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High and Dry: On Deserts and Crisis

Interview with Dick Hebdige

STEPHANIE LEMENAGER

Dick Hebdige graduated from Birmingham University in 1974 with an MA thesis published as occasional papers by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. He has written extensively on contemporary culture, art and media and has published three books: *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (1987) and *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (1988). After teaching at various UK art schools and at Goldsmiths College, University of London, he moved to the United States in 1992 to take up the position of dean of critical studies and founding director of the MFA Writing Program at California Institute of the Arts. He is currently a professor of studio art and film and media studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. From 2001–8 he served as director of UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center and currently directs the University of California system-wide Institute for Research in the Arts (UCIRA). In partnership with the Future Art Research Institute, Phoenix, Arizona, he launched UCIRA's Desert Studies Project in 2009.

The following interview was conducted via e-mail, written by Dick Hebdige in response to prompts by Stephanie LeMenager, co-editor of *Resilience*.



STEPHANIE LEMENAGER (SL): What is Desert Studies and how did your class Mapping the Desert, Deserting the Map come about?

DICK HEBDIGE (DH): The Desert Studies project is a pilot program in interdisciplinary arts-centered research, immersion pedagogy, and process curating organized by the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts (UCIRA) in collaboration with a range of internal and external partners including the UC Riverside Sweeney Art Gallery, the Future Arts Research (FAR) Institute in Phoenix, Arizona and the Palms Bar and Restaurant in Wonder Valley, east of Twentynine Palms in the Mojave desert.¹ Launched at the UC Riverside Palm Desert Graduate Center in the winter of 2009, the project, which is now administered from UC Santa Barbara, aims to integrate arts-based research and the production, performance and exhibition of artworks into Desert Studies, an interdisciplinary research field that has, till now, tended, no doubt for understandable reasons, to be heavily weighted towards the natural and agricultural sciences.

It's our contention that widespread public concern with issues as apparently diverse and unconnected as global population growth, suburban sprawl and climate change, natural resource management, aquifer depletion, wildlife habitat protection, and escalating political tensions and border conflicts in regions as disjunct as the American South West and the Middle East have pushed the desert from the margins to the forefront of attention in debates on the future of the planet. We also strongly believe that artists need to figure proactively in the debates currently being joined around these issues and that the reputation artists have for approaching entrenched problems from new and untried angles may be fruitfully tested in the context of collaborative research on the desert not just as a physical biome but as an imagined and an imaginary space—as a loaded site of conflicting and contradictory human projections. It seems natural, at least for Westerners (and not just people in the American West) to think of the Desert as the First Place and the Last. The desert has been depicted *inter alia* as Origin (birthplace of cuneiform writing and the major monotheistic religions) and Ending (Armageddon); as sanctuary (*Arco Santi*) and dumping ground (Yucca Mountain); as next frontier of leisure (Las Vegas) and refuge of last resort (Masada); as unspoiled wilderness (Joshua Tree National Park) and irradiated hinterland (White Sands Proving Ground); as existential, spiritual, military, technological, and artistic test site; as precious irreplaceable resource and as dirt-cheap development opportunity.

The project invites students, faculty, and members of the public to

conceptualize and make art works at the remote location crossroads where the Desert (capital D) as both tabula rasa and palimpsest—as No Place and as a concatenation of images—converges or collides with the actually existing lower-case deserts we study close up, and at first hand, through lectures, research and periodic field trips—what we call “dry immersions.” The “Back to Square One” factor implied in Desert Studies is key to the project and is linked to the emphasis on immersion. Getting lost inside the materials—if not literally inside the space of the desert—is of paramount importance in an era when the fantasy of total locative control—being tracked at every keystroke by corporations and the State whilst knowing where you are at all times, thanks to GPS-enabled cellular technology—is so oppressively prevalent. Hence the course title Mapping the Desert, Deserting the Map.

Today in the faltering chaotic post-Cold War uni-polar era, in the era of Monsanto, bio-engineering and genetic patents, in the era of the Anthropocene, of melting ice caps and a repositioned jet stream, the very nature of Nature is changing, and, with it, our relation to the art of the possible: the absolute horizon, conceivably, of what can or can't conceivably be fixed. That unparalleled sense of urgency requires us to go back to first principles and start again, conceptually, from scratch. The desert seems as good a place as any to begin doing that. . . . Then again, a friend just showed me MIA's “Bad Girls” music video set against a backdrop of what appears to be a landscape in the Persian Gulf (though the video was actually filmed in Morocco [MIA: “I didn't want to get shot”]) in which, to quote the Wikipedia description:

MIA leads a crowd of women decked [out] in traditional Middle Eastern garb . . . in a modern day *Rebel Without A Cause*-esque drag race . . . and are watched by cheering men . . . in kaffiyeh . . . as the (women) drive, spin, skid . . . across the desert plain . . . (in a way) that resonates whether on Crenshaw, Eight Mile, or a bullet-scarred road running parallel with an oil pipe line . . .

in a gesture that might be construed as a protest against the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia.² In other words, when setting out to start again, one has to remember—pace Pussy Riot—to preserve the radicalism of the gesture by bracketing all forms of piety and fundamentalism.



Fig. 1. Palm tree phone tower, Wonder Valley, California. Cell phone photograph taken by author, August 23, 2009.

SL: When we chose people to interview for the first issue of *Resilience*, we were looking for people who created a way of working with the environment, an idea or practice that has proven resilient—adapting and thriving over time. With that in mind, would you have imagined, in the late Seventies, that your work in Desert Studies and the noir geographies of southern California could be conceived as breakthrough practice in environmental cultural studies? In other words, does the trajectory from *Subculture* to Wonder Valley surprise you?

DH: Like any life trajectory, the line from *Subculture* to Wonder Valley is serendipitous. In other words it's the result of a set of flukes that nonetheless make sense in retrospect. The move from tracking UK punk in the '70s to mapping the Mojave four decades later mirrors my own personal trajectory in a very direct way, so, in a literal sense, the trajectory is biographical. There's a strongly marked autobiographical inscription in "Birmingham school" cultural studies from Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* to Stuart Hall's reflexive interventions on the politics of identity and on his own formation as an émigré Jamaican activist and intellectual.

