

Art and the Environment: Reimagining Nature and Culture Through the Works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Andy Goldsworthy, and Olafur Eliasson

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Abstract

This paper examines the work of Christo and Jean-Claude, Andy Goldsworthy, and Olafur Eliasson, focusing on their contributions to environmental art. Christo and Jean-Claude "The Gates" transformed Central Park with vibrant saffron-colored doors, mixing synthetic and natural materials to capture the public and boost the local economy. Andy Goldsworthy uses natural materials to criticize the separation of nature from culture and emphasize nature's ephemeral beauty. Olafur Eliasson's installations provide viewers with environmental information, creating insight and interaction. Together, these artists redefine the relationship between art and nature, and promote a participatory understanding of environmental interaction.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, from Bulgaria and France, are known as environmental artists because they use installation sites and material

recycling practices. Their artworks and projects, including The Gates, are aimed at modeling the energy and flow of people walking through the city by incorporating the ground lines of New York.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude created The Gates as an installation art in Central Park, New York City. The Gates took about 26 years from conception to final installation, designed as an artificial representation of nature. The installation had saffron-colored vinyl gates displayed for 16 days in February 2005. This artwork also influenced the permission process for future larger-scale public artworks in New York City. For instance, projects like New York City Waterfalls by Olafur Eliasson and Even Horizon by Anthony Gormley.’

The project aimed to uplift the public spirit and highlight the connection between Central Park and its urban surroundings, blurring the line between artificial and natural elements. Christo and Jeanne Claude showed how art can frame and enhance the beauty of nature. The Gates transformed Central Park into a special site.

Despite the large scale of The Gates, it did not disrupt the public’s use of the park, allowing visitors to continue their daily activities. Remarkably, the project boosted economic activity without any corporate sponsorship. It benefited local hotels, restaurants, museums, and other nearby businesses, while also creating jobs for workers in steel production, assembly, transportation, and installation. In total, The Gates contributed an impressive \$254 million to the local economy.

There were both positive and negative views on The Gates. Before their unveiling, there were comments that the money could have been

spent on more valuable things. However, after the installation, people thought it created a different but beautiful perspective throughout the park. Some appreciated the joyful and vivid color and the movement of the work, while others compared it to a car wash or shower curtains.

A key element of Central Park, highlighted by The Gates, is its ability to provide access to nature in the heart of the city. The installation not only emphasized the park’s unrealized entrances but also symbolically uplifted visitors’ spirits through the creation of portal-like structures. The Gates was meant to be experienced through time and movement, offering a temporary escape from the rigid urban grid. Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work deeply engaged with environmental themes, inviting reflection on human awareness of time’s passage and its impact on the natural world.



Andy Goldsworthy

The debate surrounding nature and culture has sparked discussions across fields such as

environmental art, cultural theory, anthropology, and sociology. Experts have sought to unify these concepts, blending the definitions of nature and culture into a singular idea. Andy Goldsworthy's work actively contributes to this ongoing dialogue, exploring the intersection between the two.

Andy Goldsworthy uses the perspective of how art interacts with the environment to challenge the conventional separation between nature and culture. He looks at the environmental arts that emphasize representation, leading to another type of art: performative environmental art. This art shows changes in society since the 1960s. His art reflects how people's view of nature has shifted from being passive to more interactive.

His perspective on nature interconnects with culture through an idea: materialist ecology. This is a contemporary idea that challenges traditional views by highlighting a participatory approach to materials. Instead of viewing and thinking about it, he works with materials and actively participates in the creation process. By doing this, he diminishes the long-lasting dichotomy between nature and culture. His artworks allow the viewers to think about their role in the environment, proving that humans are not just observers but fundamental elements of the natural landscape. This overturns the idea that humans are separate from nature, showing that human activity is something complicated and connected with natural processes.

Moreover, Goldsworthy's theory is clear in his process of creation, involving utilizing natural forces, like gravity or water flow. These kinds of forces are not controlled but rather followed and respected, making the art combine his intent and material characteristics. This method also reflects a relationship where humans and non-humans

collaborate to make a piece of artwork, leading to creation that is philosophically profound in ecological interconnectedness.

Traditionally, landscape arts presented nature from a human perspective, emphasizing the realistic and abstract parts as something separate from ourselves. This method treated landscapes as just an object for human viewing, signifying a clear distinction and dominance over the natural world. Critic Tim Ingold challenges this view by offering that landscapes are dynamic environments containing continuous interaction of human and non-human elements. This changing idea allowed a shift from landscape to environment. This allowed the term environment to encompass an extensive range of natural phenomena, continuing beyond panoramic scenery to include components such as weather patterns, natural cycles, and ecosystems. Furthermore, this reevaluation of the human role within nature highlights an interactive relationship rather than a passive one.

