

Through Benicadell

NURIA ENGUITA

Invited by Vicente Todolí and Corinne Diserens, Hamish Fulton presented his work in Valencia for the first time in 1992, with a beautiful exhibition held in the Ferreres Hall of the Centro del Carmen, a venue which then showcased the most contemporary proposals of the newly established IVAM (the Valencian Modern Art Institute). From then on, for the last twenty five years, Hamish Fulton has developed a close relationship with the city of Valencia, where he has engaged in several projects, including urban walks.

In 2015, Vicente Todolí—this time as the advisor to the collections of Per Amor a l'Art and Inelcom—suggested to Hamish Fulton the possibility of undertaking a walk in the Valencian region skirting Mount Benicadell, the highest peak in a mountain range of the same name located in Sierra de Mariola, between the districts of Albaida (in the province of Valencia) and Comtat de Concentaina (province of Alicante). This beautiful area is important for its symbolic value, and it also played a relevant role in the lives of the promoters of both art collections. Not only did Hamish Fulton happily accept the proposal, but he also viewed it as an opportunity to link it to two other coast-to-coast walks he had made earlier in the Iberian Peninsula: from Sesimbra to Alicante in 1989, and from the estuary of the Douro river in the Atlantic to the delta of the Ebro river in the Mediterranean, in 2001. This resulted in the walk between Riumar and Alicante, which was carried out from the 9th to the 29th of February, 2016.

The paintings, murals, photographs, drawings and sculptures produced as a result of this walk, which are now part of the two collections mentioned above, are the main focus of the exhibition *Caminando en la Península Ibérica* (Walking in the Iberian Peninsula), now presented at Bombas Gens Centre d'Art, along with work from previous walks. A new book and a new exhibition by Hamish Fulton always implies acknowledging the possibilities of art as a human experience and as a venue for visual and conceptual experimentation.

Originally trained as a sculptor, Fulton was one of the key players in the emergence, during the 1960s, of art practices under the umbrella of *conceptual art*, which now could be called *contemporary art*. These practices, in which colour, form and matter give way to experience, to thought and action as art resources, imply breaking away from the previous evolution. They have led to the emergence of a post-medium or transmedia art which has overcome the forms, media and genres that once defined it, an art which, therefore, has to be individually accountable in terms of contemporaneity, rather than in terms of tradition. Furthermore, the contemporary work of art has to produce an artistic universality based on its individual formal rule, and its political and social dimensions lie on its particularities, contingencies and contexts.

It is well known that when Fulton was just 27 years old, he made the decision that walking would be the factory for his art, its only *raison d'être*. Since his first walk, Fulton has developed an ethic and an aesthetics of walking that bring together physical and spiritual aspects, and is attentive to the rhythms of nature and its measure of time. His walks are part of an ecology, they follow a plan which is often determined by the moon cycles and the paths made by thousands of previous lives, and by the acknowledgment of the land struggles of many communities. These walks are also made under the precise prescript that only his footsteps will be left behind, that nothing will be added or taken away. “Not leaving any trace”, as he puts it. It bears repeating that the walk itself is the work of art. Each walk is a new adventure, a time taken away from the normal course of life; it has a beginning and an end, it is always different. Nonetheless, what matters is the intensity of the process which carries it over—the act of walking. It is not possible to portray an experience, but the subsequent use of images and texts allows Fulton to show without portraying, to say without explaining, to name the landscape without containing it. Places, times and distances act as living registers of the road and allow us to imagine it, to traverse it. Together with the numbers and the proper names, the words appear as traces of the experience, or as details of the landscape.

These materials which result from his walks offer a profound meditative intensity which can be readily seen in its horizons, simple arabesques on the wall, as an abstraction which replicates the visible form of the landscape, and which, as spectators facing the landscape itself, makes us think about the idea of itinerary, but also about the idea of limit, of boundary.

In an interview he gave in Italy in 2005, Fulton made a statement that it is essential for the understanding of his work and, at the same time, shows the human and political dimension of his practice in all its greatness: “Words are free to exist in any size, colour, material or language—written or spoken”. His mural paintings are the speech of the artist, which adapts itself to each country, to each language, the same way it gradually becomes part of a human and geological history that exceeds it in all the roads he has travelled. The word is a place for experimentation, but it is also a place for living, a place to live with, something that identifies us, just as roads are the speech of people in the land, their constant dialogue with nature. However, speaking and walking are probably some of the most endangered actions in a world which is relentlessly destroying ancestral cultures and natural resources, while expelling and impoverishing entire populations, and this, after all, is also what Hamish Fulton talks about in a poetic manner.

