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The light fantastic: Nancy Holt at Dia Gallery, New York

This indoor survey provides fascinating insights into an artist known for her ambitious outdoor installations



Nancy Holt's 'Sun Tunnels' in the Great Basin Desert, Utah (1973-76) © Estate of Nancy Holt/VAGA, New York

Ariella Budick 8 HOURS AGO



In the 1960s and 70s, when city folk were fleeing to the suburbs and suburban kids were migrating to rural communes, a small corps of artists travelled even farther — as far away from everything as they could get. Among them, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson and his wife Nancy Holt — the lone woman in a crowd of macho loners — headed for the American south-west and commandeered the desert for a new genre called land art. Works such as Heizer's still-not-quite finished "City" or Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" required acres of terrain, infinities of sky and the near-total absence of people to make their full effect. Which makes it a challenge to exhibit this cohort's work in urban galleries.

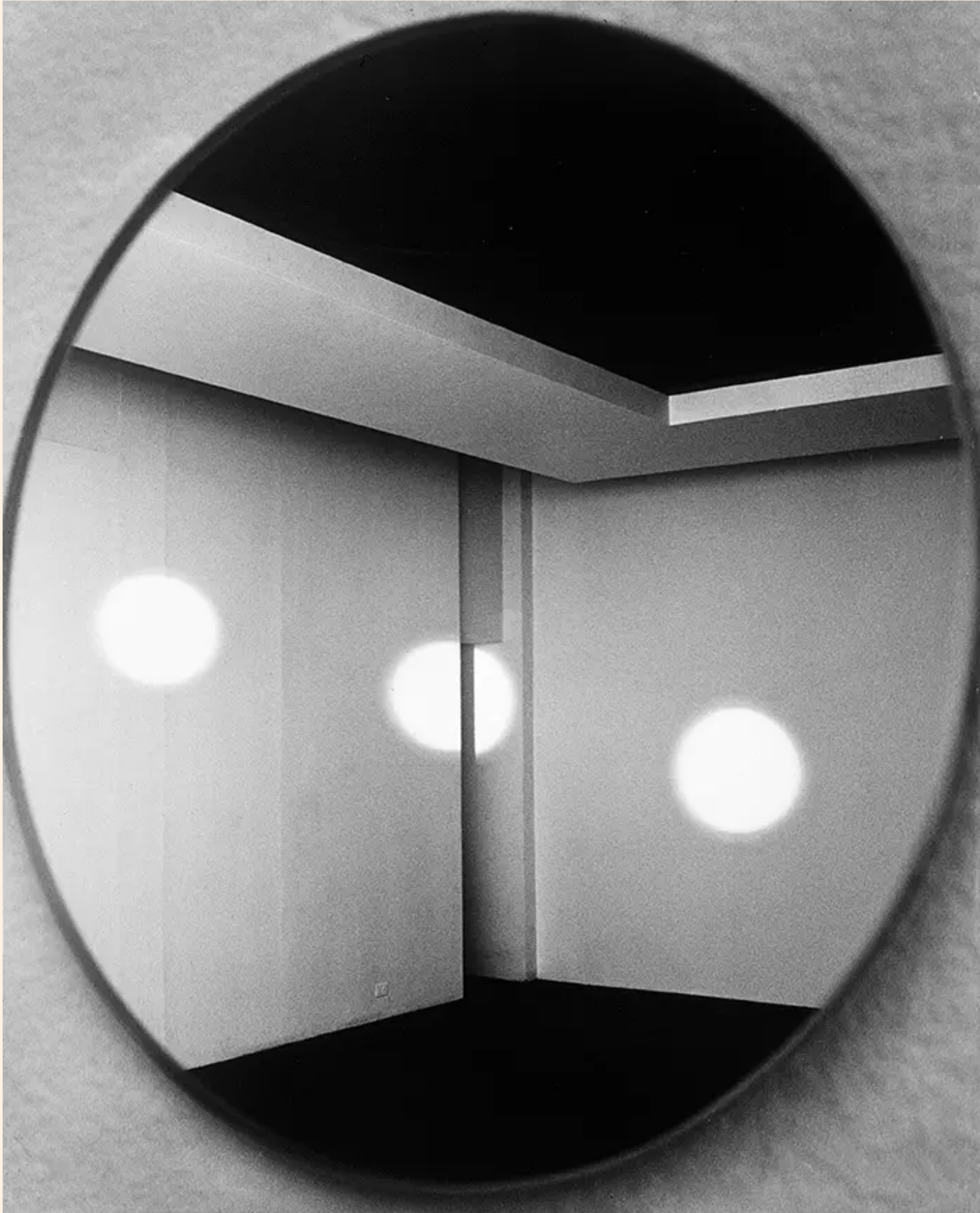
The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has an immense boulder balanced above a custom-constructed trench for Heizer's "Levitated Mass". Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art displays models and photographs of Roden Crater, James Turrell's Arizona opus. And now, New York gallery Dia, which recently acquired Holt's gargantuan "Sun Tunnels" (1973-76) in Utah, has found an indoor way to honour her. The show, at the institution's Chelsea, NY, branch, is provocative and tantalising, a keyhole glimpse of an artist who spent her career making outsized keyholes and choreographing the views beyond.



