

Nature & Walking Hamish Fulton

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by Carole Haensler

“Images of the land. I walk on the land, not in the ‘landscape’.”*

Hamish Fulton’s images of the land are not abstractions – or “extractions”, as you might be tempted to describe them in order to capture the utilitarian dimension so often ingrained in Western art – they are experiences. The artist speaks of action: “So what is the action? I go on walks and materialise my walk texts. This is the action. In other words, if I do not go on a walk, I cannot materialise a walk text.” (Hamish Fulton, 2021). Nor are they imagined landscapes, rewritten or adapted for philosophical, cultural, or even political purposes, as in the case of Caspar Wolf’s sublime depictions for Albrecht von Haller in the eighteenth century, Théodore Rousseau’s paintings to preserve the Forest of Fontainebleau in the mid-nineteenth century, or more recently Olafur Eliasson’s interventions as part of COP 21 in Paris (*Ice Watch*, 2015). With Fulton, the landscape is definitively not an object – perhaps for the first time in the history of art – but rather a physical experience. The artist seeks to materialise this experience, inviting us to bring it into existence with him through the message – whether graphics, words, photographs, or various objects such as a metre bar or pieces of wood – that he leaves us.

“Walking is ancient and contemporary.”*

Hamish Fulton’s medium is walking: walking as an act of observation, as a means of experiencing the living world and our own place within it in the broadest sense of the term. It is about entering into the living world rather than observing it from a distance, through the lens of a certain discourse or aesthetic. An ultimately logical approach, since walking is the primary way in which human beings explore and have explored and understood their environment throughout history. In the Romantic era, walking became a means of reconnecting with God and/or nature. In the contemporary period, walking has also become synonymous with social and political activism. Walking is an encounter with history and culture. To walk is to observe and experience environmental changes, as well as geopolitical and geological boundaries. Hamish Fulton’s work is a form of resistance in the sense that his walks are an attempt to combat fragmentation, to challenge the artificial barriers that humans impose on the environment. It is just as much about exploration as it is about experience. His creative approach relates somewhat to that of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912–2009), the founder of “deep ecology”, who built a cabin on an isolated plateau north of Oslo, Norway, far from industrial civilisation. The planks for his cabin were transported to the building site on the back of a donkey. It was to be a spartan place, yet essential in the truest sense of the word. It was here that Naess read, wrote, walked and climbed. Walking, mountains, connecting with the natural environment, listening to it to find your place within it: this is also the kind of

experience that Hamish Fulton's work refers to. A coincidence of timing? 1973 marked the beginning of Naess's "deep ecology" and was also the year that Fulton coined the term "walking artist" to describe his artistic practice.

"Walk-In-Nature."*

Hamish Fulton's work is deeply rooted in nature – both human and environmental – and represents a quest to be present, a quest that has been ongoing since the 1970s and the early days of the environmental movement. His approach remains thoroughly relevant today and resonates surprisingly well with the new insights offered by genetic research into theories of evolution. Since the 1990s, there has indeed been a reappraisal of the pyramidal structure used by Western thought to represent the living world – with all its biological, ecological, and animal dimensions – since antiquity. This strict hierarchy, which places humans at the apex, is a philosophical concept that has become cultural, even political, over the centuries, although it was constructed without any scientific basis. The development of genetic science tends to give a different form to the relationships between different species, presenting them as a network or a "tree of life": "The hierarchical concept has recently been disproved by science, thanks to the field of genetics, which has led to a new, phylogenetic classification system and proposed a different, far more substantiated framework since the 1990s: the tree of life. Starting from the last universal common ancestor, the various forms of life branch out in all directions: bacteria, archaea, and eukaryotes, which includes animals. As well as genealogical transfers of genetic information, horizontal transfers also take place, driven by prokaryotes, bacteria, and viruses – some imagine these as vines connecting the branches, while others view them as a fourth group of living organisms. Now appearing to be just as significant as the genealogical links, these horizontal connections lead us to prefer the image of a network or a tree of life." (Éric Baratay, "Introduction: Pourquoi désanthropiser et décroïsonner les concepts?", *L'animal désanthropisé*, ed. Éric Baratay, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4000/127zc>.) Fulton's interpretation of the world around us makes his work timeless, or rather always of its time, for its time is that of life itself.

*From *Words from Walks*, 2019 © Hamish Fulton