Performing Nature

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Natural environments differ from artworks in two ways: (a) they are surroundings filled with objects, processes, and the observer, (b) they are natural, not intentionally created to be appreciated. I show that this serious problem for accounts of aesthetic appreciation of nature has led many thinkers in environmental aesthetics (e.g., Carlson and Rolston) to claim that appreciators should be actively engaged with a natural environment. But how? One suggestion has been that appreciators play the role of creative performers in the arts. I explore this analogy, distinguishing three different kinds of performance. I argue that none is a good fit as a model of nature appreciation but that the analogy sheds considerable light on environmental art, especially the site-specific artworks of Andy Goldsworthy.

I.

In 1979, Allen Carlson pointed out that natural environments as objects of aesthetic appreciation radically differ from artworks of any type.[1] A natural environment is something that one is within, not an object to be contemplated from the outside, and its complex properties were not caused in order to delight, move or interest a human perceiver. To deal with the twin features of being a natural not an intentional object and of being a surrounding environment, Carlson proposed his "Environmental Model" of nature appreciation.[2] Since then, controversy has been focused on that aspect of this model that has come to be labeled "Scientific Cognitivism," Carlson's claim that scientific knowledge is required for appropriate appreciation of nature. This debate, however, has obscured the potentially more interesting question of how to aesthetically appreciate any natural environment, even if one utilizes the requisite knowledge.[3] On this topic Carlson originally provided little guidance. He adopted the language of 'experience' and said that "we must experience [an environment] not as unobtrusive background, but as obtrusive foreground." He reasoned, as do other commentators,[4] that this involves using all of our senses, since a natural environment was not created to be, for instance, a visual as opposed to an auditory object; it has whatever perceptual properties we can observe in it using all of our senses in consort.

But adding this to the requisite scientific knowledge leaves a salient question unaddressed: How is it possible to appreciate a whole, dynamic environment *as foreground*, given that foreground is such only relative to a background? Since an environment is everything around one, including the background, it appears to be a psychological impossibility to attend to it appropriately, to pay attention to everything at once, *even if* one's attention is structured by scientific categories. Sheila Lintott is right when she says, "One cannot possibly pay attention to every aspect of any natural setting" (p. 6).[5]

II.

The inadequacy of the background-as-foreground maneuver presents us with an aesthetic conundrum. On the one hand, it is obvious that it is possible to appreciate nature aesthetically. On the other, it looks impossible to appropriately appreciate a natural environment, especially when one accepts that, as Carlson has said more recently, it "is intimate, total and somewhat engulfing." He speaks of "the unruly nature of the object. . . . Environments are constantly in motion, in both the short and long term . . . there are no predetermined boundaries . . .; as we move, it moves and changes . . . [it] does not come to us framed as do traditional artistic objects."[6] Thus he insists that appreciators need to *act* differently toward or in relation to an environment than they would toward artworks. The nature of an environment *requires* different conduct if one is to respect its nature.

We have to reconsider aesthetic appreciation of nature both because natural environments are environments and because they are non-intentional. If we consider human-made aesthetic three-dimensional objects deliberately sited in some sort of space, such as an architectural structure sited in an urban environment, or artists' installation pieces, such as the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (Peter Eisenman's 2700 stone slabs set in a rectangular grid with walking lanes so that visitors can wander through it from any direction), we see other cases where there are multiple ways to perceive and experience an object or set of objects in

1. Although his was the most influential formulation of the problem, Carlson was not the first to notice this. Carlson credits Ronald Hepburn's 1966 article "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" (reprinted in Carlson and Berleant eds. *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, [Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004]) with renewing interest in the aesthetics of nature. In that article, Hepburn anticipates many of the points that Carlson was to make later about the differences between the aesthetics of nature and of art.

2. Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1979): 267–75.

3. For example, Nick Zangwill's criticisms in "Formal Natural Beauty," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 21 (2001): 209–224, focus on the conceptual requirement and not on the question of how we are supposed to relate to, perceive, or otherwise interact with the environment.

4. For example, Holmes Rolston III and Arnold Berleant in their various writings.

5. Quotes are from Sheila Lintott, "On the Performative Interpretation of Nature," delivered at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Asilomar CA, April 2003.

