



Title

Nancy Holt / Inside Outside

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Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/nancy-holt-inside-outside>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Greg Thomas: 'Nancy Holt / Inside Outside ', *Burlington Contemporary* (20th April 2023), <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/nancy-holt-inside-outside>

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Cover image: **Fig. 2** *Sun Tunnels*, by Nancy Holt. 1973–76. Concrete, steel and earth, 2.8 by 26.2 by 16.2 m. (Dia Art Foundation; © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).

Nancy Holt / Inside Outside

by Greg Thomas • 20.04.2023

This book was published to coincide with a major retrospective of work by the pioneering Land artist Nancy Holt (1938–2014) at Bildmuseet, Umeå (17th June 2022–29th January 2023). Working around the site-specificity of Holt's practice, which was mainly realised in, and is inextricably bound to, various outdoor locations across North America, the exhibition included video, photography and graphic documentation of her career-defining constructions. It also included examples of her early concrete poetry, audio works and room-sized installations. Two pieces were recreated on site, one of which was a new iteration of Holt's *Ventilation System* series (1985–92), which involved extending the gallery's ventilation system so that it snaked around walls and popped up in the grounds **FIG.1**. Bracketed with images of these two new works *in situ*, the present volume faithfully represents the exhibition and includes several commissioned, illuminating essays.

The subtitle, 'Inside Outside', primarily refers to Holt's liminal position as a woman artist in the male-dominated Land art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Beyond its documentary function, the book is concerned with redressing that balance, but also with teasing out latent feminist themes and gestures in Holt's work, which has tended to resist discussion on such terms. However, in a 1993 essay outlining the ecological aspects of her practice Holt alludes to another 'inside outside' dichotomy: 'for the last twenty-four years I have made large-scale, outdoor, site-specific sculptures. Each work evolves out of its site, with consideration given to the topography, the built environment, and to local materials, along with the psychology, sociology, and history of each place' (p.197). Holt's concern with the context in which each work is placed and with the human stakes of its creation run counter to a tendency in North American Land art to strive for a form of sublime spectacle. Here, the surface of the earth appears almost as a *tabula rasa*, on which the work of art can entirely define the parameters of its own meaning. By contrast, Holt's practice, while achieving a similar kind of grandeur, often seeks to get outside of itself, as it were, to address the terms of its own realisation; that is, Holt integrates the recording of such processes into the work itself.

A clear example is Holt's best-known work, *Sun Tunnels* **FIG.2**. Constructed in the Great Basin Desert in north-western Utah between 1973 and 1976, this work comprises four huge concrete cylinders arranged in a rough cross shape on a vast arid steppe.

Each pair of tunnels is aligned to frame the sun as it rises and sets during the summer and winter solstices respectively **FIG.3**. The barren stretch of land where the work is located seems initially to have been chosen for its very lack of context: its sparse signs of human, animal or plant-life, and the absence of historical documentation and sociological significance. Yet, in a 1976 'Self-interview' Holt relayed at length the site's history of human habitation: 'the oldest people who ever lived in the Americas lived some 2,000 years ago in that area – Fremont People. They were a migratory people they would live in the caves when they were in the area – so there is zero or twelve feet of debris, bones, earth, bone [*sic*] beads; you would pick up a handful of earth and there's all this stuff in it – you can recognize teeth' (p.104).



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Nancy Holt / Inside Outside* at Bildmuseet, Umeå, 2022, showing *Ventilation System*. 1985–92. Steel ducts, turbine ventilators, shanty caps, fans and air, dimensions variable. (Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Bildmuseet, Umeå; © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York; photograph Mikael Lundgren).

