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# **David Nash**

by

**Eugene O' Malley**

**Fine Art,  
Sculpture.**

**1997**

National College of Art and Design  
Department of Fine Art ,  
Sculpture

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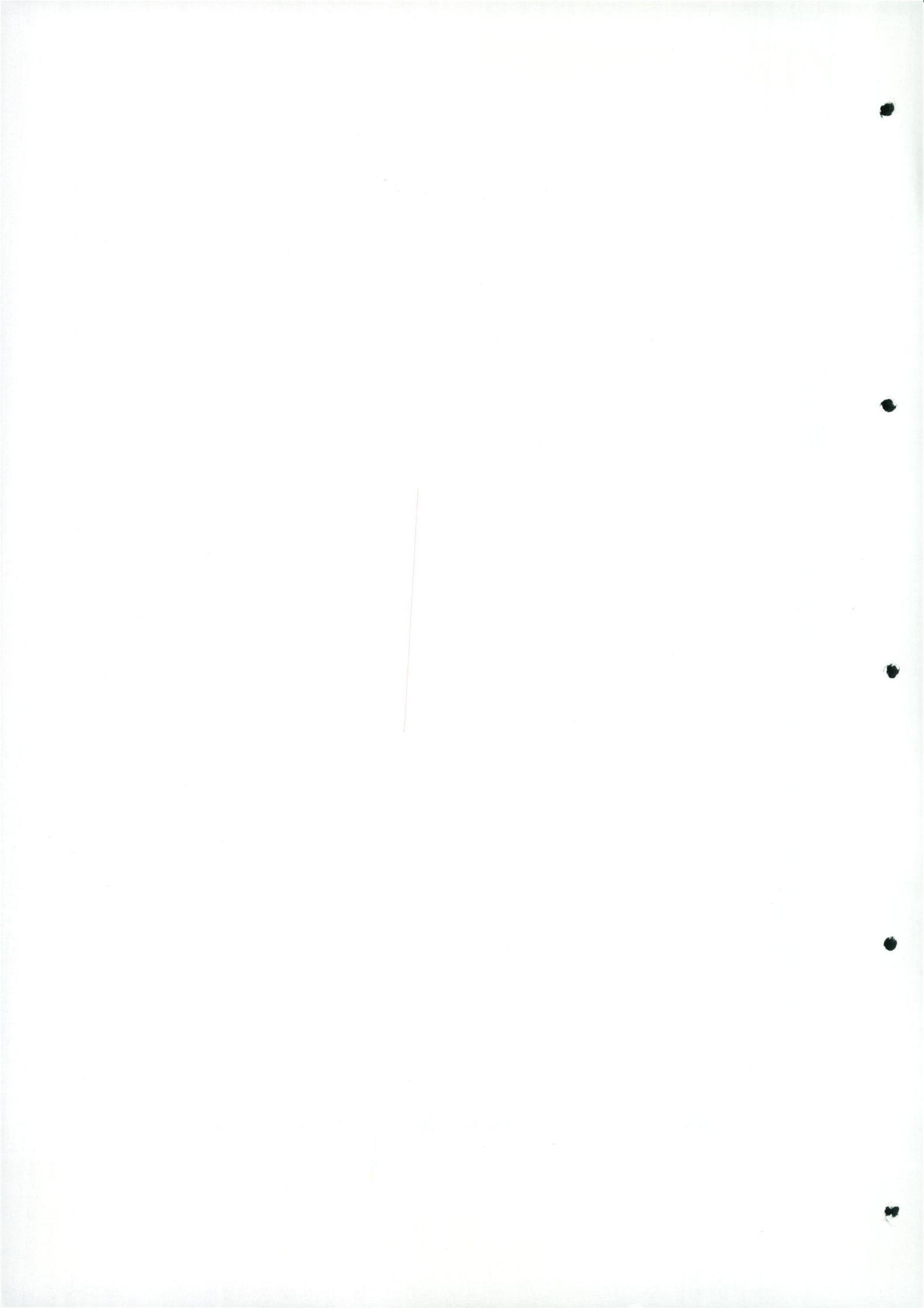
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by  
Eugene O' Malley

Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design  
and Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree  
of Bachelor of Arts in Fine Art Sculpture.

1997



With thanks to my tutor Dr. Sue McNab  
and David Nash for his co-operation.



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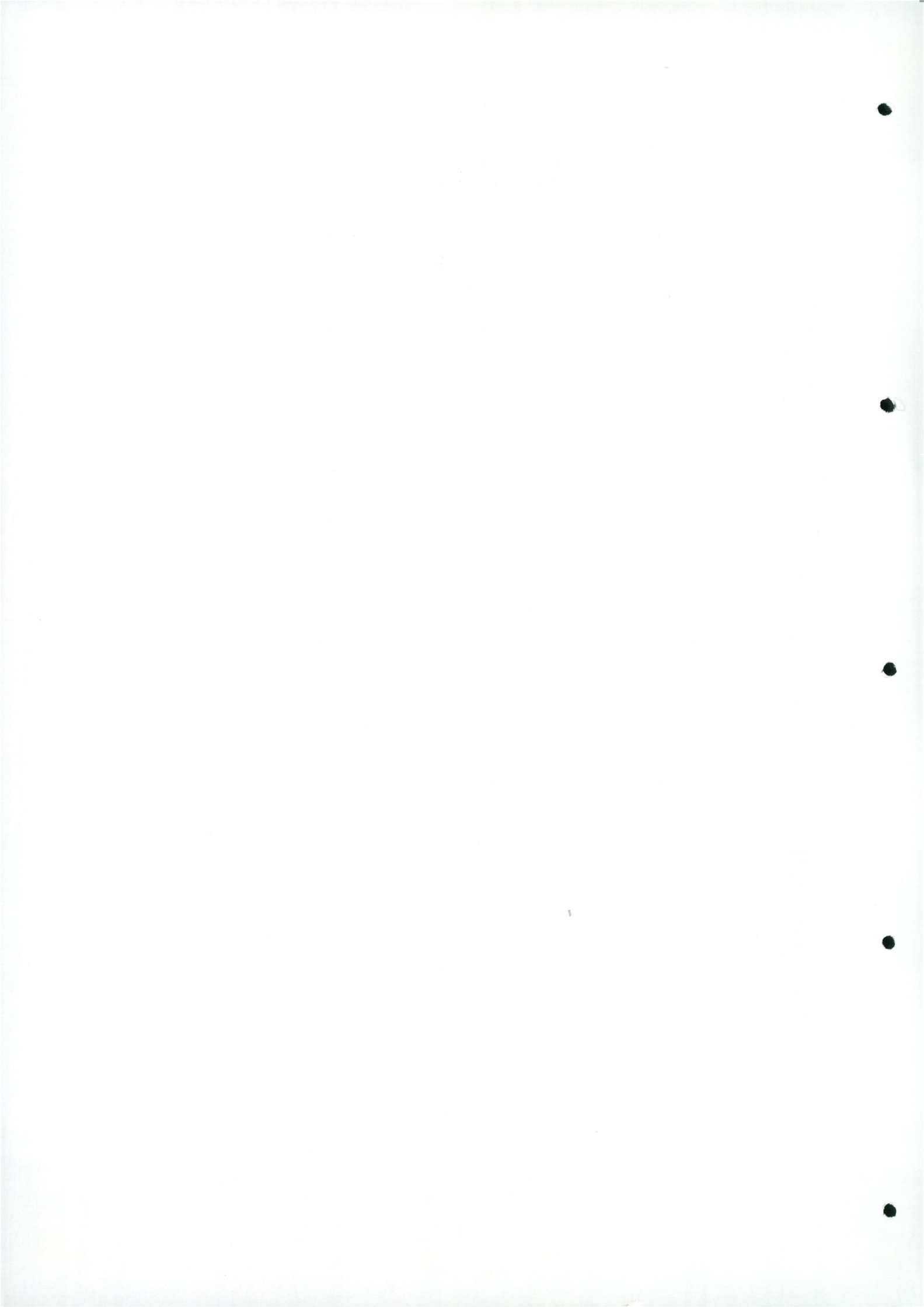
All works by Nash unless otherwise stated.



## Introduction.

David Nash is an artist who does not conform to any specific movement. He must therefore be examined in relation to many artists and his individual ethos. His ethos has its seeds in Western art history but it also has similarities to different cultural histories such as that of Japan. His work is not that of a typical postmodernist, one instance being his choice of using strictly wood as a raw material which he is now famous for. Nash involves himself in rural surroundings which is appropriate and intrinsically linked to his work. Nash is much admired in a romantic sense and left to his own devices, but his work deserves more of an in depth examination. In his work he tackles issues and thoughts that originate from his personal experience, but he works them so as not to exclude the viewer from the process which is central to his work. He creates projects which are not motivated by the desire to create an art object. In the case of his on site projects the works are in many cases transient and quickly reintegrate with the earth, which means that photographic documentation is the primary source through which people consume his work. Nash's works in the gallery are more traditionally akin to art objects as they afford a degree of permanence.

During the course of my research I sent a questionnaire to Nash, any unreferenced quotations in the text originate from this correspondence. I will examine relevant artist's work which came before Nash in order to situate him in the very specific location he inhabits now. I am a student of Sculpture and in



my own practice I deal with similar aspects of rural life. I am also interested in the camouflage of an artist's work in the environment, rather than the placing outside of an obtrusive art object. Nash's work exists both in and more importantly beyond the gallery system, it emerges from his constant ethos but does have specific downfalls which are very evident in a number of his works.



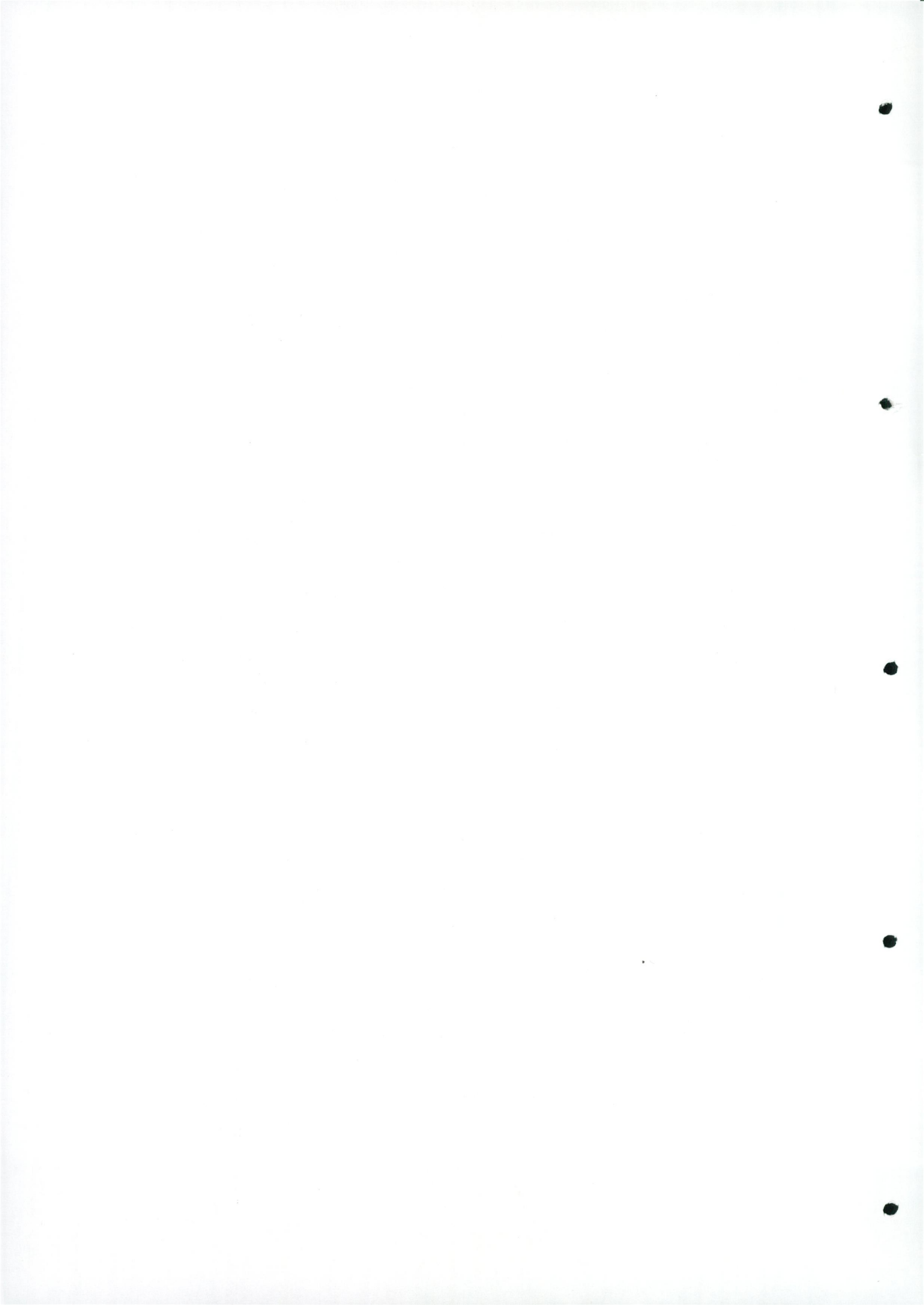
## Chapter One:

**Relationships with Land Art.**

David Nash has emerged as an artist out of the land art movement and into a niche strictly of his own making. As land art became established certain problems became apparent, it was his awareness of these that impelled him along his own route. Land art originated for many reasons, two important ones being the replacing of the object by processes and the attempt to create work which enabled artists to disconnect from the gallery system. In attempting to sever artist's links with the closed system which is a gallery space, land artists accidentally created other elitist systems. Work which was produced by land artists was often situated in inaccessible places which meant that only the minority with sufficient interest and means to do so could see it on site. No longer could the work be relatively easily accessible in an inner city gallery.

