

IS ENVIRONMENTAL ART AN AESTHETIC AFFRONT TO NATURE?

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Environmental works of art

In this chapter I consider one aesthetic issue that arises between nature and art in the sense of arising from an intimate relationship between the two. There are, of course, many such relationships between nature and art in the history of humankind's domination of the earth. However, to investigate this aesthetic issue I here take as my example a quite recent and essentially artistic phenomenon – what is typically called environmental art. Within this category I focus mainly on works such as the earthworks and earthmarks of artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim and certain structures on the land such as those of Robert Morris, Michael Singer, and Christo. Some paradigm cases are Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969–70), Singer's *Lily Pond Ritual Series* (1975), and Christo's *Running Fence* (1972–76).

Environmental works of art share a common feature that both distinguishes them from traditional art and makes them examples of the most intimate of relationships between nature and art. This is that all such works of art are in or on the land in such a way that a part of nature constitutes a part of the relevant aesthetic object. In other words, not only is the site of an environmental work an environmental site, but the site itself is an aspect of the work. Art critic Elizabeth Baker, for example, speaks of the site as “a part of the content of the work,” adding that these “works are not only inseparable from their sites – they are not really definable at all apart from them.”¹ This is clearly not the case with, for example, most sculpture; with such works, although the site can be aesthetically significant, it is not a part of the work itself.

Environmental art was initiated in the mid 1960s and has continued into present. Throughout this time it has been frequently questioned by individuals concerned about its environmental and ecological consequences. For example, to clear the ground for the construction of *Running Fence*, an 18 foot high, white nylon “fence” running 24 miles across northern California, Christo had to file a 450 page environmental impact report and was required to work closely with local environmental authorities.² A more recent and ambitious work by

the same artist, *Surrounded Islands* (1983), caused greater controversy. Since the work involved surrounding eleven islands with 5.5 million square feet of pink plastic, environmentalists were concerned about its consequences for the ecology of the islands and attempted to prevent its construction by legal action.³ Works such as these have even prompted one author to question the morality of environmental art in general. After discussing a wide range of such works, all of which he calls earthworks, Peter Humphrey concludes: “Are earthworks ethical? It is doubtful.”⁴

In this chapter, however, I do not consider the ecological, legal, and moral issues raised by these works. Rather I concentrate on only one aesthetic issue about art and nature that arises from the way in which they are related to one another in environmental works. In part because of the way nature becomes incorporated into, becomes a part of, art in such works, it has been suggested by a number of observers that these works constitute something like aesthetic indignities to nature. One artist, for example, views many earthworks “as simple one-sided aesthetic impositions upon nature.”⁵ Similarly, in a recent discussion of art and nature, Donald Crawford notes that some of such works “forcibly assert their artifactuality over against nature.”⁶ He adds that although critics usually challenge the environmental impact of these works, one cannot but think that they believe the artists are “engaged in an aesthetic affront to nature that goes deeper than the scientific assessment of environmental implications.”⁷ Following Crawford's way of putting this point, I frame the issue under discussion here by asking if environmental art constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature.

Before discussing this question, it is useful to clarify the issue by noting two points. First, the affront in question is an aesthetic affront. I take this to indicate that the affront is generated by the aesthetic qualities of an object, rather than by, for example, its social, moral, ecological, or other such qualities. Crawford, for example, distinguishes a work's “aesthetic affront to nature” from its “environmental implications.” Thus, although an artwork such as Humphrey's hypothetical *Asian Floodwork*, the object of which “is to show Third-World agriculture under water,” would have unacceptable moral and ecological qualities, it would not constitute an aesthetic affront to nature (or to the Third World) on these grounds.⁸ Whether or not it would constitute such an affront would depend on its aesthetic qualities, whatever they might be. Second, it is important to note that the aesthetic affront is an affront to nature, and not necessarily to normal or appropriate appreciators of the work. The affront in question is by works that “assert their artifactuality over against nature” and are “impositions upon nature.” Of course, works that constitute such aesthetic affronts to nature may also affront normal, appropriate, or environmentally concerned appreciators, but such possible affronts are distinct from the issue involved here. Nonetheless, it is true that the recognition of an aesthetic affront to nature requires an appreciator, for nature itself cannot recognize the affront. This seems somewhat peculiar, but I take it to be no

more so than the fact that I can insult, affront, or impose upon Jones even though Jones may not, and may not even be able to, recognize this.

