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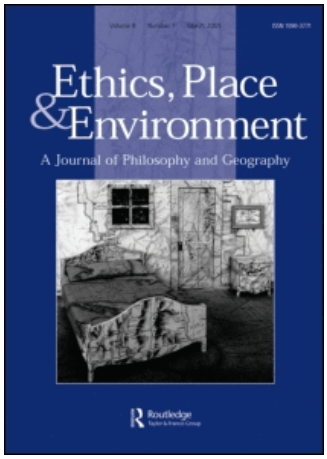

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Ethically Evaluating Land Art: Is It Worth It?

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Ethically Evaluating Land Art: Is It Worth It?

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ABSTRACT *Land art requires careful evaluation when assessing its aesthetic and ethical value. Critics of land art charge that it is unethical in that it uses nature without such use being justified by some future good. Other critics charge that land art harms nature aesthetically. In this essay, the author canvasses these charges and argues that some land art is ethically and aesthetically defensible, and that some has great and rare potential in both realms.*

Introduction

A major issue at stake in debates over land art is whether it is worth the ecological and environmental costs that are incurred in its creation. In this essay, I defend land art from critics who argue against its ethical and aesthetic value. I approach this issue as Tolstoy approaches the general moral question of whether art can justify its costs in *What is Art?* (Tolstoy, 1996). Although land art is subject to many ethical and aesthetic criticisms, much land art is ethically and aesthetically defensible and some is even commendable. I discuss and critique Peter Humphrey's contention that earthworks are not ethical and Allen Carlson's charge that environmental art constitutes an aesthetic affront to nature. Through comparisons with instances of more traditional forms of art, I make the case that land art is not inherently deserving of a higher degree of ethical scrutiny. Moreover, by virtue of the intimate connection between art and nature in some instances of land art, they have extraordinary ethical potential. In this context, I explore how such potential is realized by many artists and thwarted by others.

A Note on Terminology

Land art is a contemporary development of several previously established and diverse artforms. We can trace contemporary land art to Conceptualism and the installation and performance art of the 1960s. Regarding content and medium, land art has commonalities with nature writing, landscape painting, informal and formal gardens, film, and photography. Land art is also rich and varied in form, taking the shape of large or small works of site-specific permanent sculpture, works made from natural materials and exhibited in a gallery, large or small ephemeral works,

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architectural projects, marks in or on the land, performance art, site-specific conceptual art, activist art, and art that functions as an agent of environmental change. Not infrequently, the work is either short-lived or inaccessible and is documented via photography, film, sketches, or text. Works of land art also range in purpose from the early earthworks of the 1960s, many unapologetic in their use of environmental resources, to the environmentally motivated ecoventions of the 1980s and present, aiming to heal or restore nature.

In *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies*, Sue Spaid offers a general characterization of art that 'involves nature' and a useful division of the field. For her, any art that 'activates the land' is land art. She organizes this broad category into subcategories of earthworks, environmental art, ecological art, and ecoventions. 'Earthworks', she tells us, 'are primarily permanent, large-scale, non-natural forms sited in "wide open spaces", as opposed to particular environments, such as along a river, amidst a field, or in an urban setting'. On the other hand, environmental art 'is generally less monumental and tends to employ nature as a medium, so as to enhance the viewer's awareness of nature's forces, processes and phenomena'. Ecological artists are concerned with 'issues of sustainability, adaptability, interdependence, renewable resources, and biodiversity', and some ecological artists go so far as to create ecoventions, which are artworks that 'aim to restore natural resources, stabilize local environments, value anew, or alert people to potentially confrontational conditions' (Spaid, 2002, pp. 10–12).

To summarize, some land artists attempt to realize nature in one way or another in their work (environmental artists), others express a deep concern for nature (ecological artists), some attempt to make art that directly improves the ecological health of the land (ecovention artists), and others seem more or less indifferent to negative ecological implications of their work (earthwork artists). I shall follow Spaid's general characterization and division of the field. Thus, land art is art that 'activates the land', and land art includes earthworks, environmental art, ecological art, and ecoventions.

