



**NANCY
HOLT
MASSACHUSETTS**

NANCY HOLT: MASSACHUSETTS

REBECCA UCHILL

Worcester, Barre, Somerville, Medford, Cambridge, Boston, New Bedford, Dennisport, Chatham, Provincetown – these places are my Massachusetts. Here there is perseverance, rigor, ingenuity, fortitude, forbearance, staunchness, rootedness, eccentric individualism, historical presentness, along with formal exteriors, mystic undertones, hothouse academia, antiquated culturati, and the complete and absolute dismissal of the vocal “r.”

— Nancy Holt, “Born: Worcester, 1938,” 1979



Louise Holt, Ernest Milton Holt, and a young Nancy Holt at four months old in Leominster, MA, 1938. Courtesy of Holt/Smithson Foundation and Nancy Holt Records. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

The life – and art – of Nancy Holt (1938–2014) are deeply connected to Massachusetts. She was born in Worcester County in north central Massachusetts, spent her earliest childhood years there, and eventually graduated from Tufts University, in Middlesex County, in 1960, where her traveling retrospective *Sightlines* was later exhibited in 2012. The artist’s relationship to Massachusetts recurs as a touchstone in a number of her artworks and personal reflections. At the outset of a 1992 interview with Scott Gutterman for the Archives of American Art, Holt looked out over New Jersey from her Manhattan home and gently corrected a misimpression: “I’m looking out on *almost* my home state, but not actually my home state. I was born in Massachusetts.” She went on to describe a feeling of transience during her childhood in New Jersey, where her father was stationed for work. “They rented for many, many years, thinking that we were about to move. And I was taught that living in New Jersey wasn’t, like, real life. . . . Real life happens somewhere in New England.”¹

Holt’s childhood was marked by Cape Cod summers and long-distance relationships with New Bedford relatives. In a 2007 interview with James Meyer, Holt described the profound sense of familial distance that came from being apart from the Holt homestead in Massachusetts. “In those days if you lived in New Jersey, and all the relatives lived in Massachusetts, you hardly ever saw each other. . . . Of course, I knew they existed from hearing about them, and I knew that they were connected with me through blood, but the relationship was at a distance, and some of that distance ended up in my work.”² From an artist known for engaging with site, systems, and perception, Holt’s artworks about familial place – to which she is connected through “blood” networks but views from afar – offer an additional dimension for considering these key attributes of her work. The exhibition *Nancy Holt: Massachusetts*, presented in two UMass Dartmouth CVPA campus galleries in the 2021–22 winter season, explores Holt’s relationships with family, networks, and place – and how these themes are particularly vested in her 1991 sculpture *Spinwinder*, located at the entrance to the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, campus.



Nancy Holt, *Spinwinder*, 1991, at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. © Holt/Smithson Foundation. Photographed by Chris Diani, 2021.

Construction process for Nancy Holt, *Spinwinder*, 1991 at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (formerly known as Southeastern Massachusetts University), MA. 35mm color slide. Courtesy of Holt/Smithson Foundation and Nancy Holt Records, Holt *Spinwinder* slide sleeve. Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institution. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.



Spinwinder fabrication for Nancy Holt, 1990–1991. 35mm color slide. Courtesy of Holt/Smithson Foundation and Nancy Holt Records, Holt *Spinwinder* slide sleeve. Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institution. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

Research slides taken by Nancy Holt in preparation for her sculpture *Spinwinder* at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (formerly known as Southeastern Massachusetts University), MA, 1991. 35mm color slide. Courtesy of Holt/Smithson Foundation and Nancy Holt Records. Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institution. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