Environmental art as an aesthetic affront

Given this clarification of the issue, I turn to the question of why anyone would hold that environmental art constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature. The most obvious and intuitive answer is that some of these works are similar in appearance to things that almost everyone agrees are such affronts.⁹ For example, Walter De Maria's *Las Vegas Piece* (1969) consists of four, 8 foot by 1/2 to 1-mile earthmarks in the desert 95 miles northeast of Las Vegas. The work resembles a bulldozer scar on a virgin desert landscape, which is not unexpected, for it was constructed with a bulldozer. Heizer's *Double Negative* is a 50 foot by 30 foot by 1,500 foot double cut in Virgin River Mesa, Nevada, which displaces 240,000 tons of rhyolite and sandstone. It is reminiscent of the results of mining operations, in particular the highwall cuts and skyline notches produced by Appalachian coal mining. Since the aesthetic affronts offered by the latter are significant enough to partly justify reclamation legislation, it is not surprising that some see Heizer's piece as involving a similar affront. Indeed, one critic characterizes such artists as cutting and gouging "the land like Army engineers."¹⁰ Another striking example is Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), constructed by dumping a truckload of asphalt down the side of a quarry. It resembles the aesthetic consequences of certain kinds of industrial pollution.

The similarity of appearance of such works to the eyesores produced by industry, mining, and construction is not accidental. Smithson once remarked that the "processes of heavy construction have a devastating kind of primordial grandeur" and that the "actual disruption of the earth's crust is at times very compelling."¹¹ Heizer characterizes himself by saying: "You might say I'm in the construction business."¹² In fact in the early 1970s Smithson contacted industry in an attempt to actualize a proposal for a set of works called *Projects for Tailings*. His vision was to construct earthworks of the millions of tons of waste "tailings" and spoil produced by modern mining operations.¹³ It becomes clear that environmental works of art can go further than simply being similar in appearance to the aesthetic affronts of our technological society. They can be virtually identical to them in appearance. Consequently, the claim that such works constitute aesthetic affronts to nature acquires some initial justification. In a way somewhat the converse of the cartoon mentioned in Chapter 9, one can imagine a "leader of industry" responding to a work such as Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* with the comment: "If my company had dumped that eyesore out there, the government would make me clean it up!"

I suggest, however, that this obvious and intuitive line of justification does not establish its conclusion. This is because I suspect that even if a given environmental work is absolutely identical in appearance to an undisputed



Illustration 3 *Asphalt Rundown*, by Robert Smithson (1969), Rome (Courtesy of John Weber Gallery).

(clean up) - neat people & young

aesthetic affront, the former need not have the same aesthetic qualities as the latter. My view is that the aesthetic qualities an object has are only those it appears to have when it is appropriately appreciated and moreover that such appreciation must involve appreciation of that object as the kind of thing it is. Consequently, if two different objects are different kinds of things, they can have very different aesthetic qualities even if they are identical in appearance. This general position is defended in Chapter 5 of this volume as well as in the literature.¹⁴ If it is correct, it means that since it is a work of art, Heizer's *Double Negative*, for example, may be, as one critic describes it, "a deep, majestic double cut," while the skyline notches produced by coal mining, even if identical in appearance, have no majesty whatsoever.¹⁵ Thus, since being an aesthetic affront to nature is a function of an object's aesthetic qualities, the fact that environmental works of art resemble objects that are undisputed aesthetic affronts does not by itself establish that they are such affronts. The aforementioned "leader of industry" is simply not appropriately appreciating these environmental works – he or she is not appreciating them as works of art.

