

WWLB007. TOPSHAM

Location: Topsham, River Exe, England
Keepers: Lesley Kerman & Graham Rich
Status: Installed
Guide: Railway Sleeper Slipway
'Sir Alex Walk'
Topsham
Nr Exeter,
Devon
England

Arriving at Topsham proceed to the River Exe, turn right, and walk up river towards Exeter. You will pass the recreation ground and find 'Sir Alec's Walk', a pedestrian pathway. Follow this path in a Northerly direction towards the M5 Motorway Bridge (which crosses the River). As the Recreation Ground narrows towards its Northern end, three wooden slipways become visible. One is made from railway sleepers. In the top plank is a metal ring. Attached to this metal ring is a chain which runs under the slipway. Pulling on this chain will reveal a watertight box which contains the River Exe stamp. Please replace everything as found.

ALEC FINLAY

THE WALK YOU TAKE AND THE WALK YOU MAKE: AN INTERVIEW

“A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Artist, publisher, and poet Alec Finlay was born in Scotland in 1966 and grew up in the Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh. During his childhood, his parents Ian Hamilton Finlay and Sue Swan Finlay transformed their small hillfarm, Stonypath, into the garden of poetry and ideas now known worldwide as Little Sparta. This fusion of the pastoral with the conceptual is a characteristic mode of the Scottish avant-garde, which has persistently engaged with its folk roots and with landscape as an environment of the mind.

Within these traditions, Alec Finlay's work is distinguished by its focus on moments of encounter and on acts of gathering. In 1990, he founded Morning Star Publications to produce artists' books and poet-artist collaborations. Beginning in 1998, the award-winning Pocketbook series brought out books by individual artists and writers, including Hamish Fulton and Thomas A. Clark, as well as a set of innovative anthologies focused on Scottish culture. These books, some with accompanying CDs, include *The Libraries of Thought and Imagination: an anthology of bookshelves*, *Justified Sinners: an archaeology of Scottish counter-culture*, *The Way to Cold Mountain: a Scottish mountains anthology*, *Wish I Was Here: a Scottish multicultural anthology*, and *The Order of Things: an anthology of Scottish sound, pattern and concrete poems*. More recently, the Small Press Series has published work from Finlay's participation projects, including *Mesostic Herbarium*, *Windblown Cloud*, *The Book of Questions*, and *Turning Toward Living*, in which multiple creators, from school children to professionals, contribute works whose forms are conceptualized by Finlay. He has also done important editorial work for the Scottish publisher Polygon on two volumes by the late Hamish Henderson, a key figure in the Folk Revival and in twentieth century Scottish letters.

Finlay's artist projects have been exhibited or undertaken at the John Hansard Gallery (University of Southampton), Turner Contemporary, the Royal Scottish Academy, and the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. In a long-term residency at the York Sculpture Park, he created a series of solo and collaborative works on intersections of the cultural and natural worlds, documented in the volume *Avant-garde English Landscape*. He is also a well-known master of renga, a poetic practice designed less to produce a text than to draw a group of writers into a shared space of thought.

In 2003, Finlay began a worldwide project involving concrete poetry, landscape, walking, mapping, and friendship—the worldwideletterboxcirclepoem. What follows is a conversation between Finlay and Susan Tichy, who in 2006 was asked to become the keeper of a letterbox.

Susan Tichy: What is letterboxing?

Alec Finlay: Well, I call it a form of hobby-walking. Letterboxing is walking with a riddle, a quest, a guide. The first letterboxes were hidden on Dartmoor, a wilderness landscape in south-west England, and now it's a very popular pastime in the US. A box or receptacle of some kind (bottle, tupperware) is placed in a concealed place. This contains a stamp, ink pad, and sometimes a log; then a guide is published (the web being the most popular host nowadays). So, it is the creation of a personalized destination, hidden treasure, a combination of agency and reward. It's a human need to have a reason to walk.

I adapted the form in 2003 as one of a number of global projects concerned with landscape, and, in this case, in particular with mapping, resolving to site 100 letterboxes around the world over a period of ten years. I am now exactly halfway.

What I do is to choose a place and invite someone nearby to act as a keeper; they accept care of the box, choose its exact location and write a guide telling people how to find it. Most of the sites are chosen because of associations (for instance, Wittgenstein's homes in Norway and Ireland; Rannoch Moor for Joseph Beuys; Lake Simcoe for Glenn Gould), and also because of some connection with people I meet and my desire to place them in places that are remote to me, but local to others (Punto Del Este in Uruguay; Sydney, Australia). Friendship is an arbitrary and delightfully common way to map the world. It may be that I have an interest in Gould and then recall an old friend in Toronto who can go to Lake Simcoe, or simply that I get to know a person, such as yourself, and I feel they would compose an interesting guide.

