

MACBA presents the largest curated survey of Nancy Holt's work in Europe

► Multifaceted artist **Nancy Holt** (Worcester, MA, 1938 – New York, 2014) was a key figure in the New York art scene and a pioneer of site-specific installations and the moving image.

► This show features a selection of work made between 1966 and 1992, spanning film, video, photography, concrete poetry, sound works, sculpture and room-sized installations, as well as works on paper.

► *Nancy Holt / Inside Outside* explores concepts of place, site and perception—ideas at the heart of Holt's work, ideas that she developed both spatially and as a means to connect with nature and the surrounding built environment.

► *Nancy Holt / Inside Outside* is the largest curated survey of Nancy Holt's work in Europe to date and includes projects made over three decades. Rooted in a collaboration between Holt/Smithson Foundation and Bildmuseet at Umeå University, Sweden, where it was first presented, the MACBA show includes six additional pieces and an extensive catalogue offering a comprehensive look at Holt's remarkable career.

Title: *Nancy Holt / Inside Outside* **Opening:** 12 July 2023, 8 pm **MACBA dates:** 13 July 2023 to 7 January 2024 **Production:** MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, in collaboration with the Bildmuseet at Umeå University, Sweden, and the Holt/Smithson Foundation, Santa Fe, United States. **Curators:** Katarina Pierre, director of the Bildmuseet, Lisa Le Feuvre, executive director of the Holt/Smithson Foundation, and Teresa Grandas, curator of exhibitions at the MACBA

"The space, and the sky, and the sun just knocked me out. . . . I felt that my inside and the outside were identical, somehow. That somehow I had been carrying this landscape within me, and suddenly there it was, without. . . . When I came back to New York, I was never the same person again."

Nancy Holt (1938-2014) wrote these words in 1968 after the first trip she made to the desert of the American West, a formative experience that would have a major impact on her artistic practice over the following decades. Holt began working as an artist in 1966, starting with concrete poetry. She described that "In these word structures are my concerns with site and geography; voidness; cyclical time; and repeats and doubles." In 1967 her poetry moved from text to image and from the page to the landscape, soon after expanding to explore the materiality of sound, voice, light, and space. Before making her first artworks Holt trained as a biologist, an interest that can be seen in the ways her artistic practice connects art and science and examines interrelations between built and natural environments.

Holt's work reveals an ecology of interconnectivity: she links trees and people, the breathing structures of buildings and bodies, light and planetary constellations, location and the cardinal points. In her film,

video, photography, drawings, sculptures, earthworks, and room-sized installations she creates an incisive poetics of place through operations of “repeats and doubles,” fixing the gaze to mobilize vision.

The provocations of ‘inside and outside’ are present throughout the five decades of Holt’s artistic production. She observes and unravels these perceptual demarcations in buildings and in society at large, asking questions of what remains open and exposed in the exterior, and what remains concealed inside, out of sight. Her spatial and visual poetry invites us to recognize the hidden systems that structure our ways of experiencing and perceiving the world.

Holt is a figure frequently linked to the Earth, Land and Conceptual Art movements, yet she is much less recognized than her male peers, a situation this exhibition strives to correct. Her preference was to remain outside of art historical categories, and instead be identified as a “perception artist.” The work of Holt constitutes an invitation to pause, attentively observe, and reflect on the concrete world in transformation.

<https://www.macba.cat/ca/sobre-macba/premsa/roda-premsa-nancy-holt-dins-fora>

“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. Many of these works have astronomical aspects, being aligned with the sunrises and sunsets on the equinoxes and solstices, the North Star and/or the moon. Others of my works are *System Works* which variously channel water, air, electricity (a form of fire), and methane gas from decomposing organic matter.

Nancy Holt, *Ecological Aspects of My Work*, 1993

EXHIBITION

“The space, and the sky, and the sun just knocked me out [. . .] I felt that my inside and the outside were identical, somehow. That somehow I had been carrying this landscape within me, and suddenly there it was, without [. . .] I was never the same person again.”

Nancy Holt / Inside Outside is the first major European survey of Nancy Holt’s artistic legacy and features a wide selection of projects made between 1966 and 1992. “Inside” and “outside” are compelling concepts that run throughout her five decades of artistic output. Holt’s spatial and visual poetry invites us to recognise the hidden systems that form and structure our ways of being and our means of perceiving the world.

Nancy Holt (Worcester, MA, 1938 – New York, 2014) was a key figure on the New York art scene and an innovator of site-specific installations and the moving image. Although she is often linked to the American Land Art and Conceptual Art movements, her work has received far less attention than that of her male

peers—an imbalance this exhibition seeks to redress. Rather than being bound by art history categories, she preferred to describe herself as a “perception artist”.

