

Nancy Holt Sun Tunnels, 1973–76

Internationally recognized as a pioneering work of Land art, Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) is situated within a 40-acre plot in the Great Basin Desert in northwestern Utah. Composed of four concrete cylinders that are 18 feet in length and 9 feet in diameter, *Sun Tunnels* is arranged on the desert floor in an “x” pattern. During the summer and winter solstices, the four tunnels align with the angles of the rising and setting sun. Each tunnel has a different configuration of holes, corresponding to stars in the constellations Capricorn, Columba, Draco, and Perseus. The small holes create negative spaces, allowing the sun to cast shadows inside the tunnels that trace the earth's rotation.

Holt's five-decade-long practice included work in art, architecture, and time-based media that involved singular mediations in the environment. After graduating with a degree in biology in 1960 from Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, she moved to New York City. Holt began composing concrete poetry as well as creating video, sound, and photographic work that aligned her interests in the nuances of observation and the particularities of site. By the early 1970s, her work became increasingly concerned with heightening the viewer's spatial consciousness.

During these formative years, she traveled extensively to various locations in the United States and abroad, and first visited the American West in 1968. Her engagement with the Western landscape manifested in the photographic series *Western Graveyards* (1968) and continued with the film *Mono Lake* (1968/2004), a collaboration with Michael Heizer and her husband, Robert Smithson. Holt's interest in the West as both concept and terrain is evident in her first site-specific environmental work, *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* (1972), for which she placed a group of her Locator sculptures within a large field in Montana. Initiated in 1971, the series of vertical steel-rod sculptures, supporting telescope-like pipes through which a viewer could look, gives focus to discrete points of view. Soon after, she developed the room-sized installations *Holes of Light* (1973) and *Mirrors of Light 1* (1974). Each explores the physical properties of light projected onto cylindrical forms. Holt's work with artificial light led her to work with natural light in the landscape and, eventually, create *Sun Tunnels*.

“The idea for *Sun Tunnels* became clear to me while I was in the desert watching the sun rising and setting, keeping the time of the earth. *Sun Tunnels* can exist only in that particular place—the work evolved out of its site,” said Holt in a personal essay on the work, which was published in *Artforum* in 1977.¹ She began working on *Sun Tunnels* in 1973 while in Amarillo, Texas. As her ideas for the work developed, Holt began to search for a site in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. She was specifically looking for a flat desert surrounded by low mountains. The next year, Holt purchased the forty acres of land in the Great Basin Desert in Utah, where *Sun Tunnels* now exists, and worked with local contractors to construct the artwork. It was completed in 1976.

On the one hand, *Sun Tunnels* functions like an enormous sundial, creating a visible yet impermanent record of the passing of each day and year. On the other hand, the work operates like a camera dependent on natural light; its concrete tubes act as viewfinders that frame precise images. Finding the empty space of the desert disorienting, Holt devised *Sun Tunnels* as a means for directing vision within the vast landscape. “Through the tunnels, parts of the landscape are framed and come into focus,” she has explained.² Moreover, at 9 feet in diameter, the cylinders are large enough to circumscribe even the tallest person. The ability to place oneself in *Sun Tunnels* was important to the artist, who wanted to “bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale.”³

Holt's film *Sun Tunnels* (1978) documents the immense scope of realizing the artwork, from a long shot of the open desert, to the casting of the concrete tunnels punctured with the constellation holes, to the positioning of the artwork in the landscape. The final sequences of the film capture the setting sun during the summer solstice, highlighting the performance of light and shadow patterns in the final installation.

Drawing on the most fundamental tools for mapping—the sun and stars—Holt's project is a compass, locating itself and the viewer within the barren expanse of the region. Defined by both the landscape and the larger cosmos, *Sun Tunnels* sculpts the sun's light through the interplay of land and sky, and celestial shifts from day to night.

notes

1. Nancy Holt, “Sun Tunnels,” *Artforum* 15, no. 8 (April 1977), p. 37.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
3. *Ibid.*

Nancy Holt was born in 1938 in Worcester, Massachusetts, and was raised in New Jersey. In 1960 she graduated from Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. Shortly after, she moved to New York City and worked as an assistant literary editor at *Harper's Bazaar* and a teacher at the Downtown Community School as well as a researcher at the Lederle Labs in Pearl River, New York. Subsequent to realizing *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), Holt conceived several public commissions: *Hydra's Head* (1974) along the Niagara River at Artpark in Lewiston, New York; *Stone Enclosure (Rock Rings)* (1977–78) in Bellingham, Washington; *Dark Star Park* (1984) in Arlington, Virginia; and *Astral Grating* (1987) in a New York subway station. She also realized several large-scale land reclamation projects, including *Sky Mound* (1988) in New Jersey and *Up and Under* (1998) in Nokia, Finland. In 2010–12 a retrospective exhibition, *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, traveled from the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University in New York to venues in Boston, Chicago, Karlsruhe, Salt Lake City, and Santa Fe. Holt died in New York in 2014.