In this context, Andy Goldsworthy's works stand out as a deep exploration of the environment. His art extends further through defining the environment: it engages with environmental elements interactively, utilizing natural materials and forces as essential parts of his creative process. His technique highlights the ever-changing nature of environments, challenging the viewers to see the environment as a participant in the art-making process rather than just a setting. His works, therefore, do more than beautify: they act as dialogues with the environment, allowing people to see them as part of a larger ecological web.

Goldsworthy's approach to art is distinguished by his unique way of interacting directly with the landscape. He uses a variety of natural materials-

stones, leaves, ice, snow, and branches—for sculptures and installations. His process requires a huge effort and delicate precision, showing a close relationship with the materials that require both physical work and a deliberative process.

One of his notable works, *Tree Fall* shows his use of organic materials to create pieces that contain natural patterns. For this piece, he coated the interior of a tree trunk with clay, which later cracked as it dried out. This piece reflects themes of growth and constraint, containment and release, illustrating his focus on the processes that drive natural change. Additionally, in *Icicle Star*, he arranges icicles that are broken by natural forces into a star-like pattern on a frozen surface. This work captures the fleeting moment, highlighting the finite nature of the material and the environment. This piece transforms into a structured form through his intervention, emphasizing the transient beauty of winter's creations.

Olafur Eliasson

Olafur Eliasson, born in 1967 in Copenhagen, Denmark, is an influential figure in the modern-day environmental art field. His philosophy in art nurtures the idea that artwork has the power to be a catalyst for social change, emphasizing sustainability and the interconnectedness of human beings and nature. Through his large-scale installations and incorporation of natural elements, Eliasson creates immersive experiences that inspire audiences to rethink their connection with the environment and their responsibilities within it.

Eliasson's installation "The Weather Project"

exemplifies his innovative method of reshaping the environment to evoke environmental attention. Installed inside the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, this massive-scale installation presents a semi-round disc made of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps, which together create an artificial, glowing sun. The atmosphere inside the hall is in addition converted by way of excellent mist produced with the aid of humidifiers, diffusing the light and blurring the limits among herbal and synthetic environments. Additionally, a mirror attached to the ceiling amplifies the sun's and the hall's perceived dimensions, deepening the immersive experience. Through this piece, Eliasson delves into the themes of climate and weather, encouraging audiences to contemplate their understanding of these natural phenomena and their effects on everyday life. The communal gathering of spectators beneath the installed sun represents humanity's collective experience of climate and weather, highlighting the interconnections among individuals as they confront environmental challenges.

Another work by Eliasson, "Ice Watch," reveals his commitment to environmental activism and raising awareness. For this installation, Eliasson transported massive blocks of ice from a Greenland fjord and organized them in a clock formation in public areas. As the ice gradually melted, it provided a striking visual illustration of the outcomes of climate change, encouraging viewers to encounter the physical evidence of global warming firsthand. The clock-like

arrangement of the ice underscored the urgency of climate change, serving as a reminder that the time to do so is finite. By bringing the melting ice into the city's surroundings, Eliasson efficiently increased awareness among diverse audiences, highlighting the concrete repercussions of climate change in both a compelling and relatable manner.

In "Riverbed," Eliasson again merges the lines between nature and art, transforming the gallery area into a space that resembles a riverbed. Visitors walk through a setting packed with rocks and flowing water, resulting in an experience that is both tactile and thoughtful. This installation invites visitors to immerse themselves directly with the environment, evoking emotions of curiosity, wonder, and interconnectedness. By putting a natural landscape into an artificial and man-made area, Eliasson allows audiences to think about their roles in the broader environment and the influence they put in.

Through his works, Eliasson creates experiences that blend artistic innovation with environmental awareness, inviting audiences to engage with nature and its pressing challenges. His work redefines the relationship between artwork and nature, fostering an interactive understanding of environmental connections. By incorporating natural elements and large-scale installations, his artwork becomes a platform for social change, underscoring the importance of sustainability and the ties between humanity and nature.



Conclusion

In short, the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Andy Goldsworthy and Olafur Eliasson break boundaries of environmental art by challenging the differences between nature and culture. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "The Gates" showed us how art can transform public spaces, forcing us to engage with the city. Goldsworthy's organic sculptures highlight the fluid and participatory relationship between human activity and the natural process. Eliasson's installations bring climate change into the public sphere and ask us to think about our place in the natural world. Together these artists ask us to move beyond looking, to contemplate how art can give us new perspectives on nature and our place in it. Their work is a powerful reminder of the connection between art, environmental awareness and social responsibility.

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