

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

A Nomad Among Builders

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4q7180df>

Journal

Places, 4(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Auping, Michael

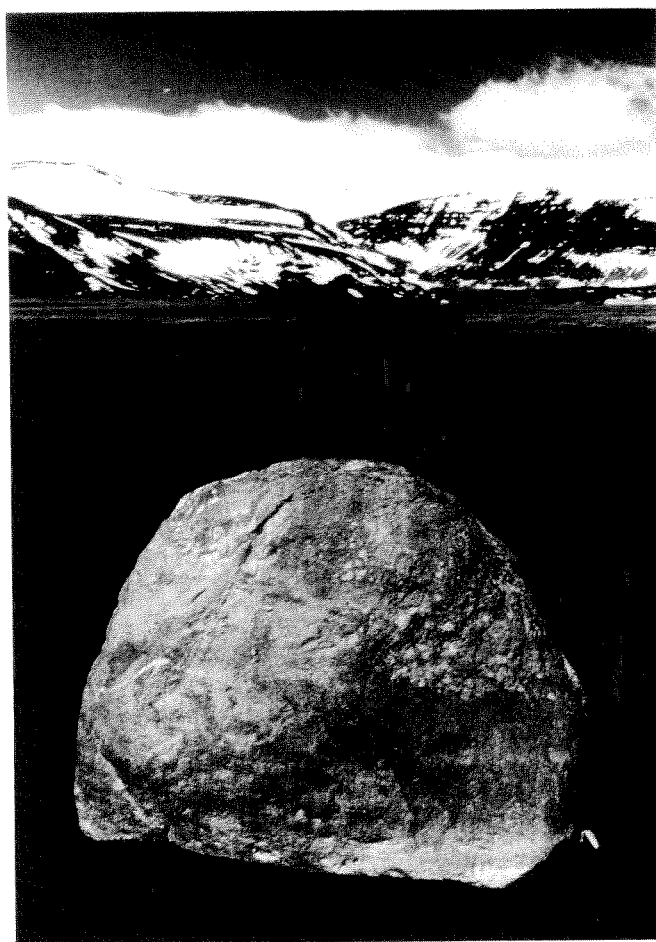
Publication Date

1987-10-01

Peer reviewed

A Nomad Among Builders

Michael Auping



W A T E R
S T O N E

A Walk to the Summit of Dranga Jokull At The Time of the Full Moon

Holmavik to Holmavik Northwest Iceland the First Seven Days of June 1985

I **Water Stone, 1985; A Walk
to the Summit of Dranga
Jokull at the Time of the
Full Moon**

There is something venerable about the nomad, moving across the surface of the planet with no need to take possession of it. For such peoples, architecture has a unique meaning. It is often impermanent, collapsible, and mobile, not a monument to colonization or a system of controlling a place. In this sense architecture is not a “thing” but a temporary state of being. The English artist Hamish Fulton has for almost two decades attempted to make an art that parallels this state. In working with nature as subject, Fulton’s approach is not one of displacement and construction but a nomadic odyssey that embraces a spiritual sense of place.

Since 1969 Hamish Fulton’s art has stemmed from walks he has taken in the landscape. He represents these walks through the combined mediums of words and photographs, his reaction to the character of the landscape determining the length of the walk and the number of photographs made during the journey. He tends to distill his experience of a walk into precise images, often representing a journey with a single photograph placed behind glass in a large, dark wood frame. Each of the photographs is set in a mat, upon which is printed a text giving factual information about the walk and brief details of the experience culled from an ongoing diary. These are essentially country walks, but they take place on what seems a McLuhanesque scale. Over the past decade or so, Fulton has walked literally thousands of miles in Nepal, India,

Bolivia, Canada, Peru, Iceland, England, Scotland, America, Mexico, Australia, France, and Italy.

