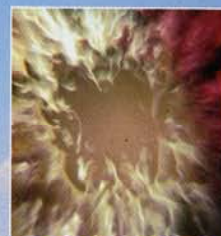


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A TEXT ABOUT HIGH DESERT TEST SITES



LISA ANNE AUERBACH & ANDREA ZITTEL

TEXT BOXES CONTAIN HDTS “MOMENTS”

GETTING LOST

The best and worst part of High Desert Test Sites is getting lost in the desert. We make a map, but it's usually inaccurate. The desert is big, a magnitude larger than the city, and we can never fit its immensity on a sheet of paper without the details getting too tiny. So in addition to being inaccurate, the maps are also completely out of proportion, which makes some visitors tense. Seeing the sites isn't like gallery hopping in Los Angeles. LA is notoriously spread out, but it's nothing compared to the desert. Driving these huge distances, you're really forced to connect with the landscape and become immersed in the place. Sometimes this immersion is literal—getting stuck in the sand is a common occurrence. Then someone else will drive by and help dig you out with their hands. Or a local with a truck and a chain will take pity on the poor urbanite. Everyone's sweating and sunburned and wearing ridiculous hats. Then they start talking about the art they've been looking at. Because the situation is so foreign, people feel comfortable striking up conversations with strangers. Getting lost makes it possible to really explore.

HAVING AN EXPERIENCE

I completely agree that one of the most redeeming things about the events is that everyone gets lost. A direct drive from the first site to the last one takes about seventy-five minute, which I absolute hell when it comes to organizing the events. But the distance is also the thing that opens all these spaces so that odd adventures start to happen. Part of me thinks that having an “experience,” especially an unpredictable one, is another secret artwork that we sneak into the program.

The directions to Hal's piece, which was on the dry lakebed, read something like, “Go down Broadway Until it ends and continue in the direction of three o'clock.” There are no roads on the lakebed, just a bunch of tracks from ATVs and dirt bikes. During HDTS, there are a lot of Volvos lost on the dry lakebed, not going too fast.

To continue this thought, in a world that tends to package art as an import/export commodity, I often find myself wondering if there are still ways to experience an artwork in a single place and moment in time. What if, rather than trying to campaign for more and more funding and lure out larger audience and travel our exhibitions, we develop works that cost less, that are dependent on no one for their creation, and provide an experience for an intimate audience? When we first started doing HDTS it was one of those situations where everything and nothing seemed possible at the same time.

THE EXPERIMENT

It would have been easy enough to move to the desert, drink my perfected recipe for homemade margaritas, and make art between regular trips to New York, LA, London, Berlin, and Stockholm. But somehow (as usual) I quickly became overinvolved. I wanted to find out if contemporary art could play a role outside a major art-world center. I wanted to be able to talk to the guys behind the counter of Barr Lumber about that bitchin' cockroach performance by Pentti Monkkonen the same way that I heard them talking about dirt biking or the playoffs—only HDTS would be their home team and our event would be their playoffs. The HDTS home turf includes Yucca Valley, Pioneertown, Joshua Tree, 29 Palms, Wonder Valley, and a scattering of small towns strung along the thin stretch of 29 Palm Highway, which heads out into the deep desert toward Arizona and the Colorado River.

Life here often feels a bit like a dry, sandy version of Northern Exposure—an intimate community of diverse (often humorous and sometimes maddening) personalities. Most people who live here are transplants, though everyone seems to come for a different reason. In 29 Palms, swarms of marines live on the largest Marine Corps base in the nation. Joshua Tree has the rock climbers (think landlocked surfers), New Agers (the Institute of Mentalphysics), and lots of shacks—notoriously suspected to be meth labs. Then to the west is Yucca Valley, with a few old-time ranches as well as the beginnings of stucco spillover from the growing sprawl out of Palm Springs and the lower desert.

Some great rumors circulate in the local community about what we're up to. A friend once said that his neighbors told him I was buying plots of land, installing sculptures on them, and then selling them to museums for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Well, it isn't quite like that, though I admit that in a perfect world HDTS could set a precedent for another kind of institution that would acquire and archive long-term, site-specific, experimental works and maintain them in the context for which they were created. Dia, of course, set the obvious precedent but only for a handful of artists in a very fleeting moment in history. It seems timely that once again an institution would start to consider long-term commitment to art that doesn't require deep storage or ongoing shipping costs.

