
A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2000

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ABSTRACT

Robert Smithson is considered by many to be one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. His wife, Nancy Holt, is also an accomplished artist in her own right. While Smithson's career was illustrious, it was also brief, for he was killed in a plane crash in 1973 just 14 years after first showing his work. Nancy Holt's career did not begin until 1968, some five years after her marriage to Smithson, but it is still continuing today. Very little information exists about their relationship, artistically speaking, and this intrigued me. Specifically, I wanted to know if Robert Smithson had influenced Nancy Holt's work, or if Holt had influenced Smithson's work. Did they ever collaborate? Were these collaborations elaborate, or more importantly, had they been documented? Was this question of potential influence even a fair one to ask of this artistic couple? What my research sought to uncover is a link, a connection, that existed artistically between these two artists during Smithson's lifetime. By examining the works that were produced by Holt between the years of 1969-1973 (the years in which Holt was producing art while Smithson was
still alive) and examining some of the works that were produced by Smithson during this same time period, I hoped to unearth the nature of this couple's artistic relationship.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This undertaking would not have been possible without the unconditional, unwavering, enthusiastic support of my trusted adviser, Dr. Robert Arnold.
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Major Field: Art Education
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I began this research project in earnest, not fully understanding the demands that this undertaking would entail or even how ambitious my research proposal was. When I first thought about going to graduate school I began to think about possible thesis topics, or at least a possible area of interest. I had majored in art history and minored in women's studies as an undergraduate and thought that a topic that would involve some combination of these two disciplines would at the very least hold my interest. Unfortunately, unearthing such a topic proved rather difficult and time consuming. I hadn't found my topic even as thesis and graduation deadlines loomed, and I ultimately had to extend my stay in the graduate program one year. When I finally formulated a topic that satisfied my art historical and women's studies interests, I still had yet to develop a research question around which to center my thesis. I was interested in the art and lives of Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, as individuals and as a couple, but what did I want my research to uncover? What new knowledge did I want to create?
At first I really didn't even "get" all of the works by Robert Smithson, nor was I that familiar with his legacy. And I hadn't even encountered his writings; I knew Nancy Holt and her works almost solely from a feminist perspective. After coming across a book entitled Significant Others, by Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, while browsing at a local bookstore, I began to formulate a specific topic. My research question developed when I realized that Holt and Smithson were not included in the book's compilation of artistic couples. As I began to dig further I found that very little information existed on Holt and Smithson's relationship; in fact it seemed as if very few people knew that Holt and Smithson were a couple. And so my research began, in earnest.

After spending months negotiating this topic I began to realize how ambitious it was. The information on Smithson alone was overwhelming, prolific, complex; the information on Holt was practically nonexistent. I yearned for something—anything—substantial regarding Holt's career or her thoughts on her relationship with her late husband. I struggled with Smithson's writings and his ideas about art and earthworks and entropy. After my topic had been approved I went about trying to contact Nancy Holt. I started with the gallery that, at the time, represented Holt and the estate of Robert Smithson, the John Weber Gallery, and they put me in touch with the James Cohan Gallery (Holt and Smithson's estate are
now represented by the James Cohan Gallery). The James Cohan
gallery provided me with information that enabled me to
contact Nancy Holt. And so a cyber-relationship developed
between myself and Dan, Holt's helpful assistant, via e-mail.
Dan patiently answered my numerous queries and provided me
with much valuable information. During the early stages of
my research it became evident that I needed to make a trip to
the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.
to review the copious amounts of information on Robert
Smithson that Nancy Holt had donated to the archives.

While on this research trip to the archives I had an
epiphany. After having spent many hours reviewing rolls of
microfiche I decided to reward myself with a trip to the
Smithsonian's Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. There I
encountered an exhibition entitled Regarding Beauty. One of
the works on display in this exhibition was Robert Smithson's
film *Spiral Jetty* (1970). I had never seen the film before,
and I have been forever grateful that I saw that piece of
work when I did. When I saw the film, sitting in a small,
dark room, it changed my life, at least in terms of my
thesis's development. All that I didn't "get" about
Smithson's works was remedied by experiencing this film.
More importantly, though, the film reinforced the need for
and the importance of my research. For as the credits rolled
at the end of the 35 minute film, I learned that Nancy Holt
was one of the film's co-creators. As I left the museum that
day and began to flesh out the outline for my thesis I was rejuvenated, motivated and encouraged. I was ready to tackle the ambitious undertaking of writing a thesis on two important twentieth century artists, who just so happened to be married to each other.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I first became interested in the works of Nancy Holt as an undergraduate student at Miami University while taking my first contemporary art survey course. This interest was encouraged by the fact that Holt's *Star Crossed* (1982) is on permanent display at Miami's art museum. And unlike most art students my interest in Robert Smithson, the artist to whom Holt was married, was at first a secondary interest. As I learned more about contemporary art, more about the Earthworks movement of the late 1960's and 1970's, and more about these two artists I became very intrigued by their individual works. I also began to wonder if this couple had ever collaborated, artistically, during the brief time—1963 to 1973—that they were married. Was their relationship one of mutual accomplishment, or did the spotlight on Smithson's career overshadow Holt's career? Did they ever work together? Would research reveal that Holt's artistic celebrity was a result of her marriage to Smithson, or, as is often the case with famous couples, would it be revealed that Smithson had received much of the credit and attention that was actually due Holt?
As I began the process of choosing a research topic I was compelled to find one that involved the works of both a female artist and a contemporary artist, preferably one that was still active in the contemporary art scene. However after taking an art history course in the winter of 1999 about the revolutionary L’Informe [Formless] exhibit that was shown at the Pompidou Center in Paris in 1996, I became more and more fascinated with the works of Robert Smithson, some of which were included in the show. In the spring of 1999 I began in earnest to research the works of both Holt and Smithson, and I became intrigued by the possibility of exploring the artistic nature of their personal relationship, with the hopes of satisfying the above mentioned criteria as well as my curiosity about Smithson, earthworks, and entropy which had developed as a result of the Formless show. After reading through some of the obvious source materials on Smithson and Holt- his writings, her interviews- I became very curious as to why I had yet to find so little, if any, information about their artistic or personal relationship. As a starting point and in search of answers to what was developing into an intriguing and challenging research question and thesis topic, I decided to tackle the enormous amount of information and material and writings on and by Robert Smithson. I also began to research and attempt to conduct an interview with Nancy Holt.
My preliminary research question developed out of one simple question: Did Robert Smithson artistically influence Nancy Holt, or did Nancy Holt influence Robert Smithson? In search of an answer to this query I began the bulk of my research. The Smithson literature and writings are substantial, while the Holt information is less abundant, and the material on Holt and Smithson is scarcer still. Exploring the private and potentially sensitive area of the nature of their personal relationship was an uncertain variable. My search would either turn up a treasure trove of new information and insights, as I hoped it would, or it would become a one way journey down a dead end street.

Several important questions regarding Holt and Smithson stemmed from my research question: What was the nature of their aesthetic relationship? How did their personal relationship affect their creative endeavors? Did any of Smithson's works specifically influence Holt's work, or vice-versa? Did Smithson's style change after he married Holt, or rather as a result of his marriage to Holt? Or more importantly, did they ever collaborate on specific works of art? As my research progressed I learned that the various circumstances surrounding their relationship—Smithson's untimely death in 1973, the subsequent role Holt took on as a young widow, a title which was a sensitive point with her (Smithsonian Archives of American Art, roll 3833, frame 844), her emergence onto the New York gallery scene
around the time of Smithson's death—made for delicate research. Yet at the same time these circumstances presented provocative scenarios in terms of artistic influence and/or collaborative efforts. Delving into this heretofore uncharted territory was important. From a feminist perspective my research was important because it would potentially reveal that Holt was an accomplished artist, completely independent of Smithson and his career. From a scholarly perspective it was also important because it meant that new knowledge would be created, knowledge that could possibly revise the canon of twentieth century art history.

