

Oral history interview with Nancy Holt

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nancy Holt on July 6, 1992. The interview was conducted by Scott Gutterman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

SCOTT GUTTERMAN: I was reading the biographical information. I was curious. You live in an apartment that looks out on New Jersey, but not the apartment that you grew up in. You grew up north of here.

NANCY HOLT: Yes, a little further north, but not that much further.

SG: Actually, it was closer to the George Washington Bridge, right?

NH: No, actually, closer to the Lincoln Tunnel. Practically straight out from the Lincoln Tunnel. So, yes, so I'm looking out on my almost home state, but not actually my home state. I was born in Massachusetts.

SG: I see.


NH: And I never really felt like a citizen of New Jersey because my parents were both from Massachusetts. My father was from New Bedford, and my mother was from Worcester, and I was born in Worcester. And they were thorough New Englanders, and only moved to New Jersey because my father worked for Dupont. He was an engineer, and was transferred there. And, of course, this was—he lived through the Depression. Anyone that lives through the Depression, of course, clung to their jobs. And it was also the age of the organization man. You know, the corporate loyalty.

SG: Right.

NH: So when he got transferred, he went to New Jersey. He was told he was only going to be there for a couple of years, which he was very happy about. So they never bought a house. They rented for many, many years, thinking that we were about to move. And I was taught that living in New Jersey wasn't, like, real life. Like, real life happens somewhere else in New England. [Laughs.]

SG: The capital of real life.

NH: [Laughs.] I was a little kid, you know? I really believe that. I mean, parents, really. They were not totally in the place where they were living. They were living in their heads—you know, in this fantasy life. They were cut off from the course. I sort of imbibed that, you know? I thought, "Well, I'm kind of stuck here in New Jersey." [Laughs.] And every chance we got, we went up to Massachusetts. We went to the Cape in the summer. When it came time for me to go to college, of course I had to go to



school in Massachusetts. That was where the seat of all learning was. [Laughs.] Well, it's sort of true, too.

SG: Yes.

NH: I don't think I considered any schools that were not in Massachusetts. I went to Tufts.

SG: Right.

NH: Primarily because I wanted to go to a co-ed school in Boston.

SG: It was two colleges then?

NH: It was Jackson and Tufts, but all the classes were together.

SG: Right.

NH: It was a relatively small school with good academics. They had all the—you know, academics in the Boston area. I guess if you couldn't work in Harvard, you ended up at Tufts. [Laughs.] So it was pretty—I liked that, and I liked being in that area.

SG: Despite the lack of connection with the place, and much more identification with New England—


NH: Well, wait. I would like to correct that, though.

SG: Okay.

NH: I ended up inadvertently, becoming very much a New Jerseyite—in a non-mental way. I might have had a kind of detachment or distance in my mind, but I had really become a New Jerseyite. Looking back, I think growing up in New Jersey was a wonderful experience because it's a limbo place. It's a place where you don't have to live up to any images, whatsoever. [Laughs.] There's no way you have to be and nothing particular is expected of you.

SG: Did that have any kind of larger resonance? It sounds almost like a portrait—not of all of the United States, but of aspects of the United States.





NH: Well, I don't think there are too many places like New Jerse. Because even Mississippi, you have a real culture there, you know, like a standard.

SG: Right.

NH: But almost anywhere—Colorado or Montana or North Dakota you would have that, you know?

SG: Ohio was not part of that there. [Laughs.]

NH: [Laughs.] Well, that's sort of a borderline.

SG: [Laughs.] Okay yes, I think they're [inaudible] cousins.

NH: I always think that maybe Delaware also is a place like New Jersey.

SG: Right, I know what you mean about that—without strong regional traditions, just a middle zone.

NH: Yes, and in New Jersey, of course—surrounded by kind of like the decay of the industrial revolution. And New Jersey had the first highway culture. So you'd have these decaying nightclubs—burned down nightclubs along the highway, and it was close to New York.


SG: Right.

NH: Everyone disliked New York intensely. I was warned over and over again never to go to New York, and that's still the same today. I was back in New Jersey recently, and the people that live there still tell their children the same thing. "Stay away from New York. It's a very evil place." They project all their evil onto the city.

SG: I think the city projects some of it back. [Laughs.] I guess maybe for a while, you grew up thinking along those lines, but clearly didn't wind up thinking along those lines, in terms of suspicion in the back of your mind.

NH: Well, no. Well, being young, New York was a place that offered all kinds of intrigue and mystery. However, I didn't grow up in a family that had any kind of cultural consciousness, and cultural pursuits were unheard of. Art was meaningless, so I lived twenty minutes from all the museums in New York, and I was never, ever taken to a museum—ever. And I had very poor art training, and no encouragement. It was, in that respect, very restricted. On the other hand, there was, like, a kind of





rawness in New Jersey. There was this energy, and this excitement about New York, and going to see the nightlife, and the strange people, and I would do that a lot—as much as I could. I didn't go to museums. I came to the Village, and I looked at all the weird people, you know? [Laughs.]

SG: Makes sense. What about the influence of the landscape? I mean, you talked about an industrial landscape. Was that impressing itself upon you, early?

