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What Should We Do With Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt's Island?

In the 1970s, the artists bought a rocky strip of land off the coast of Maine. Now, it's a place for others to wrestle with their legacies.

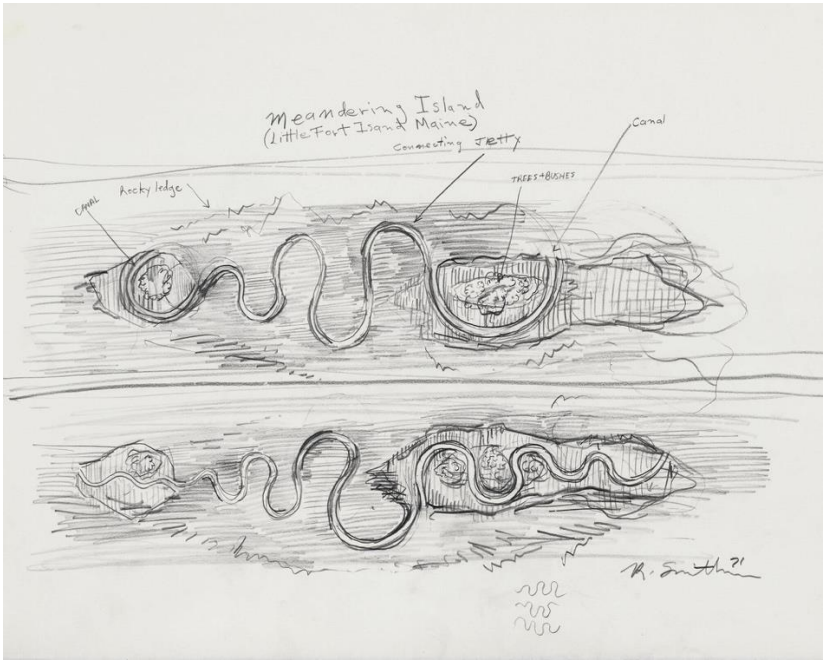
by Andrew Russeth (November 12, 2021)

Little Fort Island this past June. Credit...Holt/Smithson Foundation

YOU CAN LEARN a lot about artists from what they are unwilling to part with. After Andy Warhol died in 1987, some 10,000 items, from 175 cookie jars to a 1974 Rolls-Royce, were auctioned off. Following the modernist painter Florine Stettheimer's death in 1944, her paintings, which were never sold during her lifetime, were donated to museums across the United States.

When the key land art figure Nancy Holt died at 75 of leukemia in 2014, her will called for the creation of an organization to guide twin legacies — hers and that of her artist husband, Robert Smithson, who died in a 1973 plane crash at age 35. Holt's estate included her magnum opus, a quartet of cosmically aligned concrete cylinders in Utah's Great Basin Desert known as "Sun Tunnels" (1973-76), which was acquired by the New York-based Dia Art Foundation, as well as a surprise. "We discovered that we owned an island," says the writer and curator Lisa Le Feuvre, who was hired as the Holt/Smithson Foundation's director.

Little Fort Island — or Guard Island, as it is also known — is a thin sliver of rock off the craggy coast of Maine, near the small town of Harrington (population 950), between Bangor and the Canadian border. It's a few hundred feet long, with a small grouping of trees at its center. Holt and Smithson had bought it, sight unseen, for $3,000 in 1971, the year after he completed "Spiral Jetty," his swirl of basalt stones that extends some 1,600 feet into Utah's Great Salt Lake. Smithson made drawings for an earthwork there that would include a curving canal and land bridge, but after he actually visited the island, he changed his mind.



A 1971 drawing of Robert Smithson's initial plans for a project on Little Fort Island, which he and his wife, Nancy Holt, owned. Smithson died before he was able to do anything with the site.Credit...© Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York

"He decided that it was too picturesque," Le Feuvre says from her office in Santa Fe, N.M., where Holt once had a home. "I read that, and I never understood what he meant by that." However, when she traveled there earlier this year, removing her shoes and trudging through knee-deep mud at low tide to reach the spot where Smithson had thought he might site the project, "I got it," she says. "It is so beautiful."

