

# Walking the Line ...

by Christos Tolera

Increasingly, we are asked to view Art through glass, on a screen or from behind a rope. Over time, it is becoming a one-step-removed experience, a non-contact sport. All Art is made to touch us one way or another but rarely are we invited to touch Art and in recent times I have found myself actively discouraged from engaging with Art on anything other than a cerebral level. Sculptures are surrounded by signs ordering us not to touch, yet the beauty of sculpture, I had always been led to believe, was that you could interact with it physically as well as analytically. I had always been taught that sculptures could be touched and stroked, their temperature gauged, their contours explored. (Unless, of course, their delicate nature made that unfeasible.) In a recent visit to the National Portrait Gallery, I was shocked to find every single painting there displayed under glass. No longer could I read the ridges and swells of the textured paint surface. The visceral nature of the paint had all but disappeared and my connection with the paintings became uncertain. Experienced through sight and conscious mind only, their immediacy had been lost, their impact curtailed. The same is true of many of the works at London's Tate Modern and other major galleries. Surely, I thought, it's too early to be consigning these relatively new works to history; there to be admired as precious artefacts needing protection from the breath of the viewing public. Galleries become museums in this context and the Art loses its vitality, its intentions subdued. Whether physically or metaphysically, in Art as in life, the concept of touching or being touched is slowly being eroded. Personal contact in communications is distilled through text messaging and emails from the safety of our own homes. War is waged in the dark, from the skies, far from the view of faceless targets. Sex is becoming a singular activity as the Internet provides us with endless possibilities and fantasies with which to occupy our restless minds.

It can be argued that experience lies solely in the mind but I would also argue that conscious thought is not the only thing that happens there and just as a nudge or a tickle from senses other than sight is vital to enable us to fully engage with Life; so it is with Art. I am interested in how, as a consequence of feeling somehow excluded, my desire to touch has been reignited. There is nothing quite like prohibition to stimulate desire and I long for contact as I fondly recall the times when Art has touched me most, when I have been encouraged, albeit against my lesser judgement, to touch

Art.

It was spring 1978. I was nearly sixteen and full of the confidence of ignorance. Quite what I was doing walking along the Whitechapel Road I have no idea but the last thing I expected to find was Britain's first ever purpose built Art gallery. Sat somewhere in between the Wimpy Bar and the then famous 'Blooms' kosher eatery, was an impressive but easily ignored Arts and Crafts building, which had inscribed upon it in large gold letters, Whitechapel Art Gallery. My teenage daydream interrupted, I had a look inside the main doors and I saw that they had a show on by Carl Andre, the minimalist sculptor whose 'pile of bricks' had courted great controversy a couple of years earlier when shown at the Tate Gallery. Not that I understood anything about the work, actually titled *'Equivalent VIII'*, but that had been the year of the advent of Punk and it seemed to fit in with my idea, at the time, of a two-fingered salute towards the establishment and its conservative values. I was intrigued, yet I expected to hate the work and was ready to ridicule it through my limited thinking. My art education up to that point had consisted of the idea that if you could make something that looked like something else then you were pretty successful. The more it looked like what it represented, the better it was. I was already proficient in that area, so as far as I was concerned I didn't have much more to learn and was just waiting my turn before I assumed my rightful position amongst the deities of the Art world. Armed with this knowledge I walked through the inner doors of the gallery into the main exhibition space.

To a gallery virgin like me, it was as though I had walked into a church, welcomed but on my best behaviour. I could hear the hushed reverent whispers from the couple on the far side and every step I took seemed to reverberate, loudly announcing my presence. (These were the days before trainers became 'de rigueur' for all self-respecting teenagers, the days when we wanted to be seen and heard. If you didn't have leather soles on your shoes, you still banged Blakey's quarter-moon shaped metal protectors into the heels, so as to make a noise and even create a few sparks both literally and metaphorically.)