NH: I think I was always intrigued by the oil refineries and the flames. From my bedroom window, I could see Manhattan, so I reversed the situation. I had this distant-like glittering universe that was a forbidden universe. I sort of snuck over there almost. I had the sky and the buildings and the lights. I mean, it was pretty far away, but the city, you could see it. I think that that sense—it threw me to be concerned with where the sky meets the earth. But in the east we don't have much of that experience. You have to go out west, to be knocked out by it. It's only trees and buildings, but my landfill project in New Jersey is unique in that that's a site in the midst of the metropolitan area. It's only fifteen minutes from here, and you have this big, vast open space, and you see the landfill forms touching the sky, and there are no trees or anything in the way. It's just this big, vast open space, and when you walk to the top of the landfill, you can see all of Manhattan, you can see Newark, you can see the Pulaski skyway. You can see, maybe twenty miles in every direction and you are totally conscious of the sky, the same way as you would be out west. It was an amazing place, in that respect that you feel like it's not the east coast, and yet, there you are, in the middle of Manhattan practically.


SG: I saw some photographs of Jan Gruger [ph]. Did you see these? I forget what they're called, Project New York, or something, but they were shot from New Jersey to New York, from these very wide-open spaces. They're very odd. They're very eerie.


NH: She's from New Jersey.

SG: Oh, is she?

NH: She and Bruce Boice, who is her husband. I knew them when Bob was alive. That was our big connection with them, is that we were all from New Jersey, and we used to go out and talk about New Jersey, and how great it was, and how we missed it. Our favorite diners. [Laughs.]

SG: Yes, well, I guess she has a new book, I think it's new.





NH: Well, way back then—and that was in the early seventies. she would go to New Jersey all the time. She did a whole series of highway photographs with trucks. Do you remember those? Twenty years ago?

SG: Not so much. Not so much. You know, I'm going to test this because it would be a real tragedy if it weren't working. I'm going to try to get back to the word tragedy [Audio break.] The area where you grew up was probably more residential.

NH: Yes.

SG: So it wasn't actually the area in your backyard.

NH: No, I lived on just a regular suburban street, in a phony Tudor house. [Laughs.]

SG: [Laughs.] See that sounds nice. I grew up around a lot of phony Tudor houses. [They laugh.] Now when you go back and forth to New Jersey, there's so much—you pass through this veil of industry. Was that your experience, coming back in there, too? I guess it's been there for a long time.

NH: It's been there a long time. Now there are newer industries, like industrial parks, and the Meadowlands Complex. Well, actually, the Meadowlands used to be the mosquito breeding area.

SG: Right.


NH: We had a terrible mosquito problem in New Jersey, when I was growing up. They finally controlled it a little bit by polluting the wetlands, you know, by putting oil so that the little larvae couldn't develop. I think they just sprayed oil or something on top of the water.


SG: Specifically to—

NH: To kill the mosquitos, but they were terrible, I must say. Back there, we were very happy they figured out a way of killing these larvae, because it was miserable!

SG: I'll bet.

NH: It was terrible.





SG: Yes, they could eat you alive. [Laughs.] Because when I think of the look of that area, I mean, I think of that project the *Dark Star Park*, but that's actually not the one—

NH: No, the one that the landfill is on [laughs] you have me doing it now—no *Sky Mound*.

SG: Right. Right. I wondered how much was coming back from thinking about those places—those kind of nether places.

NH: I don't think so much with *Sky Mound*. I think my sense of that kind of space came more when I went out west. I'm bringing that experience to this kind of more western site. I was absolutely stunned when I went out west for the first time. I went with my husband, Bob. It was 1968 and I got off the plane in Las Vegas—then it wasn't as built up as it is now. Where you got off the plane it was just this big, flat desert. The space, and the sky, and the sun just knocked me out. I didn't sleep for three days. And it was a very special experience where I felt that my inside and the outside were identical, somehow. That somehow I had been carrying this landscape within me, and suddenly there it was, without. I didn't have the normal kind of barriers—these person barriers. I was like out in the landscape at the same time I was in a body, at the same time, but I had no tiredness. I was alert and just part of the universe. It was incredible. It lasted about three or four days, and it made all the difference to my life, and my perceptions, and my work.

SG: So you weren't heading to go to Las Vegas? [Laughs.]

NH: No.

SG: You were to go somewhere near there? Was it a project that might—


NH: Yes. We were going out with Mike, he was doing some projects by a lake there. We went with him, and we actually helped him do some of those early works. Then Bob collected some rocks you know, for some of his sites. So when I came back to New York, I was never the same person again.

SG: It sounds like a key transformation.

NH: It really changed everything.

SG: Wow. Let me backtrack for the sake of chronology. You had started talking about going to Tufts and coming back to New England. Was your interest in art sparked there at all? Or still not really?





NH: Well, I really didn't know much about who I was or what I was going to be when I was young. I was a late bloomer. I had a difficult family life, really. I lived in a nuclear family, where I was the only child. There were no other adults. I mean we had no relatives. My parents had very few friends, and the ones they had, they had over a night to play bridge, I maybe said "hello" to them when they came to the door, and then I was sent to bed. I never had a teacher that I connected with at all. I never met one adult that I had any connection with. Except, of course, the two [inaudible]. [Tape speeds up] And so that was my world—these two people and my mother—she sort of had a lot of emotional problems, and she was also very ill with a lot of different illnesses. She wasn't really a role model for me. I didn't want to be like my mother. My mother was ill, and sick and confused. So I looked at my father and I thought, well, he's somebody who is out in the world. He's doing his job. They didn't seem to have very many interests. They didn't really enjoy life very much, but my father played tennis, he seemed to enjoy that. I think that you know I only had the two choices, so I chose to be like my father. He was a scientist, so I decided that interested me. That was part of it I think. Another part was that I was fascinated with the world, you know like plants and animals. I didn't know that I was an artist. I was like, "Oh, look at that weird plant." [Laughs.] "It would be nice to know about these things." I ended up going into biology. Now, when I look back, we make all these categorizations that are totally false, just for the sake of being able to teach certain disciplines, but biology is so visual. I remember taking a course in histology, the study of tissues and skin. We'd put things under the microscope—different dyes, and they'd turn different colors. It was incredible looking! And then I would draw them, you know?

