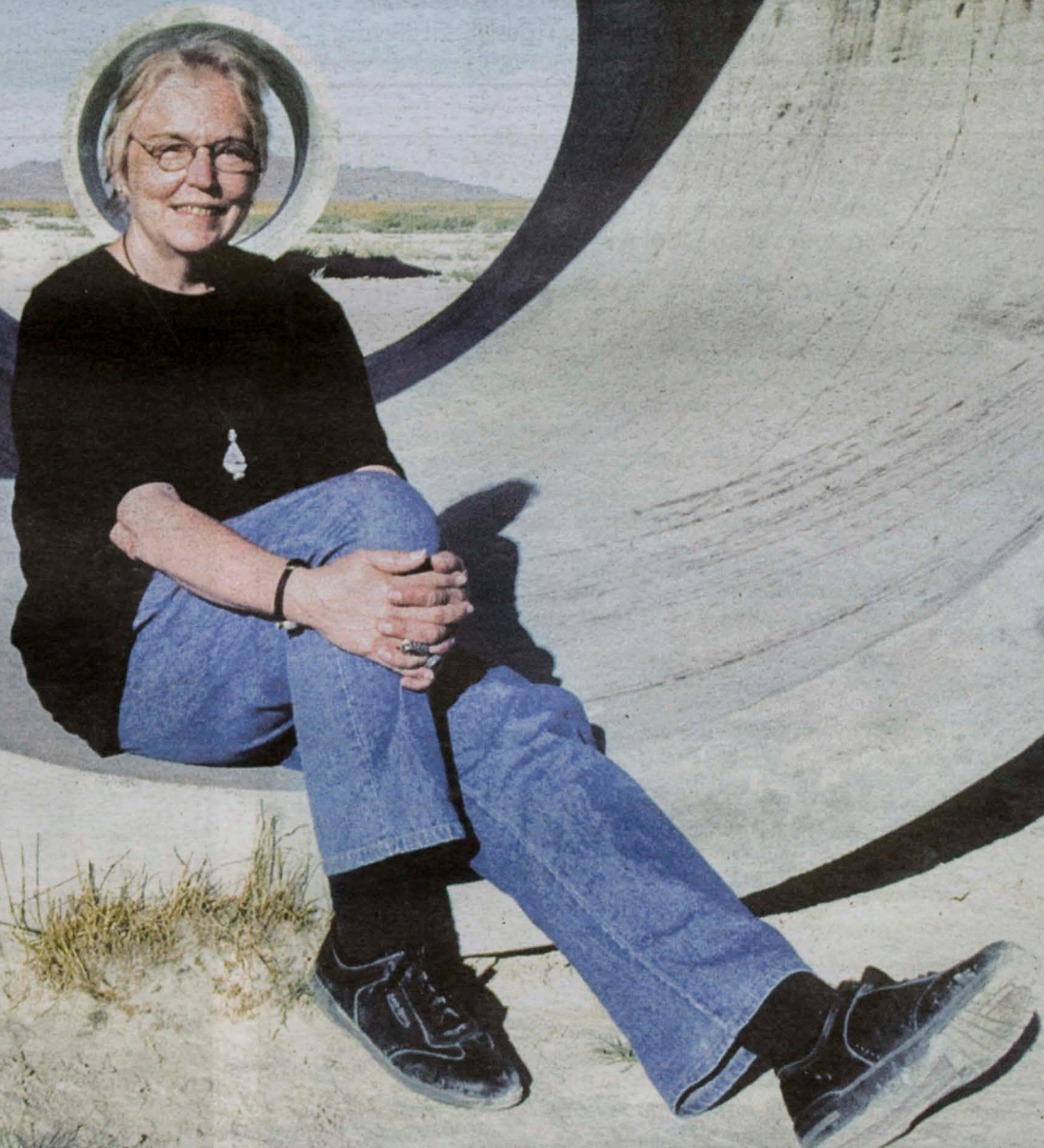


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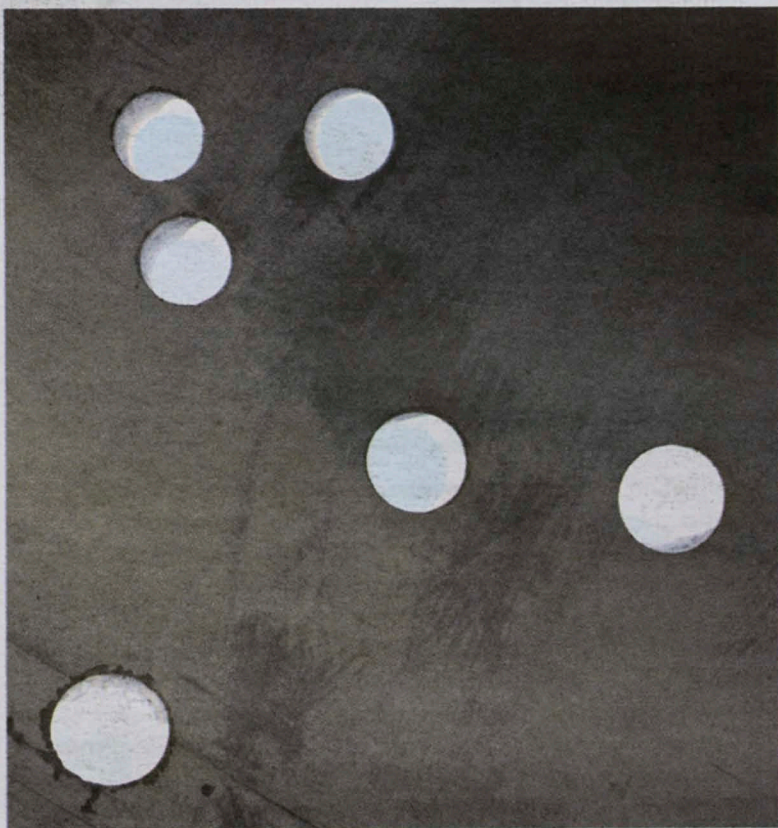


NANCY HOLT 1938-2014

THE ORIGIN OF SPACES

The life and work of Nancy Holt

Michael Abatemarco | The New Mexican



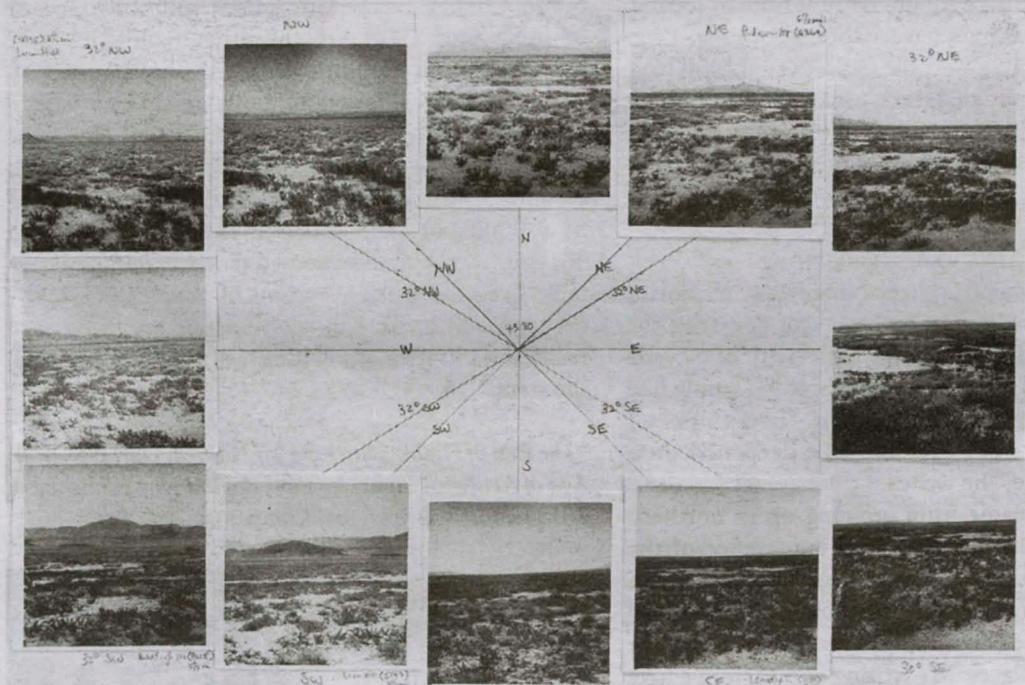
IN 1972 on a stretch of land north of Missoula, Montana, Nancy Holt installed a site-specific piece called *Missoula Ranch Locators: Vision Encompassed*. The work had a simple premise. Eye-level galvanized steel pipes attached to metal stands gave viewers the experience of directing their sight to specific locations on the landscape, blotting out all other features. Eventually, the land where the work was installed was sold, and it was taken down.