This general position, however, provides a different means by which to support the claim that environmental art constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature. If an object's aesthetic qualities are those given in appropriate appreciation, and if appropriate appreciation involves appreciation of the kind of object it is, then there is a simple way to alter the aesthetic qualities of any object. This is by changing the kind of object it is. Moreover, such changes of the kind of an object and the resultant alterations of its aesthetic qualities can constitute an aesthetic affront to that object – indeed perhaps they necessarily constitute such an affront. The point can be illustrated by examples from the history of art. Consider Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (1504) and Duchamp's famous mustached and goateed version entitled *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). With a few pencil marks and a punning inscription Duchamp changed the work's kind from a Renaissance portrait to a twentieth century Dada statement and in so doing dramatically altered its aesthetic qualities. After Duchamp, the work epitomizes, as one observer – an observer no less than Dali – puts it, the "antiheroic, anti-glorification and anti-sublime aspects of Dada."¹⁶ This is a relatively clear case of an aesthetic affront to the work in question; in fact some critics have used stronger terms, such as a "denigration" of the work.¹⁷ Moreover, I think we find the affront to the work acceptable only because Duchamp used a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* to execute it. Had he used the original, the impact of the affront would have been greater. Similar affronts to works of art are not difficult to imagine. Consider changing the kind of work the *Guernica* (1937) is, perhaps making it somewhat impressionist, by applying gay, pastel colors to its lighter areas, or, following Monty Python's Flying Circus, changing Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04) into a kinetic sculpture by giving it a moveable right arm. As a kinetic sculpture, the *David* would have radically different aesthetic qualities, even when its moveable arm is at rest in the position

originally ordained by Michelangelo. This last point underscores my earlier claim that the affront is not simply a function of the appearance of an object; it is a function of changing an object's kind and thereby altering its aesthetic qualities.

It is in this sense that I think environmental works of art can constitute aesthetic affronts to nature. As noted earlier, a distinctive feature of environmental art is that a part of nature itself is a part of the aesthetic object – the environmental site is an aspect of the work. The environmental artist, sometimes with only a few marks on the land, comparable to Duchamp's pencil marks, changes the kind of thing that this part of nature is. The environmental site is thus changed from being a part of nature to being a part of an artwork and with this change the aesthetic qualities of nature are altered. Heizer, for example, says: "The work is not put in a place, it is that place."¹⁸ And Smithson spoke of his sites as being "redefined in terms of art."¹⁹ If such "redefinition" of kind necessarily involves an aesthetic affront, then environmental art necessarily constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature. However, even if there is no necessity involved, it is not difficult to see many environmental works as comparable to Duchamp's mustached *Mona Lisa* or Monty Python's kinetic *David*, although such works lack the lightness and humor of Duchamp's and the Python's creations. More typically the tone is seemingly set by Picasso's famous remark: "Nature exists to be raped!"²⁰ In any case, at least some environmental artists seem to have taken his words to heart. For example, Heizer comments: "I find an 18-foot square granite boulder. That's mass. It's already a piece of sculpture. But as an artist it's not enough for me to say that, so I mess with it. I defile it."²¹

Perhaps "defile" is too strong a word to characterize most environmental art. Nonetheless, the general way in which environmental artists alter nature's aesthetic qualities by turning nature into art does seem to support its being an affront to nature. This is illustrated by Heizer's works such as *Displaced-Replaced Mass* (1969) in which a 52 ton granite boulder is "messed with" by placing it in an excavated depression. It is also evident in works such as Christo's *Surrounded Islands* described earlier and *Valley Curtain* (1971–72), 200,000 square feet of bright orange nylon polyamide spanning a Colorado valley, or Oppenheim's *Branded Hillside* (1969), a "branding" of the land executed by killing the vegetation with hot tar. In such cases nature is "redefined in terms of art" at a cost to its aesthetic qualities such that to speak of an affront, if not a "denigration," is quite appropriate.

Some replies to the affront charge

Rather than further develop the claim that environmental art is for the reasons indicated an aesthetic affront to nature, I now turn to four replies to this charge.²² One common reply is that environmental works do not constitute affronts because they are more or less temporary. It is true that many works are

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temporary. Most of Oppenheim's pieces and some of Heizer's earlier ones were constructed such that nature would gradually reclaim the site, and all of Christo's major works are designed to be dismantled after a specific period of time. For example, although *Valley Curtain* took over two years to execute, it was in place for only a few days. However, this is not true of all environmental art. Many pieces by Smithson, Heizer, and others are seemingly intended to be permanent marks on the land, and others are surprisingly durable. For example, although De Maria's *Las Vegas Piece* is only a few inches deep, in 1976 one critic enthusiastically reported: "Six years old and only slightly eroded, the cut appears freshly 'drawn.'" ²³