6. Allen Carlson, "Environmental Aesthetics," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 142.

Environmental Philosophy 4 (1&2), 15–28.

an environment. But in the case of these human-built aesthetic objects, objects that were made to afford aesthetic experience, there are still intentions and conventions for how to frame and perceive the object. For example, one is expected to look at a building from the multiple sight lines down adjacent streets and not from six inches away. In the case of a natural environment there are no background assumptions (underwritten by artist intentions and conventions for experiencing a genre or type of art) about how it is to be perceived: from what points of view, how it is to be framed, on what level of detail, what is to be attended to and what is to be ignored, and so on. The individual appreciator's point of view is seemingly unconstrained except by the natural objects themselves, which as Carlson noted are in constant change on multiple time scales.

Since plainly it is possible to aesthetically appreciate a natural setting, we must find a workable model of how this can be done. When is a *particular* take on a rich, multi-faceted and dynamic object aesthetically accurate, when is a particular take on such an object an *appropriate appreciation* of the *whole object*?

III.

The solution to this difficulty preferred by some environmental theorists, such as Berleant and Rolston, has been to emphasize some form of engagement with the 'unruly object.'[7] Stephanie Ross, for example, endorses an activity requirement in her review of Carlson and Berleant's *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*: "the natural world itself is unframed and unbounded, *challenging the spectator to integrate* his or her experience."[8] Because natural environments are spatial, the activity recommended for appreciation necessarily includes physical action, where this may or may not be taken to preclude episodes of contemplation.[9] Holmes Rolston III for instance claims that "aesthetic appreciation of nature, at the level of forests and landscapes, requires embodied participation, immersion, and struggle. A forest is entered, not viewed . . . there is the kinesthetic sense of bodily presence, being incarnate in place. . . . This surrounding and engagement, spontaneity and participatory eventfulness, differs from art. . . ."[10] In an earlier work he says that "landscapes are also known in participant encounter, in being embodied in them" and that this requires a "participatory environmental aesthetics."[11]

7. See Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

8. *American Society for Aesthetics Newsletter* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2006): 5 (my emphasis).

9. Malcolm Budd does take 'engagement' to rule this out. Accordingly, he rejects Berleant's 'aesthetics of engagement' by noting that being *in* a landscape "does not prevent our aesthetic experience from being contemplative, which often it properly is." Malcolm Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111.

10. Holmes Rolston III, "The Aesthetic Appreciation of Forests," in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2004), 189f.

11. Holmes Rolston III, "Is Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscapes Science-Based?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 381, 384.

While engagement may be an attractive way to think of being in nature, does it form the basis for aesthetic appreciation? What sort of engaged activity counts as appropriate *aesthetic* appreciation? The following examples seem prima facie doubtful on this score: extreme snowmobiling, playing frisbee on a mountain pass, examining a forest for percent of beetle infestation, racing the Appalachian Trail. The first is a recreational *use* of obstacles that happen to be natural rather than human-made. The second is a leisure pursuit that ignores its surroundings for the game. The third is focused not on percipient experience but on establishing a quantified record of objective fact about natural objects. The fourth is so focused on the participant's athletic task that there is not time to notice the items in the surroundings except the rocks and roots on the trail.[12]

Accordingly, we need to be 'engaged' or 'immersed' in an environment in the *right* way.[13] Some writers suggest that a 'creative' response, something analogous to what an artist does, is what is appropriate, even perhaps required aesthetically. Carlson (1992) says, "In such appreciation the role of designer is typically taken by the appreciator. . . . That is to say that in our aesthetic appreciation of the world at large we typically play the role of the artist and let the world provide us with a design . . . we creatively interact with the nature of the environment we confront. In this way the environment itself, by its own nature, provides its own design." The twists and turns of this quote illustrate the problem. We want the appreciator to be both creative in how she approaches nature and how she crafts her response—rather like a sculptor with her materials—and yet we want her response to track the nature of the environment, rather as a *spectator* of a sculpture should do. These contrary requirements threaten to conflate the roles of artist and appreciator, as well as to assign a freedom of manipulation to the creative appreciator of environments that might very well be rejected by those who regard objectivity of aesthetic judgments of nature and respect for nature as nature as primary in any acceptable model of nature appreciation.[14]