Tolstoy's Problem

In contemporary philosophical discourse, discussion of the ethics of works of art tends to center on how the moral character of a work affects its artistic quality. That is, the focus of the debate is usually on what the work says and how that message relates to its value as a work of art; very little attention is given to the means of making the work of art. In contrast to these contemporary debates, Leo Tolstoy discusses the justification of what we might call the production costs involved in the making of art, and he sincerely wonders whether these costs can be justified. Aware of the great and serious sacrifices, many involuntary, made for art, he reasons that if such costs are to be justified, art and the messages it conveys must be extremely important indeed. In fact, according to Tolstoy, art must be of invaluable service to humanity if its grave costs are to be justified. Here is his reasoning, gleaned from the opening sections of *What is Art?*:

> For the production of every ballet, circus, opera, operetta, exhibition, picture, concert, or printed book, the intense and unwilling labor of thousands of

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> people is needed at what is often harmful and humiliating work. (Tolstoy, 1996, p. 15)
>
> It is said that it is all done for the sake of art, and that art is a very important thing. But is it true that art is so important that such sacrifices should be made for its sake? This question is especially urgent because art, for the sake of which the labor of millions, the lives of men, and, above all, love between man and man, are being sacrificed—this very art is becoming something more and more vague to human perception. (Tolstoy, 1996, p. 14)
>
> Therefore it is necessary for a society in which works of art arise and are supported, to find out whether . . . it is important and worth all those sacrifices which it initiates. (Tolstoy, 1996, p. 16)

In sum, Tolstoy's line of questioning asks: Is art worth it? The modern and contemporary art worlds include some particularly interesting specimens relevant to this discussion. Arguably, they include works that many, including Tolstoy, would be reluctant to regard as good art or as art at all. A non-exhaustive list of these interesting specimens includes a man nailed, crucifixion-style, on a Volkswagen Bug (VW Beetle); a toilet turned on its side; an iron with spikes on it; asphalt dumped down the side of a quarry; an artist reading aloud from a scroll of paper she pulls from her vagina; and a hole dug with a bulldozer. In this mix, we find works that fit into the category of land art. Some land art, such as contemporary art-gardens, is acclaimed because of its ecological benefit, while other land art, such as earthworks of the 1960s, is criticized for the ecological cost of production. However, it is not clear if the former are artistically or the latter ethically justified. Are art-gardens not art because they are practically useful? Are earthworks unethical because of the way they use the land? Tolstoy anticipates such worries when he explains that 'art, in all its forms, is bounded on one side by the practically useful, and on the other by unsuccessful attempts at art' (Tolstoy, 1996, p. 17).

Tolstoy is interested in how the work of art was made, the power that the work has to express its content, and the overall quality of that content. His theory of art is notoriously fraught with difficulties. Critics charge it is overly restrictive and overly moralistic. Generally, I agree with these charges, yet I find Tolstoy's views on art to be at least as insightful as they are problematic. I think he is right that if art is really worth all of the sacrifices made for it, it must be a very important enterprise. However, art is not the sort of thing that can be justified in general or purely abstract terms. There is good art and bad art; there is art that is worth its costs and art that is not. I do not attempt to justify art; instead I discuss whether particular kinds of land art are justified.

Along these lines, we might restate Tolstoy's concerns as follows:

> For the production of land art, nature is infringed upon and turned into art. The defender of land art argues that the final work of art is very important and that the ends therefore justify the means. But is it true that the resulting land art really is that important? This question is especially urgent because there are prima facie reasons not to infringe on nature. A work of land art is usually a work that is appreciably or geographically remote to most people and therefore

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> something vague to human perception. Moreover, visiting such works frequently involves additional environmental (and other) costs. It therefore is necessary for our society, a society in which works of land art arise and are supported, to find out whether it really is important and worth those sacrifices it initiates.

Some of the charges claim to be purely aesthetic, but most constitute an interesting mix of ethical and aesthetic concerns. Ethically scrutinizing examples of traditional artworks is instructive as to how land art ought to be evaluated. The examples I examine help explain why, even in cases of fairly extreme costs, some land art is entirely worth it. One lesson I draw from this analysis is that land art does not deserve increased scrutiny simply because it makes use of nature; however, particular instances of art (all art) warrant increased scrutiny due to connections between the manner in which they utilize their medium and the message or attitude conveyed in the work. Some art derives its power by pushing the limits of medium usage and message, especially as the two interact. In conclusion, I offer a liberal interpretation of Tolstoy's ideas concerning the excellence of art in regard to subject matter; that is, I discuss his praise of art that communicates the highest 'religious perception of the age' (Tolstoy, 1996, p. 143). This ideal can help us see a unique excellence that land art is well situated to achieve.