Holt goes on to indicate how the viewer's experience of *Sun Tunnels* might put them in a form of dialogue with the site's early inhabitants: 'being there you feel connected with those people and with the fact that they saw the same sunrise and contours' (p.104). In addition to this evocation of continued human presence, the wider creative project around *Sun Tunnels* incorporates such ephemera as preparatory drawings, photographs and film stills. In one still, for example, we see the artist talking to a forklift truck driver while he manoeuvres one of the tunnels into position. Holt goes into great detail about the process of bartering for locations and materials, liaising with astrophysicists to determine the work's positioning, and the gendered dynamics of interacting with businessmen and male manual labourers. Through interventions such as these, Holt appears to be looking in on her own practice and recording it as a third party might.



Fig. 2 *Sun Tunnels*, by Nancy Holt. 1973–76. Concrete, steel and earth, 2.8 by 26.2 by 16.2 m. (Dia Art Foundation; © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).

Works such as *Sun Tunnels* also reinscribe human presence by inviting interaction and ground-level perception, rather than opting for the kind of overawing spectacle best glimpsed at an impersonal distance. Whereas the superlative view of Robert Smithson's genre-defining *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is from a light aircraft, Holt described the process of engaging with her mid-1970s masterpiece in terms that suggest a pilgrimage on foot:



Fig. 3 *Sun Tunnels*, by Nancy Holt. 1973–76. Concrete, steel and earth, 2.8 by 26.2 by 16.2 m. (Dia Art Foundation; © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).

When you park and start to walk towards *Sun Tunnels* it starts to be larger than human, and when you are actually inside, the tunnels from the outside are twice as big as you are. They are pretty much humanly related, which is I think the most important factor of how I chose the scale for the work. I am not interested in building megalithic monuments in the middle of nowhere. Since the place is so inhuman, I wanted to bring the place back to a human dimension (p.104).



Fig. 4 Nancy Holt installing *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* in 1972. (© Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York; photograph Michael Wheatley).

Celebrating the mesmeric fallibilities of the naked eye, in this account Holt describes a perceptual terraforming of the site, thus implicitly bringing into play the material circumstances of human habitation. Although, it is worth noting that there is what appears to be an unintentional discrepancy between the above account of an ‘inhuman’ wasteland and her statements on the site’s long history of inhabitation. Crucially, one can enter the tunnels, which have holes punched in the sides that also receive light from various constellations.

It is possible to define this activation of the self within Holt’s practice as feminist, or at least necessarily female. Male artists have, after all, historically found it easier to assume a self-effacing

‘neutral’ position in the creation of their work – and, by extension, to invite their audiences to adopt the same neutrality – because they are used to the terms of their perception being presented as the norm. By contrast, many modern and contemporary women artists embed some awareness of the creating or perceiving self into their practice as a way of challenging this long-established system. James Nisbet’s nuanced essay in this book, ‘Moving / West’, explores how Holt integrated her process into aspects of her land-based work by connecting it with examples of her time-bound, aural media. For instance, he notes that Holt gathered raw material for her radio piece *U.S. 80 SOLO: Nebraska* (1979) while ‘driving home to New York City in September 1976 – having just completed [...] *Sun Tunnels*’. Holt ‘kept a tape recorder by her side to intermittently log stray thoughts and observations’, including ‘the names of small towns, changes in the terrain, snippets from the radio’ (p.46). For Nisbet, these temporal interventions into the spatial medium of Land art reflect ‘techniques of delay and spacing’, showing Holt’s practice as one exploring and presenting the artist’s self-development over time, rather than simply creating vast static sculptural forms (p.63).

There is, of course, another way to look at the self-awareness in Holt’s practice, which is, after all, a common aspect of Land art aesthetics in general. The documented walks of Richard Long, to take a well-known example, express an awareness of the body as a vital constituent of the work of art. A similar point can be made regarding the framing of the world in Holt’s practice, for example in the use of viewing apertures – from the vast optics of *Sun Tunnels* to the eye-sized peepholes of *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* [FIG.4](#) and *Views Through a Sand Dune* [FIG.5](#). This is partly to engender an awareness in the viewer of themselves ‘as viewer’ by nudging them towards a more self-conscious encounter with the world-as-art. But in this case, too, there are analogies to be found within the wider environmental art movement – James Turrell’s skylights for one – that undercut the idea of such a gesture as exclusively feminist.



