

Long and His Straight Line: A Land Art from a Park

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Work of art can exist in many forms: a painting, a sculpture, a performance, or just an idea. This paper will focus on a site-specific work called “*A Line Made by Walking*” (see Figure 1 in appendix) from a famous land artist Richard Long, arguing that site-specificity in land art is effective as an approach for audiences to experience.

Site specificity refers to the work designed particularly for a location that has a direct relation to the space (Wikipedia 2018). A famous art critic Krauss discussed this concept in relation to classical sculpture and modernist sculpture, and she raised the importance of the site by stating that, the notion of sculpture became “nomadic” and modernism lost its “site” (Krauss, 1979). Richard Long operates the idea of site specificity on land by combining the aspects of minimalism and conceptualism. In 1967, when he went to St Martin, he found a field in the park to operate and then recorded the processes of the work through photography --- he continued to walk on the grass to make a straight line. Because of the repeated walking and special shooting angle, the impermanent trace seems to be visible and distinct under the sunlight. From the black-and-white photo with a frame of 85.5cm×115.9cm, Long uses quite strong contrast to capture the shrub in the dark and the straight line in bright on the trampled lawn; the simple composition divides the photo into three parts by horizon and the manmade straight line. Obviously, the straight line here is the specific object and the park in England is the specific site to embrace the object. People cannot move the artwork because it grows on the site ephemerally. Long’s artwork underplays the physical presence for viewers, but introduces the concept of specific objects made for the environment; he also expands the understanding of art practice: drawing in the studio is not the only art approach, operation on a remote land specifically can also be an effective visual language to audiences.

Among the most significant aspects, three aspects of the site specificity should be emphasized to explain its effectiveness in viewing: conditions of surroundings, psychological influence of viewers, and the medium artists use to present. To begin with, in the aspect of environmental settings, Long

breaks with the convention of presenting art in the gallery but using the natural environment for viewers. He intervenes (Arnason & Mansfield, 2013) the nature through walking, a gesture to connect nature; and he makes this transitory landmark on earth, which can be a meaningful gesture. In this site, nature connects to the art: unlike the indoor artwork, the transient line in nature appears to be a “cut” both connecting and separating the ground (Foster, 2011). On the one hand, the straight line connects the ground and the shrubs, which seem to stretch out endlessly at the end of the horizon. On the other hand, a straight line separates the ground into two parts. Therefore, the simple line is emphasized as a specific object again and again for viewers to capture at first glance.

Moreover, in the aspect of psychological influence on viewers, Long’s operation provides more connections with viewers to touch nature in such a spatial distribution. Nature can have psychological effects on humans: when we look at the word “rain”, some melancholy and sorrowful scenes and emotions come into our minds. Nature inspires viewers to have emotions and encourages them to enter the site spontaneously. Long’s walking is a symbol of going “nowhere” (Tufnell, 2007, p.39), and with this philosophical meaning manipulated in nature, the line can show an exertion of energy and human intentionality. Also, site specificity assigns people to the circumstantial location to concentrate on the subjects. When the viewers enter the gallery, the light, shades, placement, and others’ work always play roles to affect viewers’ perception. However, site specificity allows spectators to engage in the small-scale place to interact through gazing at the line. It is an exploration of time, space, and distance.

Finally, the medium to present site-specific work can be useful for viewers to experience. Choosing the wilderness to make art means the placement of “line” is ephemeral, which can be destroyed by meteorological conditions, natural disasters, or manmade reasons — removing the artwork or relocating the artwork can be destruction because it changes the site with strong meaning to the artwork. Therefore, the artist uses the camera to record for viewers, as it is a straightforward way

for viewers to observe. From the lens of the camera, the monumental work can be documented with the filter to show a strong effect: the black-and-white filter is impressive and trenchant to display the simple straight line. In 2013, Arnason and Mansfield wrote the medium use in land art in their book "*The History of Modern Art*", they said that films and photographs can document the piece and provide reliable access for viewers, with little doubt about sublime, although unpredictable and unrepeatable effects. (Arnason & Mansfield, 2013) I think their theory of medium used in site-specific land art is useful and I agree with this idea but they overlooked some drawbacks of photographic documentation: sometimes the photography limits the depth of the artwork and ignores the process of the work. In my opinion, photography records in two dimensional without suggesting the volume of the work, and the audience cannot see all the details; what is more, although Long uses the camera to preserve the process of the art, the idea and repeatedly walking cannot be replicated perfectly. These limitations of the camera restrict the site specificity, but using the camera as the medium is still the best way for an artist to retrieve the work's materiality so that audiences can visually enter the site to interact with this straight line.

In conclusion, Long's orchestration extends the form of art, and intensifies his idea of the line for audiences to see a clear transformation in his work: from the land to art, from a line to psychological implication, and from the lens to the specific site. Consequently, the limited landmark on earth with special environmental settings, psychological influence, and artist's medium, site specificity in land art is an effective art language for audiences to appreciate.

References:

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Appendix:



Figure 1: A Line Made by Walking (1967)