And what about any collaborative efforts? Holt and Smithson worked together several times, and always in the same medium. They co-created four films together between the years of 1968 and 1971. Holt also completed Smithson's last work, *Amarillo Ramp* (1973), with Richard Serra and Tony Shafrazi after Smithson's death in a plane crash while he was working on this piece in Texas. These collaborations came as a welcome discovery, for as I established a timeline for the development of Holt's and Smithson's careers it became evident that establishing and attributing influence would be difficult. As it turns out, Smithson's first show was in 1959 at the Artists Gallery in New York, the same year that he first met Nancy Holt. Holt graduated from Tufts University and moved to New York in 1960; she and Smithson married in 1963, at which time Smithson "didn't do much, got
married... started to write" (Flam, 151). He "began to function as a conscious artist around '64-'65" (Flam, 146), notably after his marriage to Holt. Holt's and Smithson's work were shown at a group show, Language III, at the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1969, and Holt had her first solo exhibition in 1972 at 10 Bleecker Street in New York. Between 1969- when Holt received her first outdoor sculpture commission for Buried Poems and her work Detach Here was first exhibited- and 1973, the year Smithson was killed, she was actively working and showing her work. Smithson was most active, artistically, during the years that he and Holt were married, particularly from 1967 to 1970. Holt and Smithson first collaborated in 1969 on the video East Coast, West Coast. While Smithson's career was garnering a lot of attention from the art world, Holt was just starting to emerge onto the art scene. The earliest acknowledgment or notice she received was a brief mention in Alan Sonfist's book, Art in the Land. She was known in New York in the mid-1960's "as a photographer, a filmmaker, and a concrete poet" (Shaffer in Sonfist, 169). The give-and-take that I had imagined between Holt and Smithson was slowly starting to reveal itself, as I had hoped it would. However if Holt had influenced Smithson's work, it has been undocumented and could be challenging to prove. And since Smithson died at the very beginning of Holt's career, just four years after she first started showing her work to the world, any
symbiotic, aesthetic relationship that they might have shared might only have just begun to be realized or revealed. Holt is given credit for numerous photographs that appear in various texts documenting Smithson's excursions and searches for his "nonsites." She has also given herself credit in an interview in 1979 as the personal editor of Smithson's writings while he was still living, and she was the editor of the compilation of his writings that were published in 1979 as the book *The Writings of Robert Smithson*. During their ten year relationship they also made the films *Untitled (Mono Lake)* (1968), with Michael Heizer (which is unavailable for public viewing), *East Coast, West Coast* (1969), *Spiral Jetty* (1970), and *Swamp* (1971), in addition to the unintended and unplanned collaboration on *Amarillo Ramp* (1973) after Smithson's death. Establishing the fact that some kind of influence between Holt and Smithson existed would be dependent upon these four films and a comparison of the handful of works that Holt completed and exhibited between 1969 and 1973, and several of Smithson's works from this same time period.

Relying heavily on *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* by Jack Flam, which is a revised and expanded edition of Holt's *The Writings of Robert Smithson*; Robert Hobbs's *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*; Gary Shapiro's *Earthwards*; the extensive amount of materials that were donated by Nancy Holt to the Smithsonian Archives of American
Art; biographical material I received from, and correspondence with Nancy Holt, I believe that a cause and effect relationship exists. This relationship would just have to be carefully established and examined.

Unfortunately several obstacles have impeded my research. One of the reasons that so little information exists about Holt and Smithson's relationship is that Holt will not answer any questions about their personal relationship (correspondence with Nancy Holt, September, 1999). She is also selective about granting interviews, having a policy of only granting interviews to Ph.D. candidates (correspondence with Nancy Holt, January, 2000). And as a result of my research I feel that this absence of information is also due in part to the fact that when Smithson was still alive, no one asked about his relationship with his wife.

My thesis, then, will focus on the effects of Holt and Smithson's relationship that my research did uncover— their collaboration on the four films that they made during the last five years of their marriage, and any relationship that exists artistically and visually between the individual works that they each produced between 1969 and 1973. I will also focus on their individual artistic developments, which for Smithson began before his marriage to Holt. Each film will be discussed separately and at length in hopes of interpreting to what degree they collaborated on these works,
and to see if these films had any later influence on either of their careers. The other works that Holt completed and/or exhibited at this time—Buried Poems (1969-1971), Views Through a Sand Dune (1972), Missoula Ranch Locators (1972), Locating #1 and Locating #2 (1972), Zeroing In (1973), Going Around in Circles (1973)—will be examined for any signs of Smithson's influence. Several of the works that Smithson completed during these years—First Upside-Down Tree (1969), Second Upside-Down Tree (1969), Third Upside-Down Tree (1969), Mirror Displacements from Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan (1969), Asphalt Rundown (1969), Partially Buried Woodshed (1970), Spiral Jetty (1970), Broken Circle (1971), Spiral Hill (1971), Amarillo Ramp (1973)—will also be scrutinized for any possible signs of Holt's influence.
CHAPTER 2
NANCY HOLT

Nancy Holt was born on April 5, 1938 in Worcester, Massachusetts. She spent the majority of her childhood, from 1941-1956, residing in northern New Jersey. She attended Tufts University from 1956 to 1960 and majored in biology, receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in 1960. She did not create art in college, and she did not begin creating art until 1968 (correspondence with Nancy Holt, May, 2000). She met Robert Smithson in 1959 on a visit to New York City, where Smithson's artistic career was just beginning. Holt moved to the city in 1960 after college graduation, where she became friendly with Smithson (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Retrospective, 31). She and Smithson were married in 1963. They lived together in an apartment in Greenwich Village from 1963 until Smithson's death in 1973. Holt remained in New York until 1995, when she moved to Galisteo, New Mexico.

Her career as a contemporary artist began in 1968, and her work was first shown at the Language III show at the Dwan Gallery in New York. She did not show her work again until 1972, in several group and one person exhibitions. She is best known as an earthworks artist, although she has worked
with other mediums such as video and film. She was included in several "feminist" shows in the 1970's, most notably the "c. 7500" show, curated by Lucy Lippard in 1973, and she has collaborated with other artists including Richard Serra and Carl Andre.

_Sun Tunnels_ (1976) is considered by many to be Nancy Holt's magnum opus, and to know this work is essentially to know Nancy Holt the artist. It has been called an "American Stonehenge" (Norwood and Monk, 212) and it is situated in a remote location— the Great Basin Desert in northwestern Utah. _Sun Tunnels_, like many earthworks, is not easily accessible. Most people are acquainted with it only through photographs. The idea for the piece came to her when she and Smithson were in Amarillo, Texas in 1973 (where they were working on Smithson's _Amarillo Ramp_), although she did not purchase the land until 1974, and she did not begin working at the site until the following year (Holt, _Artforum_, 34). The work consists of four concrete tunnels, each 18 feet long, each with an interior diameter of 8 feet (Holt, _Artforum_, 32). The tunnels are large enough to walk through and provide a welcome respite from the intense summer heat, for the interior temperature of the concrete tunnels is 15 to 20 degrees cooler than the outside air temperature. When one does venture into one of the four tunnels, one is faced with numerous holes that have been drilled all the way through the 7 and 1/4 inch thick wall, revealing brief glimpses of the
sun and sky during the day, and the stars and moon at night. These holes measure from 7 to 10 inches in diameter and let in various sized shafts of either moonlight or sunlight. These holes function as such,

Each tunnel has a different configuration of holes corresponding to stars in four different constellations: Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn. The sizes of the holes vary relative to the magnitude of the stars to which they correspond. During the day, the sun shines through the holes, casting a changing pattern of pointed ellipses and circles of light on the bottom half of each tunnel. On nights when the moon is more than a quarter full, moonlight shines through the holes casting its own paler pattern (Holt, Artforum, 32).

The constellations that were chosen to be included in the work were chosen for aesthetic reasons, and for their size, as Holt wanted to keep the work on a human scale (Norwood and Monk, 213).