SG: Mm-hmm [affirmative] You'd draw them as part of the lab work, trying to draw?

NH: Yes, right. Then I got interested in—at MIT they have a series of lectures about abstract expressionists and do you want to stop right now? [Tape Off/On]

NH: Did I give you back your big bag already?


SG: Yes, I put it back in here. I've never seen anything like that. So anyway, you were telling me about a series of lectures at MIT, that I guess you went to while you were in college.

NH: Yes, you know, as I say, I was very uneducated in the realm of art.

SG: So you weren't studying art at all?

NH: Well, yes, at college I started to a little bit more, and I took a few art courses, you know, art history courses. So anyway, I went to these lectures at MIT, and that was what impressed me a lot.





And although, the theory, I don't think it's very much of theory, but at the time it meant something to me.

SG: Right. And you don't remember who gave them?

NH: No, I don't. Then I started going to New York, in my junior year, alone. I had a friend at Barnard. So I started meeting people here, going to museums, and meeting artists. So I started to have more understanding. You know how it is.

SG: Right. Although coming here while you were in college, and meeting artists it must have been a very strong interest that was developing.

NH: Yes, but I think it was more that I was kind of a rebel and suddenly I found other rebels you know? [Laughs.] I knew I just wanted to get out of college. I didn't want to fool around going to school—I thought I'll graduate, I think in my junior year I knew that I was in the wrong field, but I didn't want to switch because then I would have to go to school longer. I didn't see the value of going to school to study art, especially at that time, because it was after abstract expressionism, and they were teaching something that it was like not already alive, and there were these notions about feeling feelings that nobody has ever felt before you know. Expression—I was never, ever in that mode, and it would have been a very deadly thing for me to have gone to art school. I would have been repelled. So, fortunately, I [laughs]—

SG: Skipped that and just moved to New York.

NH: I moved to New York. I learned a lot just by being around, and being with artists. I was always sort of like conceptualizing my approach, although my art is not conceptual. I don't like the term applied to my art. My art, if anything, is perceptual, and I'm always wondering why that term didn't have more caché. Because it's really definitely is concerned with seeing. And there were other artists—Richard Serra and I, at the same time, were doing perceptual art. It's one of those hidden art movements that nobody picked up on. But he— like that last show he just had at Gagosian's, with the round forms. It's about seeing shapes, depending on where your position is in the room. So he's been doing that a long time.

SG: Who were some of the artists at that time, you know, just moving here, that you were interested in?

NH: Well, I knew Bob, and he made a big difference. [Laughs.]





SG: Had you met him in Boston?

NH: Actually, my friend in Barnard brought us together at lunch, while I was here—like in my junior year of college. He had just been experimenting a little bit with Peyote. Peyote buttons—they used to have them on the street corners down there. They were legal. I mean, nobody knew what they were.

SG: Right.

NH: And I guess they made you pretty sick you know, like your stomach got upset, but people took them, anyway. So he had had, I guess, one of his first psychedelic experiences. Have you ever done it?

SG: No. [They laugh]

NH: Why not? [Laughs.] Wrong generation, right?

SG: I guess, I don't know—close, but no cigar.

NH: You've got to do it. [Laughs.] Then you can talk to the rest of us.

SG: Okay.

NH: The old-timers right? Although it's starting to be a thing that people are doing again.

SG: God, yes, and now everyone is afraid it messes with your gene structure.


NH: Only do it a few times, it's okay. Bob and I never did it more than a few times. Anyway, so it sort of like lingers you know, at least the experience is very profound, so you're in another state for a while. I've always thought that you know, so he met me when he was in this kind of altered state or something. So I really made this incredible impression on him. So he couldn't get me out of his mind.

SG: That may or may not have been the Peyote. [They laugh.]

NH: So, anyway, he was always around, and always eager to see me.

SG: And he was working as an artist then? He was going to school?





NH: Oh, yes. He was already an artist. I don't know if you saw the show in Columbia, that was this year.

SG: No.

NH: There was a book, a new book out called Robert Smithson on Earth.

SG: No. Who put it together?

NH: They have a gallery up there, in Columbia, you know Judy Shy [ph] did the—

SG: Oh, I know her.

NH: They have works in there from 1957 of Bob's, or even 1955—I think he was seventeen or [inaudible]. He would have been seventeen. And you can see the later work in it. It's of a building that's half constructed. It's just amazing. And there were a lot of very early works.

SG: Drawing or painting?

NH: No, it's a pastel drawing. He was an artist. He had his first one-man show when he was twenty or twenty-one. He was very successful in the early days. He was considered this incredible new artist, and he painted. He did all the paintings—well, the show was called *Works on Paper* so there weren't too many paintings, but there were sort of paintings on paper. He was young, but he knew everybody. He gave the first party here in New York, with rock 'n' roll—Alan Ginsberg was there. It's recorded in Fred Mcdarrah's book about the artist's world. It was in 1959. I remember it was 1959 because I was up at Boston, and I got invited to the party, and I think the letter that he sent me, inviting me, is in the Archives, because I kept it. It had drawings all on the sides of it.


SG: Neat.

NH: But I didn't go. I thought he was kind of strange. [They laugh]

SG: Right. So he was one of several people that you were getting to know, when you first moved here.

NH: Yes.





SG: When were you starting to do stuff of your own?

