

The centre and the edge in the work of Andy Goldsworthy

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Introduction

This essay is a reflexion on Andy Goldsworthy's work and his positioning between the centre and the margin in and by the art market. By art market I understand the ensemble of deals, grants, purchases, commissions, etc. between artists and various private and governmental art institutions and establishments, providing the funds that cover the costs of artistic production and artists' living costs, while also establishing a financial value and status of art works. The dichotomy margin-centre is being used as a lens to approach the dimension of power dynamics with its traditional tensions between hegemonic and alternative discourses, dominant and dominated, fixed and mobile – in Goldsworthy's work and in the context in which he operates. My choice to analyse Andy Goldsworthy's work from this perspective is particularly his lack of explicit intention to belong to either the centre or the margin, while instead seeming entirely committed to his art praxis, which nonetheless, positions him in various points at various stages.

Born in Cheshire, England and settled in rural Scotland, Andy Goldsworthy has become an iconic sculptor and his art works are represented by many important museums in the world (Skissernas Museum, 2017; Galerie Lelong & Co, 2016). Initially fragile installations, improvised from local materials found on the beach in the years of his art studies, Goldsworthy's recent work tends to be rather monumental and to spread over a network of sites to which the artist returns to journey and to create. His art practice and his sculptures challenge the fixity of concepts and systems, while stubbornly attempting to grasp and tune in with the cycles of nature, in a sustained experimentation aiming to understand land's energy, growth and decay, from thorn to glacier to its fundamental elements.

Approach

In reading the oeuvre and the artistic praxis of an artist who humbly explicates his work as an attempt to "just trying to make sense of the world" (Riedelsheimer, 2017) through a body of sculptures that simultaneously convey harmony and tension, this essay embraces a speculative, exploratory spirit, borrowing Goldsworthy's experimentalism as a means of seeking new meaning in his work, within the context of the neo-liberal art market. Can Goldsworthy's work be seen as critical art? The essay draws on a number of sources documenting Goldsworthy's work and concludes by proposing new directions for its interpretation as critical art in relation to the dichotomy centre - margin, based on theories set forth by Saskia Sassen, bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe.

System, centre and margin

If the art market is a subsystem of a larger market that operates according to capitalist modes of production and distribution, drawing on Saskia Sassen's theory (2015) about the current phase of the larger system as predatory capitalism, our times are defined by increasing inequalities between rich and poor, high

skilled financial professionals and unqualified service providers, with the rich / high professionals occupying the 'centre' stage from where they manage local and global flows of resources, generating an accelerating marginalisation of lower-skilled labour, which finds itself dispossessed and dislocated, pushed towards the 'edges' of the system. The centre and edges that the author defines are no geographic or territorial dimensions but are rather determined in relation to the concentration of power to purchase and distribute resources that certain actors have or have not. The traditional nation states and borders still exist, but their meaning has radically diluted for today's (foreign) direct investors and entrepreneurs; while the centres are usually located in highly urbanised, global cities, this is not a condition for them to function as such. It is relevant to note that land is one of the main commodities that new investors are focussed on and that investors, interconnected through webs of financial schemas that enable them to acquire patches of land over countries and continents, as Sassen points out, do not need to have a direct cultural connection to the properties they purchase.

In her writings about black feminism activism, hooks (1990) sees the margin as a place one can choose to be at, for the double perspective that it offers and the freedom to see things one way or another, a freedom that is not available when situated at the centre. Hooks defines the margin as a 'site for radical possibility, a site of resistance' (p.341) and even more – 'a site of creativity and power' (p. 343). Another way to approach the dichotomy centre-margin is proposed by Spivak in her book *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1995). In her vision, margin / marginality is merely a 'buzzword', a new category constructed by the 'centre' as a strategy to secure its superiority, similar to the narratives that invented the Third World and the Orient, as means to conceive of its own 'identification through separation' (p. 55-56) in the tradition of the 'aggregative apparatus of Euro-American university education' which produces 'weapons for the play of power/knowledge' (p. 53).