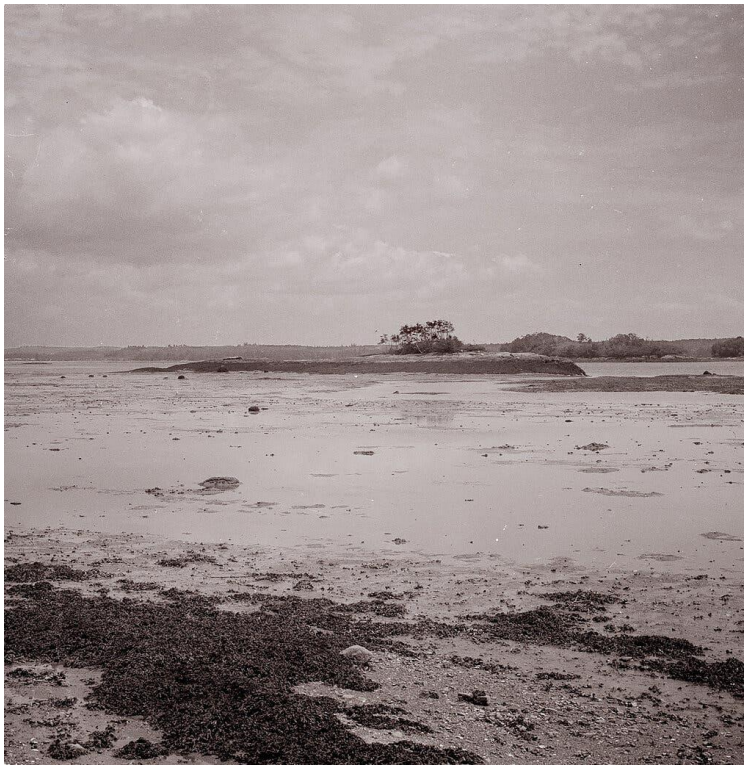
THE ISLAND HAS now become a central, and characteristically idiosyncratic, component of the Holt/Smithson Foundation's efforts to posthumously expand and extend the work of its eponyms. "How do you build creative legacies of artists?" Le Feuvre asks. "You do it through scholarship, through research, but the way that you really do it is by keeping the spirits of the artists alive." The foundation has approached five revered artists of different ages and practices — the multimedia artist Renée Green; the filmmaker and draftsperson Tacita Dean; the visual and performance artist Joan Jonas; Oscar Santillán, whose work explores the gap between science and ecosystems; and Sky Hopinka, who looks at identity and the natural world through many mediums — with a remarkably open-ended proposal: that they spend a couple of years learning and thinking about the island and in response propose any kind of work they can dream of, on the island or off, to be realized in some form or merely imagined.

Smithson and Holt in the Netherlands in 1971, shooting film at Smithson's earthwork "Broken Circle/Spiral Hill," completed that same year. Credit...© Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York

The five artists were selected in part because "they're all supercritical, and difficult, and love making knots rather than undoing them," Le Feuvre explains; interviewed late this past summer, they were planning their trips and shaping their concepts. For Santillán, Holt and Smithson are responsible for "changing the notion of artists representing nature to artists participating within ecologies." The Ecuador-born artist makes works that form links between distances, times and materials. He has affixed buttons carved from a meteorite to a shirt he found in a rainforest and sewed an ethereal hanging weaving from the yarns of 10 existing textiles, one from each of the 10 centuries of the past millennium.

While he describes himself as a "slow thinker" in an interview from the Netherlands, where he lives when not in Ecuador, Santillán, 41, says he is "trying to bring together three different histories" in conversation with Little Fort Island: obscure 1960s biological-computing experiments, the study of plant intelligence and the Indigenous South American Quechua people's concept that certain places are endowed with, as he puts it, "some kind of cognitive capabilities of [their] own." (The anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena coined the English term Earth Being, a translation of the Quechua *tirakuna*, for such forms.) It's all part of his "ongoing search for other ways of scientific knowledge that don't fit into the Western grid," he says.