Some Relevant Comparisons: *Triumph of the Will*, *Myra*, Child Pornography

On Aestheticism's Failure to Ethically Justify Land Art

According to André Malraux, Picasso's relationship with nature was one of conflict. Malraux quotes Picasso as exclaiming, 'Obviously, nature has to exist so that we may rape it!' (Picasso, quoted in Malraux, 1976, p. 55). And Suzi Gablik's comment that 'in modern times, the basic metaphor of the human presence on the Earth is the bulldozer' (Gablik, 1991, p. 77) suggests that many agree with him, although they probably would not put it the same way. Some criticisms of land art suggest that land artists echo Picasso's attitude. Of course, not all works of land art express this attitude. For example, Maya Lin contrasts her *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982) to the kind of memorial created by 'Western man':

> In a world of phallic memorials that rise upwards, the memorial certainly does have a female sensibility. I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it, the way Western man usually does. I don't think I've made a passive piece, but neither is it a memorial to war. (Lin in Hess, 1983, p. 121)

Discussing the influence that women have had in land art, John Beardsley points out that 'many women joined in the critique of the first generation earth artists, seeing in their high technology and heavy equipment a degree of macho posturing' (Beardsley, 1984, p. 164). In tracing the development of land art, Stephanie Ross describes earthworks as art that makes 'masculine gestures in the environment' (Ross, 1993, p. 170). She calls these gestures masculine 'because of their scale' and also because 'they are remote and inaccessible', since in order to see them one must brave

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'wilderness, rattlesnakes, and . . . climatic extreme' (Ross, 1993, p. 171). She puts Robert Smithson in this category with Michael Heizer, Walter DeMaria, and James Turrell.

A work in this category is Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), in which he dumped a truckload of asphalt down the side of a quarry. One might wonder about the ethical status of this action. If it were not for the sake of art, would it be justified? In his case against the ethics of earthworks, Peter Humphrey asks whether the treatment afforded to the land in the process of making earthworks is acceptable when the same treatment would be condemned if it were not artistic. Humphrey discusses the *Crazy Horse Memorial* (a work in progress, started in 1948). *Crazy Horse* is a mountain-sized sculpture on the side of a mountain in South Dakota in honor of Chief Crazy Horse. With this work in mind Humphrey poses the problem in this way:

> To get coal from a mountainside, strip miners dig in at the level of the seam, circling the hillside with an indented, treeless ring. Because of strip mining's destruction of the natural environment, regulations have been imposed, limiting it and requiring reclamation of the land whenever it's done. Both strip mining and dynamite sculpting alter the mountain on which they work, the latter probably more than the former. Yet, while strip mining is seen as something to be avoided whenever possible, people widely approve of the *Crazy Horse* sculpture, flocking to see it . . . . A question comes to mind: what's the difference between the two forms of mountain carving? (Humphrey, 1985, p. 6)

If strip mining is unethical because of the destruction it causes, then if an artwork like *Crazy Horse* wreaks similar havoc in the environment, is it not also unethical? If not, what is the relevant difference? Why is art permitted to use otherwise ethically forbidden means? To cut to the chase, Humphrey asks 'Are earthworks ethical?', and he answers 'It is doubtful' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 21). Thus, although artists may be given more leeway in their use of the land, they should not be.

Humphrey considers a series of responses to the charge that earthworks are unethical, beginning with the view of aestheticism, the view that any ethical evaluation of art is inappropriate. He argues that an aestheticist justification is unacceptable because it entails the absurd conclusion that any allegedly artistic activity could be excused. For example, he asks his reader to imagine an artist making a grand work of art, *Asian floodwork*, by causing a massive flood in the Asian alluvial valley. We would be morally outraged by it and would be unmoved by an attempt to defend it on the grounds that *Asian floodwork* is a work of art. Humphrey contends that 'an earthwork is ethical if and only if what it does to the environment is ethical' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 8). If a given earthwork is ecologically identical with an unethical mark caused by a non-artistic intrusion, Humphrey believes the earthwork is unethical, since earthworks can be 'justified only on the grounds of what they do, and don't do, to the environment' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 8). To deny this is, he says, to ignore 'the significant difference between earthworks and other artworks', which is that 'earthworks . . . leave marks on the environment, not just on canvases' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 7).

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Aestheticism, however, is not normally invoked as a defense of unethical actions taken during the process of making a work of art; rather, it is used to defend the work from criticisms that center on its unethical content. Most artworks, if they are evaluated ethically, are evaluated for their moral character. For example, one might object to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) because it is a blatant celebration of Hitler, not because of the way in which it was created. This seems to be a reasonable way to assess *Triumph of the Will*. All the defender of aestheticism necessarily claims is that criticizing a work of art based on its ethical subject matter, for example, for its pro-Nazi message, is irrelevant to its value as art.

