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Penultimate draft

Aesthetic Aspects of Unauthorised Environmental Interventions

Isis Brook

Abstract

Through a number of examples of environmental interventions this paper makes a claim that the unauthorised nature of some interventions is an integral part of their aesthetic quality. This does not mean that all such interventions have these qualities only that the regulation of what can be done where and by whom could endanger the production of a rich seam of aesthetic experience, such as edginess and whimsy, and the aesthetic engagement of artists and the general public with places.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is the role of authority or rather authorisation in the production, presentation and reception of environmental art and other interventions. In discussion of these questions I am going to use a number of very different examples of interventions in environments with an aesthetic dimension; some consciously artistic others more a response to the environment outside of the conscious creation of an artwork or event.

The prevailing zeitgeist is very much toward the ecologically and socially responsible and community responsive control of environmental interventions. This can be seen in the exacting procedures through which artists now go in working with multiple agencies and authorities to ensure that their works follow the rules, regulations, and strictures imposed by such agencies whether through ecological impact assessments or engagement with local groups and public consultation. I do not want to be interpreted as suggesting that this is a bad thing; that such concerns herald a dark time for artistic

freedom. It is not that I want to defend artistic or other freedoms in the face of authoritarian control but more to suggest that what is of value in environmental aesthetic interventions is sometimes to do with individual or group engagements with environments that are *necessarily* outside of those controlling frameworks.

The role of authorisation

What artists or members of the public are allowed to do or are prohibited from doing is a broad topic and of course there are very real questions to do with public safety, ecological damage, cultural and historical sensitivity, and good taste that need consideration. In this short paper I am leaving a lot of these questions to common sense and just focusing on the nature of the unauthorised or prohibited environmental intervention to see if there are sometimes aesthetic qualities that could be lost if all such interventions had to come within the remit of processes of authorisation. What those qualities could be I will examine by means of examples.

Unauthorised interventions in the urban context

I want to begin with practices in an urban context as it is here that we have some developed work on the interplay of the unauthorised action and the response of attempts to regulate or control the intervention into the urban streetscape. The obvious example here is graffiti where surfaces are utilised for some kind of personal or group expression. Although the definition of graffiti does not require it this is usually thought of as resiliently unauthorised. The practise of “getting up”, where youths attempt to get their signature tag in as many places or as inaccessible places as possible, relies on this being not allowed for a large part of its meaning. However, this is not the only drive behind graffiti. When questioned about some graffiti practices the respondents involved have presented their work as beautifying a grey and ugly city, and them having a duty to continue (Castleman, 1998).

Graffiti has also found a place in enhancing the characteristic sense of a city, for example where a repeated motif such as the black dummy in Barcelona is taken up by those marketing the city to give their publicity a lively street feel. (Manco, 2004:50).

The use of stencil graffiti has become more commonplace and this allows for a greater range of styles and pictorial possibilities. The stencil means that a signature tag can be replaced by an image with no loss of speed. Speed is essential if you are doing something illegal. The illegal nature of the work is what gives it an edge and it is this edge that makes some work effective in reflecting and commenting on the urban context in which it is found. The edginess of graffiti has a quality and value not missed by the world of advertising as they try to emulate its gritty street feel in their typefaces and logos. An extreme version of this is where advertising campaigns use licensed graffiti such as Sony's stencilled cartoon kid using a playstation. The response to this was to deface the images with short or debunking responses such as overwriting with "Stop hawking big business on our neighbourhood walls" or "corporate vandals not welcome" (Rowan, 2006:14). Paying to use the walls did not protect the company from a bad press because the medium and the message jarred as inauthentic, not just to those engaged in graffiti, but with the public as well. An important component of the aesthetic of graffiti is that it operates outside of the laws about what can go up in the urban streetscape.

[Figure 1, caption– Stencil graffiti in Preston artist unknown (Isis Brook)]



An example from the place I live is a piece of stencilled graffiti that has been appearing here and there around Preston (UK). Figure 1. is on Friargate Brow a part of the street that is 'the wrong side' of the ring road where the rents are lower and thus is home to a diverse range of independent shops. Here second hand bookshops jostle with tattoo artists and florists. In contrast to the main high street there are no chain stores and the street has a

lively feel with a sense of the established traditional retailers and the new and experimental shoulder to shoulder. Also on Friargate Brow there is a Local Council and European Regional development Fund sponsored art work: two identical pieces of sculpture called 'Landscape with Trees' by Claire Bigger. (See figure 2.) The tree sculptures were added in the slot detailed on the improvement plans as "public art" via a competition. The council's Development Officer for Art in Public Places tells me that they have already moved away from that type of process for one that involved more public engagement and a more integrated approach (Harris, 2006). (The public engagement that took place for Friargate Brow revealed that the shop owners would have liked some trees!)