Pretty well all the letterboxing I have come across has a folksy-crafty feel, something like rubber stamp art. I confess I've never actually bothered to visit one of these letterboxes. In adopting the form I've chosen to formalise the box. They are all wooden and have a small plaque with a designation for the letterbox within the series of 100, and each one contains a rubber stamp circle poem.

There is one other way in which I have developed the project, which is to compose letterbox walks where a number of boxes compose a path—a circle of seven at Yorkshire

Sculpture Park (England); a route of twelve on the Isle of Thanet (England); and a walk by way of five boxes sited beside native tree species in a forest in Darmstadt (Germany).

ST: Do you write the poems and then look, or wait, for them to find the right box, or the right keeper? Or do you write each poem for a box that's already sited?

AF: Somehow the form of the circle poem, which I only adopted in 2002, offered itself as the right thing to live in a box, being an orb or globe. If memory serves, the circle poems came first and then the idea of placing them led me to letterboxes. These projects always emerge in a hazy way, and then just as quickly define themselves as a certain finite possibility: 100 worldboxes + the world. There isn't an exact rule at play: I compose circle poems every now and then, and a few of them go into boxes, if they seem to fit—remember that I haven't been to most of the sites, I only know them through reading or other people's descriptions.

The connection between such a minimal poetic form and an abstracted sense of a place is often simply a case of my responding to an element—rain, the sea, a waterfall, a forest, and so on. Occasionally, a particular site suggests a vocabulary or subject for a poem. Some are found poems or adapted quotations, such as Wittgenstein in Norway, or like the poem after Debussy that I placed at Gould's cabin beside Lake Simcoe. Found texts sometimes lead me to new sites.

The recent path-walk in Germany features poems that are about the forest, though some are as much descriptive of an inner landscape. I don't like to quote poems as they should be discovered, but these ones comprise a distinct set: eiche unter buche unter birke unter ahorn unter esche unter kiefer unter fichte (tr. oak among beech among birch among maple among ash among pine among spruce); a flower within thorns a song without words; a light above woods a shadow beyond trees; a rock beneath an oak a rock beneath an oak; the same thing changed the same thing changed. Rendering them this way fixes the meanings more than the actual circle, but the first poem is an invocation of the German forest, listing some native trees; the second and third have a more lyrical feel and they relate as much to the psyche; while the last two poems refer to Joseph Beuys ("everything is wrong"; "everything must change"). The poems were all written before I went

to the location, so they are more inspired with a feeling for the dark immense German “forest”. (I was thinking in particular of Simon Schama’s writings on that topography.)

ST: Do the path-walks have keepers?

AF: Yes, all boxes have a keeper. The ones in Germany are cared for by the Forester. The keeper for the Connemara letterbox is Tim Robinson, who has recently published a study on Connemara.

ST: When you invited me to be a keeper, I knew immediately what trail I wanted to put the box on, but not how I would situate it and conceal it. So even though the place was “local to me,” I was that box’s first quest-walker. How do you see the role of the keeper?

AF: In your case I knew you were a walker-writer and would have a favorite trail, and also the invitation was a way to actualise this conversation. The role divides into two quite distinct parts; the most important is that they will actually write the guide, and that text can take a variety of styles, from the Maris’ who restricted themselves to map co-ordinates, to keepers who relate a historical narrative about a place. There are also various ways one can navigate people to a box—landmarks, compass points, paces—from topographical writing to the treasure hunt. The other role of the keeper is to care for the box, report it stolen, re-ink the pad, relate any stories that occur.

I very much doubt that there will ever be a time when all 100 boxes are extant. A couple of the ones on the Isle of Thanet have gone already. The one that was put up by a friend near Sydney went straight onto a post on the end of a pier in a marina. The owner found it there and was pissed off that he hadn’t been asked permission, so he ripped it off and threw it in a bin. I think the keeper hadn’t thought of a pier really belonging to anyone. Anyway, one of the guys who worked at the marina rescued the box and emailed me. Then a few months later I was sent a set of photographs of the box in various places, a story of its adventures, held in the arms of various people, enjoying itself at various barbecues, and so on. Hopefully soon that box will settle down in a new home. That kind of picaresque tale is just fine.

One becomes aware just how difficult it is to place a small wooden box safely in a public space and inevitably most boxes tend to go in more remote landscapes. That said, there is one in a cafe-bar in Oloumouc in the Czech Republic, a safe house of a different kind.

ST: The vulnerability of letterboxes says a lot about art in social spaces—safe inside a circle of protection (as in the café), and safe outside the boundary of most people’s attention, but subject to all kinds of adventures in between. The notion of encounter is completely wide open.