What Sun Tunnels reveals and reinforces about the work of Nancy Holt is an interest in perspective. What began four years earlier in the pieces Views Through a Sand Dune, Missoula Ranch Locaters and the videos Locating #1 and Locating #2 was a way for Holt to focus or direct the viewer's perspective, to force them to notice or see what she wanted them to see. The locators from Holt's earlier works have been enlarged in Sun Tunnels. "My art is not conceptual. My art is physical, and deals with perception, and space, and light. Physical materials, sight...However, I have a conceptual approach" (interview with Nancy Holt by
Joyce Pommeroy Schwartz, August 3, 1993). What these earlier pieces and *Sun Tunnels* do is frame a particular scene or a glimpse of the natural setting that surrounds us, although these scenes usually go unnoticed. The highlight of *Sun Tunnels* occurs only twice a year,

*Sun Tunnels* marks the yearly extreme positions of the sun on the horizon—the tunnels being aligned with the angles of the rising and the setting of the sun on the days of the solstices, around June 21st and December 21st. On those days the sun is centered through the tunnels, and is centered for about 10 days before and after the solstices (Holt, *Artforum*, 32).

"Just as the tunnels encircle the landscape without while the star holes ring the sky above, the body within becomes encircled as well. Within the tunnels the human body becomes the field upon which the patterns of the universe revolve" (Norwood and Monk, 214).

In contrast to Robert Smithson, whose earlier sculptural works could be classified as minimal, while his later works are almost exclusively large scale earthworks, Holt's career began in and is still involved with the site-specific, earthwork movement. And like Smithson she is interested in geological time, in creating something that will have a lasting physical presence.

"Time" is not just a mental concept or a mathematical abstraction in the desert. The rocks in the distance are ageless; they have been deposited in layers over hundreds of thousands of years. "Time" takes on a physical presence. Only 10 miles south of *Sun Tunnels* are the Bonneville Salt Flats, one of the few areas in
the world where you can actually see the curvature of
the earth. Being part of that kind of landscape, and
walking on earth that has surely never been walked on
before, evokes a sense of being on this planet, rotating
in space, in universal time (Holt, Artforum, 34-35).

Her initial works, done in the late 1960's and early
1970's, were a way for her to become "more engaged with the
external world" (interview with Nancy Holt by Joyce Pommeroy
Schwartz, August 3, 1993). Holt "went out West for the first
time in 1968 with Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. As
soon as I got to the desert, I connected with the place...I
went back West for a few months every year. In 1969 I began
a series of "Buried Poems," using some desert sites" (Holt,
Artforum, 34).

One of Holt's earliest works was Buried Poems (1969-71),
an unusual large scale earthwork in the sense that the work
itself is not large physically, but in scope. The process
involved is one that covers many miles. The work uses maps
and details of maps, a medium that Robert Smithson had been
using in his works prior to the creation of Holt's Buried
Poems.

One of the most exhilarating effects of consulting an
atlas is undoubtedly the constant change of scale, the
possibility of gaining in expansion what one loses in
comprehension, and vice-versa...in Holt's Buried
Poems...Five recipients (Michael Heizer, Philip Leider,
Carl Andre, John Perrault, and Robert Smithson)
received a packet of information that allowed them, if
they desired, to find and dig up a poem. This poem had
been buried in a location which, according to Nancy
Holt, had been chosen on the personality of the
recipient: "Certain physical, spatial, and atmospheric qualities of a site would evoke a person who I knew" (Tiberghien, 165).

Holt herself has described the work as such:

My Buried Poems (1969-71) were private artworks. A concrete poem, made for a particular person, was buried in the earth in such places as an unnamed, uninhabited island in the Florida Keys, Arches National Monument desert in Utah and the bottom of the Highlands of Navesink near Sandy Hook, New Jersey.

Certain physical, spatial and atmospheric qualities of a site would evoke a person who I knew. I would then read about the history, geology, flora and fauna of the site and select certain passages from my readings for inclusion in a booklet, which also contained maps, photos, very detailed directions for finding the Buried Poem, along with either postcards, cut out images, and/or specimens of leaves and rocks.

After reading the booklet the recipient would begin to understand his connection with the chosen site. Since all the sites were remote, the poem was buried in a vacuum container which would protect the contents for at least a human lifetime, allowing the poem to be dug up whenever the person happened to be near the Buried Poem area (Holt in Tiberghien, 167).

One of the poems was created for Smithson, although the information that Holt provided Gilles Tiberghien, the author of the book Land Art, about the work was for the poem and site intended for Michael Heizer (the poem created for Robert Smithson is unavailable to the public) (correspondence with Nancy Holt, May, 2000). Perhaps the lack of information on the poem for Smithson is due to Holt's desire to keep this private work private, particularly with regards to her relationship with Smithson. Interestingly all five of the
concrete poems were created for men, whom were either friends, colleagues or lovers. The influence from Smithson seems rather evident due to the use of maps as the medium in several of his works. Smithson created several pieces, such as *Entropic Pole* (1967), *Broken Map* (1967) and *New Jersey, New York* (1967), that were constructed from maps prior to the creation of Holt's work.

Another work from the same year as *Buried Poems* is *East Coast, West Coast* (1969), a video that Holt and Smithson made together. *East Coast, West Coast* is a black and white video, with sound, that features Holt, Smithson and two of their friends (fellow artists Joan Jonas and Peter Campus). It was their first venture into the medium (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 166) and it was a venture that they made together.

*East Coast, West Coast* uses the format of a TV talk show. Robert Smithson plays the part of a West Coast artist visiting the East and has a dialogue with Nancy Holt, playing a New York conceptual artist. The two capture the clichés and stereotypes of the divergent attitudes of the art scenes in both places- New Yorkers assuming that non-New Yorkers are provincial, and Westerners paranoid and defensive about these presumptions. Smithson is laid back and "cooled out," just "out there doing his thing," distrustful of words ("I just use simple words, have simple responses"), having come to art through chrome-plating cars and motorcycles. Anti-intellectual, he asks Holt, "Why don't you stop thinking and start feeling?" Holt, in the role of the over-rational, over-educated artist, criticizes him as a "mystical pragmatist" when he refuses to define his terms. "Definitions are for uptight types," he argues. His fads are all those of the sixties- getting a farm, eating organic food, wanting to go to India, living with the American
Indians, meeting "beautiful people." When Holt tries to fit his statements into East Coast systems and critical philosophy, a tension develops between them as he becomes more hostile towards her. "Don't lay your trips on me— that's all your bad psyche." Holt accuses him of not entering a dialogue and of not coming to grips with the philosophy of his attitude: "You're just a closed system and you want to think you're open...You're making a lot of philosophical presumptions." Smithson responds, "I don't need that. I'm into my own head." Holt counters, "That head has limitations. I hate to tell you...If your mind is so watery that any kind of intellectual resistance seems like a bad trip, I think you should be happy in L.A." (Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films, 70).

Holt and Smithson, like many artists of the late 1960's and early 1970's, were beginning a foray into video art and film making. Interestingly, all of Smithson's video/film works were made with Holt. They had a unique collaborative partnership with regards to this medium. According to Holt, "film and video are more collaborative mediums than sculpture. [She and Smithson] had their own individual, unique ways of making and thinking about their sculpture" (correspondence with Nancy Holt, May, 2000). In 1971 Holt co-created another film, Swamp, with Smithson. This work is a seven minute color film, with sound. According to Smithson, "Swamp is about deliberate obstructions or calculated aimlessness" (Smithson in Muller, 41). The piece was filmed in the New Jersey Meadowlands, four years after Smithson wrote "The Monuments of Passaic," an article that appeared in Artforum claiming that Passaic, New Jersey had "replaced Rome as The Eternal City" (Smithson in Flam, 74).
Holt also had a connection with New Jersey, for it was a place that she "felt in touch with" (Holt, Artforum, 34). New Jersey was most likely selected as the location for the film because of these affinities, because both Holt and Smithson had lived in New Jersey and they (Smithson in particular) revisited New Jersey numerous times in search of Smithson's nonsites. In the film,

Nancy Holt operated the camera, guided by Robert Smithson from behind; as they walk, she records what is ahead of her in a swampy area in New Jersey. Smithson directs her movements, telling her to continue in a straight line or to avoid the stickers, or to aim the camera at something in particular. Holt and Smithson are heard thrashing their way through reeds and rushes, getting ensnared in the swamp, and the obvious incongruity of their situation lends some humor to their dialogue, as do the vacillating images recorded by erratic ambulatory movements of the camera. The views of the swamp share the stumbling quality of Holt's walking and her occasional loss of equilibrium (Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films, 59).