Nonetheless, even if all environmental works had the relatively short life spans of Christo's pieces, this reply would not be adequate. It might be relevant to the environmental issues that have been raised about works such as Christo's, for the temporary nature of an environmental work can lessen the possibility and the extent of its having a serious environmental impact. However, the issue of an aesthetic affront is of an altogether different nature. An affront is like an insult rather than like an impact, and even if an insult is only temporary, it can yet be as much of and as great an insult as it would be were it permanent. If environmental works of art are aesthetic affronts to nature, they constitute such affronts by the fact of their existence and not by the duration of that existence. Had Duchamp pencilled the mustache and goatee on the *Mona Lisa* and erased it after a few days, he would yet have accomplished his affront to the work. And the consequences of the affront, whatever they are, would have continued to exist after the erasure. Some environmental artists, even though their works are temporary, are well aware of this kind of point. When asked whether the site of *Valley Curtain* remains unaffected by having hosted the work, Christo replied: "Perhaps not. Was Mont-Saint-Victoire ever the same after Cezanne?" ²⁴ If *Valley Curtain* was an aesthetic affront to nature, then the fact of its existence still constitutes the affront.

A second rather common reply to the affront charge is that environmental works are not affronts since by altering nature's aesthetic qualities they improve nature. The original site is seen as having few positive or mainly negative aesthetic qualities and the resultant work of art as an improvement on it. In speaking of Heizer, Smithson, and De Maria, for example, one critic notes that "none of these three artists has opted for sites that are conventionally scenic; their spaces tend to be rather neutral." ²⁵ Smithson in particular is known for his use of "sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature's own devastation," ones he thought could be "cultivated or recycled as art." ²⁶ He remarks: "I'm interested in bringing a landscape with low profile up, rather than bringing one with high profile down." ²⁷ The reply, in short, is that given the barren sites of works such as Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973), Heizer's *Displaced-Replaced Mass* and *Double Negative*, or De Maria's *Las Vegas Piece*, these works do not constitute affronts. They are comparable not to Duchamp's treatment of the *Mona Lisa*, but to improvements made on the work of a third rate hack.

This reply can be met by considering the extent to which the sites in question are in fact natural sites. When they are natural, as the desert sites of Heizer and De Maria, I see no grounds for the claim that they have few positive or mainly negative aesthetic qualities. It is true that such sites are not "conventionally scenic," but, as argued in Chapter 4, "the scenic" is a narrow and parochial construal of nature's aesthetic interest and merit. ²⁸ The desert, for example, has a subtle, quiet beauty of its own, and altering that beauty can be as great an aesthetic affront to nature as altering the aesthetic qualities of conventionally scenic landscapes. In fact I suggest that none of virgin nature is comparable to the work of a third-rate hack – that virgin nature by and large has positive aesthetic qualities. I have developed this suggestion in Chapter 6. ²⁹ If it is correct, the charge that environmental works on natural sites constitute affronts to nature cannot be countered by claiming that the original sites offered little or nothing of aesthetic interest and merit.

On the other hand, some sites such as many of Smithson's are to various degrees less than natural. They are sites such as quarries or spoil dumps which have been, in Smithson's words, "in some way disrupted or pulverized" and "denaturalized." ³⁰ In such cases, to the extent that the site is not a natural site, the environmental work does not constitute an aesthetic affront to nature. This is because the aesthetic qualities that are altered by the work are not the aesthetic qualities of nature but rather those that have been produced by earlier human incursions. If environmental works on such sites are designed to regain some of nature's original aesthetic qualities, then they may be comparable to an art restorer's treatment of the *Mona Lisa* rather than to Duchamp's. However, more typically, as in Robert Morris' *Johnson Pit #30* (1979), a former strip mine "decorated" with terracing and tarred tree stumps, they are designed to "improve" the site by producing new "artistic" aesthetic qualities. As such, they are comparable to environmental art on any man-made site, such as in the city. Consider, for example, Olfo Piene's city sky "ballets." If such works are not aesthetic affronts to nature, it is not because they are not aesthetic affronts, but because they do not have natural sites.

