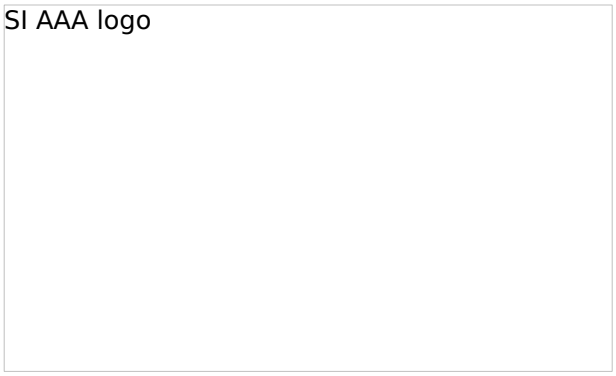

Oral history interview with Nancy Holt, 1993 Aug. 3

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Transcript

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Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nancy Holt on 1993 August 3. The interview took place at Holt's studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: 1993. We are at Nancy Holt's studio at 166 Bank Street, overlooking the Hudson River. This is Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz. We are about to speak about Nancy Holt and her public art works. Nancy, I counted 32 public art works in your résumé, dating from 1969 to 1992. This is a phenomenal number of projects. I don't know of any other contemporary artist who may have had so many environmental works out there. And they cover the USA, from New Jersey to Seattle, even Alaska. Recently Ireland and Finland were recipients of your art. What do you consider your greatest achievements? Your studio works, or those created for the public context?

NANCY HOLT: Well, I've always worked outside of the studio. It's never been an issue with me. From the very beginning, when I began my work, it was work that questioned kind of the idealism of the interior space and took account of the environment surrounding them. So I've never really done studio art. So, to answer your question—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —it's a non-issue.

NANCY HOLT: —it's not an issue. [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So I want to ask you the next one. Do you ever regret moving into the public realm?

NANCY HOLT: Well, first of all, you're using the word "public." I really didn't think of myself as doing public art, or moving into the public realm when I did my initial works, in the late '60s, early '70s. All I was doing was being more engaged with the external world. The world itself was feeding me, so that my works were growing out of concerns that were extraneous to the traditional art world concerns. But I never thought of myself as entering the public sphere.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That kind of fits in with one of the ideas that I've often tossed around, that really most interesting artists who are doing public art today were or are Conceptual artists. Do you consider yourself to be a Conceptual artist, or do you have other terms to describe?

NANCY HOLT: My art is not conceptual. My art is physical, and deals with perception, and with space, and light. Physical materials, sight. So really, my work is not conceptual. However, I have a conceptual approach. I'm a mental type of person. So I arrive at physicality through my mind, in a sense, you know? But the end product—my art—is a physical phenomenon, and the process is more of a mental process.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I was wondering about the content of your public art. Now you're talking about it being physical. But I always thought that in certain of your works, like *Ransacked,* and maybe your *Sky Mound*, that there is content that's beyond the physical—that's beyond the material, that really—

NANCY HOLT: Oh, definitely. Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —is even social or philosophical.

NANCY HOLT: Well, you see, I'm very concerned in making something out of nothing. So that my work is as much about voidness as it is about substance. And this is probably what you're trying

to get at. My Locator pieces were works to be looked through, not at. *Rock Rings.* I built this huge, heavy, rock structure—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's the work in Seattle, right?

NANCY HOLT: Yes, it's in Bellingham, north of Seattle at Western Washington University. The walls are two feet thick, and it's a very massive sculpture. But the essence of the work are the holes—the openings. The arches, and the circular openings around the periphery, within the structure. And this is true of all my work—the fact that, let's say, with even a work like *Annual Ring*, where you have this steel structure—a hemisphere made of bars of steel—most of the structure is void space or just space.—And there were these big holes in it. I'm dealing really with the absence of substance, and also with light, which has no physical substance. So I go to a lot of time and trouble to build physical structures that emphasize emptiness and light.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That seems to be what most of your works are about, as I look at them. But then I'm thinking of the structure of something like *Wild Spot*. That seems to have an additional meaning to it, although if you look at it structurally—

NANCY HOLT: Well, when I talk about light—of course, only some of my works are concerned with light, and I do a large variety of work that has different emphasis, different areas. But with *Wild Spot*, you have the same thing, with using wrought iron, in a way, which is a very open form. And in the center of that I have wildflowers growing. There are thirteen different kinds of wildflowers that are indigenous to the region, and this is up at Wellesley College, so, in the Northeast. So in that case, there is much more psychological edge to that piece, and it isn't a piece about the sun. But once again, it has that same quality of it being—when you're inside of it, you're both in and out. As a matter of fact, the work I did out of the similar kind of steel open structure down in Washington, D.C., which is called *Inside Out*—it's titled with that in mind, that when you're in it, you're out of it at the same time. It's a sense of enclosure, but expansion at the same time. And you look up, and you look through that circle at the top, and your focus is up into the sky. The work immediately focuses you into the—kind of the universe, so you really do get a sense of upward expansion, as well as expansion out into the landscape. And yet, it's an enclosure. But I don't consider dealing with making something out of nothing, or working with emptiness, and with a void—a voidness. I don't consider that conceptual. Conceptual is—you know what Conceptual art is.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. The idea is more important, actually, than physicality. And you're really saying just the opposite now.

NANCY HOLT: Physicality is very important. Even if it points to nothing.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, except it's not really nothing.

NANCY HOLT: Well, of course not. Nothing is never really nothing. Nothing is full.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But yet, you're kind of making someone focus on whatever you want them to focus, which may be the nothing or the something that is full. But then I'm also concerned about—or thinking about—how public is your art. You said you didn't start out as a public artist, and yet, you're saying you want someone to have an experience.

NANCY HOLT: Well, I said I didn't start out as a public artist with that in mind. However, my art has always been public. Do you know what I mean? I didn't have that as a concept. I didn't say, Oh, well, now I'm going to go out and do some public art. But I was always naturally a public artist. As a matter of fact, a lot of the artists today that take that label "public art," in the '70s were doing structures that were impermanent—and I think one aspect of public art is that you do works that are around for a while. You know.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —It's in a public site.

NANCY HOLT: —That aren't just impermanent installations. And so there was a switchover when public art became a concept in the '80s. It really wasn't until the '80s. There were certain artists that were doing these temporary structures out of temporary materials, that then switched over, because they saw the value of doing more public, permanent pieces. But I, on the other hand, never could fit into that more temporary work in the '70s. I would be invited to be in these shows where they would be asking everyone to do temporary work. So I would go, and I'd build something that was so strong, that they never could get rid of it. Those works are still there, today.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Is that what happened to *Catch Basin*?

NANCY HOLT: No, that wasn't it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Wasn't that a temporary project originally?

NANCY HOLT: No, it never was. *Catch Basin* is a permanent work.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It was permanent?

NANCY HOLT: Is.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Is.

NANCY HOLT: When you talk about my works, 90 percent of them—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —are still there?

NANCY HOLT: Are still there. So that I was always just doing public art—not because I had that notion in mind, but because I was always concerned with a time that went beyond—kind of the time of our lifetime. Or I was also concerned about that kind of easy kind of throwaway time that everybody seemed to be so into. You know the kind of—what is it called again? Obso—Built-in obsolescence.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —Built-in obsolescence.

