

JA:

Which came first for you: walking or photography?

HF:

When I was thirteen I read a book about an American Indian, who was a Northern Cheyenne, that's the real beginning, and then I went to art school. Photography came in later on, simply because of the ease of making some things. It was pre-digital – I used a small instamatic camera and then a 35mm camera. You could take your film to Boots and get some things that could be used. I didn't ever study photography anywhere, not that I am anti photography. I have taken thousands of photographs but mediums don't interest me. That's why I call myself a 'walking artist', because neither of these two words indicate a medium. If you google someone's name and you look it up, and it says 'abstract painter', then immediately it's the medium that's dictating.

JA:

So how do you feel about being subsumed, to a certain extent, by photography?

HF:

Your question refers basically to the 1970s, but now I am an old artist, so my practice has spanned several different periods of art photography. Ten or fifteen years ago certain European photographers were using very large format colour photography, so that is one phase that I had nothing to do with. I couldn't be pulled into that but earlier there were conceptual artists using photography so art historians put me into that category.

JA:

What is it about the specificity of the medium of photography that interests you?

HF:

A lot of the words that come to mind become loaded like 'documentation'. In recent years we've got 'fake news' and before that we had the new ability to digitally alter an image. When I was taking photographs it was simply what the place looked like, even though it's a grainy photograph, not taken very well nevertheless – I think it was believed.

JA:

Do you think questions around the veracity of the photograph in the last ten to twenty years has altered your relationship to photography, and how it's used in your work?

HF:

No. Because I know that I took that photograph and I know that when you look at it, it looks like where I was.

JA:

With smartphones: the technology around walking has changed dramatically, with data that just accumulates automatically about your movements, locations and even tells you how many steps you've done in a day. Is that something that has figured within your work?

HF:

The new possibilities and potential of technology doesn't interest me at all. We have global warming because we haven't paid respectful attention to nature and instead we're focusing inside our phones. The use of technology distracts you very successfully away from nature. There are so many issues that are going wrong in the environment because we are not paying attention.

JA:

Your earlier work wasn't overtly political, compared to more recent pieces. What's the role of politics within your walking?

HF:

The work, I would say, was always political although I didn't say it was, nobody else did, and it didn't appear to be political. Some people say today that walking is the most radical thing that you can do, but I don't know that people said that in the seventies. Focusing on nature, that is political. In the US it's called 'The Rights of Nature', hence I refuse the categorisation of 'Land Artist'.

JA:

Your more recent walks are with groups of people. What is the difference between your collaborative walks and your solo excursions?

HF:

Walking and camping is one way of being very close to nature. You are centimetres away from flying insects, ants or leeches. When you are alone camping it's an opportunity to become aware of other forms of life. Since 2008, I read, more than half of the world's population exists in urban areas. Shared walks are a reflection of urban life. I started out by calling them 'group walks', then 'public walks' and then 'communal walks', but the important thing is that they are shared. It's taken me into a completely different awareness of walking which I did not have when I was doing solo walks or with one other person. This is a meditative, communal experience and what's very interesting about them is that you can't really understand it from outside. There is also an effect after these shared walks; people spontaneously come out with thoughts because they are not holding themselves back, not self-editing. So you get an immediate response, if I make an exhibition somebody might say they like it but very often there is no feedback. A lot of artists don't want feedback, but it's taken me into another realm of walking that I couldn't have previously imagined.

JA:

So the participants of these are the makers and the audience?

HF:

Yes, my idea is that it's all in one. If you go to a museum and you see a famous painting that you are familiar with, you see the result, but not the act of painting. I just made a walk in Freiburg (Germany) and that was a 'walking in every direction' walk, by that I mean that there is no line, there is no leader, everybody is equal, everybody is necessary.

JA:

In your practice, the walk is the art but then there is this component that sits within the gallery. How do these two aspects relate?

