

HIGH DESERT TEST SITES: AN EXIT INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA ZITTEL



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This fall, the artist Andrea Zittel sat down with guest curator Brooke Hodge, who organized the exhibition *Disturbances in the Field: Art in the High Desert from Andrea Zittel's A-Z West to High Desert Test Sites* at the Nevada Museum of Art. They talked about High Desert Test Sites, its history and her dreams for its future.



Brooke Hodge: In 2000 you moved from New York to Joshua Tree, California, and in 2002 you and a group of friends launched High Desert Test Sites. How did you come up with the idea for HDTS? What was it about the high desert that inspired HDTS? Describe for us what the high desert was like when you first moved there.

Andrea Zittel: Although I had been living in New York in the 1990s, I'm actually from California and lived here until I went to grad school in 1988. I grew up in a small rural town called Escondido which back then wasn't so different from Joshua Tree, it had hills with chaparral and some boulders, though in the years since then it has become quite developed. My grandparents were ranchers in the Imperial Valley, which is located just south of Joshua Tree National Park, and I spent a lot of time in that part of the desert when I was growing up.

In 1988 I went to grad school in Rhode Island, and afterward moved to New York where I established a practice that integrated art with day-to-day living. For instance, in 1994 I started A-Z East, a small row house in Brooklyn that became a showroom testing ground for experimental living structures. This format would later evolve into A-Z West in the Mojave Desert. I actually loved New York, but the one aspect of it that felt limiting was that my entire peer group

was centered on the artworld and I was more interested in understanding how art could function in the world at large—outside of the gallery system and the art-world system. It was this questioning that eventually led to the impetus to create High Desert Test Sites.

I knew I wanted to move somewhere outside of New York, and to a culture where I felt like I could be part of a more socially diverse community. I ended up choosing Joshua Tree in part because it was what I could afford, also because it was a few hours drive from LA where most of the west coast contemporary art was based, and lastly because Joshua Tree was an intimate community where people came from really diverse backgrounds and were open to different ways of thinking and different belief or value systems. So, I moved out to the desert in the year 2000 and established A-Z West. This was actually an extremely revelatory experience and made me rethink so many of my previous assumptions about art.

This part of the desert felt unique in that it contained such a weird and random mix of people that included Marines, new agers, rock climbers, desert artists, contractors, musicians, ranchers, bodyworkers, hermits, retirees, radical homeschoolers, and people who didn't want to have anything to do with society or even own credit cards. When I first moved there I

didn't know anyone and was deeply alone, but eventually I became integrated into the community. I believe it was these relationships intermixing with my group of peers and former students from the artworld that provided the very special catalyst that would make HDTS so unique and special.

Nothing about HDTS was really "planned" in the sense that people seem to plan things now. It was originally the result of a brainstorming session with Andy Stillpass, who was a collector visiting from Cincinnati, and John Connelly, who worked at Andrea Rosen gallery (and later had his own gallery), who was visiting from New York. I suggested that we should buy some parcels in order to create places where artists could come experiment with "putting art in the world" in a way that was more informal and exploratory than the traditional "Public Art" form, which in my mind felt incredibly mediated and just as restrictive as showing in a gallery or institution.

The three of us drove around the desert for several days looking at land. Andy became attached to a spectacular hundred-acre parcel up in Piñon Canyon which is quite a bit higher in altitude and much more vegetated. I wanted a big open forty-acre parcel at the very end of Wonder Valley which was much lower, intensely hot in the summer, and felt like it was at the end of the earth. Ultimately, we ended up buying both of those pieces of land and deciding that they would be the two furthest parcels: east and west—almost 60 miles apart from each other at the opposite ends of the valley. Then over time we would eventually acquire other sites and pieces of land in between these locations to also use for artists' projects and events.

BH: Did you have goals and/or a structure for the first HDTS? How were the artists selected?

