body in the world and about measuring the world against ourselves.”

- Eckhard Schneider 1999 in: Clarrie Wallis, Stones, Clouds, Miles, A Richard Long Reader: “Richard Long thus eliminates from his work both the Romantic apotheosis of nature and all the misconceived attempts to equate art with nature...Beyond all art historical evaluation they [his works] turn the earth, potentially, into a single, equal place of sensory and mental wealth for every human being.”

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

- *South Bank Circle* was created specifically for Long’s 1991 retrospective at the Hayward Gallery at the South Bank Centre in London. A connection is being established between the area where the stone was cut, the Delabole quarry in Cornwall, and this public gallery in an urban setting. The viewers experience the material very differently from the artist who has given it a particular order.

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

- Through its name the original setting has become part of the work’s overall meaning. The first journey of the stone to the Southbank and the first arrangement of the pieces within the circle which the artist will have to repeat each time have become intrinsic to the work.

- **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:

- <http://www.richardlong.org/>
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/richard-long-cbe-1525>

- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/may/11/richard-long-review-circle-to-circle-mud-sun-moon-stars>
- <https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/richard-long--8>