You are never anybody to the mountains

MARIANO DE SANTA ANA

No role, no social status. And no fame. You are never anybody to the mountains. The walker, whose ultimate purpose is just to walk, does not seek to restore an authentic self but, quite on the contrary, to lighten the weight of identity. In the alert meeting of the world and the body he calls his own, Hamish Fulton glimpses at a kind of knowledge that exceeds the comprehensible.

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Thanks to the space not occupied by his feet, Fulton moves and constantly differentiates himself from the self. The itinerary between Riumar and Alicante also differentiates itself at every step, for space is *per se* a separating principle. For Fulton, dealing not with resting but with journeying is a clever way of confronting radical otherness, that otherness he monitors as an echo coming from every spot on the mountains which mark his itinerary.

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“There are engendering stones. Osseous stones are born within the earth. In Spain, in the area of Munda, other stones present, when they are broken, the figure of the palm of the hand”.

Roger Caillois

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For someone whose normal residence is elsewhere, say a small town in south-east Britain, walking alone for days through unknown mountains is an action that takes him away from the whole of life and, simultaneously, reintegrates him into life. A strange gesture regarding one’s own existence which, at the same time, sits nonetheless at its core.

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All alone he traces a spiral of steps between Finisterre and Toledo, and, barefoot, he draws a circle from and towards the Guadiana River. From the Atlantic to the Mediterranean he crosses Spain and Portugal, walks between the estuaries of the Guadalquivir and the Nervion rivers, travels the Camino de Santiago in the opposite direction... With the thread of an ancient patience, Fulton weaves the map of the Iberian Peninsula on the weft of contemporary impatience.

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“ATLANTIC OCEAN. MEDITERRANEAN SEA. DISTANCE AND TIME”. Looking at Fulton’s statements, arranged with the design and scale of a billboard, the observer evokes a breathing body: he lifts a foot; he inhales; he sets down his foot in front of him on the floor, heel first, then the toes. He exhales.

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“When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them—as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon—I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago”.

Henry David Thoreau

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Soils upturned by bulldozers, lighting-rod alignments, passages dug out in volcanoes. Spills of asphalt, cylindrical concrete containers. None of that. Not even circles of branches or stones. Other than his footprints, Fulton tries not to leave any trace on the landscapes he traverses. At most, he takes them back as photographs.

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In the planet of finances and global communications, spatial distances are subsumed under time approximations. The experience of vastness collapses amongst swiftly travelling bodies and electronic data exchanges rotating feverishly around the Earth. Life, ruled by increasingly abstract powers, withdraws from the irreducible quality of place. The attentive, serene, tenacious hike that is open to any encounter is, as of today, the most powerful claim of vastness in a shrunken world.

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“The Wanderer: Can I not with all speed do something to please you? Have you no wish?”

The Shadow: None except perhaps the wish that the philosophic ‘dog’ expressed to Alexander the Great—just move a little out of the light; I feel cold.

The Wanderer: What am I to do?

The Shadow: Walk under those fir-trees and look around you towards the mountains; the sun is sinking.

The Wanderer: Where are you? Where are you?”

Friedrich Nietzsche

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The art of Hamish Fulton addresses reconciliation with nature, but art and nature are antithetical instances which refer to one another: “nature [refers] to the experience of a mediated, objectified world; the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy” (Th. W. Adorno). Therefore, since they do not consign to identity their ultimate *raison d’être*, Fulton’s artworks channel their impulse to come out of themselves through ellipsis, humour and ambiguity.

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Riumar, Sant Carles de la Ràpita, Peñíscola, Cap d’Irta, Punta de Cap i Corp, Torre del Rey, Benicàssim, El Grau de Castelló, Almassora, Alquerías de Santa Bárbara, El Port, Platja de Xilxes, La Malva-rosa,

Puçol, Valencia, El Romani, Carcaixent, La Pobla Llarga, Xàtiva, Alfarrasí, Albaida, Beniatjar, Gaianes, Benicadell, Alcoy, Xixona, Mutxamel, Platja de L’Albufereta, Alicante.

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Not one ounce of pure interiority. No subconscious processes ruled by spiritual forces. No thaumaturgy capable of revealing the inner being of things. Fulton visualises his language as an invitation to a discussion on meaning. To designate his supposed place as an artist, he steps back. He walks backwards.

