

A Line Made by Walking – Tim Robinson’s cartographic practice as an emergence from Land Art

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Abstract: This essay traces the connections between the Land Art practice of Timothy Drever in London from the 1960s and his deep mapping practice as Tim Robinson from the 1980s. By connecting these practices this essay posits that his deep mapping practice is an emergence from the Land Art movement which was a popular art movement in both the US and Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Making this connection is important as it goes further than dissecting Tim Robinson’s use of space as a medium throughout his work as an artist and a cartographer. It shows that his preoccupations with space originated in a specific art world zeitgeist. Not only are his use of the maps and writings of the maps therefore a logical conclusion and evolution away from the questions posed by Land Art movements, but his work can also be used as a way to problematise and question the presumptions made by an art world which fetishized the use of rurality without properly engaging in it. His early use of deep mapping can therefore trace its lineage to Land Art but was able to evolve past this empty appropriation of rural aesthetics.

Key Words: *Tim Robinson, Deep mapping, Land Art, Earthworks, Art Market, Rurality, Mapping*

Introduction

This essay aims to look at Tim Robinson’s cartographic practice as an emergence from the Land Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain and the United States.

Tim Robinson trained as a mathematician in Cambridge before becoming a practicing artist in Vienna and London in the late sixties under the pseudonym Timothy Drever (his mother’s maiden name). His work as an artist followed a lineage of Minimalism to Land Art which was a common evolution during this particular zeitgeist. His early paintings were informed by his mathematical background, creating abstract and minimal compositions.

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Later, he created installations which were participatory such as *Four-Colour Theorem* (1969) (Figure 1) and *Moonfield* 1969 where he created flat wooden shapes painted in different colours on either side. The audience were invited to move and adjust the pieces as they pleased.



Figure 1. *Four-Colour Theorem*, Timothy Drever (1969), courtesy of Camden Arts Centre.

Here, as Nessa Cronin posits, we can see that ‘his concerns with the experiential nature of occupying or inhabiting space, and the question of spatial agency, were beginning to be choreographed and take shape’ (Cronin 2016, p. 62). At a critical turning point in his art career, where he had started to create a name for himself in the art world in London, he and his wife Mairéad decided to leave London and his pseudonym behind them and move to the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway. About this decision Robinson admits that the corruption of finance and the art world had disenchanted him:

I was really having such psychological difficulties navigating the London art world and its demand for money. I had always had this sort of romantic idea that whatever art is, it is the opposite of money. But I forgot that opposites attract. (Woods and Robinson 2015, 00:02:43)

From 1973 Robinson and his wife lived on Inishmore or Árainn, then later, Connemara. A suggestion from the local post mistress that he create a map for the island that the locals could give to tourists quickly plunged Robinson into a project spanning decades. As he slowly walked the landscape to create painstakingly detailed maps, he embedded himself

into the local lore while collecting from it. He created hand drawn maps of the Aran Islands, the Burren and Connemara. (Figure 2) He published accompanying writing on the Aran Islands and Connemara where he collated his geographical, geological, botany and placelore findings when he realised that the maps ‘were not able to express all of the things I wanted to express about this terrain.’ (Obrist 2010, 00:17:24)



Figure 2. Part of Map of Árainn, Tim Robinson, Courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

His aim with his writings was to create ‘some sense of how a landscape or how a world was made up of incredible billions of details and yet at the same time they combine somehow, mysteriously to make some great overarching pattern’ (Obrist 2010, time 00:17:24) His body of work in Ireland ‘ha[s] established Robinson as one of the foremost writers, cartographers and thinkers of the Irish landscape over the last forty years.’ (Cronin 2016, p.53) His artwork in London is often stated as a footnote to his career as a cartographer. This essay frames his overarching practice as an emergence from and important conclusion to the Land Art conversation happening in the international art world when he left it behind him.

Land Art is an umbrella term which will be used in this essay to represent the many nuanced movements labelled in theory as land art, environmental art, earth art or earthworks. Land Art emerged from Minimalism which ‘involved three-dimensional work that incorporated the embodied viewer in the situation of the artwork, but often effaced any trace of the artist’s hand from the finished object’. The sculptures were ‘objects that obscured their pasts and left their present open to future engagements’ (Sack 2014, p. 23). Pure abstraction, away from the artist and away from creation, was the aim and the

art object’s place in the gallery or museum was specifically in relation to the space and the human body within the space. The sculptures were taken off the plinth and laid on the ground on equal footing to the viewers. This central tenet of Minimalism was an important departure for sculpture; the removal of the base or plinth transformed sculpture from a visual entity separate to everyday life to a ‘physical presence’ (Causey 1998, p.124) of its own on par with the human body.

