

CHAPTER 9

ART IN NATURE

(Continuum
2008)

In the previous chapter, we extended our investigation of the aesthetic appreciation of nature beyond the usual paradigm case of appreciating wilderness, by taking up the appreciation of nature in a physical part of the human world: the garden. In this final chapter, we will continue in this direction by considering the appreciation of nature in the context of a more conceptual dimension of the human world: art.¹ As noted in the last chapter, art and gardening have long since parted company in the Western world. But this does not mean that art has left nature behind. One of the most innovative and interesting branches of contemporary art, environmental art, focuses upon nature and the natural environment. Works in this genre draw upon natural materials and phenomena, and present them to us for appreciation in the context of a creative work by the artist.

In considering this form of nature appreciation, we will focus on two issues. The first is the precise sort of involvement of nature in environmental art. To what extent is nature a part of environmental artworks, and can we really say that we are appreciating nature when we appraise these works? The second issue, which we will treat at greater length, is whether there is something unethical about the treatment of nature involved in the creation of environmental artworks. This second issue has been much discussed by philosophers, and in considering it, we will confront, a final time, a concern that has run throughout much of our discussion in this book: the connection between aesthetic appreciation and our ethical relationships with the natural world.

ENVIRONMENTAL ART: AN AFFRONT TO NATURE?

Environmental art is a genre of recent vintage, having originated in the 1960s. Nonetheless, it includes a wide variety of works. At one extreme, we find the most vivid examples of the genre: large-scale manipulations of natural sites, such as the 'earthworks' of artists like Michael Heizer

and Robert Smithson. Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969-70) consists of two massive rectangular cuts in the top of a desert mesa in southern Nevada. These cuts are 50 feet deep, 30 feet wide and over 1,500 feet long, and the work was constructed using bulldozers and dynamite. One of Smithson's best-known pieces is a work known as *Spiral Jetty* (1970). As the name suggests, the work consists of a coil-shaped jetty, 1,300 feet long, composed of rock and earth, and situated in Utah's Great Salt Lake. For a period of time rising water levels in the lake rendered it invisible from the shoreline, although it was visible from the air. Recently, a drop in water levels has made it visible again.²

The earthworks of Heizer and Smithson are on an enormous scale, involving dramatic interventions in nature. But not all environmental artworks are of this type. Alan Sonfist's work *Time Landscape* (1965) involved the artist simply allowing a city block in New York City to revert to its natural state. And moving still further from the works of Heizer and Smithson, we find small-scale and unobtrusive works that incorporate natural materials and sites, such as certain works by the contemporary British artist Andy Goldsworthy. His descriptively titled work *Sycamore Leaves Stitched Together* (1987), for example, consists of an arrangement of naturally occurring objects situated in a more or less undisturbed natural site. Other of his works involve placing leaves on streams, stacking stones on top of one another and turning a small pool of water red by rubbing stones together to release natural pigment into the water.

The environmental artworks described above differ greatly in their employment of nature. What can we say, in general, about the role of nature in environmental art? In all of these works, nature is a part of the work in two important senses.³ First, nature is a part of the medium employed by the artist, in some substantial sense.⁴ For example, Goldsworthy's *Sycamore Leaves* is made out of leaves and situated in a forest, and *Spiral Jetty* is made out of stone and situated in a lake. In all of the works described above, the fact that natural materials and sites are employed in the work is essential to the work. These specific works could not have been made from some synthetic materials, and cannot be moved to some different site. Second, natural materials are not only a crucial element of the artwork's medium, they are also a part of its content. Thus, works such as *Sycamore Leaves* and *Spiral Jetty* do not simply happen to be made of natural materials: they are, in part, about those natural materials. That is, acknowledging the natural element of an environmental artwork is vital for understanding the meaning of the work.

AESTHETICS AND NATURE

In virtue of these two features, then, all of the works on our list, despite their great differences, can be classed within the broad category of environmental art.

