

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

UNDER THE SUN

NICO ISRAEL ON HIGH DESERT TEST SITES



Top right: Jack Pierson,
Nothing, 1995.
Installation view,
High Desert Test
Sites, 2003. Photo:
Julie Chiofalo.

HDTs SEEMS MORE OF A TOTAL EXPERIENCE THAN MOST ENVIRONMENTAL ART. IT'S AS THOUGH THE SURREALIST FANTASY OF ART FUSED WITH LIFE HAS COME TO FRUITION IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERT.

WELCOME TO THE REAL of the Desert: rocks, heat, cacti, empty beer cans, all-terrain vehicles, horizon, fire ants, lizards—and contemporary art.

It's Memorial Day weekend, and we're heading east from Los Angeles on the Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway, more prosaically known as Route 10. We pass Diamond Bar, Rancho Cucamonga, and other barely distinguishable towns, about two hours later approaching the giant windmills of Morongo that mark the passage from the semi-arid desert to the arid extra-dry desert. Our destination is High Desert Test Sites, a project providing alternative space in the Southern California desert for more than thirty artists to make and show experimental work. Organized by artist Andrea Zittel, gallerists John Connelly and Shaun Caley Regen, and collector Andy Stillpass, HDTs, according to its website, undertakes "to challenge traditional conventions of ownership, property and patronage." My friend Cindy Ojeda and I decided to see how this lofty, if quixotic, goal actually looks, as it were, on the ground.

On the Morongo Indian Reservation, which straddles Route 10, there's an enormous mall of designer outlet stores, a casino, and a huge, photogenic dinosaur made of concrete that was featured in the film *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*. These landmarks demarcate a significant geological and cultural cleavage: Toward the right is Route 111 and the dubious glamour of Palm Springs; toward the left, a half hour away, is the upper or "high" desert of Joshua Tree and Twentynine Palms, location of U2's epiphanies, Gram Parsons's fatal overdose and surreptitious cremation, and the country's largest Marine Corps training facility, the Air-Ground Combat Center.

Taking the left fork on our art-viewing Big Adventure,

we eventually notice a forlorn temporary carnival plunked down in a vacant lot, its Ferris wheel rotating languidly with a few glum kids in its seats. We've arrived in the town of Yucca Valley, location of the first of seven "test sites" spread out over sixty miles. Stopping for a moment in a nearby Sears parking lot to check our directions, we see a vintage-car show attracting a smattering of admirers to its cherry '63 Corvair, '65 Mustang, and '69 GTO convertible occupying a row of parking spaces. A '66 El Camino rumbles up, with red flames painted on its side, giant steer horns fastened on its hood, and hide covering its overhead-cam engine. It looks like a mobile barbecue.

Site One, HDTs's Welcome Center of sorts, is only a couple of blocks away. Here, on the walls of a small storefront, are drawings and paintings by young local artists in the text-heavy, punk-album style of early Raymond Pettibon. "Hey," says Dave Hopkins, a twenty-one-year-old Yuccan with shaved head, nose ring, and two arms full of tattoos. He shakes our hands in greeting, gives us a map to the sites, and sells us the HDTs catalogue while his friend stands nearby, looking at us and laughing mirthlessly but uncontrollably in the staccato rhythm of a machine gun. It's 11 AM and the friend reeks of gin. Drawing on my own fond Southern California high school recollections, I think I recognize the teeth-gnashing jitters of a meth head.

Leaving Site One rather hastily, we drive out past Shear Illusions—the penchant for puns for hair-salon names is apparently a nationwide phenomenon—and, following the HDTs map, turn left at Old Woman Springs Road and head north toward Victorville. Snowcapped mountains glimmer in the distance, and in the foreground, a row of trailers squat in the sun. About fifteen minutes later we arrive at sandy and bumpy Gamma Gulch Road, location of Site Two. We park, get out of the car, and, it being well over 100 blazing degrees, retrieve our ridiculously wide-brimmed sun hats from the trunk.

Wandering aimlessly—there are no signs or "wall" texts, but we are equipped with our catalogues—we soon come across a nine-foot-high wooden X amid the Joshua trees. The sculptural installation, by Wade Guyton, seems to offer architectural support for the trees, marking the spot of its own algebraic indeterminacy amid the rocks,

Below: Vintage-car show, Yucca Valley, CA, 2003. Photo: Cindy Ojeda.
Top right: Jack Pierson, *Nothing*, 1995. Installation view, High Desert Test Sites, 2003. Photo: Julie Chiofalo.





dormant shrubs, and other forms of rump nature that surround it. Nearby is a lovely little purple concrete octopus, by Kate Costello, which looks as though it has been washed a hundred miles ashore onto the parched desert floor, where it now sits perkily. Fifty yards up a dirt path is Tao Urban's oasis-like *Water Kiosk (Tap Water Pavilion)*, 2003, a roofed structure with four large containers of water from different California rivers, the premise of which, according to the catalogue, is "to create a place for people to sit in the shade, drink a little water and take in the landscape." These instructions are pleasant to follow, and probably necessary: The heat is starting to make me dizzy.