[Figure 2. - Tree Sculpture by Claire Bigger (Isis Brook)]



Taking the graffiti and the sculpture together it is tempting to see the stencil graffiti as having a form and placement that fits with the sense of the street - it becomes an integral part of the patina of the street - whereas the sculpture has all the trappings of a council project to 'invest in' an area it sees as run down and requiring a lift. It is tacked on like a gaudy decoration on a rather threadbare but richly textured and interesting dress.

To juxtapose a piece of unauthorised graffiti and a sanctioned piece of sculpture where, in this instance, a case can be

made for one fitting and the other not, does not constitute an argument for the unauthorised. It does present a case that the authorised is sometimes aesthetically

poor either because it lacks aesthetic quality as an object or because it neither fits with nor confronts in some interesting way its environment, but so could the unauthorised. The process of authorisation is not a guarantee, but it could function as some kind of safeguard. However, it is a safeguard that has to remove the very edginess that constitutes a central aesthetic quality of the unauthorised.

My second urban example is the transformation of space brought about by skateboarders. Here a small area is taken over and its hardscaping is brought alive with skateboarders seeing and utilising the steps, slopes, handrails and ledges etc. as different types of affordances from those planned. Again there is an edginess brought to the space through the inherent danger of the speed and hard surfaces and the way the practice is seen as threatening to 'normal' users and thus banned. There are a number of features to this kind of skateboard use that I will describe in order to reveal its aesthetic quality.

1. There is the obvious thrill of practicing a physical skill, of trying new things and getting better and engaging with space bodily.
2. Using something designed for one purpose for another involves a creative vision and flexible imagination, the skateboarder is redefining objects and spaces with their actions.
3. The public nature of the spaces brings out a performative element; there is an audience. That audience might enjoy the spectacle or they might scowl and complain but either way they turn the action into performance.
4. The transformation of space fulfils the desire to make a statement about those places.

In a further elaboration of the fourth point the skateboarder could see themselves as adding colour and excitement to complete the space and they could also be making a political point about the nature of public space. Iain Borden develops this point in his book where he says:

Skateboarding shows that pre-existing uses of space are not the only possible ones, that architecture can instead be productive of things, and consumed by activities, which are not explicitly commodified. (Borden, 2001:247).

What the skateboarders in a city square show is that space is not being left for the market to define as always a shopping opportunity or a display of corporate power. The public is more than its buying power and its desires are not as easily satisfied or malleable.

The aesthetic components 2-4 rely on the transformation of public space. The purpose built skate parks that attempt to displace skateboarding from public spaces are often empty as they lack the counter-cultural elements that help to define the practice. And as empty spaces even component 1. is missing because there is no-one else there to teach you or suggest things to try and ways to improve if the officianados are all at the mall not at the skatepark.

The adjustments that are made to architectural design and the hazards introduced to detract from skateability are done in response to public concerns and local government fears, but it also speaks to a resistance to allowing the unregulated transformation of spaces. The skatepark as a response to the problem of danger speaks to a lack of understanding about the complex aesthetic qualities of a practice that is about an engaged bodily reinterpretation of city spaces, not about moving along on a board on wheels.

The urban as a theatre in which visions and meanings are contested is a familiar picture. Interventions here are often about resistance of one kind or another; whether it is a homeless person creating a garden on a disused plot or a ten year old spray painting on train carriages. What emerges from the interventions elaborated in the examples is that the intervention is often a response to place and an inventive utilising of space for expression and meanings other than those intended by an authority of one kind or another. There is a resistance to the given and a drive to transform. When the space transformed is in an urban context shaped by planners, architects or just tradition the resistance or rejection can be seen as a resistance to an idea of how the world should

be. When the intervention is in a more natural setting the nature of the interventions and our responses to them also change but some common themes could emerge in an analysis of their aesthetic qualities.

