

INTERACTING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF ANDY  
GOLDSWORTHY'S ART AMONG ALLEN CARLSON'S MODELS OF NATURE  
APPRECIATION

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In Thomas Riedelsheimer's documentary, *Rivers and Tides*, Andy Goldsworthy is shown experimenting with "the flow"<sup>1</sup> of nature and water through his work. He creates several sculptures, including a driftwood whirlpool and a hanging bramble web, all of which are destroyed as soon as they are finished by the very nature of their surroundings. He speaks to this, saying that the "real work...is the change" and it "doesn't feel at all like destruction"<sup>2</sup> because it's part of a natural cycle. Goldsworthy works to understand and celebrate the movement and ebb of the natural environment, and he photographs the results to share with others. This can be represented in terms of Allen Carlson's models of nature appreciation.

In "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," Carlson argues that, in order to completely aesthetically appreciate nature *as nature*, we cannot contain it in a "determinate" object "actually or contemplatively [removed]...from its surroundings"<sup>3</sup>—a case he characterizes as the object model – because the whole of nature is indeterminate and not contained in its individual objects. He also says we cannot appreciate nature as a "two-dimensional...scene" that we "[divide]...into blocks"<sup>4</sup> that are also isolated from their surroundings to be appreciated from a distance; this suggests that nature is a static landscape and is not three-dimensional – which he calls the landscape model. He comes to

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<sup>1</sup> *Rivers and Tides. Documentary 2001*. Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. Rivers and Tides. April 1, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Carlson, Allen. "Appreciation and the Natural Environment." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 3 (1979).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

assert that we must appreciate nature as our “surrounding...environment” and as “obtrusive foreground”<sup>5</sup>—a three-dimensional, fluid context that we exist in fully—which he terms his environmental model.

I maintain that Goldsworthy’s work is representative of Carlson’s environmental model in that it explores and appreciates nature as a three-dimensional, variable foreground; but the necessity of photographing his work in order to sell and share his pieces shifts them into the two-dimensional landscape model, framing the image and isolating it from its context, as well as creating a physical and emotional distance between viewer and subject.

### 1 Art and Environment

Goldsworthy’s work, at its core, agrees with Carlson’s environmental model in that it explores and appreciates nature as a three-dimensional, variable foreground. In an article in *The Guardian*, Tim Adams describes Goldsworthy as wanting to “get away from two-dimensional representation of landscape in a frame, and give you the thing itself.”<sup>6</sup> This perfectly illustrates Goldsworthy’s desire to distance himself from the ideas and function of the landscape model; typically, artists that try to showcase an appreciation of nature do so through found art (think driftwood or sea-glass structures on the mantelpiece), or beautiful depictions of the colors and lines of the scenery (think Monet, Cézanne, etc.). However, part of Carlson’s point is that although these things may be perfectly viable as artwork, they are unable to provide a lens through which the viewer can truly aesthetically appreciate nature as a whole. In trying to combine that with the sellable aspects of the artistic community,

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<sup>5</sup> Carlson, Allen. "Appreciation and the Natural Environment." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 3 (1979).

<sup>6</sup> Adams, Tim. "Andy Goldsworthy: 'Lying down in Times Square in the rain is bound to attract attention'." *The Guardian*. August 17, 2014. Accessed October 22, 2017.

they lose the ability to completely aesthetically admire the environment they are trying to celebrate.

Goldsworthy, on the other hand, manages to do just that—he creates pieces that combine art with nature in such a way that his work embodies the movement of the environment and his total immersion in it. Most of his sculptures target the relationship between two variable forces, working to explore and understand that fluid relationship; for example, in Riedelsheimer’s film, he created a rock cairn during low tide, knowing that it would disappear with the incoming tide. When his piece collapsed several times, he stated that each time the sculpture “grew in proportion”<sup>7</sup> to how well he knew and understood the relationship between the stones and their balance—not only was he trying to understand that relationship, but also the relationship between the cairn and the movement of the tide. Similarly, the film showed clips of mini-pieces, such as lily-pads or sticks, floating down a river laid out in a pattern that mimics the flow of the water. This shows his fascination with the interplay between the water’s movement and its surroundings—and the movement of the pieces with the water illustrates the way in which his work interacts with its surroundings.

## 2 Evaluating the Aesthetics of Goldsworthy’s Art

Because Goldsworthy experiences and investigates the growth and change of the environment, he is able to appreciate nature in a fluid, three-dimensional way, and to use all his senses to experience it as foreground. However, possible concerns arise with respect to two arguments: first, is Goldsworthy manipulating the natural environment, and is he

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<sup>7</sup> *Rivers and Tides. Documentary 2001*. Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. Rivers and Tides. April 1, 2016.

therefore not appreciating it in its natural state? Second, does the fact that Goldsworthy needs to photograph his work to sell it compromise the work in some way?