Fulton’s art was initially inspired by his interest in the American Indian. In a recent letter, he stated specifically that it was his admiration for two books he read on the subject in 1962—*Black Elk Speaks* by J. G. Neihardt and *Wooden Leg* by T. B. Marquis—that led to a 1969 trip to the United States. Fulton’s interest in the American Indian remains a guiding force in his art, and one of his ambitions is to produce an extended series on the American Indian and “their landscape.”¹

Fulton is not, however, a twentieth-century version of the Victorian voyager who transported easels and sketchbooks to the far corners of the world in search of the exotic native, unpoisoned by civilization. He is familiar with the plight of the American Indian and is clearly moved by it, although his art is certainly not—in any direct sense at least—a political comment about it. Rather, the American Indian exists as a kind of latent image in all of Fulton’s works, a metaphor for a more spiritual and symbiotic relationship with nature.

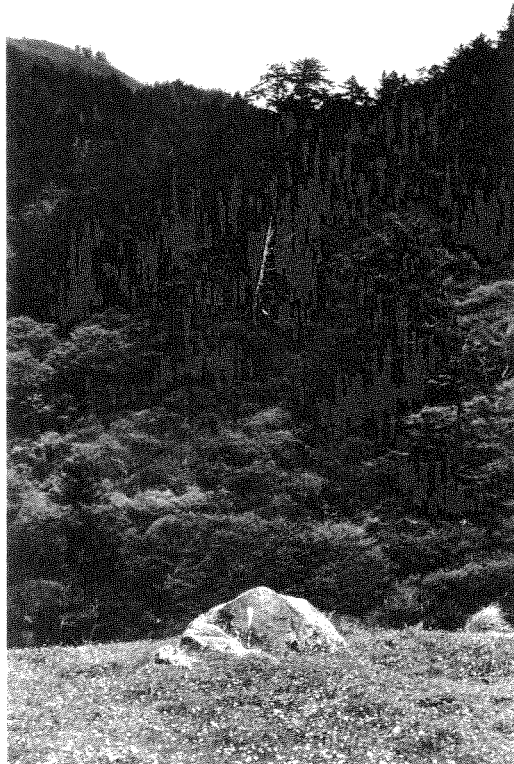
What Fulton envies in American Indian culture, or that of the Australian Aboriginal, is the lack of a monumental architecture mediating between these people and their natural environment. For such cultures, the land is not to be captured but followed judiciously if not spiritually. Fulton recently sent

me the following quotation of Narritjin Maymura, an Australian Aboriginal, in response to a question about the inspirational sources for his art:

We belong to the ground
It is our power and we must stay
Close to it or maybe
We will get lost²

For Fulton, this philosophy is expressed most poignantly in the simple act of walking. He sees walking as the central aspect of his art. “No walk, no work”³ has been one of his maxims. In Fulton’s art, walking is presented as one man’s most basic dialogues with nature, a dialogue not coincidentally central to the nomadic peoples who have helped inspire his art. Fulton does not approach nature as “landscape,” in the traditional sense of a still image, but as a physical experience. The texts that accompany his photographs relay both the time, distance, and, in a number of cases, the condition of a walk. Time is compared to distance, which is measured in relationship to terrain and weather. The interpretation of nature, the reasons he chooses to photograph particular images, is a direct result of his physical involvement with it. As he moves, each footstep is a form of measurement that mediates between his body and the landscape. When Fulton takes his photographs, he is not separated from the “scenery” as it were; he is walking through it, incorporated into it. Thus the different types of terrain become a crucial element of chance in the work, determining the

2



B I R D

R O C K

A VIEW OF FOREST WITH TREES ON THE RIGHT OF THE ROCK TAKEN NEARBY IN 1982

2 **Bird Rock, 1982.** Photograph courtesy of John Weber Gallery, New York

length of the walk, the direction and the number of photographs taken. Fulton has commented, “My work is about nature and it seems proper to allow nature to determine events en route.”⁴