The main distinction to note is between evaluating the ethical content of an artwork and evaluating the means of its creation. An artwork can be judged for its message, that is, for what it conveys upon or after its creation. Whether and to what extent the outcome of this evaluation is relevant to its value as a work of art is a matter of debate. Distinct from this is evaluation of the work in terms of the means of its creation, which may include methods we find intolerable (or commendable). But the aesthetic relevance of the means of production is another matter of debate. Should the work of art be judged in complete isolation from the means of its creation? Is it an aesthetic mistake, for example, to judge a cathedral as ugly because it was built by slaves working in brutal labor conditions? In many cases, we focus primarily on the final work and frequently we know and care very little about the history of its creation. There is a difference between saying that the work is unethical and saying that the way the work was created is unethical. However, as we shall see, some art's aesthetic features testify to the unethical process of creation; appreciating such art requires attending to the harm done. In these cases, the means of production are both ethically and aesthetically significant. Two obvious examples of artworks that invite us to attend not only to the finished product but also to the means of their creation, thereby moving the ethical status of the means of creation into the aesthetic forefront, are snuff films and Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1989). Appreciating these works requires paying attention to or at least being aware of details regarding the means of its production. It seems reasonable to judge a snuff film as aesthetically lacking because of the wrongs committed in the process of its creation, and many object to Serrano's *Piss Christ* because they cannot appreciate it without condoning the creative process that involved submerging a crucifix in urine. These two examples highlight two different, yet related questions that can be asked about artworks when evaluating them in terms of the manner in which they were created. First, one wonders whether harm was done in making the work. Second, one wonders whether the work connotes an attitude of endorsement towards any harm done. Before asking these questions of land art, it is worth considering two other similar examples: *Myra* (1997) by Marcus Harvey, and pornography.

The Uniqueness of the Aesthetic Object of Land Art

Humphrey appears to be suggesting that, ethically speaking, the distinction between means and end collapses when it comes to earthworks, because earthworks are marks on the earth, and these marks seem in need of ethical justification. Several writers have noted that a key aspect of (all?) works of land art is a close relationship with nature.

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Of course, land art is not unique in having a close relationship with nature. It is the nature of the relationship between art and nature in land art that distinguishes it from other art. Rebecca Solnit emphasizes the land artist's engagement with nature when she explains that such art 'requires the artist to go out and engage with places, communities, and materials in ways that more traditional media do not' (Solnit, 2001, p. 5). But even more than this can be said. Speaking of environmental sculpture, Donald Crawford describes the connection between art and nature in environmental art in this way: 'natural forces', he tells us, 'are engaged [here] in the stronger sense of being referred to in the works themselves; the natural forces are not merely the causal preconditions for the realization of the work of art. Thus the interaction between the natural and the artifactual is part of the aesthetics of these works' (Crawford, 1983, p. 50). In articulating the special features of environmental artworks, Allen Carlson explains the art–nature relationship in such art as follows:

> Environmental works of art share a common feature that both distinguishes them from traditional art and makes them examples of the most intimate of relationships between nature and art. This is that all such works of art are in or on the land in such a way that a part of nature constitutes a part of the relevant aesthetic object. In other words, not only is the site of an environmental work an environmental site, but the site itself is an aspect of the work. (Carlson, 2000, p. 150)

For Crawford and Carlson there is an intimate and necessary relationship between nature and art in environmental art such that, beyond being the medium, nature is part of the art. But land art is not unique in its simultaneous dependency on and artistic reference to its medium. There are examples of other artworks that forge an intimate relationship between the work and its content, and it is interesting to note that such works also invite frequent ethical scrutiny. For example, the painting *Myra* (1997) by Marcus Harvey has been the source of considerable moral outrage. The painting is a collage of children's handprints, and the image that these handprints form is the mug shot of a notorious child murderer, Myra Hindley. Arthur Danto describes his experience of *Myra* in his review of the 'Sensation' show at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999:

> To your right as you enter the gallery is a large painting (156 inches by 126 inches) of a woman's head. It is titled Myra. The child will have but a modest interest in the work until it discovers that the paint resolves itself before our eyes into a pattern of tiny handprints. Wow. The child resolves to give this a try in her next art class. You, hypocrite lecteur, will see it as a kind of knockoff of Chuck Close, especially a painting he once did of his mother-in-law using fingerprints. Close's fingerprint painting is a virtuoso performance, but the fingerprints play no role to speak of in relation to the content of the portrait. The subject of Myra, however, is Myra Hindley, a notorious and reviled child-killer. That makes it difficult not to see the tiny handprints as referring to her victims. (In Britain, the painting is seen as a greatly enlarged police photograph rather than a distant derivative of a format Close has made his own.) It was

