

Holt/Smithson Foundation Oral History Archive
DeeDee Halleck interviewed by Lisa Le Feuvre
February 1, 2019

Lisa Le Feuvre is Executive Director of Holt/Smithson Foundation. DeeDee Halleck is a media activist, founder of Paper Tiger Television, and co-founder of Deep Dish Satellite Network.

This interview was recorded on February 1, 2019 at DeeDee Halleck's home in New York City. DeeDee Halleck describes how she first met Nancy Holt in 1973, and their subsequent friendship and collaboration on Nancy Holt's films.

This transcript is a lightly edited version of the conversation, correcting names and dates where needed, as well as removing redundant words.

Keywords

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Mono Lake
New Jersey
New Mexico
Niagara

Pine Barrens
Serra
Sky Mound
Smithson
Solar Web
Sound
Sun Tunnels
Video

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Lisa Le Feuvre

This is Lisa Le Feuvre conducting an interview on February the 1st, 2019 for Holt/Smithson Foundation's oral history project, with DeeDee Halleck. And thank you, DeeDee, for agreeing to talk to us.

How did you first meet Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson?

DeeDee Halleck

I never met Robert Smithson but I met Nancy on the evening after a group of friends of Smithson's had been to a funeral, and then they went to Virginia Dwan's. And then they all went to this club, which was a transvestite club on, I think it was 4th Street, but it was quite strange. I had never been to such a club.

LLF

And was this Robert Smithson's funeral?

DDH

I was editing at Bob Fiore's studio and he came in on the way to go there. He said, "Oh, come down. We're going to this club and you can come with us." And I said, "Okay." I was tired and it seemed like a more fun thing to do. So I went with Bob. And I think he drove there.

I got in there and, and there was Nancy and a lot of friends of Bob's. And everybody was dancing. And I didn't feel like dancing at all. Neither did Nancy. And so we sat at the table, and she made some comment like, "I guess we're the two wallflowers [laughter]."


And we started talking, and it was friendship at the first sight. She was saying that she wanted to find an editor for this film that she had started about the Pine Barrens in New Jersey. And I said, "Well, I'm looking for an editing job." And she always felt that that was totally synchronicity that I should be there and that we started working on that film right away.

LLF

Had she shot all of the material for her film *Pine Barrens* (1975) at that stage?

DDH

She has already shot most of it. I think we shot a little bit more. We shot the cranberry bogs and maybe another shot of walking on the deer paths, but she needed more sound. So a lot of sound, we sort of made up. Nancy always shot without sound, and then added sound effects later.





LLF

Was it Foley sound or going out back to the sites to record the sound?

DDH

Both. When we were working on the film *The Making of Amarillo Ramp*, we got stuff from the internet. [Pine Barrens was made before there was any internet!] Nancy didn't feel that she needed purely authentic sound. If it sounded good, that was enough for her.

LLF

So you'd just met Nancy that evening and you became firm and fast friends. But what was it like at the beginning to work with her? Was she very exacting? Did she know what she wanted, or did she need you to guide her?

DDH

Well, I knew more about film than she did, so she often would ask my opinion. In fact, I mean, I have tons of emails which should probably go into the archive, of questions she would have about the film that she was working on, especially the one of *Broken Circle - Breaking Ground: Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* (1971-2011). I think she used me as a kind of authority because she was having a disagreement with the guy who was working with her.

LLF


Theo Tegelaers

DDH

Theo, yes. Theo. So she would say, "Well, DeeDee said such and such, so." What she was really concerned about at that point was the voice of the narrative. He had brought some actors in, and she didn't like them. And she wanted me to confirm that so [laughter] and I really thoroughly confirmed it. They ended up getting some art student or something to do the voice of Robert Smithson.

LLF

When you were working on *Pine Barrens* in 1973 Nancy must have been thinking about *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76). She wrote that really beautiful piece in the magazine *Avalanche* where she talks about when she was wandering around the pine barrens, she was looking for land so that she could make an artwork. Was that when she was thinking through the possibilities of *Sun Tunnels*? Or was that when she was already thinking forward to the project *Sky Mound* where she would work on the reclaimed land?