This categorization of environmental art presents an interesting contrast with gardens. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is arguable that, even though they often employ natural materials and have natural aspects, gardens are not essentially natural. Gardening could be carried out without the use of nature at all. But this is not the case for environmental art. Environmental art is defined as art that uses nature as a part of its medium, to express something about nature. As such, the natural elements that figure in these works are integral to their being environmental art. In appreciating works in this genre, we necessarily appreciate various natural forces and objects, though always within the context of the artwork.

This answers the first question raised at the start of this chapter, namely: "To what extent is nature a part of environmental art?" But it also raises our second question: Is there something unethical about the treatment of nature in the creation of environmental artworks? Environmental art essentially involves the artist intervening in nature, and appropriating it for artistic purposes. If one accepts that, in general, our treatment of nature merits ethical consideration, we must ask whether the treatment of nature involved in the creation of environmental art is ethically acceptable or not. One obvious reason for thinking that a particular way of treating nature is unethical would be its causing serious ecological harm to nature. These concerns may be acute with some environmental artworks, such as those of Smithson and Heizer, and less so for others (many of Goldsworthy's works, for instance, have little or no environmental impact, in this sense). But environmental art also raises a different, and more philosophically interesting ethical worry, which is whether the creation of environmental art constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature.⁵

The general idea behind the notion of an aesthetic affront is an insult, indignity, or slight to X that is based on interference with the aesthetic qualities of X. As such, an aesthetic affront to nature is an ethically problematic behaviour towards a natural site, but one different from more typically cited kinds of ethically problematic behaviours towards such sites, such as causing serious ecological harm. The creation of environmental art is thought to involve an aesthetic affront to nature in virtue of two facts. First, prior to the intervention of the artist, nature possesses a set of aesthetic qualities, which it has as the natural thing it is. A mountain face might look rugged and imposing, for instance; if so, this is an aesthetic quality it has as a natural thing. Second, in creating environmental art,

ART IN NATURE

the artist converts nature to art, thereby changing its aesthetic qualities. As an analogy, Allen Carlson offers Duchamp's conversion of a copy of the *Mona Lisa* into his Dadaist work, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), by adding a moustache and goatee.⁶ This conversion involved altering the aesthetic qualities of the object in question: after its conversion into a Dadaist work, the object acquired aesthetic qualities, such as looking discordant or ironic, which it lacked before the conversion. The same sort of aesthetic transformation occurs in the creation of environmental art. As Carlson puts it, the conversion of nature into an artwork comes at a cost to [nature's] aesthetic qualities', as those qualities are destroyed, or at least obscured, by the new aesthetic qualities that are imposed on the object.⁷

Together, these facts about environmental art raise the question of whether it is an aesthetic affront to nature. For replacing the aesthetic qualities of an object with a different set of aesthetic qualities, through a conversion of the object into an artwork, might be construed as an insult, indignity, or slight to the aesthetic character of the original object. Why is this? Consider again Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* Since Duchamp in fact used a copy of the *Mona Lisa*, this work is not an apt analogy for the creation of environmental art, which uses actual nature, not an imitation of it.⁸ So let us imagine a visually indiscernible work, created in the same way by Duchamp, but using the original *Mona Lisa*: call this work *L.H.O.O.Q.**.⁹ In creating *L.H.O.O.Q.**, Duchamp would clearly have been implicitly affronting the original work. This is the case insofar as this action would manifest the attitude that the *Mona Lisa* is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it is deemed necessary to replace it with something else: namely, *L.H.O.O.Q.**. It is important to note that this would be the case even if the interference with the aesthetic qualities of the original work, the *Mona Lisa*, was temporary. As Carlson puts it, 'had Duchamp penciled 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'.¹⁰ For this action would still manifest the attitude that the *Mona Lisa* is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it is deemed necessary to replace it (temporarily) with something else: namely, *L.H.O.O.Q.**. Since subsequent removal of the physical traces of the act of creating *L.H.O.O.Q.** does not change this fact, this action remains an affront to the original work of art.