While Goldsworthy doesn't have an explicit discourse about the centre-margin dichotomy, his works are often created at edges of urban sites, in the countryside, on shores of rivers and seas, at the North Pole, suggesting a preference for working away from crowded locations. As a white, successful, British male, from feminist and postcolonial perspectives he would be seen rather at the 'centre'. His work is recurrently revisiting the shape of the seed, the egg, the cone, snakes and rivers, beehives, while underlining the tension and osmosis between empty and full, solid and fragile, growth and decay. Matless and Revill (1995) read his work as masculine, by its often penetrative, vertical characteristics, as opposed to decorative, understood as feminine, an approach that Goldsworthy explicitly avoids - according to the authors.

Land as commodity versus land as medium

Over the past decades land has gained primacy over cheap labour as investment area, Sassen has shown (2015). For investors, she notes, land has the significance of a commodity - for its agricultural potential, the prime resources under its surface or simply as an asset. Sassen's investors may be – other than by a contract of lease or property – entirely disconnected from the culture of the lands they own.

Goldsworthy's practice of land art is in strong contrast with this vision, his tactics having an intimate, personal touch resembling the farming work of pre-agrarian times, performed with bare hands, his own body acting as shaping element in the process, persistently aiming to touch the 'heart of it', its energy.

The early, ephemeral works of Goldsworthy in which each tiny element and its changes according to weather and light circumstances matter, underlines rather than disturbs the harmony of the site. The resulted works, at their peak moment and through their collapse, as well as the artists' daily experimentations with the elements produce a strong visual and procedural contrast with industrial modes of exploiting land.



Figure 1 ~ 'Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, August 1984'; reproduced in Friedman and Goldsworthy, *Hand to earth*, p. 24.

Source ¹

While the impact that privatisation, migration, intensive farming and a growing presence of sheep has in shaping the landscape is central to his understanding of land and to conceiving some of his larger works (such as building walls and installations in deserted houses and churches in South of France) – Goldsworthy is not explicitly preoccupied with constructing a political discourse on these matters.

Ephemeral versus permanent, fragile versus monumental

In the actual phase of the capitalist system, Sassen argues, we witness on one side or more precisely at the core of it, high professionals managing the distribution of resources, labour, consumption as well as the narratives that optimise and justify this mode of operation; on the other side, at the edges of the system, are the marginalized, unskilled workers that feed the need for cheap service of the elite, 'expelled' by the latter (2015). For hooks (1990) the margin is a site of resistance, of freedom and creativity. For Spivak (1993) it is a 'buzzword', a merely constructed category.

While he chooses to settle in Penpont in Scotland, a region that resembles his area of origin in North Britain, the artist travels on invitation to a number of sites in Great Britain, France and the United States (Goldsworthy, Baker, Thompson, 2000) where he creates works that respond to the local landscape.

¹ Available from

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/147447409500200404?journalCode=cgia#articleCitationDownloadContainer>

In the artist's own words, when he travels he sees difference, when he settles, he sees change (Matless and Revill, 1995, p. 427)– and change, as growth and decay - is what he is interested in.

If 'lines' for a system can signify borders, barbed wires that delimit property, signs that separate rich from poor, one culture from another, modern architecture that controls the flow of water, the way Goldsworthy works with lines is the opposite: he looks for them in the landscape – such as in the shapes of rivers and trees – and by adding specific elements – petals, leaves, stones, twigs – he reinforces their visual presence without reversing or interrupting their natural course. At most, he underlines them by means of playful and fragile interventions, in acts that emanate care, concern, sympathy, complicity and a humble subordination. Subordination in the sense that he does not push his sculptures to necessary success, on the contrary: he builds in challenging weather conditions and with precarious means (almost exclusively with what is available at the site) and humbly witnesses his sculptures repeatedly as they collapse under the effect of unpredictable changes of material, spatial and weather conditions. His practice of repeating the process and learning to work with and not against the elements, is a practice of understanding nature by cooperating and not by competing with it. If a line can be understood as a limit, as separation, as signal, it can also represent flow, and imply transformation, movement, change.

A specific dimension of Goldsworthy's work is performativity. While the installations he makes have an aesthetic dimension by themselves, the act of making them is just as telling as the sculptures. For documenting this aspect, Goldsworthy employs photography and film, inspired by Brancusi's strategies to 'talk' about sculpture.

