

NANCY HOLT

Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery | Columbia University NY



or the sky-reflective *Hydra's Head* may feel experiential, but the vast majority entail a directed and attentive, even purposefully exclusive kind of "bracketed" looking. Her surveillance games anticipated those of David Bunn and Henrik Håkansson, her tours foreshadowed Janet Cardiff's walks and Christine Hill's guided tours, while Holt's light holes prefigure Olafur Eliasson's perceptual prowess. Holt's East coast character remarks, "There are

What amazed me most about Nancy Holt's intense survey of 67 artworks and ephemera dating primarily from 1967 to 1980 (two later works are from 1985 and 1992) was that it announced its theme as "Sightlines," a kind of surveillance. This activity, which begins with numerous *Locators* (mounted tubes for directed seeing) produced between 1971 and 1980, expands to embrace *Views Through a Sand Dune* (1972), *Zeroing In* (1973), *Holes of Light*, *Sun Tunnels* (1973-76), video installation *Points of View* (1974/2010), *Hydra's Head* (1974), and meticulous tour maps of particular places. Another aspect that struck me was how much her practice entails language, whether as concrete poems, cross-words, film narrations, or tour transcripts.

One of my favorite videos is her *East Coast/West Coast* (with Robert Smithson) from 1969, which totally spoofs the art world's reduction of hundreds of artists' practices to two regional stereotypes. After seeing Holt's survey, I can't help but wonder whether her East coast character, who advocates a conceptual, systematic approach, isn't based upon and incidentally poking fun at her own artistic practice. Over and over, she reproaches the West coast slacker, "Why did you bother to come here? You have to define yourself better." Sometimes the traits that make us who we are are the very ones we'd modify if we could. I make these points not because Holt's practice seems too rational and deliberate, nor do I think she ought to alter her attributes, but because this survey emphasizes just how methodically Holt pursued procedures aimed at enabling viewers to glean worldly details. If happenstance is in short order here, surprise proves ubiquitous.

Holt's focal point is sight rather than sensory perception. Works like *Holes of Light* (circles cut into walls that allow light to cast shadows on another wall), *Sun Tunnels* (four large concrete cylinders whose cut-hole patterns mimic stellar constellations)

sense thresholds," as if too much sensorial experience nullifies everything. One surmises that it's better to be focused and on-track rather than attempt to absorb everything as Smithson's West coast loafer endeavors to do.

In light of the fact that human beings have poor eyesight compared to other animals, Holt's works centered on advancing sight seemed destined to butt up against its limits. At first glance, her work appears to embrace Edmund Husserl's notion of reflective attentiveness, which he deemed the basis for true "lived experience," since such a consciousness would be free of presuppositions and intellectualizing. Yet as much as Holt's monocular devices help to focus vision, they hardly enhance sight the way that glasses, telescopes, or microscopes do. Her tubes double as sight-director and -detractor, as they simultaneously establish and critique their narrow scope—which incidentally is the limitation of photographic looking (viewing

a vast world through little holes). Her six *Western Graveyards* (1968) photographs particularly caught my attention, given their subjects' uncanny resemblance to the remains of Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), a connection I could never have made had I not ventured to Kent State.

Repeatedly encouraging firsthand observations or inviting viewers to focus on and avail themselves of details seems totally at odds with today's populace, who welcome distracting virtual events and implicit critiques of the "bias of the eye." Camille Paglia links

our cultural obsession with seeing to the pivotal role, dating back to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, of vision in sustaining power. It's fascinating to imagine Holt's "sight-specific" works from the 1970s pitted against that era's focus on touch, "core" imagery, and *authentic* female experience. To them, she must have seemed an alien in a woman's body flaunting her phallic cameras and spy glasses. While feminists were rescuing and preserving personal stories, Holt was exploring the relationship between directed looking, subjective evidence, and world history. I see both sides as working toward the same aim, though their similarities didn't become apparent until the 1980s when the concealed biases of science started coming to light.

~Sue Spaid



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