In 1980, the Massachusetts legislature established a Percent for Art program, dedicating one percent of the budget of state construction projects for works of art. The Massachusetts Art in Public Places program ran for ten years, operating as a collaboration between the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the Division of Capital Planning and Operations, before the program folded in 1991 as a result of administrative challenges and budget cuts.³ Holt's *Spinwinder* was among the last works to be commissioned and produced as part of this program.⁴ The 1985–86 call sought public art for the Science and Engineering Building at Southeastern Massachusetts University (now the Dion building at UMass Dartmouth), establishing a \$96,000 budget for the total project. The call noted, "The university traces its history from two textile schools which opened in 1895. The geographic area is rich in history and ethnic diversity, with strong ties to the maritime and textile industries. . . . The final artwork could take into consideration the history and diverse cultural groups of the surrounding area."⁵

* *Spinwinder*, installed at the campus entrance, delivers on the desire for an artwork connected to local industrial histories – to the trappings of the maritime trade, with a title that "evokes boat names," and its pointed formal associations with the area's historically significant textile industry (in which Holt's grandfather, Samuel Holt, was a significant player).⁶ With six interconnected tubes spraying outward from a central cylinder, which can be rotated on a track, leading to large spools encircled with steel cord, the work has direct formal relationship to textile machineries, including a rising-shed dobbie and calendaring machine that Nancy Holt documented in slides while on a preparatory visit to the campus during the creation of the sculpture. At that time she also photographed the selected site for her sculpture and its adjacent observatory – a feature of the built environment that would have interested Holt given her ongoing responsiveness to celestial phenomena in her artworks.⁷ Her slides also reveal a visit to 1213 Purchase Street, which housed the New Bedford Textile School, where her grandfather taught. In describing the conception of *Spinwinder* in an essay credited 1991/2010, Holt narrates the industrial history of the region through the lens of personal family memory:

I never lived in New Bedford, but on our annual trips from New Jersey to see the relatives there, I gradually got acquainted with the clapboard houses, the widow's walks, the ships, and the old textile mills so characteristic of New Bedford and the nearby coastal region. In my memory are glimpses, first of the interior of my grandparents' house on Locust Street, then, as I got older, of historic sites like the Whaling Museum and the Seamen's Bethel on Johnny Cake Hill. . . .



View of the exterior of the New Bedford Textile School building at 1213 Purchase St. in New Bedford, MA, 1913. Courtesy of Claire T. Carney Library Archives and Special Collections, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. PCS_NBTS_1913.

Nancy Holt and team during *Spinwinder* construction, week of September 8, 1991. Installation of aluminum tubing "spindles" and final touches. Courtesy of Claire T. Carney Library Archives and Special Collections, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Construction process for Nancy Holt, *Spinwinder* at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (formerly known as Southeastern Massachusetts University), MA, 1991. 35mm color slide. Courtesy of Holt/Smithson Foundation and Nancy Holt Records, Holt *Spinwinder* slide sleeve. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

As my grandfather showed me around town, he would tell me about the history of New Bedford, how it was transformed from a whaling port into an industrial center. . . .

As the mills sprang up, immigrants came in droves to take the new jobs created. By 1900, 70 percent of the townspeople were first- or second-generation immigrants, mainly English, Irish, and French Canadian. Many Portuguese, Polish, Jewish, and Cape Verdean immigrants soon followed. . . .

My head was spinning with these recollections of the somber, yet strangely irresistible, textile mills when I visited the university campus in 1988 to look at several possible sculpture sites.⁸



In a formal relationship akin to her many sculptural works that solicit a viewer's perception through constructed apparatuses, Holt's framing of the area's history was both grounded in and filtered through family experience. Her grandfather Samuel Holt was the head of the Department of Designing at the New Bedford Textile School, one of two regional textile-industry institutions that later merged and became Southeastern Massachusetts University (SMU).⁹ In creating *Spinwinder*, Holt embedded a number of textile production artifacts in a box within the concrete foundation of the sculpture, nicknamed a "time-capsule" in a photo caption in the campus newspaper (and sparking a discussion about its eventual unearthing – the written proposal and material permanence of cement that encases the box suggest that this attribution and treatment were not intended by the artist).¹⁰ Carolyn Bertrand, reporting for the student newspaper *The Torch*, names a handful of the buried artifacts: "spools, a piece of fabric, a wooden sock form, and a bottle of dye."¹¹ Through the recent discovery of an undeveloped roll of film in the university archives, and other sources, further identifications of artifacts became possible: parts of a spinneret machine and a power loom; a shuttle for weaving; and the attribution of a fabric piece, a Jacquard textile banner imprinted with the SMU logo.¹² All of these materials, along with many other archival materials presented in this exhibition, have been digitized for the Digital Archives Collections at the UMass Dartmouth Claire T. Carney Library.

