

# VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

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## Nancy Holt, “Light and Shadow Poetics”

by Jody Zellen

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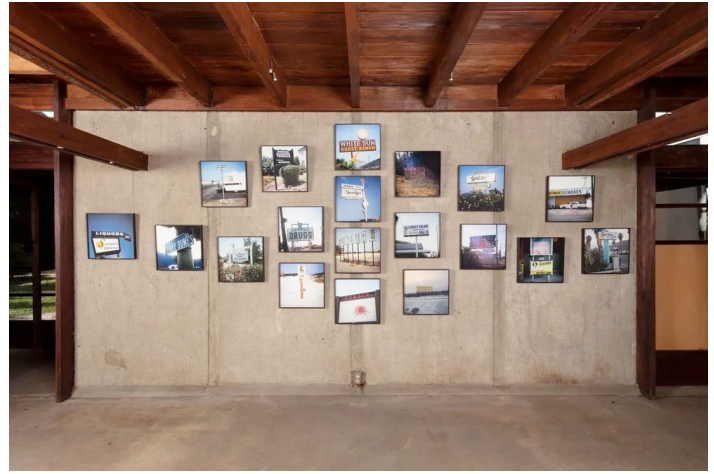
Nancy Holt, “Sunlight in Sun Tunnels,” 1976, inkjet print on archival rag paper

Nancy Holt (1938-2014) is best known for her “Sun Tunnels” (1973-78), an earthwork placed on a piece of land she purchased in Great Basin Desert, Utah. Four gigantic concrete cylinders are installed there in an X-shaped configuration specifically aligned to frame the rising and setting sun during the summer and winter solstice. First and foremost, the work is experiential. It is about perception and the relationship of the human body to the minutiae of the ever-changing landscape. Though not the same, of course, extensive photo-documentation has brought the work to those of us who cannot venture to Utah.

For the exhibition “Light and Shadow Poetics,” a selection of photographs, videos, and a sound piece are presented within the space of the historic Schindler House. Installed on bare concrete walls between thin vertical windows or alongside built-in furniture, Holt’s works enact a dialogue with Schindler’s structure. They share interests in sightlines, shifting light conditions, and how the body is positioned within space. The exhibit brings together two masters — Holt, the conceptualist and land-based artist and Schindler, the modernist architect — both of whom were concerned with the ways light could be captured, represented and experienced.

This is immediately evident in Holt’s “Light and Shadow Photo Drawings” (1978) a series of twenty-two black and white inkjet prints that were fabricated by the artist from the original 126 format transparencies in 2012. They fill two adjacent walls of the gallery. To create these abstract images, Holt shined a light through curved cutouts and photographically captured the ensuing shapes and shadows that were projected. The result is an array of circles, curves and arcs in opaque and transparent shades of black, white and gray that feel other-worldly, even celestial.

Another iconic work, “Sunlight in Sun Tunnels” (1976) is a large print consisting of a grid of thirty images that focus on the changing light in the interior of one of Holt’s “Sun Tunnels.” Holt placed her camera at the edge of one of the



Nancy Holt, "Light and Shadow Poetics," installation views, 2026

pipes and shot a picture every half hour from 6:30am to 9:00pm with the intent of documenting the movement of the sun from the perspective of the interior of the tunnel. Seeing the image in the context of the Schindler House, one becomes hyper-aware of how light fills its interior space.

"California Sun Signs" (1972) is a series of nineteen square-formatted color photographs that feature the word "sun." The images document signs and illustrations celebrating the marriage between California and the sun as the source of its weather and the seductive qualities of its landscape. Installed in a loose grid, the images feel simultaneously current and dated. The photograph of a "Sunland" gas station with prices at 35 and 33 cents certainly takes us back to a previous era. Images depicting the words Sunkist, Sundaes, Sunset Palms, N. Sunair Plaza, Sunbeam Inn, Sunshine Pre-school and even Sun Air Drugs take us on a focused journey through California's desert landscapes. These snapshot-style photographs highlight bright light and blue skies. In the advertisement for "Sunair Center" the letter "S" sits on top of a yellow sun and below an arrow that points into the deep blue sky.

During my visit to the Schindler House, the light was bright enough to make it almost impossible to see the projected video "Sun Tunnels" (1978) that documents the original installation of the work in Utah. Color reflections also overwhelmed two black and white photographs, "Concrete Poem" (1968) and "Concrete Visions" (1967). To see these images I had to bob up and down, dodging my own shadow as well as the reflection of the trees in the courtyard. While Schindler's architecture disrupted the viewing of Holt's pieces at that instant, it also called attention to the relationship between inside and outside, as well as to how light changes over time. This was exactly what Holt was exploring in her large-scale earthworks. Like Schindler, she was interested in the process of looking, the poetics of light and shadow, and the nuances of human perception. Together in this exhibition, the two artists' visions become rich companions and counterparts.

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