



Time and Nature: What Is Meant By Preservation?

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In the most benign of ways, nature preserves present a thesis about the meaning of time. In the cordoning off of Yosemite National Park, or the Betasso Preserve, which borders the city of Boulder, CO, one can discern the relationship between the ideas of God, truth, human free will and the natural world. What connects these themes, throughout the history of Western philosophy, is a conception of time that understands it to be at once eternal and ephemeral. Insofar as this is true of nature preserves, The Art Guy's "Urban Preserve of Boulder," as an apparently simple reversal of the phenomenon, short circuits the standard chain of concepts that makes temporality comprehensible. In so doing, the work raises questions about the meaning of nature, freedom and the wisdom of preservation.

The first thing to consider when analyzing a nature preserve is preservation itself. As a philosophical concept, preservation has an early association with a political ideal. The goal of constitution writing, for example, is to find those laws that can be preserved within a society. This means laws that transcend the ever-changing character of the temporal world, laws that can 'stand the test of time'. Traditionally, such laws are grounded in an idea of unchanging nature, or the logical or divine structure that orders nature - meaning nature as a whole but also human nature in particular. The stability of Plato's Kallipolis, in the *Republic*, therefore, is found in its rulers' knowledge of the unchanging forms. In Augustine, this same framework is adapted to propose that the temporal law of the earthly city is justified only insofar as it corresponds to the eternal law of God. This means that preservation, as a value, already assumes the metaphysical distinction between the permanent and impermanent.

Though Augustine carries the Platonic model of justice through preservation into the Christian tradition, he complicates it by placing it in the context of free will. Free will exists in opposition to an otherwise pre-ordained, divinely ordered nature; it grants autonomy from nature as divine idea. Because freedom is unique to human beings, the

human is separated from the rest of nature, as well as all other animals, who behave almost mechanistically, according to instinct.

The correct exercise of free will nevertheless involves affirming the will of God and the laws of physics: freedom is only used well when it is bound to necessity, when it wills to preserve what is necessary (as Stoic wisdom emphasized). Human freedom opens the possibility of a more intimate relationship with the divine and the divine idea that structures nature – a relationship called knowledge – but human freedom is also the sole source of evil and suffering in the world, for God cannot produce anything evil Himself. According to Augustine – as well as Aquinas, Descartes and the common understanding of the problem – humans, then, are uniquely positioned: we are above nature insofar as we are capable of this free relationship to God, but we are also cut off from nature's unwavering goodness, its divine, logical ordination, and are therefore also capable of falling below nature, insofar as we can produce unnatural, monstrous evil. By the same token that we are god-like, we are also monsters. Whenever we do not preserve the natural law, we desecrate it.

Our relation to nature has for centuries, then, involved double-dealing: we are in one moment disdainful, in the next, reverent. It is no doubt as both gods and monsters that we establish laws to protect mountains and marshes and animal populations. In the context of today's environmental policy, this logic is explicit. Take the practice of carbon "offsetting," for example; we protect swaths of land from human interference so as to justify continued pollution in the developed world.

Our confused relationship to nature is ultimately born of the metaphysical conception of time. From the beginning of ancient Greek thought, philosophy has labored to explain how temporality can seem at once infinite and finite; how it can be at once a continuous flow, and divided into moments. We take time to be as permanent and immutable as the speed of light, and also as impermanent and fleeting as lightning.

It is often the case that a philosophical question lands more cleanly, and loses little of its import, when it is delivered in the form of a joke. In 2009, in a work called "Then and Now," The Art Guys told a great joke about time. The piece consists of two sheets of plywood, one standing next to the other, with words sawed out of them. On the first, in the pile of sawdust, as well as fragments of the letters that were sawed out.

"Then and Now" 2009, plywood
"Music for Sideburns" 1988, amplified sideburns
"Morning Routine" 2005, still from video

Like many works by The Art Guys, "Then and Now" has an amusing, general Warholian charm, spiked with an arts-and-crafts flavor. It is straightforwardly conceptual and appears direct and easily digestible; its message is simple: that was then, this is now, get over it!

But the humor goes deeper. There they both are, side by side: Then and Now. They exist simultaneously, which seems to contradict the very idea they otherwise express. Are these plywood sheets – and by this token the past and the present themselves – simultaneous or successive? Is time eternal or fleeting? Beyond the playful paradox of the written statements, the piles of sawdust and letter fragments tell another story. Separated by about a foot, the piles bring to mind Vivian Mercier's description of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: "a play in which nothing happens, twice."