NANCY HOLT: So my work has always been concerned with time, as well.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: How about place? Because that really makes—

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Time and place. But right now, I'd like to talk about time because it was that quality—the fact that I was attracted to materials that lasted a long time, like concrete, and earth, and bricks, and stone masonry, and steel.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Did you use those materials because they were so permanent, or because there were other things going on with them?

NANCY HOLT: I had other reasons, but certainly—always I had a desire to want to build works that were going to be in their places for a long time, because I wanted to see nature change the works. They would go through cycles because of time and natural cycles.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So you don't mind if the works change—if plant material grows up on them?

NANCY HOLT: No, I like that. And I like going back and seeing the works at different times of the year, and I like seeing them in the snow and the rain, and in the mist. We have this idea that sculptures seen—or the pictures we see of it are always on nice, sunny days, with some ideal condition. But I've actually made work like *Catch Basin* in Toronto, which actually functions best on a rainy day, because it collects the water off of the slopes, and brings it in to a central basin. So that's one reason. And, then of course, when I do do works about the sun, I'm concerned with time, in a more cyclical sense. You know, like a more universal sense of time. But really, I'm concerned with that kind of natural time, or cyclical time, because it's closer to what I'm really interested in, which is no time.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: [Laughs.] That's a loaded word. What is no time?

NANCY HOLT: No time is a time out of time.—It's hard to describe, but it's a time. Absolute time.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's not stop time?

NANCY HOLT: Stop time. It's when you lose consciousness of time. I think art is about—all art is about that, to a certain extent. It points to those moments out of time. Outside of the regular time of the world.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: A lot of people describe art as being of its time, so you're really saying something. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: No. Well, all art is really about the timeless. And, of course, we're living in a

particular time, so we're affected by that time. We're working in a matrix that's been laid down already.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Maybe it has to be both. Of its time and timeless.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Maybe that defines art, in a funny way.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. But the time of the sun—natural time—it's closer to that kind of timeless state. It's not clock time. You know, it's not our busy, worldly time.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Many of your pieces seem to relate to natural phenomenon. I think it's a very definite characteristic. It's been noted in the literature, so the sun would be that. But then you have this whole series of works—many of them, I guess, done for installations where they're interior, and you're using pipes and materials—almost interior construction. I remember going into one of your works in Philadelphia, and you could have been going into the basement of the building—say, a big building.

NANCY HOLT: Well, what you're referring to are what I call my Systems pieces. I've done plumbing works, and electrical systems, and ventilation systems, and heating systems using hot water. And also land drainage systems, which is like *Catch Basin*, that we just discussed. In these works, what I'm doing is I'm channeling natural elements so that—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Oh, you mean that's the connection?

NANCY HOLT: Of course. Because what is plumbing?

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Water. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Plumbing is you're channeling water. And before there was plumbing—in fact, here's a quote from this turn-of-the-century architect, Adolf Loos. He was the one that said, "The plumber brings civilization." And plumbers are the pioneers of cleanliness. In other words, before plumbing went in, one-third of the people in the world were dying of various contagious illnesses —

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Dysentery.

NANCY HOLT: —So water really allowed us—it sort of checked the negative, catastrophic aspects of nature—plumbing did—in allowing for more cleanliness. So that these technological systems that we've developed—we love to complain about them, and we love to hide them away, and pretend they don't even exist. And we sort of yearn for some ideal of nature, some pristine, untouched natural setting. Forgetting that we're so dependent on water and air conditioning and electricity. So with those pieces, I'm just sort of bringing into consciousness a lot of this—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And you do that consciously?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. The channeling of all these natural elements is extremely important to our well-being. So I'm just making people more aware of that because it is something that people don't want to deal with. And the more conscious we become of it, then the more we can be agents of nature, rather than aggressors against nature, you know? We can channel nature's elements in a more intelligent way that benefits the planet. But we can't do that if we don't own up to it. So these systems are about that. That's one thing they're about. Now, in the case of *Catch Basin*, where I'm using a drainage system—I made a land drainage system as a work of art. And it actually alleviated a problem that they had in this park up in Toronto, because they had this puddle of water—large puddle of water—which would form every time it rained, and it would stay around a long time because the earth was very clay-like, and the earth would not absorb the water. So I went up there. I took a look at that. I said I'd fix it for them.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Is that your point of departure?

NANCY HOLT: Well, it was one. One point. I like the idea that I restored the landscape. It was a park situation. They had just extended St. James Park. They had knocked down some old buildings, and then the landscape architect had come in, and extended the park, but had either the landscape architect or the contractor that did it made a mistake and had this low point, where the water collected. So I was able, through *Catch Basin,* to alleviate that problem, and by putting in these channel pipes—clay channel pipes that caught the water. Now, drainage

systems like that go back, like, 10,000 years, to Crete and Babylon. I'm using ancient technology. You know, you think of the aqueducts in Rome. Technic is a Greek word that means art or artifice.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I didn't realize that.

NANCY HOLT: So technology need not be so insensitive, as it has been. That we can combine—like the aqueducts of Rome—we can combine technology and art. And this is what those pieces are about, partially.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So you are also talking about beauty, too.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Intrinsic beauty.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. And I'm also talking about function, you know? Because all these pieces that I did function. Like, the one you saw in Philadelphia—the ventilation piece—that was the first ventilation—it worked. I mean, not in a big way, just a little bit of air was circulating around. But it was still working, and the plumbing systems all worked. The heating system that I did at John Weber. *Hot Water Heat,* it was called, that actually heated the gallery. That was the heating system for the gallery. I did another one in the Ace Gallery in Los Angeles in January, when they needed a little heat. But anyway, all the systems—the electrical systems—cause light to happen, and was the only lighting in the gallery, as well. So it points to the functionality of these works. Now, those functions in one way—but my other sculptures function in another way. Let's say, *Dark Star Park* functions because it is a park. And I had to think of the fact that it was a park, as well as a sculpture. I had to think about pedestrians walking from one place to another, and the easiest way for them to get from one place to another. I had to think of people sitting down, I had to leave enough room for baby carriages, I had to think about some shade for people. As well as conceiving the whole thing as a sculpture.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You know, that sort of reminds me of architects that consider aesthetic people, but they also are problem solvers. You are really saying that you see yourself, as an artist, as a problem solver.

NANCY HOLT: No. I really don't like that word "problem solver." [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Okay. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: I am not a problem solver. I think that—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Do you like the word functional better?

NANCY HOLT: I would say functional. Problem solving is too rational an activity. And I think too much now, sometimes, with the way they set up these public art projects. You know, they bring an artist to sort of solve design problems or something.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's right. That's actually what I was trying to get at. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: It's too limiting an activity. It's just not what art is. Art is not about solving some design problem, somewhere. It's really—art is art.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: What is it? What makes it different from the architecture, as a problem solver. Which architects think is also art, and will tell you it is. And yet, artists seem to be very different—it's like they come from different directions.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Well, art is not a rational activity. So that problem solving is in the mind. Art is more of a matter of—let's say there is a site—somebody invites me to see a site, and I go there, and I sort of absorb the site. You know, I sense the essence of the site. That doesn't really take that long to do. It's usually a rather quick experience. You know, when you come in from the outside, and things are fresh, and you sort of can, if you open yourself to the experience, you understand certain essences of a place.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Would you use the word intuition?

