

## Patient Radicalism: Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels

Forty-five miles from the last road sign in the salt flats of north-west Utah sit four large concrete tubes: Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels. According to the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), the artwork consists of these 18 foot long "tunnels" which are 9 feet in diameter and are situated in an open X configuration. The CLUI website is where one wishing to visit Sun Tunnels would get their directions.<sup>i</sup>

From Interstate 80, take the exit for the Bonneville Salt Flats, and head north. After a mile and a half, where the road makes a right angle turn to the right, bear left onto Leppy Pass Road (usually marked with a sign for the "TL Bar Ranch"). After two miles you will reach the pass. Stay on the main road, which bears left at the pass. Note the odometer here, and follow this road. It traverses the eastern side of Pilot Peak, passes the TL Bar Ranch, and continues north. Forty miles from the pass you will come to a dirt road heading east at a right angle. Turn right here. The tunnels are visible to the east, a few miles away. After two miles there will be a road heading south. Take a right on this road. Bear left in a few hundred yards and you will shortly arrive at Sun Tunnels.

At the Sun Tunnels, there is no "info. Center," no marker and no indication of authorship or ownership. In fact, the tunnels themselves are easy to miss in the vast landscape since a thin clay-salt dust quickly coats everything and anyone in the area. Essentially, one must be looking for the Sun Tunnels in order to find them.

This paper will attempt to show how Nancy Holt produces a photographic experience for the viewer of Sun Tunnels that is an attempt to reconcile the objectivity of being outside an image (seeing) and at the center of an experience (being). I will argue that this is a radical action achieved through mobilizing split subjectivity, attention, and

radical temporality in assertion of forms of power that are not predicated on capitalist values.

Sun Tunnels differs from other earthworks such as Spiral Jetty and Lighting Field because the ownership of the land is not an arts institution or a public trust. The work is on private property. A visitor to Sun Tunnels is technically trespassing: treading on another's ground. Aside from this condition being the foundation of our nation, it is also according to Luce Irigaray, the condition of all women's writing. Women's use of masculine language is possible because women are "not simply reabsorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere.*"<sup>ii</sup> (Emphasis mine.) A visitor to Sun Tunnels is at once a guest and an intruder, at split subject. Holt forces the viewer to begin already on someone else's ground, her own. The location of Sun Tunnels sets the stage in the "elsewhere" where Holt is the author of the terms.

In 1973 Nancy Holt began work on Sun Tunnels in an area of Utah actually called "the barren desert." Feature-less and ugly in comparison to the region's surrounding riches of natural beauty, the right location for Holt was defined by its very fruitless and useless-ness. Holt was looking for a location that would allow the act of framing to surpass the view, thereby redefining its value. Through each tunnel, one sees a shifting but ever-perfect (on the solstice this means "perfectly" centered) image of the sun, the sky, and the land. Because of its barrenness, this particular land held no value to anyone before it was enclosed. "Space after all is only valuable once it has been divided."<sup>iii</sup> The act of valuing began with Holt choosing and purchasing the parcels around and at Sun Tunnels. Her attention *creates* value by setting up an economy that defies capitalistic

commodification. Whether or not the appraised monetary value of the land went up as a result of the work is irrelevant. In this case, attention has become the currency. Holt seemed to be interested in the land because of its purported valueless-ness. In her 2011 artist talk at the Graham foundation she said that the locals never went there. To recognize worth in a barren desert – worth that is not based on the land's ability to produce or reproduce is a feminist way of valuing.

Additionally, making attention the currency puts power in vision – not just visibility. In art and in cultural studies, seeing has been associated with power and coded as male. Holt's tunnels focus on vision as a contextual phenomenon. The visitors to the artwork do not look at it (which would be replicating the subject/object convention) they journey to it and then look *through it*. The subject is thus defined by where she is located, not merely *that* she sees or is seen. This subtle shift exposes power as flexible and contextual, as opposed to fundamental or inherent.

In the late afternoon on June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013 the cars begin to arrive. We have already been out there one night and half the day. We are wind-beaten and sunburned, covered in dust and comfortable. It feels like our turf. There were two camper-trailers here before us. They are likely better equipped for the terrain than our little camp of two tents and a sedan, but we made it. The incoming cars are announced from a great distance by billowy clouds of dust that move across the desert floor and toward us. They come slowly at first. One every twenty minutes or half hour but by early evening they come more rapidly, from all sides, since there is no discernable road here.