One of the key philosophical insights of the twentieth century, known as the "critique of presence," responds to the contradiction between permanence and impermanence in our conception of time. The thought, announced by Martin Heidegger but elaborated upon by Jacques Derrida, is that time itself is understood to be eternal only through the reification of a present moment. And, moreover, the present moment itself is discerned within the manifold flow of time solely by the presence of something *spatially* present, and something of human *value*.

The eternal is that which is taken to be present through the succession of temporal moments. For Plato this is the realm of ideas; for Descartes it is God and mathematics; for Kant, pure reason. Because the passing of time does not alter this transcendental present, whatever its articulation, it is deemed atemporal. But this atemporality nevertheless relies on the *passing* of time, insofar as its permanence requires persistence *through* change. Thus the eternal and atemporal are impossible because they must necessarily remain in relation to time as succession: the eternal relies on the fleeting for its eternality (and visa-versa).

What is the origin of this discord between permanence and impermanence at the heart of time? In order for either the succession or the eternality of time to be recognized, some counter-movement must be picked out and distinguished within the flux of passing time. How this counter-movement is recognized is necessarily grounded in human care and value. Give me a fixed point and I will move the world, said Archimedes. And so it is with time: it both moves and stands still because of the injunction of human value within its flow.

Take, for example, the temporality, or trajectory, of a flower; it moves in time only because it *blooms*; it is only by identifying the flower as a *whole* with the *moment* of



blooming that the flower can be made sense of temporally. Yet this definition of the flower is dependent not on the flower itself, but instead on our own interpretation of it, our understanding of nature as defined by beauty and reproduction. It is a spatial image elected by human value to serve as the eternal present that governs the passing of time. The repetition of an image over the changing being is the eternality of its presence. Nature, in this understanding of temporality, is only ever grasped metaphorically. The image does not capture time in itself, but rather only as it is valuable to the human. With regard to time or nature as they exist independently of human beings, the repetition of the image is literally nothing – perhaps nothing that happens twice. The attempt to preserve nature – or a plot of urban territory for that matter – is only the attempt to preserve an image. Godot does not walk this path, only Pozzo and Lucky.

An example of how an image of nature supersedes nature itself can be found in the history of ecology. In the late 19th century, Sir Arthur Tansley, the botanist, popular psychologist and founder of ecology, coined the term "ecosystem" to describe the web of connections among plant species, and among vegetable life, animal life and their elemental conditions. Collecting data on the dynamics of natural environments, Tansley concluded, in a series of works from the early 20th century, that these ecotopoi maintained stability and balance through self-regulation; that they operated like machines, or systems.

In a multi-year study in the 1970s, however, a team of scientists led by George Van Dyne reviewed the case for balance in ecosystems, meticulously collecting data on the ebb and flow of an environmental site, and their findings contradicted the foundational idea of ecology, that nature operates like a system. In Van Dyne's study, nature did not appear balanced and stable, but fragile and chaotic. The subsequent dust up of Tansley's own research revealed that he had either grossly manipulated the data, or collected it very selectively. Perhaps allowing a bias grounded in his psychological theory to influence his interpretation of the scientific data, he put the image of stable balance ahead of the empirical evidence. As long as empiricism presupposes the metaphysical conception of time, this phenomenon of assuming one's conclusion may be unavoidable.

So what the hell is time, then? What is nature? If it is not an ordered series of 'now's governed by an eternal law, then what? Certain

schools of twentieth century philosophy argue that temporality is, in essence, nothing more than the interplay of order and interruption – interruptions that cannot be anticipated or systematized. Time, in this sense, is always only of the event. It is non-successive repetition, or simply difference itself. The articulation of such a temporality may be formally impossible. Hume famously spoke of it as "constant conjunction"; Heidegger offered the idea of "the held moment"; Derrida, perhaps riffing on Hume, describes the "dissimulated conjunction" of time and space.

If we cannot make a distinction between the eternal and the impermanent, we have lost God, and with Him, ordered nature. This predicament returns us to the question of freedom: if time is not a succession of moments governed by a law, then the entire notion of causality must be rethought, and with it, freedom. To undo the metaphysical hierarchy of God, nature, humans, and animals, one must also jigger with the ideas of freedom and necessity. What if freedom is distributed not solely to humans but also to other animals? And even to gravitational fields, and electricity, and rocks themselves? What if all of nature and its parts are not governed by necessity in its traditional sense, but rather spring more fundamentally from an original freedom, or freedoms, which operate in ways we have yet to imagine? This would be one conclusion of the critique of both anthropocentrism and logocentrism.