*Tracey Emin*  
*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*  
1995  
*Appliquéd tent, mattress and light*  
48 x 96 1/2 x 84 1/2 in. (122 x 245 x 215 cm)  
© the artist. Photographer: Stephen White  
Courtesy Jay Jopling / White Cube, London



1963-1995

SAM  
ARLON  
MARTIA  
ANTONY

ROSE  
THE

I was immediately aware of a row of metal tiles, each maybe two feet square, laid like a path, leading into a cavernous space. I began to walk alongside the tiles, earnestly looking at them and trying ever so hard to see something other than what was in front of me. (It would be twenty years before I understood that one of the tenets of Minimalism was that, unlike representational Art, the made object looked like what it was. It is of itself. I exist therefore I am. Perfect in its entirety.) After walking the line a couple of times, I ended up at the top, looking down once more along the row of tiles and as I relinquished my efforts to make sense of what I saw, I began to feel compelled to walk on the tiles. After much uncertainty I put my best foot forward. There was something strangely liberating about taking those tentative steps onto that walkway. It felt right. The feelings of crippling adolescent self-obsession dissipated as I began to stand tall, at the centre of the room and at one with the sculpture. I WAS THE ART! “Oi! Get off!” I looked to my right and there he was, the uniformed gallery attendant, spittle settled on his thin grey moustache. These were the days before Art friendly Art students patrolled the galleries dressed in black. This man was, like many relics of his generation, happier in a uniform, issuing or being issued orders. The peace and love generation hadn’t quite made it to Aldgate East.

Consumed by shame and a sense of indignation I stepped off the tiles. If it felt so right, how could it be wrong? I don’t know why I felt so righteous but I was determined to find out more and on my way out I happened upon a piece of text, which entirely vindicated what had become my ‘walk of shame’. It spoke of Carl Andre’s intention that the viewer would engage with the work by walking on it and that with every mark made, the work would record the history of its own making. I wanted to run in and tell the whispering couple in the corner that I had been right all along and if Carl was here he’d tell the berk in the uniform where to get off. Instead I left but I took with me an experience, which had opened my mind to a different world. The tiles affect the space they are placed in. I had affected the tiles I stood on. My presence and interaction with the Art had affected the whole space, gallery and exhibition as it would never be affected again. I had made a difference and without being pandered to or patronised, I had been made to feel valued and important and above all clever. Although I wasn’t able to articulate this at the time, the relevance of that experience is especially valid now, in a time of exclusivity and exclusion where the prominence of a more conceptual Art can lead us to thinking that Art needs to be understood before it can be appreciated. As I have already said, not all experience is conscious and I believe that those fifteen minutes in Whitechapel, in 1978, have informed my thinking and my judgement to this present day.

Many years later, having left London and gone west a while, the summer of 1995 found me wandering into Bristol’s contemporary art space, The Arnolfini. I wanted to see what the fuss was all about regarding the ‘Brit Art’ phenomenon. On tour there was the show ‘Minky Manky’, curated by Carl Freedman, who, along with fellow student Damien Hirst, had helped organise the ‘Freeze’ exhibition in 1988 that had introduced the main protagonists of ‘Brit Art’ to an unsuspecting art world. Once more, although attracted by the do-it-yourself punk rhetoric of the artists involved, I didn’t expect to like the work. It still didn’t fit in to my criteria of what Art was and could be. I was an artist without an Art education and continued stubbornly to ignore the possibilities of creative invention offered by a world that, if I’m honest, I desperately wanted to be a part of.

Entering the space, I looked around and was welcomed by a black-clad gallery girl as I came across ‘The Tent’. ‘The Tent’, as it had become known, was a piece of work by Tracey Emin entitled *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995*. It consisted of a blue tent with a yellow interior, which had appliquéd on the inside the name of everyone she’d ever slept with. What more can I say? What more could it say? I automatically assumed stories of sexual shenanigans lay within, through the parted, curtain-like, entrance. Typical, I thought, of the joke infested Art world that this was a part of. Yet as I stood by it, against my will and what I considered my better judgement, I began to get curious. My ego began to take a hold as I mused on the possibility that my name was in there or anyone I knew or had ever met. My mind began to race and I was enjoying the intrigue. Wondering whether I could sneak a peek into the sexy bits, a voice behind me said, “You can get in if you like.” How times change. Put on the spot and lost for words, I began to flirt. “Get in?” Luckily, before I made a complete fool of myself, my girlfriend turned the corner and with a raised eyebrow came to my rescue.

After a bit of debate and a dig in the ribs, I got down on my knees and crawled inside. There was room enough for my girlfriend so she came too and what we found was a multi-layered world of memories, descriptions of love and of heartache. There was a longing and a fondness for some whilst others were merely names from a list. Regardless of significance, each name was lovingly and delicately sewn onto the walls of the tent, some big, some small, some with small narratives attached, pages from diaries or love letters lost. Sex became a side issue, as we found the names of her mother and childhood companions, as well as lovers and her unborn foetus. Visually, there was a clash of colours, of patterns and of textures, a feeling of liberty and a freedom of expression. This work was a tender celebration of a life rather than some kind of sad self-indulgent confessional. Cocooned in Tracey’s tent, away from prying eyes, I could once more rid myself of the shackles of the adolescent self-obsession I had never quite outgrown.