In her recent book, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, Emily Brady too emphasizes the necessity for a *creative* appreciation and associates this with a performance: "Aesthetic appreciation of nature might be described as performative in a fairly rich sense. . . . Nature is expressive and it *performs* in some sense too. It is in relation to its *performance* that we react and act, *improvising* in

12. This simplifies, of course. I do not deny that these activities may be enriched by an accompanying aesthetic appreciation of their surroundings and their objects (the forest). But even if we acknowledge that in each activity the agents have to interact with the natural environment, considered purely as the activities that they are in themselves, they do not appear to be an aesthetic interaction with that environment.

13. Robert Stecker critically discusses the "immersion approach" toward appreciation of nature in Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 22–23.

14. For two prominent proponents of objectivity, see Allen Carlson, "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 15–27 and Glenn Parsons, "Freedom and Objectivity in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 17–37.

appreciation and interacting with nature through it." For Brady, this involves imagination: "Imagination makes new connections between natural qualities and ourselves. It moves us beyond perceptual qualities to make metaphorical and other types of creative relations, expanding our experience and enriching it with meaning."[15]

There is, we see, a tempting transition from requiring active and engaged appreciation to requiring *creative* appreciation, as well as from the creativity of nature to a creative response to it, and finally from all this to acting as an artist within a natural environment. But an artist in what medium, and how do we avoid a repugnant freedom in which an appreciator plays out her own personal interests and values using the environment merely as her materials? Any solution thus must avoid the radical analogy of a sculptor manipulating her materials, but it must go beyond the merely anodyne claim that nature appreciators must be as imaginatively engaged as art lovers are with a rich and complex artwork. Nor does the guidance of scientific knowledge resolve the problem of the unruly nature of the object: although eliminating many alternative frameworks, such as myth, scientific knowledge will still leave open an indefinite number of options for experiencing a natural setting. Indeed, scientific concepts open up new levels and ways of understanding and hence of perceiving a natural setting and its objects.

Is there then any way to avoid a self-indulgent subjectivism while acknowledging the non-intentional, exceedingly complex and unruly character of nature? In what follows I will explore the adequacy of solving this conundrum by taking seriously the notion of aesthetic appreciation as performance. The concept of performance in the arts is a concept of a creative but still respectful and objective aesthetic response to a multifaceted object. And, as we have seen, several thinkers have asserted or implied that performance is a useful way to model appropriate appreciation. Performers legitimately provide individual realizations of multiply realizable objects. Can we perhaps model the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature on performance in the arts? Sheila Lintott has suggested such a strategy, but as we have seen she is not the only thinker friendly to such an idea.[16] I will take the idea that in appreciating nature we perform nature to imply the claim that what we do when we appropriately aesthetically respond to nature can be modeled on the core features of performance.[17]

15. Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 219 (my emphasis). Brady, in contrast to Carlson, appears to make this feature of appreciation of nature *continuous with the appreciation of artworks*, rather than to be an essentially novel feature marking a distinctive way that nature (or at least an environment) is different from the arts. For, she explains her claim that "Aesthetic appreciation of nature might be described as performative in a fairly rich sense" by quoting Philip Alperson to the effect that acts of *art* appreciation "are themselves performances" (ibid). This suggests that the problem of nature appreciation ought to initiate a new set of questions about the nature of appreciation in the arts. *Are* acts of art appreciation also significantly like performances?

What is the scope and strength of this claim? I distinguish three different claims: (i) that it is *possible* to perform nature as an act of aesthetic appreciation, (ii) that it is *necessary* to perform nature *if* one is to appreciate it adequately, and (iii) that every act of aesthetic appreciation of nature—adequate, appropriate, or not—is a performance. If we call any of these claims a "Performance Model" (PM), we may call the first the "Weak" Performance Model, the second, the "Normative" Performance Model, and the third, the "Descriptive" Performance Model. Clearly the Descriptive and Normative performance models presuppose the possibility of performing nature. Normative PM argues that a performance of nature is a *necessary* condition for an adequate appreciation. Those writers who urge something like performance also tend to imply that performance is *sufficient* for adequacy, though some would add: if it is guided by appropriate cognitive categories for nature. In Carlson's original Environmental Model, as well as in Rolston, there is a sense that performance is an achievement that many people miss in their touristic encounters with 'scenic' nature, hence such thinkers will want to embrace Normative PM and reject Descriptive PM, or they will need some way of distinguishing between adequate and inadequate performances of nature.

