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# Pasatiempo





Michael Abatemarco | For The New Mexican

# SITE SEEING



The work of Nancy Holt



There is no single critical essay followed by a series of plates in *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*. Published by University of California Press, it is not a typical artist monograph. It is the kind of book you can open at any point to marvel at the images of the artwork or absorb the text from any of a number of the book's contributors. There are multiple perspectives on Holt's career here, offered by editor Alena J. Williams, art historians Lucy R. Lippard and Pamela M. Lee, artist Ines Schaber, and Matthew Coolidge, director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation. Their observations create a well-rounded picture of Holt and her work. Further contributions include an interview with Emory University professor James Meyer and a detailed chronology of Holt's life by Humboldt State University professor Julia Alderson. Williams, a Columbia University doctoral candidate, contributes the preface, introduction, and an essay.

*Sightlines* accompanies a traveling exhibit of the same name that started at Columbia's Wallach Art Gallery and went on to Germany. "Next it goes to Chicago," Holt told *Pasatiempo*, "then onto Boston, at Tufts University. It goes to a few places that are associated with me one way or another, like Tufts is where I went to college — they now have a rather large art gallery. After that it comes to the Santa Fe Art Institute next spring, and then onto Salt Lake City. I have many connections in these places."

Holt, known for site-specific installations that incorporate astronomical observation and engage viewers in ways that challenge the orthodox museum or gallery experience, contributed some of her own writings to the book. But her contributions do not end there. Many of the images, including those of major works like *Sun Tunnels* in Utah, are the artist's photographs. Along with her writing, which includes prose and poetry related to her work, the photographs make *Sightlines* not just a book about an artist but an artist's book as well. "I was consulted all the way through about the design and oversaw the printing of the photographs," Holt said. "I built the works, I photographed the works, and I often did films and video about the works. Almost all my images had to be digitized from slides or negatives, and to do that I worked with Tom Martinelli, an artist and digital archivist who's right here in Galisteo." Working with Holt, Martinelli helped compile a visual record of a career that has spanned more than 40 years.

*Sun Tunnels*, consisting of four large concrete tubes arranged in alignment with the rising and setting sun on the solstices, is among Holt's most famous works. The piece was constructed on land she purchased in the Great Basin Desert. Construction was completed in 1976. *Sightlines* contains shots that offer insight into its making and the making of her other sculptures. "You see the construction of the sculptures; you don't just see the finished works," Holt said. "You will see process shots throughout the book." *Up and Under*, a monumental work in Finland, took nearly a decade from inception to completion in 1998. Realizing an artistic vision on a vast scale takes manpower and time, as further demonstrated by *Spiral Jetty*, completed in 1970 by her partner, Robert Smithson.

Like *Sun Tunnels*, *Up and Under* was constructed in a precise alignment. The work comprises four interconnected tunnels at one end of an earthen rise that snakes through a quarry; several other tunnels pierce the sides of the rise. "The four tunnels are aligned north, east, south, west, according to the North Star. When you walk into the middle of the large mound, all four tunnels come together, and there's one above that looks up into the sky. The earth underneath was collected from all over Finland. So, it becomes a center of Finland as well as an astronomical center, a center of the universe."

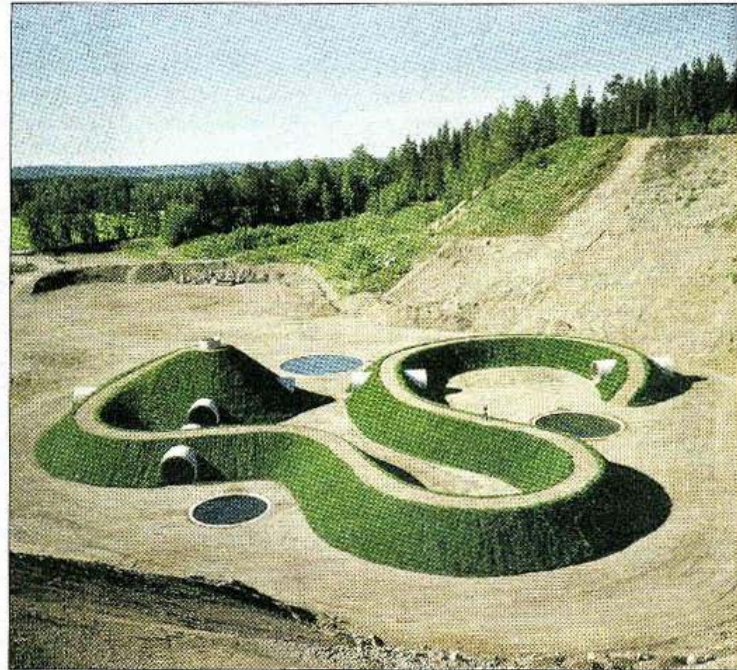
Holt first came to the idea of arranging her sculptures in alignment with astronomical bodies as an outgrowth of an interest in working with light and shadow. "If you look at my early work, I did a lot of indoor installations where I used light and cast circles and where you look through holes. So

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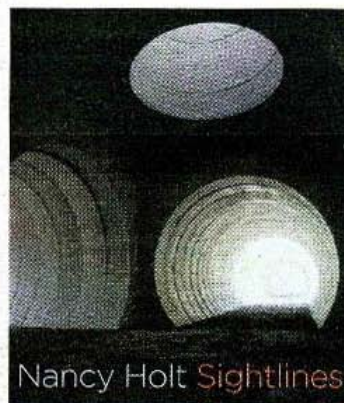


Nancy Holt: *Up and Under*, 1987-1998, Nokia, Finland; above, view through *Up and Under* tunnel; opposite page, summer solstice sunset viewed through Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, 1973-1976, Great Basin Desert, Utah; images courtesy the artist





*Up and Under, Nokia, Finland*



the work developed out of an interest in sight and vision. In her essay in the book, Pamela Lee makes that point — that although *Sun Tunnels* has a lot to do with light, it's also about looking and becoming aware of one's own perception. I knew about the solstices; I've watched the sun rising and setting on the solstices, and I wondered how I could capture that. It was a very immediate, very direct insight."

In Lee's essay, "Art as a Social System: Nancy Holt and the Second-Order Observer," the author describes Holt's earthworks as directing observers' vision so that the act of seeing becomes an integral component of the art. "It is the task of the artist," Lee writes, "... to provide those 'visual reference points' that transform the land from undifferentiated mass into an object of observation, one that internalizes what Holt calls the 'perceptual relativity' of the act of observation itself."

In 1972, Holt made *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed* on land north of Missoula, Montana. The installation embodies Holt's interest in perceptual relativity. The locators, eye-level pipes of galvanized steel, direct the observer's gaze in specific lines of sight relative to those of other locators. Eventually, the locators were removed after the land they were on changed owners several times. The work is documented in *Sightlines*, but it can no longer be seen on location. A friend reported the loss to Holt. "These are the vicissitudes of life," she said. "The same person who found that the work was missing has invited me to do the work in France. I was there in February. I went to the site that they're proposing at the University of Avignon. It won't be built until 2012, but that happens to be the 40th anniversary of *Missoula Ranch Locators*."

*Sightlines* balances text and imagery well and offers numerous points from which to consider the artist. It may prove to be the benchmark against which future monographs of Holt's work will be measured. The exhibition associated with the book is scheduled to be shown at the Santa Fe Art Institute from May 5 through June 29, 2012. ◀