AF: Having to place anything small in the wider world, not the patch we own and have walled off, in such a way as it might last, well, just try it, any of you, some time...

It brings two things to mind. The first is pragmatic: I’ve been working on a project that uses nest boxes, painted with cryptic crossword clues I compose, on the names of birds and, funnily enough, being “upstairs”, out of reach, these are so much easier to consider secure. Everyone can read them, but no one can get to them.

The other thought is a memory: the work of sculpture that I love above all others is my friend Hans Waanders’ “perches”. All of Hans’ work was concerned with kingfishers, in some way or other. Near the end of his life he began a series of pieces, of perches, where he would place a broken stick into a riverbank as a perch for a kingfisher to land on and hunt from. They went into rivers wherever Hans went, especially in places at the edges of the kingfishers’ natural habitat, and he photographed them (for a book I co-published, *perches*, morning star, 2002). Of course, most of these sculptures only lasted a few days, some perhaps a month or two, but for me they poeticised the whole river, all rivers. They became a place for the encounter Hans invoked. I’m happy that there’s a kingfisher I see quite often, darting up and down the little tidal river under my studio window. When Hans died that was one project it almost felt his friends could continue, in his memory, but somehow the gesture was all his. Vulnerability, aided by memory.

The letterboxes are for specific places, not “rivers”, so they can never have quite that field, and yet in another way they are an invocation of “the world”,—the world as a bunch of places.

ST: The captions for the perches photos say they were taken on certain stream banks in five or six countries, but the photos themselves exclude that kind of context—most are just a stick and its water. So it's as if he traveled all over in order to find the same place, again and again, or perhaps to create it. He stands on a river bank and holds out his hand, then walks away and leaves his hand there. It's so simple, it's like a magic trick to make the poetic visible... not to mention funny and homey. I'm invited into that seeing, and that hope, but I'm not lured into an actual journey. The world mapped by letterboxes seems different, very much about human places and the need to put your feet on the ground and go. Is that how you see it? or does it look different from the center of the map?

AF: That is true. What I always find especially beautiful in perches is the water, the element beyond the stick—ah, one wants to say “stick figure”, as that is the human element—and what some of the waters that are portrayed share is a temperament, a look, almost a texture, for instance the cold peaty brown laced with silver of the Grizedale perches in the English Lake District.

ST: Why “especially in places at the edges of the kingfisher’ natural habitat”?

AF: Two reasons: these are the places kingfishers are most rare—hard to see—and most vulnerable—at the edge of the place they can live. The second reason is hidden from the ordinary viewer, though it makes the work all the more touching; Hans was very ill for much of his adult life, and he died terribly young (aged 50). He chose the kingfisher in an emblematic pact made when he discovered that he had kidney failure, and for the next seventeen years *Alcedo atthis*, or “halcyon”, was his given subject. It was as if by studying that one encounter and understanding how to repeat it, and then by opening it out endlessly, he could cast ripples in time, make as much as could be made of however long he was given. So, *perches* is a late work.

Helping the birds by placing perches does have humour, lightness, but, being art, it can release completely other meanings; the vulnerable, a stick stuck in a muddy bank above a rushing stream; time, the passing of the waters; the simplicity of the gesture, camera, stick, bank, river, these materials and these alone; the journey to a far edge, life approaching death—all of these aspects of the work can be seen as autobiography. The magic thing

is that even once this life story is revealed the work is still not only that. For me it is a moving act of gentle resistance, the bravery and make-do-and-mend of a man facing death.

I hadn't thought of this before, but I have a muscular illness and walking isn't easy, so in a way the journeys and the guides I invite could be my own unknowing response to that personal situation. Sometimes these back stories are revealed to one very late on in a project, if ever.

What impressed me about all Hans' work was that he took the approach of Hamish Fulton, Richard Long, that gesture, and he made work that was gentler, more possible (not walking up a mountain, or for 24 hours). He made art within the terms of his own constrained life. A short walk is still a walk, especially when one is ill. Hans didn't make the restraints themselves his theme—the work is poetic and seeking, but there is no concealed tone of bitterness or tragedy. His final work was to stamp a single kingfisher eye, one stamp per day, the last made in his sick bed. This inevitably incomplete print of staring eyes is an incredibly moving work of art.