In 1972 came one of Holt's more well known works, one that deals with her desire to reorient the viewer's perception. Views Through a Sand Dune (1972) was a temporary work that was installed in a sand dune on the Narragansett Beach in Rhode Island. Holt placed a 5 and 1/2 foot circular steel pipe through a sand dune along the beach. The work functions by allowing passers-by to see something that they wouldn't normally see (what lies on the other side of the sand dune), and perhaps to notice something that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.
In Rhode Island...I placed a pipe in a sand dune. There was no sign saying "This is art." People jogged on the beach all the time, businessmen mostly, and I'd watch them, and they would look at that pipe in the dune, and they knew it was there for a purpose. Then they would go up and look through it. They first of all questioned the existence of this thing— they stopped jogging and even got out of boats to examine it— and I think they took it seriously. Sometimes people can get something out of my work even if they don't know quite what it is (Holt in Castle, 90).

This piece, like *Sun Tunnels*, provides a specific perspective for the viewer, one that is chosen by the artist and one that cannot be varied. *Views Through a Sand Dune* is not a large scale work, nor is it complex in its locale or purpose. One does not have to go out of their way to a remote desert location in order to experience it, nor was it permanent like many of Holt's other works (the work lasted less than a year, due to the fact that it was vandalized, the only work of Holt's to ever be vandalized) (correspondence with Nancy Holt, May, 2000). The piece is a subtle take on her desire to reorient perception. Created in a similar vein is Holt's *Missoula Ranch Locaters* (1972). The work consists of eight, twelve inch long pipe viewers which were placed in a forty foot circle in an open field. Four locators are positioned towards the cardinal directions, and the other four are stationed at intermediate positions. Each locator can be rotated around 360 degrees to allow the viewer to focus in on an array of landscapes.
...different things can be seen through each of the eight Locators- a mountain, a tree, a flat plain, a ranch house, etc. Through the work, the place is seen in a different way. The work becomes a human focal point, and in that respect it brings the vast landscape back to human proportion and makes the viewer the center of things...I used a natural ordering...Missoula Ranch Locators is positioned on the points of the compass...(Holt, Artforum, 34).

That same year Holt made the videos Locating #1 and Locating #2 (1972) which documented an experience similar to that of looking through the locators from the Missoula Ranch Locators piece. Each video is fourteen minutes in length, black and white, with sound (no information exists on Locating #1). Locating #2, is concerned with the disconnection of perceptual events from their contexts. A 12" tube is held up to the lens of the camera so that only a circular image can be seen of the landscape. Holt discusses with Jerry Clapsaddle what they see on the video monitor as the tube is moved systematically back and forth across the screen. They speculate about what the visual data might represent within the total situation, as each hole of information presents an entire context in itself. Everything must be treated purely as phenomena. Sometimes only qualities such as size, movement and direction can be seen, characteristics that often prove to be secondary when the total landscape is visible. The parts seem to function independently of memory; one doesn't store up information from one hole to inform the next circle. Moreover, viewing material within a circle gives a different reading than in some other configuration or focus. This is particularly true because the tape is of an outdoor space in which scale and perspective are difficult to assess without other points of reference. At the end of the tape, the tube is removed to reveal the entire landscape, permitting the viewer to test the accuracy of the commentary... (Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films, 71).
The two works that Holt completed in 1973, the year that Smithson was killed, were also videotapes. *Zeroing In* is a black and white video, that is thirty minutes long, with sound. This video "is an extension of Holt's interest in the perception of visual data disconnected from their normal context" (*Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films*, 72).

A board with five circular holes that can be opened and closed at different times is placed in front of a camera shooting out of a window. Holt begins by opening one circle and discussing with [art critic] Ted Castle what they see on the monitor—what the details suggest about the total situation. The holes reveal varied amounts of information, sometimes very abstract. Differences between Holt and Castle become evident from their comments. She tends to be very specific in physical description while he is poetic, frequently taking his speculations to an extreme. At one point, when Holt draws a sensible conclusion, he asks, "How do we know all this stuff?...It's very uptight. We're looking at nothing but a light source." Gradually all the circles are exposed at once. Some of the information seems interconnected, but other details are visually disjunctive. Holt zooms in on the central circle and they try to fit the additional data into the whole structure. Then the prop for viewing the scene is switched (without revealing the scene) to a single tube like the one Holt used in *Locating #2*. The tube is moved systematically across the screen. More information about what had been visible before is revealed although, as in *Locating #2*, it is difficult to retain fragments in one's memory in order to create a mental whole. Finally the tube is removed to show the entire situation. This shot is held for a long time, then the board with the five holes is put in front of the camera and moved around slowly (*Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films*, 72).

The use of the circle in almost all of Holt's works is an important theme/motif. She uses circles to orient the viewer's vision and more importantly, perception.
Going Around in Circles is an extension of this same theme. Created in 1973, the same year that the Sun Tunnels project was begun, it is another black and white video, fifteen minutes in length, with sound. This work "investigates the phenomenology of perceptual information isolated from its total of familiar context" (Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films, 73).

A board with five circles which could be opened and closed at different times was held in front of a camera shooting into an outdoor ground from a three-story window. Five people in the landscape had maps drawn with directions for their movements on the ground, and also received information transmitted by walkie-talkie. These performers were visible only through the holes of the prop as their pattern of walking or running was taped. Going Around in Circles was played through twice while the participants discussed their responses to watching the tape on the monitor in relation to the experience of executing the piece. They emphasized the breakdown of the system on the map both when viewed on the monitor and in moving over the irregular terrain. Also discussed were the various modes of physicality in the piece; the prop itself with holes that open and close, people moving on the ground, rocks for pinpointing locations, walkie-talkies, and the video monitor, which gave a different perspective than either viewing the action from the window, or participating in the activity. The physical aspects of the ground, the monitor, and the map all had different scales. The actual topology of the land is difficult to assess through the holes of the prop. Only at the end of the tape, when the board is removed, does the scale become apparent. The disparity between these perceptions is enforced by Holt's playing the tape twice, end to end. This allows the same visual information to be seen in a larger experiential context as the verbalizations affect the visual perception of the piece (Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films, 73).

Going Around in Circles, Zeroing In, Locating #1 and Locating #2, Views Through a Sand Dune and Sun Tunnels all employ the
same motif—the circle—to try and serve the same purpose; to manipulate perception and visual orientation and explore phenomenology, or how we come to be aware consciously. Interests that she and Smithson shared were land reclamation, geology and geologic time, and the natural, external world, as can be seen in Holt's *Buried Poems* and *Sun Tunnels* and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and *Asphalt Rundown*. In Holt’s numerous “locator” pieces—*Sun Tunnels, Views Through a Sand Dune, Missoula Ranch Locators*, to name a few—she deals with a sophisticated view of postmodernism.

According to Jean-François Lyotard, the irrepresentable or unrepresentable characterizes all of “postmodernism.” Thus, writes Lyotard, “the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts the unrepresentable in the presentation itself; that which rejects the comfort of formal conventions; that which researches new presentations, not to possess them, but to better show that something unrepresentable is there (Lyotard in Tiberghien, 231).
CHAPTER 3

ROBERT SMITHSON

Robert Smithson was recently named one of the most important artists of the twentieth century by ARTnews magazine (ARTnews, May, 1999, 149). But unlike many of the artists included in ARTnews's list of the twenty five most important, Smithson was known for his writings as well as his artworks. His writings were published as articles in magazines, most often in Artforum (five articles) and Arts and Art Voices (four articles), between 1965 and 1973 more often than the writings of many art critics, and his writings have become an integral part of his oeuvre. "Smithson is a brilliant writer with a vocabulary that includes knotty technical terms, adjectival largesse, broad references, and serpentine arguments. It is ... indicative that his spell of maximum writing, 1966-1969, coincides with the period when he was moving from sculpture to Earthworks" (Alloway, 58). With regards to his most well known work, Spiral Jetty (1970), one must be careful to distinguish between Spiral Jetty the earthwork, Spiral Jetty the film, and "The Spiral Jetty" article from 1972, which appeared in the book Arts of the Environment, edited by Gyorgy Kepes.
By comparison Smithson's career has received much more attention from art critics, members of the establishment and museum and exhibition curators than Nancy Holt's has, and Smithson was a more famous artist than Holt was during his lifetime (and especially after his death). Smithson had been exhibiting his works for ten years prior to Holt's first solo or group exhibition, and he was much more prolific than Holt in his output between the years of 1969, when Holt first exhibited her work, and 1973, the year of his death. And while Holt has continued to be active in the contemporary art scene, creating many of her most important works after Smithson's death, Smithson and his works and writings have received more attention, in terms of numbers of mentions in the Art Index and the amount of information that is available. By examining several of the works Smithson either began or completed during the years of 1969 through 1973, I hope to determine why Smithson has been deemed the more important half of this art couple.