Before examining more closely the underlying analogy, here briefly are some of the reasons that a performance model is attractive. *First*, is that it offers an approach to unframed nature. As Lintott points out, we need to fill "in the gaps left by the categories selected for nature appreciation" (p. 8). The gaps that Lintott is concerned with appear to exist between the scientific concepts and what appreciative behavior would follow given their application. She wonders, for example, why just because X is a prairie, it follows, as Allen Carlson has claimed, that we should survey it rather than scrutinize it.[18] In general does any specific appreciative behavior follow from the scientific categories applicable to an environment and its objects? Thus, personal perceptual activity selection is necessary, and this resembles a performance realization. A performance selects from the many remaining possibilities one realization. Indeed, she proposed that

16. Sheila Lintott developed this strategy in her "Performative interpretation model" of nature appreciation (op. cit., p. 1). She now suggests (personal communication) that the analogy may be distracting even though fruitful. I think there is heuristic value to exploring the analogy, and I will try to show that it offers a good model for understanding some environmental art.

17. Lintott says that the model is based on an analogy that, though not strict, is a "usefully informative one" (ibid., p. 1). I take it that to be useful, it should be possible to project the basic elements of performance onto acts of appreciation. If an essential feature is not there, the analogy loses its usefulness as a model. I would apply the same standard to other intriguing analogies to performance, such as the currently modish suggestion that museums are actually performance spaces that stage a performance of the artworks they display: the basic features of performance should be map-able onto museum-like display of art. See Valerie Casey, "Staging Meaning: Performance in the Modern Museum," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 3 (2005): 78–95.

18. Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," in *Aesthetics and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 51.

we also must select those very categories: "In nature appreciation we decide which, if any, categories to apply" (p. 7).

Second, there is the popular idea that the appreciator of nature *constructs* or constitutes the natural environment *as an object of aesthetic appreciation*. Thus Carlson: "in appreciating nature we are aware that the object is alien, a mystery, and therefore beyond our appreciation and . . . our mastery. However, we may also be aware that insofar as we manage to achieve some mastery of it, it is by means of our own beliefs, our own story, our own *creation* that we do so."[19] And Rolston: "In the forest itself, there is no scenery; for example, we *compose* the landscape vista. . . . The beauty is in the eye of the beholder; constituted with our phenomenal experience. . . . The aesthetic challenge is to complement the forest's dynamics . . . with this novel emergent that does *come into being when I arrive*."[20] Lintott puts it this way, "An individual's knowledge, interests, skills and attitude figure both into the construction of the object of nature appreciation and in the appreciation per se" (p. 5). This closely parallels the fact that in art performance performers construct and bring forth the musical, theatrical, or dance work.

Third, as we have seen the individual appreciator qua individual plays a much larger role than she does as an appreciator of the arts, and this too resembles the importance of the individual performer in the performance arts. As Lintott says, "we each relate to our environments as individuals" (p.5). For example, much turns on what the perceiver happens to *care about*. Lintott quotes the nature writer Annie Dillard who *lost interest* in seeing insects flying and now focuses on birds, and who also does not *care about* the tiny creatures in the grass. By contrast, even if I don't care about the details of the fruit or the gestures of the personages in a painting by Caravaggio, it is just such details that have to be noticed in any fully adequate appreciation of it.

And surely it is true that in nature each one of us will make many choices and express our interests, skills, and attitudes in different ways, now walking from this end of the beach to the other (rather than the other way round), now inspecting intently the tide pools instead of the waves, or looking for the birds rather than the storm clouds, now jumping into the water to swim instead of walking or making a sand castle: thus each one of us *realizing* a different and unique version of an environment. This general fact seems undeniable as a description of our ordinary experiences of nature. Any adequate theory of the aesthetics of nature needs to cope with this point-of-view problem. The performance theorist suggests that this variability is unproblematic, within the limit that one must relate to nature as nature. Why? Their thought is that we have a good model of aesthetically appropriate variability in performative interpretations of works for performance. Moreover, the performance theorist thinks that our variable and

19. Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, 122.
20. Rolston, "Forests," 189.

individually indexed experiences of nature are significantly like performances. But are they?