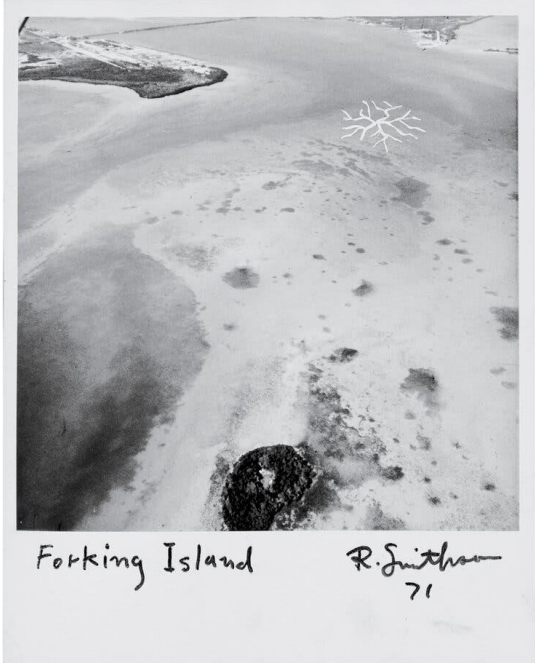
Dean, 56, and Green, 62, have actually made works in the past that reference Smithson, and Jonas, 85, knew the couple. Yet the island project is part of the foundation's commitment to not be "pickling in vinegar Holt's and Smithson's work as it was in 1972," as Le Feuvre says, "because, as we all know, that's not how art works. It lives and breathes." Earthworks change; their meaning does, too.



A picture of Little Fort Island that Holt took in 1972.Credit...© Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York

"We know that some of Smithson's and Holt's work is problematic," Le Feuvre says, noting that an artist today would not dump a giant barrel of industrial glue outside the campus of the University of British Columbia, as Smithson did for his 1970 "Glue Pour." ("Do not dump refuse," read a nearby sign.) "Spiral Jetty," Smithson's most famous work by far, and one of the most recognizable pieces of art of the 20th century, has endured challenges of its own: Originally submerged for long periods in the Great Salt Lake, it is now fully visible thanks to decades of droughts; this has increased its popularity but also threatened its longevity as more people interact with it. (The possibility of oil drilling nearby poses a different kind of threat.)

The openness of the foundation's invitation appealed to Hopinka, 37, who describes the "concerns or questions I've had about Smithson and Holt being white artists on Indigenous lands, making work that is permanent." The youngest of the artists, he is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and descended from the Pechanga Band of Luiseño people. His work in film, photography and poetry addresses the land and family, memory and history and, he says, "what it means to be Indigenous right now." As a film and electronic-arts professor at Bard College in the Hudson Valley in New York, Hopinka has assigned to his students Smithson's freewheeling writing — which includes imaginative rambles through suburbia ("A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," 1967) and New York's Central Park, as well as forays into sci-fi movies, geology and the notion of entropy.



Another island-related work by Smithson, 1971's "Forking Island," off the coast of Florida.Credit...© Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York

Though not an artist, Le Feuvre, formerly a head of sculpture studies at the Henry Moore Institute in England, is taking a self-critical approach in running the foundation. While some artist's foundations become philanthropic juggernauts (like Warhol's) or rule-enforcing guardians (Felix Gonzalez-Torres's) in perpetuity, Holt/Smithson will dissolve in 2038, the year the pair would have turned 100. It intends to relinquish lands it holds to local Indigenous nations, if they want them, or to nature conservancies.

There is plenty to do before then. "Our big focus is on Nancy Holt," Le Feuvre says. "It's not that we don't love Robert Smithson. But Nancy Holt needs this extra attention right now." Much of Holt's work went unsold during her lifetime, and so the foundation inherited about 90 percent of it; Le Feuvre attributes Holt's lower profile and commercial obscurity to the marginalization of women artists of her era and the fact that Holt spent much of her time managing Smithson's posthumous reception. In December, Sprüth Magers will host a show of Holt's work at its Berlin gallery, and a retrospective is being arranged at Bildmuseet in Umea, Sweden, next year.

In the meantime, there is Little Fort Island. "There's something quite magical about islands," Le Feuvre says, "and what I really love about them is that islands are where you see the world first. Islands are colonized first. They're where people are sent to if you don't want to see them anymore. It's where you extract wealth from the land; it's where you see climate change." Smithson, she says, "was a complete, crazy island fanatic." Although his 1970 proposal for "Island of the Dismantled Building" (a landmass covered in construction rubble) never came to fruition, his designs for a "Floating Island" (also from 1970), a 30-by-90-foot patch of sylvan landscape atop a barge, tugged around Manhattan, did so in 2005, thanks to Holt's persistence. "He loved islands," Le Feuvre continues, "because they are all about edges. What's so amazing about them is that you always know the coast is behind you and in front of you." An island can be a microcosm of the world, but it can also be a place where the status quo is upended, and anything is possible.