Driving back toward Yucca in our mercifully air-conditioned car, we pass Pioneertown, which had been built in 1946 as a movie set for westerns, featuring a "Main Street," a covered wagon, an OK Corral, and a swing-doored saloon. I half expect somebody to be tossed out of the touristy watering hole at any moment for creating a ruckus. One of the original investors in the town was Roy Rogers, who also built the nearby bowling alley. I discover later that Ed Ruscha has a house out here, which somehow seems right: Pioneertown, like Ruscha's work, conveys a meaningful vacancy.

All this driving makes us as peckish as the buzzards we see perched on the roadside creosote bushes, so, turning left on Route 62, we stop for lunch at the Country Kitchen. A gregarious Cambodian woman takes our order while a Native

American man surlily cooks up food in the kitchen. The clientele is mostly old men in wheelchairs: Are they wounded veterans, we wonder, or just run-of-the-mill convalescent-home clients? Someone comes in with an American flag that he is lovingly refurling. I begin to notice the phalanx of tied yellow ribbons and the handwritten "Welcome Home Troops" signs lining the street. This is the first weekend in which some of the Marine battalions, fresh from the invasion of Iraq, will be returning to the area. We order the homemade apple pie, which is delicious, and leave.

We drive out past the grid of roads, which seems to have been blasted out of the landscape, to Test

later that McFeely has put a small billboard out here with an unflattering portrait of George W. Bush, announcing "Loot the Art but Save the Oil," which is destroyed in a matter of hours.)

Turning right at the yellow bail bonds sign, we stop by Andrea Zittel's property, A-Z West, location of Site Five. Wandering onto the lunarlike terrain, we see some of the artist's trademark living pods painted in various hues and designs, a gutted trailer with A-Z logo, and a dozen or so three-foot-high metal music stand-like structures, on which are

placed papier-mâché squares drying in the sun. (Zittel has been recycling her paper waste to create art; the squares resemble open books containing weighty, impenetrable text.) Her house is a splendid example of the utopian impulse that drives most of her work and, it seems, her life: Located at the foot of a giant mountain of rocks that look as if they have been spewed by a dyspeptic volcano, the modest, '50s-era structure has a sunken brick horse trough/sitting area in front and a metal bathtub in the backyard. Peering into a window, we see a room that is equal parts Bauhaus and frat house, with a large central space that fuses kitchen, living room, and den.

A bit concerned that that we are in fact trespassing, we stroll up the adjacent wash and are greeted by a handwritten sign affixed to a tall post, appropriately announcing I'M SORRY. Chris Kasper's apology in the desert looks particularly sincere amid Chris Beas's giant badminton court

and a purple plastic sculpture of jellyfish stranded on the desert floor by Josh Beckman. On the top of a hill is Leo Villareal's sequenced light sculpture, *The Joshua Tree of Life*, based on a fusion of Old Testament and Mormon narratives, which seems to be pointing the way to a new Zion (or beckoning to a light-seeking UFO). Nearby are Joseph Heidebrecht's two large paintings of female figures left to parch; circling each painting is cut-out text that relies on the position of the sun to make it legible as shadow. As we leave, we pass Kahty Chenoweth's little booth for her Personal Space Wear, Oiticica-like garments for desert exploration; heat, dust, and embarrassment prevent us from trying them on. Driving off, we hear coyotes commencing their twilight howls, and by the side of the road a thickly bearded acid-casualty waves slowly, silently, and rhythmically at us, like a sun-damaged Michelin Man.

Site Three, located on public land on a dry lake bed. The map promises us an "impromptu shooting range that has been assimilated into the test sites inventory by Hal McFeely," which, in small print, it advises us to "view at [our] own risk." A pair of women on three-wheeled motorized dirt bikes zoom past us in halter tops, hooting joyfully, and off in the distance we can see a war cloud of dust kicked up by a noisy swarm of off-road vehicles. There is a lone golf ball by the side of the road—sand shot practice?—and cardboard is liberally strewn everywhere.

Approaching a crossroads, we look for a ten o'clock turnoff that would take us to the shooting range, where abandoned washing machines have been turned by high-caliber rifles to lacelike sculptures, but after a half hour of searching, our internal compasses begin to swing wildly, so we head back to downtown Twentynine Palms. (I hear



Clockwise from top left: Wade Guyton, *Joshua Tree National Monument*, 2003. Installation view, High Desert Test Sites, 2003. Photo: Joshua White. Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Wagon Station* customized by Russell Whitten (a.k.a. *Freak Russ*), 2003. Installation view, High Desert Test Sites, 2003. Photo: Cindy Ojeda. Josh Beckman, *Low Tidings*, 2003. Installation view, High Desert Test Sites, 2003. Photo: Cindy Ojeda. Chris Kasper, *I'm Sorry*, 2002. Installation view,