Fast-forward 40 years from the initial installation, and Holt was given an opportunity to envision the project in the campus garden of the University of Avignon in France, as part of the exhibition *Geniuses of the Place: Land and Environmental Art*. The new, permanent installation, called *Avignon Locators*, comprises eight locators set in specific compass directions in alignment with the North Star, bringing

an ancient and ubiquitous practice of orienting terrestrial structures by astronomic observance into the idiom of contemporary, interactive sculpture. At the June 14, 2012, dedication of *Avignon Locators*, Holt was made a knight of France's Order of Arts and Letters in recognition of her contributions to the arts.

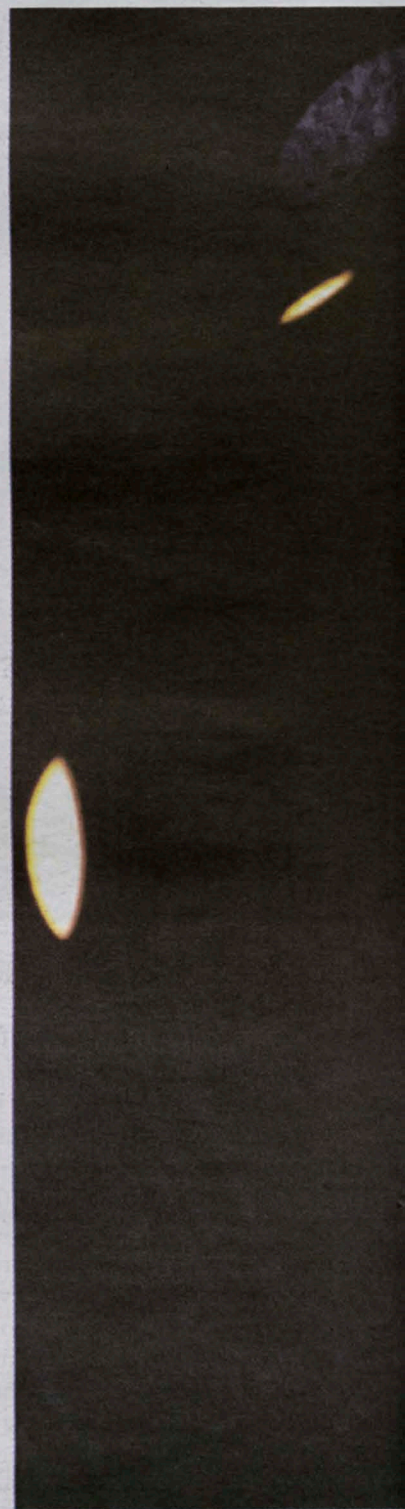
The work of Holt, who died of leukemia on Feb. 8, is marked by intense interest in visual perception. She created large-scale land-based sculptures that, though fixed in time and place, are subject to the vicissitudes of changing environments, shifting light, and the position of the viewer. The act of seeing itself was integral to her artwork. Holt lived in Galisteo since the mid-1990s, but her projects are installed at locations across the United States and in Europe.

Early in her career, Holt worked in conceptual art, then as a photographer and videographer, at times working closely with her husband, Robert Smithson (1938-1973), on collaborative video projects. Lines of sight were already essential to Holt's work as a videographer, staging experimental interview projects with contemporaries such as art critic and historian Lucy Lippard and sculptor Richard Serra. *Revolve*, an experimental work in which Holt interviews filmmaker Denis Wheeler, is a disorienting video



Nancy Holt: preparatory drawing of *Sun Tunnels*, 1975, pencil and 12 black-and-white photographs on paper, © Nancy Holt/Licensed by VAGA, New York

Top left and opposite page, *Sun Tunnels*, 1973-1976, Great Basin Desert, Utah, concrete, steel, and earth; photo by Nancy Holt, © Nancy Holt/Licensed by VAGA, New York; top, Nancy Holt at the Santa Fe Art Institute 2012; photo by Dianne Stromberg, courtesy SFAI

