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“I’ve shook hands with the place and begun.”
Andy Goldsworthy and the Earthworks Movement as Poststructuralist

*Because we cannot view the world apart from the structures we bring to it, the argument goes, we cannot measure our theories and propositions in comparison to an objective, external world.*¹

As Stanley J. Grenz writes above, one of the basic tenants of poststructuralism is that we, as individuals, are embedded into our socially and culturally constructed reality. Removing ourselves from it, standing outside of it, and judging it with objectivity is impossible. Jacques Derrida alludes to this when he says, “In other words, there is no present which is not constituted without reference to another time, another present. The present-trace. It traces and is traced.”² Derrida’s meaning here is that everything references something else; nothing, even history or art, is outside or independent of reality. This notion, evident in the writings of both Derrida and Michel Foucault, is the basis for this paper as it seeks to tie the Earthworks movement and Earthworks artist Andy Goldsworthy to poststructuralism. Just as poststructuralism indicates that no one is outside of their inherited structures, the earthworks movement suggests that people, specifically landscape artists, are not outside of nature and the natural world. Perhaps no Earthworks artist portrays this notion better than Andy Goldsworthy.

Earthworks, or Land Art, began in the 1960s as a movement in which artists began creating pieces in the actual environment they were referencing. In his *Earthworks and Beyond*, John Beardsley summarizes this shift in the landscape genre stating:

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).

² Julian Wolfreys, *Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Cromwell Press Ltd, 2007).

While some artists continued to represent its image in painting and photography, others—starting especially in the late 1960s—chose to enter the landscape itself, to use its materials and work with its salient features. They were not depicting the landscape, but engaging it; their art was not simply *of* the landscape, but *in* it as well.³

One of the most prominent current Earthworks artists is Andy Goldsworthy, a British artist whose work is seen in landscapes all over the world.

Known as an “environmental sculptor,” Andy Goldsworthy was born in 1956 in Cheshire, England. While a student at Bradford Art College during the mid-70s, he found his assigned studio space to be too sterile and confined to produce art so he began making work on the nearby Lancashire beach. Creating work outdoors proved to be a critical turning point in Goldsworthy’s work. In addition to making work in the natural world, he also began making work from it, using only natural materials oftentimes found nearby. Ice, leaves, dirt, twigs, slate, stone- all of these are resources Goldsworthy transforms into art. Because of the nature of the materials and the placement of the work, many of Goldsworthy’s pieces are ephemeral, living only as long as the natural elements permit them. In order to allow others to see his work, Goldsworthy photographs these pieces from conception to death.

The act of Goldsworthy moving from an indoor studio to immerse himself in the outdoor landscape in creating his art draws many parallels to Derrida’s idea that “the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system.”⁴ For Goldsworthy, the “textual system” is nature. It is his reality, his structure, his reference point, and he recognizes that to gain knowledge of it, he must immerse himself deep into it. In a scene from a documentary film featuring his art, Goldsworthy travels to a remote beach in Nova Scotia where he creates a sculpture from found icicles by using his spit as glue and carefully nibbling down the icicles to the necessary size.

³ John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, ed. Nancy Grubb, 4th (New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 2006).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Exorbitant: Question of Method” and “The Engraving and the Ambiguities of Formalism”, *Of Grammatology*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

During this process, he works with his bare hands despite the frigid temperature saying, “... I have to work with my bare hands ‘cause my gloves stick and I don’t have the sensitivity to do it with gloves. I lose *feel* of it. I always like to touch and you never shake someone’s hand with a glove on.”⁵ Goldsworthy understands that a deeper connection is lost when there is a physical barrier between him and the natural material he is working with. He recognizes that he gains knowledge through physically touching his materials and will not sacrifice this knowledge for comfort. His willingness and desire to immerse himself in the landscape to gain knowledge of it demonstrates that he embodies the theory Derrida set out- that we are “inscribed in a determined... system” and that in order for Goldsworthy to make work about the landscape, he must immerse himself in it and use its resources to create.