MORE ABOUT THE LOCATION

This corner of the high desert is probably best known for its proximity to Joshua Tree National Park. It's about two or two and a half hours south-east of Los Angeles (three and a half if you stop at the Barneys and Prada outlets) and two hours south of Las Vegas. So we're just a short drive from the epicenter of West Coast culture, but when you are here, you feel like you're a million mile away from it all. My grandparent ranched in the low expanse of the Imperial Valley just south of Joshua Tree, and I've found myself in the rocky high desert for one reason or another throughout much of my life.

When I was nineteen I thought I was going to be a photographer, and I went on long trips with my teacher, desert photographer Walter

* Text by Lisa Anne Auerbach in italics.



Page 280: Andrea Zittel, *Regenerating Field*, 2002, A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA. This page, from top: Andrea Zittel, *Regenerating Field*, 2002, A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA. Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Wagon Station* customized by Russell Whitten (aka Freak Russ), 2003, A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA. Outdoor screening area, High Desert Test Sites, 2002. Opposite page, left: Jeff Reed scouting locations for the Tiger Pit, High Desert Test Sites, 2003. Photo: Jedediah Caesar. Right: Sarah Vanderlip, *Untitled*, 2003. Installation view, High Desert Test Sites. Photo: David Dodge.

Cotton. Walt knows this area like the back of his hand. We drove it in his '60s Volkswagen convertible, slept on Bureau of Land Management property, and cooked quesadillas on a Coleman stove. He did a series of works in the desert that were among the original inspirations for HDTS—large, mysterious, setlike constructions that seemed both militaristic and sci-fi, which he (along with his friend and collaborator Steve Depinto) built and photographed in the middle of dry lakes and near abandoned military installations.

About ten years later, Allan McCollum and I drove through the same area and fantasized about building side-by-side, personal roadside museums where we could store and exhibit our own work. We would charge admission, which would cover the cost of storage, and build a joint cafeteria so we wouldn't have to worry about cooking. There's just something about the desert that opens up enough thinking space to reimagine all sorts of new parallel art worlds.

In 2000, I finally made the move and bought a small cabin and five acres, which I now use for my own work. The initial setup cost about forty thousand dollars, which still left a budget for art materials and periodic flights to New York. The affordable cost of living also took some of the pressure off worrying about sales and the commercial demands of an art career. (This still seems like a good model for being an artist.) In the last five years I have continued to purchase land (usually at tax sales), which I then turn over to the larger HDTS endeavor.

My grandparents moved to Palm Springs when I was a kid and we visited them there. I dreaded those trips. I remember my grandmother talking about all the "fairies" in Cathedral City and how they were good cooks. But the food was horrible, and my grandfather always sent back his order. Those were my first visits to the desert. I don't know exactly the first time I went to Joshua Tree. There was one point when it seemed that every fighting couple around me would go to the 29 Palms Inn to reconcile. I began to associate the desert with bad relationships. When Andrea moved out there, I gave the area a second chance.

Do you remember when you came out and we tried to teach ourselves how to two-step with that book that you brought?

Yeah, that didn't work out. I thought I could learn to two-step and that would be the magic skill that would tune me in to the desert people. But one thing I realized about the desert is that there isn't really such a thing as a desert person. It seems that a lot of people are here because they don't really fit in anywhere else. But how they don't fit in differs drastically. There's a subset of angry youth who dress all punk rock, cut themselves, flirt with white supremacy, and sometimes vacation in jail. There are retirees, Satanists, Jesus freaks, climbers, speed freaks, New Agers, homosexuals, and marines. Sometimes in combination: Satanist climbers, Jesus-freak homosexuals, New Age speed freaks. And then there are a lot of old people, too. They come for the "health benefits," which I guess means the dry air. I think it's pretty inhospitable in the desert, but the old people are always cheerful when you run into them at the thrift shop or wherever.

