

Module Title and Code: Research in Context – ADAD5003

Course: BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Lecturers: Holly Slingsby and Alex Duncan

Student Name: Victoria Goddard

Student Number: 2005383

Question 2:

Exploring art made or curated outside the gallery space, discuss how artists have developed art practice utilising space (and/or) place providing evidence from at least two artists and thinkers.

Word Limit: 2500 +/- 10%

Word Count: 2559 (excluding title page, table of contents, title of figures, list of figures and reference list)

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Introduction

Critic Lucy Lippard argues that “Effective art is not effective simply by being created, but by being created and communicated within carefully considered contexts” (Lippard, 1983, p. 5). Rather than simply using a site as a neutral display mechanism for work, a context outside the gallery space can enable artists to approach landscape, place or space collaboratively to amplify, challenge or complicate form and meaning.

Playful creative concepts like Hans Ulrich Obrist’s staging of an exhibition in his own kitchen (Obrist, 2014) are thought-provoking but possibly exclusive to the majority who do not have ‘insider’ art world access. This essay will instead discuss works that are (or were for their duration) more easily accessible to the general visitor.

I will focus on a key or current work by three artists who have shown work in traditional gallery environments but also developed art practices which are informed by or respond to the unique spatial, historical, geological and cultural characteristics of their sites. Best known for her land art, Nancy Holt’s central themes are perception, vision, light and consciousness of looking as an action within a landscape. Susan Philipsz exploits the spatial qualities of sound to reveal the history and narrative of place in site-specific sound installations while Anya Gallaccio uses her deep interest in materiality to articulate place in site-specific sculpture and installation. 222

Nancy Holt

Although most celebrated as a pioneer of land art, Nancy Holt's artistic practice was extremely broad. Her career began in the mid 1960s with concrete poetry and she quickly began to combine text with landscape exploration in *Buried Poems and Tours*, (1967) which guided readers to specific locations in a "mapping of language onto site" (Holt/Smithson Foundation, n.d.). Over five decades, Holt questioned "perception, systems and place" with photography, moving image, gallery-based sculpture and installation, drawing and texts in a coherent body of work thematically consistent with her land art (Holt/Smithson Foundation, n.d.).

Ben Tufnell describes *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76), generally considered to be Holt's master work, as "a machine for perception of the landscape and one's place upon it, of the landscape's place on earth and the planet's place within a larger astrological context" (Tufnell, 2019, p. 111). *Sun Tunnels* is an open 'X' formation of four 18ft long, 9ft diameter, concrete above-ground tunnels in the Great Basin Desert, Utah. (See Figures 1 and 2). The tunnels align with the sun's position on the horizon at sunrise and sunset on the summer and winter solstices and each is pierced with holes corresponding to the stars of a specific constellations: Draco, Perseus, Columba and Capricorn.



Figure 1 Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels* (1973-1976), Great Basin Desert, Utah. Photograph: Nancy Holt.

Holt conceived the work a year before finding a suitable location (Holt, 1977) and identified clear site requirements necessary to realise the work with astronomical accuracy and the correct perceptual effects. She set out to find land for sale in a spacious, flat desert site encircled by distant but low mountains that would be accessible by car for future visitors. After failing to find land in New Mexico or Arizona, Holt described her eventual choice of a forty-acre plot in Utah as a place where she felt highly sensitised to the tiny scale of a human life in comparison to the thousands of

years of human habitation evidenced in nearby caves and the geological timescales of surrounding mountains. She experienced a strong sense of connection and continuity with previous inhabitants of the landscape stretching back into pre-history, reflecting that, “From the site they would have seen the sun rising and setting over the same mountains” (Holt, 1977). Gaston Bachelard describes experiences of this kind as an “activity of poetic spatiality that goes from deep intimacy to infinite extent” (Bachelard, 2014, p. 218).



Figure 2 Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76), Great Basin Desert, Utah. Photograph: Nancy Holt.

It is easy to assume that Holt sought to create a contemporary Stone Henge, but she denies this, stating “I had no desire to make a megalithic monument” (Holt, 1977).

Rather, *Sun Tunnels* aims to make the vastness of the desert landscape humanly comprehensible by creating visual reference points. Holt explains that “Through the tunnels, parts of the landscape are framed and come into focus...the tunnels extend the viewer into the landscape” (Holt, 1977). However, *Sun Tunnels* does fulfil the function of many pre-historic ‘calendar’ structures by measuring the solar year. Lucy Lippard discusses its relationship to pre-historic art and characterises most extant pre-historic sites as imaginatively inseparable from their surrounding landscapes (Lippard, 1983, p. 106 & 12). Holt herself states that “*Sun Tunnels* can exist only in that particular place – the work evolved out of its site” (Holt, 1977).