For me, growing up in a working-class extended family household in southwest London, not far from the Kings Road and Worlds End, site not only of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's SEX and Seditious boutiques in the '70s but of the Chelsea Drug Store and Mary Quant's Bazaar a decade earlier, I got to witness the emergence of everything from mod to psychedelia to punk firsthand and was formed, in an existential sense, to a degree that isn't explicitly stated in the book, inside British metropolitan youth subculture. So the locative impulse—the attention paid to place and ground, the concern with geographical and historical specificity—was always there. In a sense that foundational concern with place simply got transferred onto the Desert (capital D) when I moved to Southern California to work at Cal Arts in the early 1990s. It took about ten years before I felt sufficiently embedded in the new terrain to write with any confidence about it.

The developing interest in Desert Studies stems directly from the fact I've had a place in Joshua Tree since 1998, but why I chose Joshua Tree, in the first place, is another question. Beyond the affordability factor (property values in the Mojave are very low compared with much of the rest of the state), the appeal was enhanced by the Mojave's mythological status as London's (or Birmingham's) arid, "empty" Other. The American Desert appealed to me because it was located on the other side of the known (Anglophone) universe. It was exotic yet familiar as the mediated backdrop for film and TV westerns, car ads and sci-fi fantasies, as the iconic platform for spectacular '60s and '70s Land Art (Robert Rauschenberg's Spiral Jetty, James Turrell's Roden Crater, etc.) and as the refuge of choice for renegade rock musicians like Gram Parsons, Eric Burdon and Don Van Vliet (Captain Beefheart), all of whom were drawn to Joshua Tree. (The imaginary is, as this list demonstrates, nothing if not irreducibly gendered: sex/race/generationally specific).

But in another sense, the distances traveled aren't so great. On the face of it it would be hard to imagine an environment more remote from the Californian high desert—topographically, demographically, climactically—than the late industrial English West Midlands where *Subculture* was put together in the '70s. Birmingham, for instance, with an average annual rainfall of 26.4 inches, has a population density of 9,451 per square mile, while the equivalent statistics for Wonder Valley are 4.06 and 5.7. Yet the two environments share common characteristics. While they're positioned unequivocally outside and against the

metropolitan imaginary, they're both physically located on the edges of major metropolitan hubs. Wonder Valley, for all its apparent isolation, is less than 150 miles from LA's downtown and can be reached with relative ease via the uninterrupted arterial sprawl of Interstate 10 and Highway 62, while Birmingham, alternately dubbed Britain's "second city" and its one-time "Motown"—the Anglo version of Detroit, center, till the late '70s, of the UK's car manufacturing industry—is only 118 miles north of London (driving time: 2 hours). As regional hinterlands, the Mojave and the West Midlands are, in effect, the literally overlooked outer rim components of transnationally networked metropolitan ecologies. They remain separate from, yet connected to the cosmopolitan world cities against which they get defined as marginal, provincial spaces (for instance, many artists who exhibit regularly in LA and/or New York have first or second homes in the desert). Classified as either pre- or post-historical, as "rural boondocks" or "post-industrial rust belt" they're, at the same time, accorded compensatory status as "weekend getaway" destinations for intrepid metropolitans.

In a rehabilitative spirit, Birmingham's hollowed out city center and network of canals have, in recent years, been made over and repackaged, Richard Florida style, as "a business, retail and leisure hub" complete with green space, a "historic core," and al fresco towpath dining, while the Palms Bar and Restaurant, way out on the Amboy Road in Wonder Valley, serves as a gathering point and performance and exhibition center in the Hi-Desert Test Site series that, every two years, succeeds in drawing contemporary art aficionados from as far afield as New York, Europe and the Pacific Rim. To further complicate any facile opposition between pristine desert and polluted urban wasteland, the 925-square-mile Twentynine Palms Marine base, immediately north of Wonder Valley, serves as a test site for military ordnance and a rehearsal stage for wars in other deserts, while the few native tribes in the region without casinos resort to toxic e-garbage disposal, tire burning, and unregulated shantytown trailer park housing developments for undocumented agricultural laborers (e.g., Duraville on the Torres-Martinez reservation next to the Salton Sea in the Imperial Valley) as subsistence economy expedients. Meanwhile the nitrogen-heavy carbon emissions from "down below" (e.g., via the I-10 from East LA to the Coachella Valley) that periodically affect high desert air quality and general visibility, especially in the summer, serve as fertilizer for the nonnative grasses

that provide the articulating tinder which can turn an isolated dry lightning strike into a major conflagration, as in the Sawtooth Complex Fire, which burned 62,000 acres around Pioneertown and Yucca valley, in July, 2006.

So there are structural parallels in the way both projects set out to question the standard geometry of center-margin relationships by inverting the terms, making the subordinate term in the dyad—youth subculture/dominant culture, desert/metropolis—central, while highlighting points of tension and commonality in the tangled symbiosis that binds each dyad together. Both projects take the “crisis” trope literally—in *Subculture*, ’70s punk is presented as a histrionic acting out of the UK-in-decline (the decline of Britain as a world power, the end of consensus politics, economic recession, “no future,” etc.), while the Desert/desert is presented as the “empty” stage and screen on which intimations of spiritual and environmental crisis, the law of unintended consequences and the catastrophic fallout from our modus operandi as a species are visibly and palpably played out and thus become available for monitoring and analysis. The desert is where both the buck and the bucks stop in terms of the vision of human perfectibility and progress and the ideology of unlimited growth, consumption and consumerism that underpins and drives it.

In a way, the two projects—*Subculture* and Desert Studies—representing, as they do, an accommodation with a sense of end-game crisis as the coming human universal, form a kind of circle. The recycling bricolage economy of ’70s punk is standard mainstream practice in the high desert where there’s very little industry beyond the military and mining, hence very little money, and where regularized forms of barter and the swap-meet model of exchange figure as the norm, in tandem with big box stores like WalMart and strip mall chains like Food-4-Less. The cost of bringing spare parts up from Palm Springs “down below” is, in general, so exorbitant that mechanics, like their counterparts in countries such as Cuba, forced to adapt to long-term trade embargos, become expert at patching and repurposing: extending the life of manufactured goods way beyond their built-in-obsolence retirement dates.