This quickly inspired the Land Art movement where Minimalist objects or sculptures *in situ* in monumental landscapes were photographed and brought back to the gallery space. The artist here played multiple roles, as creator of the object, the collector of the image and the archivist – bringing the records of the art elsewhere to uncover to viewers. It has been widely discussed that Land Art, however, approached landscape from an outsider, urban setting, and did not quite reconcile this divide. ‘They amplified and re-directed urban culture but represented neither a flight from commerce and the ‘gallery system’ nor... a withdrawal from the city into nomadism or rural settlement’ (Causey 1998, p. 169). The environmental impact, ethics and aesthetics of Land Art were often called into question (Carlson 1986, p. 636). Land Art was arguably aestheticizing nature, turning places into ‘sites’ of interrogation without delving deeper into the place where the artwork was to exist. Carlson (1986) calls into question whether Land Art was merely an ‘aesthetic affront to nature’ (p. 637) in that it imposes the idea that ‘for the aesthetic interest and merit of nature to be recognized it must first be considered a work of art’ (p. 650). Authors also questioned the environmental impact of Land Art works such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Surrounded Island’s* 1983 which saw the artist surrounding eleven islands with bright pink plastic. Humphrey asked ‘Are earthworks ethical? It is doubtful.’ (Humphrey 1985, p.21)

This contradiction within an art movement which appropriates landscape while inherently remaining detached, and even harming nature, does not correspond with Robinson’s body of work after leaving London, yet many aspects of its intentions do. This essay traces some of the aims of Land Art that do align with Tim Robinson’s west of Ireland practice and will frame it as an emergence from the theories and objectives behind the overarching Land Art movement. Seeing the movement as a whole is a challenge as each individual artist had a nuanced approach to their land practice, yet briefly it can be explained as an artwork, usually Minimalist and sculptural, created *in situ* in a specific landscape for the purposes of aesthetic art creation.

Some essential dialogues with Robinson and Land Art emerge here. A conversation between land artist Richard Long and Tim Robinson shared in *Listening to the Wind* (Robinson 2006) is especially important. This direct engagement with the art world which Robinson emerged from is important as it shows Robinson’s own thoughts on the practice of Land Art and what aspects of it, he railed against. Robinson’s practice emerges from an agonistic relationship to Land Art, a kind of complicated synthesis of his mathematical background, the most recent early post-modern turn in the art world; Land Art and the land of Inishmore itself.

Land Art Comparisons to Robinson

It cannot be ignored that Robinson's emigration from the art world and migration to the West of Ireland did not erase his past art world experience. This essay argues that the practice of Robinson is a clear evolution from the processes and modes of thought behind Land Art. Central players of Land Art, Robert Morris, Richard Serra and Carl Andre recognised 'the problems of contemporary art as needing to be solved within the social and economic context of the city.' (Causey 1998, p.171) Robinson (as Timothy Drever) also felt the urgent need to express this conflict he felt for the art world in an essay written with fellow artist Peter Joseph in 1969 entitled 'Outside the Gallery System' where they 'voiced their dissent at an art world bound up with commodity fetishism' (Smith 2015, p. 288). They held an outdoor exhibition where the work fit into 'environmental art' or Land Art. It was a participatory body of work accompanied with a wish that this kind of community engaged Land Art as a whole 'should be not just the latest fad of the art-world, but a bridge into the real world' (quoted in Smith 2015, p. 289).

Robinson's quest for a 'bridge into the real world' emerged from the contradiction within Land Art to appropriate from the environment out of a commodifying, urban setting without any sustained engagement with the land or place itself. Their aims may have been to engage with place, but the results were ultimately discussed in art galleries, museums, and institutions of power away from the place of the work. One example of this is Christo and Jeanne Claude's *Running Fence* 1972–76.