Land art was very much site specific, therefore photography was only the second best means by which the public could view the work. In the majority of cases the photographic image was the means by which the artists work was consumed. The work was viewed through published material and or through photographic exhibitions in galleries usually accompanied by plans of the location. This process ensured that possibly even less people saw the works firsthand than before the move away from the gallery.

The move away from the gallery with land art marked an increase in the quantities of



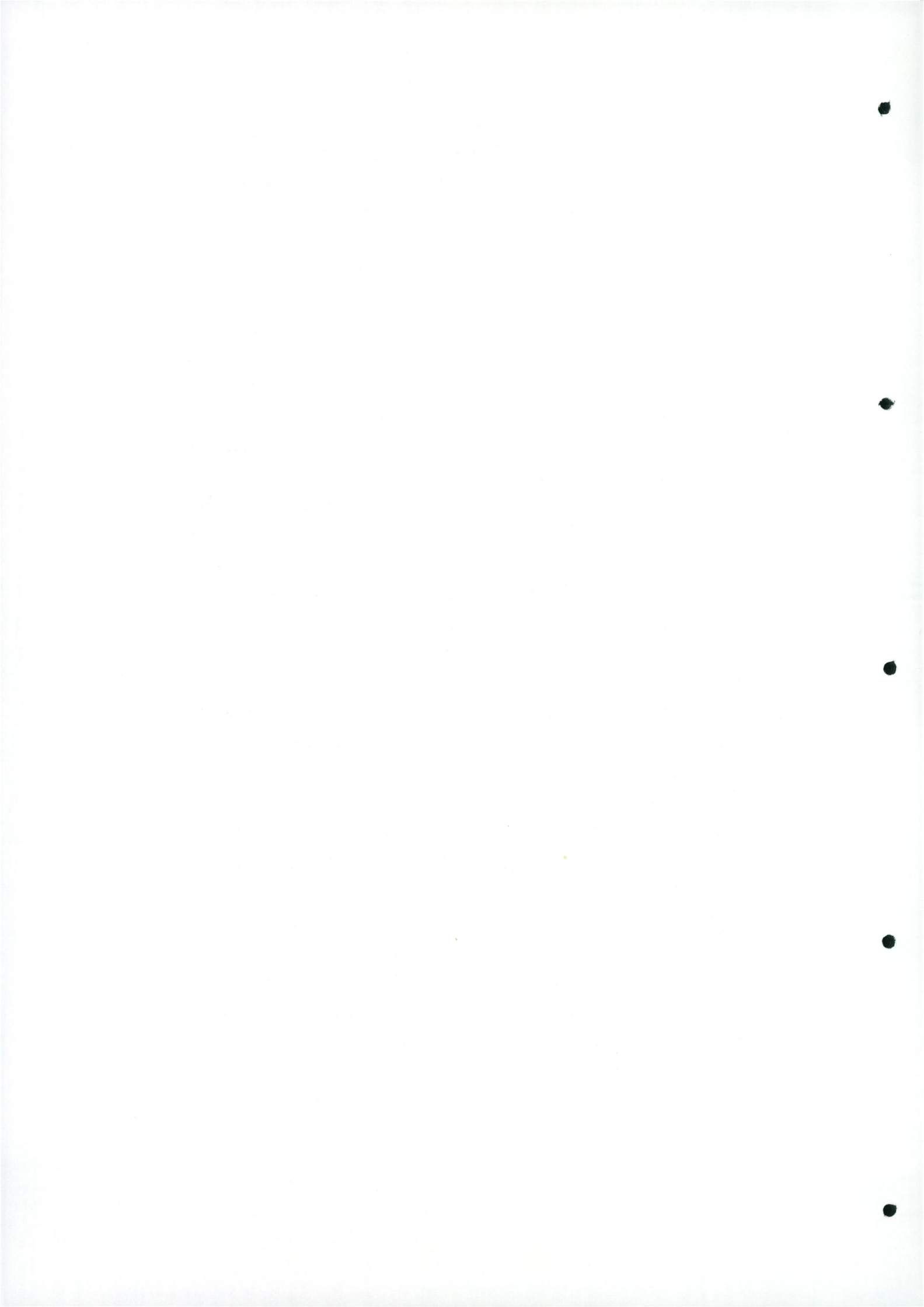


public art in so far as the new work was primarily cited in public spaces. In relation to public art the general consensus is that, on the whole, it is constructive and important in a community or area. Public art is attributed with powers of bringing cultural identity and economic success to its location. It is seen as a public investment to culturally enhance a community, especially in areas of redevelopment in both urban and rural communities. Nash's work exists both in the gallery and out of doors, the latter of which can be accredited with enhancing its environment.

David Nash is an established artist living and working in Wales. To fully understand his position, other artists working both before and during his time must be considered. Nash has been categorised in various ways through the years but it is possible to say he is one of the artists carrying the torch of land artists. The first land artists worked through nature on a large scale to achieve their objectives. Michael Heizer is a prime example of an artist who worked on nature specifically to achieve a finished work.

Michael Heizer created such monumental work as "Double Negative" in the Nevada desert which was completed in 1970. This work is clearly very permanent and also very ecologically invasive. It alters the environment to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine it being allowed in this day and age, now that ecological matters are further up the list of importance than they were in 1969.

Earthworks, as they were called, were almost given a free reign, they were allowed to change environments to a huge extent where any other planning application



would presumably be turned down. Earthworks of the late 1960s and early 1970s became very intrusive processes involving the moving of large quantities of earth to create a new landscape. At the time it was made, work such as Heizer's "Double Negative" met some adverse reaction. This was based on the permanence and scale of such work. This debate carried on and only quietened when transient small scale work by Nash or Goldsworthy was made in conjunction with nature.

By the same token Robert Smithson was a land artist whose work encroached onto nature and indeed some works are simple illustrations of ideas using the earth as the medium through which to exist. Nature in this instance is the raw material being used to create the finished work but Smithson was sympathetic to the sites he chose. He chose sites which had already been disrupted or polluted in some way by man. He attempted to redeem the landscape by constructing an alternative scene to that already changed by mining or other industrial interactions. "The legacy of minimalism is the replacing of the object by processes". (Chapman, 1977, p82.)

This importance of process is evident in specific works of land artists from the late 1960s to the present. Robert Smithson's "Asphalt Rundown" is an example of a documented work with a performance-like action. The piece was performed, photographed and displayed. The finished work is just as much about the action as it is about the outcome. The process here, as in many of Nash's works can be said to have more importance than the final three dimensional outcome.



Land projects became an effort to re-establish and reaffirm our connections to the natural world, to counter the drift toward the increasing urbanisation of contemporary life. Land artists affirm the need for this relationship by requiring that we experience work and site as a single totality. After the first wave of land artists involving earthworks, came a number of variations such as ephemeral works in the environment, environmental performance and didactic art.

Richard Long is an example of one of the land artists to turn to transient works which were very much associated with actions and periods of time. His work like many artists of the 1970s cannot be categorised so clearly as to restrict it to one of the above headings. His work involving the collection and arrangement of stones while walking through various environments was not only on a less than monumental scale but it had much more subtle outcomes. This act of assembling stones while on a journey has many similarities with the work of Nash. Long's work usually took the form of an arrangement of rocks or stones on the ground which never rose to a height which would make them dominate their environment. The afore-mentioned artists could be said to be simply carrying on the tradition of exploration, they explore new territories which they then mark in a time-honoured tradition.

Long views his works as ritualistic responses to the site with which he is interacting, his

largely horizontal gestures acquiesce in and compliment the landscape, that these quiet gestures will be quickly erased is part of the modest



ambitions of the artist when working  
in nature.

(Kemac, 1993, p169.)

Long's work is a temporary indentation on the environment which signifies man's existence. It is also evidence of the interaction of man and nature for however long it took to assemble the piece.

Working in the public sphere, Nash is one in a long line of artists who have interacted with nature. Because of the transience of his work he receives few of the critical attacks from ecologists which his immediate predecessors had to endure. He is involved in a certain communication with nature which is not only relevant to his work but also to his life, which he endeavours to maintain on an even keel, not at odds with nature. The large scale and the industrial methods of production are most definitely not evident in Nash's work.

One of the major drives within land art is the desire to reassociate man as being an intrinsic part of the natural world. The puritanical view of man and his actions being fundamentally separate from nature is not an ethic which artists from Smithson to Nash believe in.

Man is as much a part of the  
ecological system as any  
organism....Human activities in the  
environment are not inherently  
disruptive.

(Beardsley, 1977, p28.)

Due to the fact that almost all land artists change the environment to some extent, their work cannot be called ecologically neutral. This applies to land artists of the 1970s, but it is just





as relevant in the 80s and 90s. Artists such as Goldsworthy and Nash are examples of artists who work in the environment using natural materials and are not inherently disruptive to any great extent. These artists produce work which has evolved from that established in the 1960s. No more is monumental interference with nature such as was necessitated by Heizer's "Double Negative", popular with the public, critic or indeed the artist. Nash and Goldsworthy carry the torch of land artists but they have changed some of the characteristics in line with changing views toward the environment since the mid seventies.



## Chapter Two:

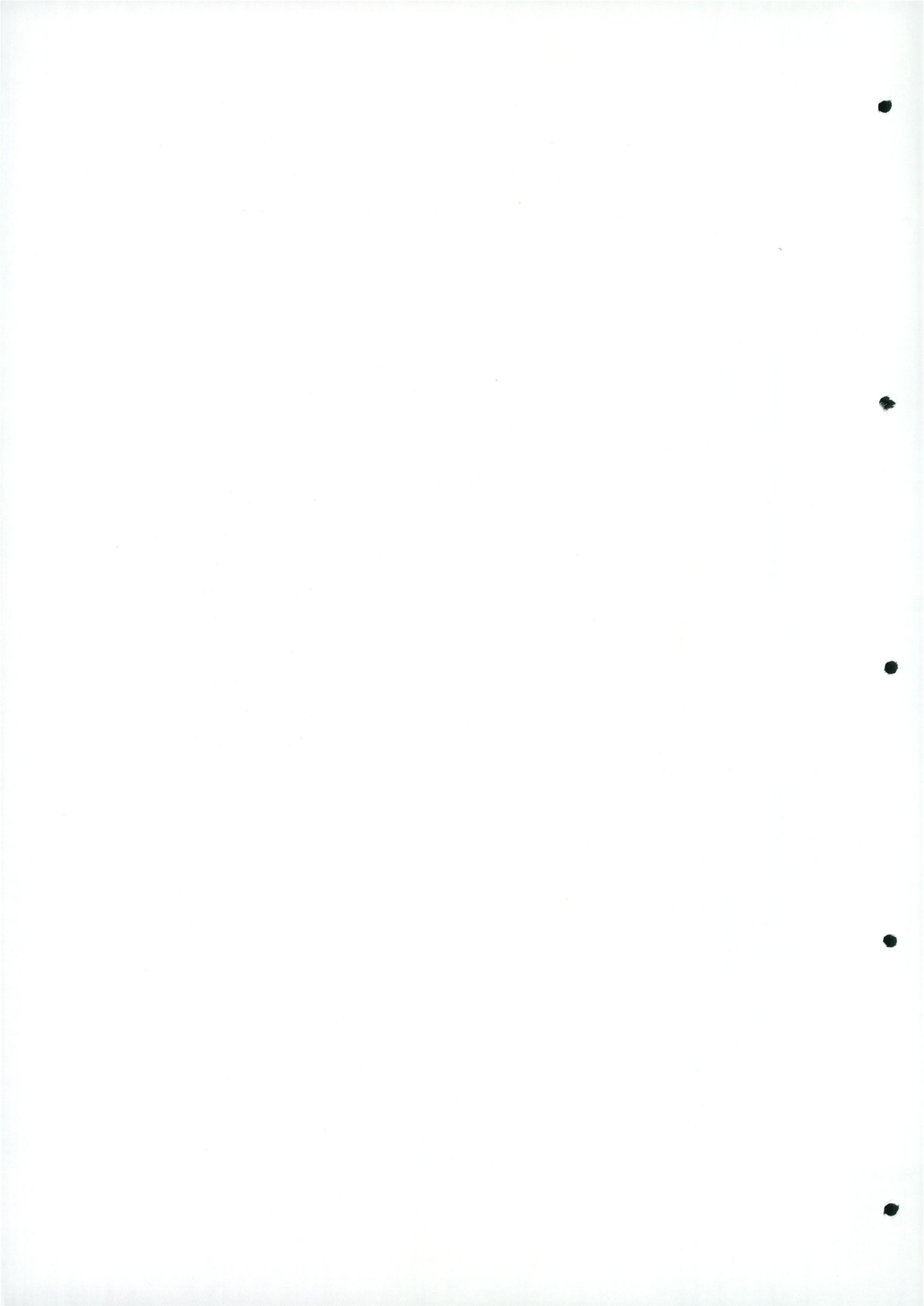
**Interaction with the Land.**

David Nash's work is popular and gains increasing acceptance for many reasons, one of which is the numerous links and associations it has with the farming community and its traditions. Nash works alongside the processes of nature using the elements, the materials and the seasons. There is a view of rural dwellers that they are intrinsically closer to nature than their urban counterparts. This is often exaggerated and romanticised, but it is still this link to the land which Nash works with. As he says himself:

I want a life and work that reflects  
the balance and continuity of nature  
identifying with the time and energy  
of the tree and with its morality,  
I find myself drawn deeper into the  
joys and blows of nature. Worn down  
and regenerated; broken off and  
reunited; a dormant faith revived in  
the new growth of the old wood.