NH: Well, I went through like a real—I don't know how to describe it. I had to go through a whole inner-transformation before I could do my work. I had to understand a lot, I had to read a lot. I went for a meta-physical time, a religious time. I had to grasp a lot, my state of being had to become a certain way. That was a very big thing with me, being versus becoming. Because all of my life I was becoming, becoming, and not really because I had been forcing all these things that were not right for me. I had to shed them. I had to unlearn, and so I had to spend a period of time just doing that—just reading, thinking, being, living, you know—living on next to nothing. You know, just seeing how little I could have, and just get away with the bare essentials of life. I had to find all that out, so it took me a while. I don't think I started doing any art until I was in my late twenties. In that respect, though, I was always in touch with other artists, and always having long, lengthy conversations. I used to think of myself as being the most conceptual artist. Someone like Ian Wilson, who had taken it just about as far as it could go, in the art context, was still within his ego structure. This was what I was interested in—breaking down the egos. He was having a show at a gallery, and he was still giving talks—people were coming, he was like the guru, you know? And he was still writing sentences, and framing them. The whole conceptual thing used to greatly disturb me because those little sentences, and all the conceptual work was going off to Europe, packaged up. The Europeans loved it because they didn't have to spend much freight and insurance charges, and all that. It was like the hottest commodity art. Here he was trying to break the commodity mold, and it was the opposite. It could proliferate all over the place. I was very upset by this, and I used to attack these people all the time. And I felt that my doing nothing—I was taking the purest stand I could take. I thought I was an artist in the fullest sense, by doing nothing. So that was my art.


SG: Right.

NH: But then, after taking—and really, deeply feeling this—it was very tough, you know. When everyone else around you is doing work and having things, and getting their names around—it is very, very hard to consciously not do that.

SG: Right.

NH: But then that all changed—actually, when I did my Locator pieces—once again, when I went to the desert, it was like instantaneous. I woke up one morning, and I went to a welding place, and I made some of these Locator pieces, and it was like overnight I had produced some physical objects, and yet they weren't things that you looked at, but they were things you looked through. And this was





very satisfying to me. It was like I wasn't creating anything, and yet I was creating something in order to have a void. All my work has been like that even the latest piece I just did, which is like this elaborate system of pipes. They're all there in order for the air, and I gave form to the air within the pipes, and I'm moving the pipes with these spinning ventilators. The whole structure is called *Hampton Air*. And that's consistent in everything I've ever done. That's probably the underlying consistency. I mean like *Rock Rings*, I made this huge, heavy, many ton work, those walls are two feet thick—just to have those holes. It was somehow very consistent with where I had been before. Only suddenly, they were a little more physical. They proliferated—the Locators, once I started making them, I made lots of them. They were all over the place.

SG: And they were all to look through?

NH: Look through. Usually, I have them looking outside of the place. I would zero in on something you wouldn't notice at all until you looked through my Locator, and then you'd be kind of startled, because you don't really see anything unless you're focused on it.

SG: Right.


NH: Then I got to playing with them. You would look through one, and you'd see the other. Then I started putting shapes on the wall that you look through, you know perfectly surrounded shape. I got interested in how light and sight were so connected, because you could shine a light through these things, and you could get different shapes as it went around the walls, and everything. I thought, oh, light and sight are so—I thought it wasn't all these people that in the Middle Ages, you know? With the idea that light emanated from the eyes. And that seems very real to me. So then I started working with light and holes, you know, shining light through holes, and making patterns, and doing whole room installations like that, and mirrors—bouncing light off of mirrors [inaudible]. And it was all very intangible. I was using light in a very concrete way, which everyone was very interested in that.


SG: Yes, Dan Flavin, and many others.

NH: Yes, but his light is—I was actually using projected light and making—it seemed that they had substance, and I would draw around the edges of it—of the nothing. His was about emanating light.

SG: Right.

NH: I think his fluorescents have a certain substance, and they emanate light. I like his work a lot, but it's very different from what I'm talking about. His substance to ejected light. Anyway—





SG: Some of those pieces were in—when did you start showing some of those? I saw some of the first things were the Virginia Dwan, and John Weber—some group shows.

NH: My first one-person show in New York was at LoGiudice Gallery. Do you remember? Well, you weren't around then. It was in the old Kitchen space on—downtown.

SG: Worcester?

NH: Yes. It's Worcester and Grand.

SG: Right, where the Ohio Theater still is kicking around a little bit.

NH: Well, anyway, that's where he was. He had a big gallery. He showed Mark di Suvero. He showed a lot of the real macho guys, and he really didn't show women. This was very unique that I had a show there, at that time because feminism really hadn't taken off.

SG: Right. Were you interested in the feminist issues? Did you read about feminism, or think about it?

NH: Well, I was, once it became a conscious process. But I wasn't one of the ones that began it. But once it occurred to me that yes, these women were for rent, why hadn't I thought of that, you know? [Laughs.] Yes, I am a feminist and I had been.

SG: So I can't believe that this forty-five minutes have—


NH: I'm sure it's up.

SG: You would think, but it's still spinning.

NH: Let me put the light on.

SG: Maybe it's ninety per side. No, that can't be. Yeah that would have to be more than forty-five minutes. Well, maybe not exactly.

NH: Well we started at five minutes until eight.





SG: Oh, well there you go. With the whole battery crisis—

NH: Oh I see. Well let me turn this light down a bit.

SG: Yes, it's bright. That's night.

NH: Is that good?

SG: Perfect. So the first pieces weren't land issues?

NH: Well, they were, though, because the Locator pieces—I did a piece in Montana with eight of them on the points of the compass in a rather large circle. They were larger Locators than the ones that had been in the city, also. It was a site I specially selected because of the multiplicity of things that you could see through the locators. So you could see a mountain, and you could see a plane, and a ranch house.

SG: So all this work in the show are after going out in 1968.

