Environmental Art and Ecological Citizenship

Jason Simus*

Environmental artworks are not an aesthetic affront against nature because the aesthetic qualities of artworks are to some extent a function of other sorts of qualities, such as moral, social, or ecological qualities. By appealing to a new ecological paradigm, we can characterize environmental artworks as anthropogenic disturbances and evaluate them accordingly. Andrew Light's model of ecological citizenship emphasizes public participation in ecological restoration projects, which are very similar to environmental artworks. Participation in the creation, appreciation, and criticism of environmental art can count as a form of ecological citizenship when these practices provoke public deliberation about environmental and other community-regarding values.

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental art has received a lot of attention recently.[1] Most of the attention has been focused on evaluating the ethical and aesthetic qualities of the art object—for example, how such works might constitute aesthetic affronts to nature.[2] Issues just as important, such as the social, cultural and ecological contributions artists, critics, and audiences make in creating, evaluating, and appreciating environmental art, have been largely neglected. This is unfortunate because the ethical and aesthetic qualities of environmental artworks are to some extent a function of the broader social, cultural, and ecological contexts they inhabit. Artists, critics, and audiences, of course, also inhabit these contexts, and understanding their contributions will not only figure into our evaluation of environmental artworks, but may also provide us with a better understanding of the nature of ecological citizenship. In what follows, I explore the relationship between environmental art and ecological citizenship. In section two, I defend environmental artworks against the aesthetic affront charge by arguing that aesthetic qualities of artworks are to some extent a

---

* Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies, University of North Texas, P.O. Box 310920, Denton, TX 76203-0920; email: jbsimus@hotmail.com. Simus' research interests include environmental aesthetics and ethics, philosophy of ecology, and philosophy of art. He thanks J. Baird Callicott, Allen Carlson, Donald Crawford, Glenn Parsons, and Anna-Christina Ribeiro for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[1] A recent panel discussion at the 2006 National Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The participants were Emily Brady ("The Human-Nature Relationship in Environmental and Land Art"), Sheila Lintott ("Ethically Evaluating Land Art"), and Isis Brook ("The Aesthetic Relevance of Authority in Environmental Art"). Revised versions of these papers among others are published in *Ethics, Place, and Environment* 10 (2007): 257–350.

[2] See Allen Carlson, "Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?" in *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 151; and Donald Crawford, "Art and Nature: Some Dialectical Relationships," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1983), pp. 56–57.

function of other sorts of qualities, such as moral, social, and ecological qualities. In section three, I show that by appealing to a new ecological paradigm, we can characterize environmental artworks as anthropogenic disturbances and evaluate them accordingly. In section four, I look to Andrew Light's model of ecological citizenship (opposed to what he calls "ecological identity") that emphasizes public participation in ecological restoration projects, as these projects are very similar to (and sometimes identical with) environmental artworks. Finally, in section five, I argue that participation in the creation, appreciation, and criticism of environmental art can count as a form of ecological citizenship when these practices provoke public deliberation about environmental and other community-regarding values.[3]

II. WHY ENVIRONMENTAL ART IS NOT AN AESTHETIC AFFRONT TO NATURE

In "Nature and Art: Some Dialectical Relationships," Donald Crawford notes that critics of artworks such as Christo's *Running Fence* (a twenty-four-mile nylon "fence" installed across northern California) call it "an *aesthetic* affront to nature that goes deeper than the scientific assessment of environmental implications," and that these works "forcibly assert their artifactuality over against nature."[4] Allen Carlson holds that some (if not most) environmental artworks are *aesthetic* affronts in that they offend independently of their "social, moral, ecological, or other such qualities," and these works are aesthetic affronts to *nature*, not human appreciators, even though human appreciators are those who recognize the insult.[5] Carlson makes these remarks in his book in a chapter titled, "Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?"

Critics label environmental artworks *aesthetic* affronts for two reasons. First, by stating that an aesthetic affront goes "deeper than the scientific assessment of environmental implications," they imply that the aesthetic qualities of environmental artworks are both independent of, and more basic than, their ecological impacts.[6] By "deeper," I take it, these critics mean more emotionally resonant than the cold hard facts science gives in environmental impact assessments. Thus, recognizing an aesthetic affront requires an emotional sensitivity to the dignity of nature that transcends scientific knowledge of any actual harm (or lack thereof) that the work inflicts on nature. I generally rely upon knowledge, rather than emotion, when appreciating both art and nature, so my disagreement with these critics will end here because it seems we do not share the same assumptions concerning the ground of aesthetic judgments.[7]

---

[3] See Adolf Gundersen, *The Environmental Promise of Public Deliberation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

[4] Crawford, "Art and Nature," pp. 56–57.

[5] Carlson, "Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?" p. 151.

[6] Crawford, "Art and Nature," p. 56.