The creation of an environmental artwork, however, can be construed in the same fashion: as manifesting the attitude that the original natural object is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it is

Depend on
char. (R. H. W. W.)
Duchamp does,

AESTHETICS AND NATURE

deemed necessary to replace it with something else (the environmental artwork). Further, this would be the case even when the environmental artwork itself is temporary in nature, being later removed by the artist or by natural process.¹¹ In this manner, the creation of environmental art might be said to constitute an aesthetic affront, slight, or indignity to nature.

DEFENDING ENVIRONMENTAL ART

Recently, a number of philosophers have taken issue with the claim that environmental art constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature. In this section, we will consider one response to this claim: the idea that some environmental art has a special character that makes it immune to the effrontery charge.¹² The philosophers who advance this response are willing to concede that some environmental artworks, some of Heizer's earthworks, for instance, are aesthetic affronts to nature.¹³ They point out, however, the extreme nature of these works, and note that, in other cases, it is less clear that an aesthetic affront has been committed. In general, philosophers who are critical of the charge of effrontery point to three circumstances that mitigate the charge.

The first factor is the presence of a certain attitude towards nature, as an artistic 'material', or 'medium', on the part of environmental artists. This attitude is described by Emily Brady as the displaying of 'a form of aesthetic regard' for nature.¹⁴ In displaying this attitude, the artist pays careful attention to the original aesthetic value of nature, and develops the environmental artwork in a way that acknowledges and relates to that value. As an example of this attitude, Brady cites Goldsworthy's works, which often employ natural materials and incorporate natural forces, such as the heat of the sun or the forces of wind and tide. In art such as Goldsworthy's, she writes, 'the artist's role becomes one of enabling or increasing attentiveness to nature's qualities by pointing to them, highlighting them and working with them creatively. In these ways, ephemeral artworks show aesthetic regard for nature.'¹⁵ This attitude of aesthetic regard for nature is a far cry, Brady notes, from the 'macho aggression' evident in certain of Heizer's works.¹⁶ Unlike the latter, Goldsworthy does not obliterate nature's aesthetic qualities; rather, his works can even be said to enhance those qualities. Perhaps we may attend more closely to the look of leaves or to the subtle effects of the forces of wind and tide after seeing one of Goldsworthy's works, for instance.

ART IN NATURE

A second factor thought to mitigate the charge of effrontery is the aesthetic improvement that environmental art can bring about: environmental artworks can be aesthetically valuable, more valuable, in some cases, than the undisturbed natural sites in which they are situated. The general idea here is to point to a positive feature of the creation of environmental art, a feature that, in fact, is positive for nature as well as for ourselves, since it is the natural site that is aesthetically improved through the creation of the artwork.¹⁷ Philosophers who dispute the charge of effrontery do not appeal to this factor very explicitly, but their discussions do suggest that it ought to play a role in this debate.¹⁸ Aesthetic improvement of nature is most compelling when added to the previous factor: aesthetic regard for nature. Some of Goldsworthy's works, for example, seem to improve upon nature's aesthetic character in a way that incorporates nature's own aesthetic qualities. *Sycamore Leaves*, for example, creates an arrangement that does not exist in nature, but uses nature's own forms and materials. The aesthetic power of this arrangement, a vivid and bold tableau of colour and form, seems to be a benefit that we ought to weigh against the 'cost' to nature's original aesthetic qualities. As such, it seems relevant to assessing the charge of effrontery.