Christo did intend to engage with the people and places along the 24.5 mile stretch of fence he installed as an artwork. He intended to unify and unveil the relationships along this stretch of land. 'The land is in direct and total conflict with the ranchers with the suburbia of the little town, with the fence crossing the little town, a city of adults and subdivisions... The ideas always start with an investigation of the land, the city, or the place.' (Garoian 1977, p.19) Like Robinson, Christo attempted to contain all of the layers of 'place' in a work; 'All of my thinking revolves around the environment – not only the landscape or the hills, but the changes in the social and political environment as well' (Garoian 1977, p.19). The works act as a catalyst to reveal the place and the landscape, the differences of vista along its length, the human tensions and the changes in development. Like Robinson, Christo draws a line with his fence and attempts to do more than just mark the place. However, Christo's works survive in place for a moment in time, then exist mostly in images which survive in galleries and art books. 'The duration of the completed project is completely irrelevant. When the running fence is completed, the project is completed. How much time it stays up for the public is not a crucial question' (Garoian 1977, p.19).

This ultimate separation from the place of the artwork is akin to a kind of 'fad' which Robinson spoke of in his 1969 essay (quoted in Smith 2015). If Land Art's aim is to make a mark and then fade away, does it engage in or appropriate the environment in which it is placed? Land artists may have raised questions in an attempt to subvert the gallery system but ultimately fed them back into said system as most artists were represented by galleries who were funding the works to begin with. 'Most Land artists were represented

by important art dealers, from the start... by integrating into the system at every level, Land artists were allowing their creations to be legitimated as artworks.’ (Ginsburgh and Penders 1997, p.4)

When one looks at the central aims of these outlooks of Land Art, Robinson stands for an essential evolution from appropriation to engagement. Robinson found a solution to the problems which arise from the art market on The Aran Islands; to walk. This is reminiscent of Richard Long’s *A Line Made by Walking*, one of the earliest British examples of Land Art created in 1967, where Long walked the length of a field repetitively until the grass was trampled into a visual marker of his path (Figure 3).

Taking Richard Long (who walks specifically with the intention to make a mark) as a symbol for the thought processes behind Land Art, Robinson’s art is the evolution of this. He creates

a body of work, his mapping, with a tangibility that is so minimal that his hand, or foot for that matter, is neither creating anything new nor taking anything away. Robinson uses walking as a tool to uncover the island as artwork. He used a mantra while walking to see himself as a trace of the landscape;

When I’m walking the terrain, I am the point of the pen moving over the map and when I’m drawing the map the point of the pen is me moving over the terrain. And that’s helped me shortcut or rivet through all these layers of interference and forgetfulness between the experience of being in the place and the experience of drawing the map. The upshot, I hope, is that drawing not only conveys accurate information about what’s there and where you are but also something of the sensation of being in that place. (Obrist 2010, time 00:11:40)

The result of Robinson’s line made by walking is a map which oscillates between an object, a tool and a piece of art and must be considered a kind of brilliant stroke of transcendent land art, resolving the art world’s tendency to emptily appropriate while opening up the landscape through the process of experiencing it first-hand.

While for Land Art, the final object was important, walking and researching were also part of the process. ‘The process by which it is arrived at also has meaning. In

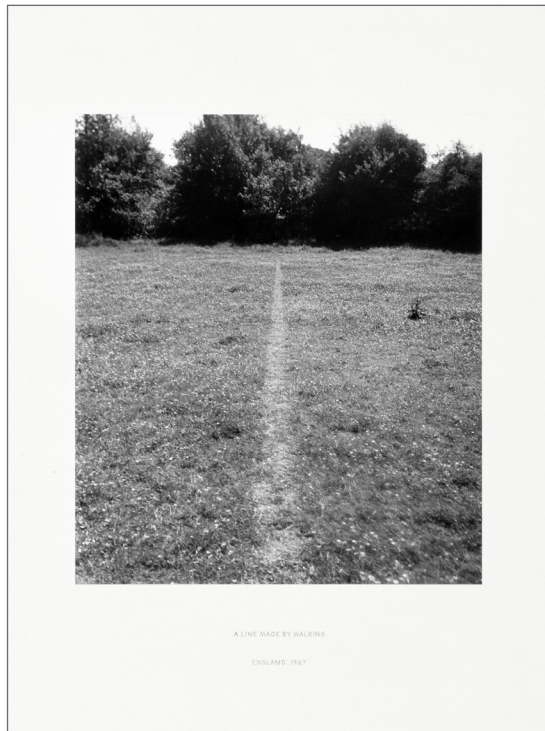


Figure 3. *A Line Made by Walking (1967)* © Richard Long, DACS London/IVARO Dublin, 2023. *Reproduced by permission.*

