Planetary Thinking: Re-encountering Nancy Holt's and Robert Smithson's, *Mono Lake* (1968/2004).

By Maria Walsh

I first saw Nancy Holt's and Robert Smithson's *Mono Lake* (1968/2004) at the 2015 Venice Biennale at *All the World's Futures*, a programme of events held in the Arena, an open-plan concert hall designed by architect David Adjaye. The main event was a thrice daily performance recital of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. Exiting the venue, I was stopped in my tracks by the luminous light - (super 8 film transferred to video) - of a large-scale projection, its mellifluous male voiceover expounding on the glacier-formed basin of the desert lake by the foothills of Sierra Nevada Mountains. Transfixed, I stayed to watch the video loop over again from beginning to end: 19 minutes, 54 seconds. It felt strange to spend time with a highly pixelated film from the 1960s amid the spectacle of a blockbuster biennale. The image was hazy, the camerawork shaky – we might call it haptic today – yet it also felt nice to journey with Holt, Smithson, and their friend, fellow artist Michael Heizer, as they lackadaisically drive along a desert track to Mono Lake, Waylon Jennings' warbling on the radio. In the context of *All the World's Futures*, it seemed as if some 'political' import was implied by the film's inclusion in the programme. Certainly, Smithson's and Heizer's intermittent recounting of 'facts' about the site's geology, its indigenous history, and ecosystem could be said to be prescient. But what intrigued me about the video was its subliminal theme of friendship and affection. (I did not know then that Smithson and Holt were married.) An atmosphere of companionship animated the inhuman time and scale of the volcanic formation. A voiceover recounts that the last of the five glacial eruptions at this site was fifteen thousand years ago. Volcanic activity began in the area some 28 million years ago.

During the first Covid-19 lockdown, the Holt/Smithson Foundation hosted a Friday film season screening films by the two artists on its vimeo site. The programme was repeated a few months later at a time when the UK was subjected to increased restrictions due to the pandemic. I rewatched *Mono Lake* in both seasons, keen to 'retake' a trip to the vast open space in the company of the artist friends. From the relevant comfort of my laptop, I not only observed details that escaped me first time round but could go with ease on the same screen between information about the film and the film itself. Doing so created a tension between why the film had lingered on in my mind since Venice and its' now tangential resonance to current transversal conditions of zoonotic diseases, the perils of extractive capitalism and calls for social justice and reparation. The two are hard to square up, but perhaps this is the intrigue of this little film: a document of friendship; a testament to an imbalanced eco-system due to human violence.

Not strictly a documentary, it had been Smithson's idea to shoot a film at Mono Lake during the artists' road trip across the State of Nevada. As well as deciding on some of the shots beforehand, Smithson selected the texts recited on the soundtrack as well as the opening and closing hyperbolically-sublime music by Michel Legrand, but the silent footage had lain dormant until 2004 when Holt edited it for Smithson's retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. (Smithson died in a small plane crash in 1973.) As well as arranging the synchronous sound of flies buzzing and water lapping, it was her idea to add two Waylon Jennings' tracks, the friends having attended his concert in Las Vegas a week before heading out to Mono Lake. She also inserted at intervals some of the Instamatic slides they are seen taking of one another and the lake's environs in the film itself, the combination of moving and still image overtly signifying how the

process of editing the film was, for her, a confrontation with time; the time of her younger self and the time of memory:

> While editing *Mono Lake*, I was able to revisit a pivotal period in my life, the time the three of us spent together in 1968 seemed deeply significant, like we were spawning an astronomical change…I had a sense in 1968 that we were in this crucible of a volcano, being formed (in Meyer 2011: 224).

Asked how she organised the movie for the Smithson retrospective some thirty-six years after initial shooting, Holt says:

> I sat there in New Mexico with an avid program, finding my own rhythm, editing that jumble of footage over and over again until it began to take form, I spent many months fine-tuning it (in Meyer 2011: 223).

It is as if Holt re-finds a rhythm, an improvisational structure and beat, linked to her feelings about this time. In 1968, she was not making work in public. Her artistic attitude was that 'being was the essential thing, and that you didn't have to manifest this being in an image in the world, that you could just turn, in an interior way, into this inner world' (Holt in Lippard, 1973).[1] Her words resonated inversely with the enforced turning inwards that ensued as a result of the continual imposition of governmental restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Needless-to-say, being forced to turn inwards in a state of crisis is not the same as turning inwards to excavate new perceptual experiences as an artist. It felt uplifting to return *Mono Lake* and an era in which the great outdoors and being with others in such a milieu

[1] Holt is discussing the time around 1966/67 when she knew Eva Hesse, the interview being about Hesse.

contrasted with the confinement and isolation of lockdown as well as the general encroachment on ‘access’ in neoliberal societies.