The pressure is mounting. A man has set up a chair five feet from the end of the eastern tunnel. He wanders through the growing crowd with his huge camera. The chair he has placed seems to demarcate the “it” spot: the most desirable position for catching the event the moment it “happens.” The atmosphere is a little strained as adults, children and dogs play in and around the tunnels idly while waiting. We return to our camp for drinks and a blanket. The temperature is beginning to drop.

Back at the tunnels someone makes an announcement, “Raise your hands if this is your first solstice.” The crowd is gathered in a close huddle around and behind the man’s chair. Everyone has a camera. The announcement-maker continues, “Well it happens very quickly, we only have a few minutes so get in, get your picture and get out of the way for the next person.” I am by the south tunnel, away from the crowd, in a “worse” position to see “it.” Though I brought cameras on this trip, a borrowed 35mm camera and my super 8 camera- I took the pictures earlier in the day and have left the devices at camp. Now I am more interested in watching the crowd and watching the sunset from the tunnel with my eyes. I try to count the bodies mobbed together around the man with the large camera, but it is difficult to get an accurate count. My guess is that about one hundred people have arrived over the last a few hours.

The sun is setting. A sort of line of picture taking where one person runs to the front snaps their photo then rejoins the mob has begun. The mob, punctuated by the rapid fire of devices held up over the heads of the others is engaged an un-yielding effort to catch “the” shot. Two young women run into the east tunnel to pose a perfectly centered kiss while their friend snaps a photo. They do this again so the friend must not have

gotten it right. There is a general grumbling whenever someone takes more than their fare share of the time or space in front of the sunset.

Fifteen feet from this scramble to get “the picture,” I settle into the south tunnel and watch the sun go down. It is off-center from where I am sitting, which is why I can sit, undisturbed and alone. I lay down, held by the curve of the circle that frames my view. To my left, behind the east tunnel, the commotion continues until it is dark.

The mob scene depressed me. The desperate scramble for the “spoils” from expedition – to take away the perfect picture- made me think that perhaps the imperialistic urge to commodify, reduce and conquer is an inevitability. Moreover, I lamented our inability to *be* in an experience unmediated by the screen or lens or contest to leave with “something.” I thought that the mob was reproducing the scarcity myth that capitalism relies on, while sunsets are not an ownable nor limited commodity. But perhaps my reaction was superficial. Upon closer investigation, I believe Holt’s sculpture both accommodates and ignores the urge to commodify it.

Sun Tunnels allows for the endless ability to produce “the image.” Infinitely already well framed by the edge of the concrete tubes, every picture of sun tunnels is beautiful, while they absurdly all look somewhat alike. The limitless proliferation of so many “spoils” from this place- would seem to remove the value gained by its remoteness. Aside from the pictures as proof of having “been there,” the sunset images of Sun Tunnels seem like a harmless a tourist compulsion rendered impotent because of the *functioning* of the work.

When I wrote to Holt, informing her of my research and planned trip, she sent back crudely scanned maps with hand drawn and highlighted sections directing me to other sites on her property that were, as she said, “works of art in their own right.” Along with the scanned map, Holt’s assistant included descriptors of each site, its date purchased and the number of acres of each parcel.

If these sites, which were extremely difficult to distinguish from the land surrounding them, are “works of art in their own right” according to Holt, then the purpose and function of the tunnels becomes more apparent. Like her Missoula Ranch Locators of 1972, the sculptures are tools aiding in the production of the work. The work itself is the viewing or in the case of sun tunnels, the simultaneous experience of seeing and being.

With Sun Tunnels Holt created a photographic experience. In her Graham Foundation talk she described the work as, “A simple structure that creates a questioning of perception... these structures to contain us makes us experience flattened views.”<sup>iv</sup> Each viewer, whether standing inside or looking through the tunnel is making flattened views of the space against the border of the tunnel. Like a camera, the viewer is directing their focus through a cylinder and making a picture – which makes the addition of a camera to the experience both redundant and instinctual. The word “views” as in beliefs, reminds us that one’s wisdom is local, particularized and spatial- or geographic- based on where they are standing; literally a view point. The piece creates an inability to have the object- the tunnels- or even a photo of or through them, without the context: the landscape they are engulfed by and the momentary section of it that they frame.