Holt's essay on *Spinwinder* makes clear her significant connection to the region. Notably, her remembrances of the childhood visits to New Bedford that were the basis of that meaningful personal history begin with memories of the interior of her grandparents' home, and move from there outward, into the streets of the surrounding town. This family house, at 39 Locust Street, is documented in Holt's 1974 work *Underscan*, a nine-minute video that chronicles letters exchanged with her Aunt Ethel (Samuel Holt's daughter, who inherited the home) over the ten years from 1962 to 1972.

Nancy Holt, *Underscan* (stills), 1974. Single-channel video, black and white, sound duration: 9 minutes 12 seconds. Courtesy of and © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

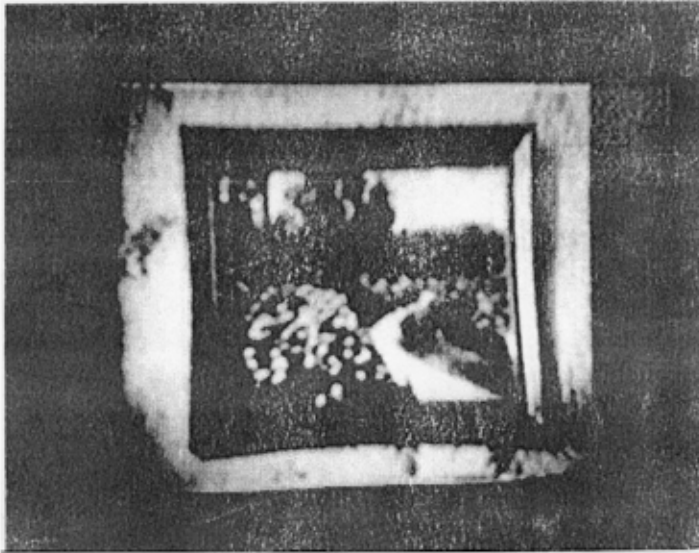


Nancy Holt, *Ransacked* (detail), 1980. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Original photograph reproduced in *Ransacked: Aunt Ethel: An Ending*, artist's book, 11 x 8 1/2 (27.9 x 21.6 cm) (New York: Printed Matter in association with Lapp Princess Press, 1980). Courtesy of and © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

— *Underscan* tracks the cyclical nature of the everyday life of one woman, with repeated reportage, excerpted from Ethel's letters, on the weather, social events, short trips, medical visits, home repairs, caring for boarders, holidays, meals, and deaths. Major life events, such as a marriage, merge with the banalities of house chores and social calls through the monotone voiceover delivery. Ethel's home is chronicled through a series of straight photographs – compressed and resized for the screen through an “underscanning” process – of details of “the old New England homes of my childhood” described in Holt's 1979 essay on Massachusetts for the deCordova Museum's *Born in Boston* exhibition: “Sandwich glass, washstands with pitchers and wash basins, flowered wall paper, tea sets, embroidered doilies, crocheted warmers, fringed lampshades, glass snow-scene balls that ‘snowed’ when shaken, metronomes, gilded frames, yellowing photo-portraits, padded family albums, patch-work quilts, lace tablecloths, huge kitchens with pantries, oil cloth covers, chintz curtains, full-size aprons, and glass doorknobs.”¹³