Robert Smithson was born on January 2, 1938 in Passaic, New Jersey. His artistic career began in earnest in 1945, when Smithson drew a wall size dinosaur for the hallway of his elementary school (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 231). In 1948 Smithson began to store his collection of reptiles, fossils and artifacts in a "museum" in the basement of his parent's house, which was constructed for him by his father. Smithson also began to plan the annual family
vacations to such places as the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone Park (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 231). In 1952 he began visiting the New York Museum of Natural History, where he was fascinated by the dinosaur murals; in 1953 he won a scholarship to the Art Students' League in New York. In 1956 he also studied at the Brooklyn Museum School in addition to the Art Students' League; three years later he had his first show at the Artists Gallery in New York (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 232).

In order to create a balanced comparison between the works of Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson I have selected only a few of Smithson's works from the years in which he and Holt were both working and exhibiting. Smithson's most prolific year was 1969, the year that Holt first publicly exhibited her work. Holt created one work, *Detach Here*, for the Language III show in 1969; by comparison Smithson created over 40 sculptural works that year alone. I have also selected those works that I feel are important with regards to Smithson's career, and those that are important with regards to potential influence on Holt's works or by Holt from the same years of 1969-1973.

*First Upside-Down Tree* (1969) was the first in a series of three upside-down tree sculptures that Smithson created in 1969. It was "installed" in Alfred, New York in the spring of 1969. A ten foot dead tree was "planted" in the ground, leaving approximately 6 feet of the tree's roots exposed.
above ground. Several things can be said of this work: that there "is something ridiculous" about a dead tree that has been "placed in a ludicrous position" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 140); that Smithson has objectified the organic, turned something living and breathing into a commodity; that the displaced trees are an attempt on Smithson's part to re-orient the viewer's perception, albeit in a comic vein. For Smithson makes no attempt to explain the purpose of the inverted trees, and he sees them as "riddles that increase in complexity as they are studied" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 140). Second Upside-Down Tree (1969) was planted on a beach near the home of artist Robert Rauschenberg on Captiva Island, Florida. Smithson and Rauschenberg retrieved a dead tree trunk from the ocean, swam it to shore, rolled it along the beach and planted it, upside down, in the sand.

Third Upside-Down Tree (1969) was installed at the site of the Seventh Mirror Displacement from the "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan" trip to Mexico. With the final inverted tree from the series,

...Smithson created works of art that parody art historians' overriding concerns with sources and influences. The roots in these pieces are exposed; Smithson called the trees "totems of rootlessness." He "resurrects" dead trees, planting them anew so they might "grow downward," leaving their taproots exposed. Because they are dead, they nullify organic time as a way of recording change. Dendography and carbon-14 dating are useless with such recent monuments as these. Like art, the Upside-Down Trees stand as testimonies of
their sources, and the trunks become only partially visible reflections of their roots (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 164).

One of Smithson's most complex and important works is an essay and a sculptural work. "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan" was published in Artforum magazine in September, 1969. "The title of course is a paraphrase of the brilliant travel book, Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan (1841), by John L. Stephens" (Alloway, 60 and Childs, 80). This essay documents both Smithson's travels in Mexico and a series of nine mirror displacements, each consisting of twelve mirrors, that were temporarily installed in various locations and photographed. "Straddling traditional boundaries of art history and personal diary, the article becomes a narrative piece" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 151). The first mirror displacements took place in the salt mine at Cayuga Lake, New York in 1969, and "climax[ed] later that year in the Yucatan series" (Alloway, 58).

A dozen mirrors, each 12 inches square, were arranged in various places, such as a field of ashes ("The people in this region clear land by burning it out"), a quarry, the seashore, the jungle. The manufactured 20th-century artifacts are not only set against the landscape, the images in the mirrors are of the environments, but displaced by reflections. The reflections bring in the theme of duplication, a kind of mapping, but the reflections of light are endless and unpredictable; to quote the artist, they "evade measure." The scattering of modular plates in the organic environment also has the effect of mixing the organic and the unexpected.
The mirrors act like the elements of the nonsite in their allusive signification (Alloway, 58).

This piece is a particular type of nonsite in the sense that the site "out there" is brought into the gallery space and documented, detailed, preserved with photographs and the accompanying essay. The importance of the mirror displacements involves the use of mirrors, and "their ability to double and redouble, mimicking the dialectic of site and nonsite" (Tiberghien, 213).

The mirror not only visually echoes the site/nonsite dialectic, it also has a "critical" function, in the sense that it allows a breakdown of the representation on its surface. But, as Hobbs has noted, Smithson's text itself functions as a mirror of his artistic activity, since it utilizes the mechanisms of writing to reflect the complexity of art, as well as to weaken the certainties of reality... (Tiberghien, 213-214).

Another piece from 1969 was Asphalt Rundown, which involved a dump truck and a load of black asphalt. The truck unloaded the asphalt down the hillside of an abandoned dirt and gravel quarry in Rome.

The black viscous material merged with the hillside; along its edge it traced a few of the washed out gullies, thus freezing erosion. The asphalt was molded by the earth, the Rundown became a casting of erosion, and the entire piece a grand tribute to entropy. The deeply lined gullies of the site already manifested a kind of "fluvial entropy" before Smithson enacted the Rundown; now it was reinforced by the asphalt, an overlay of industrial sludge (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 174-175).
Asphalt Rundown was the first of several "pour" pieces that were either proposed or executed during the years 1969-1970, involving various materials such as concrete (Concrete Pour), glue (Glue Pour) and mud (Mud Flow With Mirrors). The significance of Asphalt Rundown involved its location, its medium and its primary concern: entropy. Not only was the work executed in Rome— the eternal city— but it also took place in an abandoned gravel and sand quarry, which has dual implications. One of which is the fact that the quarry was abandoned, that it was no longer useful and, entropically speaking, had become matter-less, disordered and run-down. The other implication was that the quarry was a source for building materials, particularly the kinds of materials used to build roads, as is asphalt, the work's medium. Asphalt, gravel and sand are naturally occurring, found materials, although in the age of suburban sprawl asphalt has come to possess a more modern feel, primarily through its use in road making. So as Smithson tried to "freeze" the quarry's erosion with a material that is now commonly used industrially, he comments on the futility of combating entropy, by playing "on the idea of asphalt as a trap for energy: he makes a tacit suggestion that asphalt highways are the "entropic" tar pits of the present" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 176).

Another of Smithson's pieces that directly deals with this almost celebratory notion of entropy is Partially Buried
Woodshed (1970). Smithson originally intended to create another "pour" or "flow" piece using mud for a creative arts festival that was held at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio from January 17-23. However, low temperatures prevented the mud from flowing. Instead of abandoning the project and his desire to show the "artistic acceleration of entropy" (Masheck, 132) altogether,

...he decided on another course of action. He had thought for some time that he would like to bury a building, so he began looking around the campus for a suitable structure. The woodshed he found had been part of an abandoned farm that belonged to the university. The rustic, ramshackle woodshed stood in sharp contrast to the other buildings in the area, which were for the most part modern concrete structures. It was a makeshift storage for dirt, gravel, and firewood. Smithson decided to leave some firewood in the building, and, on January 22, had earth moved to the area from a construction site elsewhere on campus. Operating a backhoe under Smithson's direction, Rich Helmling, a building contractor, piled twenty loads of earth onto the shed until its central beam cracked. The breaking of the beam was crucial to the piece: to Smithson it symbolized entropy, like the falling of Humpty Dumpty, "a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there's no way that you can really piece it back together again" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 189-190).