Holt began her Graham Foundation talk with the photographs she took of Western graveyards. She marveled at the delineated spaces of the graves, calling them “containment in the vastness.” “I also wanted a structure to relate my body to... [something] I could walk into and be contained by.” To admit that there is no thing outside of its context is the paradox of subjectivity while it is also the beginning of personal agency. The defining of a boundary even as that boundary is understood as a falsehood, or flexible is also essential to the notion of a self. This occurs with Holt’s Sun Tunnels because you enter them.

Sun Tunnels is a non-autonomous artwork that is neither ephemeral nor relational. Holt creates an open vessel, a tool, a viewer, without doing away with ultimate authorship and power derived not from domination but from vision. (Point of view.) An eye TAKES IN light. A camera TAKES IN LIGHT. In becoming the camera, Holt, or each viewer, experiences vision- experiences enclosure of the vast desert in a scale that makes it digestible, dividable, ownable. The power lies in the opening. The “open eye” of a cylinder that a body may enter in order to feel the power of a frame from the inside allows one to experience how you own the sun, the vastness, and the infinite. Perhaps the photos that visitors take are reminders of that feeling.

But let us not get carried away with abstractions. Holt’s use of space is specific and local. This desert is not “the” desert, but this particular parcel, a “look here.” I was not sure if I was seeing correctly the various other sites she owns partially because her direct and sparse instructions were comically vague. Once you’re out there, the vastness, harshness seems to be playing a joke on you. The tunnels sit so small, inconsequential

against the scene they occupy. But at least they are delineations, anchors. This effect, only really felt through experiencing the site in person, adds to the pleasure of identifying with the tunnels. For they are set up to function just like we do out there: to be small contained entities in the vastness, taking in views.

Many of Holt's works in addition to Sun Tunnels use structures to direct attention as if drawing on the sky. *Annual Ring* (1981) and *30 Below* (1979) visually encircle points of her interest, celestial, geographic and temporal. But it was not until 1998 with *Up & Under*, in Nokia, Finland that Holt "finally got my desire to do a lot of tunnels."<sup>v</sup> I believe that her fascination with tunnels has to do with the feeling of containment she spoke of in relation to the Western graveyard photographs. In the form of the tunnel, Holt was able to distill the experience of a subject: I am contained while I perceive.

"I place undue weight on sight." She also said in the Graham talk. She was always shooting pictures and film of the process while working. "And it was hard," she went on, because she was trying to "be an objective eye at the camera but at the same time, your heart is in your work." The difficulty she spoke of would be bridged by the photographic experience she set up. *Subjective* eyes based on recognition of point of view, eliminate the need to separate vision from experience. To reconcile seeing and being one only need occupy the instrument. Sun Tunnels allowed Holt to become the apparatus without losing the self - to become the camera with a heart.

"You can walk on stars, so to speak, when you walk in the tunnels."<sup>vi</sup> Each tunnel has smaller cutouts along the cylinders in accordance with four constellations: Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn. Pointing to these celestial groups underlines that their

recognizability- what distinguishes this set of stars from that one, is that we have named them, grouped them together. We have provided a context, and a limit. Astronomy is the science that most closely mirrors this task of reconciling the poetic with the mathematic.

Holt's Sun Tunnels could be considered Minimalist according to Katheryn Hixson's definition of minimalism as the moment "that privileged the phenomenological relationship between the sensate body of the viewer and the pared-down barely aesthetic art object."<sup>vii</sup> But Hixson goes onto describe minimalism's effort toward non-referential self-contained objects. Holt's simplified geometry – limited for years to the circle and the cylinder - and systematic process can be categorized as minimalist with a lower case m, But in referring to the stars, (for example) Holt's concern is more elemental, more akin to building objects like tools, for navigation, for perception. Like maps and cameras rather than objects intended for the purpose of drawing awareness to the viewer's body. In this way, her objects care less about the viewer ("they do not wait for you") because they have a job to do, a date to keep- and will align with the stars or sun at their appointed time with or without being seen. This event-time makes the viewers into onlookers, the object activates the viewer and mobilizes them to make a trip and not vice versa where the object needs the viewer to activate its meaning.

Through Sun Tunnels, Holt asserts precisely what minimalist art strives (but inevitably failed) to remove: the subjectivity of the artist. When most of her colleagues were aiming for neutral, Holt never tried to erase the origin of her vision; in fact it becomes the work's specific center. The feminism (and I use Angela Davis's definition<sup>viii</sup>) in Holt's work comes not from a wholesale renunciation of capitalist power structures,

but in claiming ownership through specificity. In trying to achieve a neutral, the Minimalist artist hovers as close to an Objective role as possible. To presume that this is desirable or possible only serves to reinforcing the power of the dominant forces. In contrast to many of her male contemporaries, (and friends), Holt did not try to extract or “purify” perception from the body, her specific body. She used her own height as a unit of measure – once again utilizing her frame of reference as a tool.