[7] See David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary,* vol. 1, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Logmans, Green and Co., 1882).

Carlson and I, on the other hand, do share a common standard for aesthetic evaluation. He and I defend cognitivism in aesthetics, the view that appropriate aesthetic appreciation should be informed by relevant knowledge about what is being appreciated. Yet, when it comes to environmental art, Carlson's version of cognitivism appears to differ very much from mine. For example, he says that an aesthetic affront "is generated by the aesthetic qualities of an object, rather than by, for example, its social, moral, ecological, or other such qualities," as if knowledge of these other qualities were irrelevant in evaluating the object.[8] Citing Peter Humphrey's example, the hypothetical *Asian Floodwork*, which is meant to "show Third-World agriculture under water," Carlson says that while this work may have "unacceptable moral and ecological qualities, it would not constitute an aesthetic affront to nature (or to the Third World) on these grounds. Whether or not it would constitute such an affront would depend upon its aesthetic qualities, whatever they might be."[9] On this point I agree with Carlson, whether something constitutes an affront depends upon its aesthetic qualities. But I disagree that it depends *only* upon its aesthetic qualities apart from any relationship to its other qualities. In my view the aesthetic qualities of a work should not be divorced from other social, moral, or ecological qualities when the question is whether or not the work constitutes an affront. In the case of *Asian Floodwork*, there certainly is an aesthetic affront being committed, but it is an affront with respect to the work's socially, morally, and ecologically offensive qualities, as these qualities count toward (but do not strictly entail) it being aesthetically offensive. In other words, because an artwork can be morally, socially, or ecologically offensive, we should look at all the qualities that figure into an object's evaluation in order to determine whether or not it is aesthetically offensive, all things considered.[10] Determining whether or not a work is an affront is a matter of overall aesthetic *evaluation*, in which the relationships between aesthetic and other sorts of qualities play an important role. It seems to me that affronts have more to do with comprehensive aesthetic values than aesthetic qualities alone.

For example, on my view, if I know a particular work is ecologically destructive, then that would count toward it being an aesthetic affront. But the very same work would not be an aesthetic affront insofar as it is elegant, or expressive, or, for example, promotes environmental values (I return to this point later). Its elegance, expressiveness, or ability to promote environmental values would then count against it being an aesthetic affront. In other words, that a particular work is morally, socially, or ecologically reprehensible does not strictly entail but only counts toward it being an aesthetic affront; and a particular work is an aesthetic affront only insofar as it is morally, socially, or ecologically reprehensible. An artwork's morally, socially, or ecologically reprehensible qualities, then, are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for it being an aesthetic affront. On my view, whether or

---

[8] Carlson, "Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?" p. 151.

[9] Ibid., p. 151.

[10] The model I propose here is similar to Berys Gaut's "ethicism." See his "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in Noel Carroll, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998).

not a particular work is an aesthetic affront should be determined by weighing the aesthetic and other relevant qualities to arrive at a comprehensive evaluation that takes all the work's qualities into consideration.[11] I now return to the question of what constitutes an aesthetic affront to *nature*.

According to Carlson, environmental artworks can be aesthetic affronts to *nature*, not only to human appreciators. Of course, nature itself cannot recognize an aesthetic affront; doing so would require an appreciator. Nevertheless, Carlson admits that while "this seems peculiar," one could, by analogy, insult Jones even though Jones may not, or may not even be able to, recognize the insult.[12] Thus, according to Carlson, environmental artworks may insult nature even though nature is not able to recognize the insult. There are two points I want to make here.

First, I don't think the analogy between Jones and nature holds. There may be certain conditions in which Jones finds himself where he cannot recognize that he is being insulted, but most human beings under standard conditions are at least capable of recognizing an insult, whether they actually do or not. Nature itself has no agency and is thus incapable of recognizing an insult, much less an aesthetic affront. Therefore, it is impossible for nature to be aesthetically affronted because nature is altogether indifferent and without agency. I understand the intuition, however, of *attributing* aesthetic affronts to nature, and this brings me to my second point.

I think what's at play here is that the *idea* of nature is being aesthetically affronted. But whose idea of nature? Perhaps not the one currently prevailing in the relevant sciences of nature. There are no aesthetic affronts to nature itself, but some environmental artworks certainly do aesthetically insult the idea of nature as "primordially innocent," in which nature is paradigmatically pristine.[13] Consider Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, a 50 foot by 30 foot by 1,500 foot double cut in the Nevada Virgin River Mesa. Heizer's piece surely offends the idea of nature as paradigmatically pristine. But the idea of nature as primordially innocent or paradigmatically pristine may no longer be an accurate characterization of the natural world.[14] Contemporary ecology now tells us that natural systems are better characterized as being in a dynamic state of flux, where disturbances are the norm, and humans play an integral role in ecosystem structure and function.[15] Nature, or

---

[11] Because, as stated earlier, there are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions governing whether or not something is an aesthetic affront, no calculus can be adopted that will offer a way to derive a balance of positive and negative qualities that will result in an overall evaluation.