NANCY HOLT: Or intuition. Yes. And so I pick up on the site—various aspects of the site. Let's say the topography, the flora and fauna, if there is any. The built environment, the psychology of

the place, the history of the place, the sociology of the place. All these things are important. And then I have that within me, in some kind of an essential way.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You don't make a checklist?

NANCY HOLT: No, no, no. And then I have certain art ideas that are within me, running around. At a certain point, these things come together, and an idea will usually come in a flash. But it comes after I understand all the parameters of the situation and the site. And I think this is the key to public art.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I think you've just described the creative process.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. And public art—you know, you have to understand what the parameters are beforehand. You can't have an idea that is totally impractical to the site.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It has to be maintainable.

NANCY HOLT: Right. It has to be maintainable. If they have a building code that says you can only go so high, or if they have pipes running under the ground in certain places, then you can't dig in those areas—you have to know that. [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Does that bother you, or do you find that kind of becomes—

NANCY HOLT: Well, what I'm trying to say is that before I have the idea—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You try to deal with it.

NANCY HOLT: I've absorbed all of the contingencies. I wouldn't even start to even open myself to having an idea until I understood what I was dealing with. Then, once I understand those things, then the idea can come to me. Then I allow myself to open to the idea.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It doesn't constrain you, really.

NANCY HOLT: No. It's not a constraint. Actually, I kind of like it because necessity is the mother of invention. [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Use a cliché. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Because I like working against certain parameters, actually. So it's a challenge to me. I mean, really, all artists have constraints. I mean, a painter has to paint on canvas. What could be more constraining than that? Having to do things inside a museum space is very restricting.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. Actually, it's interesting that you bring that up because a lot of people who won't do public art say, I don't want to be constrained by all these people, these other people, these other things. And yet, they are not really being aware they're conditioning themselves.

NANCY HOLT: They're conditioned to a particular mode of art that has only been around for the last couple of hundred years. Galleries and museums are a pretty new phenomenon.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Public art was once the only art. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Public art was once the only art, and always met the needs of the community. It always had a greater significance than just being aesthetic and being special and isolated, which is what museums and galleries did to art.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But it was authentic, though.

NANCY HOLT: It was authentic. And now museums and galleries—they rip these artworks out of context—the older ones. And have set up a new context for art, which most artists—even to this day—even after we've had 25 years of this kind of more public art, as you like to call it. Even after that, we have most artists still thinking within the context of museums and galleries. And they automatically have to deal with all of those people, and their restrictions. And they're so unconscious about it, that they don't even see them as restrictions anymore, because they think that's the whole story.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You mean, they're conditioned. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: They're conditioned.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: To accept it before it begins. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: One of the things I noticed about you, as an example of an artist—whether you should be doing public art—is that there is a consistency, there is a private vision. There was always this discussion that public art should be about dealing with the public's need. More than restraints. Even giving the public something what they want, at some level. But it seems to me that the artists that I'm most interested in—who seem to be doing the most interesting works—still maintain their personal, consistent vision—their point of view—which they bring to a public context.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. I think that's very important. Really, there is this idea that—and you were just voicing it before—that public artists have to compromise, which really is not the case.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Good. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: I've never had to compromise in any of my projects.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I would never ask an artist to compromise.

NANCY HOLT: Right. But there is this idea, and I think it's because there's probably some truth in it, that there are some artists that will compromise their ideas in order to do public art projects. But I've never had to do that. A couple of times my work—my ideas have not been acceptable to a committee, or something. I don't modify the idea, if they don't like it, for some reason or other. I'll go back, and come up with another idea. So, so far my second idea—and often I've been happy. I like the second idea better. But I've never been in a situation where they didn't like my second idea, which is always, as I say, a fresh, new idea. A completely different approach. And never a modification.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Do you think maybe the modifications that people demand of artists, are really more political than aesthetic?

NANCY HOLT: Sometimes they are. Sometimes. Sometimes it's for safety issues.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That, I think, is reasonable.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. That's part of what I was talking about, when I absorb the whole situation. The safety issues are something that I take into account before I have the idea. You know, I'm sort of aware of what I can get away with. Usually. Not all the time.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Sometimes safety can be paranoia.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Sometimes it's—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I remember *Astral Grating*. Do you remember the *Astral Grating*?

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You were originally going to do something on the floor, rather than the ceiling, and the engineer said—

NANCY HOLT: —it might be a safety hazard.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It might be a safety hazard. And you brought up, I think, the grates on the floor, that everybody could catch their heels in. And I think the answer was, People expect that hazard.—[laughs]—That it's not the hazard, it's the expectation of the hazard.

NANCY HOLT: And that hazard has been around for so long that they can justify it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes.

[Crosstalk]

NANCY HOLT: It's interesting. In Europe, you can get away with a lot more, in terms of—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: America is a litigious society.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. People don't go to court because they hurt themselves, in Europe.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: This permeates every part of our society.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Doctors take tests just because of malpractice. You go against your judgement. I think that's a society problem, not an art problem. You don't have to really think about it. Hopefully it will change. Thinking about the public—are you conscious of a public that will publicly use your art, or does it matter to you? I noticed a lot of the photographs that you take yourself don't have any people in them. It always bothered me. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: I know.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: When it's art in a public space, shouldn't people be part of it?

NANCY HOLT: Well, yes, they should. And I'm always so pleased to see a lot of people participating in my works, and using them. But when I take my pictures, I'm usually doing it so that I can give people a sense of what the art is about. So I shoo all the people away, and I take my pictures. I take usually one or two with some people in it, just to show—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: For scale. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: For scale. I usually have one person in for scale, for the long distance shots. And then a whole bunch in a couple of shots, just to show that yes, people do really come here, and they really get something out of the situation. What interests me in doing public projects is that people will come—and each person brings their own context with them. They bring to the work whatever they already know. And the work is right there, in their midst. And my work has always involved them, in one way or another. They can't just avert their eyes and walk around them, because the works are usually works that you walk through, or under. I mean, they're going to affect a person, even in a subliminal way. So that there's an engagement with the public. They become part of the works. They're incorporated in the works. They'll have their unique responses. There will be all these different levels of understanding that people will bring to bear on the work.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: There's a contradiction that you said that reminded me of—we talk of the word "public," and it kind of conjures up the image of a lot of people running through a space. And really, that's not what happens. It's a single individual with a work of art. So in a funny way, public art is just as private as going in a museum, and looking at a painting by yourself. The public is the place because many people can use it. But as far as the viewer—the viewer is still the private person responding to the work.

NANCY HOLT: Right. You know what is interesting, like with *Sun Tunnels*, people have to go out of their way to go to this place.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It takes more than a day. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: But it's there. It's always available, so anybody can go. So what happens is that when you go out of your way to experience a work of art, the experience is a lot deeper, and it's longer in duration. So it's not like going to a museum, and giving your so many minutes to each work, or so many seconds to each work, and just moving along, and having a sense of abundance or volume, or whatever. It's a singular experience. And it brings you to a place that you would not have gone to if it had not been for the work of art. So you're experiencing—with *Sun Tunnels* it's a very remote area so you're on this little point. You really have a sense of being on the planet, you know? And where you walk.—You may be the first human being ever to walk on that spot, if you walk out now.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I did not even think that when I was there but you know, it's interesting. When I went to visit *Sun Tunnels*, there was a young woman with us—a teenager. And she says—and every time I see her now—she's now a married lady—that that experience changed her life. That on her college application, they said, What was the most memorable experience of your life? and she said, I went out to visit this piece in the desert, and we drove

hours and hours to get there. So it's interesting how you can affect people.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And even making the effort was probably very significant. It made her feel different.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And gave her confidence. She was not a confident little girl, which was interesting.