At the same time, the ongoing war of attrition between opposing tribes in residence—e.g., recreational vehicle users and peace-and-quiet conservationists, can take on a Mad Max aspect in a place like Wonder

Valley that sometimes approaches a pitch of raw intensity reminiscent of the lifestyle aspirational spats fought out between British mods and rockers or skinheads and hippies in the 1960s. And it's worth remembering—particularly at a time when punk style is being recuperated as pure fashion history in big splash exhibitions in places like New York—that the “desert rat” as combination hoarder/scavenger/“human vermin” is not just terminologically kissing cousin to the “punk.” Punk was never just about repurposing utilitarian designs as some kind of purely decorative arts project: making safety pins and garbage bags into shock-and-awe fashion statements. It was also always about the politics of consumption and consumerism. Seventies’ punk, as a prophetic End Time discourse, always involved an ethically based critique of, and resistance to, late capitalist spend-and-burn disposability and waste. It staked its claim in the dirty unwanted and unwashed remainder of hippy Utopianism—in everything the organic movement defined itself against—in mass production plastic, toxic gunk and industrial detritus, and, just as I’m forced to confront what my own contribution to overconsumption looks like when I haul my garbage to the landfill in Joshua Tree, so punk practice made it impossible to forget that the ground we’re all standing on is always, ultimately, made out of dirt. As the deserts of the US Southwest continue to draw and bind together in their isolation, and their interlocking cliques, voluntary and involuntary marginaux of every stripe—welfare recipients, fixed-income retirees, Burners, boulderers, alienated military personnel, eco-warriors, tweakers, religious secessionists, off-roaders, artists, freelance programmers, data analysts, and musicians—it becomes harder and harder to draw the line between utopianism, resistance, escapology, and survivalism. Once they’re seen as modalities of action rather than as objects, texts or styles, the punk vs. hippy/subculture vs. counterculture dichotomy—which I’ve come to think has always been more rhetorical than real—begins to blur and buckle.

If Desert Studies is, in any way, a breakthrough in environmental cultural studies, I’d like to think it’s in the degree to which we strive to make the experience of the desert socially as well as environmentally immersive—in the ways we work to challenge the idealized view of the Desert/desert as empty space and tabula rasa, as a pure uncluttered landscape, or as a preferably people-free biomic litmus test. Desert Studies tries to resist and work against the megaphonic evangelical aspects of told-you-so environmentalism. We aim to create a context

in which those participating can learn not just from the programmed content—lectures from credentialed desert “experts,” organized tours of local points of interest, etc.—but from unprogrammed encounters with friends, colleagues, strangers, and ourselves in the stunning, if unfamiliar, settings that the desert can uniquely provide. In practical terms this involves hanging out at the Palms interacting with, listening to, and learning from the Wonder Valley regulars who live along the very edges of habitable space, who make something vital—i.e., a culture out of next to nothing, a culture in which the conditions of extreme precarity, to which more and more people on the planet are now exposed, is nothing new; it is how things simply are. (The Desert Studies motto, by the way, is “more from less than zero”).

Beyond that, there’s nothing particularly novel or unique about what we’re trying to do. The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) got there first in terms of systematic mapping and enabling open source scholarship on desert land use that smudges the line between conceptual art practice and (environmental) politics and provides a truly inspirational and exemplary model that’s now gone global of how to “do” knowledge (as the London cab drivers used to say) without corporate sponsorship or big ticket institutional support. And locally based artists like Andrea Zittel and Kim Stringfellow have spearheaded similar, often more elaborated and more consistently embedded arts-based pedagogical initiatives than we’ve yet managed to do in the immediate vicinity of Wonder Valley.³

SL: You’ve made a strong case for the desert biome as a center of attention in the era of global climate change. What’s as interesting as this re-imagination of the desert as center is how you think through that shift by making the desert, through a variety of media. Can you delineate Desert Studies practice, how it works, how collaborations have evolved, favorite media platforms or installations?

DH: I hope I’ve answered some of this above. As far as how Desert Studies works, I’d have to say that, at this point, it works, at best, sporadically. For reasons to do with energy, time and competing teaching commitments, for instance, I only manage to offer the Mapping the Desert class periodically, though I should add we’re open to grant applications for desert-centered projects through UCIRA.

Since launching the program we’ve organized three fairly large-scale

“dry immersions”/“roaming workshops.” Invitations to participate are issued via the UCIRA website to students and faculty on all nine campuses with arts programs within the UC system. The first immersion, co-organized by UCIRA, the Palm Desert Graduate Center and Luminous Green, a European-based arts and media collective, took place over three days in February 2009 in the 28,000-acre Boyd Deep Canyon Reserve, a UC Riverside–owned research facility adjacent to Palm Desert, primarily devoted to longitudinal studies of the impact of real estate development on the indigenous flora and fauna (most notably, the endangered fringe-toed lizard). Around thirty-five faculty and students from four UC campuses (Davis, Riverside, Santa Barbara, and San Diego) together with faculty from the Cal State system, UCIRA staff, and visiting activists and tactical media artists from Europe held a series of workshops on various topics, including GPS-based artwork, Native plant lore and “designing for a waterless world.”

In 2009, Tyler Stallings, director of UCR’s Sweeney Art Gallery in Riverside received a \$10,000 UCIRA grant in partial funding for his proposal to mount a year-long series of public events, readings, and screenings to be staged across Riverside County and the Coachella Valley. Tyler’s program was a response to the Institute’s Desert Studies proposal document circulated earlier that year. The initial call invited faculty and students to submit proposals for works engaging issues “related to actual deserts and to the no less contentious bundle of historical projections made onto the idea of the Desert.”

The program was originally planned to culminate in a symposium organized in tandem with the exhibition of solicited artworks on land adjacent to the Palm Desert Graduate Center. However, issues of land use and a competing and previously approved plan for a sustainable garden on the undeveloped site forced us to jettison our initial idea and, in effect, to reverse the order of events so that the symposium would now precede by several months a more de-territorialized (at least multiply sited) exhibition. As often happens, unforeseen circumstances forced us to rethink our founding premises and to come up with a creative solution more in keeping than the original plan with UCIRA’s stated commitment both to research-based embedded artworks and to innovative exhibition and conference/symposium formats. So rather than organizing the usual exhibition talk-centered symposium devoted to a post-mortem consideration of completed works and/or a discursive exami-

nation of pre-announced “themes,” we set out to design a gathering that could function as a crucible and catalyst for new work: in other words, as an invitation to respond to an environment and the issues embedded in it through making and proposing rather than/as well as speaking or proscribing.