DDH

I think both. I think they [Holt and Smithson] had bought that land [in Utah] quite a while before. Nancy always had a lot of projects. During that time, I think she was working on that piece at John Weber Gallery. When was that? The pipes - I think '77

LLF

The *Locators* were shown 1972 at John Weber Gallery, and then later exhibitions showed Nancy's *Electrical System (for Thomas Edison)* in 1982, then *Hot Water Heat* in 1984.

Before you met Nancy and started working with her, did you know about her work and her interest in film making, video making?

DDH

I got divorced in '71, '72 was when it was finalized. Before that I was raising goats [laughter] and milking goats and making cheese. I wasn't that connected to the art world, except I had been friends with Johanna VanDerBeek and Stan VanDerBeek and Vera Williams and a number of people. M.C. Richards, David Tudor. I knew those people from the Black Mountain era. And I stayed in David Tudor's house when he was in Japan once, and in the summer with my kids when they were young. I had stayed there when I was living in the city, and then I moved to upstate in '67. Something like that.

And then I met Bob Fiore and when I got divorced, it was like opening up this whole world of the art world. I rented Joan Jonas' loft in '72, I think. I had met her through Bob Fiore. I knew the Grand Union. I knew Yvonne Rainer and Gordon Matta Clark. I love Gordon. Gordon came to see my film. I had done a film with Anita Thatcher on an old man who lived upstate with me, and I was so thrilled that Gordon came to see the show and we showed at Donnell Library. And there was no one else there. A few people with their lunch boxes or something. It was a lunchtime filming. And Gordon was there.


So, I knew Gordon and I knew Gordon's work with the house.


LLF

Splitting from '76.

DDH

Yeah. It was in the middle of my divorce, and I took my kids out to see that. It was totally upsetting to them. They were all like-- they wanted to get out of there and, because it was such a powerful image of what was





happening in my life, because we were trying to decide what happened to our big house upstate, and who got which half.

I didn't really know Nancy, but then after I went to a show she did at PS1 and various times that she was exhibiting. I very much appreciated her work, and thought she was really fun to work with and talk about art. We kind of clicked together.

LLF

And why was she so fun to work and talk about art with? Was it the way she thought about art?

DDH

She didn't use pretentious words. She had a directness and a kind of clarity to her that I really appreciated and that I found unusual within the art world.

LLF

After *Pine Barrens*, was the next project you worked with Nancy on the film for *Sun Tunnels*?


DDH

Yeah. At that point I was working with Richard Serra - I was friends with Richard through Bob Fiore because Fiore shot those films with Richard. Richard and I were good friends. Actually, I think I was working for Richard before I started working with Nancy. Mostly what I was doing for Richard was, um, I would go and have breakfast with him or lunch [laughter]. I felt like I was more like a therapist. He wasn't all that cognizant of political issues, and he liked to test some of his ideas out on me. So we had these discussions.

I didn't film *Sun Tunnels* but I knew Nancy was working on it. And I went to her Greenwich Street apartment many times. I remember Nancy always had a huge bottle of white wine in the refrigerator [laughter]. She was drinking quite a bit. I was a little worried about her because she was drinking quite a bit of wine. She was showing me drawings and maps about *Sun Tunnels*. I was involved to that extent. And then she really wanted me to come out to see the *Sun Tunnels*. And she wanted Richard to come too. I was with Richard shooting the railroad turn bridge in Portland, and somehow it was arranged that we would stop by *Sun Tunnels*. And that was July 1976.

LLF

What did you make of it the first time you saw it?




DDH

I was struck. I'd never been to the desert. I moved to San Diego then in '83, but I just was so entranced with the desert. I had always thought of the desert as something like the scene from *Greed* or something totally barren and just sand, or, you know, *Lawrence of Arabia* or something. And it was so full of life. There were little plants, and birds and, and little running animals. I was very enchanted with it. It was very beautiful. And I was so glad to be there with Nancy and Richard.