□ The home is generalized as an avatar of Massachusetts in the 1979 essay, while also being a highly specific portrait of one person in the 1974 video. In a contemporaneous discussion at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Holt said of the work: “All of these photographs together give you an indication – without you ever seeing my aunt – of who my aunt is. . . . The whole house reflects my aunt.”¹⁴ In the same conversation, Holt also noted that the video medium accomplished an “extending” into the world through broadcast.¹⁵ Video art was a means to extend an artistic practice through contemporary systems of circulation, and a means to experiment with mediation through contemporary technologies – both properties that Bruce Kurtz explored in his 1973 dispatch on the genre that featured Holt's *Locating #2*.¹⁶

Aunt Ethel and her Locust Street home are revisited in Holt's artist book *Ransacked*, published in 1980 by the art press Printed Matter. The book follows Holt as she closes a physical distance between herself and her sick aunt, who she has learned is being mistreated by a caretaker. Holt, then working on *Stone Enclosure: Rock Rings* (1977–78) in Bellingham, Washington, drives cross-country back to New York, and shortly thereafter to New Bedford, accompanied by a close friend, media artist and writer Ardele Lister.¹⁷ The duo conspire to rescue Ethel, and encounter a shocking scene of disrepair in the family homestead described with such care in Holt's prior essay and video. The house at 39 Locust Street was devastated by neglect, theft, and abuse, with food grease caked on the kitchen stove, furniture upended, and almost all of Ethel's possessions missing. “It was a sensory assault,” Lister remembers.¹⁸



This is
 a FACSIMILE COPY
 of a PHOTOCOPY
 of a PHOTOGRAPH
 of a VIDEOTAPED IMAGE
 of a VIDEOTAPED IMAGE
 of a PHOTOGRAPH
 of a PAINTING
 of a PHOTOGRAPH
 of a GARDEN

Nancy Holt (American 1938–2014), *Facsimile*, 1992. Created for the exhibition *International Fax Show*, Denver School of Art, Denver, CO. Courtesy of and © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

