

The Center's Circumference

Granary Arts held the second iteration of their program Critical Ground on June 23, 2023, in Ephraim, Utah's designated geographical center. The following essay was presented that day as a performative talk, a field session that explored ideas of center at Utah's Center Monument located in Sanpete Valley. The conceptual framework followed the process of de-centering place, providing a model to assist in democratizing art criticism. As point person, map maker, and scout, I oriented attendees to this specific place then beyond, offering an alternative view towards our expectations of art criticism. This exploration embraces cultural histories, geography, time, and language.¹

—Hikmet Sidney Loe

I. Ephraim, the contemporary geographical center of Utah



"The Center of Utah," 2023. Photo: Felicia Baca

From Ephraim: the surrounding area holds evidence of migration, habitation, colonization, settlement, and a succession of shifting boundaries.

Shifting timelines also occur. In 2022, footprints dating 12,000 years ago were found at the Utah Testing and Training Range between Salt Lake City and Wendover, less than 200 miles from Ephraim. This discovery is rewriting our understanding of human history's trajectory and movement at the end of the last ice age.

Our knowledge of other peoples—starting with the Fremont Culture—is more well known. The Fremont Culture inhabited this region around 600-1300 CE. The Ancient Puebloan Culture lived south and adjacent to the Fremont, with evidence of trading relationships. Around 1200 CE, Four Shoshonean peoples migrated from the west, with the Ute's settling in the central and eastern regions of what is now called "Utah."

In the early 16th century, this land was held by Colonial Mexico. When under control of Spain, expansion grew to the north (North America), although no settlements were established (except in 1598 in Santa Fe). After Mexico achieved independence from Spain, the U.S. Congress declared war, leading to the Mexican-American War (1846-48). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo resulted in Mexico selling their northern territories to the ever-expanding United States. The government deemed the land as public domain.

European colonization—followed by rapid expansion—led to radical shifts in populations and habitations. During the 19th century, Mormon settlers arrived in 1847. Between 1849-50, the Mormon Church designated the region as The State of Deseret,

its territory encompassing the current states of Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico, most of Arizona, southern California, and parts of Colorado.

In 1850, The Territory of Utah replaced The State of Deseret, reduced in size to span current Utah and most of Nevada. The settler town of Fillmore was the territory's center from 1851-56. In 1856, Salt Lake City became the territorial center. The first Euro-American settlement in Ephraim dates to 1854, the town named after a Mormon pioneer, etymologically traced to the Old Testament. Utah was admitted to statehood in 1896 as the 45th state.

Identifying a center assumes consensus and shared values, a more homogenous view. Each center includes a circumference, an expanding region where multiple interpretations can exist. Over time, centers shift, shining light on new circumferences.

II. The Center Can Not Hold

The exhibition *The Center Can Not Hold* (Granary Arts, 2022-23) asked architects to consider Ephraim through a conceptual lens. Their investigations led to generous and open-ended interpretations of how the meaning of place can change for each of us.

From the exhibition catalogue:

- These works ask: who has the privilege to see the center? How can we broaden our views to “see” the accumulation of time and embrace our connection to place through a center that is continually shifting? Is there, indeed, a center (geographic, historical) that holds us together? The absence of one center opens infinite views and possibilities.ⁱⁱ

Anne Mooney and John Sparano positioned their work “carto-graphic” between the central beams of Granary Arts’ main gallery.

- Our understanding of the term “center” embraces alternative ways of experiencing a landscape and the invisible presence of suppressed voices. In our consideration, the idea of a center is dynamic, evolutionary, and transitory, and embodies an ethos of multiplicity rather than the implied singularity of the word. This interactive construct invites the visitor to explore the piece from a variety of perspectives – some direct, others requiring effort to access and assess the view.
- Within a white conic shell, maps of central Utah are visible. On one side is a U.S. Geological Survey map of the Sanpete Valley, organized within the logic of the Jeffersonian grid. (1) This map serves as the background for a critique of what this and other charts portray and omit. The standardized graphics, colors and symbols act as a singular, commonly-accepted, means of reading the landscape and suggest a comprehensive documentation of place. However, this system of information prompts a questioning of what might be missing, ignored, or erased.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hannah Vaughn created abstractions of place through drawings and castings, situated on the gallery’s walls as sentinels.