The third mitigating factor is also a benefit that the creation of environmental art brings to nature. But rather than an aesthetic benefit, it consists in the wider ecological benefit that environmental artworks may secure. Some environmental artists claim to be motivated by ecological concerns, and portray their environmental art as a means for advancing an environmentalist agenda. It could do so insofar as the modification of nature involved in such works forces the viewer to attend more closely to the human-nature relationship. Above I alluded to Goldsworthy's *Red Pool, Scaur River, Dumfriesshire* (1994-5); this work presents us with a starkly artificial-looking scene, even though the alteration here has been performed using natural materials. Its strange and subtle mingling of artifice and nature invites meditation on the relationship between the human and natural worlds.¹⁹ In virtue of the particular way in which it employs nature as its medium, Lintott describes environmental art as having 'the potential to unite human beings in the inclusive and progressive mindset of environmentalism'.²⁰

The existence of these three mitigating factors suggests that the original charge against environmental art, that it constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature, was overblown. Though a handful of extreme cases may deserve the epithet of 'affront', the conversion of nature into art can be done in a manner that shows regard for nature's own aesthetic

qualities, that improves on the aesthetic value of the environment, and that is environmentally beneficial *for nature*. On the line of thought laid out by the critics of the effrontery charge, we ought to consider these nuances in the human/nature relationship. Once we do, we will see that the human–nature relationship evident in environmental art is not accurately described by saying that the artist has affronted nature.

Before critically assessing this response to the effrontery charge, we can reinforce it by considering again the analogy of Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.**. Duchamp's action in creating this work would be a clear affront to the aesthetic qualities of the *Mona Lisa*. But notice that in creating *L.H.O.O.Q.**, Duchamp would not have improved the aesthetic qualities of the *Mona Lisa*, engaged with it in a way that respected its extant aesthetic qualities, or benefited it in the long run. In short, the creation of *L.H.O.O.Q.**, while clearly an aesthetic affront, would embody none of the mitigating features that are present in many cases of environmental art, such as Goldsworthy's works. *L.H.O.O.Q.** is more like the extreme works of Heizer than it is like the latter works. This reinforces the idea that the case against environmental art has been hastily generalized.

In response to this argument, the proponent of the effrontery charge will insist that it is not clear that the considerations at issue here are, in fact, sufficient to deflect the charge that, in general, environmental artworks are aesthetic affronts to nature. To see this, consider the following analogy. I come over to your house for a visit. While you pour some drinks in the kitchen, I wait in the living room. As I wait, I proceed to rearrange the pillows, move the furniture around, rearrange the paintings hanging on your walls, and things of this nature. In other words, I 'gussy up' your living room a bit. This seems to be a clear case of an aesthetic affront. It is so insofar as the action manifests the attitude that what is there originally in your living room is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it was deemed necessary to replace it with something else.

This analogy is informative for the case of environmental art because the response to the charge of effrontery described above involves admitting that the casual obliteration of nature's aesthetic qualities is effrontery, but then distinguishing a milder treatment of nature that, because of the mitigating factors mentioned, falls short of effrontery. But although this milder treatment of nature preserves or enhances the aesthetic character of nature, to some degree or another, instead of merely obliterating it, this treatment is also ethically problematic. This is so insofar as it can be

ART IN NATURE

thought of, essentially, as a kind of gussying up of nature. And, as the analogy of the living room shows, it is not only the wholesale obliteration of aesthetic qualities that can constitute an aesthetic affront; the milder act of gussying up can be an aesthetic affront as well.

Further, note that none of mitigating factors appealed to for environmental art are sufficient to defeat the charge of aesthetic effrontery in the case of the living room. My gussying up of your living room constitutes an affront even if it is done in a manner that is respectful of your living room's own aesthetic qualities, that improves on the aesthetic value of the room, and that is beneficial for your living room. For instance, in gussying up your living room I might recognize and attend to some of its original aesthetic qualities, and merely try to 'enhance' them. I might note the fine harmony of your furniture and some of your paintings, for instance, and try to bring this out a little more through a judicious repositioning of the sofa. Further, I might indeed succeed in this: I might be an interior designer with a better eye for these things, or perhaps you have simply failed to devote sufficient attention to the matter. Finally, my gussying up your living room might even be of positive benefit to it in the long run: you and your guests might enjoy it more. Perhaps my adjustments even increase the resale value of your home. However these things may be, it seems to me that my gussying up your living room remains an aesthetic affront. It is so insofar as it manifests the attitude that what is there originally is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it is deemed necessary to replace it with something else. ? ?

