

REAL LIVING ART!

David Nash

Since the 1970s British sculptor David Nash has been involved with creating sculptures and living art installations the world over. He is perhaps best known for his sculptures that involve living elements, such as trees, whose growth has been redirected. The most notable of these include the *Ash Dome* (1977), a ring of twenty-two ash trees initiated near David Nash's home in Wales and still growing. Another such project, *Divided Oaks* (1985) done for the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, Holland, involves some six hundred trees. Nash has likewise created sculptures that involve interactions with animals as with *Sheep Space* (1993) for TICKON (Tranekaer International Center for Art and Nature) in Langeland, Denmark, and more recently for an organic sheep farm in Virginia. His mastery of wood carving is not purely formalist but often involves an extension or referencing of environment and history, as was the case for *Through the Trunk, Up the Branch* (1985) in Ireland or *Nine Charred Steps* (1988-89), enacted in Brussels, Belgium. Nash's work can equally be seen as an ephemeral expression of nature's ongoing processes. For *Wooden Boulder* (1978) the oak sculpture carving was left to follow its own course down a slope and then a stream. Over the years it moved hesitantly and according to the laws of nature and gravity along this river, though occasionally intervention has become necessary.

JG I first became familiar with your work because of the living circle of twenty-two ash trees called the *Ash Dome* you planted in the 1970s and which is still growing in the Ffestiniog Valley near your home in Wales. *Ash Dome* reflects an art whose language integrates nature's living processes into the art, of which we as human beings are a part. The later *Divided Oaks* project has that same breakthrough quality as *Ash Dome* for these works truly involve a crossover into horticulture, and ultimately a redefinition of the artistic process. To me these works pose a challenge to the postmodern ethos that art is somehow segregated, as are most disciplines from the flux and flow of life.

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DN In comparison with the *Ash Dome*, the trees for *Divided Oaks*, which is in a park at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, Holland, were already there. The soil there is very sandy and it is quite tough for plants to grow. There was a quarter acre of very scrubby oak trees that were not growing or developing. So that site was offered to me because they were going to pull all the trees out. There were probably six hundred trees. As they were so close to each other, though still alive they were not able to really grow. The annual growth was negligible. I thought that instead of pulling them all out and planting something anew, I would work with the existing trees. I made a division through them, angling one side to the east and one side to the west. They began with an open space and, at the end of this channel, the trees are crossing over. I had been invited to come and make something apt, make some sort of interaction that signalled the presence of the human being.

JG This kind of work admittedly demands some manipulation of nature. Do you prune the trees?

DN It is called fletching. The very small trees, I simply pushed over and put a stake to hold them, while for the larger ones I cut out a series of V-shapes, bent them over and then wrapped them so the cambium layer could heal over. Now this really woke these trees up. My intervention actually stimulated them, and they are obliged to grow. They are now growing and curving up.

JG The *Ash Dome* at Cae'n-y-coed in North Wales is another case of living tree art.

DN The *Ash Dome* was my first planting work. done on my own land on the coast of Wales. It is very different from the *Divided Oaks* in that I actually made a decision to plant the trees to grow in a particular form. What is also different as compared with *Divided Oaks* at the Kröller-Müller Museum, which is a long way from where I live, the *Ash Dome* is near. One of the most important aspects of the *Ash Dome* conceptually is that I had made a commitment to stay with it over time.

JG It involves a direct relationship with that land.

DN There is that, but the land art of the late 1960s and 1970s involved gestures in the land like those of Michael Heizer and Richard Long, whose work I was following and who was a sort of teacher to me. What I was uncomfortable about was the walk—that huge physical effort, and then the walk on. It stayed there, Richard knew where it was. Only the photograph was carried away.

JG Not many people really saw it.

DN Others saw it, but then what happens there? What really happens there? I just thought, for me, particularly when I am doing something that is planted, I have to be there. I have to make a commitment to stay with it. So this is a thirty- or forty-year project. Very different from a lot of the other ephemeral works. It will only work if I stay there.

JG There is a long tradition of industry that involved an intervention in the landscape in Wales where you live. Rather as with your works in nature, the landscape is never hands off, and even the residue of human intervention can be seen in the hills and valleys of Wales. You are involved in integrating the human presence in the landscape, and not in an apologetic way. There is this hands-on interaction between your sculpture and natural environment.