relation to [Land] Art, travelling, surveying, mapping, researching and writing can all be constituents of works of art' (Causey 1998, p. 172). In Robinson's practice, since his arrival on the Aran Islands, the making of something new became irrelevant to him. Robinson saw the islands as an infinite material he could draw from for his new writing practice once he moved there:

I had started to write, and the thing about writing is that it sucks in material copiously, and in the Aran Islands I found a world that was rich in so many dimensions. I soon found I was spending all my time writing it up in diaries, of which I have stacks – I've been living on them ever since in a way. (Smith 2013, p.5)

The creation of the maps and the writing about the landscape allowed Robinson to engage with the landscape without appropriating it. This monumental landscape was enough, and to create any kind of art object to represent or utilise it would fall short. As Marshall identifies, 'it is the elitism surrounding easel paintings and the power of the gallery, irrespective of subject, that Robinson's maps initially subvert' (Marshall 2016, p.194). In subverting the gallery dynamics, Robinson is still part of the conversation which Land Art was proposing about the body's relation to space and landscape. When one looks at his earlier art career, the central narrative which connects it to his maps is a preoccupation with space, 'as a practice that has art at one end, map-making in the middle, and writing at the other, we see that space itself is the *medium* with which he has been working all this time' (Smith 2015, p.284).

This feeling Robinson has about the lack of need to create any new art in place is exemplified in his description of Poll na bPeist (Figure 4), a naturally formed rectangular rock pool on one of the cliffs of Inis Móir. This rockpool has become famous for its shocking uniform shape, although it has been created by natural processes.



Figure 4. Poll na bPeist (The Wormhole), Inishmore. Paucabot. Source: Wikipedia CC3.0.

If as an artist I wanted to find a sculptural form for my intuition of the Aran landscape, I would not think in terms of circles. Aran’s circles of stone, the great inland cashels and lesser ringforts, the ancient hunchback huts, Long’s evanescent inscriptions, can be read as fearful withdrawals from these bare spaces or as egocentric stances within them, habits of thought born elsewhere and merely sojourning here, not deeply rooted in the specificity of Aran. (Robinson 1985, p.81)

The ‘fearful withdrawal’ or ‘egocentric stances’ that Robinson took issue with, are exemplified when viewing other works like Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative* created in 1969 located in the Moapa Valley, Nevada (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Double Negative*, Michael Heizer, 1969. Source: Clf23 Wikipedia, CC3.0.

This huge Earthwork which literally carves into and destructs the landscape utilises land without engaging in it with meaning. *Double Negative* is the will of man, while Poll na bPeist for Robinson, is impactful in its aesthetic but also in that it is crafted by a conglomerate combining the forces of the sea and a long spanning ancient geology. The existence of this absent block, without the need for human intervention, is emblematic of his practice as finding the awe in earth without having to force its structure in any way. His gifted crafting of language allows one to enter this awe of natural formations with him. This following passage, quoted in full, highlights the vivid sense of awe Robinson creates through his writing:

A block, then, would best embody the essence of Aran's landforms – or, since I am dealing in abstractions and have undergone the metamorphoses of contemporary art, the absence of a block, a rectangular void to stand for all blocks. And since the sea is the most decisive sculptor among the various erosive agents that disengage Aran's form from its substance, let this void be filled by water, reversing the relationship of the sea and island. Site it on one of the great stages of rock below the cliffs; do it on a prodigious scale, a spectacle rather than a gallery-piece; let the ocean dance in it, and the cliffs above step back in wide balconies to accommodate the thousands who will come to marvel at this kinetic-conceptualist, megalominalist, unrepeatable and ever-repeated, sublime and absurd show of the Atlantic's extraction of Aran's square root! What I have imagined, exists. (Robinson 1985, p.82)

This epic description of Poll na bPeist specifically pokes at the language of art while using it to energise this existing landform. The denouement of the passage, 'What I have imagined, exists' halts the excitement and acts like a call for artists to find what connection they seek in their studios out in the world; for perhaps if they go looking it will be there.