(Sutton 1994 p69.)

This belief and therefore this way of working, links him to the processes such as growth and harvest found in the farming community. In the farming community, as in others, mechanisation is moving people further and further away from direct interaction with the land. No longer does farming necessarily mean working hand to earth. This shift away from manual labour has been happening for decades and the speed of change is increasing. This process has been well documented and is evident in all rural areas. Along with this drastic change comes nostalgia for the old



ways of working the land. The traditional methods of manual labour in the land are disappearing but they are still alive in people's memory, after all major mechanisation has only occurred since approximately 1960. Due to this fact people are appreciative of work such as Nash's which involves a process of labour. When writing about "Black Dome" (pl.1) Rupert Martin wrote: "For something so peaceful and calm an extraordinary amount of effort went into its making". (Martin,1990.p21.) It took Nash and an assistant three weeks to arrange the nine hundred charred logs to create "Black Dome".

It is this amount of labour that can be appreciated when viewing the works of David Nash. His work also uses the elements and materials of the specific site. Just like the farmer working a field he must adjust his work so as to make it appropriate to the specific environmental characteristics of the area. The materials which are in the environment are used to their full potential by Nash who doesn't bring new materials into or remove materials from the site. He is in effect using his chosen environment as a self sustaining system. Farmers produce food, Nash produces his own work. "The honest marks of tools appeal directly to the senses". (Sutton,1994.) The tool is an instrument of change, metamorphosis, whether the intervention is with man made tools, one of the effects of the four elements or the processes of growth and decay Nash uses then all. This shows another similarity to the rural traditions. It also gives rise to a work being appreciated in relation to the level of craft or skill involved in its creation.





Plate 1. Black Dome, 1986.





Land artists such as Nash and Chris Drury use both local and traditional methods to work their material. In working their material they employ the attitude of 'truth to nature', this also complements their ethos which is one of harmony with the environment and the locality.

Old building methods are combined with the knowledge of material and an instinctive way of working.  
(Bonnano, 1994.)

Markers and sculptures of various sorts are already in the landscape, both sacred and profane, and help us to read the landscape and give us some connection with our past.  
(O'Regan, 1995, p45.)

This is another reason why Nash's work does not raise objections in the countryside. His work can be seen as simply another landmark which is not dominant in its environment. His work is not only site adjusted it is site determined therefore it is not inherently out of place. His methods of work create transient pieces which can be compared to many sculptural forms and scenes which are already evident in the countryside. Sculptural markers from scratching posts to ruins of old buildings all orientate a community in relation to both local history and the land. These local landmarks whether permanent or transient all work to produce a very specific identity for a community which is primarily based on the land itself.

Rarely is attention paid to the commonplace and familiar aspects of local surroundings, they are often overlooked or taken for granted but have great emotional value for the people who know them well,....Overlooking the common place



and ordinary diminishes a broad and rich cultural experience.

(Morland, 1988, p20.)

Farmers use processes which have many similarities to the work of artists such as Nash, Drury and Goldsworthy. The most obvious processes involve the growing and harvesting of crops but the most sculpturally striking can be less dramatic. Such a scene is a dead crow hanging in order to deter other crows from congregating. This very functional process also holds many associated meanings of an unknown ritual or ceremony. Farmers may collect stones or rocks from a ploughed field and dump them in a pile in a ditch. This the simplest of processes is reminiscent of numerous artists from Long to Goldsworthy. To fill a gap in a hedgerow a farmer may simply cut branches from a near-by tree and insert them in the gap until the hedge has naturally filled the space fully. The use of branches and sticks as implements such as herding staffs is one of the most commonplace uses of natural materials in the functional process of farming. This is also not as threatened by mechanisation as other more involved processes. This is a significant example in so far as it is very common and often overlooked.

The burning of stubble after a crop of hay or straw has been removed is yet another example of a process in farming which is laden with associated meanings which are primarily based on its function. The function is to release nutrients back into the soil so as to continue the cycle of regeneration. In the urban landscape an artist's intervention may be criticised or rejected for being intrusive and inappropriate, but this response is less frequent



when artists are involved with the materials of the environment in the rural landscape. The working processes of Nash are not that different from the processes which farmers themselves are involved in especially when Nash's work involves a specific function such as "Sheep Spaces", (pl.2) built at Tickon in 1993.

As mentioned previously there are many artists with a similar ethos to that of David Nash. Artists have various ways of working but their stance in relation to nature is surprisingly similar. Richard Long and Richard Harris have many similarities to Nash, primarily the importance they give to 'place'. "The first thing I do is to identify and get to know the place". (Harris,1991,p81.) The whole process depends on the specific environment in which the artist finds himself. When Richard Long was asked how he decides to stop walking and to make a work he replied:

Well when I come to an incredible place I don't have to make that decision, I have an instantaneous feeling that this is the place and here are the stones, and I get on with it.

(Long,1991,p250.)

Nash also reacts to particular sites but he does so primarily in relation to the area in which he lives and works in North Wales.





Plate 2. Sheep Spaces, 1993.





Nash more than any other land artist has made a commitment to place, he has chosen his home and as an affirmation of his faith that he will continue there he has started a work that will need tending over the next thirty years.

(Neff,1987,p138.)

The importance of a specific site and the interaction between it and the artist is central to the work of others such as Drury and Goldsworthy. Although Nash's home and primary location for work is in North Wales he is often invited to work in various locations around the world. His work is intrinsically intertwined with a locality in which he deals with specific types of landscape and natural materials. These drastically change when he works in places as varied as Australia and Japan. As Nash put it:

New location, to me, means new wood, new people, new culture, unique circumstance, all very stimulating to find new forms.

A number of these new locations are woodland symposia. It is interesting to notice that in a symposia situation such as "Grizedale" the trend is away from site dominant work and toward site determined work. "Grizedale celebrates an individual's response to a particular landscape, a large production forest". (P.Harris,1994.)

In relation to pieces of work which incorporate a specific function, Nash created works such as "sheep spaces" in 1993 in order to engage the functions and meanings of a very specific site. He learns from the environment and then adds to it in a very specific way , a small way, which is not site dominating. In this work Nash placed several blocks



of oak to function both for scratching and sheltering sheep. This site which had been used by sheep frequently was already moulded to an extent by their existence. Nash simply adapted the site in order for this habitat to be improved for its inhabitants. The oak blocks nestle amongst the trees and are only noticeable on closer examination.

Eight large tree pieces were placed into the copse and arranged in pairs, the sheep knew what they were immediately and were using the first pair when we came back with the second.

(Nash, 1994.)

This project from 1993 shows a significant level of interaction with the environment, which is primarily based on the function of the area. Nash has foregrounded function as the essence of the work.

It is very interesting to compare Nash's "Sheep Spaces" project to the recent and ongoing work of Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy with national lottery and European Union funding has already initiated a project of building one hundred sheep folds across six Cumbrian districts in England. This is set to take four years to complete, at the end of which one hundred former sites of sheepfolds will have been either rebuilt or built from scratch. The fact that both Nash and Goldsworthy have created sheltering sites for sheep is a reflection on their similar ethos, but it is also simply due to the fact that both artists live in landscapes which are inhabited by sheep. Both artists are aware of the land and its language and this leads them to notice when a specific functional characteristic is missing.



Coming from a region of sheep -North Wales-I (Nash) noticed the sheep did not have any 'spaces' - wall, rock, hedge, bank, fallen tree to nestle against. these spaces are noticeable in sheep regions, spaces where the sheep continually go to rest and shelter. They do not make the spaces, no digging or shaping, just their continual presence wears an oval patch, an egg shaped space -peaceful, innocent, holy.

(Nash,1994.)

The work of Nash and Goldsworthy may be similar in respect to their thoughts and actions on the land but one difference is that Goldsworthy does not use tools other than his hands.

With nothing up his sleeves but his inventive arms, he uses natural materials to construct objects and patterns which are generally ephemeral and often winningly decorative.

(Cutts,1987,p52.)

Whereas Nash "extends farming techniques to his artistic ends", (Cutts,1987,p46.) Goldsworthy employs a non invasive technique which does not involve the working of a material with a tool so as to change its form. This difference in the technique of making shows us two definite methods of working, Nash's giving him a stronger link with the tradition of agricultural labour than Goldsworthy.

David Nash's work with wood has changed since his first tower constructions in the late 1960s. This work produced on leaving college was centred around towers made out of "found timber, milled lumber and dead trees". (Beal,1987,p143.) These constructions involved painted planks and irregularly shaped pieces of wood being joined



together so as to rise and vertically challenge the viewer's attention in relation to the landscape. These were all constructed with wood which had been well dried before he used them.

.... I used woodmill wood, regular standard units; later green wood, fresh from the tree; now the tree itself.

(Beardsley, 1984, p135.)

The use of dry timber planks was to be abandoned after the unplanned outcome of "Nine Rough Spheres" (pl.3). Nash chopped nine rough spheres out of an ash tree all relatively equal in size, he left them aside and carried on in his studio with other work. On finding them at a later stage the spheres had become "Nine Cracked Balls". The relative heat of his studio had caused the fresh wood to crack. This radically changed the wood and intrigued Nash. This new found interest lead to a series of work which was primarily based on the changes fresh wood goes through during not only drying but any climatic change after it is cut. This awareness was to be an integral part of his work from 1970 onwards.

The initial series of work after "Nine Cracked Balls" was primarily to do with experiments on the unpredictability of unseasoned wood. Such work was made especially to show and exaggerate the effects of cracking and warping. Examples of this series of work are "Cracking Box", (pl.4), 1979 and "Three Clams on a Rack", (pl.5), 1974.







Plate 3. Nine Rough Spheres, 1970.

This interest in the continuing processes wood passes through is also seen in later examples such as "Elm Spring Arch", (pl.6), which was made in Japan in 1984.

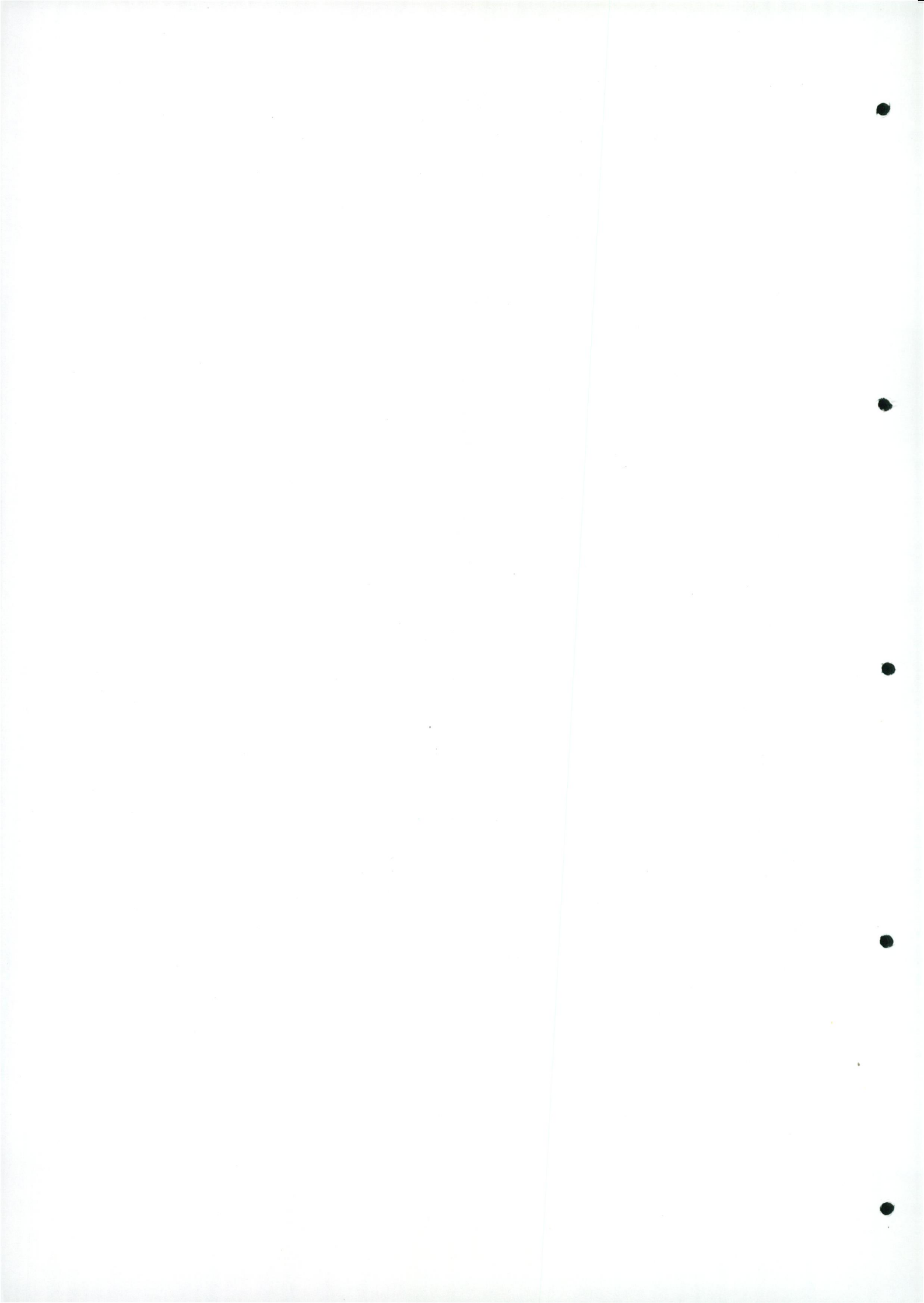


Although not all of Nash's work is as intrinsically based on the unpredictable changes which will occur, he is always aware of these processes. He does not attempt to counteract or restrict the natural processes of cut wood, he uses this aspect as an intrinsic characteristic of nature. Whether in relation to the effects of earth, air, water or fire Nash always uses this interaction as a tool in order to change the wood. These interactions are all processes which begin the reintegration of his worked wood back into the earth.

