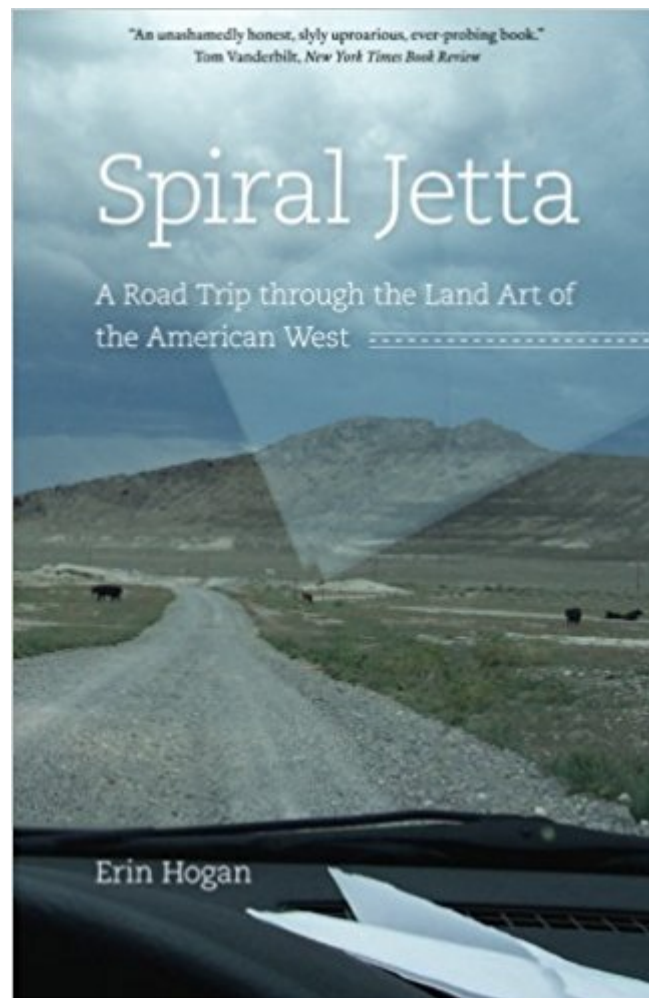




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# Spiral Jetta: A Road Trip Through The Land Art Of The American West (Culture Trails: Adventures In Travel)



## Synopsis

Erin Hogan hit the road in her Volkswagen Jetta and headed west from Chicago in search of the monuments of American land art: a salty coil of rocks, four hundred stainless steel poles, a gash in a mesa, four concrete tubes, and military sheds filled with cubes. Her journey took her through the states of Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. It also took her through the states of anxiety, drunkenness, disorientation, and heat exhaustion. *Spiral Jetta* is a chronicle of this journey. A lapsed art historian and devoted urbanite, Hogan initially sought firsthand experience of the monumental earthworks of the 1970s and the 1980s—Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, and the contemporary art mecca of Marfa, Texas. Armed with spotty directions, no compass, and less-than-desert-appropriate clothing, she found most of what she was looking for and then some. "I was never quite sure what Hogan was looking for when she set out . . . or indeed whether she found it. But I loved the ride. In *Spiral Jetta*, an unashamedly honest, slyly uproarious, ever-probing book, art doesn't magically have the power to change lives, but it can, perhaps no less powerfully, change ways of seeing." —Tom Vanderbilt, *New York Times Book Review* "The reader emerges enlightened and even delighted. . . . Casually scrutinizing the artistic works . . . while gamely playing up her fish-out-of-water status, Hogan delivers an ingeniously engaging travelogue-cum-art history." —*Atlantic* "Smart and unexpectedly hilarious." —Kevin Nance, *Chicago Sun-Times* "One of the funniest and most entertaining road trips to be published in quite some time." —June Sawyers, *Chicago Tribune* "Hogan ruminates on how the work affects our sense of time, space, size, and scale. She is at her best when she reexamines the precepts of modernism in the changing light of New Mexico, and shows how the human body is meant to be a participant in these grand constructions." —*New Yorker*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Hogan, director of public affairs at the Art Institute of Chicago and a recovering art historian with decidedly urban sensibilities, set out on a road trip to visit the most significant works of land art in the American West and to make an experimental assault on her fear of solitude. Hogan's journey in her Volkswagen Jetta began with Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty by the Great Salt Lake; in eight more chapters she documents her visits to Michael Heizer's Double Negative in Nevada, Walter De Maria's Lightning Field in New Mexico, failed attempts to find Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels and James Turrell's Roden Crater, along with stops in Moab, Utah; Juárez, Mexico; and Marfa, Tex., the contemporary art pilgrim's mecca. Hogan's pilgrimage, sparsely illustrated, is part well-informed art historical travelogue and part light foray into self-discovery; her prose is lucid, energetic and expressive, and she is an affable guide. But this narrative does not convincingly convey the depth of her interior journey or the aesthetic insight that Hogan sought to experience. 26 b&w photos, 1 map. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Facing a midlife crisis of sorts, Hogan, a "recovering art historian," took a three-week trek in search of the American Sublime. Her destinations were "monuments of American land art," including Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," a coil of earth and rock built in the Great Salt Lake in 1970. Short on personal information; we never learn much about Hogan, or about Todd, her eventual companion; this travel memoir nonetheless offers a soft lens on some hard ideas. Standing in Walter De Maria's "Lightning Field," in the high desert, amid four hundred stainless-steel poles, Hogan ruminates on how the work affects our sense of time, space, size, and scale. She is at her best when she reexamines the precepts of modernism in the changing light of New Mexico, and shows how the human body is meant to be a participant in these grand constructions. Copyright © 2008 Click here to subscribe to The New Yorker --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Although I thought that other reviewers were exaggerating about the author's snobbish attempts at viewing land art in rural settings, I very quickly tired of this author's journey. She is scared of her own shadow, and the majority of the book is filled with pages on her anxieties about various roads, hotels, etc. (For instance, she fretted that cows in the pasture might charge her car!) She was especially condescending about the rural people and communities she encountered on her journey. If you have ever driven anywhere by yourself outside of an urban area, you will most likely desire a more adventurous tale about exploring land art or the West. Additionally, the guide/itinerary on land art at the back of the book is minimal. You will not find any insider tips that you would not find in other travel books that include these major land art sites.