AZ: One reason that I wanted to start High Desert Test Sites was because I didn't believe that artists should have to sit around waiting for "permission" or even for an invitation to put work out in the world. It seemed like there should be a better and more self-sufficient way to be an artist—where you simply make art and then install it in a location where people encounter it. This also makes the work so much more mysterious and exciting when it isn't ensconced in a typical art context. There have been many, many back-and-forth conversations over the years about the advantages or disadvantages of the big events

that HDTS is typically known for and I can personally say that I'm not always a fan of this format since they do frame artworks more squarely in the art context that I had been trying to escape. (I also hate it when people call our events "festivals"!) But most people felt that having large events was the best (and perhaps most exciting) way of drawing audiences to our projects.

When we originally started organizing the larger events I wanted them to be open to anyone who wanted to participate. Andy, John, Shaun Regen, and Lisa Anne Auerbach argued against that. I initially got my way but by the second event things were already becoming extremely chaotic and I realized that they were right and we needed to implement some sort of a selection process at least for the events themselves, though we still continued to promote individual artists who came out to do projects on their own. So, before each event we would meet up—each of us with a list of artists who we thought would be interesting to work with—and basically hash out locations, resources, etcetera, in order to come up with a final list.

BH: Describe for us that first HDTS event in 2002. What was the atmosphere like?

AZ: We decided to hold our first event in connection with a solo show that I did in Los Angeles in 2002 at Shaun Regen's gallery Regen Projects. I was working on a project at A-Z West that was called *the Regenerating Field*: a grid of 25 steel racks that spill down the hill in front of A-Z West. The racks are ostensibly drying trays for a new medium that I was making out of my paper waste, but they also referenced the aesthetics of earthwork installations like the lightning fields by Walter de Maria as well as the industrialized format of modern-day agriculture. Shaun's gallery back then was in a small space so it made sense to have part of the show in the gallery and then to link to something much larger in the desert. So, for that first event I installed a series of paper pulp panels made by the regenerating field in the gallery, and then the field itself was one of the works that were in the larger event.

I remember that the first work we installed was a sign by Chris Kasper—it is a cartoon-like sign that has large handwritten letters that says "I'm sorry"—which embodied how I felt (and still often feel) about putting art in the desert. John Connelly curated a



really wonderful collection of videos by Force Field, Mungo Thomson, and Assume Vivid Astro Focus that we screened at night up on Andy Stillpass's land. Joel Otterson pit-fired handmade ceramic bowls along with a pig (people were able to eat the meat out of the bowls afterward). Marie Lorenz built a sauna using a giant boulder as a form, and a group of artists who I met through Columbia University came out under the moniker "Artists on Tour" (they were modeling their project similar to a band of musicians who tour and create art as they go). We also presented the works of the amazing desert-based artist Noah Purifoy who wasn't well known at the time. The atmosphere was very intimate. I loved how the hierarchies of the artworld dissipated when everyone met in such a new and remote location. I know that this experience was really something truly unique and special and people who attended those first events often bonded and formed lasting friendships.

By the culmination of this first event Shaun Regen had come on board as one of our co-founders as well

as Lisa Anne Auerbach. Lisa and I met when we were both doing residencies in Berlin in 1995. I really loved her work including the zines that she was working on like the "Casual Observer" (a logbook of detailed events and observations during her time working at the Griffith Observatory) and American Homebody (a zine celebrating domestic living that was created to connect a group of friends, neighbors and stay-at-homes.) Lisa agreed to work with us by making her own special zine-style publications for our first few HDTS events. Those publications were great—they were more than just exhibition catalogues, they were also artworks in and of themselves. So, with that event we sort of coalesced the original founders of HDTS: me, Andy Stillpass, John Connelly, Shaun Regen, and Lisa Anne Auerbach.

BH: Had you always planned that HDTS would be a biannual event or was there something about that first event that led to the decision?