Unauthorised interventions in natural and quasi natural settings

My first example in these more natural settings is not from the world of ecoartists but just a simple small scale intervention by a member of the public. The place is a narrow stretch of woodland that runs along one bank of the Hamble river in the South of England. It is a short stretch of scrubby woodland that runs from a large housing estate and playing fields to a small hamlet with a pub by the river. It is used as a social amenity for dog walking and provides a walk of about 2 miles. Many of the trees are overgrown hazel coppice but there are some larger trees. About halfway on the customary route through this wood there is an aesthetic intervention that transforms a natural feature of a tree that suggests a kind of door into something even more suggestive of a door through the addition of a miniature doorknob. This slight intervention introduces an element of whimsy into the experience of the woodland. Above the 'door' there has also been added a small rustic sign that reads "Home Sweet Home". One might feel that this pushes the whimsical into the kitsch. However, both are minimally intrusive, easily overlooked and seem pleasing additions to this particular woodland. (See figure 3.) They suggest an engagement with the place that, whilst humorous, is also one of endearment and a sharing of that endearment. Indeed there has been a sharing taking place because in response to this intervention others, probably small children, have, over time, left small plastic or soft toy animals on an adjacent tree stump that now form a little collection.

[Figure 3– Woodland Door, artist unknown (Isis Brook)]



What are we to make of this? One could say that this kind of whimsical distraction prevents others from experiencing the wood for the specific qualities it has as woodland. It denotes an engagement with nature, but an engagement of the wrong sort. However, I want to build a case for saying that this kind of intervention in this kind of place is fine. Obviously one doesn't want too many and they need to be in the right kind of place, but this particular intervention has aesthetic qualities that enhance this particular woodland. How so? Primarily it works by enhancing something that is there already so that others can see what the person intervening saw. In this case the door like qualities of an incidental shape formed by natural processes. The intervention does

not draw attention only to itself, it draws attention to something about the natural form. Because the underlying motif is one of fairies or elves rather than something to enhance the understanding of why a tree forms such shapes we might think the intervention is misplaced, it relates to a cultural idea not a natural process. However, this is a small strip of woodland in a built up area that is used by dog walkers and young families and it is they, not ecologically informed artists with an educative agenda, who are engaging with the place. That the engagement takes the form it does is something to celebrate; it has a charm that speaks to an imaginative engagement that understands the wood as peopled, not by fairies and elves, but by families enjoying a gentle walk. It punctuates the passage through space and marks the deepest part of the wood, the furthest point from both ends. It also punctuates the passage through time from playing fields and childhood, when such things were easily imagined, to the restorative drink and the more social engagement of the pub. An interesting aesthetic dimension of this is that one could imagine a 'better' tableau, one where the animals were not a mismatched collection of what could be seen as the detritus of popular culture with their harsh plastic colours but a beautifully crafted set of figures in subtle woodland shades. However, this would have the opposite effect. This would suggest a controlling imagination that was imposing a vision and the vision itself would then become trite or hackneyed. As it stands, in its unaffected jumble, it speaks to a semi-spontaneous engagement and a joyful playing with the place. I need to reiterate that this is not ancient woodland or pristine nature, there such an intervention would seem out of place, but here there is a fit between the things done and the nature of the place.

These kinds of interventions are also transitory, they last for longer than a placing of leaves on water *a la* Goldsworthy, thus allowing some interplay and elaboration between different anonymous respondents, but they don't last for years as is fitting with their spontaneous humorous engagement. Also, and importantly, they could easily be removed by another as *their* own intervention. Interestingly this has not happened yet, although recently in this particular case a handwritten notice has appeared by the door with the title "eviction notice". Here someone perhaps unhappy with the

proliferation of toys has, rather than remove them, joined in the game with the addition of irony. The humour of their intervention relies on the juxtaposition of formal language and usually tragic situations with this playful context. This does add the question 'should these things be here?' And this, far from undermining the overall intervention, actually strengthens and enriches its aesthetic force.

The English Lake District is an area renowned for landscapes that range from the pastoral to the sublime. Of all the lakes Wastwater is probably the furthest at the sublime end of the scale. Lying at the foot of some of the highest fells it has an often still surface reflecting the dark sheer cliffs. The dark and brooding nature of the place is strongly evident even on a sunny summer's day. Apart from its obvious appeal to the Romantics it has drawn comment more recently with the banning of windsurfers from this lake on aesthetic grounds. Emily Brady has explained, "the bright colours of the windsurfers' sails would be visually intrusive and incongruous with the aesthetic unity of the landscape" (Brady 1998:98). I am in agreement with her about this but am less sure what to make of another environmental intervention at Wastwater.