While not megalithic in scale, *Sun Tunnels* is a large and complex work. It measures eighty-six feet long diagonally, took a year to build with an extensive team of building contractors and its effectiveness as an artwork is dependent upon its siting within forty acres of land under the control of the artist. Whitney Chadwick points out that the opportunity to make work on this scale is a peculiarly American and mostly male privilege due to the availability of land and access to patronage (Chadwick, 1990, p. 335). In this instance, Holt funded two thirds of the cost of land with her own money (Holt, 1977).

Chadwick also points out that while land art was mostly made outdoors, often deliberately evading contemporary art systems and galleries, documentation of the work was frequently exhibited within typical indoor art environments and galleries (Chadwick, 1990, p. 335). (See Figure 3). Although he describes her photographs documenting *Sun Tunnels* as able to stand alone as body of work, Tufnell notes that for

Holt they are no more than part of a wider conceptual framework (Tufnell, 2019, p. 109).

Holt goes further, deeming them “memory traces, not art. At best, they are inducements for people to go and see the actual work“ (Holt, 1977).



Figure 3 Nancy Holt, *Sun Tunnels photo studies [detail]* (1975). Installation view: Spruth Magers, New York, 2025.

Susan Philipsz

Susan Philipsz originally trained in sculpture but began to experiment with sound while making early work about the internal spaces of the human body. Noticing the physicality of her own singing and the bodily processes involved in producing and projecting sound, she developed an interest in how sound defines architectural space (Savitskaya, 2015).

Philipsz now describes her work as “using sound as a medium in public spaces to trigger an awareness in the listener, to temporarily alter their perception of themselves in a particular place and time” (Holt/Smithson Foundation, 2025), elaborating, “my work deals with the spatial properties of sound and with the relationships between sound and architecture.” She often uses existing music in the manner of a found object, amplifying or altering the meaning by changing context (Licht, 2019, p. 126). Much of Philipsz’s work uses her own unaccompanied voice, which is light and untrained, and she tries to sound as if she is singing to herself in abstraction rather than consciously performing. Old folk songs, sea shanties and madrigals are frequent reference points and can give the audience a sense of temporal displacement in a modern environment. (Holt/Smithson Foundation, 2025).

Philipsz’s *Lowlands* was the first sound piece to win the Turner Prize in 2010 (Licht, 2019, p. 126). “My work always starts with the place,” explains Philipsz, and *Lowlands* was first presented in 2008 in a Berlin gallery opposite the canal where Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg’s body was dumped after her 1919 murder. While developing the work, Luxemburg’s persona began to merge in the artist’s imagination with the river spirit Anna Livia Plurabelle from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Philipsz combined these with a third narrative, a sixteenth century Scottish seafarers’ ballad, for the eventual 3-channel structure of the sound installation in which her lone, untrained voice quietly sings three different versions of a haunting lament for a drowned lover (Barunke, 2009).

This is a typical working process for Philipsz; she supports her initial response to atmosphere, acoustics and sense of place with extensive site-specific historical research and wider allusions to literature, creating multi-layered work, often with elements of speculative narrative (Holt/Smithson Foundation, 2025).

When invited to participate in Glasgow International art festival in 2010, Philipsz presented an expanded version of *Lowlands* through hidden speakers under three bridges in the city centre. [Video of Lowlands in Glasgow](#) On her first visit to this architecturally grand but desolate urban landscape, Philipsz was struck by flowers at the water's edge memorialising a suicide (Higgins, 2010). The work acquired new literal and metaphorical resonances outside the gallery. Reflecting on re-siting the installation in this context, she found that ambient sounds of "the trains overhead and the sound of the water was all part of the experience" (Licht, 2019, p. 126), noting that the gallery experience of the sound was more intimate and contemplative. In the Glasgow iteration of *Lowlands*, the acoustics of the space emphasised the ethereal quality of Philipsz's disembodied voice, and a lone woman, apparently singing to herself rather than explicitly performing for an audience, has a disquieting vulnerability in a bleak and potentially dangerous place.