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After leaving Valencia, Fulton goes by El Romani. The sign indicating this place name puts the script in a special state of vibration. Could this place have been originally a wasteland, the only place where gypsies were allowed to camp? Who was that maybe not so gregarious Romany? Did he ever fantasised about erecting here an New Babylon?

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Black topographic profile. Grey background. The legend is in white characters: “BENICADELL SKYLINE A 14 DAY SOLO WALK FROM SEA LEVEL AT RIUMAR CONTINUING TO THE TOP OF 1104 BENICADELL ENDING BY THE WATERS EDGE IN ALICANTE SPAIN 19-29 FEBRUARY 2016”. Fulton’s response to science is that it “is, and always will be that admirably active, ingenious and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general” (M. Merleau-Ponty). This is another one of his strategies to recall his incalculable experience, while he refers to the subject as a broken mirror in the fracture of the world. Like a black lightning bolt, the topographic profile gleams in a *terra incognita* of the spectator’s memory.

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To, from, by since, in... prepositions adapt to space better than measurements. Orientation, direction and immersion are conditions

indicating relations which refer to the being-there and its links with exteriority.

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“The rate of the Earth’s rotation is irregular, that’s why the days are of unequal length, especially in view of the mountain ranges’ resistance to the wind”.

Peter Handke

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Neither in writing nor in maps are there accurate accounts. There is always something missing. Whoever writes or draws a map leaves a non-written, not-drawn trace that undermines the legible and the visible.

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During the hike an old mile marker comes up to meet Fulton. The artist photographs it and includes it in his metrics.

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“I have heard of a bar of platinum kept by a logical and talkative nation as their standard of measurement, the throne room and the burial chamber of every calculation and prediction. I could feel at home inside that metal core slumbering at the very hub of systems”.

Seamus Heaney

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Like the pilgrims who venerate the Tibetan Mount Kailash, Hamish Fulton approaches Benicadell Peak. When he gets to the foothills of the mountain, he circumvents it. Then he continues his hike towards Alcoy. Then he returns, he reaches the summit, he comes down and continues up to Alicante.

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What does the mountain offer Fulton? Consideration and respect in the era of the shrunken world. What does he ask of it? Maybe to reveal to him the means, only sensitive, by which it becomes a mountain for its body.

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During his crossing of the Benicadell Mountain Range, Fulton finds a boulder which has broken off the mountainside, a fragment of the rocks that support the Iberian Peninsula and all the continents and islands on Earth. Witness to a history perhaps not recorded in any human memory. Like the artist, the rock is in the unpaired circumstance of being there.

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“Then the Iberian Peninsula moved a little farther, one meter, two meters, just to test its strength. The ropes that served as evidence, strung from one side to the other like those used by firemen when walls develop cracks and threaten to cave in, broke like ordinary string, some of the stronger ones uprooted the trees and posts to which they were tied. Then there was a pause, a great gust of wind could be felt rushing through the air, like the first deep breathing of someone awakening, and the mass of stone and earth, covered with cities, villages, rivers, woodlands, factories, wild scrub, cultivated fields, with all their inhabitants and livestock, began to move, a ship drawing away from harbour and heading out once more to an unknown sea”.

José Saramago

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The mountains through which Fulton walks are of great age. Under his feet, though undetected by his conscious mind, very slight seismic events are constantly taking place. The light from the sun and the other stars that illuminates his way is not the same light that is leaving those celestial bodies at that very instant.

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Photographs free of grandiose rhetoric about the landscapes he crosses. Long breath mixed with anamorphic resources from advertising. Textual utterances from which the elocutionary self fades out. Minimal traces left on the territory he treads. Humour hidden behind an appearance of gravitas. Maybe what is happening to Hamish Fulton the wanderer is that he has a problem with gravity.

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“Hui-Tzu told Chuang-Tzu: ‘Your teachings lack any practical value’. Chuang-Tzu replied: ‘Only those who know the value of uselessness can speak of what is useful. The land we walk on is immense, yet its immensity has no practical value, for all we need to walk is the space taken up by our feet. Suppose someone dug the ground we walk on until making an enormous abyss up to the Yellow Fountain. Would the chunks of soil on which our feet rest be of any use?’”.

Octavio Paz

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Between Riumar and Alicante, as he walks in a state of alertness, Hamish Fulton gets the glimpse of an echo coming from every point of the mountains that mark his course. At the end of his journey the echo stops. When the artist presents the exhibition that refers to his experience through the landscape, the echo, delayed, comes back.

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