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## NANCY HOLT

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TUFTS UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

by *peter r. kalb*

**MEDFORD** *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), Nancy Holt's 88-ton installation in Utah's Great Basin Desert, consists of four massive concrete culverts, each pierced on its skyward side with holes framing the stars of different constellations. A similarly intimate relationship between environment, object and eye characterizes most works in "Nancy Holt: Sightlines," a touring survey of the artist's work from 1966 to 1980. (The show originated at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University.)

The exhibition and catalogue fill a conspicuous gap in the scholarship of postwar art in the U.S. and in our understanding of Holt's esthetic, which she described as "fixed concentrated demarcated located concretized pre-focused and circumscribed," in "Vision" (1973), a typescript poem included in the show. "Sightlines" demonstrates the centrality of Holt's work to the history of Conceptual, Land and video-based art.

The exhibition begins by establishing Holt's interest in mixing nature and art through text, photography, film, steel pipe, cement and the human body, with an emphasis on orientation and observation. Holt's cameras are displayed alongside her concrete poetry and photographs. Also included is photographic documentation of large-scale outdoor installations such as *Sun Tunnels* and *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* (1972), in which Holt positioned eight lensless viewfinders-pipes she called locators-to frame details in the Montana landscape.

"Sightlines" judiciously selects a number of Holt's films and videos for display, among them *Mono Lake* (1968/2004), made with her husband, Robert Smithson. Present also are her experiments in Structuralist video and filmmaking. For *Underscan* (1974), Holt videotaped still photographs of her aunt's home and then reshot the video while it played on a monitor, using a modification called

underscanning. For *Revolve* (1977), Holt shot a conversation with filmmaker Dennis Wheeler using three fixed cameras, then edited the footage into a cycle of repeating perspectives that draw attention to acts of representation and narration.

In her essay "Sun Tunnels" (1977), Holt wrote, "I wanted to bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale." Like her *Sun Tunnels* installation, in which the huge tubes become apertures, "Sightlines" situates Holt at the intersection of organizing systems and an infinitely expanding field of vision. It is a strength of this detailed and beautifully installed show that it also reveals an artist pursuing that which eludes both vision and order. As we imagine ourselves standing between Holt's massive tunnels and the setting sun, or as we listen to Wheeler describe his experience of dying of leukemia, we sense the urgency and poignancy of Holt's wish to connect with the incomprehensible, be it geographical, astronomical or metaphysical.

[Currently at the Santa Fe Art Institute, through June 29, "Sightlines" travels to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Oct. 18, 2012-Jan. 20, 2013.]

Photo: Nancy Holt: *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* (detail), 1972, photo of earthwork in Missoula, Mont.; at Tufts University Art Gallery.

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