- The material articulations are at once place-based—rooted in the Sanpete Valley, seeking to connect to and understand the current and recent characters and happenings of the low-slung basin—and distinctly [universally/inescapably]

human, connected to a specificity that is ever-changing. Relying on physicality as the driver – a non-conceptual point of departure that trusts the memory of hands and body and impulse to react in relationship to material. As memory extends beyond cognition, leaning into cellular and evolutionary memory to collect, organize, polish, press, compose, cut, recompose, dissect, encase, expand, and imprint. The resulting studies are an exacting accumulation of time (compressed, irreversible and opaque), a dissection of the past, an expansion of time, and an articulation of fleeting moments in found objects (bones, tules, seeds, petals, wire, ink, roots, burned trees, buildings, nests, limestone, etc.) and paper (cast, molded, pressed, etc.). A trembling momentary existence, that is not its final form.^{iv}

Investigations the idea of centers, and centeredness, led us to embrace a broader understanding of how time allows for multiple narratives from one spot. How do these ideas lend themselves to a more democratized art criticism? How can research on place, geography, history, and the study of geographical and conceptual centers, aid in this endeavor?

III. The Nevada/Utah Border

Back to geography. Moving clockwise from Ephraim we encounter the Utah/Nevada border, about 180 miles west (as the crow flies) from this designated center.

When The Territory of Utah was created in 1850, it included most of present-day Nevada (except for Las Vegas region), known as Washoe, named after the Washoe people. In 1859, the discovery of silver ore found in present-day Virginia City, Nevada (then part of the western edge of The Territory of Utah) led to a national silver rush.

This discovery led to huge amounts of extracted silver, resulting in immense fortunes for a few, advancing western mining and extractive technologies for many.

The Territory of Nevada was formed in 1861, splitting from The Territory of Utah due to political, religious, and economic differences. The designated eastern boundary was defined as the 39th meridian west from Washington D.C. This archaic, longitudinal meridian was the first time a meridian was established as a boundary. (The Washington meridians are four, used as prime meridians that passed through buildings in Washington D.C.: the Capitol; the White House; the old Naval Observatory; the new Naval Observatory.)

- Lines of longitude, also called meridians, are imaginary lines that divide the Earth. They run north to south from pole to pole, but they measure the distance east or west.^v

In 1862, this initial boundary was moved east by one degree to follow the 38th (also archaic) meridian, based upon gold discoveries found in The Territory of Utah. In 1866, the border moved *again* to its current situation along the 37th (also archaic) meridian, after the discovery of even more gold, forming the boundary separating present-day Nevada and Utah.

This is the only time in United States' history a meridian was used as a state boundary. It is not the only time a state boundary was established based upon political, religious, capitalistic, and/or extractive tendencies.

IV. *Sun Tunnels*, the Other Center

Following the contemporary state line north, approximately 95 miles from White Pine County (NV) adjacent to Millard County (UT), we enter Elko County (NV) adjacent to Box Elder County (UT). This state line intersects the former city of Wendover, now Wendover (UT) and West Wendover (NV). The division of this once unified town is striking. Each state is governed by laws derived from political edicts and cultural expectations: the ideals (and assumptions) of abstinence in Utah vs excess in Nevada (gambling, drinking, prostitution) looms large.

Utah is in Mountain Time, Nevada is in Pacific Time. To mitigate the confusion of two time zones in one city, Pacific Time begins fifteen miles west of West Wendover. The confusion remains, though, if one continues driving north. The answer to the often-posed question “are we in Mountain or Pacific time?” changes continually.

Continuing north, the state line slices the vertically oriented Pilot Range, resulting in an eastern slope (UT) and a western slope (NV). Pilot Peak was named by the Goshute people as Cang-it-cho-ip and the Shoshoni as Waahkai: was renamed by explorer John Frémont in 1845 as he traversed and mapped the Great Basin. It is the fourth highest peak in Nevada—a state filled with an abundance of mountain ranges and peaks—used by everyone living in or traversing the region as a visual marker, separating the unrelenting alkaline playas to its east from the more forgiving, habitable landscapes to its west.

Ten miles east of the state line—the 37th archaic meridian—northeast of Pilot Peak, is where artist Nancy Holt (1938-2014) situated her earthwork *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76). Holt placed four concrete tunnels in an X formation in an alkaline valley to align viewers to

the movements of the sun during the summer and winter solstices. She added a concrete marker in the center of the work, denoting not only the work's center, but also the center of the forty-acre property she owned.

The idea of creating and/or accessing a "center" is found in many of the earthworks created during the 1960s and 1970s, postulating a place for visitors to stand, view, and experience art within a landscape. Holt pointedly commented in her essay "Sun Tunnels" that "the center of the work becomes the center of the world."^{vi}

As individuals, though, we can never stand in the same place: our experiences are colored by too many factors based upon our embodied selves. Holt's statement offers multiple interpretations: as the artist planting the proverbial flag, claiming land from which the whole world radiates; or, as a generous offer to investigate and question the many factors we believe make up our own personal and geographical centers.