[12] Carlson, "Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?" p. 152.

[13] Stan Godlovitch, "Offending against Nature," *Environmental Values* 7 (1998), p. 144.

[14] See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), pp. 69–90; and William Denevan, "The Pristine Myth," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate,* ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), pp. 414–42.

[15] See S. T. A. Pickett, V. T. Parker, and P. L. Fielder, "The New Paradigm in Ecology: Implications for Conservation Above the Species Level," in *Conservation Biology: The Theory and Practice of Nature Conservation, Preservation, and Management* (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1992), pp. 65–88;

our idea of nature, then, is anything but primordially innocent and paradigmatically pristine according to current science. On this view, environmental artworks are not aesthetic affronts to nature; and this conclusion can be illustrated by drawing an analogy with avant-garde art. Carlson explains that in the same way Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (a dada artwork in which a reprint of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is given a mustache and goatee) is an aesthetic affront to art, some environmental artworks are aesthetic affronts to nature. Note, however, that Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* is only considered an aesthetic affront under a theory of art that takes the classic beauty of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* as its paradigm example. Just as Duchamp's works force us to question our assumptions about art, many environmental artworks force us to question our assumptions about nature. And just as beauty is no longer the paradigm of artistic achievement, neither is primordial innocence the paradigm characteristic of the natural world.

In this sense, avant-garde and environmental artworks are similar in their ability to push the boundaries of what we consider standards of artistic achievement and aesthetic appreciation, and this is typically marked by talk of aesthetic affronts when, for some, the boundaries get pushed too far. Letting go of the deeply ingrained idea that nature's beauty is dependent upon it being undisturbed and pristine is difficult, and may throw into question the thesis known as positive aesthetics. Positive aesthetics, according to Carlson, is the view that "all the natural world is beautiful . . . insofar as it is untouched by humans," and this view, along with talk of aesthetic affronts, is indicative of the old ecological paradigm (though both views can be updated).[16] In fact, it seems talk of aesthetic affronts appears most often when such a paradigm shift is imminent, illustrating the theory-dependent nature of aesthetic appreciation. There are no permanent aesthetic affronts, only new standards of interpretation; and theories come and go. From all of this it should be obvious that I think environmental art has tremendous potential; and I would hope that talk of aesthetic affronts could be replaced by a more fruitful and timely discussion regarding sustainability and the role of public art in a given community, which I address later in section five. Now I want to return to what kinds of ecological and ethical conditions environmental artworks must satisfy under our new ecological theory.

III. EVALUATING ENVIRONMENTAL ARTWORKS UNDER A NEW ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM

As stated earlier, an artwork's morally, socially, or ecologically reprehensible qualities are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for it being an aesthetic

---

Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and S. T. A. Pickett and P. S. White, eds., *The Ecology of Natural Disturbance and Patch Dynamics* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1985).

[16] Allen Carlson, "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," in *Aesthetics and the Environment*, p. 72. Carlson adopts the same strategy in defending positive aesthetics (Berys Gaut's "pro tanto" and "all-things-considered evaluation") as I do for defending environmental art. See Gaut's explanation of this method

affront. Whether or not a particular work is an aesthetic affront can be only be determined by weighing the aesthetic and other relevant qualities to arrive at a comphrehensive evaluation that takes the relationships between all a work's qualities into consideration. For the cognitivist, having the knowledge that an artwork is ecologically destructive counts toward (but does not strictly entail) it being an aesthetic affront (i.e., it is an aesthetic affront insofar as I know it is ecologically destructive). So, what constitutes ecological destruction under the new theory? It seems overly strict to deem artworks as aesthetic affronts if they cause *any* ecological destruction; in that case, no artworks, environmental or otherwise, would be ethically sound. Thus, identifying the appropriate degree to which a work makes an impact on its environment is necessary to make the creation and appreciation of ethically sound environmental art possible.

The notion of *scale* is central to current theory in ecology that characterizes nature as a dynamic series of fluctuating disturbances (such as droughts, floods, fires, species invasions and extirpations, etc., both naturally and anthropogenically caused), so we might think of environmental artworks as anthropogenic disturbances that are either temporary or relatively permanent. The scale or degree to which these kinds of anthropogenic disturbances, in comparison to naturally occurring nonanthropogenic disturbances, can provide the appropriate ethical constraint we seek in evaluating environmental artworks. For example, J. Baird Callicott amends Aldo Leopold's land ethic according to the new ecological paradigm as follows: "A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."[17]

We can apply this ethic to temporarily installed environmental artworks in order to avoid them causing excessive harm to the environment. In the case of more permanent works, a similar approach could be taken in which the works should not significantly impact biodiversity and ecosystem functions beyond the typical flux of local invasion and extirpation. In both cases, the ethical constraints are set by determining the appropriate scale or degree to which the works disturb the ecological system they inhabit in comparison to regularly occurring non-anthropogenic disturbances in the same locale.