Holt’s process was often more architectural than sculptural. Later, she took on the concerns of an engineer such as water piping, drainage, landfill repurposing. etc. In this light, her reference to the stars seems more akin to their usage historically as navigational tools and markers of time than to an expression of mysticism or spiritualism. Working much like a construction foreman, most of the labor of building Sun Tunnels was directed rather than performed by Holt. Nevertheless, she was never distant or removed from the process. For example, she had physicists and astronomers consult on the project in order to calculate the correct placement of the tubes. Yet she delayed the completion of the work for a whole year in order to *see for herself* the sun rise and set on the solstice. The “undue weight” she claims to put on sight is actually her trust in the validity of the subjective experience. She needed to know firsthand that the math, her systems and her own perception were aligned. This example of slowness and delay can also be seen as a kind of resistance to the market pressure of what contemporary theorist Bojana Kunst calls “projective temporality.”

This kind of time “projects its own completion as the ultimate horizon of work. Yet even while this “projective temporality” opens many possibilities, it does not produce

the differences among them: at the end what always arises is a completion of already projected possibilities.”<sup>ix</sup> A lived experience differs from a projected future in that it cannot be calculated. In Holt’s choice to “see for herself” she was asserting the value of her lived experience, even if it lost her time, money, or other market assets.

The tunnels are made of concrete, which is sand, hardened earth. The geological time she thus calls into focus sets the value beyond the relationship the object may or may have when the viewer is present. The stars and the sun will return year after year regardless of spectator attendance. The object is watching the stars, or framing the sunset. It is doing the same activity we are, setting up a lateral relationship to the viewer. Called viewer, we have the same function as the concrete viewers- without hierarchy except that Holt’s chosen views and chosen sites have a claim to permanence- especially because they are privately owned and protected by the undesirable (in the eyes of a developer) nature of the surrounding land. Geological time is so much slower than our time that it seems to be a scale in which “nothing happens.” But just as with Tony Conrad’s *Yellow Movies*, (1973) the tunnels as timekeepers de-center the human scale of time. Extreme slowness is a kind of patient radicalism, refusing the pressure of the new.

One of my favorite professors who specializes in 1970’s minimalist sculpture cannot understand my interest in Sun Tunnels. He said they seem “hokey.” Granted, he ventured, he has not been there. I see how there is a “hokiness” to all the pictures that look the same of the site. But this seems to be a joke on the uninitiated. The reproductions cannot include 45 miles down a bumpy dirt road, incessant winds and

scorching heat and the thin film of salt clay lining your mouth and nostrils, or the effect this has on the picture taker's body.

Still I think there is more to his argument. The ordinariness of these elemental constituent parts –clay, the sun, the circle, are what may be described as hokey, mainstream, universal. Carl Andre and Donald Judd may have worn the overalls of the common people, but their work rarely risked the association of simple pleasures. Artists who ascribe to avant-gardism may love to be boring but they do not want to run the risk of being benign. Nancy Holt does not seem to mind. Perhaps the ordinary can be a form of resistance more radical – and with more political charge-than the “cutting edge” since it will inevitably fold back into the capitalist pressure of the *next*. The joy of a sunset is a repeatable pleasure, valuable but worthless. By bringing our attention into to such a simple experience Nancy Holt is staking her patient radical claim.

<sup>i</sup> “Sun Tunnels,” last accessed August 12, 2013, <http://clui.org/ludb/site/sun-tunnels>.

<sup>ii</sup> Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.

**iii** Read, Alan. *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 160.

<sup>iv</sup> Holt, Nancy. *Mining the Wasteland: Land Art's Legacy in Contemporary Art and Politics* presented at the Graham Foundation on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Hixson, Kathryn. ” The Subject Is the Object: Legacies of *Minimalism*,” *New Art Examiner* (May, 1991)

<sup>viii</sup> Davis, Angela. Speaking at the University of Chicago, May 11, 2013. Paraphrased from my notes from this lecture: Davis describes feminism as a way of questioning prodding and thinking that must explode whatever category it examines.

<sup>ix</sup> Kunst, Bojana. "Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making." *Maska, Performing Arts Journal* No. 149–150, vol. XXVII (Autumn 2012)