

A Different Lens for the Earthworks Experience

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The Earthworks movement of the 1960s and 70s challenged the conceptual art world by transforming nature into a gallery space. Land artists manipulate existing landscapes, using nature as a medium, to create large-scale works bound to their sites. Both critics and artists have stressed the experiential nature of such work, and as a result, the dominant process for viewing these installations is to visit them in person. Through an analysis of land artist Nancy Holt's photographic piece titled *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels*, this paper reconsiders the most effective method in which viewers interact with Earthworks. Analysis of Holt's work reveals the ways in which the medium of photography alters the Earthworks experience and proposes its use as a more powerful alternative to traditional means of viewing.

Earthworks, also referred to as Land Art, is a conceptual art movement of site-specific sculptures that gained momentum during the 1960s and 70s. Early Earthworks were defined by their manipulation of remote wilderness, often through the excavation or reshaping of an existing landscape [1]. The art form has expanded to include any work bound to its site, which has allowed for the incorporation of man-made materials such as concrete and steel into these projects [2]. The movement's popularity during the 60s and 70s can be attributed in part to the public's increased interest in protectionist environmentalism, a movement that hoped to prevent the disruption of natural ecological systems through the regulation of chemical and land use, as opposed to traditionalist genteel conservation [1]. During this time period, many Land Artists used terrain and ecology as their canvases to add to the discourse about human's relationship to nature. Others found themselves "disenchanted with the commercialism of the art world" and turned to Earthworks as a rejection of capitalist values and culture [2].

In her artwork *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels*, Land Artist Nancy Holt utilizes the medium of photography to document one of her most well-known installations. The art piece is titled *Sun Tunnels* and consists of four large-scale concrete cylinders strategically placed in an 'X' on the desolate surface of Utah's Great Basin Desert. Two of the cylinders frame the sun at sunrise and sunset during the summer solstice, and the other two during the winter solstice. Holt brings more of the cosmos into her sculpture by drilling holes that mimic constellations through each of the concrete shells. For her piece *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels*, Holt photographs one of these concrete cylinders every half hour over a span of fifteen hours then arranges the images chronologically into a gridded pattern [3, Fig. 1]. The resulting photograph allows the viewer to trace the sun's interaction with the site and sculpture throughout the day. Holt's installation changes the way people experience the site, and the composite photograph shapes the way viewers experience the sculpture. Photographic projects such as *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels* contradict the assumption that visiting the site is a requirement for experiencing an Earthwork.

Land Art compels the viewer to reconsider their relationship to the world around them by introducing sculptural

features into the landscape. Land Artist James Turrell explains his approach to the medium as being "concerned with what my spaces direct their seeing to, and hence what they direct our seeing to" [4]. The placement of Holt's sculpture invites the viewer to peer through the large concrete tubes, quite literally framing the sun as it rises and falls above the horizon line, like a magnifying glass bringing a piece of the landscape into focus. In *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels*, the use of negative and positive space directs the viewer's eye toward the horizon just as successfully. The dark shadows that consume much of the photograph act as negative space, bringing the viewer's attention to small circles of positive space at the center of each individual frame. The contrast between the dark shadows and faded landscape enhances the viewer's focus.

The use of photography in documenting these works challenges conventions of how and where Land Art is meant to be experienced. Earthworks are often heralded as "perceptual and experiential" artworks that rely on the "involvement of spectators." Many scholars and art critics feel that visiting an Earthwork in person creates a nuanced relationship between human, sculpture, and site that is not available in art galleries [2]. Land Art is a form of conceptual art which appeals to the elite art sphere, but the concept of reexperiencing the outside world also has a more universal appeal. Earthworks evoke innate human emotions by manipulating the spaces they inhabit. For instance, the distinction between bound spaces, which "enclose firmly by clearly delineating spatial boundaries" and unbound spaces, which are "more open and expansive," create different experiences for users. The former establishes feelings of comfort and security while the latter evokes a sense of freedom [5].

Land Artists' strong use of scale is one possible explanation for these sentiments. According to Renshaw, large-scale Earthworks "render the human spectator insignificantly small" and allow viewers to "reexperience nature's vast scale" [6]. In *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels*, Holt is able to continue this exploration of scale through a photographic medium instead of a sculptural one. At the center of each frame, the far end of the sun tunnel creates a small, circular window into the vast Great Basin Desert. The dark shadows that fall inside the tube take up the majority of the photograph, while the



Hot Sunlight in Sun Tunnels, 1976

actual landscape is confined to a snippet of barren desert scrub against a faint blue sky. This makes the desert feel distant, even though it surrounds the entire sculpture. Within the shadows lie scattered light gaps that resemble constellations, and in the foreground of the last few images shines a funnel of golden light which indicates the sun's presence. The scale of these astronomical elements in comparison to the desert landscape makes the viewer feel closer to the cosmos than to Earth.

