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# A tour of Nancy Holt's ruins: from entropic monuments to system works

*Visite des ruines de Nancy Holt : des monuments entropiques aux "oeuvres-système"*

**Monica Manolescu**

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- 1 American artist Nancy Holt (1938-2014) addressed the theme of ruins, their diverse and changing forms, and the processes that define them in performances, photographs and site-specific works starting at the end of the 1960s until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Holt repeatedly visited ancient ruins and contemporary degraded landscapes, adopting various attitudes and modes of engagement ranging from the sightseeing tour to intervention that reclaimed precarious contemporary sites, transposing certain functions and features of ancient monumental ruins to her art. Nancy Holt was active at the very beginning of what would later become known as land art,<sup>1</sup> and she continued her artistic career over five decades. She was an early practitioner of land art and conceptual art, and worked in a variety of media (concrete poetry, artists' books, photography, video, sculpture, performance and site-specific installations). She has received less attention than other land artists of her generation despite her role in the experimental landscape of postwar American art.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 Ruins as central theme and inspiration for art-making in the 1960s and 1970s were part of a larger reflection on time and entropy, which resulted in an interest in the nature of monuments, old and new, and in artworks as monuments. Holt's photographic and site-specific work engaged with processes of experiencing time both in the present moment and in connection to celestial cyclical patterns, affording an enlarged, cosmic understanding of the site and suggesting the possibility of a transformed vision and self. Ruins and monuments, ruins as monuments, were central to this endeavor. Holt's art was inspired by a whole range of ruins, from prehistory to contemporary times, and sought to redefine the very notion of ruin to include both prestigious traditional ruins and abject vestiges of consumerism. The ancient ruins that interested Holt were

constructed in the landscape, left to live with the elements in the *longue durée* as embodiments and vehicles of geological and ritual time, displaying certain formal features and performing (sometimes inscrutable) memorial and ceremonial functions. Holt's art established connections between ancient ruins and the more recent ruins of modern life such as landfills, transferring and adapting certain paradigms (the picturesque or celestial observation) across time. Some of her work was inspired by ruins and reflected on ruins, while at the same time being subject to change and degradation, processes that should not be understood as forms of ruination that diminish the work, but as processes that shape versions of the work over time and that determine its becoming (what Nisbet calls "second site"). Holt's site-specific works have deteriorated and some have been renovated, for instance *Dark Star Park* in the early 2000s (Nisbet, *Second Site* 46-47).

- 3 For Robert Smithson (Nancy Holt's husband from 1963 until his untimely death in 1973), a fundamental objective of art was to create an experience of past, present and future all involved simultaneously in a process of temporal resonance and balance marked by degradation and uniformity. While for Smithson entropy was inevitable and attempting to stall it was illusory, Holt's work starting in the 1980s was animated by an ecological impetus and used advanced technology in order to diminish the environmental impact of certain contemporary ruins such as landfills.
- 4 At the end of the 1960s, Holt traveled from New York, where she lived and worked, to visit ruins of various kinds and periods in the United States, Mexico and Europe. Between 1967 and 1969, she toured and photographed suburban abandoned houses in Cedar Grove, New Jersey, old cemeteries in Virginia City, Nevada and Lone Pine, California, Maya monuments in Palenque, Neolithic and a few bronze and iron age sites in England and Wales. On all of these trips she was accompanied by Robert Smithson, but other artists were present as well: Michael Heizer on Holt's first trip to the American West in 1968; Joan Jonas on the first *Stone Ruin Tour* to Cedar Grove, NJ in 1967; Claes and Patty Oldenburg, and Allan Kaprow and his family on the second *Stone Ruin Tour* to Cedar Grove, NJ in 1968. For Robert Smithson, the trips to England and Wales, to the American West and to Palenque informed his theoretical writings and gave rise to some of his most important works. Similarly, Holt produced significant individual works in the American West and in England, for instance the two photographic series *Western Graveyards* (1968) and *Trail Markers* (1969). Holt shared a certain number of core notions and practices with the postminimalist, conceptual and land artists that she interacted with, but she developed a distinctive body of work and evolved towards an original crystallization of ideas about time, monuments, and vision, moving in directions inspired by ecology, as well as myth and ritual.
- 5 I will examine two aspects of Holt's reflection on ruins that illustrate a move from the concerns of land art with monumentality, temporality, entropy and perception, to later, more emphatically ecological art that combines those previous concerns with land reclamation, oriented towards rehabilitation and relying on technology. The meanings that Holt extracted from ancient ruins were diffused into a hybrid reworking of ideas from other periods (for instance, prehistoric or picturesque paradigms) that produced, on the one hand, site-specific monumental works redeploying materials and functions associated with ancient ruins, and subjected to entropic change; and, on the other hand, vast ecosystemic works that reclaim the relics of modern consumption (such as waste), and whose forms and objectives are also inspired by ancient ruins. In