Discussing her work generally, Philips explains:

When you listen to my installations, you become very much aware of the space you're in and yourself in that space. It's a simultaneous experience of being with the sound but also grounded in the present. Especially when the work is placed in a gritty, urban setting, you're prevented from fully entering a state of reverie. You

become aware of how the sound defines the architecture and draws attention to it in a new way (Savitskaya, 2015).

Alan Licht discusses problems in documenting sound art which are similar to those faced by land artists, particularly when trying to convey spatial qualities created by multiple channel sound environments: a two-channel stereo recording loses the audience's multi-dimensional experience. He suggests video as the best compromise, pointing out that "a photo of Susan Philipsz's sound installation *Lowlands* is a photo of a bridge or an empty gallery" (Licht, 2019, p. 14;15). (See Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4 Susan Philipsz, Lowlands site, Glasgow International Festival 2010.



Figure 5 Susan Philipsz, *Lowlands* (2008), installation view, Art Cologne 2009.

Anya Gallaccio

Part of the Young British Artist (YBA) generation and the 1998 *Freeze* exhibition, Anya Gallaccio investigates themes of temporality, decay, transformation. Her often-site-specific sculpture and installations explore the conceptual potential of natural materials that might rot, grow or otherwise change over time. Gallaccio has worked repeatedly with trees, flowers and natural foodstuffs, particularly apples, and her process has been described as “underpinned by historic and geographic awareness” (Schubert, 2013, p. 9). She is also known for working with bronze and ceramic direct casts of trees, fruit and vegetables (Van Adrichem, 2013, p. 222).

Anya Gallaccio's *Apple a Day* (2024), a spiral orchard sculpture at Lees Court Estate in Faversham, Kent, is a legacy project made in tandem with her comprehensive survey exhibition shown at Turner Contemporary in Margate (September 2024 – January 2025) (Turner Contemporary, 2025a). Gallaccio explains that the making of the exhibition, *Preserved*, was strongly site-specific and focused on materials which addressed the geology and natural produce of Kent. (See Figure 6). Correspondingly, the orchard sculpture is inspired by the surrounding Kent Downs National Landscape and apples, which as well as a recurring motif in Gallaccio's work, are a primary local commercial crop and historically important in the county; Kent was known as "the fruit basket of England" (Turner Contemporary, 2024a).

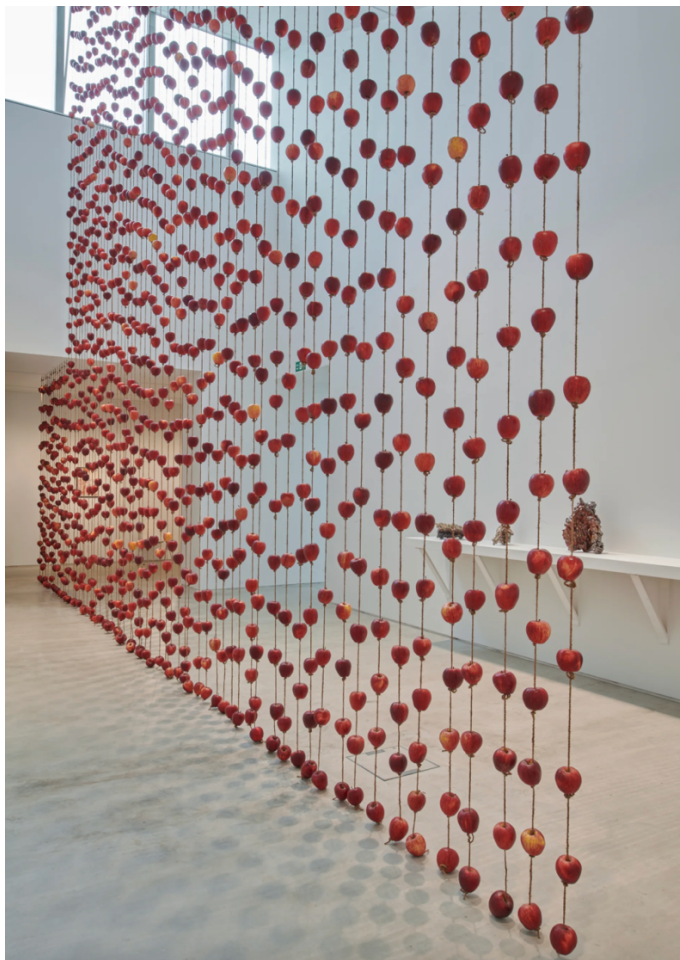


Figure 6 Anya Gallaccio *Preserve*, Turner Contemporary, 2024.