Now scheduled for four days in October 2009 and centered around a rental property in Wonder Valley, the symposium, dubbed Dry Immersion 2, was in this way reframed as a research and networking opportunity for potential art makers from across the system and beyond, with focused discussion groups, presentations by a range of invited speakers and side trips to local points of interest—e.g., *inter alia*, the Marine Base, the Integratron in Landers, a motel sign museum in Twentynine Palms, Noah Purifroy’s sculpture garden in Joshua Tree, Pioneertown, a community northwest of Yucca Valley, based around a 1950s TV Western stage set. More than sixty participants, including students and faculty from seven UC campuses attended this event, which ended with a guided tour by UC Riverside affiliated conservation biologist, Dr. Cameron Barrows, of protected dune and oasis systems in the lower Colorado Desert, east of Palm Springs. Attendees were invited to submit proposals, together with requests for limited expansion funding to cover materials and installation/performance costs to the Sweeney and UCIRA. The resulting artworks were exhibited and staged over three days in March 2010 in Dry Immersion 3. In this culminating iteration of the process, twenty-four artists from seven UC campuses mounted installations and organized performance works guerrilla style, in and around abandoned homestead shacks in Wonder Valley, while other participants exhibited wall works—photographs, drawings, and paintings—at the Palm Desert Graduate Center on Frank Sinatra Drive, a golf links world away from the scrubby upper desert.

The works presented were heterogeneous in terms not just of their conceptual scope and the range of media, materials, and formal language used, but in what the artists set out to do and how they went about it so it’s not easy, or even, frankly, meaningful for me to pick out favorites.⁴ At the Wonder Valley site there were performance pieces, including one based on an old desert real estate scam (Masha Lifshin, Joshua Tree Fruit Juice) while in *Ur Ritual* Gabie Strong engaged myths of origin and apocalypse, *son et lumière* style in a live collaboration with ten fellow artists, filmmakers, and musicians. Sculptural installations

implicated the narrative preoccupations of National Park Service educational signage (*The Desert Die*, Matthew Herbert, Jared Stanley, Gabie Strong), questioned seismology's dominant "disaster" motif (*Trace: Resonance Field*, David Wicks, Peter Hawkes, Elaine Hu), explored the symbiosis between geological fault lines and desert flora (*Tamarisk Field*, David Wicks), the storied desert mirage effect (*Horizontal Bypass*, Stephanie Washburn, Karen Spector) questions of inverted scale (Untitled, Nikki Leone) and imperial fantasies/ideologies of interventionism in the Middle East (Elcin Joyner, *Mobile Ziggurat*).

A docu-fiction video, *The Deuce-Nine is a Ghetto*, part ethnographic document, part improvised communal performance (Claire Zitow, Elizabeth Chaney, Ash Eliza Smith) featuring escapist fantasies acted out by local residents was screened on monitors alongside costumes, props and bowls of fruit and flowers inside one abandoned shack. The Wonder Valley setting off Wollmer Drive—a haphazard arrangement of deserted cabins, abandoned household detritus and empty concrete pads thrown up against the soft pink line of the Pinto and Bullion mountains in the distance was an integral component of the event. A testament to what had proved to be unsustainable domestic arrangements, it looked like an outtake from a Weather Channel special on tornados.

Though the Palm Desert Graduate Center furnished a much more orderly backdrop, the wall works exhibited there were similarly eclectic. Flora Kao hung abstract acrylic canvases based on frottage—a palimpsest of rubbings from surfaces as miscellaneous as palm tree trunks, roadside metal signage, and sewage pond containers from the Marine Base. Other works on display included fanciful designs for desert-worthy art research vehicles (Ken Ehrlich), large paintings of dissolving architectural forms based on field trips to the Salton Sea (Daniela Campins, *Bombay's Traces*) and large format photographs of the simulated Iraqi village we'd visited inside the Marine Base in *Dry Immersion 2* (Christopher Woodcock, *Postmodern Desert Viper*). In *Scrap Matters*, Desiree d'Allesandro and J. R. Venezuela presented an inventory/archive of the deteriorated texts found stuck to desert brush collected by the two artists during excursions to Wonder Valley. Blown up to epic scale and digitally enhanced, the arbitrary pages torn from random books (including in one instance a page from the Old Testament) form part of an archive composed by desert winds, in collaboration with the cacti, of half-filled out forms, supermarket receipts, foreclosure notices,

incidental jottings, and fragments of maps and newspaper ads: a geographic testament to the brevity of History and to our fleeting purchase on the planet: a statement from the dry mouth of the Valley.

I'd also give honorable mention to Masha Lifshin's "low tech video enabled aeronautics" project, *Bottle Rockets*, performed at Dry Immersion 2: water-powered rockets made out of recycled pens equipped with nose cones mounted with discarded cell phone video cameras launched into the vast uncluttered horizon visible from Iron Age Road east of Wonder Valley.⁵ And last, but not least, *Honolulu Club*, a swim-dive performance by Long Beach-based endurance eco-artist Sierra Brown which was scheduled as the culminating event of Dry Immersion I when the group adjourned to the shores of the Salton Sea, 40 miles east of Palm Desert, for a celebration/farewell lunch.⁶ As the workshop participants sat beach-side, eating bowls of lobster bisque prepared beforehand by the artist, Sierra appeared in a wetsuit, swam out into the sea, performed a series of exhibition dives and, after surreptitiously swapping the empty net she was carrying for a preplanted net containing seven live lobsters, swam back to shore, measured the "catch" and declared it duly legal—i.e., in compliance with the relevant California fishing ordinance. Brown's piece set out to draw attention to the history of failed utopian aspirations which had led in 1908 to the inadvertent creation of the ultra-saline thirty-five-mile-long inland sea, and to its subsequent development as a now desolate resort community, while simultaneously raising questions about what we eat and our general lack of curiosity about where our food comes from. The performance was videotaped by CBS-affiliated Channel 2, and broadcast on that night's "Eye on the Desert" local news program. The commentator ended the segment by announcing that the principal ingredients used in the bisque had come from the Salton Sea—a miscue which inadvertently proved Sierra's point. After a phone call, a rebuttal was issued at the end of the following night's program.