both cases, the articulation of the paradigms of ancient monuments and a contemporary reflection on time, situatedness and ecology is essential, though distinctly expressed. An evolution of the trope of ruins can be traced across Holt's artistic discourse and practice, with emphasis on the specificity of geographies, histories and sites, with an American and transatlantic component. The attention to specific, individualized contexts is articulated with the attempt to activate certain models of perception that synchronize the individual, the earth and the cosmos. These models recall the language of archetypes and symbolism (arguably inspired at least in part by Jung and Bachelard), which suggest implicit potentialities of the work that can be awakened in individual or collective experience (or not). This synthesis between a reflection on the specificity of sites and the activation of certain supposedly generic (though historically determined) experiences of cosmic time places the individual within a complex temporal structure in which the present, history and cyclic patterns of temporal configuration coexist.

## Ancient ruins in England, Wales and Mexico: "layers of human history"

- 6 In August and September 1969, Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson took a trip to England and Wales. Robert Smithson was participating in the exhibition *When attitudes become form* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. They visited ancient ruins, gardens landscaped by Lancelot "Capability" Brown and national parks in Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon and Wales. They explored the prehistoric sites of Stonehenge, Avebury, Silbury Hill, Pentre Ifan and the Oxted chalk pit quarry in Surrey (**Figure 1**). They also met with English land artists Richard Long and Keith Arnatt. Holt made her first *Buried Poem* for Smithson at Wistman's Wood and Smithson made several *Mirror Displacements*.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1. Nancy Holt, *Old Sarum* (1969)



Copyright : Art © Holt/Smithson Foundation/ADAGP, Paris, 2023. [https://media.tate.org.uk/aztate-prd-ew-dg-wgtail-st1-ctr-data/images/old-sarum-nachy-holt\\_0.width-840.jpg](https://media.tate.org.uk/aztate-prd-ew-dg-wgtail-st1-ctr-data/images/old-sarum-nachy-holt_0.width-840.jpg)

- 7 In an interview dating from 2012 in which Holt discusses the significance of the trip to England and Wales for her own practice and Smithson's, she subsumes archeological ruins and eroded rocks to the observation of human intervention and time made visible in the landscape. She identifies a transatlantic mirroring between the ruins of England and Wales visited in 1969 and the ruins of New Jersey she had visited in *Stone Ruin Tours* in 1967, but the trope of America as a young country leads her to distinguish between American ruins and "the ruins of Western civilization":

I've had a long-lasting interest in archaeological sites. Old Sarum is an awesome place. We saw land forms, especially the banks and ditches, which functioned for a culture that existed more than 3,000 years ago. You can feel the layers of human history as you stand on the ancient ruins. Bob and I were both fascinated by how the landscape over long periods of time has been changed and reformed by human beings out of necessity, not just as something to look at. I had already done my piece *Stone Ruin Tour* 1967 and 1968, which consisted of taking a small group of people on a tour of a crumbling labyrinthine garden with stone walls, overlooks, and disappearing stairways, in the woods of northern New Jersey. And I had made a series of photographs of old American West graveyards. Each grave is unique, with most of them surrounded by dilapidated fences of various materials and styles. Seeing the ruins in England reinforced my interest. You have to remember that we Americans live in a young country, so we don't get to see many of the ruins of Western civilization. We do, however, have extraordinary Native American ruins, such as those at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, near where I live. (Holt, interview with Grant)

- 8 The term "landscape" is loaded with artistic and historical significance. Holt shifts it towards a paradigm of intervention, central to land art, informed by (but distinct from) the tradition of the picturesque.<sup>4</sup> The remark on the "change" and "reform" brought about by human beings defines the role of the artist in land art as agent, not merely

observer of the landscape. In a layering of history and ruins, Holt also talks about the mines they visited in Wales, which qualify as ruins of an industrial past:

These structures are now overgrown and broken down. Bob and I both grew up in northern New Jersey, where you could find hidden quarries, forbidden places, scattered throughout the landscape. The coal mines in Wales were like that too. These so-called depressing, forgotten places that fall within the gaps of one's consciousness are often described negatively. But if you look at them with a neutral eye, you start to see them differently. You begin to see a beauty in their entropic condition. (Holt, interview with Grant)

- 9 In her reflection on ancient and recent ruins, Holt singles out the tradition of the English picturesque that she and Smithson acknowledged as a significant antecedent for an understanding of the artist as agent transforming nature. The picturesque is characterized primarily as “working with the landscape”:

At the time we were both interested in the ideas about the Picturesque put forward by the Reverend William Gilpin, as well as Uvedale Price's *Essay on the Picturesque* 1794. Price, like Capability Brown, understood how to work with the landscape – to work as nature's agent. (Holt, interview with Grant)