From avant-garde to fame

Andy Goldsworthy has become famous. In a register of power as defined by centres and edges, this success grants him an influential position. He is invited and paid to create by institutions that occupy key positions on the global market, his work shows and sells in established art galleries, funding bodies and heritage sites commission his interventions with substantial budgets. Yet, his home base remains the Scottish village of Penpont, from where he regularly travels to a series of places to make new art works. As Matless and Revill accurately warn in their essay based on talks with the artist, his popularity might be double-edged (1995, p. 444). A dark future scenario sees Penpont becoming "Goldsworthy country", the authors speculate, an outcome that would contradict the artists vision embodied in numerous works (such as the walls) that question private property by implying that humans belong to land rather than the other way around.

Critical art

For the purpose of this essay, two definitions of critical art will be introduced. On one side, according to Mouffe (2007), while most artists became co-opted in the capitalist system, by operating as its designers and consumers, the system, by showcasing itself as lacking contradiction, creates a false impression

of a 'smooth' system. In this context, she defines critical art as art that occupies the public realm and attempts to challenge this smooth image that capitalism promotes of itself, revealing its hidden, 'repressive character'. The idea of society giving the illusion of being in harmony is also found back in the work of Byung-Chul Han (2017), who claims that due to the fact that there is no time for divergent views to be discussed, what results is an 'illusion of harmony' which has the root. Adding to Han's claim, I believe that next to the apparent lack of time for tackling dissent and perhaps, we witness an increasing incapacity or unwillingness to accept as potentially valid, ideas other than ours. A second definition of critical art is given by Rancière (2010, p.142) as a form of art that creates awareness about the estrangement of relationships and the alienation produced by capitalism, and, consequently triggers a commitment to the transformation of the system.

Goldsworthy: critical or embracing the system?

From the very beginning, the artist's work had at its core the human relationship with land and nature, a reason for which Common Ground, a London based art collective invited him for a residency in the capital (Common Ground, 1986). This topic could not be more actual today, as the problematic of devastating human impact on the planet gains urgency in most scientific and cultural debates. What has Goldsworthy's work to contribute to public knowledge and awareness, and does his art fit in this debate?

At a first reading, by his works of art - especially his early ephemeral work - made from raw materials he finds in nature, usually 'dead' materials (dead leaves, twigs, thorns, river stones, ice and snow) – Goldsworthy's work embodies a praxis of relating to nature with humility, explicitly stating "the land doesn't need me, I need the land" (Riedelsheimer, 2001). Standing out as in striking contrast with the ways capitalism exploits forests and other natural recourses, his practice can be read as a practice of resistance. Without systematically and explicitly opposing or criticizing industrial means of relating to nature, his work in itself is a one-man revolution, resonating with Mahatma Gandhi's motto "Be the change you want to see in the world" and with Masanobu Fukuoka's proposal to embrace natural agriculture (2009).

Another aspect that differentiates his work from industrial modes of production is scale. If capitalism aims at sheer size as a hallmark of progress, Goldsworthy's practice, like a ritual, a practice of meditation that concludes with offering his world to nature and let it become 'one of its constituting layers', is an implicit advocacy of human scale construction, approach that would potentially cause less destructive impact on the environment, as compared to industrial scale agriculture, invasive technologization and urbanisation.

Working bare hands at the Northern pole to realise a snow sculpture exposes the artist's flesh and bone to the harsh weather of the location whose material he uses, much in the way farmers used to work the land by hand in pre-agrarian times. Chasing the early daylight at sunrise, making a sculpture that must be completed by the time the sun reaches the particular position that will contribute at making the work

touch its peak, requires repeated experiments for understanding the material, the time needed for a specific construction to be made, the way in which the sunlight affects it, etc. This way of working is in strong contrast with making digital art using a desk computer, seated on a comfortable chair with tea or coffee at hand reach, a work that can sequentially reach myriads of viewers on the internet by just one click of a mouse.