A third, more sophisticated reply to the affront charge draws upon the attempt to identify the works of environmental artists with the works of nature. The idea is that if environmental art and nature are the same kind of thing, then environmental art cannot constitute an aesthetic affront to nature, or at least it cannot do so by changing the kind of thing nature is. The bases for this reply were most clearly articulated by Smithson, who claimed that an "artist's treatment of the land depends on how aware he is of himself as nature." ³¹ He also urged artists to "become conscious of themselves as natural agents." ³² He characterized his own artistic interest as that of taking "on the persona of a geologic agent where man actually becomes part of that process rather than overcoming it." ³³ In this view the changes to nature and its aesthetic qualities produced by environmental works are of the same kind as those brought about by natural processes such as earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. In fact Smithson explicitly compared some of his works – in particular, one with the self-

explanatory title *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) and the earlier described *Asphalt Rundown* — To the results of natural occurrences such as the Alaska earthquake and the Icelandic volcanic eruptions.³⁴ The point is that although such natural occurrences change nature and alter its aesthetic qualities, they do not change the kind of thing nature is, and thus, whatever else they yield, they do not result in aesthetic affronts to nature. If environmental works of art are also natural occurrences in this sense, they too can avoid being aesthetic affronts.

Concerning this reply, we may initially note that claiming that an environmental work cannot constitute an affront to nature because it, like nature, is also natural is comparable to claiming that Duchamp's mustached *Mona Lisa* cannot constitute an affront to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* because it, like Leonardo's work, is also art. In each case, even if we accept the claim of a basic similarity of kind, there seems to be enough difference to make an aesthetic affront possible. Be that as it may, there is perhaps a deeper problem with this reply: it seems, as is said, to throw out the baby with the bath water. If we take the comparison between environmental works and natural occurrences such as earthquakes completely seriously, it becomes difficult to see any point or purpose in environmental art. As we have seen, some environmental artists, including Smithson himself, have elaborated the point and purpose of their art in terms of improvements on nature, of "recycling" "devastated places," or of "bringing up" "low profile" landscapes. But viewing environmental works as natural occurrences undercuts this kind of justification. One cannot consistently hold that these works have the point of improving upon nature and that they yet have the natural purposelessness of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Of course, one might concede that such works have neither point nor purpose, that they, like natural occurrences, involve neither improvement nor its Jack but only existence and change. It is reported, for example, that Heizer considers the meaning and *raison d'être* of his desert works to be only their "own existence — nothing more and nothing less" — they have "no significance" other than their "presence."³⁵ This line of thought, however, has its own drawbacks, for it puts environmental art in an uncomfortable limbo between nature and humanity's traditional incursions upon nature. The former, as embodied in natural processes, is characterized by inevitability; the latter, as embodied in activities such as farming and mining, are characterized by purposefulness.³⁶ However, if environmental artists can claim for themselves neither the inevitability of nature nor the purposefulness of traditional human incursions, then their art may be more similar to simple vandalism than to anything else. If so the charge of being an aesthetic affront is not avoided, for the vandal's marks and alterations, since they are excusable neither by inevitability nor by purposefulness, constitute greater aesthetic affronts than any other. Compare Duchamp's treatment of the *Mona Lisa* with that of a vandal who attacks it with a can of spray paint. Even Smithson once said that he could not accept pointless graffiti on boulders (although it was all right on subway trains).³⁷

The last reply I consider attempts to avoid the affront charge by reasserting a purpose for environmental art. However, this purpose is not to improve upon nature by recycling it as art. In fact it is not to alter nature's aesthetic qualities in any way, but rather only to bring out or to make more evident these qualities. In this view an environmental work does not change the kind of thing nature is, turning a natural site into part of an artwork; rather it only "spotlights" the site itself. Thus the environmental piece is construed as a means of displaying and enhancing nature's beauty, and not as an aesthetic affront to nature. Perhaps the genesis of this conception of environmental art is to be found in the traditional idea of art as a mirror of nature or in the idea behind some of Smithson's earlier works which he called "nonsites." These works display in a gallery materials such as rocks and gravel from a natural site and thus call attention to that site without making it a part of the work. Such gallery-bound nonsites do not change nature, but at most only our perception of nature, and thus it is difficult to see how they could be aesthetic affronts to nature. On balance, they are more like providing the *Mona Lisa* with proper lighting than like providing it with a mustache.