[Figure 4. Wastwater, Cumbria, UK (Ajo198)]



This is an unusual case as it is not something that the casual observer or even the intrepid investigator can see. Deep beneath the surface of this dark lake is a gnome

garden complete with picket fence. This has been created over time by divers leaving the gnomes at a very deep point in the lake. Wastwater is particularly deep the sheer cliffs extend about 50 metres before it begins to flatten out. There are currently in the region of 40-50 gnomes. To fully understand the meaning of this phenomenon I suspect one would need to know a lot more about diving culture but what is clear is that this is no mean feat. As a newspaper report on this phenomenon explains:

It is hard to exaggerate the hostility of the environment at the depth where the main gnome cluster is to be found. Although the water is exceptionally clear, the light rapidly falls off as the divers go deeper, and they rely on their torches. The water is cold, around 4C, and the air coming out of the divers' cylinders, for reasons to do with the laws of thermodynamics, can be much colder. Sometimes divers are breathing air at a Siberian -32C. In these circumstances, it is easy for the divers' regulators, the devices that feed them air, to freeze up (Meek, 2005).

The gnome garden is certainly prohibited, Wastwater is part of the Lake District National Park and leaving anything is prohibited. Also there have been concerns about the gnome garden attracting less experienced divers to go to depths they are not able to deal with and there have been three deaths possibly associated with this. For this reason the Police's North West Regional Underwater Search Unit were sent down to remove the original gnomes which they duly did. The response from the diving fraternity has been to recreate the gnome garden at a depth of 52 meters just beyond the depth to which the police are allowed to dive.

As we can't see the gnome garden it has to be treated as a performance or conceptual piece if it is treated as environmental art at all, it is certainly an intended environmental intervention. What qualities does it have? It has daring, the sense of pitting oneself against the elements, or stretching one's bodily/psychological capacities to their limit. It is forbidden and thus carries an added sense of defiance. Why gnomes? Perhaps it is the totally alien and despised nature of these denizens of the suburban garden that makes their presence in Wastwater absurd and that absurdity mirrors the act of placing them there. That sense of the absurd relies on Wastwater's own dark and forbidding sense of place, a sense of place that the gnome garden could potentially undermine.

That is, it only works, in the sense of being an interesting and powerful environmental intervention, if the absurd juxtaposition remains. In this case I think it does. The extremity of the different realms being brought together and the element of danger that remains almost defies our understanding and the inherent humour of the situation remains spiced with a tangible sense of the tragic. Here the element of spontaneous engagement is absent in the individual act of placing a gnome, that takes some planning, but the growth and development of the phenomenon has a strangely organic feel. There is a sense of pitting oneself against a hostile environment and symbolically taming it, but only in a way that is evident to other initiates.

The invisibility of the gnome garden is a factor here that I want to now bring out by comparing it briefly with another form of intervention that has been creating a problem in national parks in the UK.

This problem is the unauthorised setting up of memorials to loved ones who have died. This has reached such a point on Ben Nevis in Scotland that the John Muir Trust and Nevis Partnership have set up a 'site of contemplation' at the foot of Ben Nevis to accommodate this apparent need and as an eventual place to which the 50 or so plaques and cairns, currently dotted around the mountain, can be moved. Although this has created a controversy there is a growing acceptance that when the character of a place is wild and rugged it is not appropriate to 'litter' it with these artefacts. (Of course if the intervention was placed a long time ago it tends to be incorporated into what we understand as the character of the place and can become a focus of local legend.) There are a lot of issues that could be explored here but I mention it just for the interesting juxtaposition of two areas of wild character where unauthorised interventions by the public have taken place. My claim is that the gnome garden does not necessarily interfere with the aesthetic character experienced by other visitors to Wastwater whereas the monuments on Ben Nevis do. The walker is no longer free to have their experience shaped by the rugged terrain and spectacular views across wild country, but is reminded, at various intervals, of people who have died or rather the needs of the friends/relatives of those who have died.