AZ: This is going to sound a little crazy, but in the very beginning I was planning on hosting HDTS events every six months! I think we kept this up for three or four events? The reasoning behind this is that I didn't want the events to get too precious. I wanted the work in the desert to be ongoing, ever-evolving, and fluid. Which I suppose could have worked if we weren't trying to run HDTS in the bits of time in between whatever other deadlines were going on. Later when I realized every six months was wildly unrealistic we would plan the events whenever I had a gap in my own schedule and knew I could find time to put everything together. When we later had actual staff (usually one or two people working part time) we evolved into a more biennial format, though even that has flexed sometimes.

BH: How has HDTS evolved over the last almost twenty years?

AZ: HDTS has changed in so many ways both in terms of its internal structure and its relationship to the community - though I think many of our ideological goals have remained quite consistent through the years. When I first moved to this part of the desert all my relationships and friendships were with people in the community. None of the people who I interacted with on a daily basis had any idea about the art world. When artists came out to the desert I would introduce them to people I knew in the community and witnessed a really inspiring period where we were



all learning from each other. For instance, my studio was in the small industrial complex that housed various auto repair facilities, so I became friends with a lot of those guys and they told us all sorts of amazing lore about the desert that Lisa used in the publications.

Ray from the radiator shop next door had a small airplane and he took Chris James up in it to take photos for his project at the end of Iron Age Road. Ray also had horses as well as friends with horses, and one of them loaned his horse to Jacob Dyrenforth for his performance “The End” out in Wonder Valley. Till Lux, who owned a local sign shop, helped introduce us to all sorts of other people in the community, made our branding and early logos, and did “donuts” in his white lifted pickup truck out on Sunfair Dry Lake for David Dodge’s work called “Dust Farming.” David Hopkins, a local tattoo artist, drew our second and third publication covers and helped oversee an HDTs-sponsored gallery for local youths, which doubled as our event HQ for a few years. Russell Whitten, who I first met when he was working at Bar Lumber, ended up doing an incredible souped-up rendition of a Wagon Station which is now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum.



Jacob Dyrenforth, *The End* (video still)

These days we still have friends who are deeply local—and integrating diverse communities is still a priority—but as more and more people move to the area from the city there isn’t the same feeling of immersion in something really separate from what we already know. In essence the outer world has merged more fully with the high desert. We still have local artists who we champion. And we feel that there are so many people out here who may not identify as “artists” but who are doing rigorous, creative, or

critical works that very much embody many of goals of contemporary art.

Another thing that has changed a great deal is the overall structure of HDTs as an organization. In the early days I did all of the administrative work myself, and the other founders each stepped in with various types of support (I’ll say more about this in a minute). However, over the years we eventually all became busier with our own lives/projects/practices and I began to work with Aurora Tang who came in as managing director in 2011. Aurora and I began to invite outside artists or figures who we respected to curate events and we would usually work directly with these curators to make sure that the overall ethos as well as the balance of local and visiting artists were maintained.

Besides curatorial strategies, the economics of the art world have changed a great deal in the last 20 years. I originally wanted to show that it was possible to make significant art for less money and in the early days HDTs ran on a very ideological zero budget. Of course, that doesn’t exactly mean a “zero” budget but we didn’t have a bank account or do fundraising or anything. I committed my own time, funds, and energies organizing the events and helping artists with site visits, installing, etc. Shaun paid for our mail announcements, Andy supported more expensive projects by better established artists who we wouldn’t otherwise be able to work with, and Lisa continued to design and coordinate our publications. Until Aurora came on board all labor was purely volunteer-based. We all literally paid money to do HDTs rather than being paid by it.

I think the biggest reason that this had to change was in part due to how this impacted the artists who we worked with. As living costs, rent, and travel became more expensive, it became more and more difficult for artists to take time off from work and to travel somewhere to do an unfunded project. Aurora was very sensitive to this and I know that when Vanesa [Zendejas] took over she and Elena [Yu] have worked hard to continually fundraise to create better compensation for our artists. As that has happened our overhead of course has also gone up significantly, and we have had to take a hard look at how to make this project more sustainable.

BH: What have been some of the HDTs highlights for you?