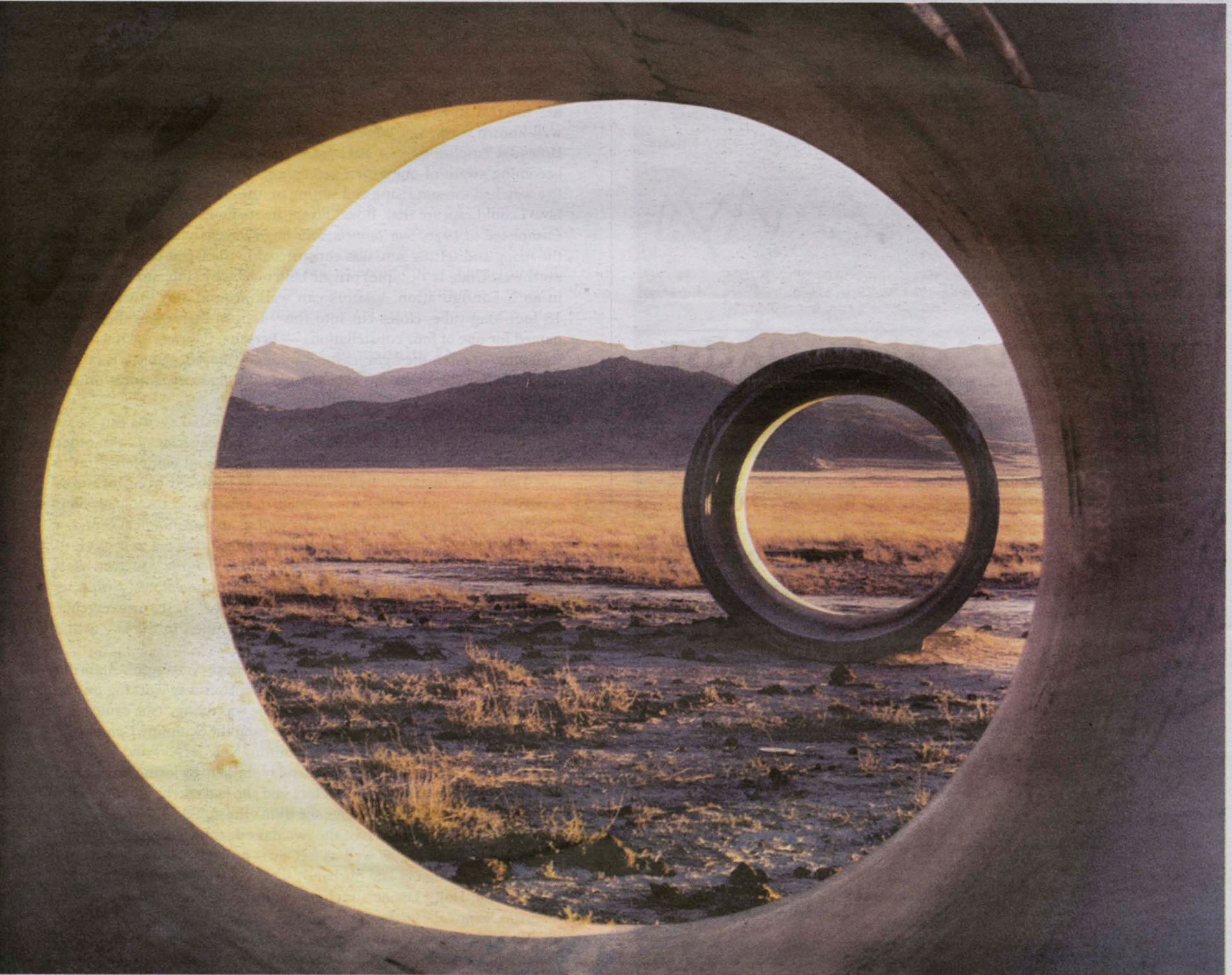


shot from multiple vantage points. Holt's art, much of it documented in her own photography, is integral to the land-art movement that emerged in the 1960s, associated with luminaries like James Turrell and Smithson, who is best known for *Spiral Jetty*, constructed on Utah's Great Salt Lake.