Rather than make an object that resists the elements of nature, I try to find ways of engaging those elements so the object is continually active in the environment.

(Nash, 1990, p66.)

In 1979 Nash began working with condemned trees, these being ones which for various reasons had to be felled. He then laboured through a specific process to work the whole of the tree.



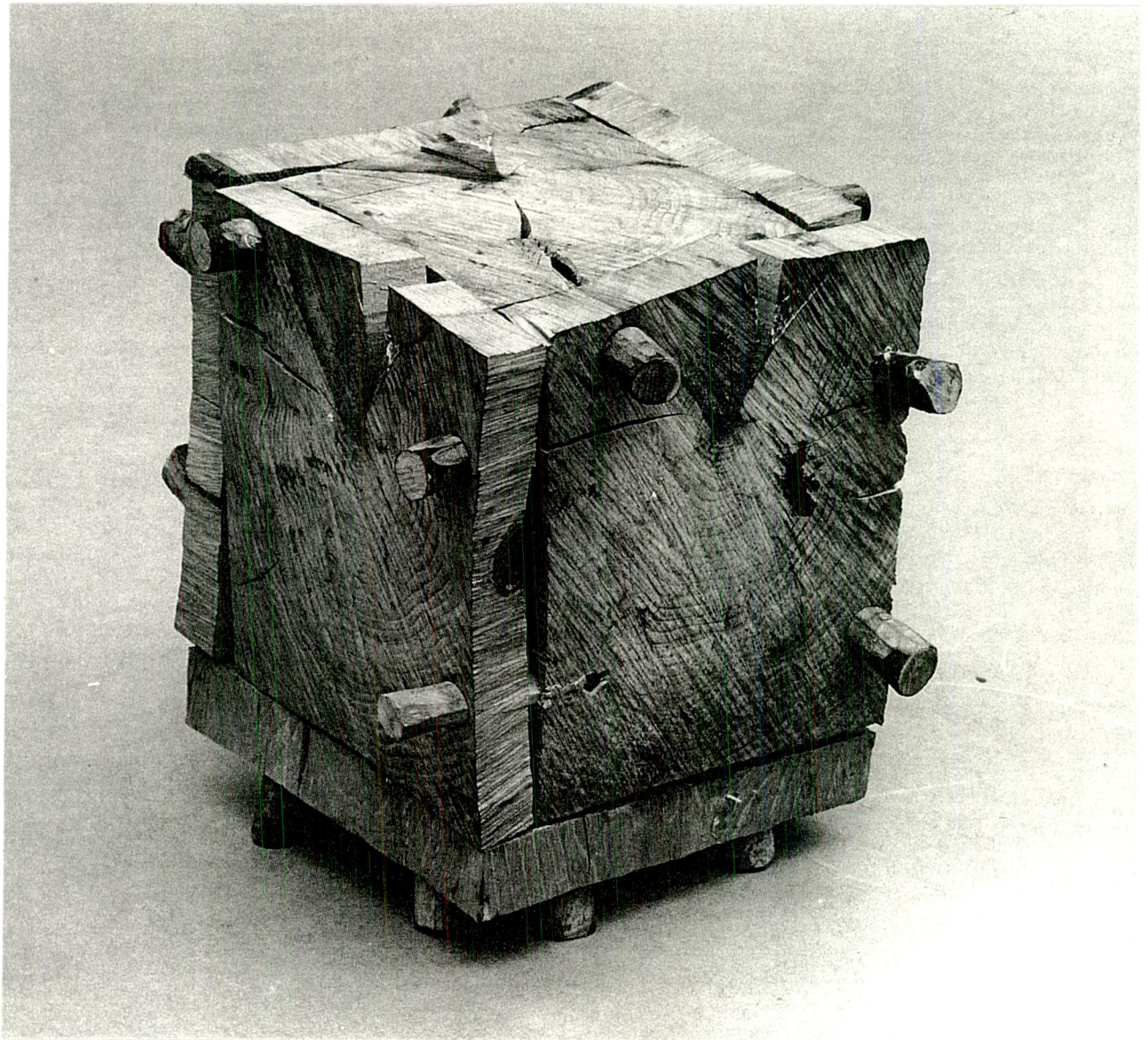


Plate 4. Cracking Box, 1979.



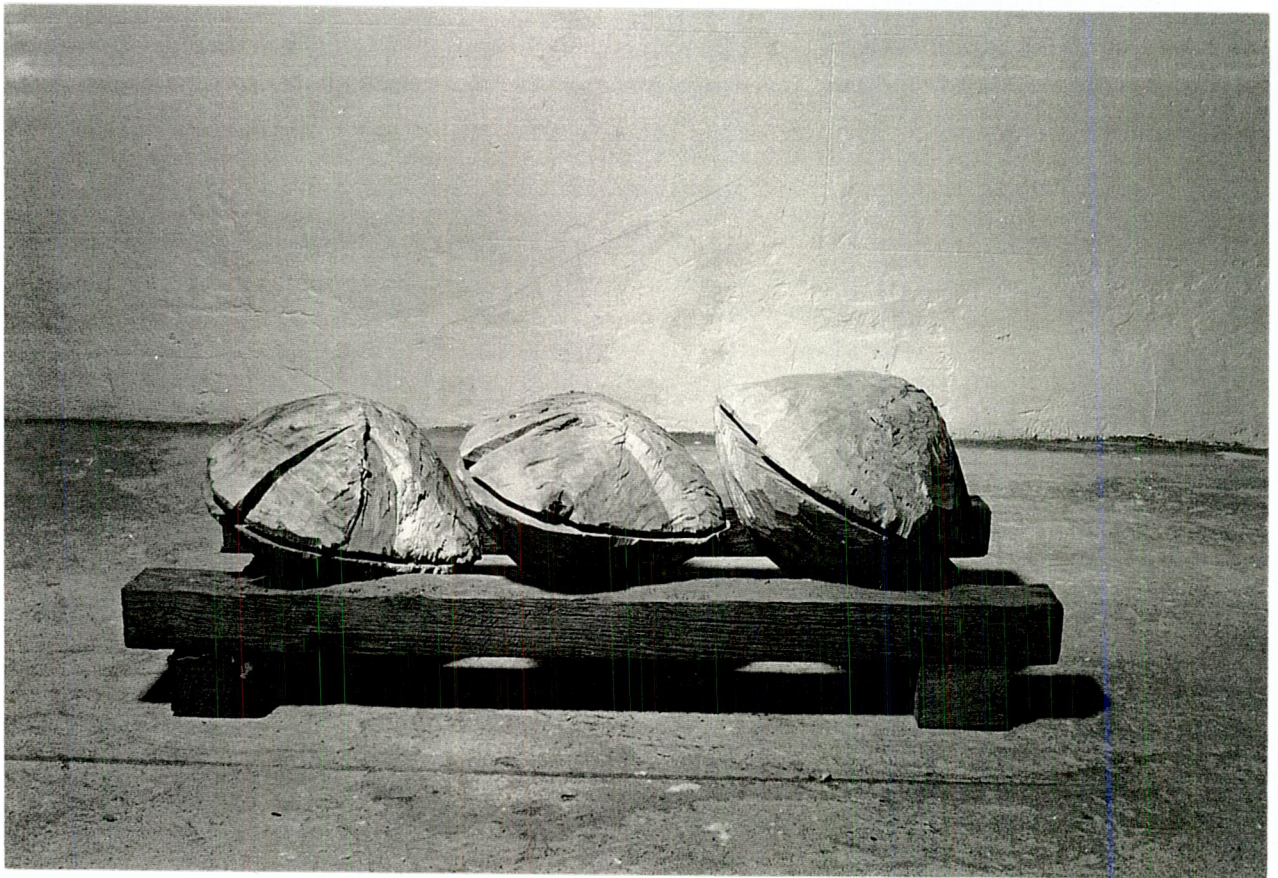


Plate 5. Three Clams on A Rack,  
1974.





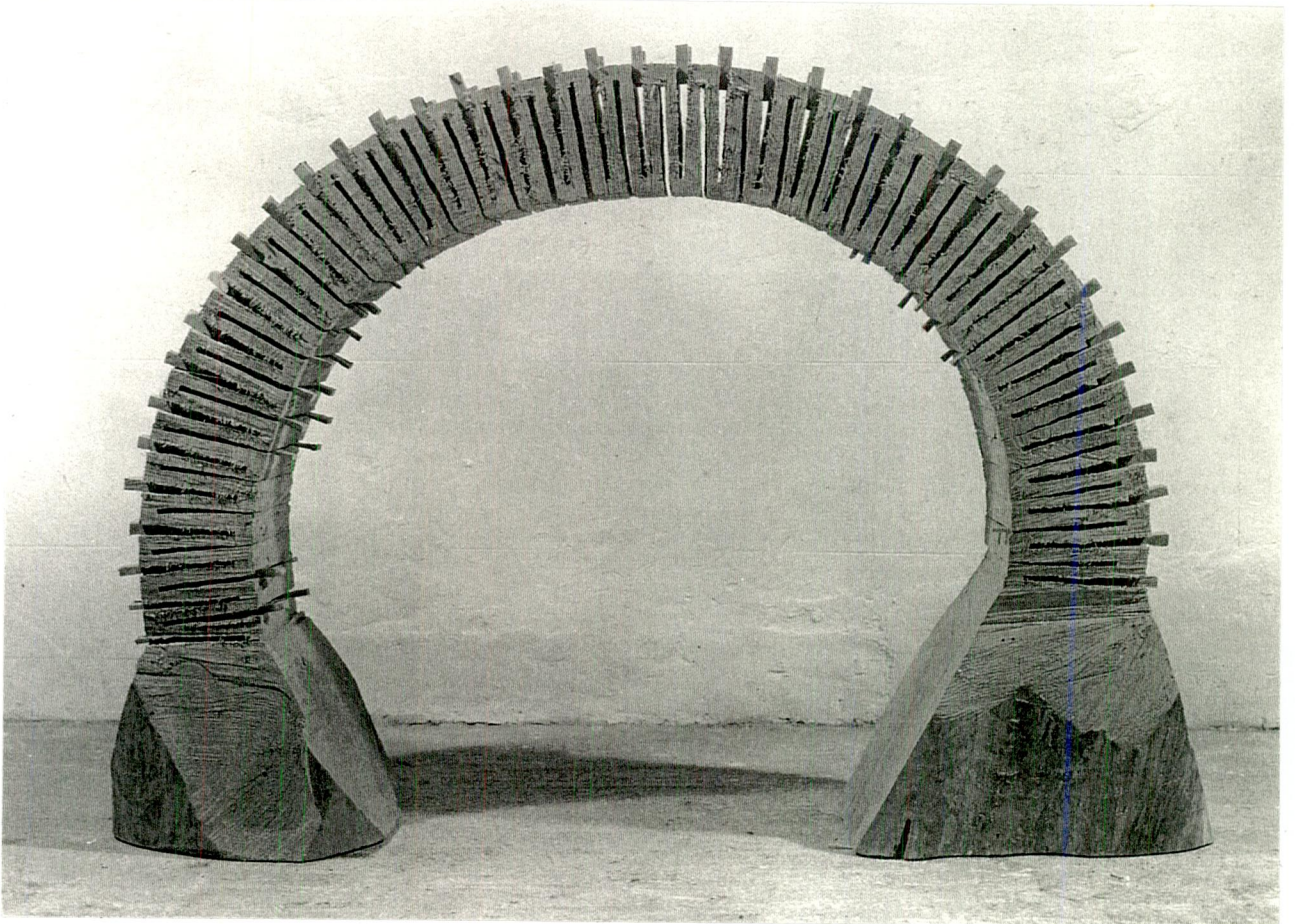


Plate 6. Elm Spring Arch, 1987

Briefly put, having selected his tree and felled it Nash stays with it camping near by, working all day every day until practically every element of the tree has been reconstituted as



sculpture; even the smallest twigs are burned in an oven made with local materials, thereby creating charcoal for drawing that retrospectively describe the whole process.

(Neff, 1987, P138.)

I envisage the sculpture gradually reintegrating with its environment, rotting down gradually, fungus, leaf mould, plants adding to its progress of return, leaving a vestige of the original form, a slight hump.

(Nash, 1990, p66.)

This attitude leads to Nash's early abandonment of varnish, paint or any other wood preservative which would aim to counteract the process of reintegration of the wood into the earth. His work from this early stage is made in conjunction with the natural processes which will eventually conquer the wood and absorb it completely.

The more I look at the tree, the more I see the tree; its space and location, its volume and structure, its engineering and balance. More than that I see the uniqueness of every single tree, and beyond that still I see it as a great emblem of life. A potent vibrant tower, a whirling prayer wheel of natural energy.

(Nash, 1984, p135.)