Common themes

From these examples of the woodland door, the gnome garden the skateboarders, and some graffiti art it is possible to extract some common themes in the unauthorised interventions. They all involve some kind of engagement with the environment where a change is brought about in a semi-spontaneous and imaginative way. The skateboarder does not construct the slope or ridge necessary to carry out desired action X they find a space that has possibilities and then explore and push what the space affords and their own abilities. Here engagement is two way with an obvious interplay between the space and the skater as they transform each other. The performative element is emphasised when the skaters can be seen to transform the nature of the space; the city square is changed by the action at least for the time it lasts.

With both skateboarding and graffiti there is an element of speed that is a necessary by-product of their unauthorised nature. This introduces an element of danger but also camaraderie. The actors come together and then disperse and what happens may exhibit positive aesthetic qualities or it may not it depends on the feel of the action, how it comes together in the moment. There is something of the improvisational about these interventions and some of those qualities identified in improvisation are evident here (Hamilton, 2000). The actors are alive in the moment and something about the moment means that great performance is possible.

The gnome garden example can be added to the others as an intervention that shares in the element of danger. Here it is even greater and comes from the physical environment rather than its unauthorised nature. All three have the aesthetic quality of edginess. I have looked in a number of dictionaries and only the *Collins* seems to come close to how this term is currently being used with its definition 3 “innovative, or at the cutting edge, with the concomitant qualities of intensity and excitement”. But there seems to be something more specific to this quality when people talk of this film or that comedy routine being edgy: it is more to do with provoking in the audience a sense of

uneasiness with not quite knowing how to take something. With the skateboarders and graffiti artists the edginess comes in with their operating outside of what law abiding citizens do and thus the specific actions or images used can critique mainstream culture.

There is nothing edgy about the woodland door, this is an intervention that escapes mainstream criticism because it is in a place that no one has an agenda for, it doesn't fly in the face of some other meaning. What it shares is that same semi-spontaneous engagement. A place sparks the imagination and the response is some minimal transformation which others then relate to and join in. In this instance what is created is a good example of the whimsical (the gnome garden has something of this as well). The whimsical is, in my view, an under investigated aesthetic category. It treads a delicate line that is always in danger of crossing over to the kitsch, but its saving affect is its lightness of touch. There is with whimsy not humour exactly but a lightening of the spirits, the kind of thing that raises a smile and nothing more.

In our engagements with natural and semi-natural environments whimsy has a difficult place. We speak of the beautiful or the sublime and believe nature to be something to be approached with care and treated with great seriousness. This is, of course, so much better than a lack of care or trivial exploitation, but our engagement with nature has many moods and the whimsical is one of them and one that is an easy way in for many people.

Let me bring the idea of authorised environmental art and the whimsical together through the kind of public engagement that has been happening with Anthony Gormley's work 'Another Place'.

This work is 100 life sized cast-iron figures placed at various depths along three kilometres of Crosby Beach. This is a beach in an industrial setting near Liverpool and the figures all look out to the horizon. The figures and especially their repetition carry a sense of everyman and their position in the rising waters can carry different meanings, but do speak to our relationship as ultimately naked before nature. The tides and weather means that the work is always changing and strikes different moods at

different times. In the summer on warm days the sculptures have been found in various stages and forms of dress as local people and visitors engage with these forms and make them their own by adding seaweed skirts or items of real clothing. At one time, before an important match, some were kitted out in the local football team's strip.

We could despair at the weakening of a moving piece of work but on the other hand there is a delightful sense of engagement here. We could read this as the message of the artist not getting through, but we could also read this as a form of empowerment. In some weathers, on some days this is what the figures are about, they are taken up into the human realm and made part of the family.

[Figure 5– Figure from Gormley's 'Another Place' at Crosby Beach (Kirsteen)]



The interplay between sculpture and place is rounded off by this engagement of the people of this place and the dominant form of engagement here is whimsical. Gormley's work has an undoubted majesty that could be undermined by permanent transformation, but this is impermanent play and expression of other meanings of beaches and the seaside in the British psyche and, I think, all the better for it.

These kinds of things cannot be planned or engineered; their improvisational nature is what gives them a specific kind of quality. We can't call it the quality of the unauthorised as this would assume that all such interventions are on a par. This is not the case, but sometimes something just happens and it works, and part of why it works, why it generates the responses it does, even if that is just a wry smile, is because it was obviously not planned to be that way. Someone has played with the form and created something different.

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