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Arts

ART REVIEW

Holt's vision aligned with sun, earth

Review: 'Nancy Holt: Sightlines' at Tufts University Art Gallery

By **Cate McQuaid** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 16, 2012



A detail view of "Sun Tunnels," which Nancy Holt and a crew of collaborators installed in Great Basin Desert, Utah, in the mid-1970s.

MEDFORD - The postcards for “Nancy Holt: Sightlines,” at the Tufts University Art Gallery through April 1, have a billiard-ball-size hole in the middle. Instructions on the back suggest holding the card up to a favorite outdoor view. I took a gander outside my kitchen window at the house next door. The circle in the postcard focused my vision on my neighbor’s window, and I suddenly saw it anew: A dark rectangle against a white ground within a dark circle. I also felt like a bit of a voyeur, and immediately stopped looking.

The experience of peering through a lens, and noting how that changes perception, is at the core of Holt’s work. She’s best known as a land artist - part of the movement in the 1960s and 1970s that brought attention to nature by making art out of the environment. The classic example of the movement is Robert Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty,” built in the Great Salt Lake in 1970. Smithson, who was married to Holt, died in a plane crash three years later, at 35.

Holt’s earthworks often feature lenses. The best known is “Sun Tunnels,” which she and a crew of collaborators installed in the Utah desert in the mid-1970s. The exhibit’s postcard image is a view from within one of these. Each tunnel is 18 feet long and 9 feet in diameter. She arrayed four of them in an X formation, at some distance from one another.



LEE DEFFEBACH

Nancy Holt shooting the film about the construction of “Sun Tunnels.”

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Like Stonehenge, the tunnels are aligned with the sun on the winter and summer solstices: the video and photographs show sunlight at dawn and dusk peeking over the horizon and cascading through two tunnels - concentric circular frames. Holt also had smaller holes drilled into each tunnel, forming the constellations of Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn. Inside the tunnel’s shadow during the day, the holes cast stars made of sunlight along the

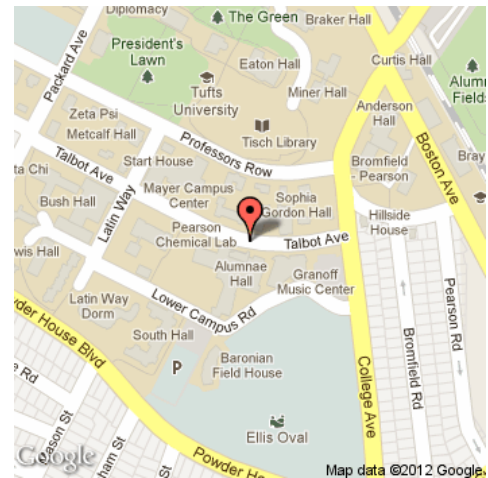
interior. As above, so below. “Sun Tunnels” reawakens the cosmos.

“Sightlines,” which was organized by curator Alena Williams and traveled to Tufts from Columbia University’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, has Holt’s film of the construction of “Sun Tunnels” as its centerpiece.

Like many exhibits that lean on documentation you can’t see in person, the show is at times frustrating. But because Holt’s central conceptual conceit is how the lens we view the world through shapes our experience, her camerawork and audio recordings become an extension of the work itself. Indeed, much of the art on view here has nothing to do with earthworks, and everything to do with how perception is shaped. Her goal as an artist, it seems, is to act as a lens herself, to direct vision without proscribing it, alerting the viewer to new ways of looking.

Take her 1974 video installation “Points of View.” Holt videotaped scenes of Manhattan in four different directions from the walkway encircling the gallery where the piece was first mounted. The grainy black-and-white videos sometimes have us gazing down a dark tube toward a circle of light and the cityscape - just like me looking at my neighbor’s house. The circle meanders across the monitor, and opens out to fill the screen.

Holt asked friends to provide audio commentary, which offers another lens through which to view the piece. Looking at one of the four “Points of View” videos, sculptor Richard Serra and critic Lucy Lippard gabble on interpretively, sometimes helpfully and sometimes not. How like life. “A circle,” observes Serra, “but I’m more interested



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NANCY HOLT: Sightlines

Tufts University Art Gallery, Aidekman Arts Center, 40 Talbot Ave., Medford MA

Closing date: through April 1

in looking at our reflection.”

These lenses mediate. They may focus our perception, but sometimes they gum up the works. The tools can often frustratingly outweigh the experience - as in a 1974 video, “Boomerang.” Here, Holt is on camera wearing headphones, and we hear audio of her voice and the echo of it in feedback. She’s clearly unnerved by the echo, and deconstructs the experience in a monologue. While this work points out how recording can interfere with reality - which was perhaps something of a revelation in its day - here it feels claustrophobic and abortive.

But Holt uses recording to her advantage in “Revolve,” a 1977 interview with filmmaker Dennis Wheeler about his treatment for cancer. Holt, off screen, asks Wheeler questions as she videotapes him from different angles. When he says something significant - “When you get someone else’s blood, it’s a very heavy trip” - a quick edit shows him from a different point of view, repeating the same sentence. It drives home his plight.

In the end, it’s the earthworks and their documentation that move “Sightlines” beyond a purely conceptual framework into the mud and glory of nature. In the 1971 video “Swamp,” Holt and Smithson ramble through the reeds. We don’t see them, but we hear them talk about their environment, and how to shape it with the camera.

The video “Mono Lake,” shot in 1968 but not edited until 2004, documents their visit, with artist Michael Heizer, to a fly-infested saline lake in Utah, chatting about its history and ecology. Smithson is there to collect cinder for his earthwork “Mono Lake Non-Site (Cinders Near Black Point).” One of the men giddily rolls down a mountain of cinder, like a kid.

Holt shot her 1975 documentary “Pine Barrens,” in New Jersey, with an old-timey soundtrack by an area band and commentary by the locals, known as “Pineys,” about the deserted, undeveloped tracts there. These videos sweetly convey how the land forms the people, and how the people respond to the land. It’s not exactly standing in the middle of a tunnel in the desert at high noon, watching stars splash in the dark at your feet, but you get the idea.

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