NANCY HOLT: Well, I think it's all part of the experience of the work—is getting there. Being part of it. [They laugh.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: In thinking about your work, because it's in the landscape, you somehow fit into categories—maybe we shouldn't talk about categories—of Landscape art, which is another way of defining a particular kind of art in a public space. Do you have any relationship in your work, to traditional Landscape art, like the Hudson River School? You didn't want that? [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: [Laughs.] No! No, I don't feel a particular connection to that.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I was really asking you more—because people are categorizing things, as things become more popular, and, in a way, public art is becoming popular. They become formula. That can be damaging, because people get into a field without really finding themselves. They look for it, and I think they have a problem with public art now. I think what's interesting about your art—and I remember how I first found you—is I was looking for artists who seemed to be doing public art, and that goes back many, many years ago. Not that the artists were finding me, which happens now. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: I just don't want to go into that whole Hudson River School, and all of that. You know.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's an art historical kind of—

NANCY HOLT: That's right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That may be totally irrelevant, which is fine.

NANCY HOLT: There may be a few connections, but I don't think it's significant for this interview to move into that area.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Okay. The only reason I really was thinking about it, because I was thinking about another aspect of the artist, and you may not want to get into that either. Is that one of the problems of public art is it's not reviewed, it's not critiqued, because it's usually in remote places. It's not just in big cities where a lot of people can come easily. Does that bother you?

NANCY HOLT: Well, yes and no.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Maybe it's an extraneous issue.

NANCY HOLT: No, it's an important issue. You know, how does the work get out in the world. That's the issue, really. I've found that I've had to—you know, I do my own photography as an adjunct to doing the sculpture, because I know how important it is to let people know that the works exist. And, of course, one of the best ways to do that is through photography. There's no point in doing work that you don't tell people about—you want people to have the experience of the work. And photographs—they have a life of their own, also. I'm very interested in my—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You don't mind your work being known by its photograph, or film?

NANCY HOLT: Well, since I do all my own photography, I'm very much—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —It's part of the work. It's part of the audience.

NANCY HOLT: —It becomes part of the whole process of doing this work. I take photography very

seriously. I see it as an extension of my work in the world. However, I do also feel that the photographs point to the sculpture, and that it allows people to know where the sculpture is. So that any time that they're in that area of the country, they can go and see the work. And certainly, this is a society of travelers. We are the transportation society. We have a tradition of travelling around, seeing sights.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But you know, there are now museum trips out to places like *Sun Tunnels*.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. I understand that, too.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So it's even become more of a formula. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Right. But it's always been part of our tradition, and these works fit right into that, and the works are totally available. If they were more traditional sculpture, the best thing that could have happened to them was that a museum would have bought them. They would have ended up in storage—museum storage. They wouldn't be available to me, or to anyone else.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I never thought of that.

NANCY HOLT: Of course.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. Sculpture actually has a special problem. You tend not to see it as frequently as you would a painting. It's harder. It's harder to bring out.

NANCY HOLT: Yes, of course. It's hidden away. It's not available. But I can do these public sculptures all over the country. That during the lifetime of anyone, they would, at some point, probably, be in that area of the country, and would have the opportunity, if they were interested, to go and see the work. So I really feel that it is as available as any traditional sculpture would ever be.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You have now—what—over 30 out there, so chances are, someone is going to come upon one or more of them.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And hopefully, you'll be doing more. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Right. But I think also the idea of them—you know, the drawings, and the photographs, have a significance of their own. I mean, take a look at *Sky Mound*, which is only one-quarter finished.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It really exists in drawing now. It's familiar as a drawing.

NANCY HOLT: It's already had a tremendous impact. I don't know—something like 50 articles have been written about, or it's been part of.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, because it's really a social phenomenon.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. And it's already had an impact, even though it's not completed. Probably more articles about that than any work that I ever did complete. So it's shown me that the ideas themselves are potent. And I just had a show of what I call *Projects on Paper*. Well, only one of those has been completed. So the ideas were getting out, about works that I hadn't done. But anyway, I think that the idea is significant in and of itself. The ideas can generate other—like, doing the landfill project has generated other reclamation projects of a similar nature, elsewhere. And more of a consciousness that we need to do something about the landfills.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: More of a public consciousness.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: In other words, the artists are kind of recognizing that. I always think of Rachel Carson. I mean, in a way, she was an artist, and she wrote a book, and it raised consciousness to the people who seemed to first realize what she was doing were artists. They went out there and picked up on the ideas. Do you consider yourself in that tradition? Were you aware of her work when she wrote it?

NANCY HOLT: I was aware of her work.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Was that meaningful to you?

NANCY HOLT: I don't recall. I don't remember it being particularly meaningful to me. No. The ecological issues have come up in my work because my work is so site-specific, and I've dealt with natural elements, like you mentioned. So it was only natural that certain ecological concerns with certain works would start to surface. And actually, it started way back in 1972 with *Views Through a Sand Dune.* I selected this sand dune, which was at the end of a peninsula. The Narragansett River was on one side, and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. And the sand dune was gradually wearing away because of wind erosion. And by putting the pipe through the dune, which allowed for a view of the ocean—one-third land, one-third ocean, one-third sky—and sort of combined all the elements, because you saw water, land, air, and then the sun and the moon. So it was a way of visually focusing in on the place, and bringing the elements together. But the pipe itself allowed for the air to go through it, which helped to retard the erosion of the sand dune. And before I did the piece, I remember I consulted with a scientist about that, and he said, It would be helpful to the dune if you do that. So I remember that was an aspect of the work that was important to me, and gave it another dimension.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You liked that?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. It gave it another dimension beyond my initial—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: The poetry, which you have just seemed to be describing. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Right. So it all started back then. And right along, there have been certain works like *Catch Basin* in Toronto, which I've described, which got rid of a stagnant pool, which was killing the grass, and causing some pollution. And then *Sky Mound*, which is reclaiming a landfill in New Jersey. I also right now have plans to do work in Finland, which is going to reclaim an old sand quarry, which I hope to get done next summer. And then there's also—in England, at a limestone quarry, I've come up with an idea for a few years ago, and they're sort of stalled on that. —[laughs]—But, anyway, that also would reclaim both the limestone quarry, and in England they used their old quarries for dumping garbage, so it's also a landfill, only it's not a mound. They used a cavity to put the garbage. So it will also—

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JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: One of my favorite pieces that I'd love you to just talk about is *Star Crossed*. It was an early piece, and I just find it aesthetically, very meaningful to me. Kind of the idea of the Indian mounds, which is another aspect of your work that I think is there.

NANCY HOLT: Well, that work was done at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. And I was invited there to be part of an art-architecture week, and Frank Gehry was the architect, and he ended up not—at the last minute, he couldn't come. So, as I recall, I was able to get his money, as well. [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Oh, that's very nice. —[laughs]—There's never enough money. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: I'm trying to remember. I did two pieces at Miami, actually. I'm trying to remember the context of this now. I did this other one, *Polish Circle,* I used some old post—and I can't remember if that—I think that was done during that week. Yes, I think that was it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And *Star Crossed*, you came back to do?

