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REVIEWS

Richard Long

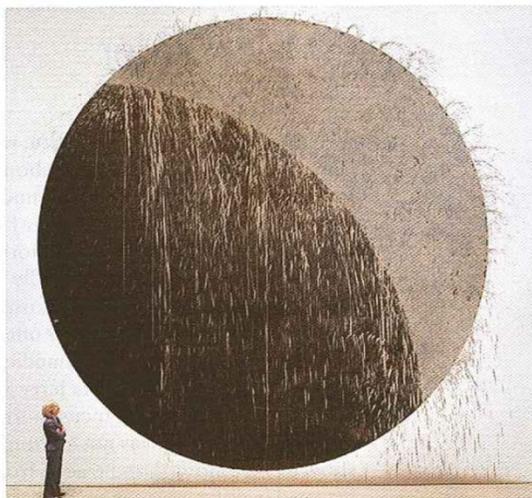
SPERONE WESTWATER

With *River Avon Mud Crescent*, 2011, Richard Long achieves the unlikely effect of making the twenty-nine-foot-high ground-floor gallery of Sperone Westwater's young Bowery outpost seem cramped. A disc of black acrylic gesso overlain by a waxing moon form created with hand-applied squiggles of mud, the work nearly covers the double-height wall; runoff sludge splatters the floor and ceiling. Even with the perspective afforded by the mezzanine, the view is no less awesome—seeing it was like having a front-row seat at some sort of primitive planetarium. Though this was the most striking instance, Long's feel for space was everywhere in evidence, with text pieces, photographs, slate works, and sculptures shrewdly ranged throughout four of the building's eight floors.

For the viewer familiar with Long's work, the exhibition offered no curveballs—though it's hard to imagine what a surprise would even entail. (One of Sperone's elder statesmen, Long counts this his *fourteenth* solo show at the gallery, and it follows his large 2009 survey at Tate Britain.) For all its various manifestations, his oeuvre—inspired, since the late 1960s, by the lengthy, solitary walks he takes in locales all over the world—is marked by an economy of means (elemental, geometric forms of stone, wood, and mud; documentary photographs and texts) and a steadiness of focus. If the conceptual ramifications of his project (the artwork as temporary, ephemeral; nature as a sculptural medium) feel well rehearsed today, Long remains a sensitive interlocutor of (still very relevant) matters of institutional setting and siting. Packing the sculpture terrace with one of his signature arrangements of Cornish slate, Long dramatized the comparative wild of the urban park below, while a pair of text pieces installed on opposite sides of a narrow room lent an aspect of physicality to these otherwise bare-bones notations of location, date, and miles and days journeyed. Despite their apparent clarity, the texts are unexpectedly tough to process visually: The words overwhelm their wall supports, and the to-and-fro spatial negotiation necessary to parse them can introduce a disequilibrium bordering on vertigo. This was genuinely, cloyingly true as well of a third text installed in the "moving exhibition space" that is the gallery's elevator; the dissonance accentuated the very gap between experience and description that Long has so assiduously plumbed.

"Abstract art laid down in the real spaces of the world" was how the artist once characterized his backcountry sculp-

Richard Long, *River Avon Mud Crescent*, 2011, paint and River Avon mud, 27 x 27'.



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tural interventions, and one might summarize the other component of his practice, things made for exhibition, as the inverse of this formula: materials from the real world marshaled to make abstract art. This fungibility, and the urbane, even precious, formalism of the work, has opened it to a certain critique—that what appears radical on the exterior becomes less so on the interior (and all the more so when items made on the outside resemble those that sell so well on the inside, e.g., muted geometric abstractions, elegant black-and-white landscape photographs). Some selections here, and the placement of some others, suggested an awareness of the uneasy dynamic whereby the outcome of an initially objectless endeavor is very much an object. The rigidly symmetrical hang of a set of five *Untitled* panels from 2008, made by dipping slate in mud from the River Avon in Long's native Bristol, evokes nothing so much as exchangeability. Elsewhere, the caking of Johns-like cross-hatching and Pollock-like spray into encrusted dirt, or the very uniformity of Long's "fingerprints" (applied with a rubber glove-coated hand), embody the calcification of abstract mark-making in the decades since he began working.

Long's art turns on these contradictions and others, between modesty and ambition, monumentality and anonymity, predetermination and accident. Advances occur via a tinkering with his mainstay variables. A winning group of 2008 works, for example, imports his mud fingerprints, in neat rows and columns, to small vintage blackboards whose various alphabets and abaci literalize the becoming-culture of nature that he has long tracked. Their understated might dawns slowly, incrementally, over time—like the walks from which they issue.

—Lisa Turvey