"Then and Now" is just one of many works in which The Art Guys take time itself as the material of their art. In a 1988 interpretation of a 'held moment' the duo dined at a Denny's restaurant for a full 24 hours. The year prior they placed microphones to their cheeks in a performance titled "Music for Sideburns." On what time scale, and to what sort of being, would the sound of sideburns growing be audible, or present itself as music? More recently, they have followed these questions of scale and perspective in works such as "Razor" (2004) and "Mourning Routine" (2004/2008). The first of these captures an electric razor as it dances across a table, buzzing with what looks like autonomous animation. The second is the story of a bathroom routine told from the perspective of a manual razor, giving us a jarring perspective of Jack's chin, neck and, especially, nostrils.

The Art Guys' time-based projects are paired with works that similarly play with the common understanding of nature. When the Art

"A Real Estate" 2006, various media on paper
"Funny Tree" 2011, clown nose on tree
"The Art Guys Marry A Plant" 2009, wedding event

Guys placed a clown nose on a tree ("Funny Tree," 2011), and then one on an architectural plywood structure ("Funny Space," 2012) the gestures indicated that both the social and the natural were terms in a conceptual play, mask-wearing characters in the drama of philosophy. Their work flouts both the ordered idea of nature, and of society. In "A Real Estate" (2006), a piece that will horrify those invested in the idea of natural ecosystems, the two drew up a proposal to buy and bulldoze an empty lot, replant it entirely with invasive species, and then put the land back on the market. This imagined human intervention into nature is especially poignant because it takes place in the context of property rights. Going back to at least Kant, property rights have been understood as a site of special harmony between natural and human law. The confused intermingling of human and natural law is also at stake in one of their more infamous recent works, "The Art Guys Marry a Plant" (2009), which is exactly as it sounds. Marriage, another locus where natural and human laws apparently converge, appears absurd when it is applied to an actual object of nature. By re-crossing the wires of nature and society, the audience discovers what a tangle they were to begin with.

The upshot of all the above is that what is being preserved in a nature preserve is nothing more than an idea. The object of such preserves is to keep the dream of metaphysics alive. Properly speaking then, natural preserves are, in most senses, social preserves.

"The Urban Preserve of Boulder" is of course a social preserve, too, albeit one that makes more manifest how tangled the concepts implied in preservation are. With the Urban Preserve, we are called to see ourselves as part of the natural world, but also to question the wisdom of the idea of preserving nature. We protest, upon seeing the "Urban Preserve": you cannot preserve me – I'm free! And perhaps we are then prompted to ask whether freedom is restricted only to us.

And it is not insignificant that the "Urban Preserve" in fact exists primarily on the Internet, or that the bulk of the "Preserve's" ephemera is presented "virtually." Most things exist primarily on the Internet today; most things approach us through virtual mediation. In one sense, the Internet's ability to *make present* anything in the world is the culmination of the metaphysics of time and nature. The image overtakes the flux of the visual field; the social is transformed into the natural, and visa-versa, but only insofar as both are represented by some final algorithm, the new Word of God; the uniqueness of each event is glossed over as each is entered as a data point into a voluminous log. The bond between the eternal and impermanent is forged. As more of life migrates to the Internet, we increasingly enter a permanent present. In the Internet ideal, the past colonizes the



right: site, looking east/southeast, photo collected on Wednesday, September 8, 2016, 11:24 AM CT, Google Earth street view screen capture

future, as each moment, preserved forever, can always be returned to, and the future is thus increasingly determined by a past made present again and again. An eternal presence for every fleeting pass, a world in which every interruption can be accounted for within the order, such is the dream of any preserve.

The point of the "Urban Preserve" is not merely that we humans are a part of nature. It is also that nature may not be what we think it is and that preservation according to its metaphysical definition may be impossible. By highlighting the transient character of human development and society, the "Urban Preserve" also questions nature's mode of temporality, asking what in nature we precisely hope to preserve in the first place. Birds and mountains are lovely, and worthy of respect and aid. But our attempt to conserve nature in itself, according to any image, whether we are motivated by humanitarianism or a belief in naturalistic holism, in the end only serves to further entrench a set of ideas about ourselves.