In 1968, as well as relating to debates in conceptual art on the status of the object, Holt’s attitude was also influenced by an informative experience from 1963 that later found expression in the trip to the Nevada desert. I cite it here as a prequel to the planetary thinking *Mono Lake* led me towards:

> In the spring of 1963, there was a sudden moment out of time, or a timeless moment within time, when I had tremendous stillness and clarity. My body relaxed and my breathing came from a center which felt endlessly spacious. *With every breath I was aware of sharing air, like an atmospheric bellows, with all the other beings on the planet* (in Meyer 2011: 220 – my emphasis).

She later describes how in the vastness of the desert in the summer of 1968, she had the ‘overwhelming experience of my inner landscape and outer landscape being identical’ (in Meyer 2011: 222). The editing of *Mono Lake* communicates such a sense of interconnective spaciousness, both in the way the ‘characters’ move aimlessly in and out of the frame, walking off in different directions or tumbling down the site’s cinder mountain in long-shot and close-up, and in the way the site’s relative imperviousness to their motion is woven into the texture of the film. *Mono Lake* is like a conduit between the teeming populations of alkali flies that swarm the shore, the calcareous algae tufa towers that accrete there and the artists’ improvisational exploration of the site.

Prior to seeing this film, I had an aversion to ‘land art’, seeing it as unnecessarily invasive and heroic, an opinion derived from viewing a film of the

making of Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) when I was an art student. Although Smithson clearly intended to collect rock for one of his non-site sculptures,[2] *Mono Lake*'s sensibility is diffuse and mellow, a sensibility I associated with Holt's presence in the video, a view reinforced when I found out she edited it and read her words. I had previously only been aware of Holt through her performance in Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974).[3] Transmitted live on Texas public television, Serra taped Holt as she talks and hears her words played back to her after a one-second delay. She describes how she is 'throwing things out in the work and they are boomeranging back…boomeranging…eranging-ing…anginging' in an echo chamber in which, as the art historian Rosalind Krauss described it, there is no escape (1976: 53). This experience of dissonance between body and mind is the opposite of Holt's motivating principle of interconnection. She does not speak on *Mono Lake*'s soundtrack, but the film is infused with this principle.

On subsequent viewings though, *Mono Lake* troubles. Smithson's cowboy hat and boots cannot but hark back to the westward movement of pioneers and cowboys across the desert plains. The romantic nature of this image hides the violence that underpins it: the eradication of indigenous communities in settler colonialism by miners and ranchers. A disused manmade structure shown in long-shot goes otherwise unremarked in the film. Instead, a male voiceover solemnly announces that before 'the White Man' came, the Mono Lake area was inhabited by small bands of Paiute Indians. The non-contiguous assemblages of these groups meant it was easier to appropriate the land they inhabited, a key aspect of their culture being non-

[2] A non-site is an indoor earthwork that while abstract represents an actual site. Smithson's *Mono Lake Nonsite (Cinders Near Black Point)* (1968) comprises two parts: a steel container holding cinders collected from near Black Point, Mono Lake and a map photostat.

[3] Due in part to the fact that many women artists of Holt's generation have only quite recently been given due recognition, Holt is now credited as a collaborator.

possession of the land they occupied. The voiceover does not mention the violence of eradication, but that, while their life was hard, the Paiute knew how to have fun, playing games and gambling being part of their culture. This allusion to Paiute culture complicates the usual image of Native Americans as either victims or perpetrators of destruction (from the point-of-view of settler colonialists) and hints at the artists' sympathies, but it is not that simple. Describing the site's ecology dominated by the alkali flies that swarm in dense black clouds along the shore, a voiceover interjects that ducks eat the flies who eat the worms, and 'the Indians eat all three'. The Paiute are nowhere to be seen, the implication being that this population disappeared much as the volcanic activity that formed the Mono Lake basin and that both belong to prehistorical time. A YouTube video from 2006 shows a Paiute woman walking along the shore of Mono Lake, her voiceover informing that in her family she is only one of three Paiute living nearby and that the younger generation are not interested in the tradition of harvesting the fly pupae, partly due to the fact that the basin is drier and many things have disappeared.[4] Another website is telling: 'Since miners and ranchers colonized the basin and destroyed the indigenous way of life, the tradition of eating *kutsavi* [alkali fly pupae] has diminished, but some families continue to enjoy the *delicacy* today' (my emphasis).[5]

Many writers have identified a link between the destruction of indigenous ways of life in settler colonialism and of eco-systems in extractivist capitalism, and zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19.[6] Posing the question as to what causes

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjmyP-kEBwQ Accessed 11 December 2020.
[5] https://www.monolake.org/learn/aboutmonolake/naturalhistory/alkaliflies/ 24 Dec. 20
[6] Dipesh Chakrabarty says: 'The current moment of the COVID-19 pandemic belongs not only to the global history of capitalism and its destructive impact on human life, but it also represents a moment in the history of biological life on this planet when humans are acting as the *amplifiers* of a virus whose host reservoir may have been some bats in China for millions of years' https://criting.wordpress.com/2020/10/16/an-era-of-pandemics-what-is-global-and-what-is-planetary-about-covid-19/#_ftnref6, Accessed Sep 2020..

pandemics, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, citing infectious-diseases specialist David M. Morens and coauthors in a paper from 2020, states that:

> it is “deforestation, agricultural intensification, urbanization, and ecosystem disruption” that “bring people into contact with wildlife and their potentially zoonotic pathogens” (in Chakrabarty 2020).