Robinson sees his background as an artist as a kind of perversion of his view of the landscape, and there is an irony in calling him an artist when he has a clear aversion to any addition to a landscape. Yet this essay argues that his practice is the ultimate destination of Land Art, away from anthropocentric practices of appropriation towards engagement; the land, the matter itself is the art and the human is the catalyst to allow it to be, to map it, to write from it, to walk across it. 'Treat it as you see fit' Robinson says of one of his own pieces of work; a distressed map of the Aran Islands, an artwork for Cork's European City of Culture 2005 curated by Simon Cutts and later reshowed in an exhibition Map Marathon curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist. His plea for us, to care for the map as he lays the map on the ground instead of the wall, is not just for his map but for the earth under our feet; the spaces, histories, communities and stories in which we occupy.

Robinson and Long in Conversation

In an interview with Jos Smith, Robinson recalls the mood in the art world in London right before he left, where the Land Art he was loosely involved in was more about the spatial environment of their art rather than the larger environment which the term is more often used for today. He does recall a shift starting in artists removing to the countryside and utilising the landscapes there as a medium to craft. Robinson admits that Richard Long's practice must have had an effect on him:

Richard Long was one of the leading lights at the time and a number of artists were leaving the cities and doing things out in the natural world, making little changes on it and so on. I think that meant the beginning of more of an artistic consciousness of the natural world and its fragility, and the necessity to protect it. So maybe there was a slow change going on in the connotations of the word at that time, and I'm sure all that had some influence on our decision to leave London in 1972 and go off to the Aran Islands. (Smith 2013, p.4)

Early in *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, his first publication on the Aran Islands, Robinson mentions Richard Long.

It is a wild spot to which the magnetism of sanctity steered the desert father from Inis Meáin, and it seems that as such it appealed to another connoisseur of wilderness, the English artist Richard Long, who in 1975 left his mark, a small stone circle, nearby. It still stands in part, a group of limestone splinters jammed upright into crevices of the rocky ground, about three yards south of the tower. Long’s work takes him to the remotest parts of the earth, where he makes some construct like this out of what is to hand – stone, of necessity, in this instance – frequently impermanent, of ten circular spiral, a passing shadow cast on nature by a restless culture, and then photographs it and exhibits the photographs with accompanying trophies of maps, stones and words in the air-conditioned, neon-lit art galleries of capital cities. (Robinson 1985, p.32–33)

Robinson’s aversion to removal from place to the surgical galleries of an urban elsewhere is clear in this passage. As Causey posits on Land Art, ‘by adding to the art gallery alternative locations for displaying art, [Land] Art did not circumvent the capitalist structures of the art world.’ (Causey 1998, p.172)

The making of a map, as an art form, ensures the art is never severed from place in this way. The map, as a tool, allows the viewer to enter place, and the space between the map and the landscape becomes Robinson’s artistic domain. He, acting as both the point of the pen, and the penman, acts like a silent guide, a catalyst for individual discovery. Where Long, alone in the landscape, snaps a photograph, a still, which is dictated to the viewer in a singular space, the gallery; Robinson’s maps are alive, with endless and open possibilities for the viewer to use as a frame into aspects of the map which most excite or allow them. The books which follow, writings on the walking of the making of the maps, add another layer of openness still. A reader can watch this picture unfold in real-time with Robinson and find the same enchantment within the words. This enchantment is a way of seeing which can be then utilised no matter what space or place the reader occupies.

Robinson’s processes are still very much in line with land artists and their aims. When Robert Smithson created one of the most famous land works in the US, *Spiral Jetty* 1969–70 (Figure 6), he drew on local history and myths around the salt-lake where he built the work. Causey explains that he ‘used a mixture of history and fantasy to point up truths about the frailty of human endeavour and the inevitability with which human achievements turn to ruin and are sucked back into the ground’ (Causey 1998, p.178)