Holt grew up in New Jersey, a state which, alongside New York, features repeatedly in her work. “Looking back, I think growing up in New Jersey was a wonderful experience because it's a limbo place. . . . [It was] surrounded by the decay of the industrial revolution. And New Jersey had the first highway culture.” In 1956 Holt returned to Massachusetts to study biology at Tufts University, which sparked an interest in the connections between science and art. In her third year, she began making trips to New York, “seeing art, meeting artists”. After moving to the city in 1960, she forged long-standing friendships with artists at the heart of the New York art scene, including Carl Andre (born 1935), Eva Hesse (1936–1970), Joan Jonas (born 1936), Sol LeWitt (1928–2007) and Richard Serra (born 1938), as well as Robert Smithson (1938–1973), whom she married in 1963.

Over the course of five decades she posed questions on how we might understand our place in the world by exploring perception, systems and place. Nancy Holt / Inside Outside presents a major selection of her work that reveals the wide range of her artistic practice, including concrete poetry, sound pieces, photography, film, video, sculpture, installations, land art, architectural interventions, artist's books and sketches. The exhibition also presents documentation of her ways of working.

Holt's career started in the mid-1960s soon after she joined Harper's Bazaar magazine as assistant literary editor. In 1966 she began making concrete poems, considered to be her first artworks, where she plays with the structure, content and form of language and alludes to sight, place, systems, sites and geography—subjects that appear repeatedly throughout her oeuvre. An archetypal piece is *The World through a Circle* (1972), a poem in which she reflects on the nature of elements: “The world through a circle / Elements real and reflected / Concentrated, encompassed / The sky brought down / A hole through the earth, either way / Drawing in a glance / And then a second look / And more. / The world focuses / And spins out again, seen.”

In her essay “The Horizon of the Text”, published in the catalogue *Nancy Holt / Inside Outside*, Karen Di Franco says: “Made in private, and largely unseen at the time, many of Holt's texts, which she names as concrete poems, bear the traces of their containment through hole punches in the left margin of each page—three circles that create material absences in the page. In relating the circular within a material engagement with the properties of language, the marginal or diaristic is emphasized in poems that, through an experimentation with concrete poetry, produced a dialectic between the geographic and phenomenological sites of belonging by the incorporation of personal or personalized material.”

Holt extended her exploration of language from the page to the landscape, guiding friends through unfamiliar sites with written scores. Her *Stone Ruin Tour* (1967) marks the start of her experiments combining sound and photography. In June 1967 she recorded herself dictating a tour through a labyrinthine garden in Cedar Grove, New Jersey. She later transcribed part of the recording to create an imperfect and unfinished map to explore the site, which was given to artist friends as a guide. Her *Tour of*

the John Weber Gallery (1972) is a similar exploration of an environment and its myriad details, this time the space of the eponymous gallery.

As Holt's work evolved, recording displacements and movements of the human body through space in a series of images became a recurring motif in her early series of photographs. In *Down Hill and Over the Hill*, both from 1968, artist Joan Jonas was photographed walking through the New Jersey dunes, her footprints leaving ephemeral traces on the surface of the landscape. It is worth noting that over her almost six decades of work as an artist, Holt consciously preferred to work in conjunction with others rather than on her own. In many of her projects, Holt collaborated with other artists, and even with astrophysicists, astronomers, architects, engineers and other experts and professionals from a wide range of different fields.

Travel was an important part of Nancy Holt's work, and she roamed the Interstate Highway system armed with a camera to create visual poems from repeating observed occurrences. In his essay "Moving / West", James Nisbet notes that the experience of travel "offered Holt an opportunity to key in on mediation and transience in her practice. Rather than a complete lack of encumbrance felt in her car hurtling down the highway . . . Holt's responses to western space . . . are more finely attuned to movement away from one point and toward another, even if that latter remained unknown. Against the long-standing and deep-seated colonial tendency to treat the desert environments of the western United States as a *terra nullius*, Holt incorporated these spaces into her work as always in relation to a process of passage."

Several times Holt turned her photographic eye to graveyards, including *Western Graveyards* (1968), a series of abandoned gravesites found along the roadside on her trips to the west of the United States. In *Trail Markers* (1969), which Holt described as an artwork waiting to be perceived, her eye was caught by a series of orange dots painted on stones to indicate the path for hikers in Dartmoor, the United Kingdom. The markers highlight a human construct within a vast natural expanse, linking to Holt's interest in systems and human movement through space and time, and to her fascination with the circle.

On a brief visit to Miami in 1969, Nancy Holt made the visual poem *Miami Puddles*, which engages with the city of Miami solely by photographing its puddles. This work foreshadows Holt's later pieces of land art that consider the aesthetics and technology of water drainage.

Circles appear repeatedly in Nancy Holt's work, from the holes punched in the sheets of her visual poems and the orange dots painted on stones to the rounded shapes created by the play of reflected light and her use of pipes, among others. In 1971 she made the first of her *Locator* sculptures. These simple "seeing devices" were made of industrial piping welded into a T-shape and secured to the ground. When looked through with one eye, they drew attention to the time-bound processes of sight and site. The play of observation set up by these artefacts evokes the reflections on perception that run throughout Holt's work—what we see, what we cease to see, partial and total vision—given that what we think we see when we look through a *Locator*, such as a black dot on the wall, might actually be an outwardly distorted form designed to be perceived in another way. This is the same inside and outside that Nancy Holt had espoused in her 1972 show *Outdoors–Indoors*.