NANCY HOLT: And then I got the president of the University interested in doing *Star Crossed*, but we never really had sufficient money. We had to get donated pipes and we got this front loader operator to donate his machine and time, and students helping. It just took a long, long time. And we had bad weather, and there was an engineer who did the calculations, like, for how much soil I needed, and didn't figure it right. Well, let me just say a few words about the sculpture, itself. Oxford, Ohio is one of the few places in the world where magnetic north and astronomical north is the same. Astronomical north being North Star. So I thought this was an incredible thing that somehow—I mean they did not invite me there for that reason.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You were happy to do that. Fit in. [laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: This was like this amazing—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —serendipity. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: —phenomenon, you know? So I thought, I've got to do something about this. So *Star Crossed* sort of celebrates that. The large tunnel goes east and west, and the small tunnel, which is at an angle, goes north and south. So anyway, we had the pipes donated. There was enough money, I guess, to pay for the pool construction. You know, this oval pool had to be put in. When you look through the small tunnel at the oval pool, which is really a significant oval. It's 18 feet long by seven feet wide. It looks like a perfect circle because of the angle of your vision, which harken back to the early Locator pieces I did. In fact, you'll see all threads—in all my work, you'll see certain things come back again.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: The consistency is very satisfying. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: So these tunnels go through an earth mound. And when I did *Sun Tunnels* I was really very interested in the whole idea of tunnels, and what they mean as agents of transition. So that when you walk through a tunnel, it's like going from light, to dark, to light. Or it could be akin to birth, or to death. And it's something that affects people—the public. Let's say the public knows nothing about art. They walk through a tunnel, they are going to be affected by it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And you're aware of that when you do a work that is a tunnel.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. I'm very aware that certain aspects of my work are just very gut experiences, that you don't have to have words to describe them. That people are just going to have an experience. It may be a wordless experience, but they'll have it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Hopefully all public art really does that, otherwise it doesn't quite make it.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. You can't orchestrate it. It's something that you couldn't mentally decide that you wanted to have that happen. It's a factor. It's a byproduct of the work of art itself. You can't engineer it. You can't build it in. It's either there, or it isn't.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So you're aware of it, as it happens.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: As it unfolds?

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Are you ever surprised by your work?

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Something happened that you didn't expect, which is really nice. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes, that's right. So you can't always figure these things out, beforehand, altogether. You can do, you know, certain things, but other things will fall into place as it is being done. So—what was I saying?

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You were going to talk about the technical problems. You started to, in building *Star Crossed*.

NANCY HOLT: Oh I know what I was saying. I was saying that the oval pond becomes a circle that you look through a small tunnel, and how that connected with earlier things. So when I built *Sun Tunnels* I had the urge to build a tunnel that would go through an earth form. I thought, Well, I really want to somehow incorporate that in my work in the future. So *Star Crossed* was that work, where you really get a sense of being under the ground. You know, I built this mound on top of it, and under the earth. Of course, you know, *Sun Tunnels* this is true of, also. There's an echo, and it's much cooler inside of the tunnel.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. *Sun Tunnels*, too. We were there on a very hot day, and we actually got out of the heat by going into the tunnel.

NANCY HOLT: So it becomes a refuge in the desert. The same is true in Ohio. It's very hot. It's humid and hot. It's right near Kentucky. And it's very fitting to have a mound because the landscape is a very rolling landscape.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Isn't this where they found Indian mounds?

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's what I always thought of when I saw the piece.

NANCY HOLT: Well, the Miamisburg Mound isn't far away, which is, I think, the largest one in that area.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But it is one of the sites where they did find these Indian mounds

NANCY HOLT: And all around in the Oxford area there were Indian mounds.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Were you consciously aware of that when you were building the piece?

NANCY HOLT: You know, it's funny. I think I learned about it when I was there. However, it wasn't the primary motivation for my doing the earthen mound. My primary motivation is that I wanted a tunnel under the earth. Then, when I found out two things—that the magnetic north, and then the Indian mounds that were all over the place—you know, right nearby. Not famous ones, though. Except for Miamisburg Mound, which isn't too far. But they were all ones that the farmers had whittled away, you know? They're not impressive anymore, but the archeologist said, Well, these were Indian mounds. But I was delighted. This happens to me a lot.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Magic. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Like coincidence, you know?

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Are you a mystic?—[laughs]—Do you believe you are sent to a place to find out—to identify what it's about? [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: I often feel that things—the universe has placed me in certain places, and times to manifest something in the world, that has some kind of meaning. I might not be totally comprehensive of. I do have that feeling.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It seems to. And it's interesting that the first thing I thought of were the Indian mounds, because that's part of my experience. I was not aware of some of the other things.

NANCY HOLT: Well, as I say, people bring to the work their own experience. Now, *Sun Tunnels*—so many people talk about Stonehenge.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: The scale of it?

NANCY HOLT: Well, yes. So they all assume because they think of it, that I must have thought of it. But my work really doesn't come out of those ancient monuments. [Laughs.] I mean, I love those ancient monuments, but certainly, if you look at the development of my art, you will see within the art itself, the development of *Sun Tunnels* extraneous to any historical monuments that there might be—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You know, I often think of your art, specifically, as being very American. So that fits in with what you're saying. A lot of these monuments like Stonehenge are really in Europe or Easter Island—the very famous ones. Or in Scotland.

NANCY HOLT: Well, I think—I am using industrial materials—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Which is an American ideal.

NANCY HOLT: Well, yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: We think of ourselves as that.

NANCY HOLT: Well, I guess American is associated with big industrial materials. And also earth-

moving equipment.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Somehow like big bulldozers and stuff.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: We are bigger than these other places—I was just in Japan. Japan is a small island. You're aware of that. It's like a confinement.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. We had that big expanse and big machines. So I've had to use bulldozers and front loaders and dump trucks to make my work. First of all, that's supposedly a masculine kind of thing to be involved with. And that's hard for Europeans, for some reason, to imagine women doing that.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But there are as many women artists, who I think are really very, very good in this field, as there are men, who are dealing with actually, exactly the same equipment, spaces, difficulty.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So I think that's an old wives' tale about women and men. [laughs]

NANCY HOLT: I think this kind of work did emerge in America. I mean, it is American. It sort of had to happen here first. But now that it's developed and grown, I think that it can now move—there's much more consciousness in the last 10 years in Europe and Scandinavia about the importance of this work that started here, in this country. And I think it can translate very easily into the European landscape.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes, but the question is, are the American artists going over there and doing them? I know there are some. Robert Morris went to Europe.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Well, that's what I'm saying.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's what happens. But are the European artists—can they pick up on this sensibility, or do you think that happens less frequently?

NANCY HOLT: Well, European so-called Land artists were all pretty conceptual. Like Richard Long and Jan Dibbets. And that's why in Europe there was this big confusion about Earth art or Land art. They thought it was a conceptual art movement, which always amazed the artists here, you know? It's like, you go out, and you build a huge jetty in the middle of the Salt Lake, out of big rocks, salt crystals, and water, and some European art critic says it's a conceptual artwork, you know? It's because the European Land artists were conceptual.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —Were conceptual. That's a really interesting distinction I think. In a way, you're giving me an understanding of something that I'm a little confused about.

NANCY HOLT: Richard Long—going on those walks, and taking pictures, and then writing a little fragment of a poem.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And then he does a piece, which is really a totally different thing.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. He does a piece in the gallery situation. And that, to me, is real conceptual art, you know? Using photographs and fragments of language. Poems and things.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It is. And when we started, you kind of made that distinction with yourself, which was really very important. To kind of pinpoint where you are in art history.