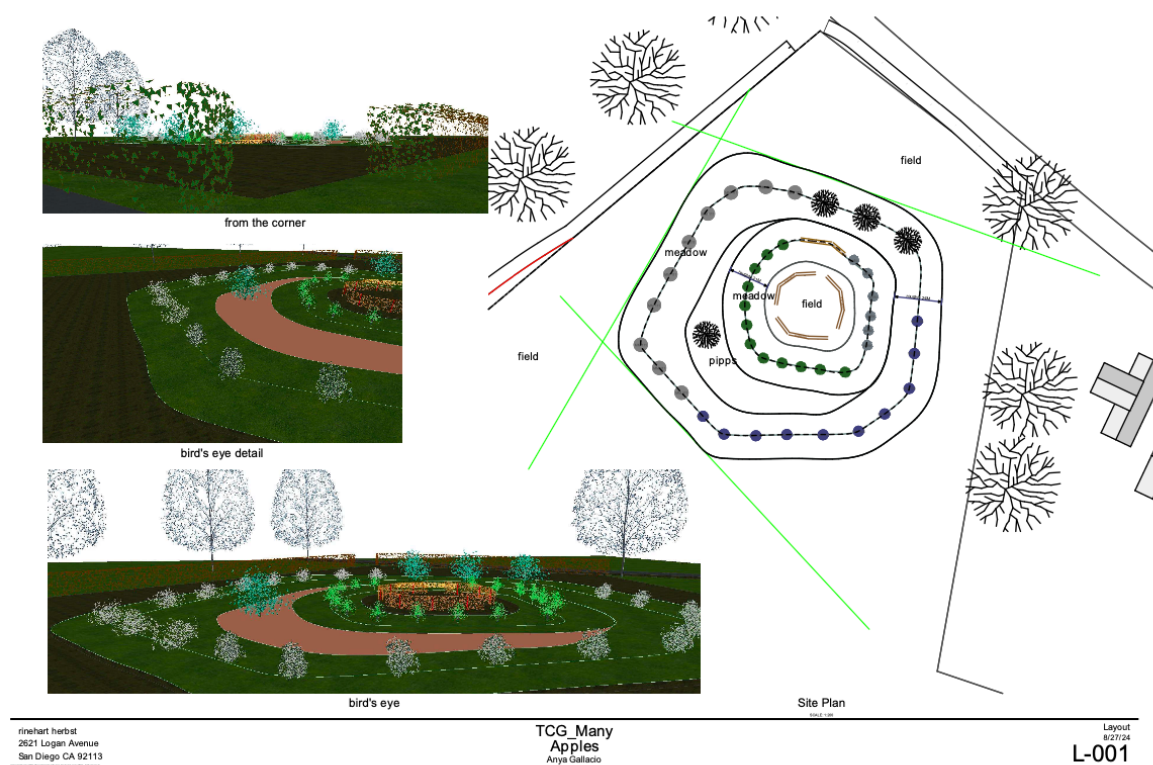


Figure 7 Anya Gallaccio's original design for the spiral orchard at Lees Court Estate.

Gallaccio chose a spiral form for the sculpture to “subvert” the usual grid planting of an orchard with a more organic pattern found in nature (see transcript of email correspondence with Toby Parkin of Turner Contemporary in Appendix 1). Working in conjunction with Kent-based Brogdale Collections, holders of the UK’s national fruit collection, Gallaccio selected over 30 mostly rare and heritage varieties of apple to plant, including Decio, which was brought to Britain by the Romans, and one which supposedly originated from a tree in Isaac Newton’s garden (Turner Contemporary, 2024b). Scale and sculptural form have been managed by grafting the chosen apple

varieties onto rootstocks varying in size from the smallest espaliers to a full-sized 'standard' tree, spiralling out from the largest at the centre to the smallest. When the trees reach maturity this should achieve a sense of dynamism and movement.

Toby Parkin explained that the apples have been planted chronologically, with the oldest species at the centre and the newest at the outside of the spiral (see Appendix 1), allowing visitors a spatial experience of time. Small differences between the apple varieties' flowering and ripening times will indicate time on a much subtler scale in spring and autumn, as will weather- and climate-related changes year-to-year. The blossom and fruits will range in colour, scent, surface texture and size, offering aesthetic variation as well as biodiversity.