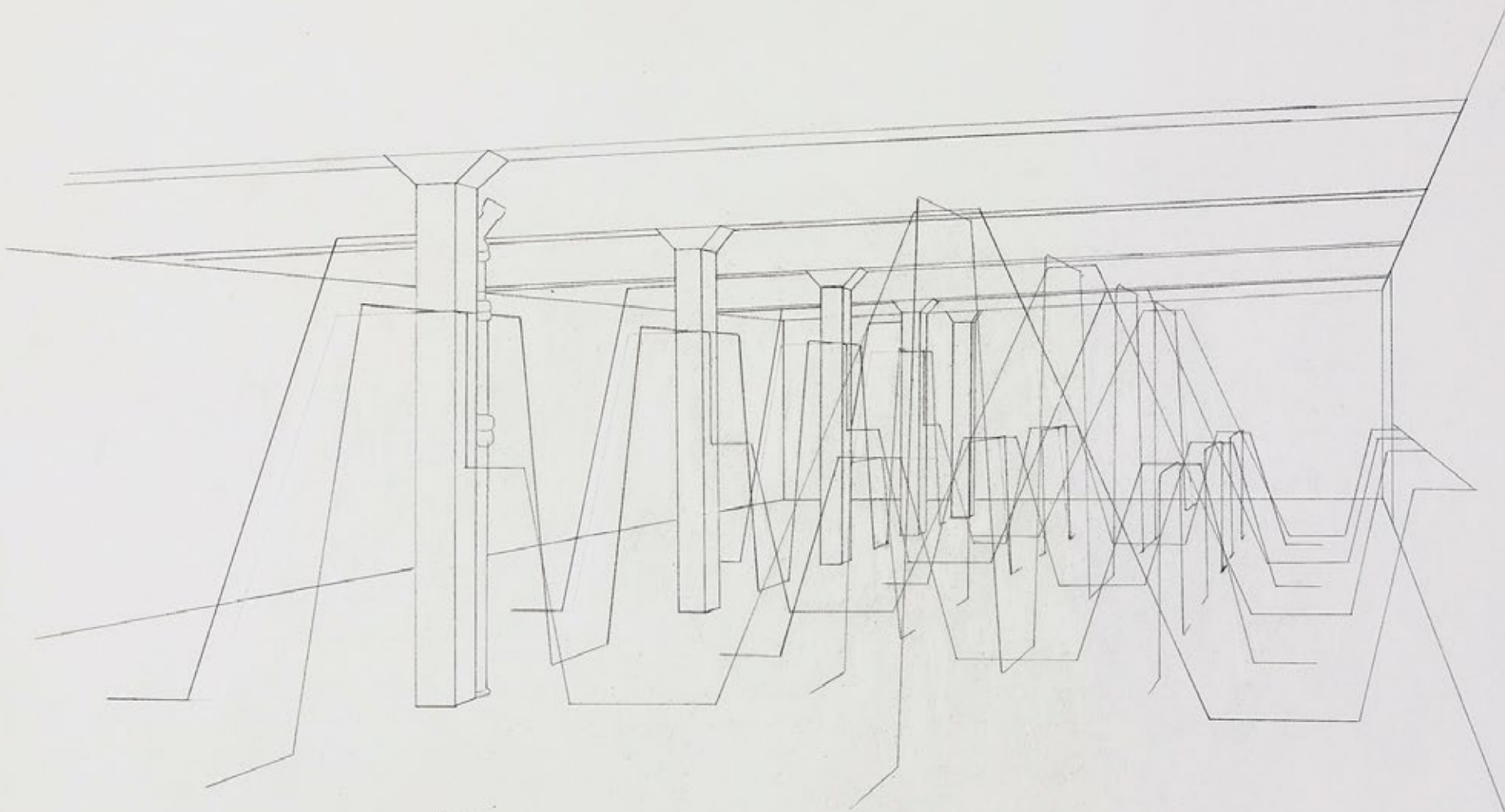
Ransacked documents a tragic tale from close proximity, told from the perspectives of Ethel and Nancy Holt respectively (in each of two parts of the book). Holt methodically and deliberately constructs this iterative narrative as a container for addressing her viewer/reader. It “sets up a structure” to contain emotional content that is more intimate than other narrative content in Holt’s work, through a distancing operation that prevents audiences from “being overwhelmed by it.”¹⁹ This approach replicates formally the simultaneous connection and distance that pervade Holt’s relationship to New Bedford as a *place* more than a *site*.²⁰

Holt returned to the trope of mediated distancing by revisiting 39 Locust Street in *Facsimile Artwork* (1993), a work produced as a fax machine transmission conveying a highly mediated image of a landscape painting (by Samuel Holt) that was depicted in *Underscan*. The work declares itself to be “a FACSIMILE COPY/of a PHOTOCOPY/of a PHOTOGRAPH/of a VIDEOTAPED IMAGE/of a VIDEOTAPED IMAGE/of a PHOTOGRAPH/of a PAINTING/of a PHOTOGRAPH/of a GARDEN.” Describing the process in a 2001 gift of an edition of the work sent to Wes Nisker and Terry Vandiver, via fax, Holt explained:

The painting is by my grandfather, a painting of a photograph of a garden. A photo of the painting appeared in a videotape, *Underscan* that I made in 1980 [sic]. To make the tape I used an underscanning process, which meant I had to videotape the videotape. The videotape was then photographed to get an image from videotape distribution. I entered it in the first ever *International Fax Show* in Denver in 1992. So it is a work that moves through time, as well as image transformations.²¹

An earlier variant of the work was printed in *Art-Rite* no. 7, with a short text by Holt on her strategy of video “distancing.” Describing *Underscan* as a “visual distancing at 3 removes,” Holt underscored the repetitious nature of time and pictorial transformation: “Certain yearly occurrences repeat, making an auditory rhythm, which coincides with the cycle of visual changes.”²²