THE CLIMATE

There was already a legacy of artistic endeavors in the high desert—by both educated sophisticates like Noah Purifoy and George Van Tassel (The Integraton) and innocents such as Leonard Knight (Salvation Mountain) and Jacob Samuelson (Samuelson's Rocks). Often the desert is seen as a blank slate for human projections, but the really incredible thing about all of these projects (and the reason that the desert isn't already filled up with private roadside museums



and installation-style artworks) is its insanely harsh climate and its practical limitations, which on most days dwarf one's ability to perform even the most basic tasks. The temperatures here range from no in the summer to snowy and freezing in the winter. (Sometimes it even feels like the temperatures swing that much in a single twenty-four-hour period.) Clear calm mornings can evolve into violent sandstorms by three in the afternoon, with enough velocity to sandblast the paint off your Escalade. But apart from the three hundred brutal days, there are about sixty-five days a year when the weather is perfect, and by using our clairvoyant abilities we always manage to hold the HDTS events on one of those perfect days (not!). Weather plays a big role in what is actually possible—it demolishes the ambitious projects and favors the fluid ones. And sometimes it makes me believe that Allan Kaprow is the smartest artist alive.

The first HDTS was in October, and we set up an outdoor screening room in Pioneertown. I don't think anyone could have predicted how freezing it would be that night. Those of us from the big city think "desert" means hot. As Mungo Thomson's Roadrunner-free desert landscapes played on the big screen, I slowly lost all feeling in my feet.

THE ORGANIZERS

Before I start talking about the events I should describe the organizers. We are a small, loosely knit group of five (plus some volunteers). John Connelly and Andy Stillpass were the first to get involved. They came to visit in May of 2002, and for three hot, dusty days we drove the valley from end to end in my black Toyota pickup truck. Andy was possibly going to loan us some money to buy land for potential art projects, and I was trying to convince him that we should purchase a forty-acre parcel at the end of nowhere. (Turn left on a dirt road about twenty-three miles past the sign that reads: "Last services for 100 miles.")

I had also shown Andy some property sixty miles west in the "good neighborhood" (Pioneertown). Andy fell in love with it, a stunning hundred-acre parcel with ancient Joshua Trees surrounded by giant boulders. But I had my heart set on the flat, sparse land at the other end of the valley. So in the end, Andy bought the parcel that he wanted, and I bought my land, and we determined that we would jointly turn them into an experimental area for artists to use for projects. At that point John started to fantasize that he would move to the desert part-time and run the project, which had yet to be named.

Over the next few days (and quite a few homemade drinks) we continued to plot and came up with the name High Desert Test Sites, which makes reference to the nearby Nevada nuclear-test sites. From the start, there was an awareness that art has both a positive and a somewhat corrupting effect on the landscape. I liked this name because it is mysterious and compelling yet slightly sinister at the same time. (Incidentally, the name created some havoc in the community, as our signs from time to time have led people to believe that the marine base in 29 Palms had expanded to include parcels throughout the rest of the valley.)

I wanted to make a postcard of the woodpile on the marine base, and Skylar Haskard was looking for material for his HDTS4 project. The woodpile is open to the public, and you can get all the free wood you can carry. But you can't take photos because they store bombs behind the woodpile. I pulled out a camera and all of a sudden there was a situation. An MP arrived and asked all sorts of questions. Now I have a record at the marine base. They even took down the design and location of my tattoos.

By the time we were up and running, Shaun Caley Regen had come on board. Shaun has actually become the invisible armature for the projects and events, providing a network base in Los Angeles. And finally we recruited Lisa Anne—artist, writer, photographer, and soon-to-be master knitter. Lisa Anne is famed for her zines like *The Casual Observer* (the darkroom log of the Griffith Observatory) and *American Homebody*. Initially she started out by making the HDTS publications (zine style), but she quickly became more involved with each event. Shaun and Lisa are the core of the decision-making branch, as they are strong women with weighty opinions who aren't afraid to say no.

The publication actually began as my contribution to the event. It was really my take on things, not an official document at all. I had this idea that being out in the desert was just as important as the art, so I included all sorts of things like restaurant reviews and information about the area. I asked all of the artists involved (at the time it was a manageable list) for information about their work, which I mostly rewrote or reinterpreted. So it was really all about me and not them! But then the publication outlives the event ... and what was originally my project became the only record of all the other projects. And because I had interfaced with all of the artists gathering the information, I had unintentionally become a bit of a point person.