We were in Salt Lake City; we met Nancy in Salt Lake City and she picked us up and drove directly. We did go to *Spiral Jetty* 'cause Richard wanted to see that. But Nancy wanted him to see *Sun Tunnels* more [laughter] so, so we went to *Sun Tunnels*. And we spent the night there. Each of us took one tunnel and Nancy had sleeping bags and some kind of foam mattresses and we put them in the tunnels and we slept out there. The stars were amazing. I remember, the next morning, there was so much light and there was so much life. There was all these birds and little crawly animals. And it was so different than what I expected the desert to be.

That was exciting to me to be in the desert. We watched the sunset through the tunnel, and then we watched the sunrise. So we woke up before the sunrise, and that was very special. And then Nancy said we should go for breakfast, and then we filed into the car and she wanted to show us this piece of land that she had that was up on a little kind of island within, within the salt basin.

LLF


This is known as the Remote Location, which is a part of the Foundation.

DDH

Yeah. It was like a mountain in a very flat sea but there were little, like, fjords that would go in. And so she parked the car into one of these fjords because she thought maybe it would give some shelter 'cause the sun. It was 9 o'clock in the morning but it was still very hot. And, um, that it might be a little shady, so.

Then we went hiking but we didn't take any water. We were so stupid [laughter]. But she thought, "Oh, I'll just show you and we'll come back." So we went merrily up this mountain in a really happy mood. And she wasn't sure which . . . she should have brought the map, she kept saying. It became very, very hot. And it was July. It was July 20 to 23rd, I think, when we were there. The salt flat all around was radiating this heat and we were really in danger, actually. We went the direction we thought we were to go in, and there was no - the car wasn't there. Then we came back up and said, "Wait a minute. Where's-- we'll, we go up to-- we'll go up on top of that rock there and we'll look around." And we still couldn't see the van, which was a very big van and we should have been able to see it. We were there for several hours. It was really frightening, actually. None of





us were dressed well. I put my hands inside-- I had a tank top and I put my hands inside because they were getting burnt.

Richard was saying, "Let me go here." The thing is, it was very hard to judge distances because of the, the heat and the clarity of the, the air. Something could be 20 feet away or 200 feet away or 2,000 feet away. We kept thinking, well, we'll climb up on that and look. We didn't realize it was so far. At one point, we found these beautiful dead goat's, horns. Richard took one and I took one. At some point, I'd left mine, but Richard still has his, actually - he was saying that I was so stupid that I left my horn [laughter]. I was trying to figure out if maybe we should wait until nighttime, but there was no shade at all. There was no iota of shade.

And so what we ended up finally doing was - it was very flat all around. We decided we would just go down to the salt flats and walk around. But it was much hotter down there. Always take water when you're going out on the desert. We had nothing. We were very worried about Nancy 'cause her lips were black and they were cracking, and there was blood coming in between the cracks. She really did not look good, and we went to the emergency room somewhere in Montello or one of those towns. There was a small hospital, kind of doctor's office or whatever, and we went in and they gave her water and some kind of pill. And then we went for breakfast [laughter]. But she still did not look well. I remember thinking I just hope it wasn't some kind of permanent problem she would have, that it might have given her a stroke or something.

LLF


You said, DeeDee, that you spent a lot time in the Greenwich Street studio. Do you remember what Nancy's studio was like? Was it super neat and organized? Were there lots of works in progress? What sort of working place was it?

DDH

There was a big mirror up on top, which Tom [Martinelli] tried to reconstruct in Pacheco Street [Holt/Smithson Foundation's Santa Fe office space]. It was on the ceiling. There were all these shelves that had all those little chatkas - I think the Foundation definitely shouldn't keep those. I don't know if that's in the plan at all. I think it would make a lovely exhibit. I mean, there were dried snakes and different things that had come from the desert.