- Holt’s deliberate and methodical inscribing and reinscribing of repeated narrative and replicated visual artifacts have the effect of deteriorating the specificity of memory conveyed by either, flattening proximity to the original. Holt takes an inverse approach to her “Systems Works,” such as *Catch Basin* (1982) and *Ventilation Series I-IV* (1985–92), which elaborate or augment the function, visibility, and tangibility of infrastructures of drainage, ventilation piping, and the like. In multiple writings, Holt pointed to the fact that contemporary Western societies tend to hide these features of the built environment, while water-conveyance systems were the cornerstones of earlier civilizations. In *Electrical System* (1982),

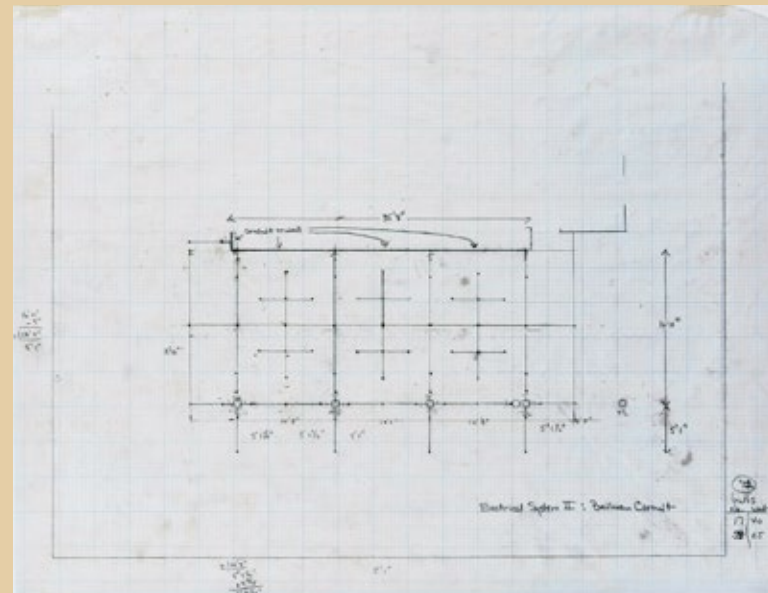
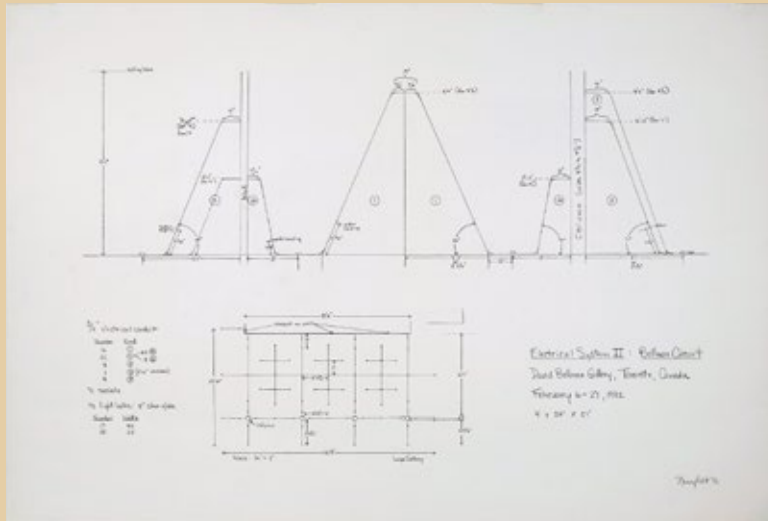


$\frac{3}{4}$ " Conduit
72 Sockets and 5' clear globe light bulbs
9' x 24' x 51'

Study for Electrical System II:
Bellman Circuit

Installation: David Bellman Gallery
Toronto Feb, 1982

Henry Holt '82



This page and preceding pages:
 Nancy Holt (American 1938–2014), Study for *Electrical System II: Bellman Circuit*, 1982. Graphite on paper, sheet. 27 1/16 x 40 1/16 in. (68.8 x 101.8 cm). Collection Art Gallery of Ontario. © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