Marie Lorenz, *History of the Last Five Minutes*

AZ: There are so many works that I consider highlights. Here are a few that come to mind, but of course there are so so many more:

We Build Excitement by Jesse Sugarman turned an abandoned derelict house in the middle of the desert into a monument to a Pontiac Dealership. Jesse suspended a series of salvaged Pontiac cars high in the air, each precariously balanced on four steel pipes. I asked one of his assistants if they ever fell and was told that they make noise when they start to fall and they also go sort of slowly so it’s possible to get out of the way.

Mark Klassen installed a payphone (back when people still used payphones) in a desert wash near A-Z West. The phone connected to another payphone that was installed in Socrates Sculpture Park in New York. People could pick up the receiver from one phone and talk to whoever would pick up when the phone rang at the other end. (I think he also included a few more phones that were located randomly around the country. For instance, one was in a Nebraska

laundromat.) In order to make all this work, Mark had to do a massive amount of research and he connected it to my own phone line by digging and laying something like a thousand feet of phone wire.

Ann Magnuson did an amazing performance about a time-traveling hooker at the Joshua Tree Saloon. She asked the Saloon if she could do the performance on their dance stage and they said no, so she told them that she was hosting a bachelorette party with a bunch of guests and they said no problem. So, basically, that was how she ended up doing a pole dance in a cancan costume in the Joshua Tree Saloon.

For his performance “The End,” Jacob Dyrenforth rode his horse off into the sunset for a small audience that was stationed out at the Palms [a restaurant in Twentynine Palms]. Not too long before sunset the horse ran away, but fortunately it was rounded up in time for the performance.

Marie Lorenz participated in several of our events. One of my favorite of her works, “History of the Last



Yoshua Okon, *White Russians*

Five Minutes,” is a book containing drawings and texts that detailed everything that happened to her over the weekend of the event - more or less at five minute intervals. Every hour or two she would add the latest pages detailing her experience to the book which was displayed on a little desk out in the desert at the very end of Wonder Valley. (Sort of like an analogue Instagram before social media existed)

Ry Rocklen performed *High/Dry Lullabye* as the sun was setting on a patch of carpet in the middle of Sunfair Dry Lake Bed. Dressed up as Lion Man, Ry used a 1950s vacuum (complete with headlight) to suck up the dust he was continuously sprinkling on the carpet as he went along.

Beach House #3 by Pentti Monkkonen was a nighttime performance at the Palms where a group of drummers started playing a beat on a series of big wooden sculptures and there was a huge black and gold striped geodesic egg that was set up on legs shaped like inverted pyramids. - Pentti emerged from the egg in a giant orange cockroach costume and began to run around until finally an exterminator (I think that was Liz Craft?!) came and sprayed him with a fire extinguisher.

Yoshua Okon’s *White Russians* was a performance that took place in the Wonder Valley home of the Akiens family. Yoshua collaborated with the Akiens and their friends to create a performance of one big fictional family, that people come and visit (in their home) throughout the weekend. Visitors were offered drinks (*White Russians*) and then the Akiens and friends would spontaneously do these scripted actions every 20 minutes or so. For instance, they would all sing a Western song, or a fight would break out where Joshua and the guests would get kicked out, etc. I thought this was a really charged piece and liked that it played off of the fears and fantasies that urban people often have about people who live out in the “middle of nowhere.”

BH: And what are the challenges of presenting an event like HDTs? Have there been individual projects that have been particularly challenging to produce/present? How have those projects become successes despite the challenges involved?

AZ: Logistics are a never-ending challenge. Artists generally create works for HDTs in remote locations with no power, water, and long drives to any services

or supplies. It’s typical to get out to a site, start working, and realize that your drill battery is dying (for instance) and have to drive 40 minutes back to A-Z West to charge it. Also, so many works over the years have been vandalized or stolen and incorporated into building materials by local residents. Some artists have attempted to incorporate vandalism into their projects, for instance Hal McFeely made a political billboard out at the dry lake during the (president) Bush years when the US invaded Iraq that was meant to get shot up by local residents who were more right-leaning in their political beliefs.