Along these lines, Carlson objects that

> If we take the comparison between environmental works and natural occurrences such as earthquakes completely seriously, it becomes difficult to see any point or purpose in environmental art. . . One cannot consistently hold that these works have the point

---

in his "The Ethical Criticism of Art," p. 182. For an updated version of the positive aesthetics thesis that is consistent with the new ecological paradigm, see Jason Simus, "Aesthetic Implications of the New Paradigm in Ecology," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42 (2008): 63–79.

[17] J. Baird Callicott, "From the Balance of Nature to the Flux of Nature: The Land Ethic in a Time of Change," in *Aldo Leopold and the Ecological Conscience,* Richard L. Knight and Suzanne Riedel, ed. (Oxford: University Press, 2002), p. 105.

> of improving upon nature and that they yet have the natural purposelessness of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.[18]

Here I want to address two points. First, note that I am not comparing environmental artworks to catastrophic events such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The effects of those kinds of events far exceed the normal spatial and temporal scales I earlier referred to. Natural disturbances are ongoing processes such as droughts, floods, fires, species invasions and extirpations that occur with some degree of regularity. Second, I agree with Carlson that natural processes or disturbances may have no purpose or *telos*. However, because natural and anthropogenic disturbances play no teleological role, this does not mean they are without significance. Natural disturbances may have no purpose, but they certainly have the *potential* to effect changes in the integrity of the system in which they occur, and often those changes actually do occur. So if the comparison between environmental artworks and natural disturbances holds, these artworks have the *potential* to effect changes in the local ecosystem in ways comparable to how droughts, floods, and fires do. These works also have the potential to effect *cultural* change when they promote public deliberation about environmental issues, whether or not those changes actually come about. Sustainable artworks maximize that potential by being more ecologically and culturally integrated than the kind of works that, for example, come with a promissory note for economic compensation after excessive damage has been done.[19] By integrating the cultural and the ecological, sustainable artworks are examples of what is possible in achieving artistic excellence within the constraints of what is ethically and environmentally sound.

Interpreting environmental artworks as anthropogenic disturbances is very similar if not identical to how ecological restoration projects have been characterized according to the new paradigm in ecology described above.[20] One of the more interesting social aspects of ecological restoration is the public's participation in these kinds of projects, such as removing invasive species and replanting native ones in a given locale. Andrew Light has described this sort of public participation in ecological restoration projects as a form of ecological citizenship.[21] In section

---

[18] Carlson, "Is Environmental Art an Aesthetic Affront to Nature?" p. 157.

[19] In her "The Human-Nature Relationship in Environmental and Land Art" (see n. 1 above), Emily Brady states (in n. 14) that proceeds from Christo and Jean-Claude's *The Gates* go to a charity they founded, "Nurture New York's Nature, Inc.'" Eric Katz questions ecological restoration as a "technological fix" in "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 12 (1992): 231–41.

[20] See V. Thomas Parker and Steward T. Pickett, "Restoration as Ecosystem Process: Implications of the Modern Ecological Paradigm," in S. T. A Pickett and P. S White, eds., *The Ecology of Natural Disturbance and Patch Dynamics* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1985), pp. 17–32.

[21] See Andrew Light and Eric Higgs, "The Politics of Ecological Restoration," *Environmental Ethics* 18, no. 3 (1996): 227–47; Andrew Light, "Restoration, The Value of Participation, and the Risks of Professionalization," and Ecological Restoration and the Culture of Nature: A Pragmatic Perspective," both in *Restoring Nature, ed.* Paul Gobster and Bruce Hull (Washington D.C.; Island Press, 2000);

five, I turn to the question of whether public participation in the creation, appreciation, and criticism of environmental art counts as a form of ecological citizenship in a way similar to how more "hands on" practices do for ecological restoration. But first we need a working definition of ecological citizenship.

IV. ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP

In general, to be a citizen is to be a member of a community who possesses certain legal rights and assumes their corresponding political responsibilities. Where the liberal conception of citizenship emphasizes rights, the republican emphasizes responsibilities. These two conceptions of citizenship are typically divided by the liberal focus on the individual's *private* legal status and the republican focus on *public* political agency. An essential characteristic of citizenship shared by both the liberal and republican conceptions, however, is the sense of identity that comes with membership in a community; and the communities that members identify themselves with are sovereign, territorial nation-states, traditionally speaking.[22]

While the traditional distinction between the liberal emphasis on private legal rights and the republican emphasis on public political agency remains largely intact, the sense of identity that comes with community membership is no longer necessarily tied to the traditional nation-state in the age of multiculturalism, globalization and pluralism. The communities that members identify themselves with now need not be sovereign, territorial nation-states. Membership in a plurality of other kinds of communities, then, comes with a plurality of corresponding rights and responsibilities.