Holt drew on the existing electrical systems of buildings through elaborate systems of conduit spatializing electric lighting in their site-responsive spaces (the work was initially tested in her studio, and then in the John Weber Gallery, New York, and the David Bellman Gallery, Toronto). In preparing to exhibit a 2021 installation of *Electrical System*, maintaining fidelity to Holt's ethos of site-responsiveness was key. Describing the recent presentation of the work at Lismore Castle Arts, Holt/Smithson Foundation Program Manager William T. Carson noted: "*Electrical System* needed to interact with each building's unique systems, structure, and materials."²³ At UMass Dartmouth, which hosts the first posthumous United States presentation of *Electrical System*, this objective meant evaluating design for our CVPA Campus Gallery, as well as selecting appropriate light bulbs (as the original incandescent bulbs are no longer standard). Over the course of a year, technician Shingo Furukawa, with electrical engineering students Matthew LaVoie, Derrick Manu, and Shedricke Mulbah (all '21), consulted with the Holt/Smithson Foundation to bring this installation to light. In the context of *Nancy Holt: Massachusetts*, the immersive gallery work offers a formal foil to *Spinwinder* on the front lawn on the other side of campus, while also exemplifying a different dimension of relational site-specificity.

Through Holt's personal and artistic relationship to Massachusetts, we see a connection to place that is both intimate and distanced – one that invites its audience to become embedded and to “look through.” This is a relationship that is replicated in the spatial design of many of Holt's larger environmental works and media artworks, including *Spinwinder*, with its invitation to participate in the figurative looming and weaving of place and historical memory through entering the sculpture and rotating its moving parts that surround the central burial space. Ultimately, Holt considers the (history-infused) site and the (perceptual) body to be connected, and her very personal biographical family system provides an important framework for understanding this relationship. As she wrote in the conclusion to *Ransacked*:

To me the story of the dying of my aunt and the falling apart of her house will always be interconnected, the gradual decline of her body through cancer coinciding with the harsh invasion and deterioration of her long-cherished house. In my efforts to get my aunt out of situations that both she and I could barely comprehend, I acted with a sense of fate and mortality, and understood something about kinship and also something about place. This plain old house, which has now twice been the subject of my art, is my physical connection with genes and blood and family history. All the memories of the Holt family reside now only in the house, which has passed into other hands, and in myself, the last member of my family.²⁴



Nancy Holt in Leominster, MA, 1939. Courtesy of Holt/Smithson Foundation and Nancy Holt Records. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution © Holt/Smithson Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, New York.

THANK YOU

Thank you to the Holt/Smithson Foundation – above all, Lisa Le Feuvre, along with William T. Carson, Edna Riley, and Natalie Good – for their support of UMass's efforts to honor Nancy Holt, Ethel Holt, and Samuel Holt's legacies through this initiative. Thank you to the CVPA Dean's Office, the Leduc Center for Civic Engagement, and CVPA Galleries, especially Gallery Director Viera Levitt, for their financial and logistical support. The exhibitions, research, and overall initiative were made possible by an award from the Henry Luce Foundation's American Art Program, and the dedicated efforts and generosity of colleagues, friends, and thinkers including Allison Cywin, Shingo Furukawa, Michelle Bowers, Ben Jones, Kirsten Swenson, Lasse Antonsen, Eric Lintala, Charlotte Hamlin, DeeDee Halleck, and Ardele Lister.

EPIGRAPH

Nancy Holt, "Nancy Holt, Born: Worcester, 1938;" *Born in Boston: Sixteen Prominent Artists Who Were Born or Raised in the Boston Area but Who Developed Their Careers Elsewhere* (Lincoln, MA: deCordova Museum, 1979), 23. Reprinted as "Massachusetts," in *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, exh. cat., ed. Alena J. Williams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 256.