NH: Yes.


SG: And seeing the western landscape.


NH: Yes.

SG: Then, were you as interested as showing in a gallery in New York, as you were taking it outside, in another place?

NH: I was doing *Buried Poems*, which were very sight specific and very much in the landscape, and they were about the landscape in a certain sense. I would go around to different places, and a place would conjure up a person in my mind, and I would write a conceptual poem you know, a concrete poem, actually. I used to write concrete poems and that would be particularly for this particular person. And I would bury it in the ground in a—in a vacuumed container. And the person had a lifetime to pick it up, but they were very unique and unusual, and difficult places, usually like unnamed, uninhabited islands, in the Florida Keys.

SG: So you had to do a lot of digging to get your poem.





NH: Well, it's not so much you have to do much digging, but you have to follow my map very carefully. And the map became a thing, too, because I would describe this or that, or the other thing you had to look for you know, and I also would read up on the history of the place, and the flora and the fauna. I would really immerse myself in the site—but they were very private. They weren't meant for public consumption. It was, in a sense, working out of that—the being without the ego. I mean the next step really was to do something like that, where I did it for a particular person. No one knew I did it except the person that I did it for.

SG: Right.

NH: And then the Locator pieces were a little more public, and they became a little later after the *Buried Poems*. Sometimes I think they overlap a little bit.

SG: Would you want to document those early pieces? I mean did you document those early pieces?

NH: I have some of the original booklets, and things that I gave to people, or copies of them anyway.

SG: You mentioned trying to live on as little as you could. None of these pieces are—were for sale.

NH: No. I never sold the Locator pieces, and really now I'm—I've never pursued it. It's like going back into the past and dredging up the old work. I've got them sitting in storage. Actually, the New Museum owns one of them. That's true. And I was in a show they did when they were still in their old spot.


SG: On Fourteenth?

NH: Yes, but they really need to be shown again, I guess. That needs to happen.

SG: I'm sure they will. I'm just curious how you were able to make ends meet at that time. Just doing this, and doing that?

NH: Well, I took various part-time jobs. I taught three and four-year-olds half a day at the downtown community school. That was fun. I really enjoyed that. Let's see I was an assistant literary editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. That was the first magazine, really, in a popular way, to publish really good people, like Natalie Serope [ph] and Iris Murdoch and—well I can't remember who else, but anyway, some really good people. [Laughs.] I don't think they have that reputation now, but it was a way of getting





some really first-rate writing into all the beauty salons in the country, so people could be exposed to that kind of writing.

SG: Right.

NH: So I kind of liked that. That appealed to the populist in me. Although my job— [End of side one, tape one]

[Side two, tape one]

NH: [In process]—they made all of the decisions, I was just there part-time, and I got to read all of the manuscripts that got sent in, unsolicited. And so I read a lot of Alan Ginsberg's father's stuff. He would send stuff all the time, but it was interesting. I would get to go out to lunch with Natalie Serope [ph], and go to these fancy restaurants uptown, which I just read about. [Laughs.] And I saw the inside of the New York magazine world.

SG: That's great. So you were doing various other things?

NH: Yes. I also had a roommate, when I first moved to New York, so that helped pay the rent.

SG: Where did you live? Downtown?

NH: Well, I started out living on 10 East 95th, in this very little tiny apartment, but it had a little terrace, which was nice. And I shared this tiny little space with my friend. And then we moved to 75th Street and 23rd Avenue, and we had a much bigger place, but it was like in a railroad tenement. And then I moved downtown to a loft, four blocks away from here, which had a lot of mice. [Laughs.]

SG: You had all that stuff. [Laughs.]


NH: Yes.

SG: I was just walking by Westbeth [Artist Community]. This is way before Westbeth was built? Was that built in the seventies, or something? The early seventies?

NH: Well it's been there, the building is the Bell Telephone Building.

SG: Right.





NH: It became an artist co-op in 1971 or 1972. Or 1970, maybe, but the building I was in, which was Greenwich and 12th—was the pilot project for Westbeth.

SG: No kidding?

NH: It was the very first building that the city allowed people, loft lovers, to be legal. It was up for auction, because the taxes had not been paid. It was a civic minded group who said, "Well, let's make this building for artists." The Kaplan Fund—the furrier, he gave money towards it, and the city waived the taxes. So the place was re-done at that point, you know, got renovated to meet standards.

SG: This was in the mid-sixties or the late sixties?

NH: I don't know. It was in the sixties. I'm trying to remember if it was 1968.

SG: I thought that the first artist conversions that the city allowed were in SoHo.

NH: No.

SG: George Maciunas.

NH: No. Ours was the very first. I think it was in 1966, maybe at the earliest.

SG: Right. Maybe the SoHo stuff was later.


NH: SoHo didn't start until 1970.


SG: Right. When they defeated the expressway. What else was I going to ask? I saw some of your early shows also involved video.

NH: Yes.

SG: Were you looking around at new forms, at new ways of doing things?

NH: Yes. Video—it sort of happened one day when Bob and I were visiting Joan Jonas and Peter Campus. It was in 1969, and that was maybe the first year that they had portable video equipment.





And Peter had just gone out and rented the equipment, and none of us had ever used it. Both Peter and Joan became well known video artists.


SG: Right.