LLF

Did Nancy enjoy having objects as ways to remind her of certain situations? What was it about these objects that made them so attractive to her?





DDH

I think it was her interaction with nature. They were more natural things -there were, um, different kinds of geodes and different kinds of rocks. I think she really shared that with Smithson, I think it was a kind of reaction to the sort of civilization of trying to find some way of being in touch with something more primordial and basic.

LLF

When Nancy moved out to Galisteo, New Mexico in 1995 was she thinking about those sorts of questions?

DDH

She didn't go directly to Galisteo. She had a different apartment where Grace Jones was, that was a big, fancy, renovated loft right on the river. She wasn't there that long. I don't think she liked it. There was something kind of cold about it. That was when she was working on *Sky Mound*. She was very upset when that didn't happen.

She talked a lot to me about how important it was that so many of these landfills and how much garbage there was, and about making it possible to be able to turn something into an art piece from that and, and to make people realize what it was. There were these pipes that she did put in and they're flares - the methane was on fire. She felt that people should realize that it's not like you would hide it. She felt that the actual action of what a landfill was, the process of the artwork had to include an acknowledgment of the fact that it was, built on a landfill.

LLF

How far did Nancy get with that project?

DDH

Well, she built those pipes with the flares but then it just kind of came to a halt. I think that was after she had also been turned down with by Buria Finkel to make the sculpture *Solar Web* in Santa Monica, California. I went out to Santa Monica when it was still going to happen. Everybody was very excited about it, but then it got turned down by the local board.

LLF

Am I right that the third film you worked with Nancy on is *Mono Lake*?





DDH

I didn't really work on the *Mono Lake* film, but she wrote to me a lot about it. She would ask me if I liked the music or she would send me a cut. I thought the music was great - the radio, or whatever.

It's a fun film but I'm trying to think if there was another film. I worked a little bit on the Aunt Ethel film *Underscan* (1973-4).

LLF

Tell me a bit more about that. There is the artist's book, *Ransacked* (1980). Was she very interested in mining her own family history? *Underscan* is such a personal story, the one of Aunt Ethel.

DDH

I think that Nancy didn't have any family. That was her last family and she felt that it was an act of kind of survival or retrieval, whatever, that she needed to make sure that that was there. She also liked to tell me about the grandfather who made that weaving piece that was in her bathroom in her house in Galisteo. I hope that got saved.

LLF

It did.

DDH

She was very proud of that - that this intricate weaving was done by her ancestor.

LLF

Later she made that work at University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth called *Spinwinder* (1991). Her grandfather taught at that very college, well an earlier incarnation of it.

DDH

I think she must have approached them.

LLF

I think was an open competition and she entered it and then started researching and researching and researching.

DDH

She didn't know that her, her grandfather taught there?





LLF

That's what the university has told us. There is a time capsule buried underneath *Spinwinder* with various items that was collected at that moment.

DDH

I don't know what I was doing at that point, but I wasn't that much in touch with Nancy. There were periods of time where - it's not that we had any disagreements or anything, but it's just that I was very busy, then I got remarried, and was raising another child. She came just after my daughter Molly was born, saw her as a baby. I didn't know I was pregnant, then I found out I was pregnant and for a short time, I thought of having an abortion, and then I decided to keep the child. And then Joel [Kovel] and I got married. And Nancy was our witness for my wedding. Yeah. And she took a picture, which I don't even know where that picture is. It was just in this judge's apartment, who was a friend - or, a friend of a friend, so. She was the only person there at the wedding, and then she came -- I guess she came to the hospital after Molly was born.

LLF


You and Nancy had a very longstanding correspondence. Am I right in thinking that you would find postcards that you thought she would love and you would send them to her?

