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## Sun Tunnels (1973-76) by Nancy Holt: One Earthwork's Interdisciplinary Approach

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CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS // INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK INCORPORATING THE ARTS  
HOW ART, DESIGN, MEDIA & PERFORMING ARTS DISCIPLINES ENHANCE THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE

# SUN TUNNELS (1973-76) BY NANCY HOLT: ONE EARTHWORK'S INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

► HIKMET SIDNEY LOE // ART HISTORY

► PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In 1973, American artist Nancy Holt (1938–2014) extended her studio practice into the land, employing light, vision, and perception through photography, film, installations, and poetics. By creating her monumental earthwork Sun Tunnels (1973–76), Holt became a leader within Land art, one of the few female artists working in a male-dominated discipline.

Sun Tunnels—located near the border of Western Utah and Eastern Nevada—is comprised of four concrete tunnels placed in an “X” pattern on the Great Salt Lake Desert’s alkaline floor. Each tunnel measures 18’ (L) x 9’ 2 ½” (D); the overall work measures 9’ 2 ½” x 68’ x 53’. The earthwork is a viewing device during summer and winter solstices as the sun rises in the middle of one tunnel then sinks through the middle of the adjacent tunnel. One constellation perforates each tunnel, providing additional framings of the land. In 2002, Holt explained: “the work comes out of my concerns with perception. Whether the sun is out or not, you can go there and have a sculpture experience.”<sup>1</sup>

Through her eponymous essay (1977) and film (1978), Holt presents the earthwork through interdisciplinary subjects: scientific (astronomical, mathematical, geologic, architectural) and regional (historical, cultural). Land use (Indigenous peoples, migration, military, industrial) joins poetry and philosophy to extend the work’s site-specificity. Holt wrote: “the center of the work becomes the center of the world.”<sup>2</sup> International cultures (China, transcontinental railroad; Southeast Asia, planetariums; Ancient Sumer, Base 60 number system; Western Europe, archaeoastronomy) and spiritual beliefs (Native American; Buddhism; Hinduism) form this metaphorical center.

These subjects create the basis of *The Sun Tunnels Encyclo: Exploring Nancy Holt’s Earthwork through Perception and Site* (The University of Utah Press, 2026) as encyclopedic entries. “See also” references expand entries, creating an ahistorical, intimate reading of this monumental earthwork. From past geologic and human time through the work’s completion, Sun Tunnels is situated in the present through contemporary issues of Indigenous reparations, climate change, extraction processes, and the search for poetics of place on an increasingly fragile planet.

► REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

<sup>1</sup>Holt, Nancy, and Hikmet Sidney Loe. “History of the Sun Tunnels near Lucin, Utah.” In *Great Salt Lake: An Overview of Change*, edited by J. Wallace Gwynn, 561–68. Salt Lake City: Utah Geological Survey, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>Holt, Nancy. “Sun Tunnels.” *Artforum* 15, no. 1 (April 1977): cover, 32–37.

Archives of American Art

Bureau of Land Management

Center for Land Use Interpretation

Dia Art Foundation

Getty Institute

Holt/Smithson Foundation

Museum of Modern Art, NY

Nevada Department of Conservation & Natural Resources

Nevada Historical Society

University of Nevada, Las Vegas Special Collections and Archives

University of Utah, Marriott Library Special Collections

Utah Department of Natural Resources

Utah Division of Indian Affairs

Utah State Historical Society



Nancy Holt. *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76)

Great Basin Desert, Utah

Collection Dia Art Foundation, with support from Holt/Smithson Foundation

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Photograph Hikmet Loe, 2018

► ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hikmet Sidney Loe is an educator, curator, and author whose work examines the changeable nature of the earth, addressing perceptual and cultural constructs of the land. She began teaching art history in 2021 at UNLV as Part-Time Instructor, where she holds Graduate College status; and has taught for the Honors College, University of Utah (Ecology & Legacy Program) and the Honors College, Westminster College. Her curatorial projects mine ideas of place (Southern Utah Museum of Art; Granary Arts) and artists’ responses to Land art and environment (2023, Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art). She authored *The Spiral Jetty Encyclo: Exploring Robert Smithson’s Earthwork through Time and Place* in 2017; it won the 15 Bytes Book Award for Art Book in 2018 and was finalist for the Utah State Historical Society Best Book Award. Her upcoming book is *The Sun Tunnels Encyclo: Exploring Nancy Holt’s Earthwork through Perception and Site* (2026). Online writing is found with *Southwest Contemporary*, *Hyperallergic*, *15 Bytes*, and *mappingslc.org*. In 2021 she was the inaugural Research Fellow for Holt/Smithson Foundation, codifying Holt’s personal library as an investigative resource.

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