NH: But that was the first day, and Bob and I made a tape, which is still shown to this day, which is called *East Coast/West Coast*. And he played the role of a west coast artist, and I played the role of an east coast—an east coast conceptualist. It was kind of funny, and Bob is totally out of character in this tape. It's like a put-down of California artists you know, so that was the beginning. Suddenly video was around, and I had friends who were into video. So I started thinking in that direction. In the beginning it was very fresh, you know, you notice sort of basic things that you were sort of used to now. So when I made my tape *Underscan*, which was in 1974, I used the under-scanning device, which contracts the image. You use it on monitors to see, not only on home monitors, but on professional monitors. You want to see exactly what you're getting on the tape, which you can't see when it bleeds out along the edges. So it's a button that you push, and it contracts in, and it does something very interesting to still images, you know, here you have this expanded image. Then, if you push it halfway in, you get an elongated image, and then you get a very contracted image. So I did a tape that was based on—used that as part of its *raison d'être*.

SG: Right.

NH: But that was in 1974, but before then, I had done quite a few tapes where I had made like a mask for the camera, with holes that would open and close, and you would see different things as you opened them up. And I did an installation at the Clocktower. You can't see out of the Clocktower. You can't see the views, but I allowed—you could see the view of the monitor. I've had four monitors for the four windows. But I had a circle. You can only see a circle of what you could see outside, and that circle would move along, and people would—in the soundtrack would discuss what they thought they were seeing. I picked eight different people who totally—what I thought were the eight different ways of approaching, eight different philosophies—philosophical points of view. In fact, the work was called *Points of View*. It was, I thought, quite interesting, how people responded to seeing a fragment as it went along, and then, suddenly, you saw the whole image, and then there was always that element of surprise. Oh, they hadn't guessed it right. They had misinterpreted it, or whatever.

SG: We already mentioned some of this, but it seemed like from the beginning your goal was not to stay within the gallery format. You went to the conventional showing format.





NH: The first show—the first pieces that I showed were the Locator pieces, which, always in the beginning, pointed out the window.

SG: Right.

NH: And then, also, along with that, I was doing these tours of the gallery, which were these tape-recorded tours that people would take. They'd come in, and they'd put the phones in their ears, and they'd have this little tape recorder, and I would take them on a tour of the gallery, which would always be looking out the window, talking about something, and looking up at a crack in the ceiling.

SG: It sounds like an expanded look at what was both in and around the gallery.

NH: Yes. Anything that they are.

SG: Were you looking at other people's stuff in galleries? There was clearly a movement among a lot of people to break away from, but would you also look at people who were more conventionally shy in galleries, with any interest?


NH: No. [they laugh] No, I must say, I thought they were all—painting was a total bore. No, I was only interested in—

SG: So were galleries like a necessary evil?

NH: Well, I guess the way I think about it is if you're an artist, you don't think just within that context. It amazes me that to this day most artists only think within that context. As if the past twenty-five years hasn't even happened. It's incredible, I mean galleries and museums have only been around for two hundred years, or maybe two hundred and fifty years, and it's just this tiny piece of history, and yet, it's infected artistic mentality to such an extent. I mean, creative people can only think within the walls of the museum and gallery. And art schools aren't doing anything, you know? I give quite a few lectures because that's the only way they can get any kind of exposure to the kind of work I do. Is to have me coming in to lecture, which isn't enough. I mean they're not teaching.

SG: Right. How did you hope that people would get exposure? You didn't just see the gallery as the site where they could experience your stuff. Did you perceive it as having all sorts of things that kept you from perceiving the stuff?





NH: Certainly, yes. It is a sterile place, it's an art space. You prepare yourself to see art when you walk in—it's very limited. You do something in a public sphere, and you're affecting people that don't even know they're seeing art.

SG: Right.

NH: And people are bringing to it whatever they know, and they feel they can be engaged even if it's in a negative way. They don't feel like, oh, I don't know enough about this. There is like a—

SG: A genuine response.

NH: A genuine response, a real engagement, so, yes. That was all restricted, but I just see the gallery area as being one of many areas where I could show my things. To me it's peripheral. It's strange, I'm showing right now at Guild Hall in East Hampton. I haven't shown in a museum in so long, and yet it's a perfect space because I'm half outdoors, and I'm half in. And how many places in Manhattan have that—sixteen-foot ceilings, and an outdoors that I can—it appears to penetrate the wall, and goes out. It's seventy-eight feet long. I mean, those opportunities—that kind of space is not here.

SG: Right.

NH: Although there are spaces around that I have my eye on, you know, that would work the certain things. So I think it really is a matter of circumstance, and how you can make a certain site work for you. When your site is specific, that's the challenge, you know?


SG: Yes, I was reading in some of these pieces—talking about trying to put back a sense of function to art. Trying to give back a sense of ritual.


NH: Not ritual.

SG: No?

NH: I mean it might be a byproduct, but that's not my intent, but where its function— I'm interested in—well, these pieces I'm doing that have basic technologies—they all function. I mean they don't function in a big way.

SG: Right, but the hot water pipes.





NH: Yes, the water goes through, you know, it's like I did this piece in Ireland, these pipes up and down. You have these two little streams of water at the end. You know, it's laughable, there is humor in it. And this piece I just did in the Hamptons. All these pipes and everything and then you have these little ventilators spinning around, and I have some of them go real slow, and some of them are going like that—it's not about functioning in a big way, but it really makes you more conscious of, among many things, besides the form of it, and a lot of other things that are happening—of these systems that were so dependent on, that we relegate to the unconscious.

SG: I was saying the writing systems, and the ducts.

NH: Yes, remind me, I'll give you the catalogs for the [inaudible], because I wrote them.

SG: Oh, that I have. That I have.

NH: How did you get that?

SG: They gave it to me at John Weber.

NH: Oh, so you read the little essay that I wrote?

SG: Yes. Yes, I did, actually [they laugh].

NH: That's my goal. I was trying to make a little brief statement about these pieces. I really would like to write something a little longer, but I had to get something out. But the work that's in there is the one I did in Finland.


