

Nancy Holt

In 1971 Nancy Holt placed several telescopic works around her loft studio in New York City's West Village. Locators, as she called them—vertical, steel pipe sculptures of varying heights with welded crosspieces through which one may look—focused perspective on a detail of Holt's daily environment. She secured the Locators to the floor and windowsills, positioning them to direct one's interior perspective on exterior focal points, such as a pair of windows across the courtyard or an exhaust pipe on the roof below. While seemingly simple in execution, this act of using industrial plumbing pipes to shape one's visual perspective set forth the artist's turn to sculpture. The artist would later define the marked pursuit as the “concretization of perception.”¹

Holt's early practice included work in concrete poetry as well as site-based audio, video, and photographic series, all of which began to align her interest in the nuances of observation. With her Locators, however, she felt that she had discovered the “key that led to [her] later sculpture,” emphasizing the material properties of perception.² In a notebook entry dated October 1971, Holt elaborated on this breakthrough: “Bringing art back to the eye—treatment in depth. Changes made in depth rather than on a flat plane. Near and far interrelate in a new way. . . . Perception dealt with directly—no illusion.”³

Dual Locators, a work from 1972, consists of two aligned Locators that present a doubling in visual reality. Each Locator can be looked through from either side, giving the observer a choice of viewpoints. Two distinct loci are installed on facing walls. On one wall is a circular mirror, which reflects the participant's visual image. A black circle is placed on the opposite wall, which creates the illusion of looking into a void. Alternatively, *Locator with Spotlight and Sunlight* (1972) engages artificial and natural light to articulate the mechanics of vision. Looking up through one end of the tilted viewing piece is an ellipse of light cast on a wall by a theatrical spotlight. Looking down through the other end is an oval of natural light intercepted from a window. Holt's precise positioning of the Locator in relation to the light sources enables the pattern of each ellipse to demarcate the participant's field of vision. This observation was revelatory, as she noted: “Light, like sight, can be channeled, controlled so that shapes of light can materialize.”⁴

Less than one year later, Holt's examination into the interconnection of light and sight was fully realized. Moving beyond the direction of sight that she explored within her Locator works, she began to construct specific situational conditions to

highlight light's impact on our spatial consciousness. The rarely seen, room-sized installations *Holes of Light* (1973) and *Mirrors of Light I* (1974) are pivotal to understanding her ideas concerning perceptual experience. Profound in scale and involving rigorous calculations, both works are architectonic structures in which projected light is channeled within a complex spatial experience. *Holes of Light* does so by projecting light through circular holes to investigate principles of directionality and shadow, while *Mirrors of Light I* utilizes circular mirrors and rays of light to examine the laws of reflection. Paramount to both works is their experiential nature, which Holt recognized in a 1980 interview in *Artforum*: “A perceptual structure is built into the sculpture. The work can be seen only in durational time—the time it takes to see it from many points of view.”⁵

Created for the artist's first solo show in New York City at the LoGiudice Gallery in January 1973, *Holes of Light* invites the viewer to circumvent a bisected room that is activated by shifting intervals of illumination and darkness. Conceived in powers of ten, the 20-foot-wide space is divided lengthwise by a hanging partition wall, which is perforated with a diagonal row of eight 10-inch-diameter circular holes.⁶ Mounted lights installed on facing walls alternate on and off, shifting light from side to side every thirty seconds. As projected light intersects the dark side of the space, cast 20-inch-diameter ellipses, twice the size of the work's eponymous circles, form an extended diagonal along the wall. Meanwhile, bright light illuminates the other side, revealing pencil-traced ellipses on the wall, which mark the transitory play of light and shadow. When looking through the partition wall from the lit side, one full circle of light can be seen on the opposite wall, whereas the remaining circles become a graduated sequence of crescents. Realized for the first time since its original installation at Bykert Gallery in 1974, *Mirrors of Light I* involves a descending diagonal row of ten 9 ½-inch-diameter circular mirrors that are placed along the far wall of a constructed rectangular-shaped room. A spotlight, installed on a side wall, is directed onto the mirrors and casts an opposing diagonal of refracted ellipses around the space. What results is an experience in double perception as the cast circles of light, bent and stretched across the space, are seen partially again in the mirrors.

“The world through a circle / Elements real and reflected / Concentrated, encompassed,” begins a concrete poem that Holt wrote in 1970.⁷ The circle in her work frames conversely both presence and emptiness, and recalls the earth,

sun, moon, and human eye. In pushing the conventions of sculpture and proposing a participatory experience in these early works, the circle is actuated, and Holt's ideas on the concretization of perception—focus, light, and space—are revealed. Immediately upon realizing *Holes of Light* and *Mirrors of Light I*, Holt began to explore these concepts in the landscape and created *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), her iconic work in the geographic expanse of Utah's Great Basin Desert. With *Sun Tunnels*, Holt looked above to capture the purest sources of light.⁸ On each summer and winter solstice, four concrete circular tunnels, arranged in an X format, spectacularly frame the sunrise and sunset. Furthermore, during each day, the sun projects through different configurations of holes that correspond to stars in the constellations Capricorn, Columba, Draco, and Perseus, casting circles of light throughout the tunnel. During the evening, in the moon's light, the holes themselves become circles of light, emulating the constellations in the sky above. As such, *Sun Tunnels* realizes the vision declared within her 1970 poem. In tracing the earth's rotation, keeping in time with celestial shifts from day to night, “The world focuses / And spins out again, seen.”⁹