It was a decent read. There were just some moments where the trip went off-topic. I think there was a whole chapter where the road trip wasn't mentioned.

The author's account of her visit to earth works in the western US is often hilarious and is never dull.

This is a cross-over book: a mixture of a small amount of art history, with a bit of travel writing and with a nod towards Kerouac's *On the Road*. The latter is hard to avoid I guess given the genre--the road trip to various desert sites. I've always wanted to go to the art sites she visits or tries to visit. It's rather disappointing and unfortunate that the author doesn't find Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels and she doesn't see Roden Crater, so two of the chapters are about these failures. At the back of the book are directions to most of the sites, perhaps assembling this information before the trip would have been a better idea. There's a rather laboured discussion threaded through the book about the author's efforts to be spontaneous that explain this peculiar lack of preparation. She does manage to visit Spiral Jetty, Lightning Field, Double Negative and the Chinati Foundation in Marfa and her accounts of these visits is engaging and enjoyable. On the whole, the book is a very easy read, but a bit less biography and more engagement with the sites would have suited my taste better.

Land art was a controversial movement that came out of the 1960's and 1970's. Artists like Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Walter DeMaria tore apart the concept of art being individual works displayed in a gallery or sculpture garden independent of surroundings and time. They went to the most remote corners of the American west and southwest and created huge installations that are wedded to the landscape with an expectation that time and elements, as well as the viewers' physical perspective, can change their work and statement. A generation later, an urbanite armed

with a doctorate in art history, who was well read on the debate about land art realized that since its entire point is about where it is, she ought to go out and see these icons for herself. Erin Hogan may have been intellectually equipped, but going to land art is nothing like donning heels and a black dress and going to a gallery opening in Chicago. Thus her book is an amalgam of art history, art criticism and a frequently funny travelogue of an innocent who had never traveled solo before. The title of the book incorporates this range: the first earthwork she visits is Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" on Salt Lake, and the car she drives to remote, off-road locations requiring high-riding all-wheel drive vehicles is a VW Jetta. This book works on many accounts: Hogan is a natural storyteller and she is an accessible interpreter of art history and criticism. Due to very poor directions, not to mention a scary evening in a bar called the Saddle Sore, she does not find Holt's "Sun Tunnels" and later, a conversation with a Navajo ranger convinces her that it would be foolhardy in gun country to seek James Turrell's "Roden Crater." Although that's disappointing, she achieves some major experiences, especially a transformative overnight at De Maria's "Lightening Field." However inauspicious their start on the trip, she and the Jetta survive, and she provides revised travel directions for those who would like to make their own pilgrimages without the slapstick.

Ironically, it seemed to me that the most compelling chapter was the one covering Juarez, Mexico. The description had an edge that was absent in most other parts of the book except the accounts of her bar visit. I enjoyed reading the book and hope to visit some of the places described. Overall the Spiral Jetta is well written although I caught a couple repetitions that a good editor should have flagged. The questions Ms. Hogan raises about the market, high/hip modernism, and money are worth considering in greater depth. On a personal level I was surprised by the appearance of the boyfriend halfway through after the trip had been billed as chance for her to learn to be alone. I wanted to know why that idea was put aside. This sounds like a negative review but it shouldn't be. The author's voice was honest and the topic is intriguing. I imagine it would also be useful to anyone planning a trip to the Lightning Field or the other places she covers. They all seemed exceptionally hard to find.

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