SG: Oh, right. It's a different piece.

NH: But also, by function, I mean something else, too. With the other pieces, like the *Dark Star Park*—there you have something that functions as a park, and it's a work of art at the same time.

SG: Right.

NH: So really I mean that function means a lot of things, when I speak of it. And it was a landfill project, *Sky Mound*, here I am reclaiming landfills, and making them, again, a park artwork, and a naked eye observatory, and a kind of wildlife preserve, in a sense. We put in a pond, and we have the sort of bushes. There are two hundred and fifty different kinds of birds in that area, so they'll be





attracted—already they're hanging around. We put fish in a pond. So there's an ecological concern there, too. So that's what I mean by functioning. And then, also the methane collection system—collecting the methane to be sold to the local people as an alternate energy source, which is incredible, you know? Here we have these landfills, and they've got something very valuable.

SG: Right.

NH: And I've used part of the system to make the sculpture. In other words, it was coordinated to fit in with the overall plan for the sculpture was so that's function.

SG: Right.


NH: And that really fits in with the piping system—the landfill fits in with all these piping systems I've been doing.


SG: Right, so it's not just a question of public. I remember hearing John Newman talking about trying very hard to make something that is meaningful to him formally, and doing at a large scale, but he said not making it into a corporate chachka, you know, something that sits in front of a building.

NH: Yes.

SG: It made me think of that when you said, "How do people experience something?" I agree with you when they go to a gallery, there's a huge curtain drawn in front of their eyes. On the other hand, when they see something in front of a building on Park Avenue, even though they're outside and it's a little more direct. There's sort of this curtain of insignificance. It's there, but it's just something they walk around. Is it something that—do you try to actively engage people, or let them come to you?

NH: You know, usually, in the case of my work, there is no way that you can just walk around my work. You're going to walk through it, or under it, or in it, so you're immediately engaged with it, and that's the big difference, besides site specific work. I've never done a corporate commission. It isn't that I don't want to. I'd like to. I mean sure if it was a good site, or they had a lot of money—these corporations, from what I understand. But they do go for the very—the good material—the fine, elegant material. My work doesn't appeal particularly. I have been up for a couple corporations, and I am right now, actually. I might get it, if they like my work, but it's just an oddity that it hasn't occurred. But I do believe that corporations look for work that has a certain look that will reflect how you know, the quality and taste, and all that.





SG: Right, or an interest in it. The bag I brought is this elegant Guggenheim bag.

NH: Very tasteful. [Laughs.]

SG: Sponsored by Phillip Morris. [They laugh.] I remember the hot water piece.

NH: The hot water heating?

SG: Yes, I remember that very well. And I remember pulling away that gallery curtain—walking in and confronting and being confronted by—and liking it very much [Laughs.]

NH: I'm glad to hear it. [Laughs.]

SG: I really do. That is why I was excited from the get-go.

NH: People are, by the way, reserved about walking within the works that I do in those spaces.

SG: Right.

NH: I noticed that the—

SG: Well there was a big sign on the wall that said, "Caution, is very hot," or something.


NH: Can be hot. [Laughs.]


SG: Can be hot. I think I didn't get too close to it either, [laughs] but I looked at it for a good, long time. I'm interested in the *Ventilation System*. I guess you've already said that the insistence on knowing a structure, and understanding a structure. Did you feel—it seems to connect with what you were saying earlier, that you had to think a long time before you could start. It would seem to me that you would have to get to know how one of these systems works before you can just set one up.

NH: Not really. [Laughs.]

SG: Would you just learn about the system by doing it?

NH: You know how plumbing works. You turn on the faucet.





SG: I don't know how plumbing works.

NH: Well, you just turn the faucet, and the water goes through. It's that easy. You hook into the existing plumbing system, and you put the pipes together. No, you don't have to know a lot about it. If I had another thing that goes into my work, I wouldn't be able to do the work. I'd have to depend on masons and plumbers and sheet metal workers. Actually, ventilation is probably the least skilled. I mean you just buy these ventilation ducts. It's hard to do it, to make it look good, because sheet metal bends so easily, and puckers so easily, but you just have to be careful.

SG: Right.

NH: I work with a really good person, somebody who cared. So I do depend on—I don't know how to do plumbing, but I depended on my friends. You know, several artists that I know do plumbing, and my electrical pieces were done by artists.

SG: I remember speaking with somebody else who was saying it was the experience of doing it, and being forced to learn about it that contributed to the overall texture of the piece.

NH: Not with me.

SG: Not as much. No.


NH: No. Well, what I would say is this—that I'm very much into the process of doing my works. I'm never an absentee artist.

SG: Right.

NH: I'm there constantly. There are quite a few artists that do site specific work that allow a lot to happen when they're not there. I can't imagine that. I'm there every day, and I get very close to the people that I'm working with. In fact, I'm very particular about who I work with. I interview a lot of people. Like, if I have to get some concrete work done, I send out plans to maybe five or six different places, and talk to the different people, and usually you can find one who will see the work as a challenge, and who is happy to be involved with something like this.

SG: Right.





NH: Most people want to do something that's pretty rote. They don't want to get involved with something different. I'm so cautious for all these work for people that—

SG: Is it hard to find plumbers, masons—you said many of them are artists.


NH: Plumbers and electricians are artists, and actually, my first ventilation piece was with an artist. But when I do the big outdoor pieces, then I'm working with professional masons. Actually, like the piece—*Rock Rings* piece is a very good example. I had to find the right mason, the right look for the rock and the deeply inset water joints. And I saw work that I liked, and I met the mason. And he was someone who really saw what I was trying to do. And he devoted, like three months of his life to doing this work. And it was the first time in his life that anything he ever did was going to be appreciated, in and of itself, and that has happened over and over again, with the different artisans that I've worked with. They throw themselves into their work because it's a monument to their skill.