Accessing Goldsworthy's work for viewing it can require long walks in remote areas, a different way to 'consume' art than browsing the internet for online galleries - which resembles online shopping, as companies like Amazon dream of. In addition to Goldsworthy's original work (the sculptures themselves), photographs, books and films documenting his work are available in galleries, movie houses and online, much like commodities that Amazon would like the entire cultural production to become (McGurl, 2016). This is one of the contradictions in Goldsworthy's work. By this kind of procedures, the artist on one side allows his work to be accessible to a larger audience (as free or affordable material) while on the other side, he feeds on and feeds the capitalist, technologized strata of the art market.

Additional thoughts on marginality

If for Sassen and hooks the notions of centre and margin are rather fixed in the sense that one can be situated either at one side or the other, we see that in the art market, the dynamics of this positioning can be, like Goldsworthy's work, rather erratic. From a poor student to a marginal artist to a rejected avant-gardist, an artist can be projected straight into the centre of the market by being curated, invited to expose or commissioned by financially or authoritatively powerful institutions and patrons. That there is an algorithmic rationality to this dynamic, as precise as that of the financial systems that govern the market of capital and commodities, might be just as possible as the option that success is attributed according to organic network dynamics (resembling to communities of social insects), as Hayles (2006) suggests. While the latter option is not an invitation to leave aside the attempts to find rational behaviour in the art market, it aims to emphasise the significance of chance, if not chaos, in everything that makes our world, a chance that artists like John Cage and Andy Goldsworthy made an explicit part of their work. While employing a dose of order in osmosis with a dose of chaos, it is the specific proportion order/chaos which defines the efficacy of their work.

What remains partially obscured is the degree to which these artists borrowed inspiration from Eastern paradigms of thinking and of creating, for so far as their encounters with Eastern cultures has been documented. While this aspect requires access to personal accounts and archives, research in this direction could generate new tools for undoing the centre-margin (analogue with the West-East) dichotomy. I speculate that there is a substantial exploitation of knowledge extracted from eastern traditions by western artists and thinkers, and that the degree to which this flux has been made explicit varies from one author to another. Shedding more light on such transfers might reveal the fluid and 'common' nature of knowledge, rather than its fixity as claimed by patronizing, proprietary systems. This possibility is aligned with Spivak's proposition on reading marginality.

Conclusion

Goldsworthy work can be read as an attempt to understand the system, as a reflection on it mainly practised ‘outside’. His sculptures and their documentation are traces of the artist trying to understand nature and the land by dwelling into them, lingering with them, by explicitly being one with them. The artist justifies his daily artistic practice by his need to feel rooted - an analogy that brings to mind the image of a tree, its roots spreading underneath the surface layer of land into its depths, mirroring its branches in the air. While both roots and branches usually spread outwardly towards what one could call the edges of the tree, they depart while staying essentially connected to the trunk and keeping it centred. This analogy might poorly fit the image of our economic system as we know it, fragmented by neo-industrial, invisible wireless networks; but seen through the eyes of a computer engineer, these techno-financial systems, even in their cloud version, often rest on tree-like structured software and hardware assemblages.

The margin that Goldsworthy chooses is one of a vast land, of serenity, of bird chirping, raw weather, rivers and butterflies. Despite the lack of an explicit discourse about the actual political system, Goldsworthy – willingly or unknowingly – establishes a practice that is in sharp contrast with the fashions that destructive capitalism dictates from its centres. In the artist’s own words, ‘art is that way of taking another way of looking at things than the normal one’ (Riedelsheimer, 2017) where normal today seems to be the hegemonic, neo-liberal, commercial way.

A possible way to read Andy Goldsworthy’s work is as an invitation to imagine tree-scale business models. If this reading sounds just as crazy as walking through a green hedge instead of taking the sidewalk along it², it is a recurring proposal in works of Fukuyama, Ghandi, Tagore, to name only a few people that embraced localism and de-growth as both ideologies and practices. Moreover, through the eyes of a tree, there is no conflict between its centre and its margins.

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² As Goldsworthy’s does in his recent performances, documented in *Leaning into the Wind* (Riedelsheimer, 2017) – trailer available from <http://www.leaningintothewind.com>

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