SL: Dick, can you describe some genealogies for the desert arts practice that has been central to your Dry Immersions?

DH: It'd be a total misrepresentation on my part, of course, to claim any kind of precedence or priority or groundbreaking significance vis-à-vis desert aesthetics or experimental practice for the projects that have come out of our program. The deserts of the Southwest have served

as spawning bed and staging ground for some of the most spectacular and influential American art of the past century in a tradition in which landscape often functions as a laboratory and site for conceptual orienteering and material inscription (e.g., Land Art) as much as, if not more than, as an object of representation or as a conveniently uncluttered platform for installing work. It's become common nowadays in alternative, environmentally conscious circles to knock '60s and '70s big gesture Land Art on the grounds that it's aggressively interventionist and hubristic—outré masculinist heroics transposed from the studio to what used to be called remote location “non-sites” (before GPS rendered the term “non-site” obsolescent). While, admittedly, a -fifteen-hundred-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide basalt coil extrusion into Salt Lake at Rozel Point UT (Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* 1970) or the conversion of an extinct four-hundred-thousand-year old, three-mile-wide cinder cone volcano in northern Arizona into a massive naked-eye open sky observatory (James Turrell, *Roden Crater* begun in 1979 and still ongoing) hardly comply with the injunction to “take only photographs, leave only footprints,” I'd list these and similarly epic desert-sited works as among my favorite examples of Desert Art: functioning, as they do (for me at least), as meditation mandalas to trigger awe and silent introspection.⁷ I see them as the New World equivalents of the great temples and cathedrals of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Spiritual, yet ultimately secular—i.e., free of explicitly religious affiliations/associations, they qualify among the US's most constitutionally compliant sacred monuments. They are tributes, as it were, to the Desert (capital D) as Art's eternally contemporary first and last White Box.

The association between famous artists and particular desert sites has become so ingrained, in fact, that the link can serve as a branding tool for the regional tourist industry: e.g., Georgia O'Keeffe and Santa Fe, New Mexico, Donald Judd and Marfa, Texas; Chip Lord and Amarillo, Texas; James Turrell and Flagstaff, Arizona, etc. But I'd also have to mention more performative Land Art pieces that work against that logic and are strictly anti-monumental, like Jean Tinguely's *Study for an End of the World no. 2* (1962) in which the Swiss artist blew up a heap of consumer goods and metal objects on Jean Dry Lake, 20 miles southwest of Las Vegas, at the edge of the Nevada Test Site where, between 1951 and 1990, some 928 nuclear bombs were detonated.⁸ In the same spirit, I'd also cite Ed Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* (1967)—another clas-

sic piece of auto-destructive art, in which Ruscha, accompanied by two friends, threw a vintage Royal typewriter out the window of a speeding Buick LeSabre on what is now Interstate 15, 122 miles southwest of Las Vegas, then stopped to photograph the “crime scene” and presented the accumulated “evidence” deadpan, without explanation or commentary, in a Joe Friday “just the facts, ma’am” visuals plus locker room labeling monotone in a photocopied “artist’s book” that retailed originally at \$3 per copy.⁹ What I like about that piece is how it demonstrates a ‘60s conceptualist commitment to a kind of Buster Keaton–esque sense of the absurd and what ‘60s British artist Mark Boyle once called “motiveless appraisal”—a de-editorializing gesture of principled, if simulated, autism on the part of the artist who, having set the situation up, stands back and proceeds to record, without prejudice, whatever falls within the frame.¹⁰ A riposte to depth model hermeneutics and preordained agendas, motiveless appraisal sets out to put interpretive and expository language in its place (i.e., to kick it to the side of the road).

Another piece that puts language back in its place—this time quite literally—is John Baldessari’s *California Map Project* (1969) in which the artist, having noted where the letters of the word “California” fell on a map of the state, visited each location, created forms on the ground resembling the relevant letters at each site, photographed the results and then arranged the photographs sequentially to spell “California,” thereby rendering back map as territory/tautology.¹¹ Thanks to works like these, from the 1960s on, for an influential set of American artists the Desert—a landscape construed as indifferent to human energies, desires and purposes—becomes a countercultural metonym, for good and ill, of America itself. Beggaring description it gets conscripted as material medium and inscribed—it becomes a set of surfaces to be directly sounded out, scratched or mined or thumped and written on. Inevitably it’s that tradition and legacy that we’re working in the shadow of—in other words, honoring, confronting, commenting on, interrogating, dismantling, and diverting or digressing from Desert Studies.

We take our cue from the geographical or “spatial” turn within critical thinking that so conspicuously marks the post–Cold War “globalized” era.¹² In our case, this means articulating the legacy of ‘60s and ‘70s Land Art to the digital-scape opened up by tools like GPS and Google Earth, while revising the political-critical agenda, intervention strategies, and the scale of operations in accordance with a more contem-

porary, collaborative, and politically and environmentally savvy ethos and practice. That means substituting tactical media interventions, site visits, “roaming workshops,” walking pieces (after, e.g., Hamish Fulton, Francis Alys) and temporary installations that rest lightly on the landscape for grandiose big footprint works.

On an altogether different, more gargantuan scale than our make-shift dry immersions, the insistence (and communal enforcement) of the “leave no trace” rule at the Burning Man Festival, the temporary (annual) installation “city” built directly on the desert playa at Black Rock, Nevada, indicates just how far the libertarian “spirit of Woodstock ’69” (where waste disposal appeared to be an afterthought) has been modulated and proscribed by legally mandated environmental concerns. The safety procedures implemented around the ritual Burning of the Man that forms the spiritual/spectacular core of the festival, the ban on fireworks, and the stipulated use of burn pads to protect the desert floor by anyone wishing to incinerate their art work at the weeklong event together represent an enlightened update/advance on the Jean Tinguely tradition of desert pyrotechnics. (While nobody was physically injured at the *End of the World no. 2*, Tinguely’s 1962 detonation performance, bits of metal debris were reported raining down on spectators’ cars parked near the explosion site.)