HF:

It is not possible to re-present the experience of a walk. Some people would say that I am doing that although I admit openly that it is not possible, so it is something else. Photographs and text, are perhaps a little bit like reading a newspaper: You see a photograph of someone, they are in a place. It says that. And since you have never been there and you don't know anything about the story, part of you might believe it. It works in a similar way.

JA:

How should people consume your work? Are you precious about it?

HF:

If you mean am I precious about how it is presented? I just try to be careful. I think it is good having control, but it is also good to be spontaneous and less calculating. Quite often on these communal walks people share images online that they took on the same walk, which I think is interesting: multiple views of the same experience. I am not precious about that.

JA:

In your use of text, and combinations of text and image, how does text and the photograph differ in terms of the kinds of 'images' they can both make?

HF:

Well they can contradict each other, that's one thing. But something is arrived at by the combination. In the seventies I made a series of photographs from a walk I made in Alaska, and you would see a landscape photograph and the title below would say a 'geese' or 'ducks'. You don't see any of them in the photograph though. It doesn't mean that they are not there – it is a question. If it is not in the photograph, are you lying? No: it is just that it was one second before, or more to the left, or four days later – the passage of time when you are walking. The relationship between words and images, and how they come out, can be used in so many different ways.

The photograph shows you grass, a weather pattern, no clouds. It gives you that kind of information, but the problem is that it then drifts off into art history and the history of landscape photography, and then you are into mediums and abilities: did the photographer make a good composition? Was it well printed? The text is more -

like a 'record' – a record of an event. It is important for me to identify them as 'walk texts'.

JA:

You mentioned taking thousands of photographs, and I imagine you make very extensive field notes when you are making a long journey. How do you go about refining that into what are often very minimal elements within the gallery piece?

HF:

Through time it became the objective.

JA:

To be as minimal and as reductive as possible?

HF:

Yes. The reduction issue originally – in the early seventies – was probably coming from Japanese haiku. It doesn't come from American Minimalism. The minimal description gives a lot of mental space. When there is a lot of information then there is much more control by the author. The photograph triggers one kind of thing – it might be a projection of the person because they haven't been there, or maybe a memory from somebody that has been there. And then the writing is limited so you can have your own thoughts on the matter, accepting or rejecting it. It is just to throw up a few questions for people to consider. But it is a record, it is not fictional.

JA:

You mentioned some of the problems with landscape representation. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that a little bit more. Is it problematic in terms of how it shapes our broader relationship with nature?

HF:

One thing that comes to my mind is the issue of Tibet. I did read something by the Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu who mentioned photographs by Galen Rowell, an American photographer and mountaineer who took many, photographs in Tibet. Norbu said (these are not his exact words) that this person came to Tibet, in the modern era, took all these amazing photographs, which are very evocative and beautiful, prayer flags blowing on a pass, beautiful blue sky, local people in colourful clothing with their yaks... But not one image of the suppression of the Tibetan people by the Chinese invading authorities. So that is an area where photography shows you something: it's not been manipulated, but it is only one aspect of a reality. If the camera moved a few degrees you would see a whole platoon of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. But Rowell's photographs looks idyllic.

Many years ago there was a very big British landscape painting exhibition at the RA. There were a lot of people and you had to queue up behind each painting. So many people, so many enthusiasts, and they loved these paintings. I totally respect that but when I queued up I heard a lot of talk about the paint or the paintbrush, but not the land, or land rights.

JA:

How has aging affected your ability to make your work?

HF:

So far, I am extremely fortunate. Tomorrow maybe it will be different. Who knows what's going on inside their bodies! Knowing what you have done previously is a huge advantage. When you become older, maybe you can't still do what you have done before but at least, you know that you did do it - you were able to do it. Sometimes just that knowledge is the thing that can propel an old body along.

JA:

Do you think that age has changed your perception of nature?

HF:

Yes. Where I live I remember when we used to have lots of butterflies and I remember when the swallows arrived. If you aren't paying attention then there's nothing to remember. You won't know what you have lost.