DN The *Ash Dome* is very hands on. It upsets quite a lot of people. When I began it in the 1970s, the environmental movement was just beginning to manifest itself and I noticed that urban dwellers of the environmental sensibility tended to believe that nature gets along better without the human being, who is largely viewed as a parasite. The message is “Don’t touch!” “If you actually live in a rural agricultural area you see people touching the ground all the time. Its part of their livelihood, supporting the people in the urban areas. If somebody is touching nature, in my belief, there is this dialogue in and with it. Part of the point about the *Ash Dome* was “Hands On!” It is a central irony that people love hedges but don’t like people to slash and cut and bend. “Ooh! Poor trees!” Part of the point was that nature actually gets on very well when a human being is caring with it and lives with it.

JG Your living sculpture works are neither virginal postmodern nor politically correct! The tree is the living element that can be worked with, adapted, and manipulated. The emphasis is always on the crossover between nature and human culture. The two are not at odds, but symbiotic and interrelated.

DN When I first planted a ring of twenty-two ash trees for the *Ash Dome* in 1977, the Cold War was still a threat. There was serious economic gloom—very high unemployment in our country—and nuclear war was a real possibility. We were killing the planet, which we still are because of greed. In Britain our governments were changing very quickly so we had very short-term political and economic policies. To make a gesture by planting something for the twenty-first century, which was what the *Ash Dome* was really about, was like a long-term commitment, an act of faith. I did not know what I was letting myself in for.

JG And how has the *Ash Dome* matured over the years?

DN The point was that *Ash Dome* was made for the twenty-first century. It was started in 1977 when the year 2000 was a very long way to go, almost unimaginable. If I had started it in 1997, it would have been very corny. My wife and I were actually with it at the moment of the Millennium. We didn’t stay all night, but were there from 11 P.M. to about 12:30 A.M. I lit it up on the inside with some submerged candles so it just flickered.

JG Do your works have anything to do with ritual or performance? I am thinking about the *Snow Stove* (1982) in Kotoku, Japan, the *Ice Stove* (1987) in north Wales, and *Sea Stove* (1981) on the shores of the Isle of Bute in Scotland, for instance.



1.1 David Nash. *Standing Frame*, 1987. Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis. Courtesy of the artist.



1.2 David Nash. *Sheep Space*, 2000. Schoenthal, Switzerland. Courtesy of the artist.

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DN No! They have absolutely nothing to do with ritual or performance. There is no shamanism. You can bring those associations to it, but my concerns are fundamentally practical. The spiritual is absolutely dovetailed into the physical and the two are essentially linked with each other. To work the ground in a practical, basic commonsense way is a spiritual activity.

JG The act of burning wood in your sculptures such as *Black Dome* (1986) link your process with a primordial cycle of regeneration. The carbon generated by forest fires, for instance, is a natural phenomenon that brings about regeneration of the soil. *Black into Green* (1989) likewise brought together a series of tree trunks that were charred in a loose arrangement on an island at Vassivière Lake in France.

DN For *Black Dome*, I was among twelve artists invited by the forestry commission to make public works in the Forest of Dean in Gloucester, an area that has a long history of charcoal manufacture. There is a lot of iron ore there and charcoal was used to smelt the iron. In the more hilly areas there are flattened-out spaces where the charcoal burners built their fires that carry an echo of this past activity. Only certain plants will grow in these places because there is so much carbon in the soil. Knowing of the history of this place, I conceived making a mound out of charcoal, a brittle material. We went at making nine hundred charred stakes that were to be graded into a dome eight meters in diameter and one meter high in the center.

JG The charring became an action and the dome a reminder of the charcoal-burning activity, the human presence in this apparently “natural” site earlier on.

DN The whole idea was that it would rot down to a mound of humus and that only certain plants could grow on it. What I hadn’t anticipated was people liked to walk on it. It got very trampled but it survived. New safety laws came in, and it was decided *Black Dome* was not safe for people. So it was prematurely covered over. It is now just a mound, which it would have become anyways.

JG There is this language or grammar in your wood pieces. The weird juxtaposition of maybe two elements, letting the materials speak for themselves within the object or form. You do not dominate or formalize them too much. The weird conjunctures of natural and carved forms and dimensionalities cause us to question our own presence in relation to this physical language of carving.

DN Making objects, making gestures that are sustained in a certain place, knowing that other people are going to see it, encourages other people to be aware of it. I think all human behavior has moral or immoral qualities. Rothko said his paintings were moral statements and I really linked to that when I was a student. Every human gesture seems to have a moral content. It does stand for a human being’s behavior. If somebody knows nothing of my work and they come across a piece, I hope they will get a sense of the light touch, that there is

something here that serves as a stepping stone for the mind into the continuum of that particular place.