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> Myra that was detested most when 'Sensation' was installed in the Royal Academy of Art two years ago—as if the wickedness of the subject were transferred to her effigy in paint. It was Myra for which a Plexiglas shield had to be made, Myra that was declared sick by right-thinking Londoners. Brooklynites, unfamiliar with British headlines, give the painting an aesthetic once-over and pass on to the next work. (Danto, 1999, p. 26)

Myra is a work of art that merges process and product in a manner similar to the dialectic relationship between art and nature in land art. Indeed, this merger fuels *Myra* aesthetically, otherwise it is seen as a knock-off of a fairly clever artwork. The way the work refers to the five innocent young victims of the spree of tortures, rapes, and murders committed by Hindley and her partner, Ian Brady, makes it a much more profound work. This profundity, however, fuels passionate moral outrage. Many people, including family members of the victims, are deeply offended by the work; *Myra* was damaged several times before being put behind Plexiglas.

Although one can understand the outrage, it is misplaced. For one thing, it is clear that *Myra* did not cause any harm to the five victims. In other words, *Myra* refers to harm done, but it is not evidence of it. Yet one might wonder whether it expresses an attitude of celebrating, condoning, or admiring the harm and/or the person who caused the harm. Comparing *Myra* to a compelling documentary intended not only to increase awareness but also to stir sympathetic feelings for innocent victims might be illuminating. Questions remain nonetheless. Does Harvey mean to honor Hindley or memorialize her victims? Or is there something else going on in the work? Let us pause to examine the work's power, especially since it does not contribute to, nor does it seem to endorse the harm done by Hindley and Brady.

Some argue that *Myra* is commendable, aesthetically and ethically, because it forces the viewer to confront the harm done, and it invites the viewer to do this in an affective manner. This is probably the source of the moral outrage over the work. Perhaps the powerful manner in which the work depicts Myra as, in some sense, defined by, created by, or constituted by her victims is offensive to the families of her victims. So, one might question whether the work is harmful to the families because its existence serves as a very painful reminder of the harm done to their loved ones. Land art can also be understood as a mark that forces the viewer to confront harm. In his writings, Robert Smithson explains how art can capture our attention and present alternatives. In 'Untitled (1971)', he references the intersections of art, ecology, and industry:

> The artist and the miner must become conscious of themselves as natural agents.... The world needs coal and highways, but we do not need the results of strip-mining or highway trusts. Economics, when abstracted from the world, is blind to natural processes. Art can become a resource, that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. Ecology and industry are not one-way streets, rather they should be cross-roads. Art can help to provide the needed dialectic between them. A lesson can be learned from the Indian cliff dwellings and earthworks mounds. Here we see nature and necessity in consort. (Smithson, 1996a, p. 376)

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And in his proposal for a reclamation work in Ohio, Smithson reiterates his conviction that art can (and should) help expose the world as it is:

> The artist, ecologist, and industrialist must develop in relation to each other, rather than continue to work and produce in isolation .... Yet, art, ecology, and industry as they exist today are for the most part abstracted from the physical realities of specific landscapes or sites .... The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions or utopias. (Smithson, 1996b, p. 376)

Although calling attention to the harm done in works like *Myra* may further offend innocent parties, no such offense is present in relation to land damage. Indeed, for those of us who care about the land, the more attention that can be called to damage that has been done, the better. We are offended by apathy, and the families of the victims of Hindley and Brady's murders surely are as well.

Along these lines, Thomas Heyd claims that earthworks 'are like fingers pointing to what little we offer in exchange for nature' (Heyd, 2002). Heyd defends earthworks from both ethical and aesthetic charges, arguing that earthworks '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' (Heyd, 2002). If this is so, art has the capacity to accomplish what more practical activities are unable to accomplish. Both Smithson and Heyd are claiming that a work of land art may find its efficacy in its very lack of practical justification. An artwork is not justified in terms of its practical use. Since art is in this way divorced from the business of everyday life, it is able to disrupt the routines we follow and our habitual perceptions. Heyd and Smithson both make the point that since an earthwork is not justified in traditional manners, it is able to urge us to question commonly accepted justifications for human intrusions in the land.

On the Marks That Land Art Leaves

I have yet to address an important point that Humphrey makes when he says that earthworks 'leave marks on the environment, not just on the canvas' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 7). For while the marks on the canvas in Harvey's *Myra* may be offensive by referring to harm done, some land artists harm the land in creating their art. Unlike the land art that leaves marks on the earth, *Myra* does not leave marks on the subject of the painting, the victims. Realized land art projects do mark the environment. Moreover, they do so in a way that makes attending to the work of art without also attending to the mark and imagining its genesis difficult if not impossible. This, according to Humphrey, is ethically significant. However, this is also not a unique feature of earthworks.