IV.

The first thing to notice is there are three significantly different paradigms of performance in the arts; each holds some promise to model engagement with nature:[21]

a. *Performance of a pre-existing work* as in musical and stage works.
b. *Improvisation* (jazz, interpretive dance, rap, mime).
c. *'Performance art'* (hereafter hyphenated): the one-off unique performances[22] by such artists as Rachel Rosenthal, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Stelarc, Mierle Ukeles, etc.[23]

These paradigms have crucially different characteristic features. Which paradigm is the one that is significantly analogous to appropriate acts of nature appreciation? It is natural to suppose that performance-of is the desired model. But there is a problem: with nature there is no work for performance with its associated set of conventions that determine what would be a good or a bad performance. Such conventions for performance of works for performance also make other assessments possible as well; that a performance is incomplete, partial or defective. Can performances of nature be any of these things?

Moreover, in performing a work the performer makes the work come alive, provides a completion of it. Nature seems to need no such completion; nothing could complete it in *this* sense.[24] Put differently, works for performance have

21. I take as irrelevant the everyday sense of 'performance' that (say) you gave at the party last night when you pretended to be disinterested in your old boyfriend or that a salesman makes in a presentation. I also set aside the more technical sorts of performance in the arts, such as (e.g.,) Chinese Circus acts, which though stunning, are feats of physical accomplishment rather than interpretive or creative performances.

22. Those familiar with performance-art will know that many of these pieces were not performed before a *live* audience. E.g., Chris Burden's piece, *Disappearing* (1971) consisted simply in him disappearing for three days (*Chris Burden: 71–73* [Los Angeles: Chris Burden published, 1974]). Since that will become an issue below, it needs to be noted that these pieces were still performed *for* an audience. Performance-artists are performing for an audience—though not necessarily a live audience—in the same way that a painter paints for an audience.

23. In my view, performance-art pieces are each unique events, rather than abstract works that can be performed in different places at different times (like musical works). This distinction is illustrated by the clearly exceptional case of Marina Abramovic's performance of other artists' classic performance-art works, which she 'performed' in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Abramovic herself notes in a remark that undermines the conceptual viability of *repeating* these performances: "It [the original piece] was supposed to be *that* event, in *that* moment, and that was it" (*New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2005, p. AR 16). No doubt she did something. I view her actions as appropriative performance-art, that is, her performances are *new* performance-works.

24. Rolston speaks as if we make it come into existence *as an object of appreciation*–see "Forest" and "Is Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscapes Science-Based?" Still, isn't the physical existence of a concrete environment very different from that of an abstract object such as a musical work or a play?

only an abstract existence until performed, in Paul Thom's terms they "call for" performance; performance is their goal, their teleology.[25] Can we say the same about natural environments?

Turning to improvisation, as in jazz, it too significantly depends on preexisting pieces and associated familiar structural and stylistic conventions. There is, to be sure, also 'free' improvisation in jazz and dance. Call this subcategory "free-improv." In free-improv as well as in the third paradigm, performance-art proper, there is a performance generated by the artist, and it tends to be undetermined by pre-existing scores or conventions. However, by the same token, are there materials or objects whose nature is to be respected and appropriately manipulated in such a performance (a desideratum of nature appreciation)? I'm inclined to answer, no. There are, of course, physical and psychological *limitations* to such performances, and, in free-improv, usually some sort of style. Still, as such artists are not performing an independent work, there is little room for assessing a given performance as wrong or right with respect to its materials. In performance-art either there are no obvious materials or the materials are said to be ideas. In any case, it is often impossible to say whether these materials have been adequately performed. I offer as an emblematic example almost any early piece by the infamous performance-artist Chris Burden, for example, his *Transfixed* in which he was crucified (nailed) to the back of a Volkswagen Beetle.[26] Such relations between the performance and the materials or content of the performance as *adequacy to*, *understanding of* or *respect for*, that we should want for nature appreciation do not have any obvious application.[27]

In summary: each of these paradigms has attractive features from the perspective of nature appreciation. Performance *of* a preexisting work, as a model, possesses the crucial desideratum that it requires respect for independent material. But a feature of this model is that it presupposes conventions for realizing the work which underpin the notions of good and bad, adequate and inadequate performance. Performances *of* works can be evaluated. To be sure, there are socially recognized, if culturally relative, *habits* of appreciating nature, but I doubt that these habits per se constitute perceptual-action norms that (a) have the status of conventions of performative interpretation or (b) respect nature as nature.[28] Yet, can we perform nature without any conventions?

