



Elizabeth Cook-Romero | The New Mexican

There will be drilling — there may not be art



Nancy Holt: detail of *Sun Tunnels*, built from 1973 to 1976 in Box Elder County, Utah; photo courtesy the artist

Top, Robert Smithson: *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, long-term installation in Rozel Point, Box Elder County, Utah; photo Gianfranco Gorgoni, collection Dia Art Foundation

We're all going round the same spiral

For aficionados of avant-garde art, the *Spiral Jetty* — created by Robert Smithson (1938-1973) — is an icon of the American West. The 1,500-foot-long jetty, composed of basalt and earth, juts into Utah's Great Salt Lake at Rozel Point. Unlike conventional jetties, Smithson's takes a sharp counterclockwise turn, then curves like a young fiddlehead fern.

A trip to the *Spiral Jetty* can feel like a pilgrimage. The work's remote location means that it's not on the way to someplace else. To see this earthwork, visitors make a trek through a strange and magnificent landscape. Of late, lovers of art and nature are not the only ones who have been visiting Rozel Point; on Jan. 7, 2008, Pearl Mountain Exploration and Production Ltd. requested a permit to drill exploratory boreholes along the north arm of the Great Salt Lake in an area known as West Rozel, just five miles from the jetty.

The request for a permit to drill in the lake bottom moved through Utah's state bureaucracy in a streamlined process that required an environmental assessment rather than an environmental impact statement, according to Lynn de Freitas, the Friends of the Great Salt Lake's

executive director. In 2005, 175,000 acres around the north arm went up for lease, she continued, and by the time the environmental group was able to take action, the state had already exchanged contracts on 55,000 acres. The proposed exploration near the jetty was within those acres.

Sculptor Nancy Holt, Smithson's widow, lives in Galisteo. She first heard about the proposed oil exploration in late January. "The director of the Friends of the Great Salt Lake called and said as far as she knew, the deadline for public comment was that day; it was afternoon," Holt recalled. "She said she might be wrong — that was on a Monday, and it turned out we had until Wednesday. I sent a group of e-mails to about 25 artists and writers who I knew really cared about the jetty. ... Those friends sent it to other friends."

E-mails and phone calls from across the U.S. and Europe flooded Utah's Public Lands Policy Coordination Office in Salt Lake City, and the public-comment period was extended to Feb. 13. The Dia Art Foundation, which acquired the jetty (and the long-term lease for the land it was built on) from the artist's estate, joined the fight. As of Feb. 14, the office had received more than 2,800 e-mails and letters, plus around 210 phone calls.

Jim Springer, public-relations officer with Utah's Division of Oil, Gas and Mining, sounded droll when asked if he was surprised by the comments the drilling permit had generated. "Normally — yeah — that would be unusual," he said. With a bit of prodding, he added, "The bulk of the comments have been against development in this area, and they have come from a number of areas from around the world; they're international, for sure."

Because the comment period was extended once, Springer noted, a further extension is unlikely. The Division of Oil, Gas and Mining had expected protest about drilling in the lake, he continued. "But it's been done before at an area called Rozel Point, which is 400 yards south of the *Spiral Jetty*. There were remains of a facility there when Smithson developed the jetty itself." Oil seeps were first reported at Rozel Point by explorer and mapmaker Capt. Howard Stansbury in 1850, Springer continued. The earlier wells at Rozel Point were abandoned before the jetty was built because the oil had a high sulfur content. "Thirty to 40 years ago it [oil from Rozel Point] was useful only as road base, but as the price of a barrel of oil has risen, suddenly that inferior quality has taken on more marketability."

There is no way to count the number of people who have visited the jetty, Springer continued, noting that he has visited the work several times. "It's interesting work, but I'm not sure personally if I buy the argument that the particular surround of the jetty was integral to the artwork, considering there was development within 400 yards when it was constructed." He added that he didn't know if the volume of protest would persuade the state to deny the permit for drilling at Rozel Point.

I've heard this song before

De Freitas' phone call about the oil exploration near the *Spiral Jetty* was too familiar to Holt. Not only is her home region of Galisteo threatened by oil exploration, in May 2007, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance notified her that the land adjacent to *Sun Tunnels*, her famous installation located in Utah's Box Elder County, had been designated for oil exploration. "They [the Division of Oil, Gas and Mining] told me the test well wouldn't be too obtrusive," Holt said. "It would be a little pipe that maybe a bush could hide. But they would have to put in a road and use big, heavy cranes. You don't just put in a little pipe. ... And, of course, if you allow a company to do a test well and they find oil, you can't turn around and say, 'Sorry, you can't get that oil out.' The test well is made to sound like a little nothing, but it's the beginning of a whole process."