JG A strong relation to the land once existed in all primary cultures, and there was a basic resourcefulness associated with use of materials essential for cultural survival. A sense of infinity came with understanding those limits. Contemporary culture encourages a consumer attitude to materials and products, yet all materials ultimately derive from and have origins in nature. We are losing that physical, tactile sense of connectedness to a place that your work embodies.

DN To varying degrees we spiritualize material by our work with it. Unconsciously we are creating a language that another human being can pick up on. We connect to that spirit quality that has been put into it. This isn't done by ritual, it is simply done by "common" sense.

JG And the language of each individual artist reflects their own experience?

DN Yes. Individuality within the global reality of the physical world.

JG Your step and ladder pieces are unusual metaphors that maintain the integrity of wood, the natural undulations of tree form, while integrating manmade forms. *Through the Trunk, Up the Branch* (1985), in Ireland, demonstrates this quite dramatically, offsetting a tree's base with a series of steps. . . . In this case the tree is supporting the structure that symbolizes an ascent or descent.

DN I was presented with a huge dead elm tree in Ireland that had been dearly loved by the owner. With an Irish woodsman, instead of cutting it at the root, we decided to cut it above the first big limb. I made about ten sculptures from the top and then I was left with this huge trunk and big branch. So it remained rooted and the steps had a gesture that was upward. A neighboring farmer said he'd like to go up those steps and have a Guinness with God!

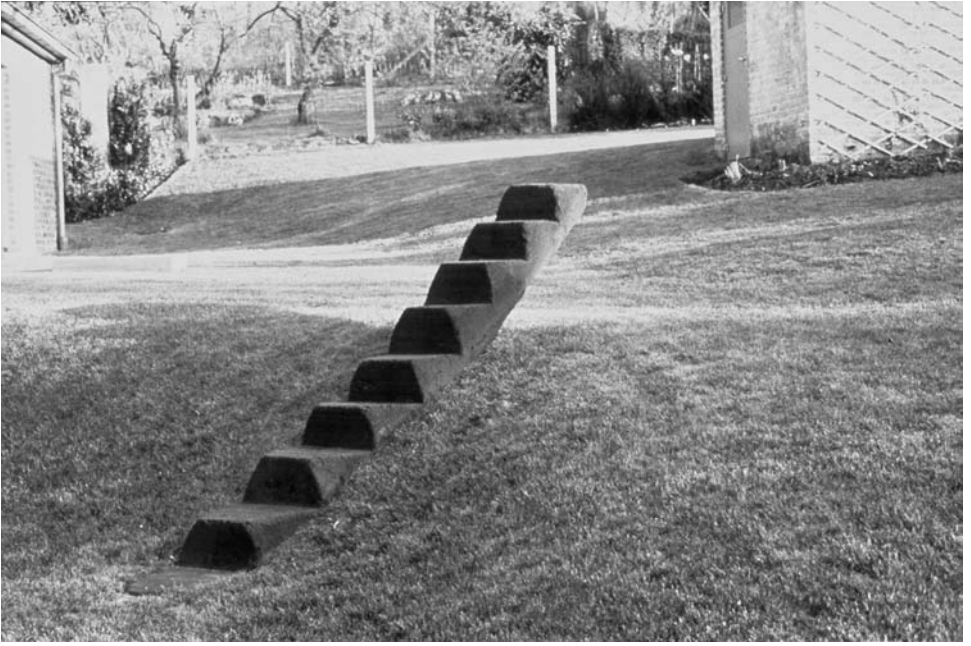
JG Do you expect to do anymore planted works? Do you have any future projects that involve living elements?

DN I am very wary to do anything that is far away from where I live. When I take on a contract to do one, it is a five-year or ten-year period. I am paid half when I do it, and I am paid in increments a fifth of the remaining on each return visit. Then I have a carrot to get me there. I know I have a budget that pays to get me there.

JG What sort of feeling do you have when you are working, when you are carving or making a piece?

DN I am usually charged up by the idea, because ideas have energy. I am invigorated by it. I love the economy of means that when you cut a shape, you have another piece of wood coming away you can use for smaller pieces. In the big projects abroad, just from the nature of how much I am trying to do, what I am trying to achieve, I have to work with other people. The social dynamic interests me very much.

JG It is an exchange process.