Formally, Gallaccio's orchard recalls David Nash's living sculpture *Ash Dome* (1977, replanted with oak in 2019, see Figure 8) and both have expressed similar thoughts about working sculpturally with living trees to express ideas about longevity and time spanning into the future (Turner Contemporary, 2024a) (Pes, 2018). However, Gallaccio conceived *Apple a Day* as both sculpture and learning resource, realising a goal from a 2003 visit to chef Alice Waters's Edible Schoolyard in Berkley, California, where gardening and cooking are used to achieve goals in diversity and cultural understanding (Turner Contemporary, 2024a).



Figure 8 David Nash at Ash Dome.

As an educational project, Gallaccio, Turner Contemporary, Brogdale Collections and Lees Court Estate worked jointly with five primary schools from the most deprived areas of Kent. The aim was to engage the children with “learning about biodiversity, sustainability and local heritage using Kent’s association with apples and orchards” (Turner Contemporary, 2025a). This was achieved with strategies including workshops and teaching resource packs, but when speaking of the sculpture itself Gallaccio particularly noted that “the kids planted the trees themselves, it gives them agency and investment in the future and the health of it” (Turner Contemporary, 2025b). Lees Court has committed to nurture the orchard for at least 25 years, and it is hoped that original student participants will return as the orchard matures, deepening their relationship with it over time. *Apple a Day* aligns with principles of relational aesthetics and Nicolas Bourriaud’s views that art can create a “hands-on utopia” where “The contemporary

artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic [social] agglutination" (Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 9, 21).



Figure 9 Anya Gallaccio leading a tree planting session with a local school.

Conclusion

Art is at its most effective and best able to communicate with its audience when context is considered as component of the work. This approach can enrich work inside and outside traditional gallery spaces. Nancy Holt, Susan Philipsz and Anya Gallaccio address differing themes in varied media but each works with the specific spatial, physical and cultural qualities of site as a core element of their practice. Holt's *Sun Tunnels* "evolved out of its site," (Holt, 1977), Philipsz "always starts with the place," (Barunke, 2009) and Gallaccio's *Apple a Day* project uses site to reach out into the social world.

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Appendices

Email correspondence with Toby Parkin of Turner Contemporary:



Victoria Goddard (2005383)



To: info@turnercontemporary.org

Fri 21/11/2025 12:37

Hello

I am a fine art student from Swansea College of Art and wondered if anyone at Turner Contemporary could help with information about Anya Gallaccio's spiral orchard project? I am writing an essay about art made outside traditional gallery environments and particularly discussing place, space, time/duration and anything that could give in-depth context would be hugely helpful.

Kind regards

Victoria Goddard

Sent from [Outlook for iOS](#)

Dear Victoria,

Thank you for your email and apologies for the delay in responding. I worked closely with Anya on this project and can answer any questions.

We don't have a pack on the artwork yet but I can share a report we wrote to the funder summarising the project. The artwork was part of a wider learning project that engaged primary school students so the report is quite focused on outcomes for children but does also include info about the work. Please come back to me if you need any other specific info as we have more details, but they just aren't collated into something shareable.

Just for context you can also see the orchard spiral on this satellite view:

<https://maps.app.goo.gl/2WAY1kzMFW9ofZFy8>

Best wishes

Toby

Toby Parkin

Head of Learning and Participation

T +44 (0)1843 233000

M +44 (0)78 6666 4969

Turner



Victoria Goddard (2005383)



To: Toby Parkin <Tparkin@turnercontemporary.org>

Thu 11/12/2025 12:22

Dear Toby,

Thank you so much for your help, it's hugely appreciated. The report provides very useful context for a discussion of Anya's work in my essay. I wondered if you had any further information on the choice of a spiral form for the orchard?

Best wishes

Victoria

Sent from [Outlook for iOS](#)

...

Hi,

She's talked about the shape subverting the usual grid pattern of an orchard and using a more organic pattern found in nature. The orchard is also chronological and has the oldest species of apples in the centre and the more modern varieties towards the outside of the spiral. It means that she tours people around the orchard from the centre and talks through the varieties as they become more modern at the end of the spiral.

This is probably too much detail but I've attached all the trees that are featured in the orchard.

Best wishes

Toby

Toby Parkin

Head of Learning and Participation

T +44 (0)1843 233000

M +44 (0)78 6666 4969

Turner

A PDF copy of Turner Contemporary's internal report, Apple a Day Project: Summary Report, as cited, can be made available if required.

A PDF copy of Turner Contemporary's internal document on the trees planted in the orchard can be made available if required.