What enhances this work is Smithson's vision to predict the political climate that would overtake Kent State's campus just four months after the work's completion. On May 4, 1970 four students were killed and nine were wounded by National Guardsmen during a campus protest of America's invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam war. "This subsequent tragedy has for many people eminently politicized the creation and
significance of the *Woodshed*. Art critic Phil Leider told Nancy Holt he felt it to be the single most political work of art since Picasso's *Guernica*. Nancy Holt has referred to the piece as "intrinsically political" and indicated that Smithson himself believed it to be "prophetic" (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 191). Unfortunately tragedy also befell the *Woodshed* itself when the university accidentally bulldozed the piece in 1984, thus destroying one of only a handful of Smithson's remaining large scale earthworks.

Smithson's best known work, and perhaps his most important work, is *Spiral Jetty* (1970). In addition to the sculptural work Smithson also documented the piece's construction with the film *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and a piece of writing, "The Spiral Jetty". "Since [Smithson] felt that many significant experiences in the twentieth century are vicarious ones available through secondary media such as film, video, and essays, [he] decided to make secondary media primary in *Spiral Jetty*" (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Retrospective*, 17). The work is one of only four remaining earthworks by Smithson (the other three are *Broken Circle* (1971), *Spiral Hill* (1971) and *Amarillo Ramp* (1973)). "Even though *Spiral Jetty* has been more elaborately documented than any other work by Smithson, by both a 35-minute 16mm film...and an essay, it still remains his most misunderstood piece" (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 192).
To many people, Spiral Jetty is the quintessential heroic gesture in the landscape. If Jackson Pollock created a new standard for scale and boldness by dripping paint on a large piece of canvas laid on the floor, then Smithson established a never before contemplated precedent for monumental art when he created a spiral of mud, salt crystals, rocks, and water—indigenous elements of the landscape. The Spiral Jetty appears to many viewers, who have seen only photographs and not the actual site, to be twentieth-century man rivaling the great pyramids of Egypt, the Serpent Mound in Ohio, and Stonehenge in England. They interpret the Jetty as an example of man conquering the wilderness by imposing magnificent—yet gratuitous—marks on the landscape. What these viewers fail to realize is that building the Spiral Jetty is hardly an achievement to compare with such other twentieth-century gestures as making footprints on the moon or creating clones. If Spiral Jetty represents a monumental heroic gesture, the gesture is definitely an anachronistic one (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 192).

Spiral Jetty is constructed from 6,650 tons of mud, rocks, water and precipitated salt crystals. Heavy equipment—caterpillars and dump trucks—were used to move the material into the spiral shape. The spiral extends some 1500 feet out into the Great Salt Lake, Utah off of Rozel Point, and is fifteen feet wide. The location of the work was of particular concern to Smithson.

As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement...From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions would hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other...No sense wondering about
classification and categories, there were none (Smithson in Flam, 146).

The making of the work was documented in a color, 35mm film, also entitled *Spiral Jetty*. Those who helped with the production of the film were Barbara Jarvis, Bob Fiore and Nancy Holt. The film is a remarkable piece of work that encapsulates and speaks to what *Spiral Jetty* is all about.

Concurrently with the Earthwork Smithson made a film which shows its construction and, after completion, its vertiginous relation to water and sun. The film is both a record and a representative work by Smithson as well. The sculpture and the film are related like site and nonsite, though with a new amplitude of resources and references...In the film he declines to use the horizontal expanse of the site...The typical camera angle is, so to say, slightly stooped, with little sky visible, or close up. The machines are mostly shot in close-up, looming on the screen, biting earth, emitting rocks: they are compared to prehistoric animals in a technological-prehistorical analogy (Alloway, 60).

The film— and the work itself— deals with several of Smithson’s favorite terms or motifs, the first one being the spiral. The work is located in the Great Salt Lake, a lake that has been referred to as “America’s Dead Sea” because of its enormous salt content. Smithson chose this sight in part because of the salt, for salt is made up of crystals that form and regenerate in a spiral shape. When the tons of rock and mud were placed into the salt water, the salt would begin to crystallize into the spiral shape as it came in contact
with the materials. "The spiral is emblematic of both immersion in the primordial process and emergence from it- of Dionysian loss of particular identity in the infinite and Apollonian achievement of a vision of new self-identity, destined to become universal and exemplary. In sum, for Robert Smithson the spiral is both the process and the structure of the temporal as well as spatial sublime" (Kuspit, 82). The other term that Smithson was extremely interested in was entropy. "Entropy is a loaded term in Smithson's vocabulary. (It customarily means decreasing organization and, along with that, loss of distinctiveness.)...Basically Smithson's idea of entropy concerns not only the deterioration of order, though he observes it attentively, "but rather the clash of uncoordinated orders..."" (Alloway, 58). Another definition that is helpful in understanding entropy, and one that relates well to Smithson's sense of the term, is one by Stephen Hawking.

Imagine a cup of water falling off a table and breaking into pieces on the floor. If you take a film of this, you can easily tell whether it is being run forward or backward. If you run it backward you will see the pieces suddenly gather themselves together off the floor and jump back to form a whole cup on the table...The explanation that is usually given as to why we don't see broken cups gathering themselves together off the floor and jumping back onto the table is that it is forbidden by the second law of thermodynamics. This says that in any closed system disorder, or entropy, always increases with time. In other words, it is a form of Murphy's law: Things always tend to go wrong! An intact cup on
the table is a state of high order, but a broken cup on the floor is a disordered state (Hawking, 144-145).

Hawking’s use of the broken cup in his explanation of entropy is analogous to one of Smithson’s approaches to the term. “Smithson had been scouting out “entropic” sites...He approached them consciously avoiding what he would later call the “Humpty Dumpty” syndrome. The Humpty Dumpty rhyme is, for Smithson, “a nice succinct definition of entropy”: once he has had his great fall, all the king’s men cannot put Humpty together again (Sayre, 216). Another of Smithson’s approaches to entropy, or rather an extension of the Humpty Dumpty rhyme is,

I’m interested in collaborating with entropy. Some day I would like to compile all the different entropies. All the classifications would lose their grids. Levi-Strauss had a good insight, he suggested we change the study of anthropology into “entropology.” It would be a study that devotes itself to the process of disintegration in highly developed structures. After all, wreckage is often times more interesting than structure (Smithson in Flam, 256-257).

Smithson was also fond of Vladimir Nabokov’s observation that, “the future is but the obsolete in reverse” (Smithson in Flam, 11), and “Wylie Sypher’s insight that “Entropy is evolution in reverse‖” (Smithson in Flam, 15).

“In the film...the use of heavy equipment causes the construction to take on the look of destruction” (Shapiro, 121). Smithson was not only interested in entropy but also
the dialectic, and in the work and the film *Spiral Jetty* he intertwines the two terms.

...entropy is the concept used to reject anthropomorphic notions of representation and limited historical perceptions, while dialectic is deployed to suggest the possibility of a real relationship between the artist and nature, a relationship that could be extended through the artist to other people. Entropy would be associated with the sublime, and the dialectic with the picturesque (Shapiro, 151).

Smithson’s interest in the dialectic is most evident in his development of the site-nonsite series of works he created in the late 1960’s. And *Spiral Jetty* is perhaps his ultimate site-nonsite, a specific type of dialectic, with the film acting as the nonsite and the work acting as the site. This point is further emphasized by “the last shot of Smithson’s film [*Spiral Jetty*], which shows the editing room for the film itself; on the wall is a large photograph of the *Spiral Jetty* in Utah, emphasizing the fact that the work becomes available to us only through media” (Shapiro, 5-7). The work is a compelling take on the term dialectic in more ways than one, for what Smithson attempted to do with this piece was create order while at the same time dealing with entropy, or disorder. And this proves to be the ultimate dialectic. By using the spiral shape in this piece he is using the symbol for infinity, and by situating the work in the Great Salt Lake where it would be overrun with the formation of salt crystals—over and over again—in the shape of spirals, he is
punctuating this symbol of infinity. He is trying to provoke order in the natural setting by deliberately and carefully constructing this monumental piece; he is trying to control the natural world by manipulating earth into a spiral shape. "Maps of hypothetical earlier stages of the earth representing lost continents remind us of time's continental drift" (Shapiro, 14). This also shows us entropy visually and how long it takes, and it makes us wonder what will happen to the Spiral Jetty. By running from the shore of the lake into the center of the Jetty, and then reversing direction and running from the center of the spiral back towards the shore in the last, glorious shot of the film, Smithson encapsulates a sense of geologic time; "where remote futures meet remote pasts" (Smithson in Flam, 113).