Due to the fact that Nash's outdoor work is transient, his photography plays an important documentary role. He does not use this as a process by which to enhance or change the forms, the photograph here is used for direct documentation. Many of his outdoor projects are photographed many times, in different seasons and in various states of disrepair. "Wooden Boulder" (pl.7), was also photographed in different

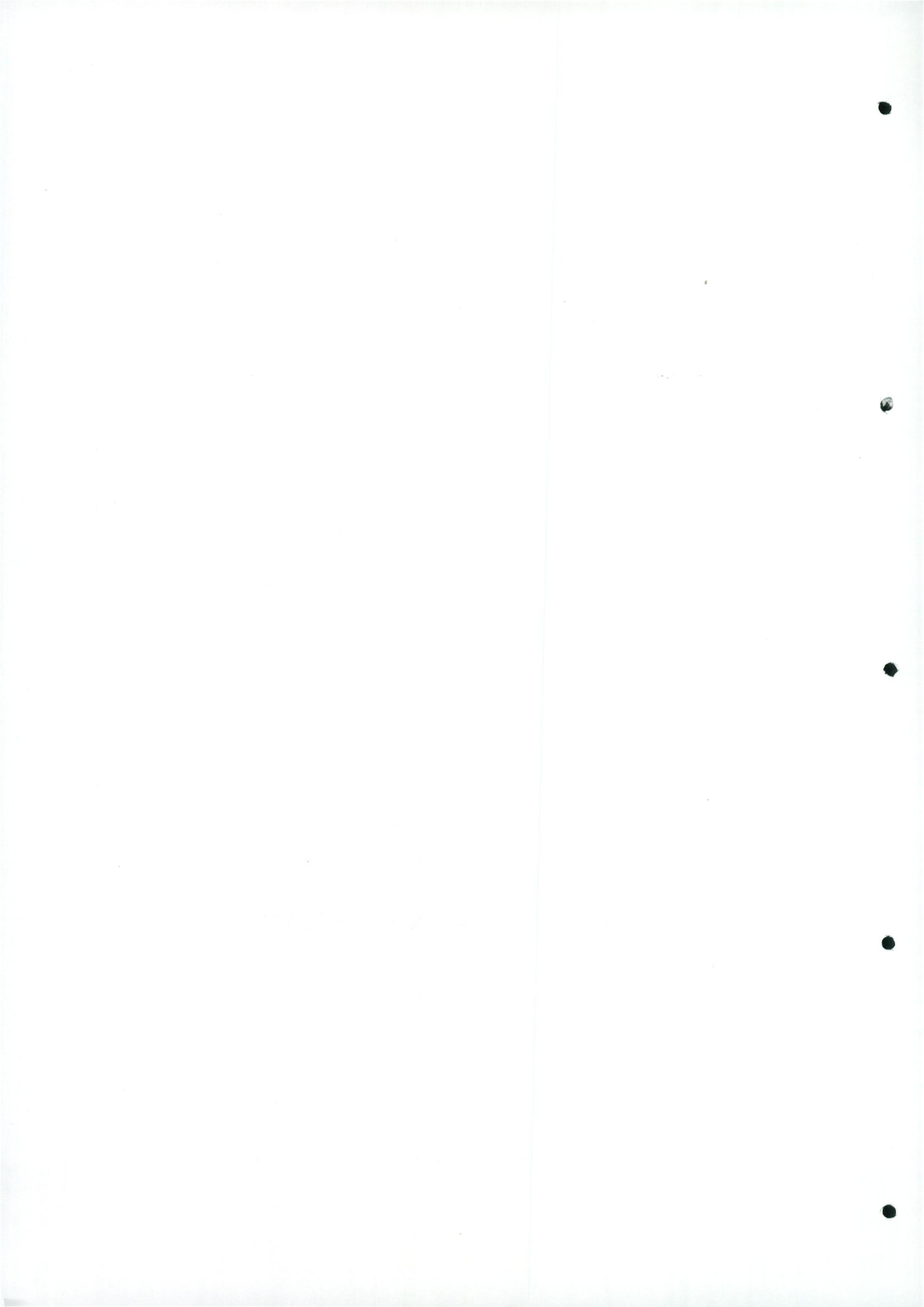




Plate 7. Wooden Boulder, 1978.

locations on its journey down a stream near Nash's home. This method of direct documentation is common to artists mentioned previously such as Drury and Goldsworthy. As Goldsworthy said of this process:



I use standard film, lenses and no filters.... each work grows, stays, decays, -integral parts of a cycle which the photograph shows at its height marking the moment when the work is most alive

(Goldsworthy, 1990, p9.)

This almost routine action of documentation is more accurate a record than a drawing. The point at which the first photograph is taken marks the end of a piece's construction. The process of change and reintegration of the work begins then and it may be photographed at many stages before its eventual demise. The photograph however is not the purpose of his work, it is simply necessary to show evidence of his interaction with a particular site which would otherwise disappear. Obviously the sites Nash works are made to be directly seen and interacted with, and this is preferable to consumption of only the photographic image.

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## Chapter three:

**Some Incongruities.**

In 1977 David Nash began a project that was to prove a major change in his working process. He initiated the project "Ash Dome" (pl.8), near his home in Blaenau Ffestiniog. This project saw a departure for him due to the fact that he was now using growing trees which was of course contrary to his previous practice of using only cut wood. This project was a circle of tree saplings planted in order to eventually form a living dome of ash trees. The dome form would be achieved by fletching the trees, three times at ten year intervals persuading the dome shape. The project would take approximately thirty years to mature and should last for seventy years after that. Nash envisaged a living dome of trees which would grow completely intertwined with each other. On the exterior, leaves would create a canopy which would shade the interior dome. The lack of light would prevent leaves or branches encroaching on the dome shaped space of the interior.

The departure from using exclusively cut wood marked a radical change in his working practice. The twenty two ash trees were to be bent and incised, according to English tradition in order to manipulate them into the form which Nash would attempt to create. The fletching was necessary because the trees would naturally grow their own way which would not create a dome. In his process he is attempting to manipulate growth. This restriction of the tree is a process which does not work in harmony



with the natural elements. Now he is attempting to alter the growth of the wood itself.

Ironically "Ash Dome" has not worked out as planned. The trees grew wildly out of shape and needed far more manipulation than Nash had anticipated or was comfortable with.



Plate 8. Ash Dome, 1977.



Undaunted he then went about creating a living dome by means hopefully more effective than fletching. Bushes were planted around the new circle of trees to force the trees to grow inwards in search of light. In this way he was using light as the tool of manipulation but the very fact that his desire was to manipulate is incongruous in relation to his other approaches. Hugh Adams wrote that Nash created

nothing stranger....than the tortured  
shapes of trees bent by prevailing  
winds or the plant forcing its way  
through hard rock.

(Adams, 1983, P20.)

This statement is an underestimation of the amount of interference which is needed to create a living dome of trees. A tree's growth is subject to many natural forces which determine its form. When these processes are exaggerated to such an extent as in "Ash Dome" they become an aggressive infringement on the tree's growth. Nash's second attempt at creating a living dome, as mentioned previously, involves planting fast growing bushes placed around the circle of trees. Although this is not as invasive as fletching, it still aims to manipulate the growth of the living tree.

This work is not simply an extension of natural processes, it is a violation of the very form which Nash has so admired.

The more I look at the tree, the more I see the tree, its volume and structure, its engineering and balance. More than that I see the uniqueness of each single tree and beyond that still I see it as a great emblem of life. A potent tower, a



whirling tower prayer wheel of natural energy.

(Nash, 1979, p135.)

This statement from Nash implies a certain reverence towards the living tree and yet soon after he began his strategy of interference. He justifies this drastic change in his process by explaining that man's interaction with nature is not intrinsically unnatural. He also explains that this new work is no more than what already exists in nature. In doing so the question is raised about the reason for attempting to copy nature. He appreciates natural growth and the strange forms it can create, yet in this project he attempts to construct replicas of nature to a specific design of his own. It is the adaptation of natural materials and form that create meaning, but in this instance he strays from this ethos.

Nash's strengths lie in his relationship to the wood which he works, this is where his most successful work lies. When he broadened his parameters to include working living trees it was one too many steps off the path he created for himself. It is therefore appropriate that although he gained recognition for "Ash Dome" he readily admits that it did not work out as he intended. His most successful works do not attempt to mimic nature, they stand aside as manmade objects but as such they harmonise with nature. His work at best moves in parallel with nature but in "Ash Dome" he attempted to create a version of nature which was doomed to failure from its conception. "It has always been one of the risks of romantic art that the artist ends up playing god". (Macmillan, 1983, p8.)

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Stuart Morgan talking about Nash (and Vilmouth) said that;

In the best of their art they aren't sitting down and deciding to make art they're making something because they cant help it and because it needs doing.

(Grayson, 1983, p94)

This is when Nash's work is most successful. In relation to artists such as Nash, Goldsworthy and Drury their work is successful when it does not degenerate into simply mimicking nature. The use of nature to create a work which exists with nature is beneficial, but art must always retain its autonomy. If an artist strives to have his work merge into nature then meaning is automatically lost. As Nash himself said;

While natural branch and twig shapes are beautiful in themselves....it is transformation that creates meaning. The objects I make are vessels for the presence of the human being, aware and surrendering to the realities of nature.

(Nash, 1989, p179.)

The work of such artists as Nash can be seen to have many components and throughout his life he has concerned himself with different aspects of man's interaction with nature. "It is the quick dodge into gentility that makes all issues harmless". (Macmillan, 1983, p8.) This statement is true for some of his work but it does not accurately describe it all. When Nash wanders away from his main ethos and technique his work is definitely weak and picturesque. His central themes and methods are



strong and powerful but when he ventures into areas such as the work with living trees he falters.

Nash also worked on a series of projects involving functional domestic objects such as chairs and tables. Although these are often cited as being playful aspects of his work they are far from being central to his aims. These projects are illustrations of whimsical ideas which do not obtain any of the power or impact of the main body of his work. Biomorphic forms are helped to emerge from the wood but they are never allowed take from the original form of the tree, an example of which is "Running Table" (Oak) (pl.9), from 1978. "Branch Table" (pl.10), 1977 is an example of one of a series Nash has made which is relatively separate from his main body of work. This object based on a table employs our preconceptions about the use of wood in the domestic situation. The origin of the wood when displayed as a functional object is often overlooked, here Nash is reminding us of the table's origin.

One of Nash's strengths is the powerful way he displays his works which have a certain austere impact. In his series of tables and chairs for indoor exhibition the objects have lost this attention seeking impact. These works are not confined to one specific period of time, he seems to return to them as he does for other more successful projects.





**Plate 9. Running Table, 1978.**

In 1977 he produced "Branch Table" and yet again in 1985 in Australia he produced a similar work entitled "Table and Chair", (ELM) (pl.11). This is a recurring project but it does not possess the intrinsic link to the natural processes which most of Nash's work benefits from. Another of his works based on the table was made in 1983. "Ancient Table" (pl.12), was constructed from centuries old oak. This inert wood was intrinsically different from the freshly cut



trees which he worked both before and after "Ancient Table". The age and condition of this wood was unusual for Nash and yet this work retains a certain presence gained by scale and the timeless nature of this specifically simple table. He has not endeavoured to change the wooden form so much as to make it intrinsically different from the raw material that went into its making. The weight of this table also links it with so many of his other works which all retain a strong bond to the initial mass of the tree from whence they all originated.





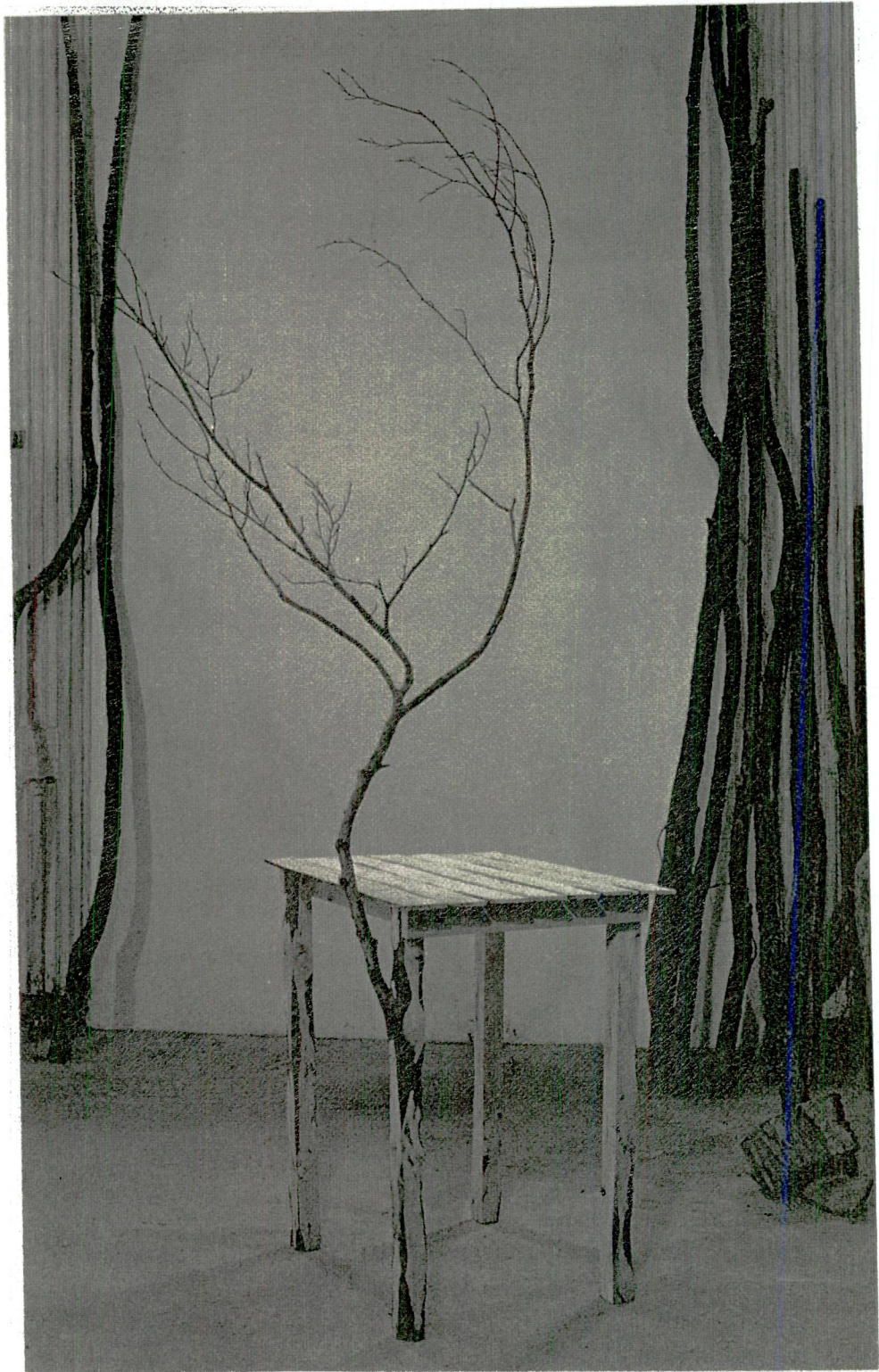


Plate 10. Branch Table, 1978.



