

Is It Worth It? Lintott and Ethically Evaluating Environmental Art

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The question ‘Is it worth it?’, as originally applied to artworks by Tolstoy and here reintroduced by Sheila Lintott, opens a fruitful avenue for understanding land art. It is, however, a question with many facets in need of analysis. I will try to sketch that analysis here. Although the target of Lintott’s discussion is the category of land art, the Tolstoyan question does not come up only in the case of land art. It frequently arises in cases of controversial or extravagant types of art of many sorts, and understanding its application to various types of art illuminates their artistic content as well as their artistic value.

I take the is-it-worth-it question to be a question of *overall* value—i.e., the sum of positive and negative values the generation of a work necessarily or contingently brings into existence. Although Tolstoy may appear to pose primarily a resource question, in actuality he pursues the issue in more complex ways that apply to land art as well as to his example of an opera. Tolstoy usefully reminds us of the multiple *locations* for moral and value assessment in the calculation of the overall worth of any artwork. He worries about the opportunity costs of the labor and the materials that could perhaps have been better used than in producing an opera performance, but he also worries about the bad *actions* that went into creating the production, and he worries about the negative *effects* of the work on its audience. Still, his discussion is unsystematic. So I propose to generalize his insights and Lintott’s rich discussion into a systematic framework for factoring values into the overall worth of *any* artwork, not just land art. Although general, I believe that this framework is especially illuminating concerning whole classes of artworks of which nature artworks are a prominent example, given the way that both Lintott and I want to understand such works.

But first, because Lintott’s focus is on the moral assessment of land art, I must register skepticism regarding the usefulness of this category for drawing any general conclusions, aesthetic or moral. As characterized by Sue Spaid, it encompasses such a wide range of diverse works and activities, from earthworks of the 1960s to contemporary ‘ecoventions’, that it is doubtful that this category has sufficient artistic unity to bear *any* ethical generalizations. And I think this is reflected in

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Lintott's frequent mention of the need for case-by-case evaluation of work in this tradition. On the one hand, 'land art' includes actual sculptural objects and installations set in nature, works that are in a loose sense 'about' their natural settings or objects, but on the other hand, it includes *any* work or activity that might be motivated by concern about human interactions with the environment in a global sense, e.g., projects involving sustainable publishing,¹ or work with deep-sea fishermen 'developing models for the reconstruction of marine ports and fishing communities',² or anti-globalization art projects such as Kristina Leko's *Cheese and Cream* project, which sought to 'draw attention to the plight of the milkmaids of Zagreb market'.³

As the Green Museum says, one type of land art is work that 're-envision[s] our relationship to nature, proposing...new ways for us to co-exist with our environment' (Greenmuseum.org). It is no surprise that work that is precisely motivated by environmentalist thinking would turn out to be both morally evaluable and morally worth it, in a broad sense of 'moral'. But no such generalization applies to the category of land art, *as such*.

I think we can carve out a more useful and artistically unified category from this diverse tradition by using Carlson's definition of 'environmental art'.⁴ His notion captures most of the art that we want in this historical progression, and it gives the relevant artworks a distinctive and unifying property that explains why the category might be relevant to critical judgment about the works.⁵ As Carlson defines the category, 'environmental' artworks are 'in or on the land in such a way that a part of nature constitutes a part of the relevant work...not only is the site of an environmental work an environmental site, but the site itself is an aspect of the work' (Carlson, 2000, p. 150). I would add that the site should be a more or less natural, and not an artifactual or urban site. Thus, not only would sculpture placed in a natural site (e.g. in a sculpture park) not count because the setting is used to enhance the artifactual object, but also the category should not include installations in *urban* settings that merely use natural objects such as grass and trees as their materials, such as Maya Lin's *Wave Field*, which is a series of grass-covered mounds on the Michigan campus, or Martha Schwartz's *Untitled* installation at the Federal Plaza in New York City, which comprises grass-covered mounds.⁶ What of landscaping? For instance, a golf course in Phoenix may snake in and around the desert and the cacti, thus not only acknowledging the site but actually incorporating some of its original features and life forms.⁷ Perhaps it is enough to argue against including this sort of artifact in the category of environmental art that the interaction of the constructed elements with nature is not the primary purpose of the course and that the natural setting is used primarily to enhance the golfing experience.