The same is true, seemingly, of the three mitigating factors when appealed to in the case of environmental art: they do not suffice to defeat the charge of aesthetic effrontery there either. The fact that environmental artworks preserve or even enhance the aesthetic qualities of nature does not change the fact that such works manifest the attitude that what is there originally is not worthy of continued unmolested existence. If it were worthy of such existence, the artwork in question would not have been created. The fact that the artist improves on the aesthetic quality of nature is similarly irrelevant: regardless of how much better the site becomes, the actions manifest the attitude that what is there originally is not worthy of continued unmolested existence. And finally, the fact that the creation of environmental art is good for our awareness of environmental issues, and ultimately for the environment itself, in the long run, also fails to change the fact that such interventions manifest the attitude that what is there originally is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it was deemed necessary to replace it with something else. would
every
N
pull
A

AESTHETICS AND NATURE

This last point deserves further consideration, for it might be thought that the creation of environmental art does not actually manifest this attitude, at least on the artist's part. It might be thought that the artist works the land reluctantly, doing so only as a last resort, to save it from destruction by the human race in general. If so, then the gussying up of nature characteristic of environmental art might be thought *not* to constitute an affront to nature.

Although some environmental artists profess a concern with the well-being of nature, one could certainly dispute the general claim that they work the land reluctantly, doing so only to save it from destruction at the hands of the human race in general. One might also dispute the notion that it is really necessary to resort to environmental art in order to save nature from destruction.²¹ But even if these claims turned out to be true, this would not undermine the claim that what environmental artists do is an aesthetic affront to nature. For an affront against X can be intended to serve the interests of X; indeed, it may be necessary for the very survival of X.

Consider, for example, the well-intentioned Europeans who, after initial contacts with indigenous people in the New World, captured individuals from those peoples and toured them through the capitals of Europe in a bid to increase awareness of their desperate plight. Though it certainly was not always so, such treatment may have been genuinely intended to help indigenous peoples; in some cases, it may even have worked. Nonetheless, parading these individuals in this way was an indignity, an affront, to them. The fact that Europeans, on the whole, were sufficiently ignorant and apathetic for such degrading measures to be necessary does nothing whatever to mitigate this fact. Analogously, the fact that people in our time are so ignorant and apathetic about nature that it takes a glowing red pool of water to interest them in it does nothing to mitigate the effrontery of such frumpery. To excuse the effrontery of environmental art in this way would be to deny one wrong simply because of the existence of a larger, more pervasive one.

It may be useful to return to the analogy with art here. As mentioned above, cases like *L.H.O.O.Q.** do not provide a good analogy for the discussion of environmental art. Being an irreverent, insensitive and extreme treatment, its genesis seems not to resemble the ways in which many artists, such as Goldsworthy, work the land. But the ways in which such artists do work the land also constitute a form of aesthetic effrontery, a form not inaptly described as 'gussying up nature'. If we want an analogy with the case of art, we ought to think of the gussying up of an

ART IN NATURE

artistic masterpiece: an 'updating' of the *Mona Lisa* that lovingly adds some new patches of colour here and there (hoping to draw further attention to the wonderful rendering of the mouth, perhaps), inserts a few items of additional interest into the background, and so on, all in the interests of enhancing the work's continued interest to contemporary viewers, and hence, its survival as an artwork. Such an updating might be well-intentioned, aesthetically successful and perhaps even necessary in a barbaric age. But none of that would make it any less an indignity to the work of art.

IS THE EFFRONTERY CHARGE COHERENT?

The line of thought spelled out in the previous section represents one possible way of responding to the charge of effrontery. That line of thought accepts the cogency, in principle, of aesthetic affronts to nature, but argues that, in reality, most environmental artworks are not of this kind. It is also possible to make a different response to the effrontery charge, however, by denying the cogency of the whole idea of an aesthetic affront to nature. In this section, we examine two variations on this approach.