It may be far-fetched to lay this at *Mono Lake*’s door, but in the context of *All the Worlds Futures*, the film was, I think, intended to intimate a post-apocalyptic time populated by geological rock formations; the desertification in the film foretelling of future catastrophe. However, such forebodings add to the urgency of saving a planet here conceived of as human-dominated rather than to the rejigging of perspective that differently interested Holt and Smithson. They were interested in perspectives beyond the ego or the self. Reaching into the present, such perspectives could be called planetary and involve considering ourselves as ‘accidents rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities’ (Spivak, 2012: 339). Planetary thinking attempts to counter the forgetting of nonhuman and other ecologies that characteries the future-oriented, homogenous time of global imperialism.[7]

Taking her cue from Spivak in trying to bypass the human-dominated impetus of either destroying or saving the planet, Jeanne Etelain proffers the somewhat bizarre notion of caressing it, asking: ‘Is it stretching it too far to bring the planet together with the erogenous body?’ (2020: 163).[8] For her, in an era in which ‘landscapes, seasons, and species undergo radical changes […] many are aware of

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[7] See Spivak, 2012: 339

[8] Etelain refers to ecosexual performance artists Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens who consider that the lover archetype is more ethical insofar as a lover must care for their romantic partner or they will likely lose them.

an ambient feeling, reflected in apocalyptic discourses, that we may no longer be welcome at home' (164). Yet, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed the inequalities that imperial world orders are founded on, we need a relation to this feeling of dis-ease that is not simply one of doom or domination. For Chakrabarty: 'these infectious diseases remind us of the deep evolutionary connections that exist between our bodies and other bodily forms of life' (2020). He states that:

> What is planetary then about the current pandemic is that, for all the human tragedy it has already caused and will cause […], it is an episode in the evolutionary history of life on this planet. […] Microbial forms of life have persisted on this planet for 3.8 billion years. *Homo sapiens* have been around for 300,000 years. "This perspective, say Morens and Fauci, "has implications for how we think about and react to emerging infectious disease threats" (2020).

I am not an epidemiologist, a scientist, a healthcare worker, or a policy maker. Being a theorist interested in moving image artworks is not at all a useful thing to be. But films such as *Mono Lake* and the ideas it generates make me feel less hopeless. The film's ecology aesthetically probes the planetary by recalibrating distance and proximity in relation to space and time beyond human measure, all of which gets spun out in a web of human friendship and affection. This for me is a kind of 'caress' and links my viewing of the film in 2015 with my re-viewings of it during lockdown. Admittedly, this 'caress' is also part nostalgia, part fantasy, lockdown accentuating the desire for landscape and spaces beyond the frame of park and garden, as well as for an era when it seemed that one could escape surveillance.

They park their vehicle in front of a No Trespassing sign erected by the Black Point Cinders Association, its weathered ricketiness facilitating ease of access. Smithson and Heizer smoke and drink Coors, Holt appearing to be what today we would call a 'designated driver'. Their trippy sense of enjoyment reminds me of other road trips in countercultural cinema such as *Easy Rider* (1969, dir. Dennis Hopper), itself a conflicted reflection on issues of the day such as racism and war. *Mono Lake* opens and closes with flames, the ending revealing their origin as the result of Smithson setting fire to toasted marshmallows on a map of The State of Nevada at Lake Tahoe. The sticky goo transmogrifies into a black viscosity that spreads across the screen. In this DIY act of destruction in miniature, Smithson returns form to an originary sludge, marshalling a tongue-in-cheek humour to 'caress' the nonhuman. This gesture points to one tactics. Another might be to create a phenomenologically immersive 'film' that mediates the planetary.

In 1973-76, in a remote valley of Utah's Great Basin Desert, Holt constructed *Sun Tunnels*, four concrete structures arranged in a cross formation, positioned to frame the sun as it rises and sets during the summer and winter solstices. Small holes perforate the concrete to cast projections of constellations along the tunnels' interior, the patterns of Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn materialising out of sunlight to illuminate the viewer's body, now become a screen rather than a surveyor. By way of *Mono Lake*, *Sun Tunnels* constructs a relation to the planetary that locates immensity terms of a 'caress' of sunlight rather than a land grab.[9] A shift in perspective that is useless but that recalibrates 'being' as co-existence, and

[9] Though Holt owned the land.

momentarily stills the helpless panic of being without a relation to viral existences that are everywhere and nowhere.

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