Greg Gilday met Andrea in the desert when he was workin' as an art shipper. I think he had a little crush on her, so he wanted to get involved with HDTS. Turned out he had an offset press in his Long Beach garage, so Andrea handed him over to me. We worked together on all three of the HDTS publications. The first one was stapled together at 7 AM the day of the event.

Greg had a crush on me? I doubt it! Why didn't you say something?



If there's no room at A-Z West, the parcel in Wonder Valley is available to the hardy. It's even farther from civilization than the Palms, and the views of the stars are incredible. Andrea says that from time to time you can see bombs go off at the marine base. It really feels like the middle of absolutely nowhere, but one time when our car got stuck the gas man came by and got us out. I really don't know what he was doing out there.

I like the fact that there aren't any real formalities in terms of who runs what. The creation of the "committee" has been quite organic, and each person has simply joined by identifying a function that they were willing to take on. Veronica Fernandez, a Texas transplant who now works in a gallery in the lower desert, is starting to help us deal with press. Giovanni Jance and Jennifer Nocon became organizers just because they were always involved and always "on call." Our resident crisis manager is Till Lux, a longtime high-desert resident (who won't let us forget that he was born in Canada by flashing the maple leaf tattooed inside his lower lip). Other hardworking volunteers include Tom Bloor, who came from the United Kingdom to pick up trash in the hot sun; Jay Lizo, who ran the headquarters last year; Bill Kelley Jr.; Guy Green; the wonderful Leah Curry and Ramie Camarena (who took care of Rainer Ganahl); and Pat Flanagan, who has become our resident ecological adviser.

THE EVENTS

If the events could be described in two words, "chaos" would be both of them. Artists fly in from remote destinations on red-eye flights, rent cars, and wind up lost in the desert at 3 AM. On any given morning before an event I'll wake up to discover at least one or two new bodies sleeping on my front patio or in cars parked on the road. The arriving bodies sleep on the front patio; the established ones get spots with air mattresses on the back patio. We've counted up to fourteen people sleeping there at once. My water is delivered by a truck, so I'm really stingy about letting people flush the toilet and take showers, and everyone really stinks.

For those who can't afford hotels and aren't lucky enough to claim spots on the back patio there is the wash behind my house. The secret is that the wash is nicer than the patio, unless you don't like snakes. The only other problem with the wash is that everyone gets stuck in the sand, and it's such a common event that it's hard to motivate anyone to help dig you out if you've been dumb enough to get stuck. We're lucky to have a

fully equipped shop for the HDTS artists to use (only it's my shop, and it is always completely trashed afterward) and a preparator who works for free (that would be me). However, lately more people have been hopping on board to help the artists, which has been a total lifesaver. Possibly the best of these moments was when Leah and Ramie did an illegal guerrilla intervention on a billboard on the highway in broad daylight for Rainer Ganahl because he had a bad back and couldn't get up there himself.

Saturday and Sunday are the days of the main event. Everyone who drives out and hasn't done a project stays in a hotel and has lots of energy and runs around trying to catch all of the sites, while the artists (who are exhausted by now) drink beer and fashion clothes from the shredded remains of what they brought with them. I keep meaning to write something on the map to explain that no one can possibly see all of the sites and to tell people not to bother rushing around so as just to have a good time. But even if I did spell it out for them, they would probably try to do it all anyway.

There's a schedule that's handed out, and in a perfect world it would allow visitors to see everything. But the perfect world doesn't account for getting lost, meeting someone new, or having an unexpected adventure—so what kind of perfect world is that?

Saturday night is the dinner, which is held at a family-run joint called the Palms, fifteen miles east of 29 Palms.