So clearly we’re not the only ones involved in a salvage-and-review of ’60s and ’70s radical experimental practice. Burning Man itself is a testament to the power, popularity, and resilience of communitarian and New Age forms of thinking and life style politics that were first debuted on a mass scale in the 1960s. My sense is there’s a renewed interest in mid-twentieth-century counterculture (particularly in Californian counterculture) across the board within the arts, humanities, and social sciences, though it’s especially marked in the contemporary art world in, for instance, the growing body of work in Europe and Asia as well as the States that sets out, in a recuperative spirit, to engage with the Whole Earth Catalog archive and with thinkers like Gregory Bateson, Stewart Brand, and Buckminster Fuller.¹³ Perhaps the conditions of hyper-connectivity under which information circulates in the digital era (a revolution that Brand himself helped to inaugurate¹⁴) has made the kind of horizontally oriented, eye-(I)-centered holistic and systemic thinking associated with what, for want of a better word, we still call “hippy” not “alternative” so much as mainstream twenty-first-century

epistemology. Though I'd also suggest that the appeal of '60s and '70s counterculture for "free radicals" today resides in the way it countered not just the fundamental tenets of the control culture against which it defined itself—the work ethic, private property, the nuclear family, etc.—but the very idea of culture per se as unconscious coercion to the norm. As is often noted, this latter expansion of the field of the political implies a repudiation of gregariousness—including the compulsory gregariousness of the Internet—traceable within American letters to the tradition of civil disobedience and nature writing begun by Henry David Thoreau.¹⁵

The last of my top ten US Desert art picks—Andrea Zittel's A-Z West—to my mind exemplifies where that dialogue, on the one hand, with the Desert/desert as imagined/inhabited landscape and, on the other, with the linked legacies of 1960s/'70s US counterculture/desert-centered art work is now headed. A-Z West is a thirty-five-acre arts research/investigative living/working studio "compound" on the outskirts of Joshua Tree that exemplifies what I regard as an embedded live-work demonstration project designed to test and showcase the artist's evolving series of modular "solutions" to questions of shelter, survivalism, and "clean living under difficult circumstances" in an overpopulated, resource-pinched world.¹⁶ A modestly downscaled Bauhaus-redux for the twenty-first century, vaguely reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West outside Phoenix, Arizona, though conspicuously shorn of Wright's overbearing messianic tone, A-Z West embodies a holistic, visually unified desert-adapted ultra-lite and ultra-sleek design aesthetic/ethos.¹⁷ The property includes the artist's personal living quarters and studio, a guest cabin, research and fabrication facilities, a shipping container compound (including a vegetable garden planted in metal stockpots and a rare-breed chicken coop), a solar power Regenerating Field, and a Wagon Station Encampment comprising ten single-person polished metal sleep pods dispersed among the boulders (bookable for overnight or weekly stays in the spring and fall), along with freestanding composting toilets, open air showers, and a gleaming wood and metal communal outdoor kitchen.

A-Z West, a logical extension of Zittel's earlier art practice—e.g., the micro-scale "Living Units" project from the '90s, substitutes the science of escapology and a crafty "slipping through the cracks"/stealth mode circumvention of bureaucratic oversight for the big picture utopianism



Fig. 2. Andrea Zittel A-z Wagon Station customized by Giovanni Jance, 2003. Powder-coated steel, MDF, aluminum, Lexan, cushions, iPod Nano, headphones, solar Ipod chargers. Copyright © Andrea Zittel. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery.

of top-down, change-the-world high Modernist design and advocates for small-scale improvised accommodations (in both the literal and figurative senses) with what is possible and practical. As such Zittel stands apart as a practical idealist from the others on my list—the first generation conceptualists, minimalists and Land Artists—though her practice together with her witty but recalcitrant idealism is consciously aligned with and informed by each of those movements. (Tours of A-z West are open to the public four times a year for a modest fee—the proceeds go-

ing to support programming for Hi-Desert Test Sites, the Mojave-based art biannual Zittel founded in 2002).

But the scope of Desert art, of course, is hardly coterminous with the vagaries of art in any one region, especially now the term “contemporary art” has international purchase (in every sense) way beyond the US-Euro lockdown on the “art world” that characterized the Cold War years. One of the aims of Desert Studies is to open us up to the sheer range and historical importance—the complexity, diversity and depth of the cultural heritage of the world’s deserts (and there are, depending on the criteria used, something like twenty-three or twenty-five desert systems on the planet). As events like the Sharjah Biennial and the Abu Dhabi Art Fair in the United Arab Emirates and the emergence of Beirut, Cairo, and Istanbul as major contemporary art centers attest, the Middle East, to cite just one region with vast and varied deserts, cultures, and economies, is fast becoming a vital hub in the transnational network of contemporary art despite or (in part, at least) because of the seismic upheavals that have cracked the “Arab street” from end to end.

At this year’s Venice Biennale, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Israel, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates were all represented in national pavilions. Following the recognition accorded the State of Palestine in April 2013 by a majority of the member states of the UN (over the strongly worded objections of Israel, the United States, and United Kingdom), Palestine was represented for the first time at Venice by émigré artists Bashir Makhoul and Aissa Deebi in an exhibition pointedly entitled *Otherwise Occupied* staged at the Palazzo Ca’ Guistinian Recanti in the Accademia and curated by Rawan Sharaf and Bruce Ferguson, the former director of FAR, UCIRA’s original partner in the Desert Studies project.¹⁸ Part of Bruce’s founding vision was to coordinate a network of international exhibitions, artist residences, and scholarly exchanges across all the deserts of the world—to use the Desert as the convenor for an expanded, mobile, genuinely intercultural global think tank on the future of art and the conceptual and actual grounds on which art gets made, i.e., the planet.¹⁹