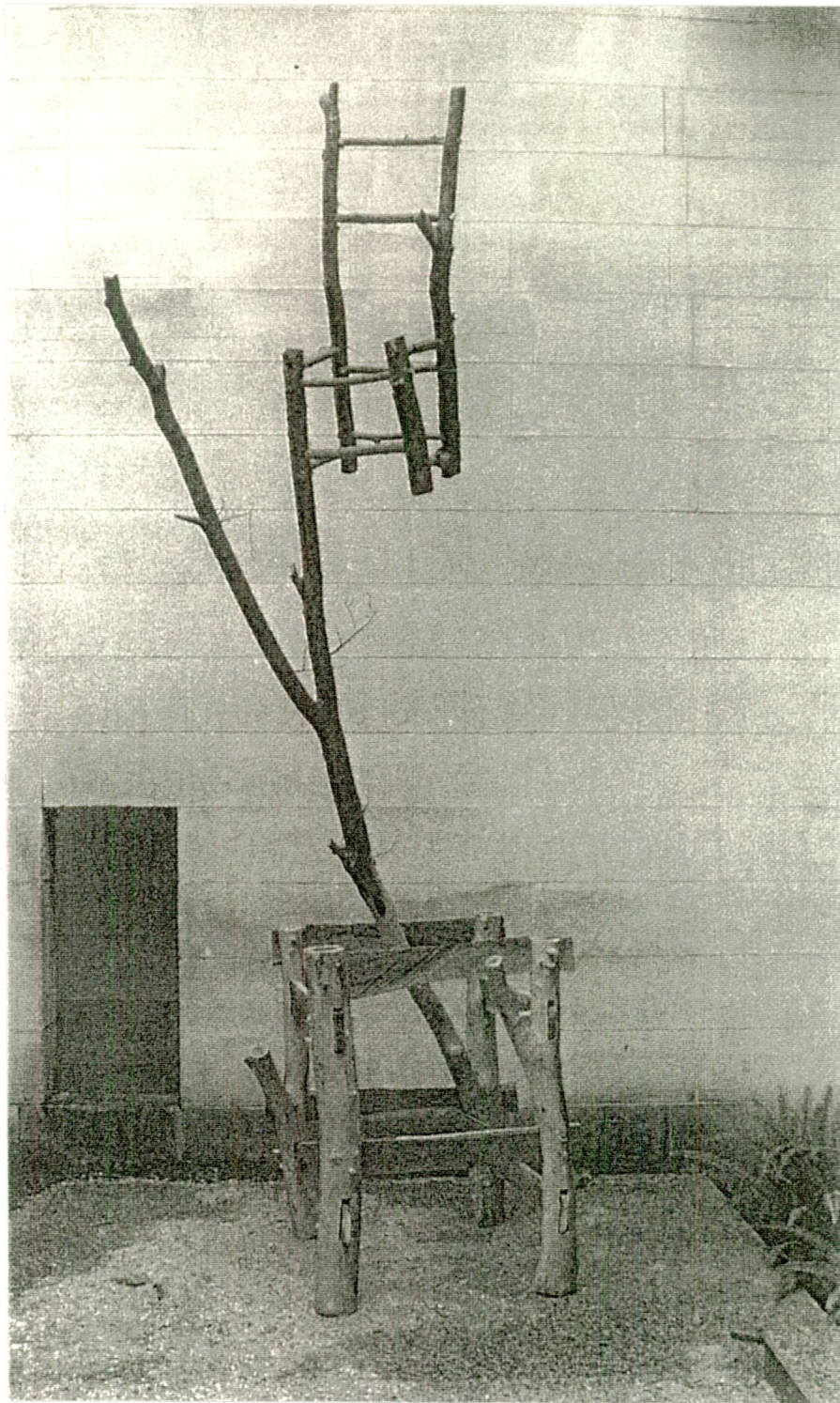


Plate 11. Table and Chair, (elm) 1985.





Plate 12. Ancient Table, 1983.





Plate 13. Cube, Sphere, Pyramid. 1993.







Plate 14. Crack and Warp Column, 1986.

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As mentioned previously Nash involves himself in projects which demand his attention over large periods of time such as "Ash Dome". He also returns to specific works and creates slightly different versions of them years later. Examples of such works are "Cube, Sphere, Pyramid", (pl.13), "Cracking Box" and his versions of "Crack and Warp Column", (pl.14). This return to a recurring form does not comply with the notion of an ever evolving work practice. Although these works span periods of time of up to twelve years they show no recognisable progression of thought. These works would seem to make more sense if they had been made concurrently and shown as a group of works in exhibition.

The series of similar works based on the "Pyramid, Sphere, and Cube" are recurring works. In this instance however a progression is evident, each piece seems to have grown from its predecessor. The "Cube, Sphere, Pyramid" of 1993 is the culmination of many projects involving these forms. This is not to say that this is the last of its kind, presumably it will reoccur and progress still further. "Cracking Box" from 1979 is one of Nash's well known works, it has also been followed by "Cracking Box" 1996 (pl.15). This reconstruction of form is only of benefit if it involves evolution. Although the "Cracking Box" of 1996 is made of different wood, this is not enough of a change to justify its reconstruction. Unless a change involving a significant progression of ideas is incorporated into such a series the latter work becomes meaningless.

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Duncan Macmillan, in a review of an exhibition by Nash in Edinburgh, is critical of his work on many grounds. Macmillan notes that the work creates associations of a shaman-like sculptor and that the result does not live up to the expectations. Nash is described as a "sheepish little man". (Macmillan, 1983, p9.) This incongruity, as it is described, is only evident if the viewer presumes that Nash is an inappropriate author of the dialogue he initiates with the wood. Nash's language is that of the material he works, he is no performer, his work is made to stand alone.

What is needed is not such a simple declaration but an act of persuasion. The artist has to convince us that he has discovered something that interests us all. A perception that is urgent because without it our lives will be the poorer.

(Macmillan, 1983, p2.)

Here Macmillan is assuming that in order for meaning to be communicated it must be done in a forceful, aggressive manner. It is true that elements of Nash's work can be viewed as being simply bland, but to say this is true for all his work is an injustice.





Plate 15. Cracking Box, 1996.

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"Any intellectual problems that Nash's work creates are born of the perception of art." (Adams, 1983, p9.) To work lyrically within nature and its processes is not intrinsically gentle and picturesque. Nash uses natural materials and processes to create his works but to say they are gentle and bland is to have a very polarised view of art and nature.

Wood is clearly at the centre of Nash's thoughts, this fact works both for and against his work. It ensures that some people, Macmillan included, view his work as being nice and charming. This however is due to their view of art in relation to nature. To view wood, it is obviously natural and to be admired as such, but this should not be permitted to be the only interpretation of the specific sculptural object. There is more than just the natural depicted in his work. To say that he simply works nature romantically is an underestimation of both his process and people's interaction with the outcomes of his work. It is not good enough to admire the skill of a sculptor through his objects, nor is it sufficient to blindly buy into the 'natural material is beautiful' ethos. In relation to Nash we are not asked to do either of the above. His is a process of work which engages us on more than simply the superficial or picturesque level.

Nash creates work either specifically for an exhibition space or for a particular site in the environment.

The object outside has to contend with unlimited space, uneven ground and the weather. The sculpture I show inside is meant to be seen inside, it relates to the limited

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space, the peculiar scale, and  
the still air.

(Neff, 1987, p136.)

These two processes are relatively separate areas to his practice creating different outcomes. When Nash works in the outdoors his work strives to be seen in harmony with nature, this can be seen clearly in "Wooden Waterway" (pl.16). This approach tends to draw attention away from the work as an art object and allows the work integrate with its surroundings. Any object imported into the gallery space undergoes transformation to an art object but it still "retains echoes of the formative forces, active in the living tree". He uses this inevitable process to present the viewer with an alternative to his outdoor work. The indoor work is not representative of all of his concerns. In the gallery his wood gains a new identity which is constructed in relation to its new surroundings. The natural characteristics of the wood are exaggerated when placed in the almost clinical interior, that is the gallery.

Entering sculpture's world is like going through the looking glass, everything becomes strange, everything turns into sculpture. This is what it's like going into a sculptor's studio, or a gallery exhibiting recent sculpture. The familiar materials and objects which we think are nothing in themselves....are picked out by the sculptor and treated as treasures.

(Chapman, 1977, p82.)

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**Plate 16. Wooden Waterway, 1978.**

Nash uses this view of the sculpture object when he exhibits in galleries. He abandons this ethos when working in the environment preferring to make work which does not draw attention to itself as being an art object. In exhibition he displays many works in close proximity, individual pieces which are then viewed in relation to the others in sight. This reading of a piece beside another is a process which does not occur in his outdoor work as there he constructs only single works. Nash's indoor exhibits

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inevitably become components of a single installation, the works are viewed in relation to each other. The effect is to enhance the display in value beyond the sum of its features.

An interesting aspect of the way in which he exhibits work in a gallery is his technique of drawing the form which is on display with charcoal from the charred form. The form is shown with the drawing behind it on the wall. This he has done on different occasions from "Pyramid in the sticks" (p.17), 1983 to "Cube, Sphere, Pyramid" 1993. This is the last stage of the work's evolution which began as it was felled. This evolution involved the burning of the wood which gave him both the new form and also the media through which he could represent the work in two dimensions. It is important to say however that just as his photographs are not his objective neither are the drawings which are not displayed without the original forms being in view.

This method of display can also be seen in the work of Giuseppe Penone. This Italian artist involves himself with "Constructing an object of aesthetic investment that is the fruit of the balance between human labour and earthly energy" (Celant, 1989, p.10). In the accompanying photograph it is interesting to notice how he has used both the actual three dimensional forms and their two dimensional representations.





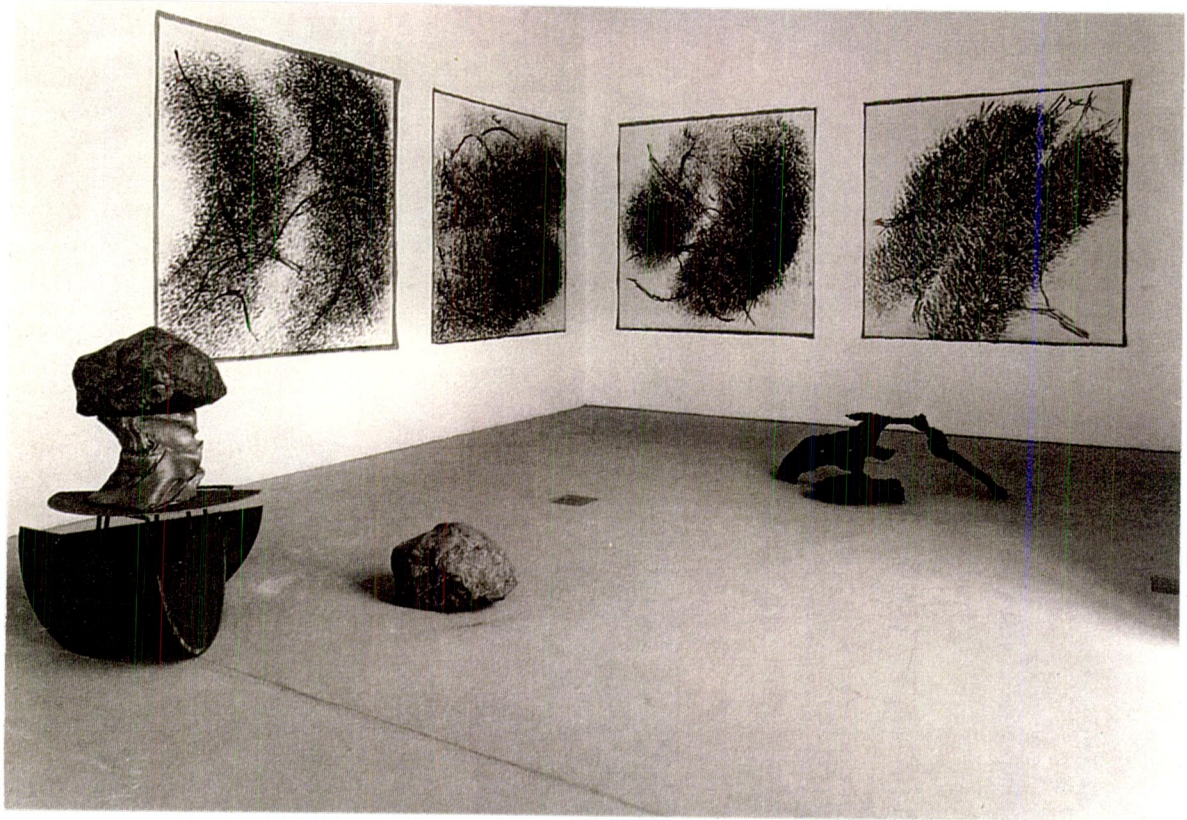


Plate no.17, To be A River, 1981.