END NOTES

- 1 Nancy Holt, oral history interview by Scott Gutterman, July 6, 1992. Emphasis added. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- 2 Nancy Holt, unedited interview by James Meyer, 2007, conducted for Williams's edited volume *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, Nancy Holt's digital files, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, and Holt/Smithson Foundation, Santa Fe, NM.
- 3 Massachusetts Cultural Council, *Massachusetts Art in Public Places Program: A Guide to the Art Collection*, 1991, 2. Digitized at <https://archive.org/details/massachusettsart00meny/page/n71/mode/2up>.
- 4 And, according to an article in the UMass Dartmouth *Observer*, the sculpture was "the last to be completed." "Then and Now" (unattributed, probably Maeve Hickok), *Observer* 1, no. 1 (November 1991), 2.
- 5 *Massachusetts One Percent For Art Program: Call To Artists/Guidelines and Applications 1985–86*, Arts Extension Service, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 3. The project ultimately cost \$81,500.
- 6 Nancy Holt, proposal for *Spinwinder*, June 23, 1988, "CVPA Art Gallery Directorpapers," Claire T. Carney Library Archives and Special Collections, Dartmouth, MA.
- 7 Many thanks to artist Charlotte Hamlin; Kate Irvin, Curator of the Department of Costume and Textiles at the RISD Museum; Brooks Hagan, Interim Dean of Fine Arts and Professor of Textiles, RISD; and Rosie Amato Bauer, UMass Dartmouth Integrated Studio Arts class of '22, for their assistance in researching the iconography of Nancy Holt's and Samuel Holt's historical textiles and references.

8 Nancy Holt, "Spinwinder," *Nancy Holt: Sightlines*, exh. cat., ed. Alena J. Williams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 140–42.

9 The New Bedford Textile School and Bradford Durfee Textile School in Fall River became the New Bedford Institute of Technology and Bradford Durfee College of Technology, as the Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute, before being renamed Southeastern Massachusetts University in 1969. This history is chronicled at <https://www.umassd.edu/about/history-of-umass-dartmouth/>.

10 "Spinwinder in the Early Stages" unattributed photograph caption, *The Torch*, Volume 38, issue 6, October 18, 1991, A-3.

11 Carolyn Bertrand. "Spinwinder Piece in Progress," *The Torch* 38, no. 1 (September 3, 1991), A-18. Bertrand also wrote that Holt moved to use a gray-colored paint (a divergence from the black of her proposal) to align the sculpture with its industrial references and to set the work in greater contrast with the surrounding landscape.

12 Charlotte Hamlin, conversation with the author, June 14, 2021 (virtual); Judith Farrar, conversation with the author, April 21, 2021 (virtual); Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 271.

13 Nancy Holt, "Nancy Holt, Born: Worcester, 1938," 23.

14 Nancy Holt, "An Evening with Nancy Holt," recorded transcript, Cineprobe Series, Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 9, 1979. ©The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Firenze.

15 Nancy Holt, "An Evening with Nancy Holt."

16 Bruce Kurtz, "Video Is Being Invented," *Arts Magazine* (December/January 1973), 41.

17 Ardele Lister, conversation with the author, August 4, 2021 (virtual).

18 Ardele Lister, conversation with the author, October 15, 2021 (by phone).

19 Nancy Holt, oral history interview by Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz, August 3, 1993, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

20 I am indebted to Lucy Lippard for this framing, which will be discussed in greater detail in my forthcoming text on *Spinwinder* for Holt/Smithson Foundation's on-line Scholarly Text Program.

21 Nancy Holt, fax to Wes Nisker and Terry Vandiver, December 18, 2001, Nancy Holt's digital files, Nancy Holt Estate Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, and Holt/Smithson Foundation, Santa Fe, NM.

22 Nancy Holt, contribution to special issue, *Video, Art-Rite 7* (Autumn 1974), 15.

23 William T. Carson, "Electrical System: An Archaeology of an Artwork," *Light and Language*, exh. cat. (Waterford, Ireland: Lismore Castle Arts, 2021), 68.

24 Nancy Holt, *Ransacked: Aunt Ethel, An Ending*, artist's book (New York: Printed Matter, in association with Lapp Princess Press, 1980), 36.

NANCY HOLT: MASSACHUSETTS



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