The work of Marko Peljhan, a colleague in the Art Department and the Media Arts Technology program at Santa Barbara who spearheads UCIRA’s ART+SCIENCE research initiative is as relevant (or more so) to that larger mission than anything we’ve done to date in Desert Stud-

ies proper. In a series of situated research and infrastructure building projects based in the Canadian Arctic (which, like the Antarctic, qualifies as a “cold desert”) organized under the auspices of the Arctic Perspective Initiative (API) Marko and API co-founder Matthew Biederman have, for the past six years, been working closely with local Inuit hunters, media practitioners, and artists to design, build, and test portable live/hunt structures and remote sensor and locative mapping technologies capable of tracking caribou herds, fish migration patterns and ice melt rates. Peljhan’s work on pilotless aerial prototypes (a.k.a, “drones”) deployed in socially accountable contexts detached from the military/profit/power matrix in which such technologies are typically enmeshed remains integral to the thoroughly grounded but uncannily prescient and farsighted research commitments that have characterized his practice since he debuted Macrolab, a portable, self-sufficient remote location art-science lab, designed and built by a team of young architects in his native Slovenia in 1994, toward the end of the Bosnian War at the dawn of the Internet era. “[W]ith the functionality and energy balance of a bee and the armor of an Armageddon cockroach,” to quote Peljhan’s own strikingly worded mission statement, Macrolab in its serial iterations has provided a template for the development of a new type of research environment equipped to track satellite-enabled and territorially bounded data flows with equal ease, enabling, among other possibilities, open-ended “civil counter-reconnaissance” operations in a manner peculiarly suited to the exigencies of life and work in the post-Cold War era.²⁰ In an exhibition in early 2013, co-curated with Tyler Stallings at the Sweeney Art Gallery entitled *Free Enterprise: The Art of Citizen Space Exploration*,²¹ Peljhan carried these concerns off-world in a survey show of forty years of space art at a moment when space travel is about to be privatized (the exhibition included prototypes for commercial suborbital vehicles built by xCOR-Aerospace, a small, privately owned corporation based in the town of Mojave (population 4,238) Kern County, California. But that’s another (final?) frontier and another story so I should probably stop there.

SL: One more question for you—as a scholar of contemporary culture—about language and ecology, or the ecologies of language. “Sustainability” has become a pet term of politicians, developers, university administrators—but it hasn’t gotten great press from environmental-

ists or artists. Do you use the word? If yes, how? If not, are there other words—similarly aspiring—that are more resonant for you?

DH: I've stopped using "sustainability"—it's now as empty and exhausted as supermarket "organic"—part of a vocabulary of green retail-friendly euphemisms: the you-can-have-your-cake-and-eat-it words. I quite like "resilience" though it does sound a bit like a cleaning product or a Navy Seals video game. What I like about the word "resilience" is that, while it posits the ability of systems to survive and bounce back from traumatic stress, it also contains the idea of "recoil," hence "recoiling from" (i.e., it retains a residual connotation of alarm and revulsion at the fact we've let things get into this state in the first place). The idea that, like good, well-adjusted Scouts, we should just make do and mend—making flowers out of whatever shit gets thrown at us—requires a sublimation of the sense of moral outrage that's an affective prerequisite for any kind of political action, environmentalist or otherwise. We're not obligated to adjust to the current state of play. As the Occupy movement makes clear, we need the Jesus and the moneylenders moment.

I think my keyword has to be "crisis" (though admittedly it's hardly aspirational). It concentrates the focus within the state of emergency (in all the senses of that term), while leaving the question of outcomes—hence the possibility of recovery or radical transformation—open. Nobody knows with certainty at any moment, in any particular set of circumstances, what's going to happen next, so the bouncing back part can't be guaranteed. I'm uneasy ascribing any permanent and essential qualities—even a quality like "resilience" with its implication of survival in the last instance—to humanity or the planet we're part of. What I like about "crisis" is that it calls us back to what is happening now, i.e., to everything that, one way or another, as human beings—individually and en masse—we're responsible for. The word "crisis" is etymologically linked to "critique" so an alternative motto for Desert Studies would be "Criticality is the necessary crisis through which practice has to pass."

NOTES

1. For more information on the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts see the institute's homepage, www.ucira.ucsb.edu. For a summary account of UCIRA's Desert Studies Project go to <http://www.ucira.ucsb.edu/ucira-desert-studies-project-update-by-dick-hebdige-ucira-desert-studies-project-director>. For documentation of artworks presented in collaboration with the Sweeney Art Gallery at Dry Im-

mersion 3 see <http://www.sweeney.ucr.edu/exhibitions/mappingthedesert> (the Interdisciplinary Desert Studies Proposal (UC Riverside, Palm Desert Graduate Center, 2009 is also posted on this site).

2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bad_Girls_%28m.I.A._song%29. To view the video click on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uYsogJD-le>.

3. See Kim Stringfellow's website, <http://www.kimstringfellow.com>, and Stringfellow's own photo-text book on the history of the Salton Sea: *Greetings from the Salton Sea* and *Jackrabbit Homestead*. For more on Andrea Zittel's work in the upper desert see below. Also see the Andrea Zittel website, <http://www.zittel.org>; Zulin, *Andrea Zittel*; and Zittel, et al., *Andrea Zittel*.

4. For more on a selection of individual works see UCR Sweeney Art Gallery, <http://www.sweeney.ucr.edu/exhibitions/mappingthedesert>. See also Hebdige, "The Desert Studies Project."

5. The Bottle Rocket project videos are available for view at the desert map website, <http://mashalifshin.com/desertmap>.

6. See <http://www.sierragbrown.com/club.html>. The Salton Sea is a shallow, ultra-saline thirty-five-by-eighteen-mile lake located directly on the San Andreas Fault in the Colorado Desert forty miles east of Palm Springs. The accidental product of an early-twentieth-century attempt to irrigate the Imperial Valley at the lowest point in the Salton Sink (226 feet below sea level), the network of earthen berms and canals built by engineer Charles Rockwell was overwhelmed in the spring of 1905 after a heavy snow-melt and for two years the entire volume of the Colorado emptied into the Sink. While the influx eventually subsided and the opening of the Hoover Dam in 1935 put a halt to periodic flooding, the lack of drainage led to the formation of California's largest lake which is also fed by the New, Whitewater and Alamo rivers and by agricultural runoff. By mid-century the inland "sea" front hosted thriving resort communities attracting real estate developers, tourists, water sports devotees and—soon after the introduction of tilapia and other species in the early 1950s—sports fishermen. However, skyrocketing salinity levels led in the 1990s to the first of the mass fish die-offs (7.6 million fish died in a single day in August 1999) and birds feeding on the botulism-infected carcasses soon began dying en masse (as one of California's last remaining wetlands, the Salton Sea supports a wide variety of avian species). The odor in high summer has driven out all but the hardiest and most financially constrained residents and Salton City and Bombay Beach (the beach now consisting in part of granulated fish bones) are virtual ghost towns. As the water level drops and a water war develops with San Diego County for a reduced agricultural allocation of Colorado, water, neighboring cities (including well-heeled parts of Palm Desert and Palm Springs) face a possible future punctuated by alkaline dust storms as toxic sediments on the exposed lake bottom go airborne. Attempts at remediation at the Salton Sea have so far proved unsuccessful though the challenge to come up with a viable rescue plan continues to draw concerned citizens and noncitizens alike from all corners (including participants in the Desert Studies project) to the area.