The first of these is the claim that the very idea of affronting nature is logically incoherent: the notion of an affront simply is not applicable to non-human things, such as the natural entities and sites that are altered in the creation of environmental art. This claim is not the claim that non-human things cannot be affronted aesthetically, but the stronger claim that they cannot be affronted at all. The claim is this stronger one since it is based on a view concerning the logic of the notion of an affront. Roughly, that view is that there is a logical connection between the notion of certain actions affronting (or insulting, or offering an indignity to) X and the notion that X can think, feel and respond to those actions in some way. This being the case, although one can, through one's words or actions, affront or insult a person, it does not make sense to speak of someone affronting a forest, or committing an indignity against a desert mesa.

In support of this view, one might point out that there are some concepts, apart from the concept of an affront, whose application surely does presuppose the mental capacities characteristic of persons. The notion of forming a contract with X, for example, presupposes that X is capable of thinking and exercising some form of conscious control over its actions.

AESTHETICS AND NATURE

For this reason, it does not make sense to talk of someone forming a contract with a mountain or a lake. This is shown by the fact that it would be inane to criticize a mountain that had undergone a landslide for 'breaking some contract' I had with it. If the notion of 'insulting' is like the notion of 'forming a contract', in this regard, then, since non-human entities such as forests, lakes and mesas are incapable of thinking, feeling and responding in a literal sense, we cannot sensibly say that human actions are capable of affronting those entities. The most we could sensibly say is that these actions affront, in an indirect way, other persons who care about these non-human entities.

There is clearly something compelling about this line of reasoning. However, it is not clear that it can provide a satisfactory response to the charge of effrontery. The line of reasoning is compelling because it certainly does hold for *some* forms of insult or effrontery. Consider the following insults: 'You're a failure' and 'You're shallow'. Directing these statements at a person can be a way of insulting or slighting him. But it makes no sense to try to insult a non-human entity, a stone, say, or a mesa, in this way. Pronouncing a stone a failure, or shallow, is nonsensical because stones cannot think, feel or act intentionally: they cannot attempt to do anything, and hence cannot be said to have carried off the things they have tried to do well or poorly. So the present response to the effrontery charge is certainly correct in holding that some forms of effrontery are logically connected to the possession of mental capacities characteristic of persons.

However, it does not follow that *all* forms of effrontery are logically connected to the possession of mental capacities characteristic of persons. And the kind of affront that we sketched in the first section of this chapter, in outlining the charge of effrontery against environmental art, is of this type. According to that sketch, we affront X if our actions towards X manifest the attitude that X is not worthy of continued unmolested existence, since it is deemed necessary to replace it with something else. We might think of this as an action's manifesting a kind of disregard, disrespect or contempt for an autonomous thing: a sort of undue 'messing with' it. Nothing in the logic of this conception of an affront requires the thing affronted to possess the capacity to think, feel or act intentionally. That our actions towards the thing in question satisfy the above condition (i.e. manifest a particular sort of disregard) is sufficient to make our action an affront to it, whatever its particular nature happens to be.

Even if this is the case, however, there is another way of questioning the cogency of the charge of effrontery. Instead of focusing on the logical

ART IN NATURE

coherence of the idea of affronting nature, we might focus on the consequences of the charge of effrontery. The idea here is that, even if it could be shown that the notion of an affront can, in principle, be applied to non-sentient nature, the claim that environmental art is an aesthetic affront to nature would commit us to saying that such benign actions such as farming and building homes are also aesthetic affronts to nature which is absurd.