Goldsworthy does not just remove the barriers between himself and his materials and environments, he also becomes fully apart of his work and its landscape. For his *Penpoint Cairn*, Goldsworthy built a giant cone in a field made from large slabs of limestone. Of this project he said, “Every stone that I place on a sculpture contains some of my own energy: the lifting, the cutting, the placing. Part of me stays with the stone, just as part of the stone stays with me.”⁶ In this statement, Goldsworthy acknowledges an exchange between the landscape and himself in the production of his work- they both give and receive from one another. He remains embedded in both his work and its landscape even after the making of it. In this sense, he again exhibits the poststructuralist view that no one is outside of reality. Goldsworthy realizes that as a human being, he is a part of nature and cannot stand outside of it to create work about it, and thus demonstrates Derrida’s philosophy in that “there is nothing outside the text.”⁷

⁵ *Rivers and Tides*, dir. Thomas Riedelsheimer, perf. Andy Goldsworthy, 2002.

⁶ Andy Goldsworthy, *Passage* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2004).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Exorbitant: Question of Method” and “The Engraving and the Ambiguities of Formalism”, *Of Grammatology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

Another similar theme between Goldsworthy and Derrida intersects at Derrida's notion that meaning is derived through context. K. Malcolm Richards explains this idea of Derrida's succinctly through the following analogy:

An artist from Zimbabwe once related his embarrassment in asking an American student for a 'rubber' during a studio class in an American university. A 'rubber' in the United States is a contraceptive, whereas for my British-educated colleague it meant an eraser. The significance of the word 'rubber' depends on its context... Beneath the surface, there is no essential relation between the signifier and what the signifier stands for outside a particular system of representation.⁸

Here it is clear that the meaning of things depends completely on the context in which they are displayed. This idea has incredible significance for Andy Goldsworthy's work. One of the most meaningful characteristics of Goldsworthy's ephemeral creations is their lifespan. This lifespan can only occur as naturally as it does in the context of nature- were it indoors, the end result would be much different. Because of the natural landscape that surrounds his pieces, their death has the ability to be interpreted as more of a transformation than ruin. A great example of this is a dome Goldsworthy built from collected driftwood with an oculus in the top's center on a beach where "a pool of water turned in a circular motion by the river."⁹ Captured through a series of photographs and film, the tide slowly carries the dome off the shore and takes it, spinning, down the river. When discussing this moment, Goldsworthy says, "it feels like it's being taken off into ... another world. It doesn't feel at all like destruction."¹⁰ In nature, we witness the cycle of life everywhere, from fungus growing on dead logs to living animals feeding off dead ones. "Stick Dome Hole" has the ability to be interpreted as a transformation only because it occurs in a space where destruction for one life is sustenance for another. Therefore, reinforcing Derrida's notion, Goldsworthy's work is only completely realized when it is outside and in the context of nature.

⁸ K. Malcolm Richards, *Derrida Reframed: A Guide for the Arts Student* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2008).

⁹ Andy Goldsworthy, *Time* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2000).

¹⁰ *Rivers and Tides*, dir. Thomas Riedelsheimer, perf. Andy Goldsworthy, 2002.

This poststructuralist notion of the importance of context is bolstered through some of Goldsworthy's permanent installation works in indoor or urban environments. For example, a reoccurring structure in Goldsworthy's work is the cairn, defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as a heap of stones piled up as a memorial or as a landmark dating back to the 15th century. Goldsworthy builds these cairns on a monumental scale, often times rising much taller than a person. When Goldsworthy's cairns are built in nature, as in his "East Coast Cairn," the viewer experiences a sense of mystery, a sense that these structures mark something significant about the space they are in, and a sense of timelessness. One can't help but wonder about the significance of the place she is in and draw relationships between the cairn and the ground it is built on, the trees that surround it, the material from which it is constructed. Goldsworthy does not only build cairns in the wild, he also builds them as permanent installation pieces indoors or in more urban settings, as in the case of *Slate Cairn* in the Fabian Carlsson Gallery in London. When these structures are viewed indoors, they become devoid of the meaning they had in the context of the landscape. They are no longer shrouded in mystery, or seen as integrated in their surrounding environment. They cannot be viewed through the different seasons or cast shadows in the sun or have shadows of their surroundings cast on them. The view from which the cairn is visible is now limited to the space it is in, whereas when it is outside, they can be seen from miles away depending on their location. The shift from in the cairn's context from outdoors to indoors transforms them from monuments into mere objects and thus their meaning changes drastically, underscoring Derrida's notion that meaning is contextual.