7. See the Robert Smithson website, http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/spiral_jetty.htm; and the CLUI site on Spiral Jetty, <http://clui.org/ludb/site/spiral-jetty>. See also Holt, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*. For a take on experimental filmmaker James Benning's take on Spiral Jetty, see Hebdige, "Reeling in Utah."

8. See Roden Crater website, <http://roden crater.com>; the Roden Crater Project website, http://www.lasersol.com/art/turrell/roden_crater.html; and Finkel, "Shh!"

9. See Museum Tinguely website, http://www.tinguely.ch/en/museum_sammlung/jean_tinguely.pdf; and (for Ruscha's Royal Road Test) the Metropolitan Museum of Art website, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1970.590.5>. For an excellent essay connecting the Tinguely and Ruscha pieces see Scott, "Desert Ends," the catalog accompanying the exhibition mounted at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (May 27–October 3, 2012) and Haus der Kunst, Munich (October 11, 2012–January 20, 2013). For a review by Suzaan Boettger of this exhibition, see "This Land Is Their Land." See also Svenson, "Land Art for the Media Age."

10. For further thoughts on the Boyle Family's tactic of "motiveless appraisal" see Hebdige, "Lucifer Setting."

11. See "John Baldessari." The three last letters of "California" as printed on the map in question fell, predictably enough, given the concentration of desert in the eastern parts of the state, on desert locations. The text panel accompanying the original installation contained the following key to letter locations:

N: 4.10 miles from Hwy 395 on Death Valley Rd. .6 miles on south side of road.

Materials: rock and dry color.

I: Outside Lucerne. 11.8 miles from Lucerne Fire Station. 2 miles off Old Woman Springs Rd. Materials: white dry color (the letter is nearly invisible).

A: In Joshua Tree National Monument. 15 miles from 29 Palms Visitor Center on Cottonwood. Materials: dry color, rocks, desert, wild flower seed.

12. See, for instance, Coolidge and Simons, *Overlook*; Thompson, *Experimental Geography*; Gordon et al., *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*. For new land art see the LAND/ART New Mexico website, <http://www.landartnm.org/abq-museum.html>.

13. See, for example, Diederichsen and Franke, *The Whole Earth*; and the exhibitions *The Whole Earth-Exhibition, California-From Eco-Psychedelia to Internet Neo-Liberalism* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2012) http://hkw.de/en/programm/2013/the_whole_earth/veranstaltungen_83124/veranstaltungsdetail_87732.php; Beck, *The Aspen Complex*.

14. Polymath, cyber theorist, and former Merry Prankster Brand, as most readers will no doubt know, campaigned successfully to secure the release of NASA's "Blue Marble" photograph of planet earth in 1967, before going on one year later to edit the Whole Earth Catalog and to collaborate with electrical engineer, Douglas Engelbart on "The Mother of all Demos," a presentation that introduced key technological innovations including the computer mouse, teleconferencing, hypertext, dynamic file linking and

collaborative real-time editing at the Fall Joint Computer Conference at Brooks Hall in San Francisco .

15. For more on Thoreau, Theodor Kaczynski, secret sharing and countering culture, for example, see Ault, *Two Cabins by JB*.

16. See Zulin, *Andrea Zittel*, and the Andrea Zittel: A-Z West website, <http://www.zittel.org/az-west.php>.

17. Taliesin West, the architect's winter home and desert school opened in 1937 in Scottsdale, Arizona, then a remote location twenty-six miles from Phoenix, was intended as a laboratory for the development of the architectural forms that took their cue from the desert landscape, flora, and fauna. He wrote, "Arizona needs its own architecture. . . . [L]ong, low, sweeping lines, uptilting planes. Surface patterned after such abstraction in line and color as find 'realism' in the patterns of the rattlesnake, the Gila monster, the chameleon, and the saguaro, cholla or staghorn—or is it the other way around?—are inspiration enough" ("Featured Artist"). Taliesin West is now the main campus of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture and houses the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

18. See the High Desert Test Sites website, <http://www.highdeserttestsites.com/hdts>.

19. See the La Biennale di Venezia website, <http://www.labiennale.org/en/Home.html>. For *Otherwise Occupied*, Bashir Makhoul created "il giardino occupato"—a mini-"settlement" made out of brown cardboard boxes stacked higgledy-piggledy in the approach to the Palazzo while Aissa Deebi's videotaped reenactment of a continuously interrupted speech delivered in 1973 by Daoud Turki, a Palestinian-Arab Red Front activist at an Israeli military tribunal before his imprisonment on charges of espionage and "collaboration with the enemy" was screened inside the building.

20. See the Arctic Perspectives Initiative website, <http://arcticperspective.org/>; for documentation of Peljhan's research with drones see <http://honorharger.wordpress.com/2013/04/21/unmanned-aerial-ecologies-proto-drones-airspace-and-canaries-in-the-mine> and <http://honorharger.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/unmanned-aerial-ecologies> at the honor harger website. For the Makrolab project see <http://www.artscatalyst.org/projects/detail/makrolab> at the Arts Catalyst website.

21. See the UCR ARTSblock website, <http://sites.artsblock.ucr.edu/free-enterprise>. For a review of the *Free Enterprise: The Art of Space Exploration* exhibition, see Myers, "Free Enterprise."

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