Some concluding examples

However, once art moves out of the gallery and directly engages natural sites, the extent to which this reply is relevant is less clear. In fact it seems that whether or not it holds for any particular environmental work depends on the exact nature of the work in question. Thus its strength as a reply must be considered on a case-by-case basis. Consequently, I conclude by examining some examples for which the reply might be thought to hold. Perhaps the best known of works sometimes characterized in this way are some of Christo's such as *Oceanfront Project for Covering the Cove at King's Beach* (1974) and *Wrapped Coast — Little Bay — One Million Square Feet* (1969), each of which involved covering a large area of ocean coastline with fabric. For example, one critic says that the former was "intimately related to the landscape in that the natural forms are accentuated by the fabric — in a sense made more visible, rather than altered or disguised." She concludes: "Concealment by a fabric so malleable, supple, and relatively sheer as polypropylene is thus ultimately revealing."³⁸ Similarly, another observer notes that "the texture and color of the sand was strangely intensified" by Christo's *Wrapped Coast*.³⁹ The claim is that these environmental works, rather than alter nature's aesthetic qualities, "accentuate," make "more visible," "reveal," and "intensify" these qualities. However, since the sites are nonetheless covered with fabric, it is not clear that this claim is ultimately convincing.

Somewhat more convincing are similar claims made for the environmental structures of Michael Singer, such as *Lily Pond Ritual Series*, *First Gate Ritual Series* (1976), and *Sangam Ritual Series 4/76* (1976). These works are constructions of materials such as wooden strips, reeds, jute, and bamboo which Singer describes as "clues" to the environment by which nature is made

visible.⁴⁰ They have also been characterized as “gateways,” “reflectors,” “accents,” and “magnifiers” of the site, and even as “instrument[s] by which each detail of the area might be signaled, might register tellingly on its observer.”⁴¹ Such metaphors are somewhat appropriate, for instead of altering or covering their sites, Singer’s pieces seem only in a sense to frame them, although the frames are internal, skeleton-like frames rather than traditional external frames. Nonetheless, framing of any kind is a recognized artistic method for displaying and enhancing, rather than altering an object’s aesthetic qualities. In a similar way it might be said that Christo’s *Running Fence* internally frames the landscape through which it passes, although in this case perhaps the frame overwhelms that which is framed.

Another environmental artist comparable to Singer is Alan Sonfist, who art critic Grace Glueck describes as “Nature’s boy.”⁴² Like Singer, Sonfist claims he is “not trying to alter” nature, but “trying to present it”; he wants to create art which makes nature “visible” and “directs” people “to look at nature.”⁴³ To this end Sonfist has developed the idea of “natural phenomena as public monuments.”⁴⁴ The idea is illustrated by works such as *Rock Monument of Buffalo* (1976–78). In this piece rocks from the local region are positioned such that the work “makes clear in one experience the geology of the entire area.”⁴⁵ Concerning the issue of presenting rather than altering nature, it is useful to compare Sonfist’s piece with works such as Heizer’s *Elevated, Surface, Depressed* (1981), a monument in which rocks are mounted on aluminum slabs and positioned according to geometrical rather than geological considerations. By contrast with works such as Heizer’s, in Sonfist’s, as one critic puts it: “Nature asserts itself as itself.”⁴⁶

As this remark suggests, Sonfist takes the concept of environmental art that does not alter, but only displays, nature’s aesthetic qualities one step further – to the point of nature itself as art. He claims: “I think nature is art and people have to realize this” and compares himself to Duchamp, saying: “He claimed man-made objects as works of art – I claim natural phenomena.”⁴⁷ The idea of displaying nature as art is not unique to Sonfist. Consider environmental pieces such as Morris’ *Steam Piece* (1967–73), in which vents in a 25 foot site filled the area with steam, or Hans Haack’s work with the self-explanatory title, *Spray of Ithaca Falls Freezing and Melting on Rope* (1969). Each of these works does little more than present “natural phenomena” in a natural site; the aesthetic qualities displayed are those of nature itself. The basic idea is given more extensive treatment by Sonfist in works such as *Time Landscape* (1965–78). This work consists of a network of sites throughout New York City, where areas of land have been restored to the way they might have appeared before urbanization. Depending upon the particular site, the land has been replanted with different varieties of trees, shrubs, and grasses in an attempt to recreate pre-colonial landscapes. As one critic says: “*Time Landscape* presents nature in an unadulterated, unmodified state as the fundamental content of the work.”⁴⁸