The reasoning behind this idea is as follows. In order to survive, there are various interventions that we must make in the natural environment: we need food, water and shelter, for instance. Obtaining any of these requires that we take the attitude that nature, as it is, needs to be replaced by something else: namely, something that will serve the afore-mentioned needs. Thus, we take the attitude that the sequestration of water into underground reservoirs needs to be replaced by something else: a well, for instance. But given this, it seems that, if intervening in nature for the sake of art is an aesthetic affront to nature, then so are all of these other things also; indeed, practically everything we do would be an aesthetic affront to nature, on this reasoning.²² For in each of these cases, we 'mess with' nature's aesthetic qualities. But it seems absurd to say that drawing water, farming and building houses are aesthetic affronts to nature. To take the notion of an affront this way would be to overreact to the possibility of treating nature unethically, to succumb to a sort of ethical hysteria. Moreover, putting this view into practice in any serious way is completely out of the question, since doing so would rob humanity of the basic necessities of life. For these reasons, it is argued, we ought to reject the claim that the creation of environmental art is ethically problematic, in the sense of constituting an aesthetic affront to nature.

This response is surely correct in assuming that any line of thought that renders the drawing of water, the building of houses and the growing of food affronts to nature is absurd and unacceptable. Such a view would stretch the concept of affront beyond all recognition. Yet it is not so obvious that taking environmental art to be an affront to nature really entails viewing these other actions as affronts to nature. This is because there is an important difference between environmental art and the other sorts of activities in question: the latter have a clear kind of exigency, a practical necessity for life. A common stricture on ethical obligations is that 'ought implies can': if someone has an ethical obligation to do something, then it must be possible, at least in some reasonable circumstances, for the person to do that thing. We could blame a man for failing to rescue an infant from a collapsing building, if he had the time to seize it. But it

AESTHETICS AND NATURE

would be inane to blame him for failing to hold up the collapsing building. This is because it is not physically possible for a human being to hold up a collapsing building. Likewise, there are no reasonable circumstances in which we can forego 'messing with' nature's aesthetic qualities by drawing water or growing food. Since ought implies can, we cannot fault someone for messing with nature's aesthetic qualities in these ways.

But in the case of environmental art, this line of defence is not readily available, in the way that it is available for drawing water, building homes and growing food. For there is, apparently, no parallel practical necessity to create environmental artworks from nature: here the 'messing with nature' is gratuitous, and therefore, open to ethical evaluation. To show that creating environmental art is really like drawing water or growing food, the defender of environmental art must argue that there actually is a practical necessity to create such works. This brings us to a very large philosophical issue – the value of, and need for, art in general – but we can at least note here the difficulty involved in this task. Artists often speak of the necessity of their art, in the sense that they feel compelled to create it. Some force inside them, they say, impels them to do what they do. But this is not the sort of necessity required to deflect the charge of effrontery, for it is not a practical necessity. Generally speaking, no one will die or suffer pain without environmental artworks. No one would deny that, in general, environmental artworks might make life more pleasant or interesting, but it is simply not practically necessary that such artworks be created, in the way that it is necessary for us to draw water and build homes. If the creation of environmental art is to be excused from ethical evaluation, it must be shown that these works not only make human life more pleasant or interesting, but that they contribute to human life in some deep, essential way. The case must be made that without them, human life would be radically impoverished. Whether such a case can be made is an interesting question, but one that we must forgo, for to pursue it would take us entirely into the philosophy of art, and so at last beyond the subject of aesthetics and nature.