The last works that Smithson completed before his death were Broken Circle (1971) and Spiral Hill (1971), a two part piece located in Emmen, Holland. These works were a combination of land reclamation and art, which were built in an old sand quarry. Smithson had been interested in abandoned industrial sites as locations for his work for some time, and the site in Holland was particularly compelling.

The uncultivated, disjunctive qualities of the quarry appealed to him; he referred to the place as "a disrupted situation" and "a whole series of broken landscapes." In addition to preferring a location devastated by industry, he was entranced by the varied range of hues in the landscape, and he noted both in conversation and in drawings that the cliffs surrounding the quarry lake were red, the soil grading up from the
sand flats was a warm brown loam, the sand yellow and white, and the water green (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 209).

Broken Circle is a large, broken circle that is 140 feet in diameter, which is located in a canal that is approximately 12 feet wide. The canal is located in a lake in the quarry which is 10 to 15 feet deep. The work's medium is green water and white and yellow sand flats. A large boulder that would have been too difficult to move was incorporated into the work's design. Spiral Hill is a large, man made hill made from earth, black topsoil and white sand; it stands approximately 20 feet tall and has a diameter of 75 feet at its base.

The creation of Broken Circle/Spiral Hill depended on accidents occurring over vast ranges of time...When Smithson found the quarry, it had already reached a heterogeneous "entropic" state. Smithson built two images that enforce and heighten this differentiated condition: a broken circle (formed of a jetty and a canal) which is impossible to circumambulate and a hill whose path, spiraling in a counterclockwise direction, forms an ancient symbol of destruction (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 209).

The works were originally commissioned by the Sonsbeek international art exhibition and were intended to be temporary outdoor installations, however, the people of Emmen voted to preserve the works and the quarry as a park shortly after the works' completion (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 213).
While Smithson began construction on *Amarillo Ramp*, the work was completed by Nancy Holt, Richard Serra and Tony Shafrazi. Smithson was killed in a plane crash while photographing this piece in July, 1973. This work is a large scale outdoor earthwork, measuring roughly 150 feet in diameter. It varies in height from zero to fourteen feet, is 396 feet in length and is ten feet wide at its top. Again, Smithson’s interest in the spiral shape is evident in this work, where the almost completed circle is actually the beginnings of the center or heart of the spiral shape. The work was built on a private piece of land that is part of a ranch in the Texas panhandle. “While passing time in New Mexico, [Holt and Smithson] met a friend, Tony Shafrazi, who told of a ranch with desert lakes he was about to visit in the Texas Panhandle. The thought of desert lakes teased Smithson’s imagination to such an extent that he and Holt decided to go along” (Coplans in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 50). Smithson worked at the site, sketching and staking out the shape of the piece, reworking the dimensions and the scale. The piece of land on the Marsh Ranch where the work was constructed was originally submerged under eight feet of water, due to the fact that the site was in a lake that had been formed by a dam. Holt and Smithson staked out the piece before the dam was emptied. The dam was not emptied until after Smithson’s death, and all that was completed on the work before his death was the placement of the stakes. The
work was actually staked out three different times until Smithson was finally satisfied. After the third staking Smithson, a photographer and a pilot went up in a small aircraft to photograph the latest configuration on July 20, 1973. The plane, which was flying low over the site, stalled and dove into the ground, killing the pilot and the two passengers on board.

After Smithson's death Holt was approached by Richard Serra about completing Smithson's last work. Holt, who thought that the work should be built, agreed and they enlisted the help of Tony Shafrazi to complete the work.

It took about three weeks for the Amarillo Ramp to be built. I know objections will be voiced as to whether it really is a piece by Smithson, and whether during the process of building, Smithson would not have altered his plan. But Holt attended all the initial planning. She worked with him on many of his projects, and Smithson discussed with her the final shape of the Amarillo Ramp in great detail, including the use and piling of the rock from the nearby quarry, from which he had decided to draw material. Smithson left specific drawings giving the size, gradation of the slope, and the staked-out shape of the piece in the water. It must be remembered, too, that Smithson never visualized the final design of any work as completely predetermined. The workers who built the Spiral Jetty were not hired hands; they offered their own suggestions as to how the machines and materials could be employed to realize Smithson's plan. This mode of approach is vital to the anticlassical side of Smithson's temperament (Coplans in Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 52).
CHAPTER 4
HOLT AND SMITHSON'S AESTHETIC RELATIONSHIP

"Nancy Holt was Bob's wife and confidante and fellow artist- they had a marvelously synergiesic relation which enhanced them both as a couple and as a pair of disparate and independent persons. Bob in relation to women was a stranger to both chivalry and chauvinism- he asked no quarter and gave none" (Andre, 102). The impetus for my research was a question that involved determining if Nancy Holt influenced Robert Smithson's artwork, or if Smithson influenced Holt's works. How I wanted to answer this question, specifically, was by comparing Holt's artworks that were created between 1969 and 1973 to some of the works created by Smithson during that same time. This proved challenging for several reasons. I wanted to discuss Smithson's more important works, but at the same time I needed to choose works that would attempt to answer my research question, that is, to show that an influence on Holt or by Holt exists. Are these two criteria mutually exclusive? Perhaps. But I think that some degree of influence exists between these two artists, although perhaps not to the degree that I had hoped for.
At the very least there are similarities between Holt's and Smithson's approaches to their work. There were recurring themes in their works, themes which they explored repeatedly. Holt was interested in the circle, and Smithson was interested in the spiral. Many of Holt's works utilize the circle: Views Through a Sand Dune (1972- destroyed), Missoula Ranch Locators (1972), Locating #1 and Locating #2 (1972), Locator With Spotlight and Sunlight (1973), Zeroing In (1973), Going Around in Circles (1973), Holes of Light (1973), Hydra's Head (1974), Sun Tunnels (1973-1976), Stone Enclosure Rock Rings (1977-1978), Polar Circle (1979, destroyed), and Star Crossed (1979-1980). And many of Smithson's works, from the latter half of the 1960's until his death, utilized the spiral: Mirror Strata (1966-1969), Shift (1967), Gyrostasis (1968), Aerial Map: Proposal for Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport (1967), Spiral Jetty (1970), Spiral Hill (1971), Pierced Spiral (1971), Amarillo Ramp (1973). Smithson was also interested in entropy, the second law of thermodynamics. This interest permeated his writings and several of his works, including Asphalt Rundown (1969) and Partially Buried Woodshed (1970).

Holt and Smithson had several relationships: they were married, they lived together and they collaborated, artistically, together. Smithson and Holt were married in 1963, four years after Smithson's first art exhibition, and whereas Smithson had been interested in and creating art
since he was a young child, Holt did not begin to create art until 1968. However, Holt worked with Smithson on several of his projects before coming into her own, artistically, and they co-created four films together. In 1966, Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and fellow artist Robert Morris went to the Great North Quarry near Patterson, New Jersey, "a trip recorded by twelve photographs of fence-climbing in bleak landscapes" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 41). In 1967, Smithson, Holt, Robert Morris, artist Carl Andre and gallery owner Virginia Dwan went on "a two day site selection trip to the Pine Barrens and Atlantic City" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Sculpture, 41). In 1968 Smithson, Holt and the artist Michael Heizer went to the Franklin Mineral Dump site in Franklin, New Jersey on a site scouting trip, and to Mono Lake, Nevada where they looked for sites and made a film together, entitled Mono Lake (1968). That same year Smithson and Holt visited slate quarries in Pennsylvania and Civil War battlefields (Smithson in Hobbs’ Robert Smithson: Retrospective, 33). On many of these excursions Holt accompanied Smithson and took many of the photographs documenting the site and the site excursions. It was on these various site excursions that Holt began to work as a photographer, and perhaps this is how her and Smithson’s interest in working in film began and where her interest in "locators" came from. It was also on these site scoutings
that Holt first encountered the landscapes that so intrigued her; the same landscapes that became the locations for several of her works during Smithson’s lifetime and after his death.