One of the more sustained articulations of *ecological* citizenship is given by Andrew Light in a series of articles on the democratic potential of public participation in ecological restoration projects.[23] Light defines ecological citizenship as:

> . . . the description of some set of moral and political rights and responsibilities of agents in a democratic community, defined in terms of their obligations to other humans taking into account those forms of human engagement and interaction that best preserve the long-term sustainability of nature.[24]

According to Light, voluntary public participation in the practice of restoring ecosystems that have been damaged "is as much about restoring the human relationship with nature as it is about restoring natural processes themselves."[25] Participation in

---

"Restoring Ecological Citizenship," in *Democracy and the Claims of Nature: Critical Perspectives for a New Century,* Ben Minteer and Bob Pepperman Taylor, eds., (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 153–72; and "Urban Ecological Citizenship," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2003): 44–63.

[22] Leydet, Dominique, "Citizenship," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Winter 2006, ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archieves/win2006/entries/citizenship. For the ancients, the community was the polis.

[23] See note 20 above.

[24] Light, "Restoring Ecological Citizenship," p. 159.

[25] See Light, "Restoring Ecological Citizenship," p. 154.

restoration projects, he argues, will not necessarily make better ecological citizens, but the democratic potential of this sort of participation is inherent.[26] He writes:

> Participation in restorations should count as at least one practice that can help promote attempts at achieving long-term sustainability within a context that assumes that such sustainability will best be achieved by appeal to human interests as they evolve in democratic processes.[27]

Taking cues from William Jordan III, a founder of the ecological restoration movement, Light draws an analogy between participation in natural processes and democratic processes when he writes, "our activity with nature is analogous to our activity with each other in a democratic society."[28] The link in this analogy is that both of these processes are ongoing and subject to change and fluctuation to which we must adapt. Jordan claims that "what is involved [in ecological restoration] is a continual dialogue rather than a program, paralleling in our dealings with the biotic community the dialogue that sustains a democratic society and makes it adaptable to change."[29] For both Jordan and Light, participation in restoration projects strengthens human-nature relationships among members of the biotic community and strengthens relations between members of a social and political community in a democratic and egalitarian framework, where each member plays a role in the planning and execution of the project. Thus, the public's participation in an ecological restoration counts toward it being evaluated as a good restoration, as opposed to one privately, professionally, or involuntarily executed.[30]

Light contrasts ecological citizenship with what he calls "ecological identity," which is similar to what I have described here. "An ecological identity," he says,

> . . . conceives of the right relationship between agent and nature as more a matter of one where nature shapes the subjectivity of the agent, which in turn creates a political framework whereby agents feel that they have individual and collective duties to nature and to those humans who share that same subjectivity. Ecological identity would count as a form of identity politics, usually defined in terms of those forms of politics at the heart of the new social movements emerging since the 1960s: feminism, race-based politics, the politics of sexual identity, and so on.[31]

While I share Light's worry that environmentalism as a form of identity politics will be less effective than a full-blown ecological citizenship, I do so for different

---

[26] Ibid., p. 158.

[27] Light, "Restoring Ecological Citizenship," p. 158.

[28] Light, "The Value of Participation," p. 164.

[29] William Jordan III, "Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration as the Basis for a New Environmental Paradigm," in *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes,* ed. A .D. Baldwin, Jr., J. De Luce, and C. Pletsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 24.

[30] See Light, "Restoration, the Value of Participation, and the Risks of Professionalization," pp. 163–81.

[31] Light, "Restoring Ecological Citizenship," p. 158.

reasons. First, I see no problem with nature shaping one's subjectivity. As long as the concerns of other communities are not excluded, and as long as one's perspective toward nature and other communities is relatively consistent, that is consistent with ecological citizenship. In fact, inter-subjective discourse across communities (about values, not preferences) seems necessary for ecological citizenship to be viable in a pluralistic context. Nature may only shape our subjectivity, where social practice gives it content.

Second, the sense of identity conferred upon members of a community is an essential characteristic of most theories of citizenship, but it is also one of the most problematic. When members of a community identify with a set of values, rights, and responsibilities that are particular to one community and not another, they may also identify themselves as individuals in these terms. Such identification brings with it two problems. First, the concerns of communities other than the ones members identify with, and the associated rights and responsibilities therein, are considered less important. Second, the members of other communities themselves, because they identify with other values and concerns as members of other communities, are given less attention at best and discriminated against at worst. So identification of this sort seems inherently exclusionary.