It's fifteen LONG miles. You pass the town, then you just keep going on this completely empty road lined with old homestead cabins amid desert scrub. You check the map, but of course it's wrong, since there's no way we could fit twenty-four miles of nothing onto the map. So everyone is driving and driving and wondering if they've passed the place, calling each other on cell phones (if they can even get reception). Then finally, after you're sure your odometer's wrong and your map's wrong and you're on the wrong road, there's this shack of a place with a buffalo on the sign and you're



Opposite page, left: **Christ Kasper, *I'm Sorry*, 2002.** Installation view, High Desert Test Sites. Right: **A costumed hike, *A-Z West*, Joshua Tree, CA, 2005.** Foreground: Andrea Zittel. Photo: Giovanni Jance. This page, top: **Hal McFeely, *Bush Billboard*, 2003.** Installation view, High Deseer Test Site. Middle: **Jacob Dyrenforth, *The End*, 2003.** Performance view, High Desert Test Sites. Bottom, left: **Giovanni Jance, *Here*, 2003.** Installation view, High Desert Test Sites. Right: **Joel Otterson's pig roast, High Desert Test Sites, 2002.**

there! On a non-HDTS night, there are always people hanging out and playing pool. It's also my favorite desert bookstore. Their section of used books has it all: military handbooks, religious texts, and guides to breast-feeding. If you're lucky, you'll also find a pair of used cowboy boots in your size. Look just to the left of the door as you come in.

The first time we had dinner at the Palms, they were a bit overwhelmed by the crowd. We told them to expect a large group, but they were barely prepared for the numbers that showed up. Everyone was hungry, and there just wasn't a system in place for feeding so many. At one point I looked into the kitchen and there was Andrea flipping burgers! Jennifer Nocon once tried to show her video on the TVs at the bar during the World Series. The handful of regulars could put up with hundred of HDTS people, but when it came to the TV they put their foot down.

Everyone stays up way too late, which is why the traditional artists' brunch at 29 Palms (hosted by Shaun Regen) is such a lifesaver for the hungry and hungover (except that we were almost blacklisted the year after Greg Martin stripped down and jumped in the hotel pool naked except for his black cowboy hat). For the rest of Sunday everyone does the art stuff while Shaun, Giovanni, David, and I, along with a few other event refugees, hide out at a local pool in a state of HDTS overload. By this point I have usually decided that the event can just run itself from here on out. (That is, until I start feeling guilty that Jay Lizo is still working at the headquarters tent and probably hasn't seen any of the projects himself.)

In the beginning there was a lot of talk about whether to have events or whether HDTS should just be a full-time project that people could access by downloading a driving map from the Web. After the second event, Andy suggested that we shouldn't have any more, and at this point I agree with him. But the problem is that everyone really loves the events. So for the time being the compromise is that we have them when the organizers have the time and energy to pull them off, and in the meantime we're trying to focus on supporting individual projects and the longer-term ones (by providing descriptions and directions to them on the website).

Everyone really loves the events, because it gives them an excuse to actually get off their asses and get out there! If the projects came and went without fanfare, I don't think people would really take the time to see them. People also welcome the opportunity to socialize in a different setting and to have a dialogue with people they might not otherwise see. The desert puts everyone on equal ground, in a way. We're all concerned about whether our SPF is high enough and if we should hit Site Five before Site Seven and what time the sun goes down. The normal awkwardness just disappears.

Yes, but the reason the events have been so cool is that there haven't been masses of people. The more events we do, the bigger the audience and the more complicated and less intimate the whole thing will become. In my opinion people should motivate to get out there even when the rest of the world isn't with them.

That's tough to do! But having smaller events has also been great and without the complications of wearing down roads. The costumed hike we had a few weeks ago brought a lot of HDTS participants, plus some new faces for a smaller-scale adventure. Everyone dressed up and no one had to leave to get to another event forty miles down the road. One way to keep it from getting too big is by having a series of smaller events instead of big blockbusters.

THE ARTISTS

Describing the organizers also calls for a description of the artists and what they bring to HDTS as a whole. Most of the artists (both

emerging and established) do almost everything themselves. As a big promoter of a healthy DIY attitude, I'm still always amazed at how self-sufficient and totally competent people become in these situations. A good example of this is Roman Vasseur, who came out in early April 2005 to realize the second phase of a project that began with an airplane drop of "black propaganda" on a piece of desert owned by Jeremy Deller in Trona, which is several hours north of our own land. Roman wanted to screen a film of the drop on the local television station. He flew in from

London while I was away for teaching gigs, so he made the trek out to the desert alone and managed to meet more people in town than I had in my first year there. By the end of his first week he had discovered a local filmmaker, Bob Stephenson, who had shot two films in the area, called *Magnum Farce* and *Filthy Harry* (no, they're not porn!), and he had found a cable network that agreed to screen his film once a week for a year at no cost. (Roman's project is currently featured on our webpage, www.highdeserttestsites.com.)