Nancy Holt's 'Sun Tunnels' in the Great Basin Desert, Utah (1973-76) © Estate of Nancy Holt/VAGA, New York

Holt, who died in 2014, sculpted in the most insubstantial of materials — light — but she channelled it using concrete, rock and steel. In "Sun Tunnels" four immense concrete cylinders rest on the desert floor, acting like lens-less, earthbound telescopes trained on a vast landscape. The openings at either end frame the horizon and, twice a year, on summer's longest day and winter's shortest, align with the rising and setting sun. At other times, daylight poking through star-shaped holes in the tubes tracks the earth's rotation. Taken together, the southwestern Concretehenge orients the viewer to the land and sky, alleviating the terror of being lost in an arid nowhere.

Holt's aesthetic translates effectively, if a bit awkwardly, to a Manhattan gallery, partly because she spent the early 1970s (before she went to Utah) tinkering with light and tubes in her West Village loft. Instead of concrete, she worked with plumbing pipe; instead of desert glare, she drew inspiration from the sunshine and headlights that played on her studio wall. Dia has mounted just four works (one of them — "Mirrors of Light I" — for the first time since its original installation in 1974), but they add up to an evocative introduction to her way of seeing.



Nancy Holt's 'Mirrors of Light' (1974) at Bykert Gallery, New York

Do you remember, as a child, staring through a cardboard tube or the gap made by a rolled-up finger, as if, by cropping out everything that didn't fit inside a tiny circle, the world would look clearer and more comprehensible? Holt does something similar in 1972's "Locator with Spotlight and Sunlight": she invites the viewer to peer through a viewfinder (just a length of steel pipe) at a tiny glowing panorama, a disc of light as featureless as the Sahara.

Though her aesthetic remains consistent, the mechanism varies. In "Holes of Light" (1973) a lamp shoots beams through eight 10-inch holes in a partition wall, casting luminous circles on a far wall. Half a minute later, a second lamp on the other side of the partition switches on and tosses the light back in the opposite direction. It's like a slow-motion game of table tennis, with beams instead of a ball. In "Mirrors of Light I" a line of 10 circular mirrors explodes a well-aimed shaft, splitting it into an array of dots across two other walls, like stations of the sun.



View of the Nancy Holt installation at Dia Gallery, Chelsea, New York © Dia Art Foundation, New York

Each piece depends on the basic properties of light, on meticulous measurement and precise alignment, but the result is ambiguously poetic. Holt described her own approach in philosophical abstractions, calling her early breakthrough (rather unconcretely) the "concretisation of perception". Perhaps the mere fact that light passes through holes and ricochets off hard surfaces has lost its eureka power over the years. Or maybe you really do have to make your way to western Utah, a 40-minute drive from the hamlet of Montello, at sunset on the summer solstice. Only then, I imagine, does the full measure of Holt's achievement come clear.

To February 16, [diaart.org](#)

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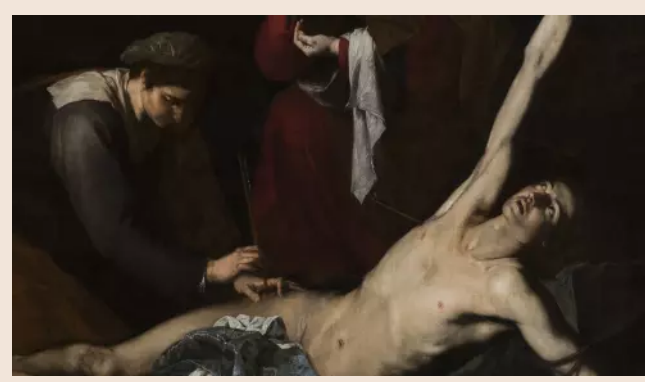
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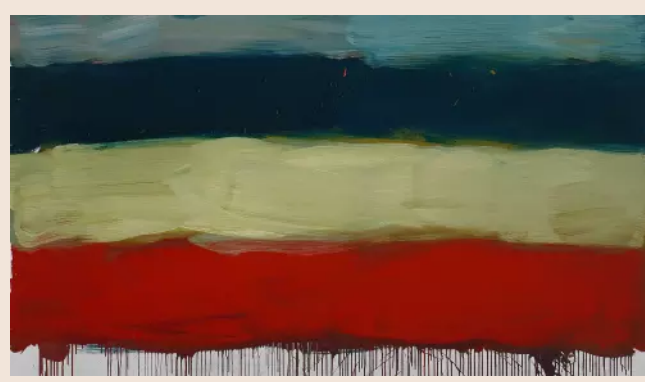
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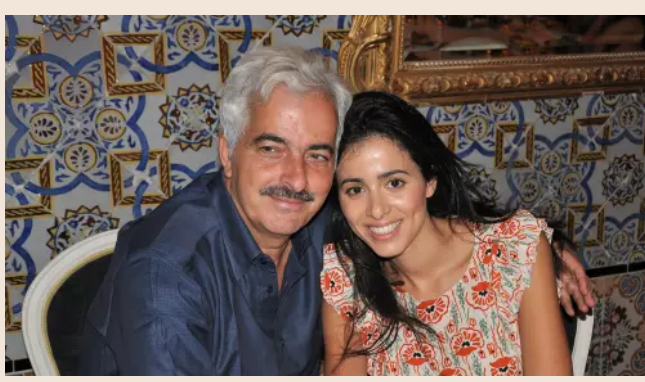
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