The first problem with identification, however, may be minor. Ideally, we would like to give equal consideration to all of the concerns we have as members of all the communities we belong to. So as long as we do not exclude other issues from consideration, identifying with a particular set of concerns held by a particular community seems relatively innocuous.

On the other hand, to identify oneself *by,* rather than merely *with,* a particular set of concerns is to see oneself as separate from the community. This second problem is related to the first, because the boundary between identifying oneself with a set of concerns and identifying oneself by those concerns is quite vague. The result is a form of identity politics, where one not only makes pronouncements about one's beliefs (e.g., "*I* care about rainforests"), but also about who they are in virtue of what they believe (e.g., "*I'm* an environmentalist"). Notice the use of first person singular in both of these examples. In neither case are the rights of members of a community or the responsibilities that come with membership mentioned at all.

In this case, "environmentalists" set themselves apart from other equally important issues such as race, gender, class, etc., by defining themselves in terms of their stance on a single issue. In doing so, environmentalists limit their political agency to issues that are purely ecological, such as preservation of wilderness areas. For example, Dave Foreman, the founder of radical environmentalist group Earth First!, once wrote that "the preservation of wildness and native diversity is *the* most important issue. Issues directly affecting only humans pale in comparison."[32] In "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon responds by saying

[32] Dave Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), p. 27.

> This would seem to exclude from the radical environmentalist agenda problems of occupational health and safety in industrial settings, problems of toxic waste exposure on "unnatural" urban and agricultural sites, problems of famine and poverty and human suffering in the "overpopulated" places of the earth—problems, in short, of environmental justice.[33]

Foreman's environmentalism as a form of identity politics neglects the relationships that hold between ecological concerns and broader social concerns. By identifying with an exclusive set of environmental issues, the environmentalist sets himself apart from members of other communities as well, which results in a kind of alienation on the part of those excluded. This alienation is apparent in contemporary society. Many citizens are concerned about environmental issues, and some are even aware that they have certain responsibilities that come with their membership in the biotic community. But few are willing to identify themselves as "environmentalists" because they realize that the environment is only one of many interrelated social and cultural concerns that need to be addressed collectively. Thus, we may need more ecological citizens than environmentalists.

V. RESTORING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL ART

Environmental artist Robert Smithson once said in an interview that "as an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the persona of a geologic agent where man actually becomes part of that process rather than overcoming it."[34] Smithson created the most widely recognized example of environmental art, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a 1,500-foot-long curl of black basalt, limestone rocks, and earth on the northeastern shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. *Spiral Jetty* is today mostly underwater; yet, the effects of erosion and fluctuating tides of the Great Salt Lake are still essential to appreciating the work as Smithson intended. Most environmental artworks like *Spiral Jetty* are works that, by design, are more in a state of process than they are static physical objects; and this ephemeral characteristic of many environmental artworks is shared with ecological restorations.

Recall that my earlier interpretation of environmental artworks as anthropogenic disturbances was grounded in an ecological paradigm that characterizes ecosystems as a series of fluctuating processes punctuated by natural and anthropogenic disturbances. Under this same ecological paradigm, ecological restoration projects are seen as anthropogenic disturbances designed to facilitate natural processes, and in this way share much in common with environmental artworks.[35] In fact, many environmental works are explicitly designed to serve double duty as ecological

---

[33] See Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," p. 84.

[34] Robert Smithson, "Conversation in Salt Lake City: Interview with Gianni Pettena," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 298.

[35] See Parker and Pickett, "Restoration as Ecosystem Process."

restoration projects, thereby highlighting their intertwined cultural and natural aspects.[36] I will not address these kinds of environmental artworks, however. It is the works that are primarily intended as making a contribution to the artworld, such as the works of Smithson, Heizer, and Christo, that I want to focus on because they are so provocative and challenging to our cultural and environmental sensibilities. That these works are ongoing processes rather than static physical objects is the most significant element shared by environmental artworks and ecological restorations which links them to the new ecological paradigm. Otherwise, environmental artworks are subject to the charge of "faking nature."[37] Regarding restoration, my purpose here is not to debate the ethics of these projects, but only to investigate whether environmental artworks have the same democratic potential these projects do because they share so much in common. While I have some misgivings about how participation in the logistics and manual labor involved in ecological restoration can do all the work of restoring human-nature relationships, natural and democratic processes, and ecological citizenship, the potential of engaging in these kinds of practices is encouraging. Although participation in the creation, appreciation, and criticism of environmental art may do all of this in a more cognitively and culturally enriching way, I only argue here that these practices have as much democratic potential as restoration does.