In addition to Derrida, Goldsworthy's work overlaps with certain ideas of poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault. In his "What Is an Author," Foucault discusses the significance we have given to the author of a work in order to help us understand the meaning of the work. He states:

...literary discourses came to be accepted only when endowed with the author-function. We now ask of each poetic or fictional text: from where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design? The meaning ascribed to it and the status of value accorded it depend upon the manner in which we answer these questions.¹¹

Essentially, in order to understand a work we seek to understand the artist, and we give greater or lesser value to a work based on who the author is. In addition, authors give contextual clues in their work to guide the viewer into the “correct” interpretation of their piece. Foucault’s way of thinking falls directly in line with poststructuralism as he views authors as caught up in the cyclical nature of history where nothing is original or objective. Foucault’s uses the example of Galileo who “is indirectly responsible for the texts of those who mechanically applied the laws he formulated, in addition to having paved the way for the production of statements far different from his own.”¹² Foucault believes the interpretation of a piece should be completely dependent on the viewer’s own experiences, which are a result of the cultural and social structure in which he lives, and that the author should be irrelevant. This notion ties into Goldsworthy’s work, as Martin Kemp says in his essay “An Uncanny Rightness”:

It is the nature of a successful work of art, in contrast to an exposition in science, that it presents the spectator with an open field for associations, even beyond those consciously defined by the artist. The artist sets the parameters for the *types* of resonances, but does not enumerate or prescribe them. No artist presents us with a richer field of possibilities than Goldsworthy.¹³

Paralleling this idea of Foucault, certain aspects of Goldsworthy’s work contribute to a diminished emphasis on the artist. The location of Goldsworthy’s work and the natural forms they exhibit create a sense of anonymity in his work, losing a sense of authorship. A good example of this is Goldsworthy’s many pieces that depict holes. Made in sand, earth, peat,

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *What Is an Author* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

¹² Michel Foucault, *language, counter-memory, practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

¹³ Donovan, Molly and Tina Fiske, *The Andy Goldsworthy Project* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2010).

leaves, and many other materials, Goldsworthy creates a deep, pitch black hole, usually no more than ten inches in diameter but seemingly bottomless in depth. Because of the scale and context of these holes, the sense of anonymity is astounding- not only is the viewer unconcerned with who the artist is, he might even wonder if these were even made by a person at all. The small size and almost-typical natural form (holes appear everywhere in nature) make them seem as though an animal or the elements could have made them. Because of the sense of anonymity, the viewer is able to interpret this work independent of the author's intent and only through the context of their own knowledge and reality. Goldsworthy's work exemplifies Foucault's question, "[w]hat difference does it make who is speaking?"¹⁴

In addition to the anonymity provided by the natural forms in his work, the traditional methods Goldsworthy employs create a loss of authorship as well. In his "Wall that went for a walk" or "Storm King Wall," Goldsworthy built a 2,278 foot long wall with 1,579 tons of stone found in the surrounding area of Mountaintsville, NY. For this project he made use of traditional stonewall building techniques and relied on wall-builders' expertise of the ancient art. Not wishing to corrupt their work, Goldsworthy states, "the first wall that I made with a waller... my idea was that I would work with him to make the wall... but he kept taking my stones off the wall and he was right to do that. I've learned you have to respect their work, their life..."¹⁵ In staying true to the ancient methods of wall building for Storm King Wall, Goldsworthy's work seems to drift back into a past time when early settlers built walls on property lines to keep their flocks and herds from escaping to a neighbor's land. Because of his traditional processes, Goldsworthy's "Storm King Wall" could be interpreted as a relic of an earlier time, something old that people made long ago. Through the sense of anonymity stemming from ancient techniques, the viewer is again unhindered by an allegiance to the author's intent. He is free to

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *What Is an Author* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

¹⁵ *Rivers and Tides*, dir. Thomas Riedelsheimer, perf. Andy Goldsworthy, 2002.

construe the meaning of the piece through his own eyes and mind, accentuating the poststructuralist idea that we interpret reality based on our own culturally ingrained mindsets.

