

GETTING TO KNOW HAMISH

On the 25th of June 2006 Hamish Fulton had a very early breakfast and set out for Cabo Mayor, Santander, to begin his journey through Cantabrian lands. When I woke up he had gone and I was aware that, providing there were no setbacks, I wouldn't hear from him again until he had completed his trip. A fortnight later he rang me from Santander airport to inform me that his journey had come to its end.

Throughout his extensive career, Hamish Fulton (London, 1946) has proven to be an artist seriously committed to his work. Countless essays have been written over the years about his working procedure, in which the personal experience of his travels, on foot, around the world has resulted in artworks characterised by an indivisible fusion of nature, photography and text. Many of us are more or less familiar with what has been written about his oeuvre; however, on this occasion it may be interesting to find out what Hamish Fulton is like as a person.

Consequently, instead of a thorough analysis of his work this short text hopes to be a summary description of my experience collaborating with him. Since the Liébana Jubilee Year Society suggested inviting Hamish Fulton to carry out a specific project in Cantabria on occasion of the commemoration I have studied his artistic career in depth, but I have also inevitably discovered Fulton's more personal side. I have explored his public profile, i.e., his artistic production (his most well known facet), but I have also had the pleasure to catch a glimpse of his inner self, which does not begin to emerge until after a few days in his company. I can now safely say that both aspects are inseparable.

Hamish Fulton is lively, polite and amusing. He has a warm, good-natured personality that makes people feel at ease in his company. The successive phone calls and numerous chats we held during the days that preceded his journey proved his adaptability and understanding when it came to overcoming any obstacle that could hinder the completion of the project. Together, we visited several bookshops and tourist information centres in Santander, looking at and comparing maps and guides of the Cantabria. It was important to study as much information as possible on the area to tailor our itinerary to suit our purpose. However, we also had time to discuss social and political issues, Spanish and international, occasions on which a typically British sharp and ironic sense of humour surfaced. In short, I got to know a vigorous and sociable man and no generational differences became apparent.

On the other hand, and focusing on his art work, I must say that Fulton is a true professional, as proven by the impeccable production of his works in which photographs, texts and frames co-exist in such a way that neither element stands out from the others. As regards his working procedure, despite its adventurous features everything is in fact under strict control, in an attempt to avoid unnecessary efforts and risks. His routes must be well defined, maps must be easy to read, the tent and sleeping bag must be top quality and easy to fold, his footwear must be appropriate to each itinerary, food must be dry and have no wrappers that take up space but, above all, the artist must have a good book and a notepad at his disposal. Consequently, upon his departure he left behind all the guidebooks, maps and leaflets he had consulted, choosing just one of each to take with him, besides the notes jotted down in his personal writing pad—a myriad of details designed to make the journey (his chief objective) as comfortable as possible. The knowledge he has accumulated since the early seventies has made him an expert in the natural environment, leading to countless personal experiences. Similarly, the exhaustive organisation and the shortage of resources characterise the means employed to produce his snapshots: only a small photographic camera and a light foldable tripod.

As to his artistic traits, I regard Fulton an unclassifiable artist. His drawings, sculpture diagrams, murals and photographic images accompanied by descriptive texts and dates of the time elapsed during his travels have led to him being considered a practitioner of Land Art. However, he does not quite agree with this categorisation, as proven by his ironic use of the phrase "THIS IS NOT LAND ART" published on the invitation to one of his exhibitions. While it is true that his oeuvre brings us into contact with nature in a conceptual sense, by means of images that accurately document the landscape he is crossing, and descriptive texts regarding the time gone by, perhaps such documentation—black and white photographs and notes on precise localisations and time—highlights the viewer's impossibility to experience nature as the artist has done. Consequently, in spite of the attempt to document and describe the experience, the viewer cannot help but feel envious for not having been there personally. Perhaps embodying a part of the history of art of our age is the price Fulton must pay for the privilege of rubbing shoulders with nature in this way.

It is undeniable that the works Hamish Fulton has produced in Cantabria enable us to get to know the diversity of its geography. The images of open spaces—valleys, mountains, rivers, paths or roads—describe his route the best. However, I would like to draw attention to three other types of images that may not be the most representative of this adventure but bear witness to the close correspondence between the artist and the man: I am referring to the images in which the artist himself appears by way of self-portraits. In the first place I would like to mention the photographs in which his presence is revealed, metaphorically, by his rucksack, his tent, his shadow cast on the ground or even the silhouette of a pedestrian converted into a devil by a graffiti; for me they all evoke the image of his own soul, especially the one of the rucksack, that seems to transform into a faithful spouse. In second place, I would refer to the photographs in which we see a single rock in the centre of the image, as if it were a casual encounter with another traveller, with whom it converses briefly in order to share the experience. Finally, in third place and despite the fact that these are not photographs but pages designed by the artist for this publication, I would like to cite the map on which his itinerary was traced and the collage made up of the various labels of bottled water he bought on the trip. These two images seem to represent a vital part of his journey and of himself, a way of collecting slight yet inspiring memories evocative of nature. Unlike the landscapes, in these three examples we sense human presence and see the reflection of the identification between artist and man. We could consider these works a representation of his alter ego, or the response to the primitive instinctive need human beings have of coming into contact with others. In these pieces Hamish may be showing us, perhaps unwittingly, his own need to feel that before being an artist he is an individual. As he himself has declared, a walk is neither a recreation nor a study of nature (nor making poetry, nor stopping to produce outdoor sculptures nor taking photographs). Walking is a way of bettering himself, physically and mentally (with a wish to be carried along gently, following the rhythm created by the walk) in order to experience a temporary state of euphoria, an intimate connection between his mind and the natural, outside world.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Hamish Fulton for the splendid work he has carried out, brought together in this publication, and for having allowed me to be his assistant during this brief yet intense experience, which has offered me the possibility of getting to know him better. I would also like to thank the Liébana Jubilee Year Society and the Cantabrian government for having included this project in their exhibition programme. Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to all those people who have taken part in the project, which I hope will contribute to popularising the region of Liébana and Cantabria in general.

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