All quotes are included in the book published to accompany the exhibition.

Based on her Locators, Holt made several pieces in 1972 that would lead her to create her first works in wide-open spaces. Two noteworthy examples are *Views through a Sand Dune* (1972), on Narragansett Beach, Rhode Island, where she inserted a concrete tube through a sand dune to create a seeing device framing views of the ocean and the shore; and *Hydra's Head* (1974), a temporary site-specific work on the banks of the Niagara River in Lewistown, New York, comprising six pools of water arranged in the pattern of the sea-serpent constellation Hydra. Although the pools are now filled in with gravel, Holt was open to the work being reactivated at some point in the future. The pools of water bear witness to the site's magnificence—from the stars in the night sky to the ripple of a water beetle. Both pieces laid the foundations for later earthworks that explore ideas of framing vision and bringing the cosmos down to Earth at the scale of human experience.

Her Locators also inspired an interest in how light and sight connect and led her to explore the qualities of reflected light. In 1974 she created *Mirrors of Light*, an installation in which a spotlight is directed at a diagonal row of mirrors to bring out the materiality of light and heighten the experience of the body in space. In *Light and Shadow Photo Drawings* (1978), a series of twenty-two photographs, she captured the shapes produced by shining a light through various cut-outs, inviting us to observe the interplay of light and shadow and grapple with the process of our own perception.

Her 16 mm film *Pine Barrens* (1975) and the photographic series *Pine Barrens: Trees* (1975) and *Pine Barrens: Footprints* (1975) show how much the Pine Barrens area of New Jersey meant to Nancy Holt—somewhere she felt at home and which she observed with great respect, its landscape and people alike. The film explores sites in the area through the voices of locals, or Pineys, interviewed by Holt, who taped seven hours of interviews, later edited down to fifteen minutes.

Sun Tunnels (1973–1976) is probably Holt's best-known and most spectacular work, bringing all the questions she had asked in previous pieces together on a single site. *Sun Tunnels* is far more than a mere sculpture in the landscape: it encompasses sketches, photo studies, a film and several texts. At its core is a piece made out of four concrete pipes 5.5 metres long and almost 3 metres in diameter arranged in an open X configuration in the Great Basin Desert in Utah. Each tunnel has a pattern of holes bored into it representing a different star constellation. The daily rising and setting of the sun and moon cast ever-changing shadows on the inner surfaces of the tunnels, as if bringing the stars down to Earth. Perfectly aligned with the angles of the rising and setting sun on the days of the summer and winter solstices, the tunnels are large enough for an adult as tall as Holt to stand inside and the "star holes" are big enough to put a hand through. In her *Self-Interview* (published in the exhibition catalogue), Holt recalls how long it took to find the right site for her *Sun Tunnels* and says: "Once you are in the work, it both opens out and encloses. From the center point, the tunnels extend the viewer visually out into the landscape, opening up the perceived space, but once the viewer is inside the tunnels the work encloses, surrounds, and there is a framing of the landscape through the ends of the tunnels and through the holes." She later adds: "With so much space there is no sense of containment, which is paralleled psychically. Inside my van and inside the tunnels I felt sheltered and protected; outside, only my body set up the limits in space. There was no escape from myself."

All quotes are included in the book published to accompany the exhibition.

Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson offered each other mutual support and created several audiovisual pieces together, including East Coast/West Coast (1969) and Swamp (1971), among others. It was Nancy Holt who photographed many of Smithson's ephemeral pieces of land art.

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The exhibition catalogue features texts by Karen Di Franco, Lisa Le Feuvre, Teresa Grandas, James Nisbet and Katarina Pierre, as well as a selection of texts by the artist herself and a previously unpublished version of her Self-Interview.

CATALOGUE

The catalogue published to accompany the MACBA show is the first major publication on Nancy Holt's work in Spanish. It includes a previously unpublished self-interview, texts by Karen Di Franco and James Nisbet and a conversation between the curators behind the project (Katarina Pierre and Lisa Le Feuvre), who seek to set Holt's projects in context and explain the enduring relevance of her work and thought. The book also features an essay by Teresa Grandas, co-curator of the Barcelona exhibition, who explores the resonances between Holt's work and the rich legacy of other women artists working in Catalonia at the same time.

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Contributors: Karen Di Franco, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Teresa Grandas, Nancy Holt, Lisa Le Feuvre, James Nisbet, Katarina Pierre

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Geopoetics

This programme of activities ties in with the Nancy Holt show by exploring the universe of women who use poetry, writing and art to address the irreversible changes affecting our planet. Drawing on genres such as climate fiction, autobiographical essay and travel literature, these authors and artists challenge us to face up to the ethical, political and existential implications of the climate crisis, while echoing its keenly felt effects on our everyday lives.

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