At any rate, from here on, I will focus on 'environmental art', those works that are primarily about non-human nature and usually about it *as nature*.⁸

The first issue concerning a general framework for valuing artworks has to do with the range of 'moral' assessment. I take it that people apply non-aesthetic value judgments to artworks and their costs and effects much more broadly than the narrow term 'moral' connotes. Noel Carroll's 'moderate moralism' position contends that 'the moral defects and/or merits of a work may figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work' (Carroll, 2001a, p. 306). There are several types of relevant cases. It is one thing for a representational narrative to extol plainly immoral *acts*,

e.g., sadism. It is slightly different—to take the well-canvassed case of *Triumph of the Will*—to *explicitly promote* a repelling political or social *ideal*. It is a third thing to *implicitly* endorse (say) racist *attitudes*—accusations made against the films *Birth of a Nation* and *Song of the South*. The moderate moralist will want to include all of these value assessments in the evaluation of the artistic value of these works, even though only a de Sade explicitly endorses particular immoral acts.

But ordinary people apply an even wider range of values to artworks, typically revolving around political commitments, sexual content, and religion. These are values that people care about greatly and that are subject to controversy. However, it is not clear that they express moral concerns narrowly construed. Did the artist Dread Scott, with his installation piece ‘What is the proper way to display a US Flag?’ (1988), *do* something subject to *moral* assessment when he invited viewers to walk across the American flag in his infamous work?⁹ Did Chris Ofili *make* something subject to moral assessment in his painting ‘The Virgin Mary’ with its dollops of elephant dung? Or did D. H. Lawrence in his explicit descriptions of sexual acts? In each case, there was outrage and offense, as there has been with a wide range of art that groups of people perceive as offensive to them or their beliefs. Whether or not we call these reactions ‘moral’ evaluations, I suggest that in the case of environmental artworks it is essential to include something like this wide range of evaluations. Carlson’s notion that some environmental artworks are an ‘affront’ to nature, for example, sounds quite parallel to the religious, social, or political offense that some people take to some artworks. For lack of a better phrase, I will call this pluralist set of values ‘broad moral value’.

Accordingly, our framework needs to incorporate the fact that the broad moral evaluation of environmental art will not be as straightforward as is the moral evaluation of movies and novels as conceived by the moderate moralist. Ordinarily, that sort of evaluation, when applicable to a narrative, is of human actions and character, as represented in the narrative, and these are traditional subjects of moral evaluation. But non-human objects and behavior with respect to such are not widely regarded as obvious subjects appropriate for narrow moral value or evaluation.

We are now in position to sketch a value assessment framework that is consistent with Lintott and Tolstoy. Considering artworks *in general*, there are at least three locations where value assessment is applicable, and within each location there are significantly different aspects that can be scrutinized. Even if we do not conceptually reduce artworks to their material bases, artworks depend upon ordinary physical objects and events for their realization and moreover have real-world effects on real people.¹⁰ These, together with the work itself, give us three obvious locations where values-based assessment may contribute to the overall value of an artwork:

- (A) the *causal process of production* that creates a work or, in the case of performance artworks, makes a work available;
- (B) the work itself as (a) an existing *enduring* thing with a material base and (b) an *artistic content*;
- (C) the *direct effects* of the work: (a) effects comprising the immediate uptake (e.g., offense, anger, derision, dread) of audience members¹¹ and (b) long-term effects on the audience (e.g., a change of attitude toward something)

as well as, in some cases, long-term effects on the physical and social world (surely a significant feature of ecoventions and land art more generally).