- 10 The privileged status of the English picturesque as a major reference for land art was developed by Smithson in “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape” (1973), where he examined the American version of the picturesque practiced by Olmsted in Central Park.<sup>5</sup> Smithson traced Price's inspiration back to Burke, with a material twist: Price “tried to free landscaping from the ‘picture’ gardens of Italy into a more physical sense of the temporal landscape” (Smithson 159). The picturesque is “based on real land” (Smithson 160) and shows awareness of geological and temporal phenomena of sedimentation. The makers of picturesque landscapes intervened in the material order of things, used various kinds of matter (mud, earth, stones) and attempted a temporal mapping of the site.
- 11 For Holt and Smithson, what is conventionally called “ruins” is redefined to signify entropic change and strata of time uncovered by the artist intervening in the landscape. Ruins stand at the intersection of the geological, the archeological and the industrial. They distill a variety of concerns: with erosion, with stratified human history, with the artist transforming the landscape. Holt departs from the posture of observer of nature, urging for interaction between the artist and the landscape, out of which evolving works emerge, which can be qualified as future ruins, in the sense of an inescapable change over time. Ruins constitute the given material of the site and also the result of any engagement with the site, in a logic which is fully adopted by the pioneer land artist.
- 12 A crucial question is what features inspired Nancy Holt's art after visiting the prehistoric monuments of Stonehenge and Salisbury. As Maria Stavrinaki shows, the Neolithic played a major role in American postminimalist art of the 1960s and 1970s (Stavrinaki 266). An additional element worth considering is Holt's trip to Mexico in 1969 with Robert Smithson and gallerist Virginia Dwan, one year after she visited English and Welsh megaliths. On this trip to Mexico, she visited the Maya complex in Palenque, whose *Sun Temple* (7<sup>th</sup> century AD) she photographed in *Ruin View: the Temple of the Sun* (1969) (**Figure 2**). The sun temple is observed through a stone structure, illustrating Holt's interest in framed perception and compartmentalized space.

Figure 2. Nancy Holt, *Ruin View: the Temple of the Sun* (1969)



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- 13 The sun temple was astronomically oriented to serve ritual purposes or to manifest hierophanies, conjoining what is seen and how it is seen. A common feature of the Neolithic structure of Stonehenge and of the temple belonging to the classic period of Maya civilization that seems to have inspired Holt (Shaffer 175) concerns their astronomical function in observing celestial bodies, structuring the human experience of time in relation to religious figures and events, with the major difference that megalithic monuments require interpretation in the absence of any written source, while the Maya monuments in Palenque are contextualized and decoded by Maya glyphs. Despite this distinct relationship to writing, the historiography of the 1960s understood Maya culture in terms of a preliterate culture, in line with a Western fantasy of primitivism. More generally, as Roberts shows, Mexico, Central America and pre-Columbian civilizations were erroneously understood as “prehistoric” civilizations. The book that Smithson carried with him as he traveled through the Yucatan peninsula (Victor von Hagen’s *World of the Maya*, 1960) insisted that despite their writing systems, the Maya were a “preliterate people” (Roberts 108). Thus, Stonehenge and the Maya temple both share the regime of “prehistoric” time (historically accurate for one and inaccurately fantasized for the other).<sup>6</sup>
- 14 It is striking to see the distinct conceptual pathways that Holt and Smithson adopted during (and starting from) their trip to Mexico. Holt became increasingly interested in joining the earthly and the celestial through framing strategies in photographs and site-specific installations that were sometimes modeled on ancient monumental structures. In his Palenque-situated pieces, Smithson also reflected on vision in the wake of his “Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers” essay (1966), further elaborated on monumentality and its representations through the use of mirrors, and further refined the notion of “ruins in reverse.” The trip to Mexico inspired him to produce the essay “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” the installation *Yucatan*



*Mirror Displacements* and the “Hotel Palenque” conference and photographs. Roberts comments on Smithson’s “anti-archeological tactics” which consist in “not picturing ruins”: “none of the famous Maya ruins appears in any of his photographs, even though several of the installations were assembled within eyeshot of the major archeological sites” (Roberts 98). Holt’s photograph *Ruin View: the Temple of the Sun* shows the ruins that Smithson chose not to show. Seen through a hole, the temple channels vision and reinforces focus. The effect oscillates between periscopic and telescopic perspective, which embraces a relevant fragment of the site, magnified through circumscribed framing. The surrounding frame of black rock is massively visible, its material ruggedness perceptible in a blurry way. For the origin/originator of the view, the frame is as important as the object viewed. It is through the frame that the significant fragment is raised to an almost revelatory status of intense contemplation, although it is not clear what revelation is expected. Holt’s interest in Bachelard and Jung (Williams 185), with their reliance on constantly revisited archetypes and myths couched in language and image should be articulated with her interest in joint architectural and astronomic configurations as expressions of spiritual meaning, as material formations that may lead to epiphanic experience. The “ruin” in the title of the photograph (*Ruin View*) seems to be on a par with the “view.” For Holt, the redeployment of vision is predicated on the ability to extract one or several pieces out of a larger site and grant them a special potential for activating the viewer. *Ruin View* foreshadows her later “locators,” structures that emphasize the individual experience of perception in the absence of camera and lens.