A specific example of Smithson’s influence on Holt’s artwork is Smithson’s use of maps in several of his works created prior to 1969, the year Holt first began work on *Buried Poems*, a work that also involves maps. In 1967 Smithson created *Untitled* (folded map of Beaufort Inlet); *Entropic Pole; New Jersey, New York; Aerial Map Proposal for Dallas–Fort Worth Regional Airport*, and he used maps as part of the documentation for several of his site-nonsites. The use of maps is also an inherent part of Smithson’s “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” article, which appeared in *Art International* in March, 1968.

An interesting source of influence on Smithson by Holt is mentioned in Robert Hobbs’ book *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*. In the introduction to the text, Hobbs has divided Smithson’s career into several identifiable groups. One of these groups includes a group of works that Smithson exhibited at the Richard Castellane Gallery in 1962 that “shows a renewal of his boyhood interest in natural history catalyzed by Nancy Holt’s concern at that time with biology” (Hobbs, *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, 12). The documentation of Smithson’s interest in natural history has been extensive, particularly from an interview that Paul
Cummings conducted with Smithson on July 14 and 19, 1972, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. He also talked about his feelings towards the Museum of Natural History in the article "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art" (1968).

In addition, I think that Nancy Holt influenced Smithson simply by being his partner, in life and in love; by being his primary photographer; by accompanying him on many of his art excursions; by editing his writings both during his life and after his death. Robert Smithson's influence on Holt is apparent due to the fact that Holt was not formally trained as an artist, and did not begin to create art until 1968, after her marriage to Smithson. And when she did begin to make art it was similar to Smithson's—earthworks and the use of maps, an interest in geologic time. What interested Robert Smithson (besides the already discussed terms of entropy and dialectic) was "[taking] many formalist bywords of the period, such as "presentness," "surface," and "sheer opticality," and [deciding] to base his art in their diametric opposites: absence rather than presence; referential points instead of sensuous surfaces; and nonseeing in place of optics" (Hobbs, Robert Smithson: Retrospective, 13). What Nancy Holt was interested in was creating "works [that] embody the task of discovery, of finding a place, exploring it, and becoming aware of one's perceptions of it heightened by the focus provided by the
work's form, its placement, and its invitation to meditate on the relationships between the local and the universal, the immediate and the distant, the inner and the outer" (Norwood and Monk, 211). When Holt was searching for the location for Sun Tunnels, she chose an area near the Bonneville Salt Flats because "the rocks in the distance are ageless..."Time" takes on a physical presence...Being part of that kind of landscape, and walking on earth that has surely never been walked on before, evokes a sense of being on this planet, rotating in space, in universal time" (Holt, Artforum, 34-35). Similarly, when Smithson was working on Spiral Jetty, he chose the location that he did because he liked "landscapes that suggest prehistory. As an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the persona of a geological agent where man actually becomes part of the process, rather than overcoming it... (Smithson in Flam, 298). It could be argued that Holt and Smithson shared a similar approach to their art which is a result of Smithson's influence on Holt, since Spiral Jetty preceded Sun Tunnels. However, I think that it is not a case of influence, or cause and effect, but rather that Holt and Smithson shared a similar philosophy and approach to their art; that Smithson's development was enhanced, or furthered, by his relationship with Holt, and vice-versa.
Perhaps the comparison between Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson is not a fair one to make, but because they were married, I think the comparison, nonetheless, is a compelling one.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION:

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD OF ART EDUCATION

The relationship between Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson is an interesting and complex one, as most working and personal relationships are. What I discovered during the course of my research was that Holt and Smithson shared a unique working relationship, where a type of 'give and take' attitude was present. They collaborated together in a manner that was non-competitive and supportive; this was not a case of male genius/presence and female absence. They worked with each other and not against each other, and it seems that this couple did not feel that there was a spotlight to steal, nor did it need to be shared. They both had autonomy within their artistic relationship, and they seemed to enjoy working together.

Did Holt influence Smithson? Yes, and this assertion is supported by the fact that Holt was an editor of Smithson's all important writings, she accompanied him on many of his site excursions, assisted him during the creation of many of his works, and they collaborated on all of Smithson's forays into the medium of video and film. Did Smithson influence
Holt? Yes, and this assertion is supported by the fact that they collaborated on several of Holt's films/videos, Holt did not begin creating art until after her marriage to Smithson, and when her career began the art she did create was in a similar vein to the work that Smithson was creating at the time (1968-1973). Did Holt support his artistic endeavors? Definitely, and Smithson supported hers, since it is not apparent that they ever competed with each other for recognition or attention. Was her career influenced or affected by Smithson? Certainly, although this should not diminish her artistic accomplishments. Does she deserve more credit for the assistance and support she gave Smithson? Yes, although I do not think this is a point of concern for Holt. Was Holt's assistance and support an integral component of Smithson's career and development? Yes, which is not to say that Smithson's career or development would have suffered or been hindered had he not had a relationship with Holt; rather I think that the relationship he and Holt shared—both personally and professionally—enhanced both Smithson's and Holt's artistic endeavors. They seemed to have shared a partnership that was symbiotic and fruitful, and this partnership was integral to the development of Smithson's career and the existence of Holt's.

The research that I have conducted over the past year is important for several reasons, but in particular, it is important for its implications for the field of art.
education. Obviously, for any art educators interested in teaching contemporary art my research will be a valuable tool. Curricula could be developed around the movements in which Holt-earthworks/site-specific- and Smithson-minimalism and earthworks/site-specific- were involved. For those interested in an integrated curriculum, there is a plethora of potential topics which could be used to combine the visual arts with other curricula. Smithson’s interest in entropy is a topic that could be utilized in both an art and physics integrated lesson plan. Smithson’s and Holt’s interest in incorporating geologic time into their artworks could provide an effective visual aid to a geology and art co-curriculum. Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, with all of the symbolism inherent in the spiral shape, could be used as the basis for a mathematics and art curriculum integration; Holt’s Sun Tunnels makes compelling use of the stars and constellations, making an engaging supplement to an astronomy course.

The research question that I developed as my hypothesis—did Holt or Smithson influence each other—looks at the relationship between men and women in the visual arts. This research question raises other questions: Is there still a gender gap where women artists are concerned? Do women receive the same recognition—either financially or critically—as men do? Are the works of male artists valued more than works by female artists? Have these perceptions
changed since Holt and Smithson’s heyday? What stereotypes exist about male artists and female artists and the type of works they produce, or should produce? An extension of this centers around the idea of exploring the nature of other artistic couples’ relationships. There have been numerous heterosexual and same-sex relationships in the worlds of contemporary visual and performing arts: Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner (visual artists); Willem and Elaine deKooning (visual artists); Robert and Sonia Delaunay (visual artists); Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler (visual artists); Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell (visual artists); Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington (visual artists); Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth (visual artists); Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo (visual artists); Yves Tanguy and Kay Sage (visual artists); Chris Burden and Alexis Smith (visual artists); Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe (visual artists); Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg (visual artists); Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith (visual artist and musician/poet); John Cage and Merce Cunningham (musician and dancer/choreographer); Curt Cobain and Courtney Love (musicians), to name but a few. What type of relationships might these couples have shared, artistically speaking? Of course the relationships shared by some of the more famous pairs—like Rivera and Kahlo, Pollock and Krasner, Johns and Rauschenberg—have been examined, explored, researched, and the findings have been documented. However, might these
relationships deserve another look? What things have yet to be documented? How have our attitudes towards women in the arts changed, or been affected by new research or findings? How have the ever changing reputations, that have resulted from certain artists falling in or out of favor over the course of the past century, affected our perceptions or opinions of those artists?

Another aspect of this line of inquiry regards the way in which art history is created. Who gets included in the canon? How are artists' reputations built or unbuilt? Surely there is the possibility that this type of research might uncover a fresh perspective and new appreciation for the artists who comprise the lesser known half of an artistic couple. And from a feminist perspective, the fact that most of the time the lesser known half of the heterosexual couple is the female half, deserves a closer look, or at the very least this "predicament" needs to be re-examined.
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