The overall value of the artwork is clearly a function of all three aspects. Why, then, is it customary to ignore the (A) level value assessments for particular artforms or genres? I suggest that this is usually due to one of two features of those forms or genres. First, this may be due to the modest requirements of the physical base underlying the form—e.g., it takes very few materials and little labor to write a song whereas it takes a lot of both to construct a large monument or building or to perform an opera. Second, it may be because the work's typical costs are no different from those of familiar non-art artifacts, e.g., the ecological costs of publishing a novel—the cutting of hundreds of trees, etc.—are no different from the ecological costs of publishing philosophy articles, newspapers, and catalogues. It might even be that there are more ecological costs to producing a best-selling novel than to (say) Christo's *Surrounded Islands*, but we do not notice this because the production costs are not essential to or inherent in the content of the novel,¹² whereas ecological costs were explicit for *Surrounded Islands* while it endured.

In terms of the costs of production, it is essential to attend to both the resources and the actions required.¹³ In Marcia Eaton's example of paintings made by flip-flopping dying goldfish covered in paint, the significant moral issue involves the actions of doing this to fish, not the minimal resources involved (Eaton, 1992). If the *production* of *Piss Christ* is offensive, it is because Serrano necessarily had to submerge a crucifix in urine. To construct *Roden Crater*, James Turrell necessarily had to level the top and excavate big holes in a natural cinder volcano. These production *actions* are subject to broad moral evaluation. By contrast, when Christo manufactures thousands of yards of plastic sheeting and brings them to a site, he merely raises a resource issue. In addition, however, the *ongoing existence* of an artwork, e.g., *Surrounded Islands during the time it is installed*, can be broadly morally evaluated too. Some ongoing costs are not part of the content of the piece, e.g., the electricity that a stage production uses for its lighting, whereas, in the case of some artworks, some ongoing costs, actions, or effects are part of the work's content. Here are three examples. (1) Chris Burden's *Shout Piece* (1971) consisted of him shouting amplified obscenities at people as soon as they entered the gallery.¹⁴ (2) Dread Scott had to put the flag on the floor to *create* his installation, but the ongoing existence of the installation was such as to require viewers to walk across the flag to write in a book.¹⁵ The former act was an essential cost of the production, the latter fact about the flag and its treatment was an essential feature of the piece as enduring through time. (3) Christo and Jeanne-Claude's current project *Over The River*, in which eight large sheets of translucent fabric will be hung over the Arkansas River, may, during its proposed siting of two weeks, have adverse effects on the wildlife, especially the shy bighorn sheep in the area, which may avoid the river even though they need to go to the river to drink water.¹⁶

Environmental artworks typically alter their sites and natural objects, either temporarily (Christo, Goldsworthy) or permanently (Turrell, Heizer, Goldsworthy, Smithson). Such artworks are supervenient on the physical alteration of that site. In making the work the artist is also making the physical alteration. Now, for much art it may be plausible to assume that we can distinguish the physical base from

the artwork supervenient upon it, and while both the base of the work while enduring as well as the making of the base can be evaluated broadly morally, this assessment can be logically distinguished from an assessment of the *artistic value* of the work, and thus does not fall under the purview of moderate moralism. For example, Michelangelo contributed to quarrying at Carrara by carving *David*, but if we disapprove of the results of marble quarrying, such disapproval applies to the act of making the marble base of *David* but not to the artistic value of the sculpture *David*, which is not about the quarry at Carrara.

Consider a more complex example that involves broad moral assessment of the enduring base. The 'guerrilla' artist Banksy's 'Barely Legal' elephant installation (LA, September 2006) had a commendable moral content but inspired controversy because a live elephant painted all over with an Indian fabric design in a mock living room was essential for the ongoing existence of the installation. We can ask whether the broad moral wrongness of the enduring base was sufficiently compensated for by its artistic value, which is itself increased by its positive moral content: the elephant in the living room signifies and reminds us of Third World poverty. In this case, it would be a mistake to regard the effect on the material base (the elephant) as what the piece was about; instead, the elephant was clearly an evocative symbolic exemplification of the underdeveloped world.¹⁷

These days we would probably disapprove of a sculpture made out of a rare endangered hardwood, but unless such a work were a conceptual piece *about* using endangered materials, the artistic value of the sculpture could be considered separately, and then we could ask whether that artistic value made it 'worth it' when compared with the negative broad moral value of using the wood in the present ecological context. Although these values are not on the same scale, I do not believe that fact precludes comparing them and rationally arriving at an overall assessment that concludes that it is (or is not) worth it. We certainly do this all the time for live performances of music, plays, or dance, when both performers and audience members plausibly conclude that what is made manifest in the performance is worth the labor of the performers and the costs of production.