While Smithson wanted to make a mark on the landscape his aim was to show the inevitable erosion of his mark. Smithson was preoccupied with playing with ideas of ‘site’ and ‘non-site’ in displaying Land Art. This preoccupation was common in this time where the ‘locatedness’ of Land Art was a departure from the ‘placelessness’ of Modernist sculpture. Locatedness was important because it also allowed a sculpture to have a temporality, giving it a finite lifespan, which jarred with the protective nature museums had over art works. This idea of locatedness aligns with Robinson’s map practice in a clear way, yet Robinson has succeeded further to subvert the control galleries and museums



Figure 6. *Spiral Jetty*, Robert Smithson, 1969-70. Source: Wikipedia, CC2.5.

have over artworks by operating with ephemeral maps. Their subject, the land, is inherently 'located' while their medium, paper, is ephemeral. This means they can move in and out of many kinds of spaces while remaining rooted in place.

In *Listening to the Wind*, Robinson's first of three books on Connemara, he documents a conversation over letter he had with Richard Long about Long's sculpture *Connemara Sculpture* 1971. Upon hearing the piece had been mapped by Robinson, Long was concerned and stated that it 'was never my intention for my sculptures to be marked 'sites'' (Robinson 2006, p. 105). Robinson responds with an explanation of his aims as the map maker.

Once an artist has made a visible intervention in the landscape and left it there, it contributes to other people's experience of the place, which may well be expressed in someone else's work of art. Placelore will start to accumulate around it – and my subject matter is the web of placelore. Just as a text is relinquished to other people's interpretations once it has left the writer's hands, so your marks on the landscape will have a career of their own; they are no longer defined by their origin in your creativity. (Robinson 2006, p.106)

As Smithson acknowledged the inevitability of human creation to ruin, so does Robinson on the artworks of Long;

Eventually they will be anonymous contributions to the compilation of the Earth... In art we take responsibility for this fact, or at least recognize our ineluctable complicity in its processes... This is how we make room, make time, make the world, for ourselves. This is the gargoyles logic of creation. (Robinson 2006, p.107)

Robinson acknowledges the temporality of all things; people, lore, language, art and writing. His own work is an attempt at slowing this process. ‘I’ve always had that sensation of the precariousness of all things. I can’t pin it down more exactly. Art can at least play at permanence. I like to think that sometimes I can write a sentence that stays written – but I know I delude myself.’ (Smith 2013, p.11) Even Robinson’s maps will one long geological day away, be rendered non sensical and will, to the horror of archivists, return to indistinct matter or dust. This conversation with Long shows Robinson’s discomfort in ownership over art, in any way. Their practices part ways in their notions of collectivity, ownership and describing the landscape. Where Long’s practice is about stamping the landscape with a mark and removal, Robinson’s practice is about tracing lightly and remaining in place.

Conclusion

When asked by Jos Smith where his mapmaking sits between art and science, Robinson is definitive that he sees them as an ‘art form’. Not in a decorative or kitsch way, but by utilising the art of drawing a person in, and keeping them there, much in keeping with the Land Art he practiced in London:

I wanted them to engage you with the surface of the ground somehow, and to involve you like thickets that you got into and that held you there. Most maps seem designed to help you get out of a place as fast as possible; I wanted these maps to draw you in and keep you there as long as possible. (Smith 2013, p.7)

If Land Art posed the question; how to take art out of the urban setting and engage with landscape, deep mapping could be the answer:

Deep mapping is simultaneously about recording and representing, complementarity and contestation, process and product, and is primarily concerned about understanding our place in the world through the lens of personal experience. It is not just about the uncovering of the *longue durée* of archaeological meaning or geological time, but the act of understanding how all those layers connect (horizontally and laterally) and create a meaningful engagement with, and experience of, place. (Cronin 2016, p.59)

Tim Robinson’s practice is cited as an ‘anticipation’ of deep mapping (Smith 2015) and he is seen as a central example of how this practice can operate. By taking his practice out of London and transforming it through his interrogation with the Aran Islands, the Burren and Connemara, Tim Robinson successfully solved the problems of empty appropriation within the Land Art movement for himself. By doing so, he created a body of work including three expansive maps, multiple publications and an archive which will breathe life back into the landscapes which he worked with. This essay outlines how his practice was an emergence from Land Art and a vital reaction against the movement’s inner contradictions. Deep mapping, therefore, can be seen in Tim Robinson’s case to be one emergence from Land Art and it would be of further value to look into how more early deep mapping has ties with the Land Art movement.

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