Where do our ideas of center originate? We can look to past civilizations and cultures, who have created ways to denote their own centers. Regionally, Mormon settlers established the center of towns by building a temple, then numbering streets in a grid, radiating from their religious center. Great Salt Lake's Antelope Island may be the location of the Shoshone origin tale: a woman and her daughter live on an island and populate the world through the tricks of Coyote.^{vii}

V. Sun Tunnels: The Center's Circumference

Holt's statement denoting *Sun Tunnels'* center proffers an alternative view, the dialectical scenario of inside and outside. Each center includes a circumference, an

expanding region where multiple interpretations can exist. In geometry, circumference forms the boundaries of a circle; it is the distance around the circle. Circles have an interior and an exterior. Yet, a circumference can also be considered as a metaphysical construct.

The situation of *Sun Tunnels* is thus expanded beyond its concrete forms to form a circumference, or possibly one of many. By identifying the cultural ways that former occupants traversed and lived in the region, the geological formations found therein, and the extraction industries that sprang up (after the transcontinental railroad sliced through Elko and Box Elder counties in the nineteenth century), Holt compels us to consider that the center of *Sun Tunnels* is just the beginning, bounded on the edges through developments embedded across time and space.

Sun Tunnels' circumference erases the border. Holt wrote of many natural and cultural sites found in the wider region, presenting a more holistic view of the land than one finds on maps. Occurrences mattered more to her work than the state (Utah, Nevada) where they are found.

While it may not have been Holt's intent to comment on the divisions that borders and false meridians create, other artists have done just that. Artist Dennis Oppenheim united the United States / Canadian border in his earthwork *Annual Rings* (1968). More recently, architect Ronald Rael created a seesaw on the border between United States and Mexico, granting people the privilege of interacting with others between two divided nations.

The idea of one center is complicated by our unique experiences; how to translate those experiences to transcend boundaries is akin to crafting art criticism.

Decentralizing geography and decentralizing writing each allows for a richer place within which to live and communicate the essence of art. It invites responses that begin with “yes/and.”

VI. From Salt Lake City to Ephraim

Back to geography. East of *Sun Tunnels* lies the Great Salt Lake Desert, an expanse photographed as seemingly “barren” (Timothy O’Sullivan, 19th century; Lionel Feininger, 20th century): half sky, half alkaline ground. This was just one of the regions that invited trappers, explorers, emigrants, and settlers to roam, survey, and colonize the west. A region previously inhabited by Goshute and Shoshonean peoples. A region, before that, that found people traversing the soil dating back 12,000 years.

Salt Lake City—the political, economic, and religious capital of Utah—is about 180 miles east (as the crow flies) from Holt’s designated center. It is the largest city in the state, the perfect counterpart to the rural aspect of Ephraim (about 90 miles south of SLC, as the crow flies), where this essay began. Moving in a clockwise direction from start to finish brings us to a few conclusions on the nature of art criticism and its democratization:

- If we remove ourselves from what we perceive to be a center, or our center—geographical, societally, culturally—we have new opportunities to expand and grow. We can see in a new light to appreciate and embrace other centers.

- The center or circumference: this dialectical situation assures that one does not exist without the other. Each is poised to expand into then beyond what we know. That knowledge can be boundless.
- This expansion suggests we can decenter: remove hierarchies, flatten, make available. In effect, allow everyone to feel they have a place where they are, in their own valued center. Each center is valid and worthy of discovery.

The idea of the center is complicated by our unique experiences; how to translate those experiences to transcend boundaries is akin to crafting art criticism.

Decentralizing geography and decentralizing writing each allows for a richer place within which to live and communicate the essence of art.

ⁱ The 2022-23 Granary Arts exhibition *The Center Can Not Hold* asked architects to consider Ephraim through this conceptual lens: their investigations and works of art engendered some of the ideas found herein. With thanks to Amy Jorgensen, Anne Mooney, John Sparano, Hannah Vaughn, and Aurora Tang. This essay was reworked after its June 2023 presentation, completed during a writing retreat at Montello Foundation, fulfilled shortly after Critical Ground 2023. With thanks to Stefan Hagen, foundation director, and to Lynn Kilpatrick, with whom I shared the retreat.

ⁱⁱ *The Center Can Not Hold: Anne Mooney, John Sparano, Hannah Vaughn*. Ephraim, UT: Granary Arts, 2023. From the introductory page.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. From pages starting "anne mooney + john sparano."

^{iv} Ibid. from pages starting "hannah vaughn."

^v National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Accessed December 5, 2023.

<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/longitude.html#:~:text=Earth's%20surface%20shifts.-,Lines%20of%20longitude%2C%20also%20called%20meridians%2C%20are%20imaginary%20lines%20that,a%20longitude%20of%200%20degrees.>

^{vi} Nancy Holt, "Sun Tunnels." *Artforum* 15, no. 1 (April 1977): cover, 32-37.

^{vii} Arthur Johnson, "Origin Tale." In *Shoshone Tales*, collected by Anne M. Smith, 41-42. Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1993.