

# The art of geography

Margaret Mackintosh

**Landscape unites geography and the arts, inspiring paintings, photographs, literature and poetry, and, of course, maps and fieldwork. It touches the emotions and provides opportunities for both teachers and children to be creative.**

Recently I was excited by an end-of-course exhibition of work that Alison McDonnell, a PGCE (Secondary Art) trainee teacher, developed with a Y9 class. It seemed to me that the ideas would interest and inspire all key stage 2 children. I'll use Alison's own words, from her display to describe the project on journeys – suitably geographical: 'The main aim of the topic was for children to explore a range of starting points for their art work including themselves, their experiences and natural and made objects and environments'.

## Text art

The children recorded their thoughts, feelings and experiences of their journey from home to school in single words. These were then arranged in the order of the experience and in the shape of the journey.

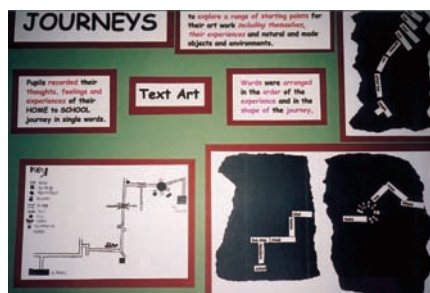


Figure 1: The project started by mapping thoughts and feelings. Photos: Margaret Mackintosh.

Alison then introduced the work of Richard Long (Figure 2). A sculptor, photographer and painter, he is also a walker. He walks for hundreds of miles in some of the remotest places in the world, during which he creates sculptures in the shape of his journey, using the natural materials found in the surrounding area.

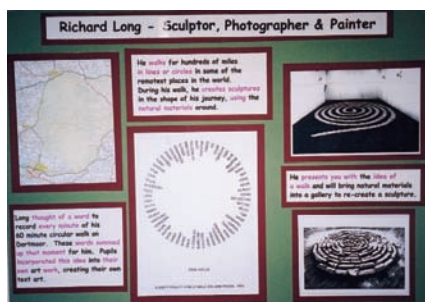


Figure 2: Introducing the work of Richard Long.

In one of his 'textworks' Long thought of a word to record every minute of his 60 minute circular walk on Dartmoor (Figure 3). These words summed up that moment for him. The children incorporated this idea into their work, creating their own text art.

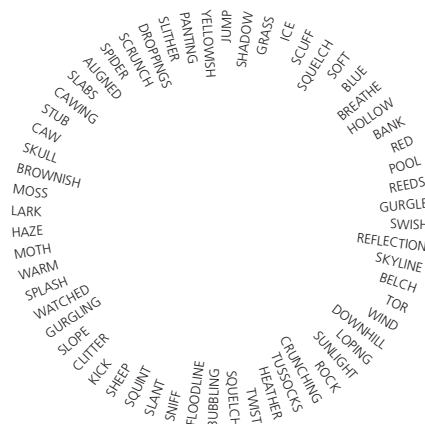


Figure 3: 'One Hour' by Richard Long.



Figure 4: Public art – in public by the public. Photos: Margaret Mackintosh.

I'm also a walker and have been delighted to come across small personal sculptures from immediately available materials that other walkers have created in the landscape on a mountain-top near Achnahaird, N W Highlands of Scotland, in a disused quarry on the coast near Cape Cornwall (Figure 4a and 4b) and outside a cave by Rydal Water in the Lake District (Figure 4c) – all made from local rock. I once found a pink rose-petal sculpture that someone,

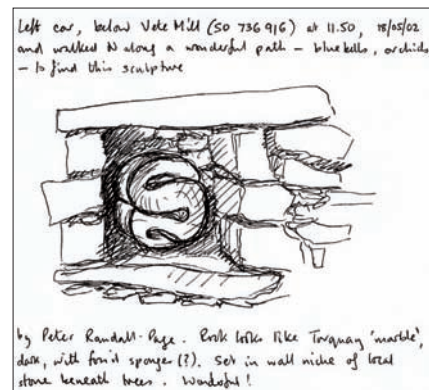


Figure 5: Sketch of a Peter Randall-Page sculpture. Sketch: Margaret Mackintosh.

inspired by their surroundings, had created in Edinburgh Botanic Garden. It was reminiscent of the work of Andy Goldsworthy and Peter Randall-Page, artists whose creativity is linked with, and whose work is placed in, the landscape (Figure 5). Perhaps this is a fieldwork activity that might appeal to and inspire your children.