In terms of the letterboxes, yes the project does differ from perches, and yet the boxes do have their vulnerability as we have discussed, and it won't surprise me if one or two of them gather a meaning or narrative similar to Hans' work. The project seems in an obvious way to be about walking, but surely the point is that as they are scattered all over the world only a very few can ever be easily accessible to anyone; I can't believe that anyone will ever reach them all, or indeed over half. Think about the travel involved! The tone of each encounter is very much set by the individual keepers and their guides, as if we were setting off to discover just one of Hans' perches, but as a whole the project becomes something else, more a world book, a record of places that ultimately we will know more in the imagination, in words, than through experience. Isn't that an interesting thing, that one offers all these maps and guides and yet, implicitly, the destinations are mostly as remote as could be from any reader in any place. It is a map of the world with the focus fallen on a few places—like the darts that Mark Boyle threw at the world to make his *Journey to the Surface of the Earth*, or like the Surrealist atlas which vastly inflates the scale of the places that interested them most, Easter Island, etc. This world book is a map of the world made for me with others' help, without my ever having to leave my room.

ST: How did growing up at Little Sparta affect your sense of poetry as something that happens in a place? I keep thinking that though the rest of us can remember a time before that idea occurred, perhaps you can't.

AF: A child's awareness is not an adult's, but yes, I did get the habit of referring to carved stone as a "poem". Another sense of it is that my father stayed put for 35 years in one small republic full of names and poems, whereas I send mine out into the greater world, to keepers and distant places, the world as I find it.

ST: And then we keepers, and walkers, do have to leave our rooms, to make your world book more than idea. Is agency another kind of vulnerability? Another kind of mapping?

AF: I wonder if the agency isn't, as always, friendship and love: the keepers, a loose network of friends and colleagues; the guides some possible paths to take—together we offer them to anyone, everyone, as an invitation. Like Hans' encounter. The concept of agency seems to be reasonably innocent when what is at stake is, after all, only a walk, or the possibility of seeing a bird. The transaction doesn't involve ownership or scarcity. And yet, as with the kingfisher, it is the idea of the encounter that is so meaningful, and that idea makes a claim on a (potentially) huge territory.

Much of my work is concerned with how we experience shared consciousness; for instance, a renga (linked verse), where a group of us shares writing a poem over the course of a day—how much of that work of art is the words of the poem on the page, and how much is it the listening, sitting, writing, reading together? I wouldn't like to say, but for sure the balance does not lie in the letterforms, but in the hours spent together. In letterboxing the idea of the walk is what we share, all of us who read the guides, but the walks themselves are discrete private events. They go unrecorded. Which part is the work, which part matters more?

Hamish Fulton is always very clear that his art isn't the works of art that he presents, but rather the walks that he makes (without us). I stay at home and hold a book of Hamish's in my hands. It matters to me that he made that walk. Does letterboxing allow us to share in that sense of identification with such an enterprise, a walk, without it being so located

in one person's identity? I don't think the project is mine in the way Hamish's walk is his. Nor do I think we follow a keeper's guide in the way that we might follow a path in the footsteps of a walk by Coleridge or Herzog. I suppose the truth is that we identify more with the project itself, a concentrated form of walk. What unites the project is a form, but the form itself remains very open.

Isn't it interesting how much any reader could feel identified with the project without even leaving their room? It reminds me of my friends the Maris, who invented the AMC (Armchair Mountaineering Club), which does exactly what the name suggests.

ST: Do you make the boxes?

AF: My friend Dan makes the boxes in his workshop next door. I'm no maker; if I was I'd have better bookshelves and a higher bed. The boxes are purely functional objects that turned out to be beautiful; let's call it rural modernism.

ST: Maybe I like to think about them because I'm going to be caring for one. They look so much like nesting boxes—yet these are already occupied. I wonder if people leave things in them, for you or for the keepers.

AF: I think those correspondences will grow as the site is more publicized—I expect more that things will be sent in to me via the website rather than left in the boxes, as somehow they don't belong to me. I think people will feel they should leave them clean for the next person. Just as interesting is the idea that people may add their own boxes within my network, piggyback style. Well, let's see.



WWLB18: kissing gate

Follow the path past Sol LeWitt's sculpture '123454321' on your right. Before reaching Bretton Hall—when you spot Richard Serra's 'Untitled' sculpture of four Portland stone blocks—turn left and go up the hill, through the Lower Park sculpture display. Walk uphill to the glass and stone Camellia House.

WWLB19: at the corner of the Camellia House nearest to the large copper beech tree stump.

Walk past the Camellia House up the tarmac path and across the University of Leeds car park. Continue by way of Barbara Hepworth's 'The Family of Man and Squares with Two Circles', across the road. The wide paved steps lead to the Formal Terrace. This will lead you to the Centre in time for tea. Your circlethrough the path is now complete.

an oak above a rock beneath
an oak above a rock beneath

when the rain falls
the music begins

the same thing changed the same thing
changed the same thing

above woods a shadow beyond
trees a light above woods

a flower within thorns a song
without words a flower

where you are
not there

without words a song
without words a song
wolves a man among men
a wolf among men

in of the tide toward the
shore setting in of the tide

light wind gives such light
wind gives such light