Giuseppe Penone.

In Penone's instance he is not rendering them as they are seen, as Nash does. Penone represents the rocks by taking rubbings, a process which creates a distorted image of the exterior of the form. The process of rubbing also transfers the tactility of the stone to the paper, which is then displayed on the wall behind the original as seen in a number of Nash's works such as "Cube, Sphere, Pyramid".

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One of the major recurring themes in Nash's work, as mentioned previously, is the reintegration of his work into the earth. This can be illustrated clearly in projects such as "Wooden Boulder", "Black Dome" and "Wooden Waterway". "Wooden Boulder" was formed with a chainsaw in 1978. It is oak of approximately four feet in diameter, cut to a rough polygon. It was lowered into a stream in Maentwrog near Nash's home and allowed to be manipulated by the changing powers of the stream. Nash had envisaged it being gradually brought down stream with the flow but this has happened only to a limited extent. It now lies in a shallow pool of water which dries out in the summer and flows with flood waters in winter. It is taking on the appearance of a stone, blackened by the weather. The boulder is bound to be well preserved for many years due to the fact that water acts as a wood preservative when the wood is kept wet. This wooden boulder has been adopted by the river, which has changed it in appearance to such an extent that it could be mistaken for a rock naturally occurring in the stream.

"Black Dome" is another very interesting project, arising from his term as artist in residence in the Grizedale forest in 1978. Here Nash often found the remnants of charcoal burning sites which had long since fallen out of use. The sites were in various stages of reintegration, some of which were only barely discernible.





Plate 18. Pyramid in the sticks, 1983.



The sites had become simply mounds of vegetation but it was a specific range of plants that grew, directly due to the amount of carbon deposited from the charcoal burning of years before. These sites were significant in so far as they were evidence of a local historical, interaction of people with the land.

Nash also found these charcoal sites in the Forest of Dean where he sited his work "Black Dome" in 1986. This project involved the cutting of nine hundred logs of larch to different lengths of up to one metre. Each log was cut and tapered with a chainsaw and then charred. Charring wood preserves it to a certain extent but as seen from charcoal burning sites it also acts as an effective source of carbon on which many species of plants flourish. The logs were arranged according to length and placed on their ends to form a neat black dome. They were wired into place to save the dome from movement which would alter the form. The dome is twenty five feet in diameter. The sides of the logs have been colonised by mosses and are now a rich green colour. What Nash

had not envisaged was visitor's desire to walk over the dome, and by so doing polishing it. On a recent visit it seemed like a stroked cat. It will be interesting to see how this added element effects the reintegration.

(Nash, 1990, p66.)

This development, although unforeseen, is simply another process which adds to the pace of this work's reintegration with the earth. His work is not meant to be fenced off, it exists in relation to

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interaction, whether that be from the elements, animals or in this case from people.

David Nash built "Wooden Waterway" in 1978 in the Grizedale forest. He was interested in the systems of the forest floor which was covered in moist humus and the vegetation of many species. The relationship between the trees, the ground, and the water being used by both intrigued him. The surface of the forest changed in relation to the amount of water available in the earth. In the winter it was continually spongy and wet while in the summer the ground became much firmer. He planned a system of running waterways which travelled along wood which was as always from the site. He located a water source and arranged logs and roots downhill from there. He created grooves along the wood so as to create a canal-like flow of water moving down the incline from log to log. He also availed of stumps of trees and their roots before allowing the water to pour off the wood and disappear into the ground.

The Wooden Waterway has lasted years beyond expectation. Walkers who notice it and sometimes follow its course have been repairing it, realigning sections that have come adrift, cleaning out stones and leaves.

(Nash.1984,p102.)

This is an illustration of interactions the public had with a work of Nash's where they actively attempted to preserve the fruit of his labour. Here his work and intentions have not only been respected but also admired to such an extent as to involve the public in sustaining the life of the Wooden Waterway.

Nash's outdoor works have lifespans varying from decades in the case of "Ash Dome" right down to

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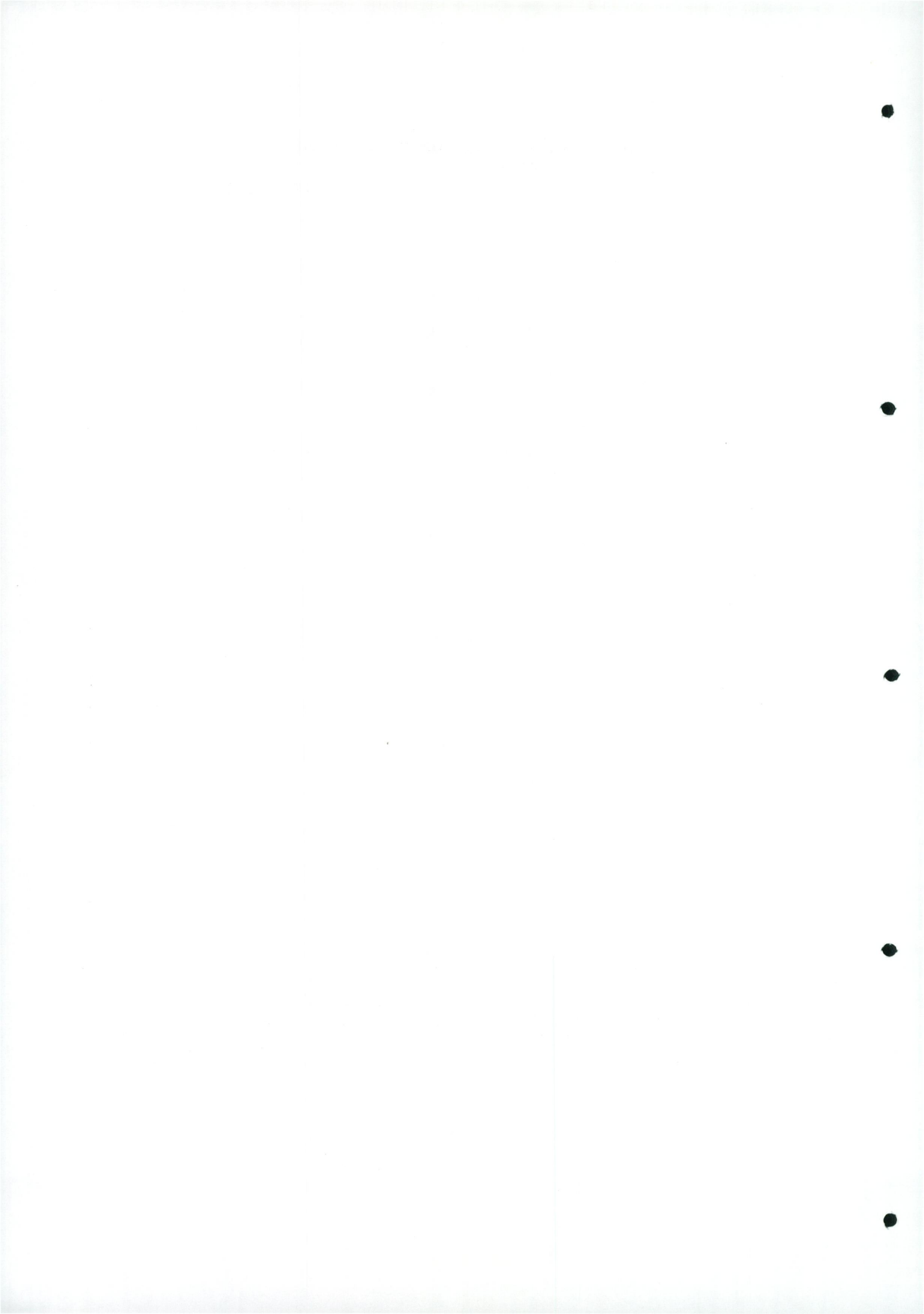
a few hours with "Snow Stove" (pl.18), Japan in 1982. He does not specifically attempt to create work which only lasts very short periods of time. The natural processes he employs determine the longevity of the works. Although this is the case it seems that a work with a lifespan of just hours implies a certain triviality. It is accepted that Nash does not make permanent art objects and yet it is difficult to afford his extremely transient works importance. The natural processes he employs such as wood warping, cracking or disintegrating in the environment all take place relatively gradually. In the instance of his stove series the fire is a destructive force. In his latter works involving fire he uses its transformational properties of changing wood to carbon. In works such as "Black Dome" and "Nature to Nature" (pl.19), 1990, he uses a fire as a means by which to create, whereas in his stove series the fire was an end in itself.

When Nash worked in Japan it was recognised that his work bore many similarities to that of Japanese artists. Historically, western artists have viewed raw materials as resources to be exploited in the creation of an art object. This is not Nash's view, neither is it that of many Japanese artists as is exemplified by the following quotations from Chuichi Fujii and Kimio Tsuchiya respectively,

I believe that wood is essentially, no different from humans: it breathes air, it cries. If I am responsive to wood, then it will also be responsive to me.

(Fox, 1991, p29.)

It is as though the wood is part of myself, as though the wood has the



same level of life force ....wood is  
not just matter.

(Fox, 1991, p30)

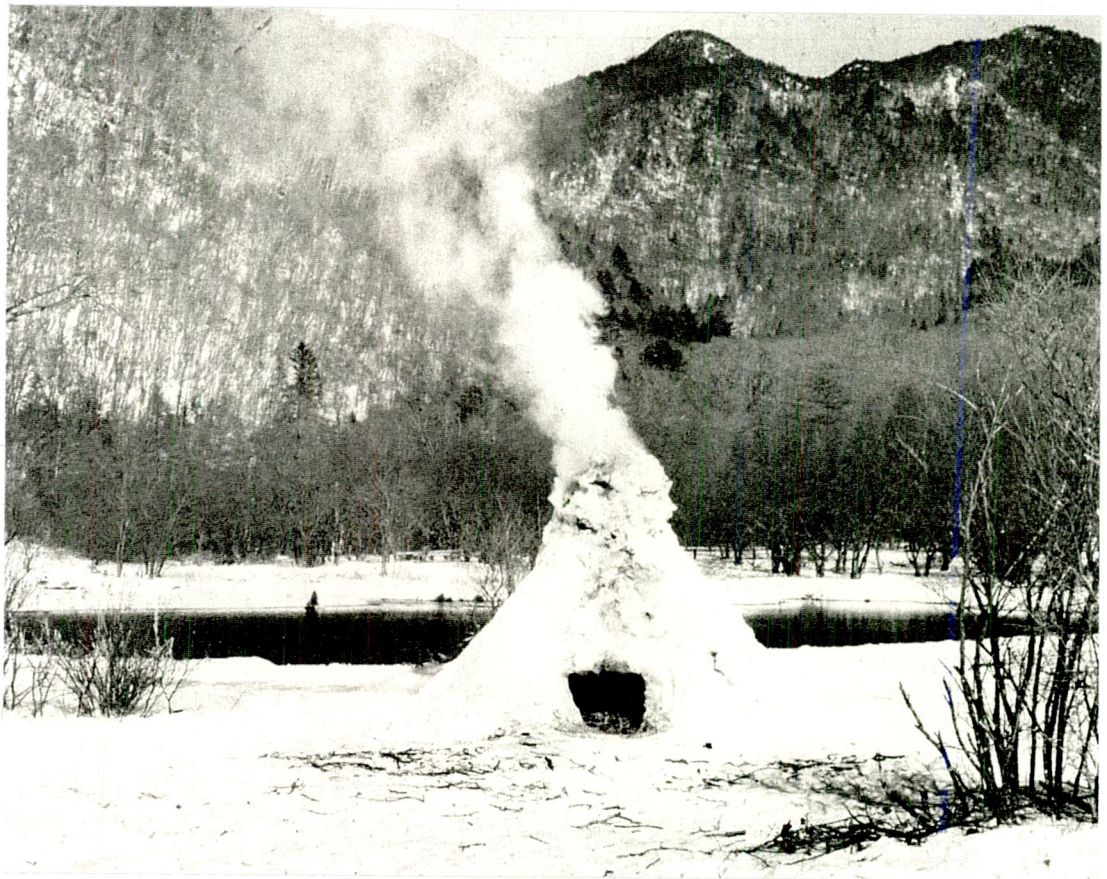


Plate 19. Snow Stove, 1982.