Neither does Fulton always present us with the grand view. His works reveal nature as an expanding process or situation that is just as faithfully represented by a modest but meaningful detail as it is in the dramatic panorama. This is to say, of course, that nature is essentially a state of mind. If many of Fulton’s photographs have an almost déjà vu quality—no matter how foreign the subject—it is perhaps because they operate on one level like mirrors. By forcing a long leap of imagination from art object to “place,” Fulton helps connect us with our past experiences of landscape and ultimately with our feelings about nature in general. The work reflects back on a very primal instinct, perhaps to what Hugh Honour has referred to as “The Morality of Landscape.”⁵ In one sense, this morality may be generated by thoughts of a pre-agricultural stage of civilization which Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed to be the “state least subject to revolutions, the best state for man.”⁶

In this nuclear era, Rousseau’s sentiments take on an even greater poignancy. In twentieth-century America, nature and Indian culture have in some respects been relegated to the status of fragile artifacts, in need of protection by (from?) the federal government. In a sense, the history of Fulton’s native



AN ELEVEN DAY ROAD WALK FROM THE NORTH COAST TO THE SOUTH COAST OF IRELAND JULY 1985

3

3 An Eleven Day Road Walk from the North Coast to the South Coast of Ireland, July 1985. Photograph courtesy of John Weber Gallery, New York

predecessors, perhaps yet to be written, is a metaphor for the collision between nature (the American Indian) and a possessive architecture of technology and politics (the United States Army, the government). In his walks, Fulton is still coping with this collision. Conspicuously (and poetically) absent from his works is reference to the colonizing realities of buildings, four-wheel drive trucks, snowmobiles, or aircraft.

The United States today represents one of the most dynamic clashes between nature and culture (Yosemite National Park vs. New York City, the John Muir Trail vs. the Los Angeles freeway system, and so on). The ecological movement notwithstanding, Americans have become used to, if not comfortable with, these dynamics. They have certainly provided inspiration and challenge for the American artist, particularly those working outdoors over the last decade or so, during which time the American landscape became part of the pioneering avant garde movement known as Earth Art. Landscape ceased to be simply metaphoric images but a material to physically manipulate via pneumatic drills and bulldozers, the artist, the architect, and the industrialist working simultaneously “developing” the American landscape. Michael Heizer, who has created a number of large, outdoor works in the southwestern United States, has said, “The work I’m doing has to be done, and somebody has to do it . . . We live in an age of the 747 aircraft, the

moon rocket . . . so you must make a certain type of art.”⁷ Robert Smithson, generally considered the patriarch of the genre, also dealt with the larger concept of nature from an essentially entropic-rational-Western approach. He could see bulldozers as twentieth-century dinosaurs, small pawns in a huge, spiraling universe of disintegration and change.

Fulton’s impression of the land is, by comparison, ghostlike. While Heizer and Smithson chose to rearrange the landscape, Fulton prefers that the landscape impose itself on him. Avoiding alteration of place, the photographs document his attraction for “unspoiled” landscape and the fact that “he was there.” Fulton agrees with the idea that the only things you should take out of the landscape are photographs and the only things you should leave are footprints.

Hamish Fulton is suspect of the notion of manifest destiny and the idea of man balancing nature through his own control. In Fulton’s art, pastoral landscape appears as a microcosm in a state of grace. Be it Transcendentalist, Far Eastern, Aboriginal, or American Indian in philosophy—all of which Fulton has acknowledged as inspirational—the work projects a sense of the mystery, intimacy, and nobility of nature, elevating those feelings close to a level of spirituality. Fulton has said, “Being in nature for me is direct religion.”⁸

Notes

- 1 Undated letter to the author, received May 1984.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Conversation with the artist, October 1981.
- 4 Words by Peter Turner, “An Interview with Hamish Fulton,” *Landscape Theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1980), p. 81.
- 5 Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 57.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 7 John Gruen, “Michael Heizer: ‘You Might Say I’m in the Construction Business,’” *Artnews* (December 1977), p. 98.
- 8 Michael Auping, “An Interview with Hamish Fulton,” *Common Ground: Five Artists in the Florida Landscape* (Sarasota: Ringling Museum of Art, 1982), p. 86.