Environmental works such as Sonfist’s *Time Landscape* and Morris’ and Haack’s pieces do little if anything to alter nature’s aesthetic qualities, and

consequently they avoid constituting aesthetic affronts on these grounds. Such works, therefore, are the only clear cases of environmental pieces that are not aesthetic affronts to nature as that notion is discussed in this chapter. However, they yet present two interrelated problems. First, they suggest the possibility of another kind of aesthetic affront – the affront implicit in the idea that for the aesthetic interest and merit of nature to be recognized it must first be considered a work of art. Second, they pose a general question – the question of why such natural environmental pieces should be considered works of art in the first place. In response to these problems, I suggest, concerning the second, that there are adequate grounds for considering these natural pieces not to be works of art. And, concerning the first, if they are not so considered, they do not constitute cases of intimate relationships between art and nature and, therefore, do not raise the possibility of offering significant aesthetic affronts to nature. If this is the case, we are, by these examples of environmental art, re-directed to the issues addressed in the first part of this volume: the important questions of how to recognize and appropriately appreciate nature’s own aesthetic interest and merit.⁴⁹



Illustration 4 *Time Landscape*, by Alan Sonfist (1965–78), New York City (Courtesy of Alan Sonfist).

Notes

- ✓✓✓ 1 Elizabeth C. Baker, "Artworks on the Land," *Art in America*, 1976, vol. 64, pp. 92-6; reprinted in Alan Sonfist (ed.) *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, New York, Dutton, 1983, p. 75.
- 2 See Alfred Frankenstein, "Christo's 'Fence': Beauty or Betrayal?" *Art in America*, 1976, vol. 64, pp. 58-61.
- 3 See "Compromise Proposed in Christo Island-Wrap," *New York Times*, March 20, 1983, p. 54.
- 4 Peter Humphrey, "The Ethics of Earthworks," *Environmental Ethics*, 1985, vol. 7, p. 21. I am grateful to Humphrey's essay for a number of insightful suggestions.
- 5 Newton Harrison, paraphrased in Michael Aupling, "Earth Art: A Study in Ecological Politics," in Sonfist, op. cit., p. 103.
- ✓ 6 Donald Crawford, "Nature and Art: Some Dialectical Relationships," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1983, vol. 42, p. 57.
- 7 Ibid., p. 56.
- 8 Humphrey, op. cit., p. 8.
- 9 Humphrey, *ibid.*, p. 8., for example, motivates his ethical inquiry into earthworks by means of a somewhat similar point:

...an earthwork is ethical if and only if what it does to the environment is ethical. This requires us to look at the earthwork as a mark and not only as art. In seeing earthworks in this way, the implication is that earthworks should be ethically judged by the same standard... that all other such marks are judged by - marks like strip mines, dams, and golden arches.

- ✓✓ 10 Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place: Artists and the American Land*, San Francisco, Friends of the Earth, 1972, quoted in Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," *Artforum*, 1973, vol. 11, pp. 62-8; reprinted in Nancy Holt (ed.) *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, New York, New York University Press, 1979, p. 122.
- 11 Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects," *Artforum*, 1968, vol. 7, pp. 44-50; reprinted in Holt, op. cit. p. 83.
- 12 Michael Heizer, quoted in John Gruen, "Michael Heizer: 'You might say I'm in the construction business,'" *ARTnews*, 1977, vol. 76, p. 98.
- 13 For a description of one such proposal and an illustration, see Robert Smithson, "Untitled, 1972" and "Proposal, 1972," in Holt, op. cit., pp. 220-1. For a useful discussion, see Aupling, op. cit., pp. 92-104.
- ✓✓ 14 Concerning different kinds of artworks, see Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review*, 1970, vol. 79, pp. 334-67; concerning artworks and non-art artifacts, see Mark Sagoff, "The Aesthetic Status of Forgeries," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1976, vol. 35, pp. 169-80; concerning artifacts and non-artifacts, see my "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1981, vol. 40, pp. 15-27 (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 5).
- 15 Baker, op. cit. p. 74.
- 16 Salvador Dali, "Why They Attack the Mona Lisa," *ARTnews*, 1963, vol. 62, pp. 36, 63-4; reprinted in Barbaralee Diamonstein (ed.) *The Art World: A Seventy-Five-Year Treasury of ARTnews*, New York, ARTnews Books, 1977, p. 326.
- 17 Ibid., p. 326.
- 18 Heizer, quoted in Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," *Avalanche*, 1970 vol. 1, pp. 48-70; reprinted in Holt, op. cit. p. 171.