- 15 In *Ruin View*, Holt merges the minimalist and postminimalist interest in vision and their simultaneous reflexive questioning of its power by anchoring the viewer in the site-specific work and by paradoxically fragmenting and enhancing vision in a manner that is reminiscent of but not entirely reducible to the function of astronomical observation associated with prehistoric monuments. The focus on a specific fragment of a larger architectural ensemble (here, the Temple of the Sun) also draws attention to a heterogeneous construction and perception of space, in which the sacred stands out (is made to stand out) in relation to other less densely connoted spaces.
- 16 Holt integrates a concern with celestial observation in several works, including her most famous, *Sun Tunnels* (1976), but the morphology of megalithic monuments is more obviously present in *Stone Enclosure. Rock Rings* (1977-1978), on the campus of Western Washington University. Built to human proportion (contrary to the megaliths), it consists of two circular, concentric stone walls, with arched entryways and round openings. Holt worked with astronomers to align the arches in the walls North-South with the North Star, an important celestial landmark for the northwest coast navigators, and to align the holes with the cardinal points (Clark-Langager 30-33; Shaffer 174). **(Figure 3)**

Figure 3. Nancy Holt, *Stone Enclosure. Rock Rings* (1977-1978)



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- 17 Holt seems to have taken over, from the prehistoric megaliths of England and Wales, and from the Maya temples, the function of guiding human perception in order to synchronize it with astronomical phenomena and sustain a more complex and ample sense of time. Monumental ruins as models are recontextualized to provide a sense of time through an alignment between human vision and astronomical configurations, between human time and cosmic time, made possible by the site-specific work. The reflection on time is also present in the geological research done by Holt. The age and type of rock are carefully documented. Here, the rock is 230-million-year-old schist from the Triassic period, extracted close to the site. The work is “about time,” about perception in/of space thanks to specific reference points, and about bringing the sky down to the earth. Holt did not recognize the astronomical model of megalithic monuments as “a conscious motivation” or a “direct inspiration” (Holt, interview with Donnelly).<sup>7</sup> However, her work actualizes a certain idea or imaginary of what prehistoric perception might have been in relation to monumentality and the astronomical calendar. We can argue that *Stone Enclosure* is ruino-morphic and ruino-reflexive, in the sense that it embodies a series of discourses on history and morphology: its material is geologically inflected, it echoes the shapes of megalithic monuments and emulates their orientation. The ritual and religious function of monuments such as Stonehenge is reimaged in Holt’s structures. It is recoded in the land artist’s project of anchoring the viewer in the site. The site is expanded to connect land, human bodies and celestial bodies, and perception is (de)structured to stimulate an awareness of higher entities, which are materially visible (stars and planets) and mysteriously transcendent (indeterminate). Where the revelation might lie is an open

question. Holt connected her reflection on the transcendent function of the monumental ruins of the past with a reflection on the workings of the psyche, with her own experience of the work of art as conducive to psychic transformation. *Stone Enclosure* produced something “deep within her psyche” (Holt quoted by Miller). However, there is no spiritual or psychic directive explicit in the work. It is rather an implicit potential at the intersection of revisited archetypal forms and individual experience situated in space and time.

- 18 After the megaliths, temples and ancient ruins that inspired her work in the 1960s and 1970s, Holt addressed other versions of contemporary ruins in the 1980s, focusing on degraded landscapes and their restoration. These works continued to express an interest in monumental configurations coordinated with astronomical ones, creating new interconnected spaces and opening up transformative aesthetic and psychic possibilities.

## Degraded landscapes and System Works

- 19 Reclamation projects deal with contemporary ruins as vestiges of relatively recent human activity and sites of artistic intervention. Orvell identifies a shifting understanding of ruins in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “symbols of the present and of the accepted condition of contemporary civilization” (Orvell). Land reclamation is predicated on this accepted condition. In the case of earthworks, land reclamation aims not so much to bring ameliorative sustainability to polluted or used-up land as it aims to turn these precarious sites into art. This had been a concern for earthworks since the late 1960s and early 1970s, in particular Robert Smithson’s projects such as *Spiral Jetty* (1970, on the Great Salt Lake in Utah), “near an old oil mining region” (Smithson 380), *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (completed in a sand quarry in Emmen, the Netherlands, in 1971) and *Bingham Copper Mining Pit - Utah Reclamation Project* (sketched in 1973 and never completed).<sup>8</sup> Smithson’s dialectical play between industry on the one hand and the possibility of an ecology without idealism on the other motivates his attempts at reclamation:

Art can become a physical resource that mediates between the ecologist and the industrialist. The Peabody Coal, Atlantic Richfield, Garland Coal and Mining, Pacific Power and Light, and Consolidated Coal companies must become aware of art and nature, or else they will leave pollution and ruin in their wake. (Smithson 379)

- 20 Smithson’s reclamation projects take extractive industries (oil and coal) as their starting point and do not seek to remediate the site as ecosystem. In the project I will discuss, Holt designed a reclamation project around a very different kind of site associated with the accumulations (rather than the extractions) of modernity: a landfill. Her project is distinctly construed compared to Smithson’s: she strives to find a balance between ecological restoration and artistic intervention, from a “site-reformative” perspective that is dominant today in ecologically-oriented art.<sup>9</sup>
- 21 Landfills as aggregates of consumer and capitalist waste are heterotopian, abject and deviant places on the margins which are kept far away from the circuits of everyday life, but inescapably connected to them, difficult to manage and contain. Garbage as “liquid”<sup>10</sup> entropic matter is a figure of dispersion, but also of concealment, oblivion and exclusion. It can be claimed that landfills create a new archeology and even a “new geology” (Thill 3). These terms invite a parallel with the practice of earthworks, which

combined an inquiry into archeology and geology with an inquiry into the relics of postindustrialism. As Nick Yablon shows, contrary to classical ruins that strike a balance between structural integrity and natural processes (fundamental to the ruin according to Simmel) and that exude an aura of noble antiquity, modern ruins tend to disintegrate in less attractive outcomes. Ernst Bloch complained that the objects of the machine age “cannot grow old, but only rot in the course of the years.”<sup>11</sup> These modern ruins were also illegible to an extent that far exceeded the conventional quality of traditional ruins as privileged figures of hermeneutic decipherment (Yablon 8-9). If the landfill illustrates the rotting ruin, immediately readable as a final (and ongoing) product of industrial and household consumption, its deeper significance is not as easily unraveled: what does it stand for? How does its relevance signify in terms of a philosophy of modernity and an ethics of future conduct? On a practical level, other challenging questions arise: what to do with these leaking ruins, where to place them, who should be in charge of them in environmentally responsible ways?<sup>12</sup> Holt formulates possible answers, adapted to a specific site with a specific history and shaped by her own artistic interest in ruins, reclamation, and the reconfiguration of a whole system around a viewer anchored in the site.

- 22 One of Holt's most ambitious land reclamation projects was *Sky Mound*, in New Jersey, which started in 1984 and was never finished.<sup>13</sup> She had just completed her first reclamation project, *Dark Star Park* in Rosslyn, Arlington County, Virginia (1979-1984).<sup>14</sup> Holt was invited by the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission to reclaim a 57-acre landfill in the New Jersey Meadowlands, four miles away from Manhattan, lying in between the New Jersey Turnpike and the Amtrak railway. Holt intended to transform this vast garbage dump by reducing environmental damage and by recasting it as a sculpture park and astronomical observatory:

The landfill is a place where sky and ground meet, where you can track the Sun, Moon, and stars with the naked eye, and where you have 360-degree panoramic views of Manhattan, Newark, the Pulaski Skyway, networks of highways and train tracks, old steel turn-bridges, and here and there decaying remnants of the Industrial Revolution. As soon as I saw the site I knew that I wanted to transform the landfill into a park/artwork. (Holt in Oakes 61)

- 23 Holt presents the site as an interconnected visual and structural universe, a multi-level network that articulates sky and earth, various kinds of infrastructures, urban and suburban architectures, and various asynchronous temporalities (the Industrial Revolution and postwar highways). The ruins of the Industrial Revolution and the ruins of the garbage dump coexist as remnants of human activity that can be compensated but not suppressed by artistic intervention. The linear and inexorable temporality of decaying ruins is confronted with the promise of a new beginning, marked by reconstruction and reparation. Recycling is central to the project, since “the methane gas generated by the decomposition of the organic garbage in the landfill is being collected and used as an alternative energy source for the community, supplying about ten percent of the gas used locally” (Holt in Oakes 61). **(Figure 4)**

Figure 4. Aerial view of the original *Sky Mound* site (1984)



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- 24 The park that she wanted to build was meant to be divided into a solar and a lunar area, with gravel paths in alignment with the solstices, ten mounds, a large sphere encircled by a moat to represent the moon, torches visible from the planes overhead and fueled by gases recovered from the tons of garbage below, and a pond attracting wildlife and draining water from the landfill. (Figure 5)

Figure 5. Nancy Holt, *Sky Mound: Sun Viewing Area with Pond and Star Viewing Mounds* (1985). Graphite on paper



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- 25 Holt imagined *Sky Mound* as a sanctuary for wildlife and people, a space to be observed, a pause within a sprawling urban and technological network. The park was meant to be seen from all around and to provide views of the industrial and urban architecture of Jersey City and New York, surrounded by networks of roads, railroads, and visible to planes landing at Newark Airport, 'while under the observer's feet would be the waste from this built environment' (as described in 'Nancy Holt: *Sky Mound*, *Drawing Matter*, which provided information for the description of the *Sky Mound* project in this paragraph). It was supposed to rise in the transitional, circulatory space of New Jersey and New York as a site to look at, but also to explore directly. In 1991, funding was



halted and the project stopped short in the early stages, after Holt constructed the pond on top of the mound.

