

Artists

Nancy Holt

Nancy Holt (1938-2014) was a key member of the Earth, Land and Conceptual art movements and a pioneer of both site-specific installation and film and video work. Holt is best known for her iconic work *Sun Tunnels* (1973-6) located in the Great Basin Desert, Utah, but worked in many media, including concrete poetry, audiotapes, videos, photographs, site-specific installations, artist's books, and major public sculpture commissions.

Holt's major themes were vision, memory, perception, time and space. Using the natural environment as both medium and subject, Holt endeavoured to make her audience conscious of the cyclical time of the universe, the daily axial rotation of the Earth and its annual orbit around the sun. In doing so she transformed perception of the landscape. Within her work photography played a central role, both as a way of engaging with landscape and representing a passage through space, and as a way of documenting site-specific works.

Holt's interest in physical space and the geographical specificity was a key concern throughout her work. *Western Graveyards* (1968), an extended sequence of individually framed images, demonstrates her fascination with the history of the American land, the work depicting numerous graveyards within enclosed spaces, framed by fences. The graves bear a striking morphological similarity to Minimalist sculpture and her photographic approach revises the movement's drive for serial production. *California Sun Signs* (1972) consists of bright coloured photographs, capturing the humor and spontaneity of the artist's gaze, through a linguistic play on sunshine and rays of light. Each sign contains some variation of the word sun but the immediate surroundings in which the signs are found introduce entirely different meanings. Holt's interest with natural and artificial light are demonstrated in this work, as certain images traces of sunlight reflect off the camera's lens or off the slick surface of the signs themselves.

Holt is best known for her large-scale environmental sculptural works, including the *Sun Tunnels*. Four large concrete tunnels are aligned in pairs along an axis of the rising and setting sun on a summer or winter solstice, the pipes acting as viewing devices for the sky, the surrounding landscape and each other. Cut through the wall in the upper half of each tunnel are holes, which form the constellations of Draco, Perseus, Columba and Capricorn, the diameter of the holes differing in relation to the magnitude of the stars to which they correspond. The holes cast spots of daylight in the dark interiors of the tunnels, which appear almost like stars. The light in the tunnels is continuously changing, the shapes and positions of the cast light differing at each hour, day and season, relative to the positioning of the sun and moon in the sky. The viewer's perception of space and scale is questioned as the tunnels sit amongst an unquantifiable panoramic landscape. The tunnels when looked through allow parts of the landscape to become framed and come into focus acting as visual reference points; they extend the viewer visually into the landscape, opening up the perceived space. When stood inside of the tunnels, the work becomes enclosed and a frame is given to the landscape.

Holt's primary aesthetic and social interests converge in her public observatories, which reflect her determination to 'connect people with the planet earth', to bring 'the sky down to earth' and to render the vast spaces of the desert 'back down to human scale'. While the *Sun Tunnels* are accessible to only a small audience Holt has made numerous photographic studies of the changing conditions within the sculpture, allowing a wider audience to engage with the experience of the work.

Nancy Holt's work has been exhibited internationally at major museums including the Hayward Gallery, London, Musee d'Art Modern de la Ville de Paris, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Kunsthallen Brandts, Centro de Cultura Contemporania, Barcelona, Tate Modern, London, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Hirschorn Museum, Washington, Whitney Museum, New York, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Her work is held in important public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, MoMA, New York, Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City and the Museum fur Gegenwartskunst, Siegen. Works by Holt are permanently installed at the University of South Florida, Tampa; University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth; Rosslyn, Virginia; Miami University Art Musum, Ohio; Toronto, Ontario and in Avignon, France and Nokia, Finland, amongst others.

In 2010-12 a retrospective exhibition, *Nancy Holt: Sightlines* travelled from the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, to the Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Tufts University Art Gallery, Boston, the Graham Foundation in Chicago, the Santa Fe Arts Institute and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City. Other recent exhibitions include *Nancy Holt: Photoworks*, Haunch of Venison, London (2012), *Nancy Holt: Land Art*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (2013) and *Nancy Holt: Selected Film and Photo Works*, at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2013). In addition her work was recently been included in *Ends of the Earth and Art to 1974* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the Haus der Kunst, Munch (2012-13) and in *Light Show* at the Hayward Gallery, London (2013).

In 2013 Nancy Holt was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the International Sculpture Center in New York.

Links

Nancy Holt: Biography (PDF)
Holt/Smithson Foundation: Website

Further Reading

Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson
in England, 1969.
Notes from an ancient island
Simon Grant, Nancy Holt, *Tate Etc.*

Exhibitions

Locators
9 October – 21 November 2015

**Frieze New York
Spotlight**
5-8 May 2016

Selected Works [See All](#)



Film [See All](#)

Nancy Holt, *Photoworks*, Haunch of Venison, 2012



Books

Nancy Holt: Photoworks
Haunch of Venison, 2012