There is a potential argument that Goldsworthy *is* creating art, manipulating the environment to do so – and because of this, his pieces cannot be solely for the purpose of appreciating nature. This, by Carlson’s standards, would perhaps make his work representative of something closer to the landscape model. However, I assert that this analysis of his work is not entirely accurate. Yes, Goldsworthy manipulates some aspects of nature to create his pieces, but he places a significant amount of emphasis on how this is his method to “understand”<sup>8</sup> and get to know the materials he’s working with in the context of their natural environment. For example, while he is building the rock cairn by the sea, each time it collapsed he was able to rebuild it a little bit taller; he says that the structure “grew in proportion to his understanding”<sup>9</sup> of the stone. Concurrently, Carlson highlights the necessity of “knowledge”<sup>10</sup> of nature to be able to appreciate it fully. Because Goldsworthy is not adding or taking anything away from the environment in which he builds his pieces, and he interacts with the materials to acquire knowledge about them, he is merely manipulating nature to appreciate and explore it as obtrusive foreground, just as Carlson requires for the environmental model.

Nevertheless, the fact that photography is a necessity for Goldsworthy is perhaps a more complicated issue. It places the piece in the two-dimensional landscape model, framing the image and isolating it from its context. In Malcom Miles’ book on Eco-Aesthetics, he states that Goldsworthy’s work implies an “association between art and

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<sup>8</sup> *Rivers and Tides. Documentary 2001*. Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. Rivers and Tides. April 1, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Carlson, Allen. "Appreciation and the Natural Environment." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 3 (1979).

awareness of the natural world”<sup>11</sup>—in other words, a union between the two which seems to make a relationship between artistic creation and nature appreciation possible.

However, Goldsworthy mentions in the film that photography becomes the way he “talks about and understands the work,”<sup>12</sup> which shows that it is inevitably a part of his process—whether it be a welcome one or not. Although Goldsworthy seems to view it as a necessary evil, in order to make a living off of his art, he still has to provide physical evidence and showcases of his pieces to share them with others. Photography, at its essence, is a perfect example of Carlson’s landscape model: it serves to remove a chunk of scenery from its surroundings, isolate it by giving it a border, and make it two-dimensional. By photographing nature, one makes it impossible to experience it as surrounding environment and as foreground—and by photographing Goldsworthy’s pieces, by extension allowing them artistic accreditation, he moves them from a three-dimensional setting into a two-dimensional landscape.

To gain a place in the artistic community, Goldsworthy must assert a physical and emotional distance between viewer and subject, rather than experiencing the pieces as fluid and in motion the way they’re intended. An article by Rebecca Solnit explains that “Landscape paintings and photographs perpetuate [a] habitual way of imagining what’s out there, acting as blinders”<sup>13</sup> and becomes the “limit” of the imagination when it comes to a full sensory experience of the environment. By Carlson’s model, this creates not just a physical distance between viewer and subject, as there is an automatic inability to touch, smell, feel, and hear the environment, but also an emotional one, as it limits our ability to

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<sup>11</sup> Miles, Malcolm. *Eco-aesthetics: art, literature and architecture in a period of climate change*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> *Rivers and Tides. Documentary 2001*. Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer. Rivers and Tides. April 1, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. "The Limits of Landscape." Orion Magazine. Accessed October 22, 2017.

feel surrounded and enclosed by the environment if the edges of the photograph are also the edges of what we can perceive of the subject. This serves, to some extent, to promote a feeling of detachment, as the work is fundamentally missing the totality of the experience with which Goldsworthy intends and wants. The act of photographing a moving or changing piece also serves to make the fluid appear stagnant, which neutralizes some of his effort to explore the relationships between variable forces.

### 3 Conclusion

Ultimately, Goldsworthy appears to land in a gray area between art and nature appreciation; it's not that he cannot create art while confining it to Carlson's environmental model, it's that he cannot create accredited or recognized art within those confines. If he creates pieces that fit strictly within that model, he sacrifices a place in the artistic community and makes it nearly impossible to share his art with others. If he does use photography, he sacrifices the ability to call his work "truly" nature appreciation, by Carlson's standards. Some nature photographers, like the late Ansel Adams, believe contrary to this: that photographing it helps "understand aspects of nature and align one's own mindset with the natural processes of the world."<sup>14</sup>

In some respects, I believe this can be decisively true, although I agree with Carlson in that it can't really be dubbed pristine aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment. However, art can still serve as a celebration of the natural environment without needing to fall within the environmental model. Goldsworthy's use of photography complicates his place on Carlson's spectrum, but I don't think it takes any value or integrity away from what he does. His work fundamentally exists in the context of its natural environment, making Goldsworthy the closest

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<sup>14</sup> Artsubtext. "The Philosophy of Ansel Adams's Photography." Art Subtext. October 13, 2017. Accessed October 22, 2017.

one can come to producing something that is both art and an appreciation of nature—it is both about and of the environment.

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