Andy Goldsworthy and the limits of working with nature

Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time, written and directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer

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Usually called an "environmental sculptor," Andy Goldsworthy creates sculptures out of nothing but materials found in the particular environment in which he is at work—driftwood, stones, leaves, sticks, icicles, snow. As pieces, they are therefore highly limited in time and space. In some instances, on commission, he creates more permanent pieces, such as his *Wall* at Storm King Sculpture Park, in New York State.

Goldsworthy photographs his work before it collapses, melts, gets washed away, or is otherwise transformed, and until now it has been viewed primarily through photographs. The film *Rivers and Tides*, directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer, now makes the work of this artist accessible to a larger audience and offers an opportunity to evaluate the merits and limitations of his project.

Born in 1956 in Cheshire, England, Goldsworthy began creating this kind of sculpture in the mid-1970s when he left what he felt were the sterile cubicles of the Bradford Art College and began to work out on the Lancashire beach.

"When I'm working with materials it's not just the leaf or the stone, it's the processes that are behind them that are important. That's what I'm trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole." [http://www.hainesgallery.com/AG.statement.html] In pursuit of this understanding, he builds meticulously balanced, human-sized cones out of stones in a race against the tide. He threads leaves together by their stems and sets them afloat down a river, recording their sinuous dance through the eddying current. At the edge of a tumultuous waterfall, he carpets a pool in the hollow of a rock with yellow dandelions to create a vibrant spot of absolute stillness.

His photographs of these pieces have been exhibited in galleries and published in books (Harry N. Abrams, publisher), the titles of which aptly describe his concerns: *Hand to Earth, 1976-1990* (1993), *Stone* (May 1994), *Wood* (Oct 1996), *Wall* (May 2000), and *Time* (Nov 2000), among others. Without the photographic record, he can lose track of what he is doing out in the cold, or rain, or wind, or standing up to his waist in water, all of which he does as a matter of course the way another artist might go to his studio. The film conveys what it is to be Andy Goldsworthy at work, and the artist's own processes—and these, no less than those of nature, find expression here.

Rivers and Tides opens with the artist trudging through a snowstorm in the early morning, at work on a project in Canada. We watch as he shapes bits of icicles by biting and licking them, tapping them gently with ungloved fingers, till they fit together. It is not clear what he is making until he steps back, and we see that he has formed the icicles into a sinuous ribbon, which looks like it is lacing itself in and out of a grey boulder, ending with a delicate, gravity-defying tail pointing up into the sky. At this moment, the sun comes up behind the rock, illuminating the icicle-ribbon like a neon flame.

In the next scene, he builds an airy dome, something like a beaver lodge, out of bleached driftwood. He locates it on the edge of a pool where the river flows into the sea and vice versa in a ceaselessly eddying whirlpool. The work finished, he stands watching it, along with a local Nova Scotia fisherman. The fisherman asks Goldsworthy whether his piece will hold together when the tide comes in, but the artist says no. (After all, it isn't held together by anything.) The water gradually dislodges the structure, carrying it off, gently rotating, as it breaks up in the current. Here the artist comments, "It somehow doesn't feel like destruction, though." The reciprocal action of nature is conceived of as part of the piece.

These are but two of the many pieces we see Goldsworthy making in *Rivers and Tides*. Documentarian filmmaker Reidelsheimer followed Goldsworthy for over a year in 2000, and has clearly worked in sympathy with the artist. The musical score by Fred Frith blends traditional Scots melodies with Far Eastern overtones, setting the tone of the film and giving it cohesion.

Unconventional as it seems, Goldsworthy's work is firmly within the tradition of conceptual art as it developed in the course of the 1970s in Britain, and other places. It is set apart from the "happenings" and video pieces of the period by its lack of cynicism, as well as by Goldsworthy's talent for arranging his "found" materials in surprising ways, but it shares the former's intrinsic assumption that this type of activity constitutes the creation of art.

His work has specific antecedents in the environmental sculptures of Robert Smithson, whose *Spiral Jetty* (1970*)* in Great Salt Lake, Utah, and other earthworks created in the late 1960s/early 1970s share a similar preoccupation with spirals and other naturally occurring forms as the basis for site-specific artworks. (For example, see www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks.)

Eastern philosophy, particularly Taoism, with its emphasis on balance as expressed in the ying-yang symbol is another influence. Goldsworthy has spent time working in Japan, and much of his work incorporates the idea of balancing opposites until the tension of their contradictions results in collapse. *Mountain and Coast* is an exhibit of work created in Kiinagashima-cho, Japan in Autumn/Winter 1987 that is currently on tour in the United States. A brief note on its creation that reads like haiku complements each photograph.

The decision to go "back to the land," with its implicit or explicit rejection of 20th century civilization, also underlies Goldsworthy's work.

Many a hippy, or "blow-in" as those of a slightly earlier generation were called, moved from urban European centers into remote areas in Ireland or Scotland, where Goldsworthy himself has lived for the past 12 years. These areas had been relatively de-populated by the Industrial Revolution, and agricultural ways of life are maintained by a remnant of the population.

Goldsworthy's work in the Scottish Highlands touches on this history. He talks about the deep impact that sheep have had on the landscape, how they relentlessly denude the hillsides to leave sweeping expanses of close cropped pastures squared off by stonewalls. Goldsworthy explains that sheep were responsible for social and political upheavals, as the landlords moved people off the land during the Enclosure Acts of the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries and put sheep in their stead.