Before the birth of the Earthworks movement, art used to be outside the realm of nature. From galleries to archival paper to preservation rooms, the end goal of a piece was to protect it from decay and destruction, and thus art was meticulously separated from humidity, wind, water, mold, or any natural process that would allow for decomposition. The Earthworks movement turns this notion on its head when its art was not only unprotected from nature, but created in nature itself. In this sense, the Earthworks movement returned art to the natural world and the inexorable structures of time, death, and decay. Earthworks sculptor Andy Goldsworthy recognizes that he cannot escape nature, our ultimate reality and context, and instead decides to embrace it by literally letting it destroy his pieces. Ice will inevitably melt, leaves will inescapably rot, stone will eventually crack and crumble. Goldsworthy's work does not become nature through its death, it was one with nature all along. By embracing his structure and reality, Goldsworthy's work becomes a prime example of poststructuralism, that we are all inherently bound to our context and cannot stand outside of our structures, and that nothing is objective because we all bring our culturally-specific mindsets to the judgment of our reality.

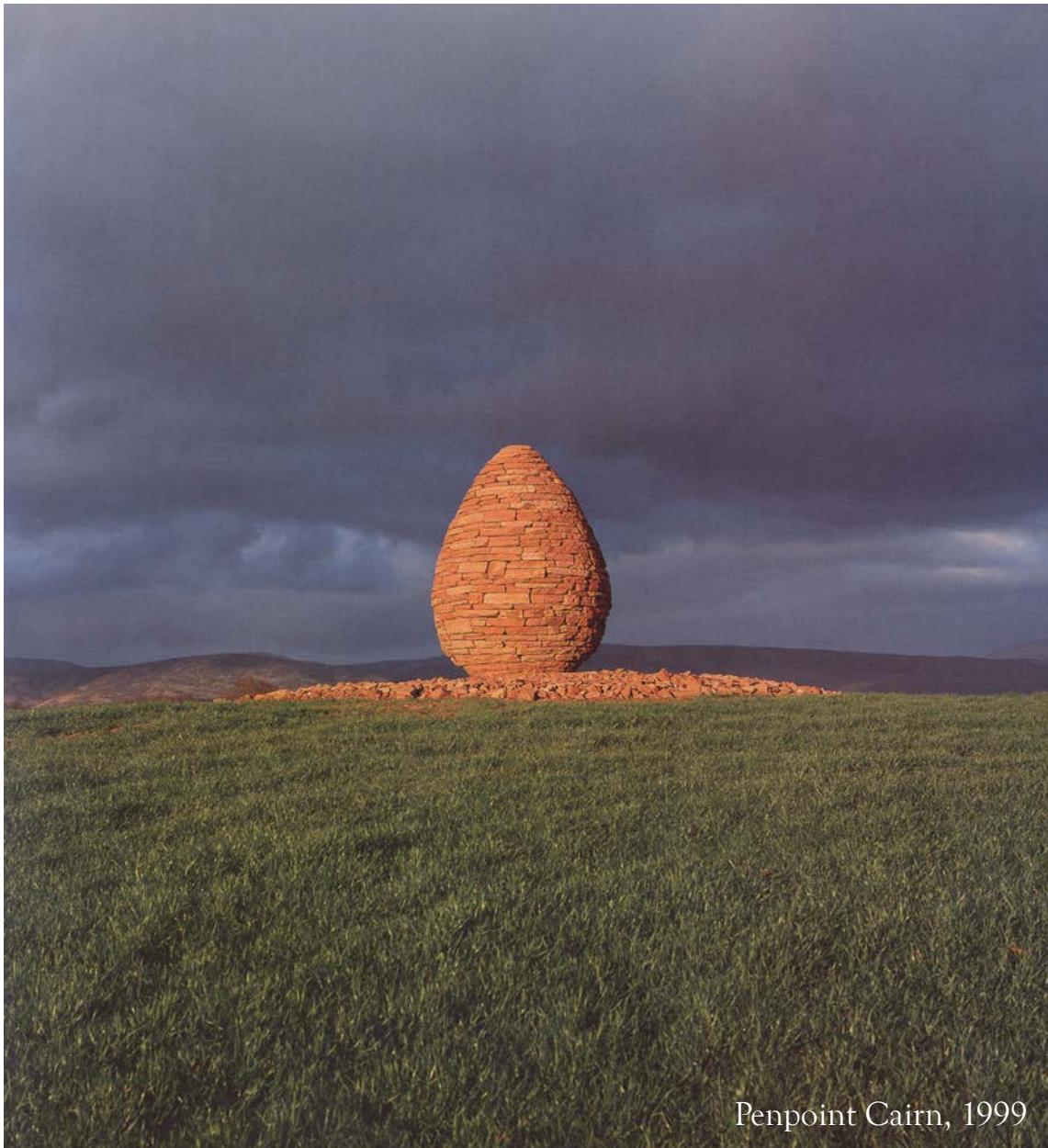
But maybe, by acknowledging and accepting our context and structures, Goldsworthy transcends them. Because the only universal event for every living, breathing being on earth is the experience of running out of time and eventually dying. And Goldsworthy intentionally allows his work to suffer the exact same fate without so much as trying to preserve its longevity. Therefore through embracing his context and letting his pieces be carried away by nature, maybe Goldsworthy does indeed reach a universal meaning.