"Certainly her work stands up to theirs completely," Lippard told *Pasatiempo*. "She was a strange combination of social and recluse. She came out to Galisteo because I found her a place while she was looking for a house. I said, 'Nancy, there's not a single catalog on your work or a book. This is insane. You're a really well-known artist, and there's nowhere anybody can go to catch up on the work.' I really worked hard to convince her to do a book. I said, 'All you have to do is do the kinds of things you do

in your lectures. Just tell about the making of the work and the reasons behind the work and have a lot of pictures. Somebody could write a preface, and you'd have a book that people can refer to.' But she just didn't get on this. Then Alena Williams, a marvelous young woman getting her Ph.D., asked her to do a show at Columbia and do a book with it, and Nancy said yes. So, whammo, there was a book, and it was wonderful because, if there hadn't been, there would be almost no compendium at all." *Sightlines*, published by University of California Press in 2011, is a retrospective of Holt's work and includes much of her own photo documentation of projects as they developed from inception to completion. Williams and Lippard contributed

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essays to the monograph. The book accompanied a retrospective exhibit of Holt's work that traveled nationally and overseas before coming to the Santa Fe Art Institute in 2012.

In the early 1970s Holt created *Views Through a Sand Dune*, an earthwork in Narragansett Beach, Rhode Island, consisting of a cement tube inserted through a large dune, allowing the observer to gaze through the dune to views on either side. Like a great eye opening in the sand, the sculpture posits the earth itself as observer and provides the viewer with a lands-eye perspective of the surrounding environment. But, as her 1974 outdoor installation *Hydra's Head* shows, her work was as much about the earth as it was the sky and the relative position of our place in a vast universe. Placed along the Niagara River in Lewiston, New York, *Hydra's Head* is a series of reflecting pools arranged in the configuration of the constellation Hydra and set into the ground. As with *Views Through a Sand Dune*, the idea here of lines of sight between earth and sky removes the locus of perception from the purely human and into the environment, as though the earth itself is bearing witness to the passage of time and the revolutions of the heavens.

Before she turned to land art, Holt was interested in the interaction of light and shadow, creating indoor installations involving light cast through holes and onto walls. The interplay of light and shadow and her interest in astronomical alignments came together in her most well-known work, *Sun Tunnels*. "Sun Tunnels has a lot to do with light," Holt told *Pasatiempo* in a 2011 interview. "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." Completed in 1976, *Sun Tunnels*, four large concrete tubes aligned with the rising and setting sun, was constructed in the Great Basin Desert in northwest Utah. It occupies private land owned by Holt and is arranged in an X configuration. Visitors can walk around and through each 18-foot-long tube. Holes cut into the 9-foot-in-diameter tubes, each named for one of four constellations — Perseus, Capricorn, Draco, and Columba — catch the light, casting gradually moving sun spots on the inside walls. The tubes are also aligned with faraway features on the landscape.

While alignments with solstices and other celestial events can occur anywhere, Holt's work is often specific to a particular location in other ways. *Up and Under*, a land-based project in Finland completed in the late 1990s, for instance, incorporates earth gathered from locations across Finland and tunnels positioned in relation to the North Star. "So, it becomes a center of Finland as well as an astronomical center, a center of the universe," Holt told *Pasatiempo*. Conceived as a work to be experienced below- and aboveground, the serpentine structure has a walkway that runs along its length and several tunnels built within its earthen walls, aligned with the cardinal directions. At the convergence of four of these tunnels, a vertical shaft rises, open to the sky at the sculpture's highest point.

One of Holt's final projects was a video about Smithson's *Amarillo Ramp*, an earthwork in the Texas Panhandle. Holt was working on the project when she received the news that she was dying. "She came back from getting a lifetime achievement award from the Sculpture Center [the International Sculpture Center in Hamilton, New Jersey] and was very high on that," Lippard said. "The next day she started losing breath and went into the hospital, and the doctors said she had maybe 48 hours. She was panicked about all the things she didn't finish."

Holt lived a few months past the two days doctors expected. Devoted to Smithson's memory as well as her own projects, Holt worked tirelessly in promoting her late husband's work. In what is perhaps a fitting twist of fate, Holt's last acts included editing the video *The Making of Amarillo Ramp*, about the project Smithson was working on when he died in a plane crash, while surveying the area where it was situated. "The *Amarillo Ramp* video was the thing most on her mind," Lippard said. "She spent her last days working on this." The video is currently exhibited in *Robert Smithson in Texas*, at the Dallas Museum of Art. ◀