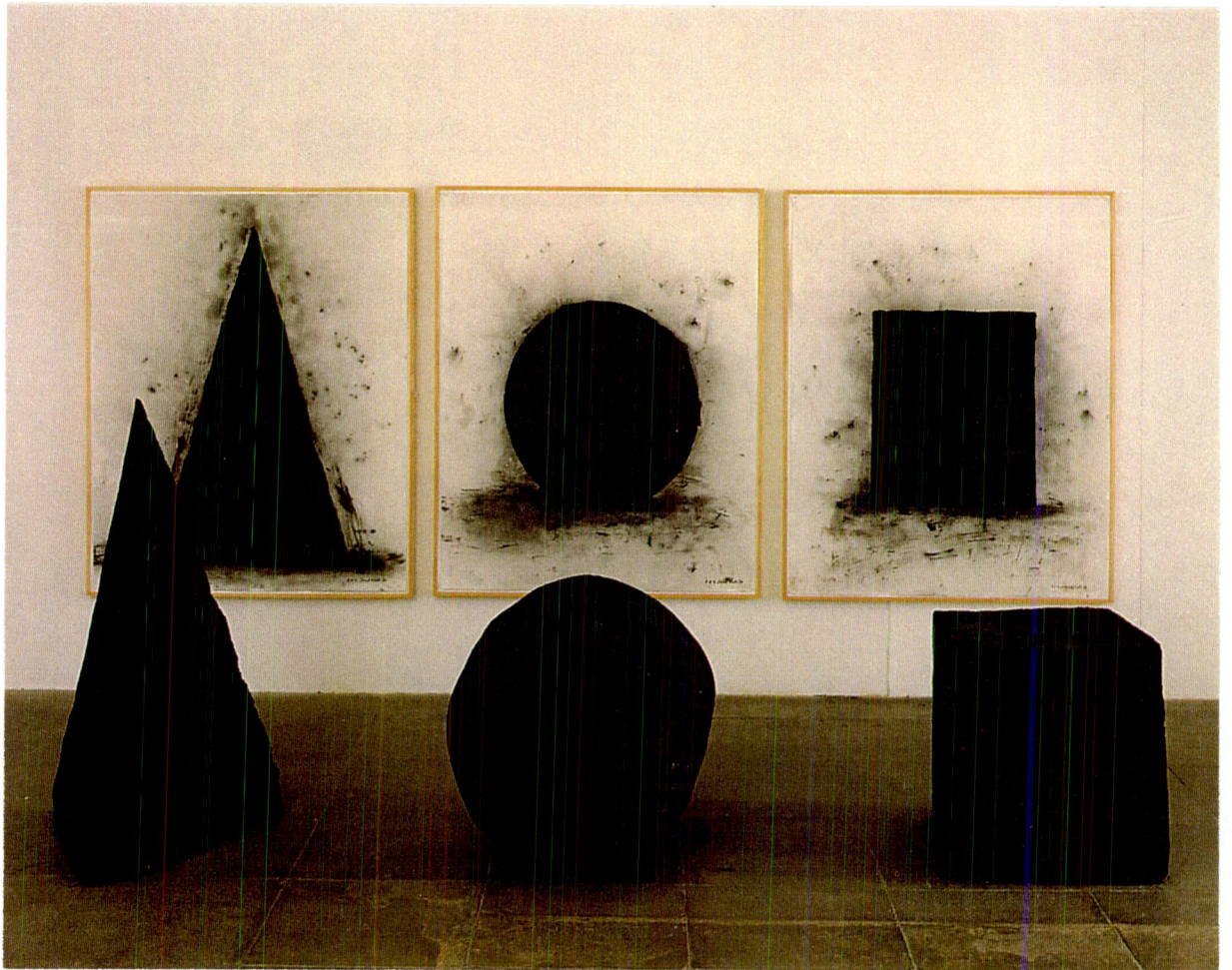


Plate 20. Nature to Nature, 1990.

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This ethos is only recently becoming common among Western artists. The work of Nash and Japanese artists such as Toshikatsu Endo originate from inherently different cultural histories and yet have striking similarities. The importance of the process as opposed to the art object is primary to the works.

Endo uses the process of charring in much the same way as Nash, he burns but does not obliterate. A new form is created, composed of an altered material, with the change from wood to carbon always dramatic. "Epitaph Cylindrical II" (pl.20), is a project of Endo's in which the process is of paramount importance. Here the process involves the charring of a large cylindrical form, the action is documented and the resulting form is displayed, this being a similar process to that of Nash. The Japanese artists mentioned previously also use primarily uncomplicated forms and unadorned surfaces as Nash does himself. This similarity is reflected in the reoccurrence of many simple forms such as the sphere, the circle, and the cube.

One such similarity is seen when comparing Toya Shigeo's "Range of Mountains" (pl.21), and Nash's "Nine Cracking Balls". Nash's rough spheres began as simple forms which gained importance only after they dried out, becoming cracked. This was the impetus for many of his "uninhibited exploration" using the processes which accompany wood after it is felled. The resultant "Nine Cracked Balls" appear now as wood which is animate matter, the cracks have defied his axe-work and changed the forms. They are displayed in a grouping, each with its own space. These simple forms and their method of display is evident in





Plate 21. Epitaph Cylindrical II, 1990.  
Toshikatsu Endo.



Toya's work with one difference. Here Toya shapes the wood with a chainsaw the marks of which are specifically emphasised. He reworks the surface so as to create a pointed texture traversed by saw lines. This action is more invasive than that of Nash, but the physical similarity in these two outcomes is striking.

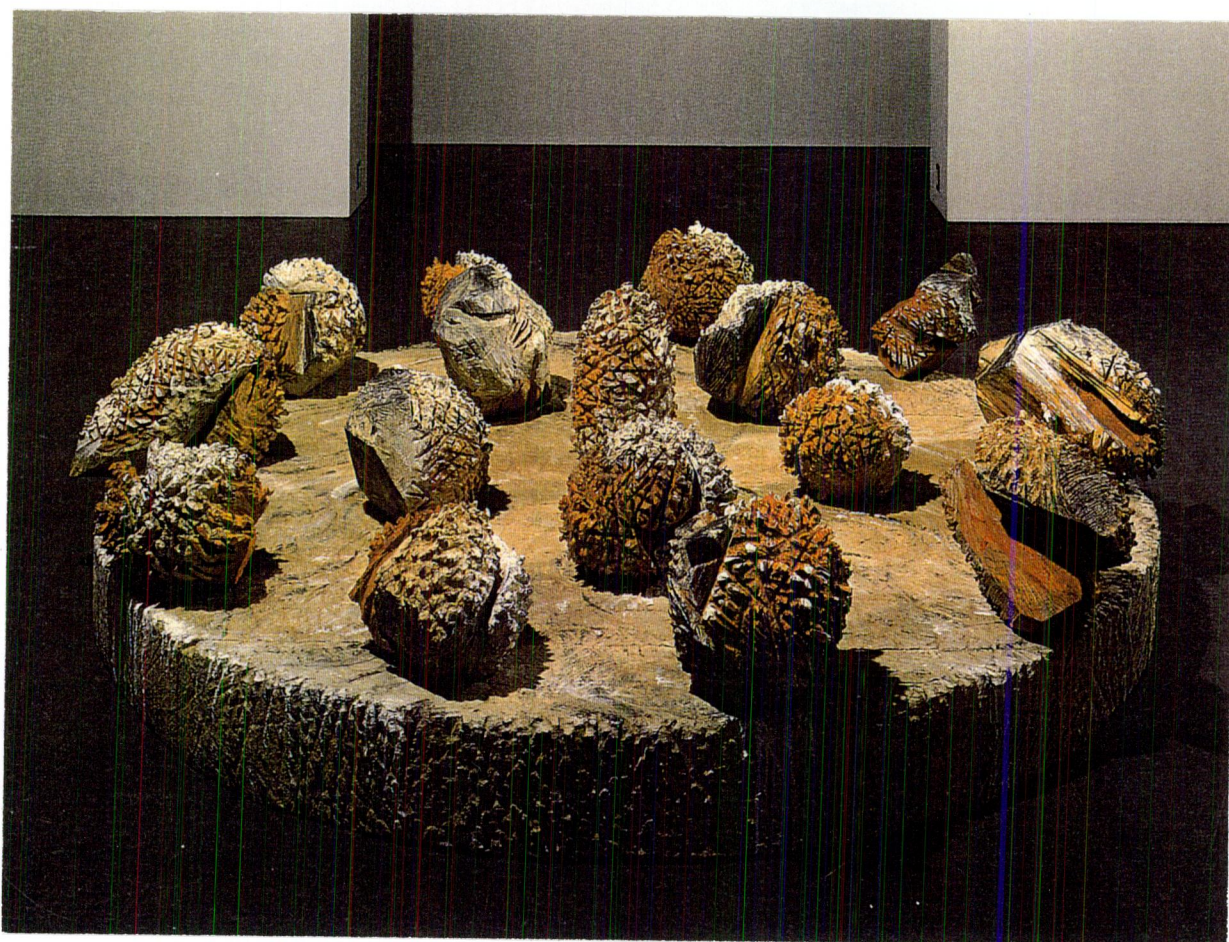


Plate 22. Range of Mountains, 1985.

Toya Shigeo.

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## Conclusion.

Nash works through a constant process which may not conform to the expected norm of a contemporary artist. He lives and works outside of the league of artists creating technologically advanced work and yet his is a practice with a very wide understanding and popularity. To call his work universal would be to underestimate cultural diversities but his work is not as limited to a specific culture as many artist's work is. His links to the rural landscape and its people are unwavering. His work consists of weak and strong points but it always grows from the evolving ethos of a man confident in his environment. His most successful work is made to harmonise with nature, but this interaction becomes interference when he attempts to manipulate living trees.

Nash situates himself living and working in rural Wales where he works through wood, challenging our understanding and views of nature.

An artist is the little kid who  
conducts an annoying personal  
inquisition into the most banal of  
adult assurances.

(Robert Clarke, 1996, p7.)

Nash does conform to this understanding of an artist, and he has chosen to confine himself to wood as a material which exemplifies the natural processes with which he is so attached. His "uninhibited exploration" allows freedom within his labour intensive practice. One of his aims is to allow his work reintegrate with nature, this is contrary to the

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tradition of permanent or semi-permanent artworks. Once convention is overcome the work can be viewed objectively. He works differently to most in so far as he works only through wood but this does not mean his work should be viewed separately to his contemporaries. With his distinctive process of work Nash differentiates himself from other artists and situates himself both within and beyond the gallery system. His work occupies an under valued position, which is as relevant now as it was at the beginning of his career. He "borrows" the wood from nature for only a short time, it then returns and merges with nature once more.

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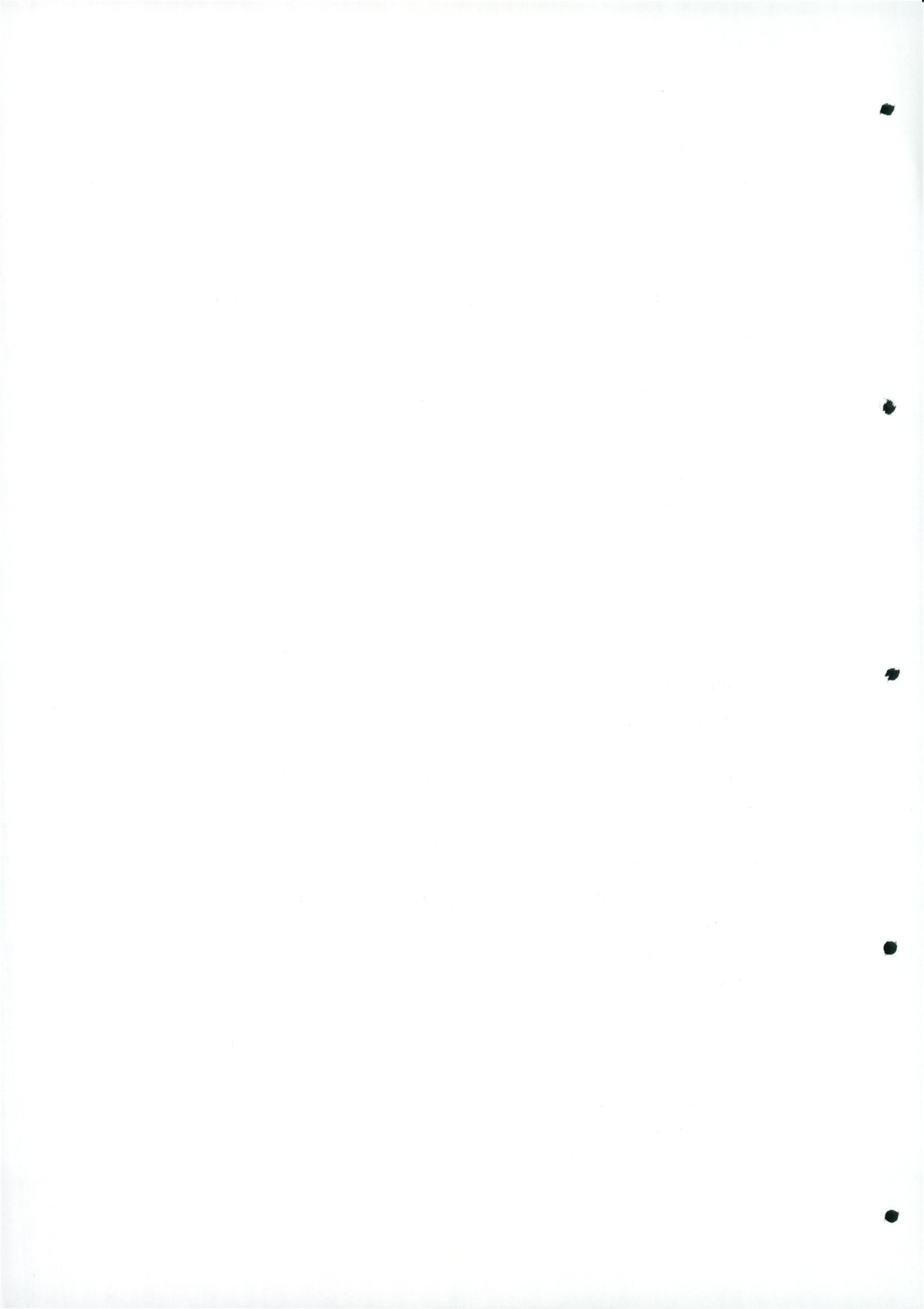
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