notes

1. Nancy Holt, “Answers to Questions,” from correspondence with Ester Carla de Miro d'Ajeta, August 1, 1975.
2. Nancy Holt, quoted in James Meyer, “Interview with Nancy Holt” (September 7–9, 2007), in *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, ed. Alena Williams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 225.
3. Nancy Holt, “Getting Out of Sight” (October 1971), in *Nancy Holt: Locators* (London: Parafin, 2015), p. 51.
4. Nancy Holt, “Holes of Light” (1973), in Williams, *Nancy Holt*, p. 242.
5. Nancy Holt, “Situation Esthetics: Impermanent Art and the Seventies Audience,” *Artforum* 18, no. 5 (January 1980), p. 26.
6. Holt speaks to the specificities of the work's dialectics in her text, “Holes of Light,” in Williams, *Nancy Holt*, pp. 242–43.
7. See Nancy Holt, “The world through a circle” (c. 1970), in Williams, *Nancy Holt*, p. 201.
8. In Holt's words: “When I was making projected light works in New York, the idea of working with the actual projected light of the sun began to intrigue me.” See Nancy Holt, “Sun Tunnels,” *Artforum* 15, no. 8 (April 1977), p. 34.
9. Holt, “The world through a circle,” in Williams, *Nancy Holt*, p. 201.

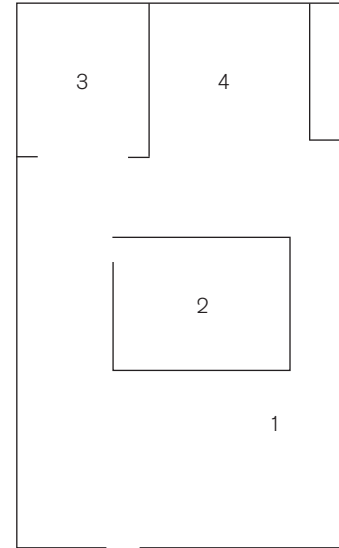
Nancy Holt was born in 1938 in Worcester, Massachusetts, and was raised in New Jersey. In 1960 she graduated from Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. Shortly after, she moved to New York City and worked as an assistant literary editor at *Harper's Bazaar* and a teacher at the Downtown Community School as well as a researcher at the Lederle Labs in Pearl River, New York. Subsequent to realizing *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76), Holt conceived several public commissions: *Hydra's Head* (1974) along the Niagara River at Artpark in Lewiston, New York; *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* (1977–78) in Bellingham, Washington; *Dark Star Park* (1979–84) in Arlington, Virginia; and *Astral Grating* (1987) in a New York subway station. She also developed several large-scale land reclamation projects, including the unrealized *Sky Mound* (1988) in New Jersey and *Up and Under* (1987–98) in Nokia, Finland. In 2010–12 a retrospective exhibition, *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, traveled from the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University in New York to venues in Boston, Chicago, Karlsruhe, Salt Lake City, and Santa Fe. Holt died in New York in 2014.

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- . "Holes of Light" (1973). In Williams, Nancy Holt, pp. 242–43.
- . "Sun Tunnels." *Artforum* 15, no. 8 (April 1977), cover, pp. 32–37.
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checklist and site map

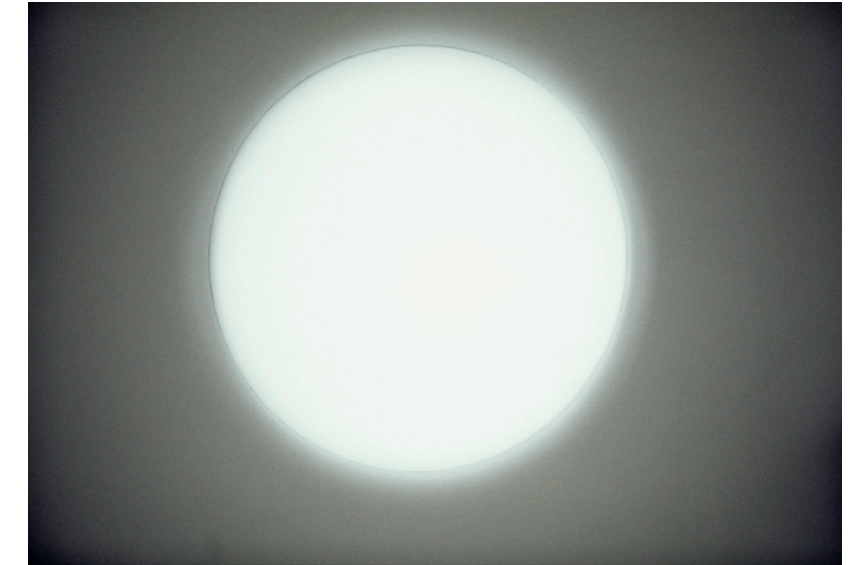
- 1. Locator with Spotlight and Sunlight**, 1972
Steel pipe, spotlight with LED light source, and window mask
Estate of Nancy Holt
- 2. Mirrors of Light I**, 1974/2018
Mirrors and Fresnel with LED light source
Holt/Smithson Foundation
- 3. Holes of Light**, 1973/2018
750-watt quartz-halogen lights, medium-density fiberboard, and pencil
Dia Art Foundation
- 4. Dual Locators**, 1972
Steel pipes, mirror, and black paint
Estate of Nancy Holt



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Cover: Nancy Holt, *Holes of Light*, 1973. Installation view, LoGiudice Gallery, New York, 1973. Dia Art Foundation with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation. © Holt/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Nancy Holt, courtesy Holt/Smithson Foundation

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