Environmental artworks such as Michael Heizer's *Double Negative,* Christo's *Running Fence*, and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* are difficult to be indifferent to. Anyone with the slightest amount of aesthetic sensitivity is compelled to respond in some way to these kinds of works just because they are so provocative and challenging. Because these works are large-scale public pieces, they transcend the exclusivity of the gallery space and the commodification of collectible art. They are thus experienced by those normally reluctant to participate in museum exhibitions where art is more often consumed than experienced.[38] In *Economy of the Earth,* Mark Sagoff draws a distinction between being a consumer and citizen. He writes:

> As a *citizen*, I am concerned with the public interest, rather than my own interest; with the good of the community, rather than simply the well-being of my family . . . as a *consumer*. . . . I put aside the community-regarding values I take seriously as a citizen, and I look out for Number One instead. . . . I may ignore the values that are mine only insofar as I consider myself a member of the community, that is, as *one of us*.[39]

---

[36] See Sue Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center Publishing, 2002).

[37] Robert Elliot argues that restorations are unethical because they are artifacts, which results in a loss of "natural value," because as such they cannot restore a pristine environment back to its original condition, as if there were such a condition. See Robert Elliot, *Faking Nature: The Ethics of Environmental Restoration* (New York: Routledge, 1997). For another argument against restoration, see Eric Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 12 (1992): 231–42.

[38] See "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* trans. John Cummins (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

[39] Mark Sagoff, *The Economy of the Earth* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), p. 8.

Sagoff's articulation of ecological citizenship hinges on this distinction, which is drawn along private/public, liberal/republican lines. One of the stated objectives of Sagoff's book is to show that not all values, such as ethical and aesthetic values, are economic values, and that these non-economic values are held by and for members within a community as such. Aesthetic values, according to Sagoff, are *community-regarding,* not just individual subjective preferences held by a consumer.[40] Yet, aesthetic values are notorious for being dismissed as "in the eye of the beholder" and are therefore often considered as merely subjective, even trivial. While it is common to hear that "there is no disputing about tastes," aesthetic judgments certainly can and do facilitate critical and evaluative discourse, and in this way can be community-regarding as Sagoff suggests.

Publicly expressed community-regarding aesthetic judgments then form an atmosphere of criticism and evaluative discourse in which community members play a variety of roles. As Smithson alluded to, the environmental artist plays the role of ecological agent by participating in natural processes, but the artist also acts as a *cultural* agent by creating works that facilitate deliberation about community-regarding environmental and cultural values. For example, a seemingly anti-environmental work like Heizer's *Double Negative* may provoke public deliberation about whether the community values art over sustainability, or to what extent such a work may in fact promote sustainability, either directly or indirectly.[41] In these kinds of cases, critics too play the role of cultural agent in terms of articulating the community-regarding values these works represent, express, or otherwise facilitate. Over time, audiences bring these values up to scale which forms a canon of cultural, aesthetic, and artistic standards according to which community members can make informed judgments. Artists, critics, and audiences, then, shape the cultural, aesthetic, and environmental communities they are members of by participating in the ongoing critical and evaluative dialogue regarding environmental artworks and the values they instantiate. Art critic and aesthetician Arthur Danto called this atmosphere of theory and critical discourse "the Artworld," in which artworks are defined by their context, rather than by their physical characteristics alone.[42]

As Sagoff reminds us, the roles we play as consumers and citizens are as fundamentally distinct as the private/public distinction drawn in most accounts of citizenship. The roles we privately and publicly play are especially important when considering how discourse regarding our aesthetic judgments is analogous to ongoing democratic dialogue. For example, when confronted with an environmental artwork such as Christo's installation *The Gates* in Manhattan's Central Park (a work that generated an enormous amount of public participation in aesthetic discourse), one might offer the response "I like it." But of course, this is a statement about

---

[40] Ibid., p. 79.

[41] Emily Brady argues that some environmental artworks that appear to have anti-environmental qualities may in fact show aesthetic regard for nature in "Aesthetic Regard for Nature in Environmental and Land Art," p. 291.

[42] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 19 (1964): 571–84.

one's personal preferences, not the value of the work. One could also personally dislike the installation, yet still recognize how it embodies community-regarding values.

When engaging in this sort of evaluative deliberation as citizens, we set aside our private interests and are more concerned with how a given environmental artwork reflects cultural and environmental community-regarding values, even values we may not necessarily identify with privately. When we make judgments about the community regarding values environmental artworks reflect, we expect others to agree with us (though not necessarily for the same reasons) because if they don't, we think either we are out of touch with the values held within the community or they are.[43] Deliberation ensues as a kind of corrective, where we check our values against the values of others in a public context. Disagreements regarding our personal preferences may be irreconcilable, but community-regarding values, even aesthetic community-regarding values, should be relatively coherent among the members of such a community, given that the community is somewhat functional. This is not to say that we necessarily *will* agree, but by publicly deliberating about our community-regarding values, we can at least set coherent standards necessary for meaningful disagreement. Contrary to Light's worry about subjectivity and its relation to an ecological identity, the shaping of our subjectivity is only a threat to citizenship if we equate subjectivity with personal preferences or private interests, rather than our community-regarding public values. While the language we use in making aesthetic judgments may be subjective, it is never private.[44] As ecological citizens, then, our seemingly private aesthetic judgments are always subject to public scrutiny.

