

High Desert Test Sites

VARIOUS VENUES, ARIZONA, CALIFORNIA & NEW MEXICO



My first impression of High Desert Test Sites (HDS) is decidedly negative. Los Angeles hipsters in designer boots, high-waisted shorts and sunhats scramble up a desert wash in Joshua Tree, California, to view Léa Donnan's *Desert Appliqué* (all works 2013). The nomadic settlement of crocheted blankets is beautiful, if static in its nostalgia for homesteading and American craft culture. But viewers leave footprints, damaging flora. I struggle with any artistic statement that holds the potential to destroy what it attempts to celebrate. HDS teeters on this precipice – on one side awareness, on the other exploitation. The hope of participation risks the cynicism of tourism. These are contradictions that appeared within the 2013 itinerary, in the locations as well as the projects. Over the course of the event, I came to view HDS itself as the work, testing the limitations of community and individual effort, which are essential limitations of art in the world at large.

With her *A-Z West* (An Institute for Investigative Living) based in Joshua Tree, Andrea Zittel co-founded High Desert Test Sites in 2002 with Lisa Anne Auerbach, John Connelly, Shaun Caley-Regen and Andy Stillpass. The group invited their friends to the desert to make and view art outside of their usual practices, while investigating the intersection of art with everyday life. For the 2013 edition, HDS hit the road for the first time, stretching to Albuquerque, New Mexico,

in an attempt to lessen the impact on Joshua Tree and extend the intention of HDS to other communities. It was also the first time the initiative followed an open-call process, the selection committee comprising Zittel (who remains most active of the founders), Dave Hickey, Libby Lumpkin and HDS managing director Aurora Tang. They narrowed down the submissions to about 60 artists and an additional ten locations, many of which are uncharted artistic enclaves. The collection is entirely too much to cover in a week, especially if we include all the local oddities and permanent works HDS has added to the itinerary.

Initiation for HDS 2013 takes place at the Palms in Wonder Valley, where the collective dark: 30 presents *Array*, a row of large pinwheels stretching into the desert. As the evening sky turns to night, handmade fireworks are lit, causing the wheels to spin, one at a time from far to near. *Array* is purposefully anti-climatic, celebrating the idea of making and sharing rather than victory. Many of the other performances throughout the week are likewise remarkable because they are so unremarkable; even those with a strong visual element are essentially performative, conceptual and ephemeral. For instance, Catharine Stebbins's *Desert Traces* begins as an installation that remembers family camp-outs and ends as a camp-out for HDS participants. And, for *Captured in the West*, Pilar Conde takes Polaroids

of HDS visitors in a historic Route 66 hotel, where other tourists do pretty much the same thing.

Before I leave the Joshua Tree area, I catch Harald Kanz's rather un-ceremonial *Samovar Tea Ceremony*. It is about the work. Kanz pours water into the pot. He places the wood in the burner. He lights it, fuels it with small chunks of wood. He serves pastries and fruit. He cuts the lemon and fills the sugar bowl. Kanz attempts to localize the ceremony in the gulch by picking dry brush to add to the flame, but for me the piece remains problematic because the location doesn't matter, and there are many less sensitive habitats than the one he (or HDS) chose.

As the caravan heads east, the LA crowd drops off, leaving a group of about 30 enthusiastic artists and travellers. I jump in a rental car with Michael lauch, who has been working on his performance, *Cover Songs*, for the last year. He hitchhiked across the country using song lyrics stained into blankets to get people to stop. The performance is a recounting of his interactions with these people, which he will give later in the week, pacing along the rim of a hole cut through the volcanic rock of El Malpais National Monument in New Mexico.