Having entered her private world made public I was able to engage with my own private thoughts. I was able to value areas of my life long forgotten and I was able to mourn others. All this and much more just because I was able to crawl into a tent that was Art. I left a changed man.

Just two years later this would no longer be possible. When the work was shown as part of Charles Saatchi's touring 'Sensation' exhibition at the Royal Academy, people were not allowed to enter. Understandably, the work needed protection from the crowds it had now begun to attract but sadly, as a consequence, 'The Tent' remains a much-maligned and misunderstood piece of Art. Worse was to happen when the work was tragically destroyed in the Momart warehouse fire in 2004, but the memory of that experience remains strong and like Carl Andre's work, it informs my thinking to this day.

*'Andre's Bricks' - The Little Artists [www.littleartist.co.uk](http://www.littleartist.co.uk)*

If Art is the mouthpiece of society's unexpressed concerns, then it is no wonder that, in this climate of alienation and non-communication, there is an increasing interest in Art that encourages public interaction. From Felix Gonzales Torres' invitation to eat sweets, to Herman Nitsch inviting the audience to forage elbow deep into bowls of entrails and jelly, the word is out.

At the Serpentine Gallery last year, artist Rirkrit Tiravanija installed two full-scale replicas of his New York apartment and left them open to the uses and abuses of the viewing public. Fridges were well stocked in the fully functioning kitchens and the people were encouraged to make themselves at home. They cooked, they ate, they washed up after themselves and some even had a little lie down before making their merry way home. This probably sounds like some occupational therapist's dream to a lot of people, a scenario replicated in the side rooms of psychiatric wards the length



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photograph by platon





and breadth of the country and if I'm honest, not having experienced it personally, I remain slightly cynical, but I am open to suggestion. After all, history has taught me that personal experience is a very good cure for a closed mind. However, what is clear to me is the artist's intent, to overcome the invisible obstacles to personal communications that we face as a society increasingly attracted to and living in a virtual world.

I came to write this piece as a result of sitting around a table having face-to-face communication. Whilst discussing the theme of 'Reach Out And Touch' with the Cent team and having relayed my Carl Andre experience to all, Jo Phillips began to tell me of her own. She told me of the time she first encountered a Carl Andre floor piece at Tate Modern and how she became intrigued and attracted to the possibilities it offered. Aware of herself and her surroundings and not a person given to spontaneous public performance, she resisted the temptation to take a walk onto the

tiles, choosing to leave her neighbourhood gallery with an itch to scratch. She was to return two or three times to be with the work, to look and to see, until one day, overcome by desire, she slowly knelt down and tentatively extended her hand to touch the tiles, expecting, if spotted, to be told to "Get off!" Instead she found herself growing in stature. "I began to feel ten feet tall," she said, as she formed a physical bond with the work and its surroundings. In this breakthrough moment, in the midst of her own private reverie, a woman's voice cut through the air like a stepped on cat. "YOU ARE THE ART! YOU ARE THE ART! OH MY GOD, YOU ARE THE ART!" How times do indeed change. 🐾 *Christos Tolera*

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www.christostolera.com*



I was born near the banks of the second highest tidal river in the world, the River Avon, where I mucked about as a boy. I was always fascinated by the mudbanks, the tides and the surge and wash of boats going up and down the river.

By the mid 1960s natural materials, sand, water, stones, had become my language. When I wasn't actually out in the landscape, the rooftop of St. Martin's School of Art became my studio. In my third show in Düsseldorf in 1969, I made a mud spiral on the floor of the gallery with my muddy boots. I always thought of these floor works as flat sculptures. A few years later, I realised I could use the same mud with my hands on a wall.

All my work is somehow concerned with showing what the world is made of. With stones, all I need to do is collect and place them, condensing a place into a small circle of itself. Mud and water are two very elemental materials; one could say water is the most important material on the planet, the key to life. 🐾 *Richard Long*

*Richard Long*  
*RHONE VALLEY MUD HAND CIRCLES 2000*  
*Schloss Leuk Switzerland*  
*Courtesy: Haunch of Venison, London*  
*Copyright: Richard Long, 2006*  
*Photograph Thomas Andenmatten*