Fig. 5 *Views Through a Sand Dune*, by Nancy Holt. 1972. Cement-abestos pipe and sand, 15.2 by 22.9 cm. (© Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).

As Karen Di Franco points out in her contribution, ‘The Horizon of the text’, an enlightening connection can be made between Holt’s ‘concretization of perception’ (Holt’s phrase, quoted by Di Franco) in vision-centric works like *Sun Tunnels* and her early engagement with concrete poetry. In such text-pieces as *Hometown* (1969) and *Untitled (Disconsolate)* **FIG.6**, Holt aims for what Di Franco calls a ‘*materialization of perception*’ (p.119): an attempt to fix a moment of embodied cognition on the page in a way that might somehow render it external. Holt’s language-based photographic series show her moving beyond concrete poetics towards a documentation of social environments and sign systems. Examples of these are *Western Graveyards* **FIG.7** **FIG.8**, for which Holt photographed dilapidated grave sites in California and Nevada, and *California Sun Signs* **FIG.9**, which records the word ‘sun’ as it appears in commercial and infrastructural contexts.

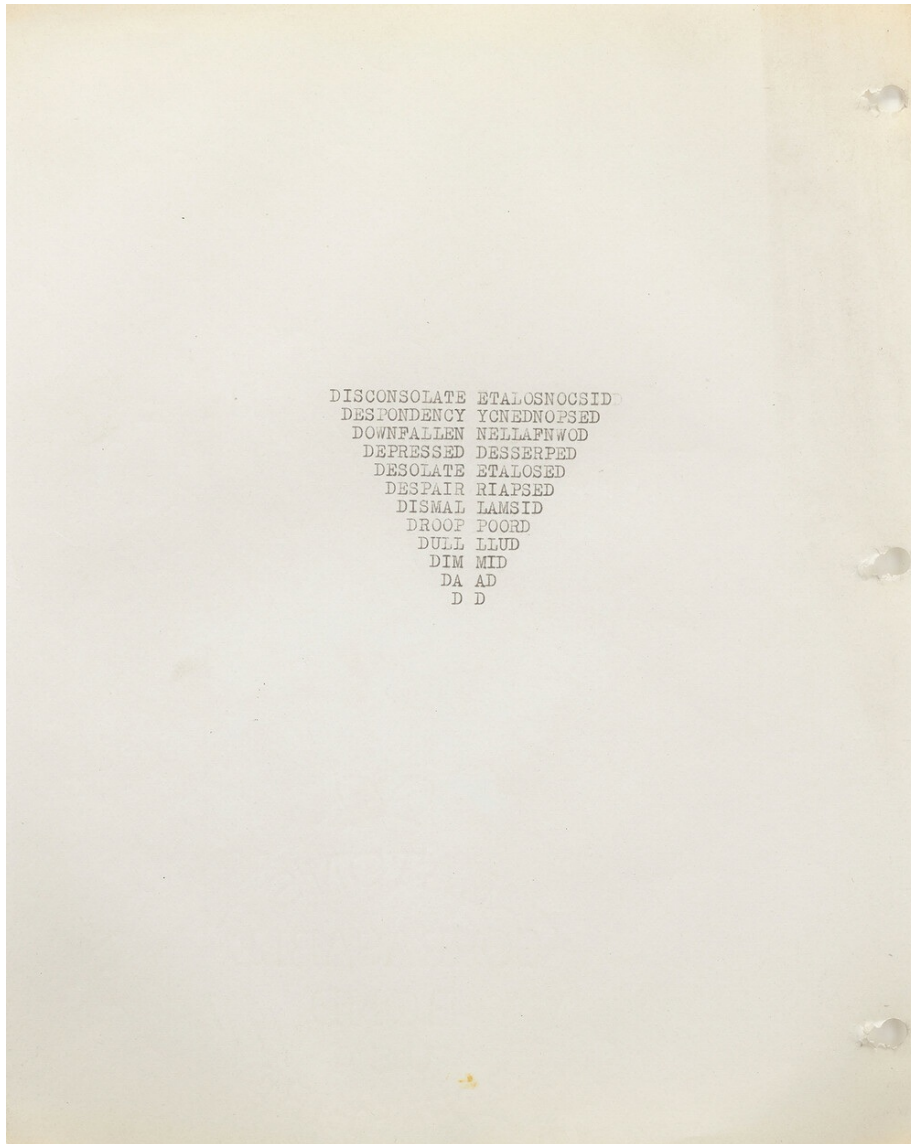


Fig. 6 *Untitled (Disconsolate)*, by Nancy Holt. c.1970. Typewriter ink on paper, 28 by 22 cm. (© Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).

None of this is to downplay the feminist potentiality of Holt's practice. However, the aspect of this book that presents a performative feminism as being central to Holt's creative persona is arguably more reflective of present-day artistic feminist discourse than that of Holt's time and milieu. In a 1976 interview with the feminist film-maker Ardele Lister, Holt – although she does not deny the relevance of gender or sex to her work and lauds the women's movement – is clearly uncomfortable identifying her work with feminism: 'I think the consciousness of what one considers to be feminism sort of blocks out this other area' (p.55), as Holt somewhat nebulously states. As a counterbalance to this, the book's editors, Lisa Le Feuvre and Katarina Pierre, have included portions of their discussions, in an interview format, of Holt's own sense of feminism:

KP: I understand Nancy Holt regarded herself as an