Pornography is another artform (or art-like form) that can be understood as leaving marks on its medium. The marks that pornography leaves may not be easily visible, being marks made, in some sense, on a person. Recall Picasso's comment that 'nature exists to be raped!' This comment is very suggestive. It makes one think

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about possible connections between examples of land art that deal intimately with nature, and examples of pornography that deal intimately with rape. A common denominator between works of land art and works of pornography is an intimate interplay of medium and message. In pornography, real people are treated in a manner that is then referred to in the final work. In land art, real nature is treated in a manner that is then referred to in the final work. Again, the medium is not only used as a tool or material but is a constitutive part of the finished product and so evaluating the means of production is fully appropriate, ethically and aesthetically. Likewise, it is appropriate to consider whether the actions required to produce a work of land art were ethical and whether those actions are embodied in the work of art in such a way as to not only invite the audience to attend to them, but also to encourage the audience to endorse them.

Take the case of child pornography. It is immoral and illegal largely, but not exclusively, because of the harm committed in its creation. A pornographic image of a child is difficult to view without being aware of the harm done to the child in the creation of the work. The moral wrong that is committed in making child pornography is clear and is a part of the work of art, but what is the moral wrong that an earthwork commits? Recall Humphrey's imaginary example, *Asian floodwork*, which he uses as a *reductio ad absurdum* of aestheticism. *Asian floodwork* is an earthwork that would be ethically wrong because of the harm it commits, yet Humphrey's analysis of this example is too quick. The fact that one cannot justify any mark or action whatsoever by calling it art does not show that one cannot justify some mark or action because it is art. Most land art, even most earthworks, does not commit the kind of harm that *Asian floodwork* would. Are there extant cases of earthworks that commit moral wrongs similar to the harm committed in making child pornography? The example of pornography helps illustrate the nature of the harm that can be done by some works of land art.

As is well known, the empirical claims concerning the harm that pornography causes are difficult to prove or disprove. But note that the harm that can be caused in the process of making a work of pornography is easily documented. Young women, barely or not of legal age, are enticed into the world of pornography. The women are sometimes very naive and may not be fully aware of the treatment they are implicitly agreeing to accept. This may not be illegal, strictly speaking, but it is obviously immoral. The treatment that these women receive can be very severe indeed. In order to strongly object to pornographic works that depict real acts in which real women are harmed one need not prove that all pornographic works depend on such harm, nor need one prove that any pornographic works cause additional harm to women not involved in the world of pornography.

Feminist critiques of pornography depicting women in degrading situations center on the claim that such depictions not only frequently involve real harm to real women, but also are frequently such that they endorse such harmful behavior. In fact, in order to distinguish pornography from erotica and to make plain that the feminist objection is not to sexual explicitness, some feminists have built the endorsement aspect into their definition of pornography. For example, Gloria Steinem argues that 'pornography', beginning 'with a root "porno", meaning "prostitution" or "female captives", thus letting us know that the subject is not mutual love, or love at all, but domination and violence against women . . . its

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message is violence, dominance, and conquest' (Steinem, 1995, p. 31). Helen Longino makes the endorsement clause even more explicit when she describes pornography as 'verbal or pictorial material which represents or describes sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation' (Longino, 1994, p. 37). Feminists object to such pornography on the grounds that it exploits in the process of production, depicts degrading and demeaning treatment, and endorses such exploitive or demeaning treatment.

Are there earthworks that endorse the harm done? If in the process of constructing an earthwork, the artist violates nature for purely selfish and base motives and the work conveys an attitude of acceptance or even endorsement of such behavior, then what he or she does is akin to what the child pornographer does. However, this is rarely the case, at least not to this extreme. Humphrey imagines a worst-case scenario.

We classify those cases of land art that exploit nature and convey an attitude of tolerance or even endorsement towards such exploitation as ethically problematic art. *Asian floodwork*, the imaginary example offered by Humphrey, fits the bill. The artist responsible for such work would be guilty of exploiting nature (and humanity) purely for the sake of her artwork, conveying an attitude that her work is more important than the nature exploited in the process of creation. However, many extant examples of land art do not. Andy Goldsworthy's art is markedly different from such exploitive work because his use of nature is not exploitive; rather, it is more akin to collaborative. Goldsworthy's refection on the creative process that led to his *Storm King Wall* (1997–98), a winding stone wall over 2000 feet long created at Storm King Center in New York, conveys this contrast well: 'I am always trying to find something that to some extent is already there, a path that I can retread, rather than trying to put something entirely new there. I like that resonance with the past' (Goldsworthy, 2004). Elsewhere Goldsworthy describes his art as a process of discovery, rather than as an act of imposing his own agenda on nature. Whether or not other works of land art are or are not ethically problematic in the sense I am describing can only be determined by considering examples of different kinds of works.