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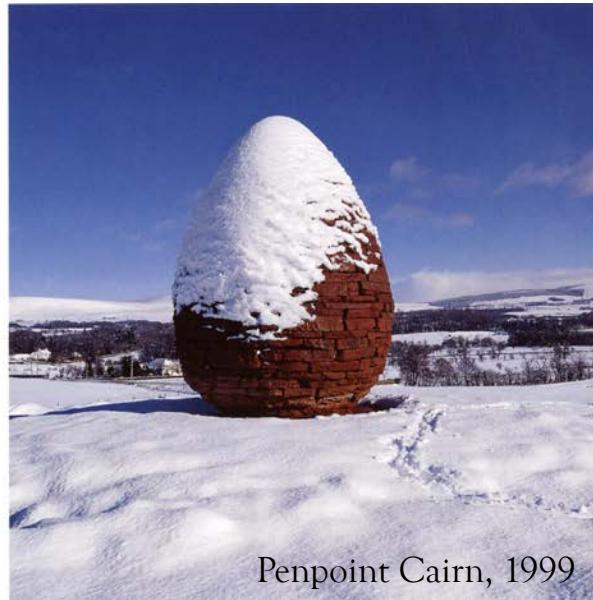
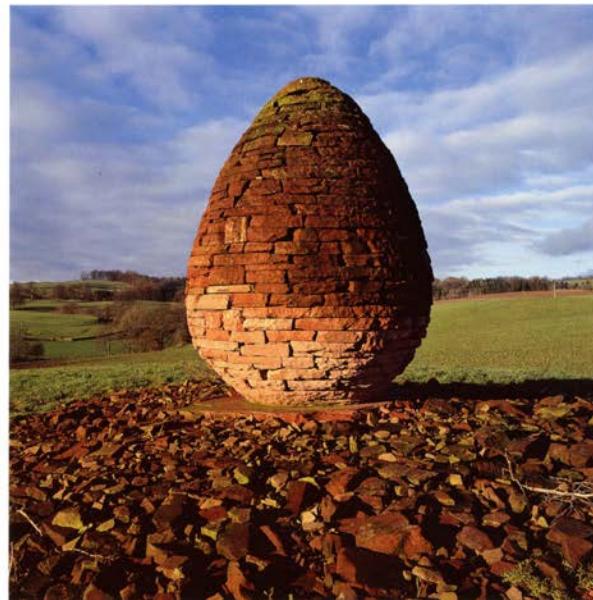
Reconstructed frozen icicles, 1999