Marie Lorenz is another incredible HDTs veteran who befriended Garth. He lives in a concrete tepee with no power or phone, and one of Marie's three HDTs projects was a moat that went around one of the rock formations in Garth's garden. (He also happens to be our prime suspect for altering projects probably not to his liking. For example, we think he smashed into Giovanni's big orange arrow with a truck and, when he couldn't break it, painted it matte brown to make it more harmonious with the landscape.)

We met Garth for the first time at HDTs, when he graciously lent us a fire pit for Joel Otterson's pig roast after voicing concern that we might burn down the desert if we tried it on one of our own sites—he has a small magnetic "lake" of iron filings found in the desert and an outdoor kitchen. He's welcomed all of us to explore his grottoes and meet his birds.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Just for fun we made a mission statement. Well, actually I made a mission statement and put it on the website, so now it's "our" mission statement. Some of the points work out really well and others are still open for revision.

I think the mission statement is something to aspire to, but in actuality it's difficult to stay true to the goals. There are always complications and unforeseen events and compromises to be made. And some projects don't always live up to their proposals. Since we are totally DIY, there's no way an artist would get "pulled" at the last minute for not coming through. But I do worry about the integrity of the event. I think at the back of our minds we ask ourselves, "How is this NOT Burning Man?" There are a lot of reasons it's completely different, but sometimes I feel that it's treading a bit too close. When I tell people who have nothing to do with the art world about HDTs, they inevitably ask, "Like BurningMan?" I frown and angrily tell them "No way," but then later, when I think about it, there are all these Burning Man-esque factors. The idea of encouraging long-range projects is central to the mission statement, but stuff is often made elsewhere and then shipped to the site the night before the event. I'd like to be a bit more hard-ass about sticking to the mission statement, since we've got one.

1. To challenge traditional conventions of ownership, property, and patronage. Most projects will ultimately belong to no one, and they are intended to melt back into the landscape as new ones emerge.

I love the idea of making art that belongs to no one, but I keep meaning to rephrase the second part of this item, as it alarms many of the locals who fear that we will literally leave our work like crumpled McDonald's wrappers to litter the land. On one hand art litter could be kind of interesting, but it also brings up one of the first problems about installing art in nature. Ultimately you have to respect nature over artistic complexity, and the problem is, great art is always a little bit "good" and a little bit "bad." This is when it sometimes starts to feel more "liberating" to make art in a gallery or an urban environment that is already corrupted and ready for more abuse.

Allen Compton's piece was incredibly successful at this. He brought out a series of blue solar-powered lights, which were installed alongside the hill above A-Z West and became a landmark after dark. Allen thought the solar cells would last a year, but it's been nearly three and some of them are still there. Some have disappeared, and it's hard to say whether vandalism or coyotes or the weather contributed to their demise. This artwork was environmentally low impact but had a huge presence. It went very quickly from being Allen's work to becoming "those blue lights on the hill."

A one-hour call-in radio program on Z107 FM was dedicated to trying to explain the blue lights that ran along the darkened silhouettes of the mountains just north of the park. People speculated that they were everything from missile-test markers to alien sightings!

2. To "insert" art directly into a life, a landscape, or a community, where it will sink or swim based on a different set of criteria than those of art-world institutions and galleries.

In 2003, redneck dirt bikers systematically and repeatedly destroyed Hal McFeely's painted billboard picturing President Bush with text that said LOOT THE ART BUT THE OIL IS MINE. It wasn't a surprise, given that he'd installed it in a place people go to shoot guns and ride dirt bikes. My mechanic's friend found Chris Kasper's I'M SORRY sign in the wash and was asking about it all over town because he was so perplexed by why someone would put it there.

3. To encourage art that remains in the context for which it was created—similar to the intentions of early site-specific art, before "site specific" became something that could be retailed for any location. Works that will be born, live, and die in the same spot.