NOTES

- 10 Miller draws a similar distinction between humble and grand gardens (1993: 21). Ross (2006: section 11) describes any garden that is not an Artwork as a 'vernacular' garden, but this term ill befits large scale, professionally designed gardens that fall short of Art status (the Victorian-era Public Gardens in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for example, or the Butchart Gardens in Victoria, British Columbia).
- 11 Crichton (1991).
- 12 The scientists in the novel use recovered natural DNA for their dinosaur creation project, but this is not essential: since DNA can be manufactured synthetically, any functional coding sequence could be employed.
- 13 Ross (2006: section 11).
- 14 Miller (1993: 15).
- 15 Indeed, it is not clear that, in stating her definition, Miller is using 'natural' in our sense; thus it is not clear what her considered view of the issue would be.
- 16 Cf. the wilderness experience machine of Routley and Routley (1980), discussed in Chapter 7.
- 17 Wilson (1984: 114).
- 18 On the 'no grow' garden trend, see Fletcher (2006).
- 19 For discussion, see Ross (1998: 206–7); pictures of the Davis garden, and the 'trellis garden' mentioned below, are included as colour plates six and seven in Ross's book.
- 20 Ibid., 203–4.
- 21 On this distinction, see Miller (1993: 10).
- 22 Both Ross and Miller reject this idea, citing Zen gardens as counterexamples; see Ross (1999: 5) and Miller (1993: 9–10). It is true that such gardens, the famous Ryoanji gardens at Kyoto, for example, contain little living material. But while entities of this type are clearly gardens in the 'area adjacent to a building' sense, it is not clear that they are gardens in the gardening sense. When the caretakers of the Ryoanji garden repair its walls, what they are doing does not seem to be the sort of activity we call 'gardening'.
- 23 Wilson (1984: 115).
- 24 Wilson is objecting to the general trend towards replacing living things with non-living artefacts.
- 25 Kant (2000: 179 [section 42]).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 The relevant question here is: would we take an immediate interest in this beauty if the birds and flowers were alive, but yet artificial?

CHAPTER 9

- 1 In this chapter, we will use the word 'art' to refer to what we called 'Art' in the last chapter: that is, something that is created by people who describe

NOTES

- themselves as 'artists', shown in galleries, critiqued by art critics, and so on.
- 2 See Kimmelman (2002).
 - 3 Carlson (2000: 150).
 - 4 The rider 'in some substantial sense' is needed in order to differentiate environmental art from artworks that employ nature only as an ultimate source of materials. Thus landscape paintings do not count as environmental art even if some of the materials used in manufacturing paints are natural materials.
 - 5 The general idea of an aesthetic affront was first articulated by Donald Crawford (1983); Allen Carlson endorses and further develops it his (2000: Chapter 10).
 - 6 Ibid., 154.
 - 7 Ibid., 155.
 - 8 Ibid., 154.
 - 9 An actual artwork that is interesting to consider in this context is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953), which he created by erasing a drawing by the artist William de Kooning.
 - 10 Ibid., 156.
 - 11 As mentioned, Goldsworthy's works are often transient; another environmental artist known for ephemeral works is Christo.
 - 12 This is the general approach of three recent reconsiderations of environmental art: Brady (2007), Brook (2007) and Lintott (2007).
 - 13 Brady says that the charge of effrontery is justified in the case of *Double Negative* (2007: 290).
 - 14 Ibid., 289.
 - 15 Ibid., 292.
 - 16 Brady quotes the phrase 'macho aggression' from Malcolm Andrews (1999: 213).
 - 17 Carlson is dismissive of the notion that environmental art can aesthetically improve nature, arguing that, in fact, 'virgin nature by and large has positive aesthetic qualities' and that 'none of virgin nature is comparable to the work of a third-rate hack' (2000: 157). As we have seen in Chapter 7, however, even if Positive Aesthetics is true, it is implausible to think that nature can never be improved aesthetically through human intervention.
 - 18 The importance of aesthetic improvement comes out clearly in Brook (2007), who considers the case of the recent construction of an underwater gnome garden by divers in Wastwater Park. Though not an artwork, this 'work' certainly has aesthetic qualities, which Brook describes compellingly: an absurd appearance, an 'organic feel', an expressiveness of daring and defiance, and so on. Although she does not explicitly appeal to these aesthetic features as grounds for justifying such 'aesthetic interventions'

NOTES

in nature, the drift of her discussion is that there is something new and aesthetically valuable in 'works' of this kind.

- 19 Heyd suggests that even intrusive earthworks, such as *Double Negative*, may serve this function, since they 'leave the onlooker no choice but to reflect on the place of human intervention in wild nature and, in this way, may lead to renewed attention to the supposedly justified intervention of the everyday' (2002).
- 20 Lintott (2007: 276).
- 21 Humphrey (1985: 19–20).
- 22 This idea is discussed by Godlovitch (1998).