Penpoint Cairn, 1999



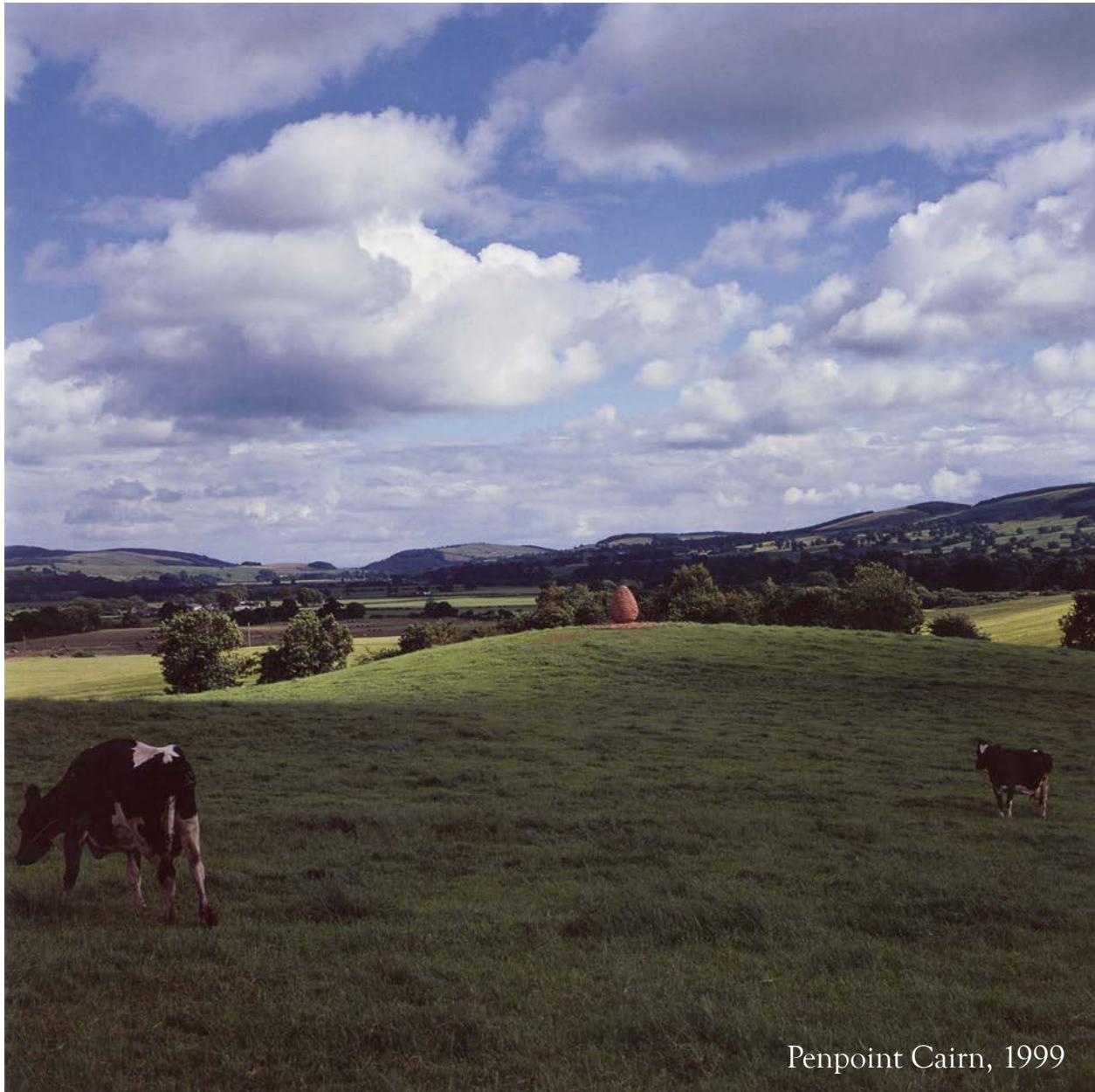
Stick Dome Hole, 1999



Penpoint Cairn, 1999



Penpoint Cairn, 1999



Penpoint Cairn, 1999



Penpoint Cairn, 1999





Penpoint Cairn, 1999



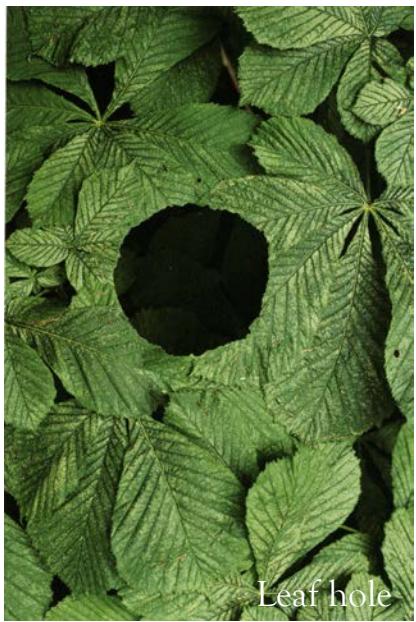