NANCY HOLT: My photographs are all of works that are completed. They point to the artwork, rather as a substitute. Or as the artwork itself.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's a good distinction. I was thinking, also, about the titles of your work, and their significance. They all seem very poetic, but they're very accurate, very short, sometimes alliterative, which is kind of nice. How do you come up with your titles? When do you come up with them? Or don't you want to talk about this? [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: No. I think a lot about my titles, actually. I like them to be, as you say, short, to the point, and yet have a certain kind of poetic quality.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: They always conjure up an image.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Very definitely, which I think is very nice. Instead of being totally unrelated—[laughs] —as some titles are.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. They are somewhat descriptive.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: One of the things I also was thinking about is a work which may be atypical, like *Ransacked*, which, to me, has always been one of the most moving works you've done. Maybe I have personalized that. Where does that fit in here, in terms of your work being out there—that it's really so autobiographical, although it's a universal theme.

NANCY HOLT: Well, I've done work in video and film, and I've done two artists books. And those mediums are important to me, as well as some photography—still photography I've done, that is art, in and of itself. With video and with that book *Ransacked*, I was able to get into some more personal, emotional areas. But always with a lot of structure. Like the tape I did about my aunt, which is called *Understand*, and *Ransacked* is about the same aunt. I was able to get very close to some very powerful, strong emotions by setting up a structure that allowed people to feel the emotion without being overwhelmed by it. And in the *Ransacked* book, the same thing was true. I used photographs of the house.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It was real?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Right. They were like police photographs of destruction after the fact. Kind of like visual evidence. I used a single light source that was kind of harsh, and black and white. And then I had the fragments of interview I did with my aunt. And somehow, you got a sense of the situation through visuals and the words. But the structure allows you to—it's not off-putting. You know how they do these TV documentaries about death and dying, or sickness, or something, and they stick the camera right in the face of the person and—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —It's awful.

NANCY HOLT: You want to get away. But by putting more of a structure, which fascinates me—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That was very conscious on your part.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You thought about how people were going to respond to it, and why they—

NANCY HOLT: Yes. How I could bring them closer by putting up a structure that would keep their distance, in a sense. People don't have to worry about—somehow they could rest in my structure. That's really what it is.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But it really is moving. You go through life, and certain works are very meaningful to you. And that was always one that I really remembered. It gave me a chill just now. By the way, at the time, there was no reason for me to personalize it. I am now experiencing something, or have the potential of experiencing it with my mother, who has just become senile, and we're concerned about the people living with her. And all I think about is that book. —[laughs]—And yet, I was very moved then. So you did it. It's interesting to know that you really—I would never have thought that you had a structure that was so conscious.

NANCY HOLT: Oh, yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I would have thought that it came out of your total emotional experience, in a personal way. I think that's very interesting.

NANCY HOLT: Well, it does. It does.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. But you were able to step back from it, and be objective. Which is kind of interesting.

NANCY HOLT: Right. I mean, how do you transform something like that into art without just making it an exposé.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's right. You have to be objective.

NANCY HOLT: Right. You have to have the distance to transform it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: The ability to do it.

NANCY HOLT: But it's also cathartic. It was much more of a cathartic arch, than some of the other things I've done. Both the tape and the book.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: How much—I don't know whether you want to get into this at all, but as a public art consultant, I am very involved in the process of public art. You know, you've alluded to the fact that some things don't happen, that you don't compromise, and that's part of the process, and I agree with that, and feel that that's the right way to handle it. But then there are all these things with contracts, and controversy, and I know that you've had a few experiences. I don't know whether you want to go into it. But how significant is it to you, or do you just pass it off as something that happened, you get it?

NANCY HOLT: [Laughs.] Contracts are very important. In the beginning, when I started out, I didn't ever have a contract, it seems. I would just do things, and they would just get done, and I was just glad to get them done.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But were you having a one-to-one relationship with usually a person?

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Like you spoke about in Miami.

NANCY HOLT: Right. And sometimes it would be situations—impossible situations. Situations like where I'd be invited to do something temporary. And because of the nature of my work, it would end up being a permanent work.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Can they deal with that? [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes. And I was just glad that they would keep it, you know? It's like, I never thought about getting paid or anything, you know for doing something permanent, which is a whole different structure. But as I've gone on in public art, and as public art has become more of a structured situation, I've come to rely on contracts a lot, to clarify exactly what's going to happen, and how much I'll be paid, and how well the work will be maintained once it's finished.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You build in this protection and makings into your contracts.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Because the people that I'm dealing with today, in building the piece—they might be very honorable people, and I really think very highly of them. But they could go somewhere else tomorrow.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And usually do. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes. [Laughs.] So you need to have something on paper, so that the next person—or, in 10 or 20 years, when maintenance is necessary on the work, where they can refer back, and hopefully follow the instructions with the artist, and get in touch with me. So those are very important issues.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. Actually, I would say, 18 years ago when I started in this—and I guess you did, too—people didn't think so much about maintenance. It wasn't until several years later that people began to say, Well, let's find money for maintenance. It was always that you built the work, but there was no money to maintain it. So that if it would need any kind of special maintenance, it did not happen. Now, I think, people are more aware of it. But, of course, we're moving now into the area of moral right, which is a big issue now. Is a work of art your work of art, if it hasn't quite been fulfilled the way you planned it? Because these are constructions. Do you disallow—do you disown a work of art?

NANCY HOLT: Well, in my contract, if they do anything to my work without consulting me—that I don't approve of—or if they add anything to the area.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. That's a big thing.

NANCY HOLT: And that just became an issue. I did a work—*Annual Ring* in Saginaw, Michigan. It was a GSA [General Services Administration] commission. When I got that commission, there were trees that were planted around the circular area where I did the piece, and I had to pay part of my money to have those trees relocated, because they were going to interfere with the shadow patterns. I went back there 10 years later, or seven years later—about 10 years later, I guess—and I discovered that they had planted the trees again in the same spot—little trees—little seed—or saplings, or whatever. I had to call the GSA and say, Look, it's in my contract that no trees are supposed to be there. Nobody consulted me. So they had to—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Did they do it?

NANCY HOLT: Yes, they did. But it's a long process. It goes from Washington to Chicago, to Chicago to the guy that's in Saginaw.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But at least they did meet their obligation.

NANCY HOLT: Supposedly. I mean, I haven't been back to see. But I was told that it was taken care of. And that's important. That was in my contract.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It is. By the way, now an overlay of interest is this Disabilities Act. And very often, in any public site, that becomes something that takes precedence. So I've noticed a lot of artists are being very careful about putting this in their contract. And hopefully they will follow through, and see that someone doesn't put a gate or a fence or a walkway or a mound.