SG: Right.

NH: And when we had the opening for *Rock Rings*, it was his night, and a lot of attention went his way. He said it was as important to him as his wedding day, and he was going to bring his grandchildren there, when they grew up. So it's very moving. And then these people remained my friends. Al Poynter was his name. I've been seeing him—when I go out to the west coast. He went to see me, and I gave a talk in Santa Barbara at a public art conference. He came all the way up from Southern California. He was way down in Long Beach. So, you know. You make these connections with people. Like this piece I did in Saginaw, Michigan, the steel—the one that's the big half dome piece. I went to a steel company that had been there for four or five generations, and they really cared about the community you know, and did a good job. And it wasn't an art fabricator. I often don't go to art fabricators, but often I do. I do like working with very good art fabricators, but I've gotten some very good work done with just regular people.

SG: And most of these works have stayed—

NH: With me, you see, I've always done public art, from the very beginning. I mean I was doing it by nature, you know? And even people would invite me to be in a temporary art show. In the seventies, most sight specific people—people were doing these temporary structures, like Alice and Mary. They were doing these temporary wood structures that would come down at the end of the show. Of course, my indoor pieces are like that. But from the very beginning, anything outdoors I would always make it so strong that it was going to be there for centuries, and they generally ended up remaining. I mean even if it was a temporary art show, the work was still there like Art Park, [laughs]





the work there I did in 1974—cools the water— they're not activated, you know the pools are there. They have put gravel in them, but any time I want, I can go up there and take the gravel out of the water. [Laughs.] So eighty—I would say ninety percent of my work is still permanent. And this is very different from other artists now, like in the eighties, who call themselves public artists, who really got into it in the early eighties. Like Mary, for example. Now she's known as a public artist, but she really didn't do a real permanent outdoor work until, maybe, 1982 or something like that.

SG: Right. I'm thinking maybe it's a slightly different context, but I was talking with David Hammond, and he was saying it was very much his goal to put something in the community that would have an effect that would become part of the community. His work deals in a lot of social issues. Do you have a similar hope, that somebody will become landscaped, and change with landscape?

NH: One thing in doing permanent work—the work goes through seasonal changes, there's no ideal time to see the work. Usually what is photographed on a nice, sunny, summer day, but I love—and when I did lectures—I would show my work with snow. I've done work like up in Toronto, which is a drainage system, so it works the best in the rain. [Laughs.]

SG: Right. See it in action.

NH: Yes. [Laughs.] So part of your question was seeing the work change. So I love to see the work change. A work like *Rock Rings* is mellowing, the rocks are getting to be more and more together, somehow. [Laughs.] I mean, they're bleeding into the mortar, and it all looks like one. I really like it. And *Sun Tunnels* is doing extremely well. They're still perfect. I thought they would be more like hairline cracks that open up, but that hasn't happened, yet. It's been a long time. And certainly of course with my sun related works, you know, the position of the sun, and always changing the nature of the work.

SG: Right.

NH: As far as what he's talking about like having a political impact—I think the very fact that a work is necessary to the community. Like, if you do a park like *Dark Star Park*, it was the first park in the Roslyn section of Arlington, which is the fastest growing metropolis, really, in the United States. It's right across the Potomac, from Washington, D.C. They can't build high buildings in Washington, so they build them over in Roslyn. And they were building them a mile-a-minute, but not building any parks. They'd forgotten about people, so it was a tremendous need, and I felt I was meeting that need. That made a difference to me.





SG: Right.

NH: And trying to do *Sky Mound*. I say trying, because it keeps getting postponed, and I call it my life-long project. Reclaiming a landfill, and transforming a dump into art, and there's a need for that, too. So in that sense, the work is political, but not in any kind of overt way. I think that art—well, for centuries, art was a necessary part of the environment. It met these needs of the people and then it got closeted in these museums and galleries.

SG: Right.

NH: And that mindset is so strong, it has just latched onto brain cells, and there's that idea that—what is it called? It's the Sheldrake idea, Rupert Sheldrake. If I am offered resonance, or something like that—that there are cultural patterns that actually get distributed to the offspring, like just through resonance. I really think that something like that has happened with the thinking with the galleries and museums. It's also an art economic thing. Proliferation of museums that happened in the sixties and seventies and eighties, and the economics of the gallery system, and art magazines catering to that, and critics only going in their little you know, gaze [laughs] to cover the things—it's a cycle. It's a system that feeds on itself.

SG: Mostly artworks are bought and sold as commodities.

NH: Right.


SG: And that being the strongest system going, or one of the strongest systems going, it very much transforms pictures and things, artworks—

NH: Well, it's strange working outside of the system as much as I do. I really just touch base with the system once in a great while. I've lived without having any catalogs. You know, Europeans come over here to interview me, and to get me in a show. They go to the Museum of Modern Art to find something to read about me before they visit me. Nothing.

SG: They don't have *Ransacked* or *Time Outs* it turns out?

NH: No, they do. They have my books, and they have my films, and they have my tapes, but you know, I haven't had a museum show and that's where you get a catalog. You have to have a museum show. Oh, I've had opportunities. I was very fussy, you know? I could have had all these mid-career things. I





felt I had to have a lot of color. There was never a possibility, when it came along. So I've decided just to stay outside of the system. Why do I need that? I don't need that. I do all right without it.

SG: That's all I got. [they laugh]

NH: Okay. [END OF INTERVIEW]