- 19 Robert Smithson, quoted in Lawrence Alloway, "Robert Smithson's Development," *Artforum*, 1972, vol. 11, pp. 52-61; reprinted in Sonfist, op. cit., p. 131.
- 20 Pablo Picasso, quoted in Andre Malraux, *Picasso's Mask*, trans. June Guicharnaud and Jacques Guicharnaud, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976, pp. 55; the remark is related to environmental art in Mark Rosenthal, "Some Attitudes of Earth Art: From Competition to Adoration," in Sonfist, op. cit., pp. 60-72.
- 21 Heizer, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," op. cit., p. 178.
- 22 Some of these replies are suggested by Humphrey, op. cit., pp. 11-18, and Crawford, op. cit., pp. 50-1 and pp. 55-6.
- 23 Baker, op. cit. p. 80.
- 24 Christo, quoted in Crawford, op. cit., p. 56.
- 25 Baker, op. cit., p. 75.
- 26 Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," op. cit., p. 124.
- 27 Robert Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City: Interview with Gianni Pettena," *Domus*, 1972, no. 516, pp. 53-6; reprinted in Holt, op. cit., p. 186.
- 28 See my "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1979, vol. 37, pp. 267-75 (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 4).
- 29 See my "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," *Environmental Ethics*, 1984, vol. 6, pp. 5-34 (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 6).
- 30 Smithson, quoted in Heizer, Oppenheim and Smithson, "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," op. cit., p. 172.
- 31 Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," op. cit., p. 123.
- 32 Smithson, "Untitled, 1972," op. cit., p. 220.
- 33 Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City," op. cit., p. 187.
- 34 Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible: Interview with Alison Sky," *On Site*, 1973, vol. 4, pp. 26-31; reprinted in Holt, op. cit., pp. 192-4
- 35 Gruen, op. cit. p. 97.
- 36 See my "On Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1985, vol. 43, pp. 301-12 (reproduced in this volume, Chapter 12).
- 37 Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape," op. cit., p. 127.
- 38 Sally Yard, *Christo Oceanfront*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 19.
- 39 Alan McCulloch, "Letter from Australia," *Art International*, 1970, vol. 14, p. 71; quoted in Carol Hall, "Environmental Artists: Sources and Directions," in Sonfist, op. cit., p. 16.
- 40 Michael Singer, quoted in Kate Linker, "Michael Singer: A Position In, and On, Nature," *Arts*, 1977 vol. 52, pp. 102-4; reprinted in Sonfist, op. cit., p. 188.
- 41 Linker, op. cit., pp. 183-4.
- 42 Grace Glueck, "Art Notes: Auction Where the Action Is," *New York Times*, November 15, 1970, p. D26.
- 43 Alan Sonfist, quoted in *ibid.*, p. D26.
- 44 Alan Sonfist, *Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments*, Purchase, New York, Neuberger Museum, 1978.
- 45 Alan Sonfist, *Rock Monument of Buffalo*, Buffalo, New York, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1979; quoted in Jonathan Carpenter, "Alan Sonfist's Public Sculptures," in Sonfist, op. cit., p. 146.
- 46 Carpenter, op. cit., p. 151.
- 47 Sonfist, quoted in Glueck, op. cit., p. D26.
- 48 Rosenthal, op. cit., p. 68. Rosenthal's article provides a useful comparison of Sonfist's *Time Landscape* and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*.
- 49 A shorter version of this chapter was presented as part of a symposium on interactions between art and nature at the Xth International Congress for Aesthetics in August, 1984, and appears in the proceedings of that congress. I thank my co-symposiasts, Donald Crawford and Dabney Townsend, for helpful comments.