Holt's photographic representation of her Earthwork may be a reproduction of her large-scale sculpture, but it does not lose its ability to communicate the temporal or atmospheric qualities of the physical artwork. Holt's composite photograph is more than mere documentation of her installation. In a review published in *Art Monthly*, Cherry Smyth describes how Holt's photography brings to life the more dramatic aspects of her sculptures, allowing her to recreate the site's atmosphere in two-dimensional space [7]. The repeating circular shapes and curved, eclipsing shadow that can be

tracked throughout the piece are reminiscent of space photography, which mimics the celestial experience of the physical installation.

In addition to capturing the atmospheric qualities of a piece, photography is a powerful tool for artists who seek to capture the transformative nature of Land Art. Earthworks are often designed to be altered by site-specific conditions and processes. Sculptures located in the desert, for instance, are subject to weathering and deterioration that does not exist in a gallery setting. A prime example of this phenomenon is a pair of photographs taken ten years apart of Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Shed*. The photographs show the evolution of a small shed as it collapses under the weight of piled dirt. The installation is located on Kent State's campus, so human forces played a large role in the work's transformation as well, especially after a student demonstration and tragic shooting that occurred in 1970. The painted words "MAY 4 KENT 70" captured in the second photograph serve as a reminder of the site's painful history [8]. For many land artists, this

transformation over time is as much a part of the piece as the initial sculpture. Horning explains how this type of photographic record is not only a “history of the work as [an] object” but that it also has the potential to become a “photographic subject that may outlast the work” [8]. Therefore, the purpose of photographing an Earthwork is twofold; It documents the changing installation, but also produces a new art piece that captures more than what is communicated by the installation at its initial completion.

Holt’s composite photograph *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels* achieves both functions. The sculptural tunnels are temporal due to the way they are visually altered by their interactions with the sun. The photograph’s symmetrical framing of the tunnel remains the same in each shot in order to bring the viewer’s attention to this dramatic shifting of light and shadows. In the first few frames, an orange hue warms the smooth concrete as the sun rises. The concrete transitions to a cooler gray as the sun makes its way across the sky, until the inside of the tube becomes fully submerged in shadow and appears black to the viewer. In the final row of images, the sunset creates a golden glow on the inside of the tunnel. The viewer is exposed to the Earthwork’s full cycle of transformation, which would not be possible if they were to visit the site in person for an hour or so. Holt’s composite photograph becomes an adjacent yet separate work from the sculpture by allowing the viewer to experience the temporal and cyclical relationship between the earth and the sun all at once.

Despite the movement’s emphasis on the in-person experience, photographic representations of Earthworks appear in museums for a multitude of reasons. This is contradictory to the aims of many modern Land Artists, who believe it is important to move away from a more “private and intellectual” scene and involve an “increasingly democratic and non-elitist” audience [2]. The movement is a subversion of the elitist art scene where middle- and working-class citizens are “denied an understanding and appreciation of art that would allow them to be a part of museum culture” due to governing bodies being made up of strict groups of elite citizens and their use of “arcane language familiar to those schooled in art” [9]. Land Art is accessible because it is conceptual work with a more universal appeal, as mentioned earlier, but it is also increasingly available to a broad variety of social classes because it exists outside the physical boundaries of a gallery space.

Even with these boundaries removed, however, many Earthworks are not very accessible to the general public because they occupy such remote sites. Holt’s *Sun Tunnels*, for instance, is located 40 miles from the nearest active town [6]. Photography provides a controversial solution to this issue because although it improves accessibility, it returns to the idea that art is a commodity to be bought and sold rather than something to be experienced. Some Land Artists embrace the movement as a rejection of this very idea. Boettger explains how their subversion is flawed because the creation of Earthworks depends upon “funding by art dealers, businesspeople, and art collectors, and documentation of these works was exhibited for sale in commercial galleries” [1]. Earthworks would be unable to exist without support from the elite art world and photography’s distribution properties, creating a complex relationship between the movement’s conflicting aims.

Although photography is not the intended lens for many Earthworks to be viewed through, it is the most functional one. Photography makes Land Art available to the masses while still

upholding the physical work’s commentary on humans’ relationship to the natural world. Furthermore, these themes are not only translated but also enhanced when Earthworks are treated as photographic subjects, as proven by Nancy Holt’s composite photograph *Sunlight in Sun Tunnels*.

References

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