selected bibliography

- Donnelly, Mick, and Nancy Holt. “Nancy Holt Interviewed by Mick Donnelly.” *Circa Art Magazine* 11 (July–August 1983), pp. 4–10.
- Holt, Nancy. “Sun Tunnels.” *Artforum* 15, no. 8 (April 1977), cover, pp. 32–37.
- Holt, Nancy, dir. *Sun Tunnels*. 1978. 16-mm film (color, sound); 26 minutes.
- Lippard, Lucy R. *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. New York: New Press, 1983.
- Williams, Alena, ed. *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*. 2011; University of California Press, 2015.

Sun Tunnels, 1973–76

Great Basin Desert, Box Elder County, Utah

Concrete, steel, and earth

Overall dimensions: 9 feet 3 inches x 68 feet 6 inches x 53 feet; diagonal length: 86 feet; each tunnel: 18 feet 1 inch x 9 feet 3 inches diameter

Dia Art Foundation with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation

Dia Art Foundation

In 2018 Dia Art Foundation acquired *Sun Tunnels* with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation. Founded in 1974, Dia is committed to advancing, realizing, and preserving the vision of artists. Dia fulfills its mission by commissioning single artist projects, organizing exhibitions, realizing site-specific installations, and collecting in-depth the work of a focused group of artists of the 1960s and 1970s. For more information, visit www.diaart.org.

PARTNERSHIPS

Dia partners with the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Holt/Smithson Foundation, and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts at the University of Utah to further advocate for *Sun Tunnels*.

Center for Land Use Interpretation, Wendover, Utah

The Center for Land Use Interpretation is a research and education organization interested in understanding the nature and extent of human interaction with the surface of the earth. For more information, visit www.clui.org.

Holt/Smithson Foundation

Holt/Smithson Foundation exists to continue the creative and investigative spirit of the artists Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson. For more information, visit www.holtsmithsonfoundation.org.

Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah, Salt Lake City

The Utah Museum of Fine Arts ensures that *Sun Tunnel's* cultural reputation is upheld locally and promotes the exceptional significance of the artwork within Utah. For more information, visit www.umfa.utah.edu.

Directions to Sun Tunnels

Sun Tunnels is an approximate 4-hour drive from Salt Lake City.

1. From Salt Lake City, take I-80 west 150 miles, through Wendover, Utah, to Oasis, Nevada.
2. Take Exit 378 for NV-233 (toward Oasis/Montello). Turn right onto NV-233 E/Montello Rd (toward Montello).
3. Continue east for 20 miles (toward Montello). A gas station is located in Montello.
4. Continue on NV-233 for 11 miles back into Utah, where the road becomes UT-30.
5. About 8 miles past the state line is a sign for Lucin, an empty town with no remaining buildings. There are two gravel roads on the right. Take the first one (Grouse Creek Road), the main road, south, for five miles toward Lucin.
6. Stay on the main road (bearing right at the unmarked fork in the road just before crossing the train tracks). Cross the railroad tracks and continue on the same road for 2 miles to Little Pigeon Road.
7. Turn left onto Little Pigeon Road and proceed about 2 miles. You can see *Sun Tunnels* in the distance. Turn right following the gravel road for 0.75 mile to *Sun Tunnels*.

Tips for your visit

Dia is proud to be the owner and steward of Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. We rely on your help to preserve the artwork for all of us now and for future generations.

Please leave *Sun Tunnels* and the natural environment exactly as you found it. Visitors must "leave no trace" at the site. Carry out any waste with you. Do not tamper with the artwork, make fire pits, or trample vegetation. Please park at a reasonable distance from the site to protect the work.

There are no bathrooms, food, fresh water, nor fuel at the site. The nearest locations with bathrooms, drinking water, and gas are in Montello, Nevada, which is approximately 45 minutes from *Sun Tunnels*. Visitors are advised to bring their own food and water and should be prepared in case of unpredictable weather or automobile occurrences. Phone reception may be unreliable.

For general inquiries related to *Sun Tunnels*, contact suntunnels@diaart.org.

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Box Elder County Utah

Dia Art Foundation
535 West 22nd Street New York City
www.diaart.org