Other ongoing challenges are of course working to be sensitive to our community and to the landscape. We only allow works that leave zero trace and have no negative impact on the vegetation or animals. It’s always funny how many artists come to the desert wanting to set things on fire or dig very big holes. (We do allow holes, but only in locations with no vegetation and of course they have to be filled in afterward). Another more subtle but extremely important concern is how to avoid the kinds of exploitation that can happen when a rural area experiences a surge in visitation, both as the result of our events and from gentrification, which began to happen in the Joshua Tree area starting around 2010. This became a huge internal conversation. If we discover an amazing location out in the desert, do we really want to put it on a driving map that could potentially send hundreds of cars down remote dirt roads, or large numbers of people to something that has only remained intact because of its anonymity? We have discussed all sorts of ways around this including ceasing to host events or migrating to a publishing platform.

BH: What led to the decision to make HDTs a non-profit organization? Has this non-profit status/identity changed anything about HDTs?

AZ: We were on the fence about becoming a non-profit for a long time since in many ways not being a non-profit allowed us so much more freedom and flexibility. Forming and running a non-profit in essence is not so different from forming a corporation. It generates a huge amount of extra work that actually can be quite expensive in its own right. But as the program grew, we knew we needed donations to support staff and projects. When we originally went through the process, we couldn’t afford a lawyer so Aurora Tang did all of the paperwork on her own.

It was really a Herculean effort that took well over a year. Although it’s been advantageous to be able to receive donations and apply for grants, we have also continued to work to remain as self-sufficient as possible by generating our own income through various projects. For instance 30% of our operating budget has traditionally come from the tours that we offer of A-Z West, 30% from our annual Gem and Mineral Sale, and about 30% from an artist’s edition that we produce once a year.

BH: The high desert has changed over the years since you first moved there. Can you describe some of those changes and how they have (or have not) impacted HDTs and the initial ethos of the event?

AZ: This community, along with the rest of California, has experienced so much growth over the last 20 years. The Morongo Basin went from being a relatively unknown and highly affordable place to live, to being an Airbnb and social media capital.

In describing the dynamics of this community, I sometimes mention a text by Jacob Sowers, an anthropologist who wrote his PHD dissertation on Wonder Valley, the very last small group of cabins scattered across the very end of the Morongo Basin. Sowers says that Wonder Valley has a specific social order that is characterized by the concept of “ecotone” – an environment in tension, a “region of transition between two biological communities.” He talks about the contrasting perceptions of space, land use, and social behaviors of the area’s three primary types of residents which he categorizes as Homesteaders, Utopics, and Dystopics. Together these overlapping groups form a type of *existential ecotone*—a condition where “instability or volatility creates stability”—in other words, the tension between these three groups and their different values and thinking is what keeps Wonder Valley from changing and from being gentrified or developed. I think this concept is an interesting one and for a long time could also have been descriptive of the larger region. However, we are now finally at a tipping point where stability (or monoculture) starts to create instability, rather than instability creating stability.

The early HDTs events took people so far out of their comfort zone and introduced them to radically different types of experiences. I have already mentioned how intimate our events were and how



David Dodge, *Dust Farming*

it led to a mixing of people who might not otherwise engage with each other. Now most people know the area from coming out here on vacation or seeing it in photos on their friends' social media feeds. So, while we continue to strive to find unique and authentic experiences, we also work to remain clear about who we serve. We serve the long-time local community as well as the art community. On top of this we constantly need to think about what it means to draw "attention" to a community or to certain local figures, and consider the consequences of this impact, both positive and negative.

BH: Over the years, work from the HDTs has been saved and archived. Why was keeping an HDTs archive important? This year, the Nevada Museum of Art acquired the archive. How do you hope to see the archive used in the future? Will HDTs continue to save and archive work from future events?

AZ: I actually never planned on having an archive but am now extremely grateful that we do. Since one of the original tenets of HDTs was that "projects will ultimately belong to no one and are intended to melt back into the landscape as new ones emerge," maintaining and caring for physical objects did not fit into our original ethos. If I saved anything, it was more along the lines of correspondence, print materials, images etc., things that easily fit in our hanging file folders.