- 26 *Sky Mound* shows Holt's interest in the built environment within which she placed art installations she called System Works, which are "exposed fragments of vast hidden systems, they are part of open-ended systems, part of the world" (Holt in Williams 68). *Sky Mound* was a system work that was attuned to circuits of transportation, industry and waste, and to the solar system, while constituting a system in itself.<sup>15</sup> Holt, yet again, lays emphasis on astronomical observation, aligning the observer on top of the landfill with celestial phenomena, thus "bringing the universe to the human being" (Holt, interview with Marter 32). Between concealment and revelation, the garbage dump is reinvented as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century buried archeological site whose waste contents are hidden, but whose observation structures reveal the movement of celestial bodies and their cyclic temporality. The linearity of entropy is thus complexified by the circular time of stars and planets, by the circuits of recycled gas, and by the cycles of vegetation and bird migration.
- 27 Holt sees garbage as an ancient product with a long history, whereas landfills are recent creations:
- These heaps of rubbish will be seen as the artifacts of our generation, our legacy to the future. So there is no escaping our responsibility for making these mounds of decaying matter safe by using the latest closure technology, and eventually reinterpreting and reclaiming them, giving them new social and aesthetic meanings and functions. (Holt in Oakes 63)
- 28 Designing a technologically advanced and artistically relevant reclamation project for a landfill is an ethical matter for Holt, a question of artistic responsibility with a social dimension, grounded in the history of consumption. *Sky Mound* appears as a synthesis of technology meant to contain the leaks from the landfill efficiently and safely, and observational, even contemplative, monumental architecture reminiscent of astronomical observatories that exceed the mere function of observation, ascending into the realms of religious and psychic transformation. *Sky Mound* encompasses functions and objectives that belong to distinct temporalities and modes, a paradoxical proto-post archeo-futurity that crystallizes the evolution of the concern with entropy that Holt had started to explore at the end of the 1960s.
- 29 The mound is a significant choice of monument associated primarily with North-American ruins, but also with European ones. The earliest ruins of North America were earthen mounds documented by Spanish settlers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and first excavated and researched in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Orvell, ch. 1). These burial and ceremonial structures had been constructed by Native American communities referred to collectively as the Mound Builders in the region of the Great Lakes, the Ohio River Valley and the Mississippi River valley over a period of 5000 years. Silbury Hill, the largest prehistoric artificial mound in Europe which Holt visited with Smithson in 1969, did not serve a burial purpose and its actual function remains unknown. Adopting the form of an ancient monument that used earth as its primary material, Holt recontextualizes earthworks in the wastelands of a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American urban environment. Contemporary waste is controlled by technology and contained in a mound inspired by early Native American monuments, as she explains in her proposal draft dating from 1986 (Holt in Williams, 214-216) and also in interviews:

The feeling of awe I frequently feel standing on top of the landfill is similar to the wonder I experienced on the huge American Indian mounds in Miamisburg, Ohio

and in the Cahokia site along the Mississippi River in Illinois. Both kinds of human-made mounds were built to meet vital social necessities, but here the similarity ends. Landfills result, of course, from the essential need to rid ourselves of the used-up, cast-off materials of our culture, while American Indian mounds derived from deep spiritual, social, and ritualistic needs. (Holt in Oakes 61)