Although artists often do not regard the effects of their works on audiences as predictable or even relevant, we can—and in some cases should—also include the predictable or intended effects in the overall assessment of worth. Thus, the overall value will be a function of the values involved in the creation and ongoing existence of a work, the artistic value of the work, and the value of the expected effects. As a practical matter, the is-it-worth-it question arises legitimately in cases where there is significant positive or negative value in the production or the effects. We need not fret over the causes or effects of a mediocre poem, but works that take great resources or have strong predictable effects may be another matter. Note too that a mediocre artwork can be redeemed in many eyes by a positive evaluation of its effects. Shostakovich's wartime Symphony No. 7 and Sibelius's *Finlandia* may be examples of just such a redemption, if one values the patriotic feelings these works reinforced and were intended to reinforce. Ecoventions fit here as they are intended to have ecologically good results and to raise consciousness as well; thus they may be worth it even if they have negligible artistic value.

We can now apply this general framework to a particular group of arts: those artworks that are about their bases. This group includes environmental artworks, but

also arguably performance art¹⁸ and some installation art, and if Lintott's intuitions about pornography are right, pornography too. This is why pornography is an illuminating analogy for land art. In all these cases a negative or positive broad moral evaluation of the action of altering the base appropriately influences the very artistic value of the piece, since the effect on the material base is a central part of the work's content. But only a part. Richard Long's geometric treks across landscapes are in part about the minimum impact he makes on the land. But if that were all they are about, they would not be artistically any more valuable than indiscernible counterpart artworks that followed in his footsteps, so to speak, but were even more minimal and less imaginative.

We can now draw the conclusion that environmental artworks are such that they necessarily have broad moral content in addition to the broadly moral properties of their underlying material acts, because as artworks they are in one way or another in part about actually acting on their natural material bases. Unlike representations of nature, they self-consciously alter it. And altering or manipulating nature, supposing Lintott is right, is always a broadly moral act. Here is a parallel: Imagine that we had a form of art that was made out of living animals—the point being to self-consciously use animals as the animals they are, not as, e.g., rich signifiers, as Banksy did. Such 'animal art' would always have a broadly moral content because most of us regard animals as beings whose interests and welfare have a moral claim to be taken into consideration in our actions affecting them. Similarly given that, as Lintott suggests, nature qua nature has a moral claim on us, it follows that environmental artworks have moral content.

Notes

¹ See the books entitled *Avant-Guardians: Textlets in Art and Ecology* in Weintraub (2007).

² See the project 'Arte y Comunidades Pesquera' at <http://www.alaplastica.org.ar/> (accessed 15 October 2006.) This is one of those linked at the Green Museum.

³ The project 'seeks to draw attention to the plight of the milkmaids of Zagreb market, whose way of life is endangered by the pressures of economic globalisation, and also shows how the disappearance of homemade dairy products threatens the citizen's right to quality of life. In this multi-layered collaborative project with real social and political impact, the artist acted as facilitator in the self-organisation of the milkmaids and the drafting of the Milkmaid's Declaration' (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2007).

⁴ Warning: 'environmental art' seems to mean something different to each theorist using the expression. For example, the Green Museum says of environmental art: 'in a general sense, it is art that helps improve our relationship with the natural world' (http://greenmuseum.org/what_is_ea.php, accessed 15 October 2006). Much of this ambiguity is created by the systematic ambiguity of 'environmental'.

⁵ I am of course referring to the way that categories play a role in critical judgments and interpretations, according to Kendall Walton's account in his classic 'Categories of Art'.