Aram Moshayedi and Sohrab Mohebbi were the ones who first proposed gathering our archive when they curated *An Ephemeral History of High Desert Test Sites: 2002-2015* as part of their larger curation of HDTs 2017. They suggested we comb through our storage, which was all in the shipping containers behind my studio, to see what we could find and reach out to artists to see if they had any ephemera that they would be willing to loan or donate. Tatiana Vahan is the main person responsible for putting together this archive and Elena and Vanesa and Neil Doshi then helped to organize all of the works into an installation in the Firehouse next to the Copper Mountain Community Center. Credit for expanding and further organizing the archive for the Nevada Museum of Art goes to Elena Yu and of course to you Brooke for curating.

BH: You've been the director of HDTs since its 2002 founding. Recently you decided to take a

step back from and hand over the leadership to Vanesa Zendejas and Elena Yu, both of whom have been working with you and HDTs for some time. What's next for you? Will you continue to be involved with HDTs? What are your hopes/dreams for the future of HDTs?

AZ: To be honest Vanesa's and Elena's energies and voices have already become the driving force behind HDTs these last few years so I feel very good about bringing them into positions with more autonomy and creative latitude. I also know that our visions are closely aligned (though clearly not identical). The fact that Vanesa and Elena are both women of color in a community that is known for being predominantly white (and often politically conservative) will help HDTs to become a different and much needed resource in our community. As this region has changed, we would like HDTs to also continue to evolve, we have lost some things as I've described in this interview, but I think we gain in other ways by working to respond to these shifts.

For me personally, I am in the process of some life changes including a shift in my own practice, which will entail leaving an exhibition-based practice to focus on the act of "life and living" as the work itself. And while I've stepped out of my position of director of HDTs I will still be on the board where I hope to be of help from behind the scenes. After all these years it will be really nice take on a different kind of role that is more private and supportive in nature.

I'd like to end this interview by including the original set of tenets that I wrote back in 2002 when we first started HDTs:

The Experiment

- 1 To challenge traditional conventions of ownership, property, and patronage. Most projects will ultimately belong to no one and are intended to melt back into the landscape as new ones emerge.
- 2 To insert art directly into a life, a landscape, or a community where it will sink or swim based on a set of criteria beyond that of art world institutions and galleries.
- 3 To run on a zero budget.
- 4 To encourage art that remains in the context for which it was created - work will be born, live, and die in the same spot.
- 5 To initiate an organism in its own right—one that is bigger and richer than the vision of any single artist, architect, designer, or curator.
- 6 To create a center outside of any preexisting centers. We are inspired by individuals and groups working outside of existing cultural capitals, who are able to make intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant work in whatever location they happen to be in.
- 7 To find common ground between contemporary art and localized art issues.
- 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. Many of the artists who settle in this area are from larger cities but want to live in a place where they can 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 still hold back the salmon stucco housing tracts and big box retail centers. Well maybe.

In 2020, the Nevada Museum of Art, Center for Art + Environment acquired the High Desert Test Sites organizational archives spanning from 2002 to 2020. The exhibition, *Disturbances in the Field: Art in the High Desert from Andrea Zittel's A-Z West to High Desert Test Sites* was on view at the Nevada Museum of Art from July 3, 2021 to February 6, 2022. The exhibition was guest curated by Brooke Hodge.

bodycity, *Body Desert: End Trails*, HDTS (2011), Coyote Dry Lake, Joshua Tree. Photo: Andrea Zittel. Andrea Zittel, Katy Davidson (2018). Chris Kaspar, *I'm Sorry*. Jesse Sugarman, *We Build Excitement*. Jacob Dyrenforth, *The End* (video still). Marie Lorenz, *History of the Last Five Minutes*. Yoshua Okon, *White Russians*. David Dodge, *Dust Farming*.

*All images courtesy of the artist and High Desert Test Sites

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