We catch up with the group at the Bureau of Land Management campsite, where Stebbins has set up. We build a fire, we swap stories and know-how, we drink wine and rum, and some of us stay up talking



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nonsense while the fire burns out. Some version of this becomes ritual each day, as the group meets for dinner and camping. After the camaraderie in Crown King, Arizona, on Wednesday, Lars Fisk offers me the top bunk of his VW Vanagon to get out of the cold felt at 5,771 feet. We ride up the gravel road to Crown King, listening to Gogol Bordello to drown out the rattling camper, which he has outfitted to look like a self-storage unit. It's a one-liner wrapped in a serious commentary on the growing business of storing extra stuff. We follow *Hotshots*, an installation of seven yellow viewing boxes, up to the town. Custom made by Saskia Jordá and Victor Sidy, the boxes offer some beautifully composed views of the valley and hills that coincide with a narrative remembering the firefighters who saved the town from the 2012 Gladiator Fire. (Arizona wildfires are given names.) We are closer, here, to interacting with the community than any other community we visit, and the disparity couldn't be better articulated than by the juxtaposition of Olav Westphalen's comedic performance, *Even Steven*, in a rustic saloon and the karaoke session that follows. Westphalen binds and weighs down a dancer so that he can dance as well as her; he asks everyone carrying more than US\$50 to deposit the excess in a jar and everyone carrying less than \$50 to take their share; karaoke, meanwhile, begins with the karaoke master's wife singing 'The Pussy Cat Song'.

In the morning, I continue on to Arcosanti, Arizona, with Emily Wobb – who came out to Joshua Tree from Pittsburg to work with Jesse Sugarmann on his project *We Build Excitement* – in her car. An experimental artist community built by the mystic architect Paolo Soleri, who died last year, Arcosanti is worth the trip just to see the grounds: Soleri built the compact 'urban laboratory' to propose alternatives to urban sprawl and it has become an artistic community housing only a fraction of the population he had imagined. The best performance there takes place in a field on the opposite side of the canyon, where a herd of deer darts in response to yipping coyotes. I take advantage of the downtime to make a first attempt at reading *The Rose*, a book of concrete poetry by sculptor Adam Marnie and the poet Ed Steck, which they'll read in Petrified Forest National Park the next day. Steck's words respond to collages Marnie made from a photo of hydrangeas in a vase on a white table. *The Rose* is a dense and difficult book to read, full of hard-to-visualize adjectives and awkward structural philosophy, that I don't finish reading. However, it comes to life at the reading. I ride with Aurora Tang through the

Petrified Forest. Any one of the viewing areas along the way could pass for an installation, quartered tree trunks aligned against the rocky desert. At Newspaper Rock, a couple of park rangers tell us we need a permit to perform in the park, before saying that we can do it if we just stay out of the way of other visitors. The poem opens up, the second half of it being a repeat of the first with certain parts (the hard-to-visualize adjectives and awkward structural philosophy) redacted, demonstrating how the beauty of language, like that of the rose, exists within complex frameworks often built with utility or exactitude in mind.

Before travelling through to Albuquerque on Friday, I stop to catch lauch's project in El Malpais. He recalls a man's hairy hands and the tattoo of an upside-down question mark. He describes men who ask to pray with him, as well as a man who has given up on life. lauch relates how he began to see himself as an interloper, US\$200 in his pocket and a credit card in his backpack. The piece doesn't have an end – lauch, standing in a crack of volcanic rock, just turns off the music after describing his arrival in California – but we are finished, shaken out of the art by the way it affected the artist.

HTDS is almost an anti-art experience. I only fully appreciate that on Saturday, the last day of the tour, while listening to the collective GWC Investigators at the Tamarin Institute. The trio spent a week in Turkey Springs, Arizona, where Travis Walton claims to have been abducted by aliens. I was sceptical, imagining the privilege it takes for three grant-funded art-school grads to run into the wilderness to test atmospheric memory for the trace of an alien presence. But I came to think of what they did as an environment-aided psychological experiment. They discovered that, rather than the site, they were observing themselves. This, combined with the thought that a place holds memories, offered a new frame for viewing HTDS. If the event is only a vehicle for the making and the sharing of art, the art illuminates the communities in which it resides. The point is not to bring oneself to a location, but to let the location come to oneself. The 2013 selections – almost entirely ephemeral and site-specific – leave their locations intact, impressing upon us that place is the true art HTDS is attempting to express.

The destruction of place is reprehensible only when it's done with awareness of what one is destroying. And our footprints are the record of our responsibility to place.

MATTHEW IRWIN

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Léa Donnan
Desert Appliqué, 2013,
installation view

2
Bob Dornberger & Jim Piatt
Secret Restaurant, 2013,
installation view

3
Olav Westphalen
Even Steven, 2013, performance
documentation



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