Improvisation provides a freedom that in some ways better fits a natural environment as object, but even in improvisation there are many conventions and

25. Paul Thom, *For an Audience: A Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 75.

26. See Chris Burden, *op cit.*

27. If the ideas are fairly clear and didactic as in, e.g., the cleaning pieces by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, or Orlon's plastic surgery operations, the performance is more of a communication, and as such, can be judged to be more or less successful.

28. Carlson, Rolston *et al* are certainly revisionist about such cultural habits. They criticize the historically conventional ways of regarding nature aesthetically, implying that our common habits of attention to nature do not regard nature as it really is.

usually a preexisting work that is presupposed in perceiving and judging the improvisation (e.g., it is improvisation on a tune or themes). Finally, free-improv and performance-art provide creative freedom, but apparently too much, taking whatever materials are at hand to create a work that *uses* the materials to make the artist's point. Although performances in this category might be *stimulated by* an object or situation, they are not performances *of* that object or situation. There are of course independently existing things, ideas, bodies, symbols, etc. that provide structure and limitations to any such performance, but that fact is not sufficient to make these performances *of* these factors.

A final problem with any performance model of environmental appreciation is that performance of whatever stripe is, as Paul Thom puts it, *for* an audience.[29] Having an audience appears to be a core feature of all performance. Nature guides may perform for an audience, but an ordinary nature appreciator is not performing for anyone. Nature appreciation is just like art appreciation; it is not something one does *for someone else*. So, if performance is the right model of aesthetic appreciation of nature, it seems that it has to be a performance for oneself. A defender of the Performance Model, accordingly, must claim that an appreciator in effect provides her own audience, that she performs the environment for herself. This is not an absurd idea, for when they practice, performers have to be able to take on the role of viewer or listener of their own actions to be in a position to shape and critique these. Practice before no one is not strictly a performance, but it bears all the other properties of an official performance of which it aims to be an indiscernible counterpart.

Still, if we are to take performance as a serious model, we need to be able to make this plausible, to be able to say why an environment requires this sort of self-reflexive consciousness whereas artworks do not. Moreover, the notion that we are performing for ourselves when engaged with nature suggests a degree of self-consciousness about these engagements that appears to be contrary to our ordinary appreciative experiences in nature as well as possibly to conflict with the ideal that we should immerse ourselves in nature.

V.

Whether or not we can usefully regard nature appreciators as performing nature for themselves, actual artists do not have this conceptual drawback. Like any artist, earth/environmental artists do have an audience; their activities and products are *for* an audience. Even so, is it possible to view any of their works as a performance *of* nature? I propose that, not only *is* it possible, but it is in fact a good way to view some but not all environmental art. In the remainder of this paper I will focus on the otherwise puzzling nature-sited work of one of the most prominent

29. Paul Thom, *op cit.* To take one example, Stan Godlovitch's analysis of musical performance has among its conditions that the sound sequence produced by the musician is intended for and presented before a third-party listener (Stan Godlovitch, *Musical Performance: A Philosophical Study* [London: Routledge, 1998], 49).

of such artists, Andy Goldsworthy.[30] Does Goldsworthy make ephemeral *sculptures in* nature (out of leaves or ice, e.g.) or are Goldsworthy's pieces really *abstract objects* or *gestures* like Duchamp's entry of the urinal *Fountain* in a sculpture show, or *ideas* like Robert Barry's sentence "All the things I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking"? Using the distinctions we have made I think we can better conceptualize Goldsworthy and also differentiate his most familiar work from that of other artists who work in or on nature, such as Richard Long and Christo.

