Sun Tunnels Solstice

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What brought me to this remote corner of the Great Basin Desert in the middle of a hot, dry, pandemic summer? A four-hour journey from my home in Salt Lake City, on long dirt roads, through sagebrush and sand. I was drawn out here by the summer solstice, something I had been yearning to do since moving to Utah: experience the solstice magic of the Sun Tunnels (1973-76), a minimalist-yet-amazing Earthwork by Nancy Holt.

The Earthworks movement of the 1970s, also known as Land Art, exploded after artists wanted to distance themselves from the over-commoditization of art in the 1960s. Largely an American phenomenon, Earthworks began in the open landscapes of the West. Probably the movement’s best-known example is Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, located on the remote north shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. But jumping west to another desolate desert in Utah, we find a lesser known but revered example Earthworks: the Sun Tunnels.

The quiet drive through Nevada and Utah on long, empty roads and a couple of cowboy towns is intriguing any time of year. But what makes the solstice so special? Holt designed the four concrete tunnels to line up exactly with the rising and setting sun on both the winter and summer