- 30 The “awe” Holt experiences is a key element in an affective experience of landfills and garbage that recalls the vocabulary of the sublime. She also uses the term in relation to *Sun Tunnels*, in a 2007 letter protesting against the potential sale of a parcel of land close to the work: “For this sense of awe of the universe to continue to inspire, an unimpeded view to the horizon is absolutely necessary” (Holt, qtd. in Loe 140). While the term “awe” is warranted in the context of *Sun Tunnels*, it appears surprising in the context of a landfill. “Awe” designates an ambiguous structure of feeling in which contraries coexist. Waste itself occupies a middle ground between desire and rejection: “waste is the expression of expended, transmuted, or suspended desire and is therefore the *ur-object*” (Thill 8). Holt’s reaction on top of the landfill shows a conflicted affective relationship with garbage and its sites of containment. It also gives garbage a privileged position as residue of what Holt calls “our culture,” a trace that grants access to a certain understanding of the latter through what it discards.<sup>16</sup>
- 31 Holt refers to landfills as “shunned earthen forms – forgotten trash heaps, relegated to the realms of the unconscious” (Holt in Oakes 63). She displaces the debate from mere material concealment to the unconscious, where garbage is suppressed just like any sordid or shameful content. Her artistic response to garbage is both material and immaterial, resorting to technology and construction on the one hand, and stimulating vision, seeking to activate a sensorial and even inner experience on the other. Holt finds a solution for the afterlife of garbage in this particular location, imagining ways in which it can be ecologically kept under regulated control and ways in which it can become part of a larger ecosystem, even visually and experientially central to it without its contents being displayed. Her desire to give new aesthetic and social meaning to the landfill as a condensed modern ruin takes the compensatory form of a celestially and archeologically-inspired mound that confronts the viewer with regimes of celestial observation and temporal rhythms (solstices and equinoxes) that have lost their meaning in the everyday life of modern and postmodern humans, especially in urban and suburban contexts, but that she makes possible for them to experience again.<sup>17</sup> The landfill becomes an elsewhere without being removed or displaced away from sight, a metamorphosed repository of waste integrated in the larger system of highways, postindustrial landscape and the solar system.
- 32 The status of reclamation projects in relation to the economic and global systems that have produced the sites to be reclaimed is a complex issue. It can be claimed that it is problematic for Holt to propose a land reparation work inserted in existing urban and technological systems without challenging them. The artist appears to accept and condone the contexts and means of waste management. Holt’s art seems to beautify them, although she does not seek to camouflage the fact that *Sky Mound* is built on a landfill. However, it can be argued that this is a limitation that Holt is well aware of and addresses directly. Instead of projecting an ideal waste-free situation, Holt confronts garbage and the design of its afterlife. She becomes the interlocutor of urban planners, engineers, architects, politicians, and local communities, giving an artistic and practical response in the aftermath of an accumulation of junk that cannot be undone,

and being lucid in her discourse about limiting consumption in responsible ways in the future.

- 33 This tour of Nancy Holt's ruins has traced a significant shift from the monuments of land art modeled after ancient ruins to direct engagement with the ecological aspects of land reclamation and contemporary ruins. The geographical trajectory followed here has taken us from the United States to England, Wales, Mexico, and back to the United States, and has revealed various modes of interaction with architecture and ruins, from Manhattan to the wastelands of New Jersey. Holt's versatile engagement with ancient and new ruins turns them into critical, reflexive, phenomenological and contextualized structures that balance several temporalities. From a historical point of view, Holt's work is remarkable in that it connects ancient monuments and the picturesque with paradigms of land art intervention and ecological reclamation. Her ruin-inspired works situate us in space between earth and sky, make us consider our various histories, ancient and modern, connect us to the complex system of the world around and invite us to think of art as a necessary part of a larger ecosystem.

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## NOTES

1. Throughout the article, I will use the term land art to refer to art created using earth and site-specific procedures. The term “earthworks” will be used occasionally to refer to several artists of the first generation “earthworks” (Robert Smithson and Robert Morris in particular) who participated in the *Earth Works* exhibition at Dwan gallery in October 1968. Excellent overviews of land art can be found in Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks. Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (2002), and Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (eds.), *Ends of the Earth. Land Art to 1974* (2012).

2. In the American context, Robert Smithson is the paradigmatic artist through which the field of land art has been studied (see Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* 87). Other land artists who have received a great deal of attention are Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim. Walter De Maria has been considerably less studied, but Nisbet's PhD dissertation and final chapter in his book *Ecologies, Environments and Energy Systems* (181-216) redress this omission. It is striking that the women artists associated with land art have received less scholarly and curatorial attention (Nancy Holt, Agnes Denes, Michelle Stuart). In the case of Nancy Holt, there have been more and more publications and exhibitions devoted to her over the past ten years. A major retrospective was organized at the Bildmuseet, Sweden (June 7, 2022-April 2, 2023), which will travel to the MACBA in Barcelona (July 13 2023-January 7 2024).

3. An exhibition presenting works by Holt and Smithson made during their 1969 trip to England and Wales was curated in 2013 at the John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton, May 10-August 17, 2013.

4. The legacy of the notion of “landscape” in land art and more recent ecological art is extensively treated by Cheetham in *Landscape into Eco Art* (2018). He uses the notion of “articulation” to designate the ways in which earlier practices of landscape were reconceptualized in land art and later ecological art.

5. See Sleeman and Martin for an analysis of Smithson and the Anglo-American picturesque.

6. In “Aligned with Nazca,” Morris comments on the fact that “the Spaniards had ‘liberated’ the Nazca area at the cost of killing every last Indian. None survived to report on what purposes the lines may have served” (Morris 33).

7. In her text about *Sun Tunnels* published in *Artforum*, Holt said: “I had no desire to make a megalithic monument” (35).