NANCY HOLT: Well, anyway, if they do something like that, either they have to undo it, or I can go in, and it always says in my contract I can take my name off of the piece. I can just disown it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Hopefully they will consult with you. You can disown a piece.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Which is a pity, because that goes against the moral right law, and also the right of the public to have works of art.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's kind of an interesting thing. All of these issues that probably were not issues when you started. As more work gets out there it is very significant. And do you feel that public art is a mission? That it really—it's not just you wanting your work to be there.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. I think definitely. It's a way of being. It's a total questioning of the art establishment as it has been taken for granted for so long. I mean, art has been too long—Art needs to be a necessary part of the society, again. And it needs to meet certain basic needs, and be functional.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Do you think, then, that what really has become a movement—there's much more public art out there, much more diverse kinds of public art than, say, 25 years ago. Do you think this is significant? Is this happening? Is this now becoming—

NANCY HOLT: To a certain extent, yes. But as public art has become a thing—something to do—it has become diluted. So now that there are all these committees and commissions, et cetera, there's like a new definition of what public art is all about. And artists who don't do public art at all are doing public art. You know, they're brought into the public sphere to do—like, a painter will do a mural or something, or a sculptor who's not really interested in public art at all ends up doing a sculpture in a public place, out of context. So there's been a real dilution. And also, there's a spirit of giving everybody a chance. Public art is very hard to do. One is lucky to get one or two works done a year. Commissions are very scarce. And here, I've worked all these years, and done a lot of work where I made no money whatsoever, thinking well, in future years, at least I'll have these works under my belt. [Laughs.] That'll help me get some commission where I'll make some money. Then, after all these years, that's just not happening. You know that—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And now you're a white female maybe, you do not have the same cachet as—

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Well, also, you'd think that experience and age would have some meaning,

but—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: When have you had enough?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Everybody, I think, thinks that I must have a lot of commissions. There's this idea that—oh, well, look at all the work she's done. Let's give this commission—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —to someone else.

NANCY HOLT: To a younger person. So it's very frustrating. And with the economy being in such poor shape, there are fewer commissions. And there's this idea that everyone needs to have a chance. So it's become clear to me that you really can't be purely a public artist. And there's just not enough commissions, really, to go around. You can't just rely on that. You can't make a whole career out of it.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Which is unfortunate

NANCY HOLT: It's very unfortunate.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's an important aspect of work.

NANCY HOLT: I mean, since it's my whole—I don't do anything else, you know? I mean, other people might do other things, but I have never done anything else, except you know, I have done video and film and books and some photography.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, theoretically, what should happen now, because you are mature. You do have a track record. One of the problems I find is there isn't enough money in the public art work. I'll see a community come in and say, "We have a hundred thousand dollars. Let's do three works of art." And really, there isn't enough money to do one good work of art. And I think there are many problems. Do you feel that you should—do you do any speaking to these groups? Do you bring up these issues? Do you see yourself as someone who can—

NANCY HOLT: Well, I do a lot of lectures.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Do you bring up these issues in your lectures, or do you mostly talk about your work?

NANCY HOLT: No. I do bring up some of the issues because people ask questions from the audience, and usually that will be one of the questions. When I say a lot of lectures, maybe—anywhere from four to eight a year, or something like that.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's a lot. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: One year I did 12. [Laughs.] The reason I do lectures, and want to do them, is that in art schools, this kind of work is not being taught. It's just absolutely amazing to me. And art schools know, I think, that they are weak in this area, and therefore, they will invite someone like myself to give a lecture. And that's supposed to suffice.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: The lecture?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. One lecture.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Rather than a course.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Right. Well, I probably wouldn't be interested in teaching a course, anyway. But they ought to have more faculty with more exposure to this kind of work, that can teach it on a daily basis.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, this problem really exists, also, with contemporary art in general. Students, art historians, really find that that is not a stress. That it's enough for them to study the past, and somehow they'll catch on with the future.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I think that's a real problem. I find very often they don't know anything about twentieth-century art. Even the immediate roots.

NANCY HOLT: Yes, I know. It's amazing.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Which is a real problem. Would you want to stop now?

NANCY HOLT: Well, do you have anything else to ask me? [Laughs.] Let me say one more thing.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Okay.

NANCY HOLT: This has just come up again. You know, even when I am considered for these public art commissions—usually I get a phone call, and I've gotten two of them this week, which reminds me of this issue. They call up and say, Congratulations. You're a semi-finalist. [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: [Laughs.] We are giving you a hundred dollars to spend six months on a proposal. Do you compete?

NANCY HOLT: Well, I have in the past because that's the way everything is set up. But it just seems a shame that with all the work that I've done—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: The people can't make a decision. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: That the people can't make a decision. And I'd be willing to come out there and meet everyone. I mean, one of these projects, that was supposed to be the way they were doing it. When I got involved with it, and sent my material in, it was that they would choose three or four semi-finalists, and then we would go and be interviewed, and have some vague ideas after we saw the site, and just talk.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It is called respond to the site. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes. And one of us would be selected. Well, that was okay with me. But now, of course—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: They want a proposal—

NANCY HOLT: They want something more. And I say, Well, how much are you going to be paying me to do this? They'll say, Well, we don't know yet, we are thinking about that.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Do you know that they have the money to build this? I have seen many budgets where they feel that once they pick the artist, they'll be able to raise the money, which never happens.

NANCY HOLT: Oh, no. This time I think they had the money but they think they get more, and I said, Well, I have to have an idea about how much more, because if you want a proposal from me, I have to know how much this is going to cost. [Laughs.] So, anyway.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's getting back to the process.

NANCY HOLT: But that is difficult after all these years—I'm 55 years old—to be told I'm a semi-finalist, with four other artists—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And some of them you've never heard of. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: That's right. There's usually a couple they throw in—local artists, or lesser known artists. And not only that, but the whole process itself is sending in slides, and applications. After all this time—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You think the people who are picking would know something. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Right. It's not an ego profession, let me tell you. [Laughs.] It's kind of a humbling profession. And you can't expect you're going to get written about very much, or get much exposure in the art world, and you have to keep going through this process like you're just starting out, and sending in your slides, and application. It's like being constantly always in a deal fight.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, part of the problem is, I think, the gallery system does not really help the public artist, because it's not built-in to what they're about.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I have always tried to make myself be in that way, but in the middle of that, but it really doesn't work either.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I have to be independent.

NANCY HOLT: No, the gallery does what it does, and I'm thankful for whatever they do. But the gallery is not central to my operation as an artist.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But you know more about it. You know more about what they need—the people need. I think you almost can't expect the gallery to be able to understand this very different aspect of art. But in general, though, are you satisfied, now that there are complaints? Are you satisfied with your life as an artist, making work out there?

NANCY HOLT: There are a lot of frustrations and a lot of difficulties, and it's not that rewarding on a personal level.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's not frequent enough?

NANCY HOLT: There's a lot of bureaucracy, there's a lot of detail. So it has its drawbacks.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I notice some of the artists who, like yourself, have done a body of work, find that they're getting their satisfactions from the proposals themselves. In other words, at least they're making art, at least they're thinking.

NANCY HOLT: I just had this show at Weber.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Which I didn't see. I'm sorry.

NANCY HOLT: *Projects on Paper*. I had never done that before. I used to say to people who wanted to interview me about the work I was doing, or about to do. I'd say, I don't want to talk about it. I'll talk about it when it's finished, because then it will be a reality. I don't want to talk about it now. But that has changed in the last four or five years. More and more the work has been unrealized. I have all these ideas, and so now, the ideas—I am exposing them more.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But is it satisfying to you, as an artist—as a person—to think about it on paper, even though it may never be realized?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. It's more satisfying to me now than it used to be. Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: That's good.

NANCY HOLT: Because realizing work is very difficult.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes.

NANCY HOLT: So I can't expect that—I'm always going to have many more ideas than can be realized.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Are you finding a format to deal with that that is somewhat satisfying?