My proposal is that Goldsworthy's pieces are not best viewed as on-site sculptures or ideas or abstract objects but as performances. More specifically they should be viewed as performances *of* natural sites and/or of the natural materials as they are found there. They are not well viewed, however, as performance-art pieces, for the reason previously canvassed, that such pieces are not about their materials; they involve too much freedom and self-expression to achieve what Goldsworthy aims at.

The interpretive claims just made about Goldsworthy's natural site works presuppose that weak PM is true, that in spite of the conceptual obstacles I have delineated, it is *possible* to perform nature. Although one problem I have raised for the performance model of appreciation does not apply, namely the absence of an audience, what of the others?

There is no work to be performed, and there are no corresponding conventions. Let's first look at what Goldsworthy does and then try to address these issues. The typical, ephemeral Goldsworthy piece happens when he places himself in a natural setting, the more familiar to him the better. He develops an idea of how to interact with the place, often related to past works on relevantly similar places or objects. He uses just his body or in some cases a primitive tool, e.g., a knife, to alter objects: to pile up stones, grind rocks by hand, glue together leaves, cut ice, etc. On the site he makes a physical structure or collects a mass of site specific materials, he places the collection, mass, or structure in the site that it comes from, and in that site it is subject to the natural forces such as tides and currents, gravity, weather, the organic life that flourishes there if the piece lasts for days or seasons. He always interacts with the site and objects, sometimes incorporating his body into the piece, as in splashing water as a piece, or making a body shape on the ground. He photographs or films the structures and their interaction with the site: the nest of branches floats out to the sea on the tide, the ice-lattice melts in the sun, the red oxide floats in a ribbon down the stream highlighting the currents and the natural wild meanderings of current over rocks in the stream. In this way he *brings out, highlights, displays*, specific natural processes and unique natural objects and their specific qualities. I suggest that in these works he plays nature, he performs the place. He even says it is his way of understanding the place. Of course achieving such understanding is an endless task; there is no complete way of understanding, no final understanding, just as there is no ultimate performance of a play. What is the role of an artist in achieving this understanding? It is in imaging *how* to perform these objects in this place.

30. My claims are only about the works that he has sited in nature, not about pieces made for or in galleries or brought back to galleries or urban sites, although those pieces are clearly extensions of his work in nature. His giant snowballs formed in Scotland and released on the streets of London, June 2000, are an example of the latter. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/800916.stm (accessed June 25, 2007).

Goldsworthy's work even addresses a central conundrum of the Environmental Model, which is that because the appreciator is *immersed* in the environment, she is regarded as part of what she is appreciating. But the natural environment is precisely defined as that which humans have not significantly made or altered, have not brought about intentionally. As Malcolm Budd says, "the aesthetic appreciation of nature, if it is to be *pure*, must abstract from any design imposed on nature."[31] Yet, is the appreciator herself a *natural* element of the natural environment she is in? Much but not all of what we are is cultural, and the more an appreciator applies cultural categories to the natural environment, the more she expresses herself as a cultural product. In this light it is noteworthy that Goldsworthy takes an unsophisticated cognitive stance toward a given environment. He tries to think about a place using traditional commonsense or folk categories, although he does use some scientific knowledge—as in the red-oxide-in-the-iron-rocks piece, which displays for him the bond between our natural bodily selves (our blood) and the red oxide in the rocks at the bottom of the creek. This example also shows how he learns about a place over time and the exploratory nature of his work. He brings out this bond, after discovering the rocks, and he thinks about it in terms of the ancient concept of 'red' and its psychological power as well as the scientific categories that serve to unify us with the rocks.[32] The unity is further brought out in the ribbon of red which mirrors the ribbon of red in our arteries. As a performer of the natural environment as natural and because he is part of this environment, he chooses to utilize the less cultural part of himself (he uses his hands to pile things, he throws snow in the air, he grinds things by hand), thus harmonizing the role of the self as part of the object and the normative goal of appreciating what is natural as natural.