The Promise of Land Art

Not only are some works of land art not ethically problematic, some are able to harness their unique aesthetic power for ethically sound ends. Humphrey and Carlson both discuss the possibility that land art might improve nature. Humphrey considers whether land art can offer a route to improvement that could ethically justify the work. Carlson looks for and fails to find evidence of aesthetic improvement. Carlson concludes aesthetic improvement is not forthcoming from land art because nature is not in need of aesthetic improvement from human beings. The underlying conviction here is to the thesis of positive aesthetics, a thesis that appears to rule out the possibility of improving on nature's aesthetic value. The positive aesthetics thesis maintains that nature has only positive aesthetic qualities. Carlson is a proponent of this thesis and argues that environmental art cannot improve on nature's aesthetic value: 'I suggest that none of virgin nature is

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comparable to the work of a third-rate hack—that virgin nature by and large has positive aesthetic qualities' (Carlson, 2000, p. 157). He contends that 'it is in this sense that... environmental works of art can constitute aesthetic affronts to nature.... The environmental site is... changed from being a part of nature to being a part of an artwork and with this change the aesthetic qualities of nature are altered' (Carlson, 2000, p. 155).

However, even granting the general truth of the controversial positive aesthetics thesis, it is not entirely clear that nature cannot still be improved upon. The positive aesthetics thesis does not entail the claim that any given part of nature is aesthetically superior to everything that is non-natural. There is also a question about the content of the positive aesthetics thesis. Does the thesis obtain for all nature or only for virgin nature? There is very little (if any) virgin nature used in environmental art. If only virgin nature has necessarily positive value, then environmental art that incorporates non-virgin nature is not guilty of the aesthetic affront charge. So, it is possible that the change from nature into art is indeed an aesthetic improvement. I actually prefer to think about it another way: I am more inclined to see land art as in the potential service of nature *and* art appreciation, and I do not think that we need to favor one over the other. Indeed, land art can increase our aesthetic appreciation of nature by calling our attention to various entities and forces by imitating or marking them. The manner in which such attention can be called in land art makes it so potentially ethically efficacious.

Humphrey admits that land art might be justified in light of this very potential to change human behavior and attitude. We have already discussed how some art, including land art, exhibits a unique and intimate relationship between medium and message. Land art, in this way, *can* serve ethical ends in a manner that is perhaps more efficacious than more seemingly direct attempts at the same ends, because it has at its command the ability to merge medium and message in a way that affects the appreciator in a profound manner. Like the power of works such as *Myra* discussed above, land art has the ability to forcefully command our attention to environmental matters. Because ethical evaluation of land art must focus on the means, the message, and the ends of art, land artists should be held responsible for their use of land, while allowing the possibility that such usage may be entirely worth it.

Humphrey argues against this justification based on the fact that many such works are inaccessible and thus we must rely on whatever documentation the artist provides, usually film or photograph. Thus, if we are able to get any behavior-changing or attitude-changing message from the documentation of the work, then the actual work in nature is dispensable for this end. As he says, '*If* such pictures do the reharmonizing education without the earthwork as well as they do with it, then the earthwork's infringement upon the environment cannot be justified by ends which the pictures *alone* can attain' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 20). Humphrey recommends Thomas Cole as a model for the kind of artistic work that might increase environmental awareness and concern while 'avoiding unnecessary (unethical) intrusions into the environment' (Humphrey, 1985, p. 21).

But Humphrey is wrong in thinking that painters like Thomas Cole are able to be as ethically efficacious without intruding on the environment. We should question whether the environmental footprint made by traditional artists is substantially less

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than that made by land artists. After all, intrusions into the environment are made by most artists. As Heyd says in his defense of earthwork artists, 'Although making earthworks . . . indeed causes a certain ecological disturbance in natural spaces, it remains unclear whether the countless painters with their oil paints and turpentine, or the many artistic photographers, with their emulsions, are not doing more damage to the fabric of the earth in the long run' (Heyd, 2002).