NANCY HOLT: Yes, actually, I am. I've been paying more attention to my drawings and my renderings.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Is it drawings mostly? Do you do anything with very expansive models, as architects do? Is that a helpful way of showing work?

NANCY HOLT: I do some models. I do some very finished models, that are sort of like small works of art. And other models—I just make to conceptualize the work, from a physical form. And then I just discard them when that process is over.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Have you used anything on the computer—these CAD systems, where you—

NANCY HOLT: I'm doing that right now with a piece that I'm about to build in Tampa, Florida, at the University of South Florida.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Oh, great.

NANCY HOLT: That's actually the next step.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So you are moving into it. Is it interesting for you?

NANCY HOLT: Well, I just met with a guy a couple weeks ago, and I think maybe next week we're going to start doing that. So I can't tell you right now how interesting it is.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: So you said you were 55.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I'm older than that, so that doesn't seem so old. But you certainly are in your prime. I did a lot of work. I knew Noguchi and Nevelson and I worked with them. And of course, they worked well into their 80s, and worked, and physically had a sense of well-being and looking to the future. Do you see yourself as an artist, as also having that kind of mentality?

NANCY HOLT: Well, I'm in excellent health, and I feel very positive. I have some reservations about the future of public art, as it is now, and the difficulty of the whole procedure. So I'm always reassessing that my involvement with public art, and how—what kind of form or shape it's going to take in the future. I really couldn't tell you.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Do you think maybe now, that we don't have enough money to build big, gorgeous museums, which happened in the '80s. You know, all the money was spent on the museum building itself, and not on the art—that now, maybe museums will think in terms of sculpture gardens, or places, or doing more in a public art. Do you think there's ever going to be a museum that is going to—

NANCY HOLT: Well, sculpture gardens are kind of boring, don't you think?

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. Well, I was thinking more of the idea of getting rid of the museum, and putting art in public.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But doing it from the museum context or personality rather than a public art. [Crosstalk.]

NANCY HOLT: Well, I really feel museums should be more responsible for this major direction in American art.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, they're not, yet. It's like they don't think about it.

NANCY HOLT: It's changed the whole course of —[inaudible]—has happened in this century. And the museums are kind of deaf and dumb about it. What they need to do is take more responsibility to take more trips out there, have trips take people out.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: I mean museum itself in the city.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. Start to fund some projects in other sites. I have land out in Utah that I would love to build on. And I wish a museum would just give me some money to build on my land, out in Utah. I'd give them the land when I finished the piece; you know we could have a contract. This is what I'd like to see. Some museum ought to buy *Sun Tunnels*. I'd give them a whole 40 acres.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Have you tried to sell it?

NANCY HOLT: Yes. It's always been for sale. It's been for sale for 16 years, or whatever. There's no reason why a museum shouldn't own that.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: You're really asking that museums think differently about their role, and about their function, in the future.

NANCY HOLT: Right. Now, I've already bought the land I want. I bought it. In '75, I bought two more pieces of land, besides the one that *Sun Tunnels* is on. I have 400 acres, all together. I bought the two other pieces—they're very different kinds of pieces of land from *Sun Tunnels*. One is a beautiful butte that overlooks—you have a 360-degree view of the desert in every direction.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Really?

NANCY HOLT: And I have an old gravel quarry with a pond on it. And one is like five miles to the east, and one is five miles to the west of *Sun Tunnels.* And so I could have a complex out there, with different works. What I need is—you know, nobody wants to give me money to do work on my own land. Public art, unfortunately, really is geared just to public spaces. And what really needs to happen, and what I've been trying to have happen since the mid-'70s is for somebody to get involved with art on my land, and I think it should be a museum that does this. But a big collector could do it, also.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Collectors do things through museums.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's really another way of thinking. But how do you feel? Do you think the work should be just yours, or would you welcome other artists to do things on your land?

NANCY HOLT: No, it would just be mine.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It would be for you.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It's your land.

NANCY HOLT: Yes. It was my concept, my land.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: It is your concept. So really, you want to do an artwork you just kind of—want to do something—

NANCY HOLT: I found a place that I connect with. I mean, other artists will find places they connect with.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Yes. It's happened. There are works out there, like that, and there is validity to it. And I told you—museums have trips, and take their little groups to see these works of land. So they even have that going on.

NANCY HOLT: Well, yes. But not enough.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, they do not spend the money.

NANCY HOLT: The Museum of Modern Art really should be a little bit more—a lot more—conscious of this kind of work, and really get involved. Especially—it's just so frustrating to have owned this land all this time, and never found anyone who wanted to invest.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, because in the olden days there would be a patron.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: And now we have either corporations or city governments, and they have so many layers of bureaucracy both on what they do. It's not pure art. It's not the individual.

NANCY HOLT: Right.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Maybe that's something new for someone to think about doing, in the world. I don't know. You have to sort of give people the idea. Connect with the right person. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Well, I've been giving them the idea a long time. [Laughs.]

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, you're only 55. [Laughs.] It will happen before you're 80. [Laughs.] I think it would be pretty exciting. I think it sort of identifies America again as this great big place with lots of land out there, and what are we going to do with the land? And if we can have art on it, that's one thing to do. We have ski slopes on it. We can have a lot of things going on for recreation. I would like to see it. I think it would be really exciting.

NANCY HOLT: Well, you know, not too far from my land is a little tiny airport. If someone had enough money, and had a little jet, they could fly out, and fly their friends out. They could spend some time looking at their art collection. Because they would own the land. They would have to sign an agreement where they couldn't do anything to the land, you know and my work.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Develop it, and put housing in. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: [Laughs.] And they couldn't change the artwork in any way. They'd have to maintain it the way it was. But that's it. Those are the only criteria. They would end up owning these—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Have you applied for a grant?

NANCY HOLT: I did years ago. With the NEA [National Education Association].

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Oh, no. I don't mean the NEA.

NANCY HOLT: No, the NEA actually—it fit into their agreement.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Really?

NANCY HOLT: Because there were public roads that go right to both of these pieces of land, which is part of why I bought them, because they were accessible. So they would be open to the public, and it did fit their criteria, but they sent me a letter back saying—and I had a sponsor to sponsor it. It was like a national organization—one that actually put the art along the roadsides in—

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: —Nebraska?

NANCY HOLT: Nebraska. So they were sponsoring me, and everything was fine. But NEA said it would be a low priority application.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Which means it did not happen.

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: But I was thinking more of the private foundations. Of course, they really want to be very, very visible. When foundations or corporations give money to art. They want to have their name on a thousand pieces of paper. [Laughs.]

NANCY HOLT: Yes.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Maybe that's the answer. Have a book made as part of it.

NANCY HOLT: Right. Well, that could happen. I'm open to anything. And I'd like to get back into that area because that's the most freedom for an artist. Choose your own land, buy it, build a piece.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: Well, maybe you have to become part of a group. In other words, if for one person to do it. But maybe there could be five artists who go out there and buy land.

NANCY HOLT: Well, no. You see, it can't be a group activity.

JOYCE POMEROY SCHWARTZ: No, no, no. I don't mean each piece. In other words, sometimes something that happens on a bigger scale can happen.

NANCY HOLT: Well, you know, this is sort of like something from my past. I mean, *Sun Tunnels* was built, but you know, with my own money and money I raised from getting grants, that were personal grants you know like came to me directly—

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