In these ways he contrasts with other artists who work with nature. Christo and Jeanne-Claude, e.g., bring cultural materials (fences, umbrellas, plastic sheets) and cultural ideas to sites, creating environment-works that are deeply cultural, connected to the history of art and formalist aesthetics. E.g., in the Wrapped Trees Project in Switzerland[33] the wrapping forms intriguing and beau-

31. Budd, *op cit.*, p. 9.

32. In *Rivers and Tides*, a film about his artworks in nature, Goldsworthy comments on the river work: "There is a shock at seeing that color, something very alien to the river; in fact, it is so rooted and *about* that place."

33. See the official Christo and Jeanne-Claude website: http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/

tiful shapes hovering over the ground, but these are not the natural shapes *of* the trees. They are something you can create with the trees and their environment, and in that sense are no more performances *of* the trees than is representational topiary. These are site-specific and temporary sculptures. By contrast, Richard Long does literally interact with an environment by walking through it. However his walks, usually in geometric forms such as straight lines, circles, intersecting lines, project abstract ideas onto the landscape. As he says: "walking—as art—provided an ideal means for me to explore relationships between time, distance, geography and measurement."[34] I suggest that Long does perform nature but not as Goldsworthy does *as the non-culturally natural*. Rather Long performs a unique natural environment *as part of universal physical reality*, which is thus describable, as everything is, by geometry.[35]

But how can Goldsworthy or anyone else perform nature given the problem that I previously noted: there are no rules with the status of performance *conventions* for realizing nature in the way that there are for works for performance. My answer is that although there may be no conventions, there is an obvious rule for an environmental artist who seeks to perform nature as nature:

> **RN**: Engage with nature in such a way as to bring out, make to show forth, to aesthetic sensibilities the non-cultural natural properties of the natural objects in that environment.

Although this rule does not have the status of a convention for how nature should be exhibited, it will have the status of a regulative ideal for those who care about appreciating nature *as nature*. In these terms it would be a mistake to evaluate a given Goldsworthy site piece as sculpture (whatever that would mean). If it were

34. From his official website: http://www.richardlong.org/ (accessed Feb. 4, 2006). His sculpture, while superficially similar to Goldsworthy's, also exemplifies the same geometric forms of circle and straight line, and thus projects ideal concepts onto the landscape. The website of the New Art Centre Sculpture Park says: "Long does not significantly alter the terrain by digging, burrowing, sculpting, or constructing. He simply adjusts nature's placement of rocks and wood to subtly demarcate geometric shapes." (www.sculpture.uk.com/richard_long.htm) (accessed Feb. 1, 2006).

35. There are other ways to look at what Long does, but they illustrate how the analogy of a *performance of* nature—in contrast to a comment on or use of—becomes unmoored when cultural elements are introduced into the equation. One alternative interpretation is that he realizes nature as non-cultural nature, and that he does so precisely by showing how universal geometric structures apply to this natural environment. Still, in walking an unnaturally straight line he is bringing a highly cultural side of himself to this interaction. Even though geometry is universal, the ideas of geometry and measurement that he is working with are cultural products. Instead of noting how geometry (non-culturally) naturally describes some structure or event in nature, e.g., how the solar rays pass through an ice lattice at sunset, Long highlights the tension inherent in an artificial application of geometry to an landscape. This is rather like arranging elements in nature to display a scientific experiment. Both activities exhibit true features of the natural elements but not features of these elements or landscapes *as non-culturally natural*. Thus Long's work falls between Goldsworthy's and Christo's.

sculpture, it might be mediocre, but it is in fact a performance of nature and as such it might be a marvelous performance of the place and its natural constituents.

Goldsworthy makes visible what is there but is not visible or not *as visible* as it is after he acts. He highlights nature naturally. This leads finally to its own conundrum: if we appreciate a Goldsworthy performance through its documentation are we appreciating nature as nature?[36]

36. My answer is that a natural environment, say a particular forest glade, cannot be made a direct object of my attention in the way that a musical work or a play can be through a recorded performance. In appreciating a recording of a musical performance I can become directly acquainted with the musical work, but seeing a film of a Goldsworthy performance does not bring that environment to me directly since that environment is not an abstract object but a concrete entity. I suggest that we think of it as an imaginary experience of that environment. If we happen to be there with him in his interaction, then we *do* appreciate nature directly through his work. Otherwise we are essentially imaginatively appreciating nature—but at least that which we are indirectly appreciating is nature as nature.