‘artist’ first and foremost, and not a ‘female artist,’ and that she, in fact, rejected the gendering of the profession and, hence, objected to being nailed down as a feminist or female artist. On one level it is easy to sympathize with her standpoint: why should gender be a defining quality for an artist? On the other hand, one starts to ponder what her decision not to come out as a feminist did to her relationship to the female artists at the time who were fighting for equal status in the art world (p.172).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Nancy Holt / Inside Outside* at Bildmuseet, Umeå, 2022, showing *Western Graveyards*. 1968. 60 inkjet prints on paper, each 46 by 46 cm. (Courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation and Bildmuseet, Umeå; © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York; photograph Mikael Lundgren).

As Pierre’s analysis suggests, the artist’s aspiration towards a gender-blind reception of her work seems naive now, perhaps even an abdication of responsibility. However, the contemporary belief that lived experience must form the creative wellspring of an artist’s practice – in particular women artists, artists of colour and gender non-conforming artists – is arguably no less time-stamped. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind the artist’s ambitions for her work, which were, in part, to match the sublime scale and spectacle of her male peers, refusing the connotations often applied to work by women artists. This volume presents a considered and thorough examination of Holt’s practice as both inside and outside the parameters of feminist self-exploration.

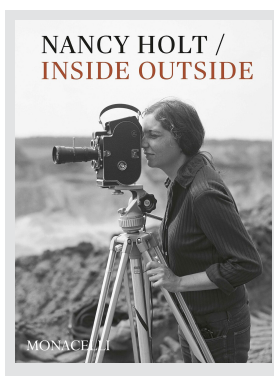


Fig. 8 From the series *Western Graveyards*, by Nancy Holt. 1968. Inkjet print on paper, 46 by 46 cm. (© Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).



Fig. 9 From the series *California Sun Signs*, by Nancy Holt. 1972. Inkjet print on paper, 39 by 39 cm. (© Holt/Smithson Foundation and Artists Rights Society, New York).

About this book



Nancy Holt / Inside Outside

Edited by Lisa Le Feuvre and Katarina Pierre

Monacelli, New York, 2022

ISBN 978-15809-359-75

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