A great idea, but once the event got so big, it felt like the sites were becoming overwhelmed with stuff that was supposed to "die" in the spot but ended up just trashing up the landscape. One of the real draws to the desert is the open space, and some of the sites feel a bit like sculpture gardens now. It's tough to be strict when we go through proposals. We can't advocate this very open experiment and then nix everyone's ideas.

4. To initiate an organism in its own right—one that's bigger, richer, and less organized than the vision of any single artist, curator, or architect.

This has really worked. In addition to the "official" sites, we encourage others to make their own sites. Some have turned their homes into Test Sites for the event, and this is great, because it really makes the edges fuzzy.

5. To create a “center” outside of any preexisting centers. Inspired by groups like the Modern Institute in Glasgow and Forcefield in Providence, Rhode Island, which aren’t based on the cachet of living in an existing cultural capital so much as on their ability to make a center around themselves, wherever they happen to be.

I’ve always said that HDTS was really started because Andrea wanted people to come visit her in the desert! And it worked. In some ways, HDTS is a grandiose sequel to her Thursday-night cocktails at the original A-Z in Williamsburg.

6. To find common ground between contemporary art and localized art issues.

Perhaps because my own work bridges art and “life,” I have always felt that it was possible to make smart contemporary art that still speaks to a larger, more “generalized” public. And I still believe that to some extent this is true. In the high desert we have found a sympathetic and often responsive audience (sometimes even collaborators) from all fields. Sometimes it feels like the whole town is willing to pitch in to pull off an event.

Ray, the muffler guy who had a place next door to my old studio (across from the Ideal Mall), was really supportive. He took us up in his Cessna when Chris James wanted to shoot aerial footage for his video. Till Lux, who owns a sign shop in Yucca Valley, made all of our signs, designed our logo and T-shirts, and did doughnuts in his monster truck for David Dodge’s piece *Dust Farming* in 2004. Dave, the owner/bartender at Stars Way Out (home of the Ugly Man Contest), brought out a group of local kids to help clean up the beer cans from the Tiger Pit and then took them into town so they could redeem the cans for cash.

We’ve been less successful bridging the gap between ourselves and the established local art scene. When we first started having events, we didn’t make our plans known, and this was seen as an insult. But really we just didn’t realize we were supposed to talk to anyone before doing something new. I guess we weren’t clued in yet to the nuances of desert etiquette. There was some nasty press at the beginning from the local art mag, but now our relationship with the local arts is healthier, and lately there have been proposals for creating some sort of alliance between the local cultural-arts association and HDTS.

It seems that people involved with more traditional, less conceptual practices are more resistant to HDTS than those who have no real connection to art. In the international art world, Andrea is hot shit. But in the desert, she’s just another kooky lady making stuff. It’s really great to see her introduce people to her world. They just have no idea.

7. To run on a zero budget. The High Desert Test Sites receives no funding –nor does it seek any. The organizers and artists themselves pay for all expenses. As a result of the zero-budget policy there is a necessity to find new ways to convey meaning and create experiences through the most economical means. The most successful works are often casual, experimental, and somewhat offhand.

The zero budget–really just the fact that we lose money on each event–is one of my favorite parts. I’m not sure why except that it means that we have to really love this project in order to keep doing it–and that we don’t owe anything to anyone.

8. To contribute to a community in which art can truly make a difference. HDTS exists in a series of communities that edge one of the largest suburban sprawls in the nation. Most of the artists who settle in this area are from larger cities but want to live in a place where they can control and shape the development of their own community. For the time being, there is still a feeling in the air that if we join together, we can hold back the salmon stucco housing tracts and big-box retail centers. Well, maybe.

The verdict is still out on this one. There has recently been tremendous growth in the area, which some attribute to its discovery by artists. But I personally feel that those artists are the same people who are going to save it from tract-house sprawl. The question is whether, after it becomes yet another artists’ community, it will really be the kind of community that a project like HDTS is meant for.

*Racing across the desert at dusk in pickups trying to catch runaway horses that Jacob Dyrenforth was supposed to “ride off into the sunse” for his performance titled *The End*.*