Admittedly, photographs and films are frequently our only means to appreciate land art. Humphrey argues that if these photographs or films are able to do the work they do, paintings such as Cole's should be equally promising agents of environmentalism. This is not the case because, unlike paintings, photographic and filmic records do the work they do in the context of land art in part by providing evidence of the art's (possibly ephemeral) existence. Photographs and films are different from paintings because they have a certain causal history such that they are reliable sources of information in addition to being possible objects of aesthetic interest. As Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Cohen claim, photographs are epistemically superior to other intentional modes of representation (Meskin & Cohen, 2004). Roger Scruton says a photograph is 'a record of how an actual object looked', and 'from studying a photograph, [a person] may come to know how something looked in the same way he might know if he had actually seen it' (Scruton, 1981, pp. 579; 587–88). Similarly, Kendall Walton describes photographs as transparent, suggesting that we can see the object depicted through the photograph (Walton, 1984). Thus, the status and effect of photographic documentation is different from paintings of the likes of Thomas Cole.

And, most importantly, the power of land art derives not merely from its subject matter or exclusively from its use of materials, but rather from the complex and intimate relationship between the two. Because they lack this intimate connection with the nature they represent, Cole's paintings are extremely unlikely to have as profound an environmentalist effect on an appreciator as a work like Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield: A Confrontation* (1982) might, just as a straightforward portrait of Myra Hindley would not have the same effect on the viewer as the image does when it is formed by children's handprints. Denes's *Wheatfield* was planted by hand in a landfill in Manhattan and yielded approximately 1000 lbs of wheat. Ben Tufnell describes the work as follows: it is an 'extraordinary work that from the beginning was conceived as a political statement . . . . The artist and a small team of volunteers carefully tended the crop and by late summer it had grown into a beautiful field of wheat, slowly changing from green to gold, nestling surrealistically amongst the skyscrapers of the financial district' (Tufnell, 2006, p. 102). Denes aimed to call the public's attention to the waste and mismanagement of natural resources and *Wheatfield* certainly succeeds. Now it is certainly possible for a painter or a poet to create an artwork that conveys the same message, but by being not only about nature but also constituted by nature, *Wheatfield*'s effect promises to be significantly more intense.

Conclusion

The question with which I began, namely, *Is art worth it?*, turned out to present us with layers of issues, some ethical and some aesthetic. I have argued that some works

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of art are plainly not able to justify their costs. Some art that does not justify its cost is art that exploits in the process of creation and becomes a work that itself endorses exploitation. For example, much pornography is guilty of this offense. In this essay, I have discussed whether land art can be said to be similarly guilty. In other words, I attempted to answer the question: *Is land art worth it?* My conclusion is that it is potentially worth it, but that actual works need case-by-case analysis. Moreover, my examples have shown that the ethical evaluation of many artworks should attend to the use of materials, the means of production, and the final message of the work. I have discussed a series of examples of works that make the ethical and aesthetic relevance of all three aspects of artworks clear. As my discussion illustrates, it is worth attending to the production process of works of art. This becomes an aesthetic issue when the work of art is such that appreciating it requires reflection on the process of its production. This is the case in the examples I have discussed, but not exclusively in the realm of land art.

Now we return again to where we began: with Tolstoy. In his own attempt to justify art, Tolstoy offers a revisionist theory of art; the only art he sees as true art discharges the important function of uniting people. For Tolstoy, the basis of art is man's capacity to share feelings. If a work satisfies his general criteria of art, he suggests it can be judged in two ways. The first measure of excellence in art is determined by its infectiousness, which, for Tolstoy, requires that the expression of emotion be individual, clear, and sincere. Thus, the audience is easily infected with the same feeling. The second measure of excellence in art is determined by subject matter. The most commendable subject matter furthers what Tolstoy calls the 'highest religious perception', which, for Tolstoy:

> In its widest and most practical application, is the consciousness that our well-being, both material and spiritual, individual and collective, temporal and eternal, lies in the growth of brotherhood among all men—in their loving harmony with one another . . . . And it is on the basis of this perception that we should appraise all the phenomena of our life, and, among the rest, our art also. (Tolstoy, 1996, pp. 145–146)

Although I cannot endorse every aspect of Tolstoy's views on art, I want to suggest that his method of evaluation can be secularized in an attempt to justify some land art. One might argue that the highest perception of our time is found in environmentalism, that is, in the awareness that our well-being, in the present and for future generations, individual and collective, lies in the growth of an understanding of and respect for nature and a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.[1] Land art has the potential to unite human beings in the inclusive and progressive mindset of environmentalism. And this is, indeed, the direction in which the land art movement presently is developing.

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