As well as making sculptures in the landscape, Richard Long takes materials from his walks indoors. At a recent exhibition of his work at Tate St Ives (see front cover) there were huge wall paintings made from brown and white muds collected from Avonmouth and Cornwall, great swirling patterns expressing his feelings of the landscape.

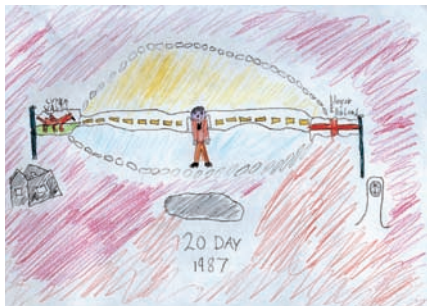
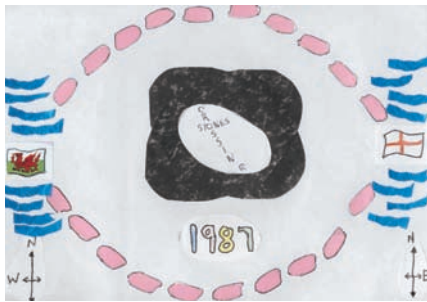


Figure 6: Illustrating the transfer of pebbles between Aldeburgh and Aberystwyth. Work by children at Ysgol Rhydypennau, Ceredigion.

His textworks provide a wonderful stimulus for children to make essentially geographical pictorial representations. One of his walks started at Baltimore Beacon, Co. Cork and continued for 382 miles to the Giant's Causeway, Co. Antrim. Because he walked from south to north the poem reads from bottom to top, the shape reflecting the geography.

I wrote to schools at each end of some of Long's walks (Aldeburgh to Aberystwyth and back transferring pebbles, Stonehenge to Zennor to see a solar eclipse and Bristol to Truro) sending a copy of the appropriate poem and inviting children to represent them pictorially. Many thanks to Ysgol Rhydypennau, Ceredigion for your response (Figure 6).



Figure 7: A 'dreamings' display.



The dreaming's location is Henbury, Nita's husband's country.

The painting depicts women sitting



with digging sticks



and Coolamons



digging for Goanna eggs



The women follow the tracks of the Goanna



to the nest and then dig for the eggs. This symbol represents Spinifex



and this is a Honey Ant



which is also bush tucker collected by the women.

Figure 8: A Dreaming by Nita Pananka.

## Map art

We are used to children showing creativity in their map-making, particularly in pictorial maps, but I think we often push them too quickly towards the conventions of the highly stylised OS map. There are many attractive parish maps and pictorial maps that we could encourage children to model. There are also Australian Aboriginal dreamings or mappings, except we tend to call them paintings!



Figure 9: Y9 Dreamings.

Alison introduced her Y9 children to Aboriginal dreamings (Figure 7). In Aboriginal mythology, 'dreamings' refer to Creation. Every Aborigine has their own dreamtime journey. The whole of the land is sacred and viewed as a kind of spiritual Mother and Father.

Traditional symbols are used, but every painting relates to that person's dreaming and so is highly personal in nature. The characteristic dots within the paintings act as camouflage.

I know children are fascinated by these dreamings and the stories they tell. Figure 8 is an example that my son bought for me when he was in Australia, in 1991 – for us the symbols need a key!

Encourage children to represent a journey or activity from their own life in this style, inventing their own symbols and providing a key (Figure 9).

Perhaps you are thinking 'What's this got to do with geography?'. I would argue 'A lot!' – it's spatial, strongly related to maps and benefits from experiencing the landscape. It gives children a way in and encourages them to be creative. It gives them an opportunity to express themselves and, from a practical starting point, provides an opportunity to talk about and learn geography. Geography into art, or art into geography? Both!

Margaret Mackintosh is honorary Editor of *Primary Geographer*.