Interestingly, the work created in the Highlands, in which he tucks a white ribbon of raw wool along the crest of the seemingly endless stonewalls, is among his least successful. Goldsworthy seems to have difficulty understanding man's social and economic development taking place through the conflict of classes. It is telling that even the way Goldsworthy describes the Enclosure Acts is incorrect. It was not the sheep who put people off the land, but the landlords.

Goldsworthy's difficulties with society lead him to anthropomorphize nature instead. He clearly needs to be in direct contact with his materials, and feels that he is taking his cue from them rather than vice versa. He goes further and speaks of "shaking hands with nature" once he has begun a piece. His stone cones have the feeling to him of guardians, standing and protecting. And "the sea has taken the work and made of it more than I could have." Nature has become a sentient force almost like another artist with whom he co-works.

Much of this can be taken metaphorically; as the artist never describes these natural processes as directed by a greater force, or god (though nothing would prevent him going in that direction). Of greater issue is the degree to which these processes of nature are assumed to be entirely natural, or that even if they were, that would make them entirely good. There is an unexamined assumption that the patterns of nature that Goldsworthy believes he records actually spring from nature itself. It may be argued that his "nature" is imitating art instead of the other way around. His patterns could be taking their cue from a Jackson Pollock painting, for instance.

Goldsworthy acknowledges that the landscapes in which he works are hardly primeval. They have been shaped for generations by human activity, and he tries to incorporate this. For example, the stone wall at the Storm King Sculpture Park was inspired by seeing the remnants of stone walls built by European immigrants when they transformed the Catskill forests into farmland. However, in the nineteenth century, farming shifted away from the area, and the trees grew back over the walls, which had become irrelevant. Goldsworthy's wall snakes in and out between the trees, accommodating itself to them rather than vice versa. It extends through a pond all the way out to the New York State Thruway, where a steady stream of trucks and cars barrel along, thus linking the economic forms of today to those of the past.

However, the efforts of human beings are essentially transient in these pieces, whereas the processes of nature are immutable and all-powerful. On some level, this may be true, but it discounts the tremendous power that human beings continuously and in fact inevitably must exert on the environment in order to sustain themselves in increasingly complex ways.

Although Goldsworthy has sought to understand and personalize these forces of nature, there is no hint of the catastrophic destruction say of an earthquake or a flood, which human beings, in some cases at least, can prevent or minimize through the proper application of resources and knowledge. Conversely, there is no reflection of the irreparable damage done to nature under capitalism with its need to extend markets and exploit resources. It is a human task to harness nature, and our technology, far from being nature's antithesis, is our means of doing so efficiently. When no longer administered by the profit system, technology will allow us to provide for our needs on a global scale responsibly, in a way impossible in primitive "state of nature."

Goldsworthy's difficulty in understanding the development of historical human processes, his withdrawal from what one might call modern civilization in his artistic activities, and his attempt to attribute human dilemmas to the elemental forces of the natural world are symptomatic not merely of personal issues. These choices indicate a retreat from society and its problems beginning in the mid-1970s in Britain and elsewhere as the radicalization of the 1960s came to an end. They are also a response to the deterioration of the social and intellectual environment under current conditions. By turning all forms of labor, including the artistic, into commodities, capitalism attempts to make art a source of material wealth, which it is not, and undermines its spiritual qualities (see *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, Mikhail Lifshitz, Critics Group Series No. 7 (translated by Ralph Winn; New York 1938), pp. 78-80).

Goldsworthy struggles to overcome this by going out of his way, whether consciously or not, to create art that literally can't be owned, but only experienced—and even at that, only partially—through the medium of photographs or film. To own a book or even an original print of his photographs is not to own a Goldsworthy, and the pieces that find themselves displayed in galleries are patently dry and lifeless out of their natural context.

One can admire the unique bargain Goldsworthy has struck. He has found a way to pursue his largely solitary and ephemeral researches, while still functioning within an art world of markets and commissions. But there is a deep loneliness at the heart of the work, and the solution that he has found applies only for himself. It allows little way forward for other artists, because it does not challenge the art world so much as circumvent it. The most progressive aspect of his work is the use of film, which can reach beyond the monopoly of galleries and exhibits; in Goldsworthy's case, ironically, this does not compromise what he is doing, the way a digital reproduction of a painting does.

There is a similar dead end to Goldsworthy's observations of change in nature, since they ultimately remain simplistic and only obliquely communicate insight into the processes of human social existence. For example, by grinding stone into red powder that he then dissolves into liquid, Goldsworthy attempts to challenge our idea of stability by showing that the elements that we think of as most permanent are in fact continuously subject to pressure and likely to change. It is possible to extrapolate from this that our seemingly permanent social and economic structures are likewise developing through the unity and conflict of opposites. However, by never referring to these structures directly, the analogy remains tenuous.

Nevertheless, the serious endeavor of an artist to explore the nature of change and the role played by intentional human activity in this process has merit, despite its limitations. There is a pleasure in the beauty and balance of many of Goldsworthy's pieces, as well as something enjoyable about their contradictions. Having experienced the elemental exploration they offer, one looks with a sharpened eye at our environment and the contradictory interplay between the individual, nature and society.

*(*An exhibition of Goldsworthy's work, *Mountain to Coast, Autumn into Winter, Japan 1987*, is currently on tour in the US and will be on view at the Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, Calif., from October 4, 2003 to January 4, 2004, and at the Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, Tenn., from January 30 to April 24, 2004)

For a listing of theatres showing *Rivers and Tides*, visit www.riversandtides.org

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