1.3 David Nash. *Nine Charred Steps*, 1988–89. Belgium. Courtesy of the artist.



1.4 David Nash. *Sod Swap*, 1983. North Wales. Courtesy of the artist.

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DN It has to be for it to work. It is an absolute delight to get the right mood. Sometimes I have failed and the project has been very difficult.

JG Do you believe symbols play a role in your work? Does a work have an overtly symbolic power? Is it the viewer who brings the symbolic reading to a particular work?

DN I have found that the *Cube*, *Sphere*, *Pyramids* I have been making—triangle, circle, square—seem to have a commonality. People are very comfortable with that grouping. If I make or invent a shape such as a cross, people will ask “Why is that?” There are shapes and combinations that seem to be universally satisfying cross-culturally. I continue to make those because I am endlessly fascinated by these aspects.

JG Did Constantin Brancusi’s work play a role or inspire you in the direction you have taken?

DN It was a fundamental experience for me. I saw it when I was eighteen, when it was in the old modern art museum and I was traveling with two friends from school. I had heard about it from my old art master. It was unusual from the other objects because it was sort of jammed into the one place. I really liked that. It wasn’t until I went back when I was twenty-two under other circumstances, and then saw the same place again I realized how deeply this spiritualization had gone into me. I continued to revere it. Now there is a moral gesture!

JG Yes, *The Endless Column* (1937). Brancusi could integrate a sense of the universal both in a single sculpture or in a carved decorative doorway to a house. The practical and aesthetic seemed inseparable.

DN That is what made me decide I wanted to live in the space where I worked. I don’t like to think of Capel Rhiw, my home in Wales, as a copy of Brancusi. If anything, it is like a magnification of that experience.

JG Do some of your works have a practical element, or build a functionality into the sculpture?

DN Yes. Various people around the world have wooden toilet roll holders built into their bathrooms and I have made handrails out of a branch for people to hold. *Black through Green* (1993), conceived for the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, involved integrating a series of five-meter-long charred oak steps into a woodland area, the idea being that hikers would gradually erode a path down the center of the steps, while leaving the ends untouched. *Nine Charred Steps* (1988) in Brussels goes up a grassy bank, extending beyond any functional use into space.

JG The land plays a great role in these works and the siting must be central to your concerns. Usually they are modest integrations that don’t seem to dominate a place.

DN Site appropriates. Site specific is not a good enough term. It is too loose. The land is absolutely fundamental and has to be in the front. I can’t stand sculpture that uses the land as a background. I find it offensive!

JG By integrating you create a kind of questioning in the viewer. First of all we are spurred on to ask “What is this?” It has no specific function. We then question the purpose of a sculpture: “What is it trying to say?” Thus we question our own purpose in relation to it. In this way a new relation to a place in the land is achieved.

DN My most successful pieces are the ones that look like they have always been there when I put them in. I consider *Charred Forms into Charred Stumps* (1989) in northern California to be my most successful piece. A very big charred sphere rolled into a hollow charred redwood stump. When we rolled it into the charred stump, it looked like it had always been there. Looking into a charred shape is like a “something” but it is also a “nothing.” It suggests an enormous space. The whole point of these pieces is the nothing.

JG When I go hiking in B.C., I see firesnags left after a forest fire that resemble your sculptures. I wonder what distinguishes these found forms in nature and your created forms?

DN It is interesting how one can sense the difference between natural occurrence and a human gesture. In Australia, the aborigines cut the bark and take it off a tree as one piece. They stitch it up and made a boat out of it. The shape that remains on the tree is like a boat. A very big scar on the tree that in fact is a boat. Seeing that, I felt I was experiencing an idea incarnating.

JG These aboriginal traces exemplify what you yourself have been engaged in—which is adapting natural forms in nature. There is no segregation of human activity from nature. Can you tell me something about how you began as an artist?

DN Well, my career parallels that of Andy Goldsworthy. Unlike Richard Long, who immediately made his mark in the art world as a very young man, exhibiting with Konrad Fischer, neither Andy nor I were picked up by commercial galleries for quite a long time. We made a living as artists in residence and “artists in the schools” programs. The arts funding in Britain is very much orientated toward making art accessible. We grew up with that. So when Andy and I were picked up by the galleries, we were like bridges. We helped a lot of people who would not be able to come to contemporary art see some more difficult work.

Take out or move! . . . I loved the minimalist philosophy, but I hated the objects. I liked the paintings, but the sculpture involved so much technology!

JG With *Standing Frame* (1994) at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, you reference structural form and natural form in one piece, yet the piece echoes a Sol Lewitt already in place there.