⁶ Examples that would be included in the category of land art but which are borderline as 'environmental art' are the replanted city lots (*Time Landscape*) by Alan Sonfist. This is because they are not always or even usually about their sites as non-human nature. Indeed, by their sharp contrast with the urban structures around them, they rather highlight the ultimately urban nature of the site and its surrounds as well as an alternative possible natural history that the site *could have had*. See the Sonfist website: http://greenmuseum.org/content/artist_index/artist_id-129.html (accessed 15 October 2006). A park for comparison is an artificial environment that is often a fantasy of nature as nature (as in sections of Central Park). As such, it is not about its site as nature.

I suggest as well that a park is to be judged and valued in an entirely different way than any work of environmental art.

⁷ Although such courses strike me, to use Allen Carlson's (2000) words, as an 'affront' to the native desert, they are not, on that account, bad *environmental art*. However, there is still the question of whether the value assessment that a course is an 'affront' affects the truth of the proposition 'The golf course is beautiful'. I think it must, but this is an argument beyond our present scope. For an argument that it must, see Hettinger (2005).

⁸ I am of course using 'nature' to refer to the non-artifactual, non-intentionally produced parts of the world around us.

⁹ See <http://www.thefileroom.org/documents/dyn/DisplayCase.cfm/id/199> (accessed 15 October 2006).

¹⁰ The relation of artworks to their material bases is especially important in the case of environmental art. Both the artwork and its material base must be considered in any broad moral evaluation, as we shall see. The reduction of artworks to their material bases is rightly rejected by Arthur Danto throughout his work. See Danto (1981) and Fisher (1995).

¹¹ It is plausible to think that it will be difficult to distinguish, at the level of broad moral evaluation, between the content and the immediate uptake effects. As Noel Carroll argues, *understanding* a narrative involves *feeling* moral emotions toward the characters; the reader should find Uriah Heep repugnant and should admire Robert Jordan's restraint in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Carroll, 2001b, p. 287). Nonetheless, there is often a distinction. Consider the different uptakes (funny vs. offensive) that are possible ways of understanding a cartoon portraying Arabs as terrorists.

¹² Nor are they causally necessary to make the novel available; the novel can now be produced digitally.

¹³ There is also an intriguing distinction between essential and accidental production materials and actions. This applies to Tolstoy's example of an opera rehearsal: it is not essential to his opera that it be rehearsed by an abusive conductor. Hence negative moral evaluation of the rehearsal actions and the conductor do not extend to the opera itself. It is not essential to a particular Tahitian painting by Gauguin that he left his children in Europe to place himself in a position to do the painting nor even that (imagine) he stole the last of the red paint on the island from his student and acolyte who would otherwise have gone on to produce many great paintings himself. This raises a question beyond the scope of this comment: ought the is-it-worth-it question apply only to the necessary costs and the predictable outcomes of a work rather than to the adventitious costs or effects? These may be relevant to a 'was-it-worth-it' question, but not to the is-it-worth-it question.

¹⁴ See *Chris Burden: 71–73* (Los Angeles: Chris Burden published, 1974).

¹⁵ This suggests a limit to the much-discussed 'transformative' nature of artworks (see Danto, op. cit.). Independent of Dread Scott's intentions, even if he had intended this as a conceptual piece proving that the flag was not the flag in his artwork, any piece involving this action will involve *actually* walking across an *actual* flag.

¹⁶ This is almost a perfect case of our evaluation framework, except that the is-it-worth-it question tends to be focused on whether the impact on nature/wildlife is sufficiently offset by the projected benefits for the local economy from tourists coming to see the project (see Correll, 2006). It appears to be difficult to include artistic value in the calculations of public policy.

¹⁷ The distinctions between the content (good) and the material base (bad) explain the contrary intuitions that people expressed about this installation. The nature of the installation necessarily required the elephant to be *used as a means*, which naturally animal lovers found offensive even if that was not part of the content of the installation. See the BBC web page 'Banksy's elephant provokes anger', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/5355638.stm> (accessed 15 October 2006).

¹⁸ This is what makes performance art different from theater and the performing arts.

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