Sun Tunnels is composed of four huge concrete pipes pierced with holes that represent celestial constellations. The pipes, which are oriented to

face the sunset and sunrise during solstices, form an X. Holt bought the land for *Sun Tunnels* during the early 1970s. "I pay taxes on the land, so they know who I am," she said. "They could have sent a notice that leases on oil and gas were coming up."

Sun Tunnels, like *Spiral Jetty*, is a destination for cultural tourists, and Holt said the proposed lease auction generated a lot of protest, but the state was undeterred. Nobody bid on the parcel adjacent to *Sun Tunnels*, but the work is far from safe. Parcels that garnered no bids remain on the market for two years, and their oil rights can be bought for \$2 an acre.

Art does not exist without ground to stand on

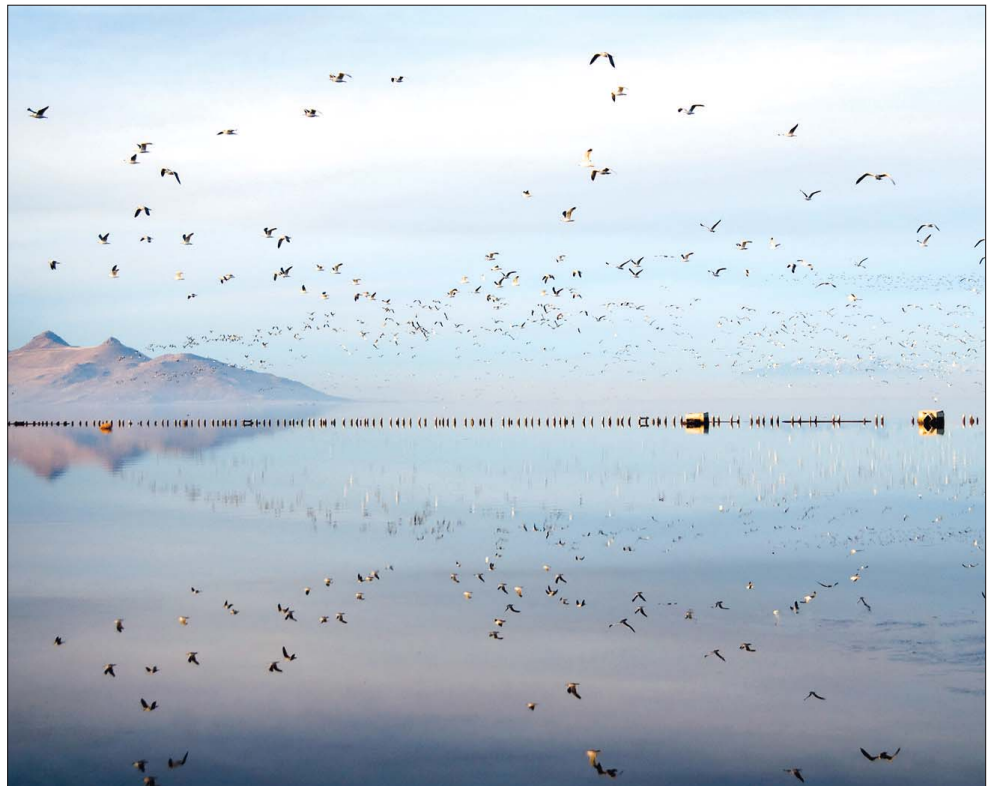
"When I was reading the comments that came from the international arts community, I noticed there were some people who understood that this lake is an extremely delicate, extraordinary, natural environment," de Freitas said. "But there were some letters that were just about the jetty. ... That was an interesting moment for me."

The Great Salt Lake supports few species of megafauna such as wolves or bears, de Freitas

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noted. "But the Great Salt Lake is significant in a hemispheric way because of the millions of migratory birds that come through. The biodiversity of that system — the soup of the lake — is rich in nutrients. The brine flies, brine shrimp, and algae are perfect fuel sources for migratory birds." As examples, she cited the Wilson's phalaropes that arrive from Patagonia, eat millions of brine flies, then head north into Saskatchewan and beyond.

The *Spiral Jetty*, de Freitas added, has helped to focus attention on the oil exploration that threatens the Great Salt Lake. Even if Utah decides not to allow exploratory boreholes at Rozel Point, there will be other challenges to the integrity of the lake and the jetty. "It's tragic really," she said, "this zeal for being hellbent on going wherever to fill the need for energy." ◀



Charles Uibel: *Linking Partnerships*, digital photograph of seagulls at the Great Salt Lake; courtesy the photographer