DN It was made initially to be with the Sol Lewitt. The Walker already had that Lewitt, and Martin Freedman saw something like this of mine in Japan. He saw the relationship to the Sol Lewitt and commissioned me to come and make a piece on the same terrace. My piece is exactly the same height as the Sol Lewitt and the inside square is exactly the same size as his square.

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JG Nature can be visually and experientially so much more powerful than human-built structures. When I look at the tree trunks supporting *Standing Frame*, there is a vernacular integrated in the piece—a straight pole and undulating tree branch supports. There is even a slight sense of humor to that piece. One needn't say mocking but instead mirroring the space between. *Sod Swap* (1983) is a completely different piece, rather like *The Wall* (1988–89) Andy Goldsworthy made in Dumfriesshire, where an exchange takes place. In Goldsworthy's case both parcels of land remained the same size, but the undulated wall creating a less standardized, more interesting configuration of that land. With *Sod Swap*, likewise, you are taking something out and putting something in and the result is equal.

DN *Sod Swap* came about when I was asked to take part in an outdoor group show at Kensington Gardens in London. I wanted my piece to say something of where it came from, so the most basic way to do this was to bring something of where it came from—the land itself. The land that was removed went to Cae'n-y-cod in north Wales. We swapped them over. At the end of the exhibition I wanted to swap them back, but they ran out of budget. So I still have the London turf which had five species of plant in it originally, but has lots more in it now. I keep it as if it was in London, so I mow the grass regularly. In London it was moved from the original temporary exhibition space to a permanent site. They don't cut the Welsh turf. They cut everything else, which is the opposite of what I do with the London turf.

JG It expresses an idea of mutual exchange! When we talk about economy, the roots of the word mean management of the home. In our times economy is very abstracted from daily life and nature. We think of art in the same way, rather abstracted—art object, art product. So *Sod Swap* brings it full circle. A greater economy of means can often express the same concerns more succinctly.

DN When there are limits to materials you rely on what you can make up out of yourself. You are only relying on what is available.

JG Sculpture can be more effective when it is not neutralized to become an aesthetic object of contemplation. When put in active areas, in farm fields where cows are merging and loitering with them, where some other activity is going on, it can be more endearing.

DN I have actually done a study and documented where the sheep go with a lot of drawings. I then made a *Sheep Space* at TICKON in Langeland, Denmark (1993). A big tree had blown down in another area, so I cut some very big chunks of oak and hauled them over into a shady area. In fact, at TICKON, the sheep really use these freestanding forms. Recently I made another such piece for a flock of sheep on an organic farm in Virginia.

JG And how do these forms work? Do you study the sheep's pathways?

DN Sheep always need shade and they need to be able to get away easily. They don't want to go into a hole. If anything approaches them, they need to be able

get off another way. They also need to be able to get out of the sun, out of the wind, out of the rain. So they go to different places according to what the weather is on a particular day. Over time, their continual presence wears an oval patch into the ground.

JG So *Sheep Space* is about building a relation between the art and the animals.

DN Yes, of course! I wouldn't put them there if they were not going to use them. If not, they would just be chunks of wood. Of course, where the sheep go, the lanolin of the wool leaves traces and oils the wood surface.

JG *Wooden Boulder* (1978–) is an ongoing process piece, a huge four hundred kilogram, one metre in diameter chunk of oak in north Wales. It becomes a sculptural action that takes place over the years. There are physical constraints on its movement, but the sculpture adapts and resonates with a physical energy. This journey or voyage is completely reliant on the vagaries of nature, which though seemingly accidental, have an unseen and inbuilt determinism.

DN I had for some time been working with the branches and twigs making linear sculptures, plaiting hazel into ropes and structures. I started *Wooden Boulder* in the mid-seventies. It came from a recently felled massive oak, from which a dozen or more sculptures were made. I intended to move it down the hill to a wood and then to my studio, but it got stuck half-way in a stream. While initially this seemed a problem, I decided to leave it there and it became a sculpture of a rock. It has moved nine times since then down this river. Sometimes I have had to move it on, as when it got jammed under a bridge . . . it could have caused a major flood.

JG I do believe that a distinction should be made between earth-sensitive art of this era and most land art of the 1960s and 1970s.

DN Its a generational thing. I think Andy Goldsworthy and I, and Richard Long, and most of the British artists' collectives associated with land art would have been landscape painters a hundred years ago. But we don't want to make portraits of the landscape. A landscape picture is a portrait. We don't want that. We want to be in the land.