East Coast Cairn, 1988



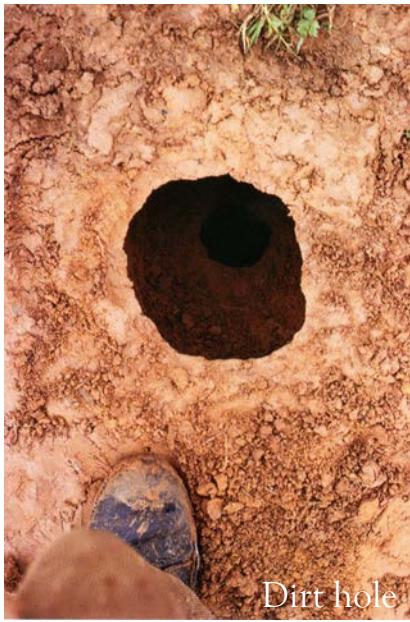
Slate cairn, 1988



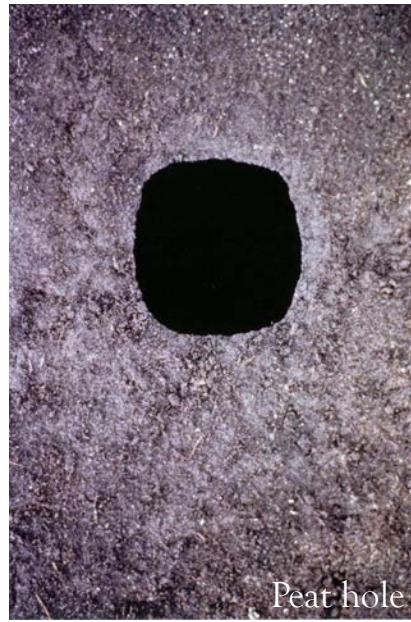
Sandstone, 1990



Leaf hole



Dirt hole



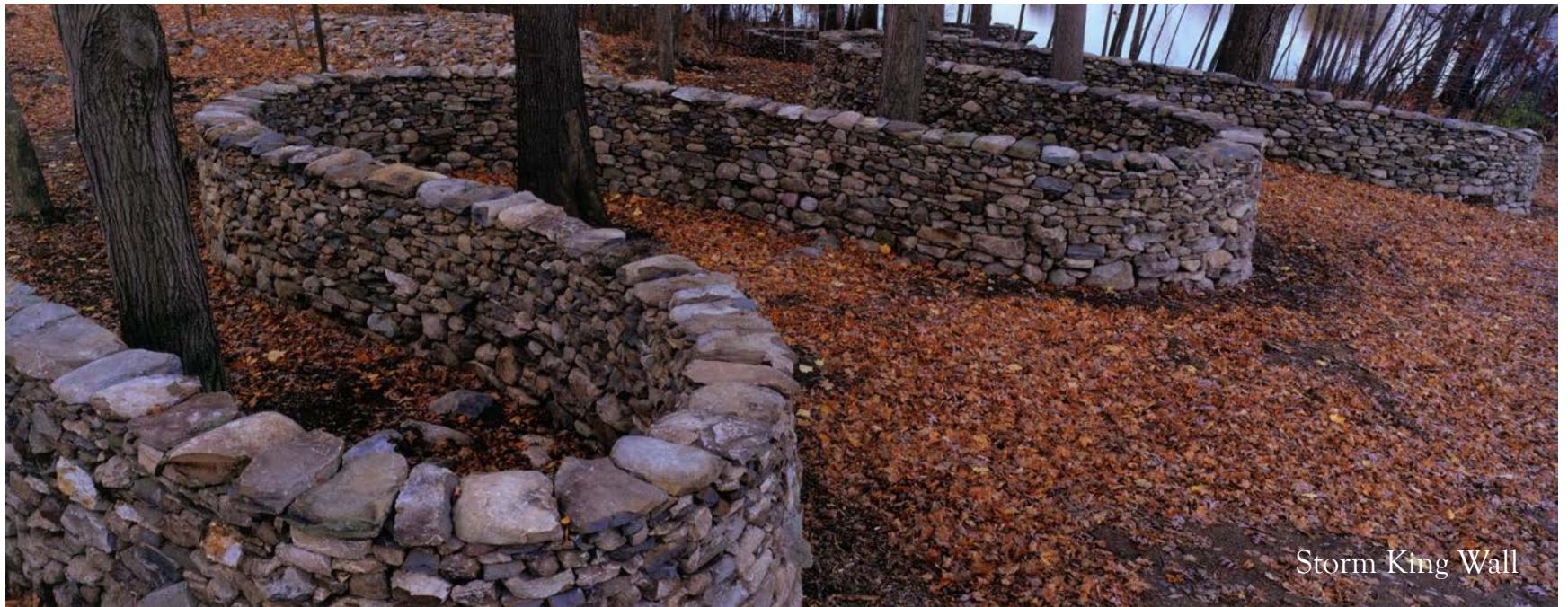
Peat hole



Sand hole



Storm King Wall



Storm King Wall