

## The Impact of Criticism

By April Kingsley

*Eds. Note: This essay is a preliminary version of the keynote address that Ms. Kingsley will deliver on 7 May to the joint assembly of participants in The First National Sculpture Conference: Works by Women and in Dialogue's Fifth Annual Criticism Workshop in Cincinnati.*

Once upon a time the art world was a simple, organized place. Everything seemed perfectly clear. Most artists could easily be grouped into various movements—avant-garde movements that transformed the recent past into history and succeeded one another in an orderly progression toward Modernist perfection. Art history itself was a German invention, and the textbook neatness of the Teutonic art history class prevailed in our museums and art magazines. Art was seen as a collective enterprise, a succession of shared styles, and the main thing that mattered was the timing of one's climb onto the bandwagon. The old-fashioned, romantic idea of art as the expression of individual temperaments was given short shrift. If the map of developments in the modern art world was too small-scale to permit the inclusion of separate pushpins for loners like Bonnard, Balthus, or Morandi, men who established no beachheads and formed no armies of followers, how could it make room for women and minority artists? What could one do with so idiosyncratic a sculptor as Louise Bourgeois, for example?

Nothing, not at least until the seventies when the situation finally changed and the straitjacketing of art by categorical thinking gave way under the onslaught of sheer numbers. As thousands of artists came to maturity and poured into New York and other major centers of artistic activity and, most importantly, as a tremendous amount of major art was being produced



**Nancy Holt, *Dark Star Park*, 1979-84, Rosslyn, Arlington County VA, gunite, earth, sod, winter creeper, crown vetch, willow oak, stone dust, stone masonry, asphalt, steel, water.  $\frac{2}{3}$  of an acre.**

than the failures. The critic's role is to focus on those successes.

Instead of simply writing puff pieces for Roy Lichtenstein-type "stars" on West Broadway in the seventies I was able to "discover" an artist like Gordon Matta-Clark and write about his strangely frightening work for the first time in *Artforum* and to give David Hammons's work its first important exposure at PS 1. I was able to define an aspect of African-American Art which seemed clearly superior to other kinds of Black art being produced in America at that time—and to a great deal of white establishment art as well. I brought it to the public's attention in the pages of the *Village Voice* and in a large, travelling exhibition I organized which was reviewed in *Time*. And I was able to write often and at length about work by women, which I found time and again to be far more innovative and exciting than the stale rehashings of old "avant-garde" ideas being produced by many male artists—especially the "stars." I was particularly impressed by the contributions and the changes women were making in Land or Earth Art and wrote a seminal article on the subject in *Arts* in 1976. Other critics and curators, Lucy Lippard, Elinor Munro, Jean Feinberg, and Nancy Rosen among them, also became involved with this subject. Interested in quality and fascinated by the meanings generated in this new work, but disinterested economically, factionally and ideologically, we critics had a real impact in this area. Benefits accrued where they ought to have—to women artists like Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, Patricia Johanson, Michelle Stuart, and others receiving more and more substantial commissions to explore new ideas. As a result, the public got better public art—works that were conducive, not confrontational, interactive, not impassive, and integrated with the site and the needs of the people, not plopped down in their path.

Nancy Holt, whose work became increasingly important in my eyes, was never part of any particular movement even though, as she would readily admit, Minimalism, Systemic, Conceptual, Environmental, and Earth Art all affected

her. I became intrigued with her work as an extension of the California perceptual art with which I was deeply involved in the early seventies, and still am. Her "Locator" pieces were very simple and straightforward attempts to involve the viewer by heightening perception and making it palpable, but the effect of the work seemed highly poetic to me. Even then her thinking was very functional—nuts and boltsy, you might say—but she took you outside of the limits of body and place to an awareness of your location on one planet with ties to others in outer space. Viewing her work, it was almost as though one passed through walls. Inside and outside, light and sight, being and non-being were simultaneous.

At first I was disturbed by the emptiness, the non-objective quality of Holt's larger scale, more ambitious pieces, like *Sun Tunnels*, (1973-6) and *Star Crossed*, (1971-81), because they seemed to embody a lack of artistic identity, to be *merely* functional. Her work seemed almost too much a service for the viewer and not enough about her and art. Like the camera lenses through which she had spent so many years viewing the world, her works were just hollow tubes, eyepieces for the world. The engineering got in the way for me on *Sun Tunnels*; the massiveness and awkwardness of *Star Crossed* bothered me. Though I realized that of the two, the site of *Sun Tunnels* undoubtedly demanded its great physicality, I preferred the perfect sparseness of the earlier pipe pieces. *Rock Rings*, (1977-8), in Washington State and *Annual Ring*, 1980-81, in Michigan, though I haven't experienced them firsthand, seemed to offer more satisfying solutions to the problem of balancing aesthetic needs against her stated intention to "make all these pieces just to emphasize empty spaces." And then she finally finished *Dark Star Park*, (1979-84), in Rosslyn, Virginia, the masterpiece of this group. It is a perfect conjunction of engineering and poetry, of stasis and movement, narrative and non-objectivity, of the active and the passive role of sculpture and of perception in the lives of people.

Nancy Holt's plumbing and electrical system pieces have a Baroque buoyancy that provides a welcome counterpoint to the physical, aesthetic, and ethical weightiness of *Sky Mound*, her current land reclamation project in New Jersey. She also makes highly personal videotapes, starkly poetic films, and even autobiographical artist's books. Such internal variety within an oeuvre should be seen as a richness, not a problem. Instead of suggesting that artists destroy atypical work, or alter it to conform with the critic's ideas, as has happened recently in situations where rigid, narrow-minded ideas of art-making predominated, the critic should at least examine these facets of the artist's work as enlightening aspects of his or her thought process. Personally, I revel in them. After all, the Renaissance masters certainly didn't confine their artistic efforts to a single mode or medium.

Critics in Cincinnati for the Criticism Workshop will have a unique opportunity to see a lot of new work. Some of it will offer thin veins to mine, of course, but there may be "gold in them thar hills," too. Go for the gold. Sculptors in Cincinnati for the Sculpture Conference will have a unique opportunity to have their work seen by critics and other interested parties to whom they wouldn't normally have access. Some of these writers will not bring much thought to bear on the female sculptors' work, of course, but if the sculptors keep their antennae out for the ones who aren't trying to cut them down to size, to pigeonhole them, to straightjacket their full expression or to tell them what they think they should be doing or whether they should be doing it at all—then these sculptors may find a critic they can support. And if there's one thing that ought to come out of such a unique situation as this, given its lack of male domination and competition, it is the excitement of mutual support.

*April Kingsley is a critic, curator, and art historian who lives in New York.*