Here I want to address an important possible objection to what I have argued for in this section. The objection is that many environmental artworks such as Heizer's and Smithson's are in locations that are extremely remote, thus the majority of ecological citizens will be unable to participate in appreciating them; and this severely limits their democratic potential to further public deliberation about environmental and other community-regarding values.[45] I have only argued that these works have inherently democratic *potential*, but how their remoteness limits this potential reveals the full force of this objection. I have two responses. First, ironically, that these works are so remote may in fact *increase* their potential to further deliberation. That is, *because* they are so remote more people discuss these works and deliberate about their values than actually visit them. The same is true for most

[43] For more on this, see Immanuel Kant's notion of the agreeable in "Analytic of the Beautiful," *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), p. 97. The form of our agreements regarding aesthetic judgments of this type is similar to John Rawls' idea of an "overlapping consensus," in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 32.

[44] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), par. 256.

[45] My thanks to Sheila Lintott for making me aware of this objection.

art. Most people haven't been to the Louvre, the Sistine Chapel, or MOMA, but this does not discourage them from discussing and deliberating about the values of the works exhibited within those institutions. Because the artworld is more of an atmosphere of criticism and evaluative discourse than a physical institution, participation does not require us to directly perceive every artwork we value or discuss. If it did, that certainly would be undemocratic. In that case, anyone who had never directly laid eyes on Michelangelo's *David* or Picasso's *Guernica*, for example, could participate in any discussion about the values those works embody and facilitate. The only difference I see between these kinds of works and environmental artworks, in terms of how they might promote citizenship is that environmental works facilitate discussion about more particular values, such as ecological sustainability, though these more specific values fall under citizenship more generally. Thus, like appreciating museum pieces in distant locations, directly appreciating environmental artworks in remote locations, is not necessary for these works to potentially further deliberation about specifically environmental and other more general values. In both cases, geographical distance makes a difference, but it should not be a relevant difference in terms of how these works can facilitate the kind of evaluative discourse that is part of citizenship.

Second, these works are set in remote locations for important aesthetic and environmental reasons; and as ecological citizens, most of us should *not* visit these kinds of works in their remote locations. Like the problem of national parks being overrun by crowds of tourists leaving large ecological footprints, herds of environmental art enthusiasts may end up ruining the very works they travel so far to appreciate, both aesthetically and ecologically. This is one reason why the documentation of these works is so important. Like some conceptual artworks that have only a temporary location, and abstract location, or even no location at all, environmental artworks in extremely remote locations or those that have decayed beyond recognition rely heavily upon their documentation.[46] Perhaps as ecological citizens we should first get to know these works through their documentation, and deliberate about their values accordingly before we make the trek to visit them in numbers that would defeat our purpose.

VI. CONCLUSION

By now it should be clear that my defense of environmental art is contingent upon these works being recognized as successful, where the measurement of success is how the relations between their aesthetic and other qualities promote public deliberation among community members. Unsuccessful environmental artworks

[46] An example of a conceptual artwork with no location is Yves Klein's *Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity*, which the artist sold in exchange for gold. The buyer was given a receipt that he or she was required to then burn while Klein threw the gold into the Seine river. Klein insisted the work was not a performance. And while the work itself was immaterial, its documentation remains important.

lack an overall coherence of their aesthetic and other qualities, such as moral, social, and ecological qualities. For this reason they fail to adequately promote public discourse about community-regarding values of the same type. The sorts of qualities and values these works exhibit and evoke are the same sorts of qualities and values that form the community-regarding interpretive framework I suggest is necessary for ecological citizenship, the interpretive framework provided by current ecological science. Thus, the relation of these works' qualities to our community-regarding values set the standards for meaningful disagreement under a particular interpretation. Like unsuccessful artworks that lack coherence between their aesthetic and other qualities, environmentalism as a form of identity politics lacks coherence between ecological and broader social concerns. Ecological citizens, on the other hand, including environmental artists, audiences, and critics, act as agents in their various communities, thereby contributing to the ongoing cultural, ecological, and democratic processes they are a part of. By publicly creating, appreciating, and critiquing environmental art, artists, audiences, and critics reinforce the constitutive roles they play as ecological citizens and in turn set the critical and evaluative standards for their communities. It is this capacity to promote the public communication of our community-regarding values that gives environmental art its inherently democratic potential.