DDH

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Ones with covered bridges or somehow. Caves or something. There's one where I said something about that it was - uh, if it's a boy Nancy said that I should name him Lazarus, so. Then it was a girl so we named her Molly. She was very involved in Molly's birth. And then she moved out to Galisteo and couldn't see very much of Molly, except we did, Joel and I, drive across the country several times. When I was teaching in San Diego I always would stop in Galisteo and check out what Nancy was doing, go for a walk in the canyon.

When Nancy got sick. . . . I went to the event at the sculpture society - what's it called? Association or whatever, with Nancy. Nancy flew back right away afterwards and she apparently, she could hardly roll her cart. And she called me from the hospital. I guess it was Jane [Perry, Nancy Holt's assistant] suggested that she go to the hospital because she was having trouble breathing. Before that, Nancy had had anemia. They kept giving her iron, and she was eating lots of raisins [laughter]. And Joel was saying he thought maybe she should really make sure she had some good workup because it could be something else. I didn't know what else it would be but, of course, it would be leukemia. Apparently, she had it for quite a while. When she called me, she said "DeeDee, I'm in the hospital and they're giving me 48 hours to live. And could you come out? I want to show you what to do? Could you finish my film?" Because we had talked about the film about *Amarillo Ramp*. She said, "I, I want you to finish it for me." And thinking that she would die in 48 hours.





Of course, she didn't. She lived for another three months. I flew out on the next flight I could get and, um, went out to see her and I went and retrieved the film from this little film studio, and the hard drives. The whole time, it was like, "Let's, let's get the film done." So she had this, right up to this moment, this incredible determination to make her work. She had done an edit, but it wasn't really finished and, and there was no text to it at all, and it was kind of hard to tell what was going on.

Then she came to New York. They medevaced her. It was very hard to decide because in order to Medevac a person, well for Nancy, they had to anesthetize her and put artificial breathing on. A lot of people don't come out of that. The doctor was very clear that this might be the end. She might not wake up. But she did wake up [laughter]. And that, that whole time in New York was very fruitful. And she edited the catalog for the show of Robert Smithson in New Jersey and she worked on the film. I would do an edit and bring it in and show it to her in the hospital. I have a picture of her editing with the big CPAC on her face.

LLF

How do you think Nancy's work should be thought of today? You were one of the closest people to her - as well as being the closest of friends, you had such an intimate relationship to her work as well.

DDH

I was very appreciative when I saw the 2018 Dia Art Foundation show. I thought that they might show just drawings of *Sun Tunnels*. I thought it was actually good that they went back to the more almost theoretical work that she did - minimalist, but perceptive and about perception. I think all of her work is really interrelated in this incredible way. I think that is what she would want, and I feel she would have been very happy with the show.


There are little details that might have improved but, I thought just the idea of, of focusing on one of the more abstract of her works was interesting. And I think it's beautiful as it really does look beautiful. You know?

LLF

My last question for this first part of our interview process is to ask you about *Niagara*. I know this is a mysterious work that Nancy wrote a short text on in *Art Rite*, it and was something that she worked on and worked on, and as far as we know, didn't bring to fruition. What do you know about that film?

DDH

Well, I know she did the piece up at the park up there. What's it called?




LLF

Art park

DDH

Art park, yeah. And it made her more interested in Niagara. She did this piece along the river that feeds into that, and then she did a lot of filming of the falls. She did a rough cut, which I didn't see. I think I was very busy at that time or whatever. I really feel like she had a pretty clear idea of what she wanted to do with it. We need to digitize all that Niagara footage and maybe try to find her the edit that she did and of reconstruct it and also put, maybe, the text onto it. I think she would really want that.

I was involved when she was working on Robert Smithson's *Floating Island* in 2005, and she was very , interested in filming that. Diane from Minetta Brook had hired this company which Nancy wasn't all that happy with, but they were competent and they shot a lot of footage. But they made this edit which she was appalled by. She didn't like it all. It was more like a kind of news story. She asked me if I-- she said-- before she got sick "When you-- when you have some time, I really want you to come up to Galisteo. We'll work on that film together."