8. In the years preceding his death in 1973, Smithson sent out fifty proposals to mining industries. *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* is his only completed reclamation project (Boettger 232 and Ryan). See also Loe (153-154). In his essay on Olmsted, Smithson claims: “My own experience is that the best sites for ‘earth art’ are sites that have been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization or nature's own devastation” (165). Another early reclamation project is Robert Morris's *Earth Project* (1968), on a landfill in Evanston, Illinois.

9. Flint Collins quoted by Mark Cheetham in his discussion of the various paradigms of land reclamation in art (direct action, aesthetic separation and withdrawal, articulation) (Cheetham 9).
10. Boscagli discusses the literal and semantic fluidity of garbage in “Garbage theory. Waste aesthetics” included in her book *Stuff Theory. Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014).
11. The quotes from Georg Simmel’s “The Ruin” (1911) and Ernst Bloch, and the discussion about the changing meanings of ruins are taken from Yablon’s *Untimely Ruins. An Archeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919*, 1-19.
12. For a study of designing the landscape of landfills in an American context, see Engler. For an analysis of waste in urban contexts, see also Lynch’s *Wasting Away*.
13. For a detailed description of Holt’s *Sky Mound* project and its various stages, see Coolidge.
14. *Dark Star Park* was built on a blighted site that Holt described as follows: “This site was a trash site, had been a gas station and turned into a blight. It was all broken asphalt and weeds” (Holt, *Art in the Public Eye. The Making of Dark Star Park*, film, 1988). She was given full control over designing the park, where she installed five gunite spheres, two pools, four steel poles, a stairway and two tunnels. Once a year, on August 1<sup>st</sup> at 9:32, the shadows of two of the spheres and their four adjacent poles align with permanent asphalt shadow patterns outlined on the ground, creating the effect of an eclipse. The date commemorates the day in 1860 when William Henry Ross acquired the land that would become Rosslyn. The work thus cyclically connects the viewers to local history and a celestial timeline. Nisbet identifies a problematic aspect of the work insofar as a date in colonial history and spoliation of Indigenous land is part of its temporal coordinates (Nisbet, *Second Site* 48).
15. See Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* for a larger inquiry into the interconnectedness of biotic and social systems of production in land art.
16. This is reminiscent of Benjamin, in terms of his method of understanding history through the detritus of everyday life, which belongs to different temporalities inherent in the obsolescence of modernity.
17. Holt mentions some of her sculptures and installations (*Dark Star Park, Sun Tunnels, Annual Ring, Solar Rotary*) that have become regular spots of celestial observation on specific days of astronomical significance (Holt, interview with Marter 32-33).

## ABSTRACTS

This article explores the evolving meaning and nature of ruins in American artist Nancy Holt’s practice. A concern with entropy and monumentality was shared by many American artists of the 1960s and 1970s, but Holt developed an original artistic reflection on ruins and the paradigms that frame their construction and interpretation, moving in directions inspired by ecology, as

well as myth and ritual. Discussions of selected works (*Ruin View: The Temple of the Sun*, 1969; *Stone Enclosure*, *Rock Rings*, 1977-1978; and *Sky Mound*, 1984, unfinished) show distinct approaches over time. Site-specific sculpture and land reclamation consecrate ruins as critical and inspirational objects situated in the landscape that allow Holt to develop artworks with ramified temporalities, committed to the history of the site and aligned with celestial phenomena. Versions of contemporary ruins such as waste are embedded in an ecological approach to reclamation that relies on advanced technology to limit environmental damage and produces “system works” that connect the reclaimed site to larger ecosystems and the cosmos.

Cet article explore la nature et la signification changeantes des ruines dans la pratique de l'artiste américaine Nancy Holt. Beaucoup d'artistes américains des années 1960 et 1970 se sont intéressés à l'entropie et aux monuments, mais Holt a élaboré une réflexion originale à ce sujet et a intégré certains paradigmes liés à la construction et à l'interprétation des ruines dans son propre travail, avec un intérêt marqué pour l'écologie, les mythes et les rituels. Plusieurs œuvres aux approches distinctes sont analysées : *Ruin View: The Temple of the Sun* (1969), *Stone Enclosure*, *Rock Rings* (1977-1978) et *Sky Mound* (1984, projet inachevé). La sculpture ancrée dans le site et les projets de réhabilitation consacrent les ruines en tant qu'objets critiques et porteurs d'inspiration situés dans le paysage, qui permettent à Holt de créer des œuvres aux temporalités multiples, ancrées dans l'histoire du site et alignées aux phénomènes célestes. Des ruines contemporaines telles que les déchets s'insèrent dans une approche écologique de réhabilitation qui utilise des technologies de pointe pour limiter les dégâts sur l'environnement et qui produit des « œuvres systèmes » reliant le site aux écosystèmes et au cosmos.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** ruines, monument, entropie, mégalithes, pittoresque, décharges, land art, reclamation art

**Keywords:** ruins, monuments, entropy, megaliths, picturesque, landfills, land art, reclamation art

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