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High Desert Test Sites: an artistic “Garden of Eden”?

High Desert Test Sites is a co-operative art project located in the desert landscape of California. Once a year, the project coalesces into a series of performances, artistic collaborations and local events. A small group of properties near Joshua Tree National Park form the sites of the project, and are figured as experimental spaces for critical artistic and design practice. The organisers of the project, including artists, gallerists and dealers, claim to work outside of the commercial sphere of art, providing a critical space in which to question contemporary society. They proclaim:

The HDTS mission is 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.¹

In a world where art and market are inextricably intertwined, this idealistic perspective nostalgically recalls a time when artistic autonomy was taken for granted and spontaneous art events were perceived to have a subversive critical effect. In particular, the project recalls the practice of Buckminster Fuller, the eccentric modernist designer prominent from the 1950s who gave himself the task of no less than transforming the world. In this paper, Fuller’s infamous geodesic dome provides a conceptual metaphor and critical counterpoint for the idealism of the *High Desert Test Sites* project, which as I argue, treads a fine line between critique and appropriation, between irony and cynicism. The *High Desert Test Sites* project has been running since 2002, organised by a small group of contemporary artists and collectors located in the Californian desert and including Andrea Zittel, John Connelly and Andy Stillpass. The first series of events was held in 2002 and featured four sites across the desert, each containing projects that combined art and design with the local landscape. This renewed sense of political optimism has been prevalent in recent artistic practices that focus on human agency and the realisation of utopian visions. This has translated into a focus on the relations between people, as evident in the popular embrace of Nicholas Bourriaud’s text *Relational Aesthetics*. In the influential text, Bourriaud advocates artwork that enables human interaction and engagement.² Building upon the ideals of the modern avant-garde, he suggests that by turning art toward a kind of humanistic use-value, contemporary artists can *actualise* their utopian ambitions. He writes, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real.”³ Bourriaud’s theory finds form in artistic practices that configure art spaces as a means for social enfranchisement, for example in the work of

¹ Auerbach et al, 2002, vol.1, p. 2

² See Bourriaud, 2002.

³ Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13. Bourriaud argues, “Art is the place that produces a specific sociability,” before asking, “How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?” (p. 16)

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Rirkrit Tirvanija, well known for configuring the space of the gallery as a communal kitchen. Engaging with the natural environment to create harmonious and socially conscientious designs, both the conceptual premise and the site-based projects recall the social idealism of 1960s counterculture.

In particular, their combination of social critique, art and design is reminiscent of Fuller’s mission. In his view, art, design and science were one and the same – namely, practices of critical thinking that could be used to transform society. Recalling movements such as the Bauhaus, Fuller declared: “The specialist in comprehensive design is an emerging synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist and evolutionary strategist.”⁴ During the 1960s, when environmental and social idealism flourished, Fuller’s various structures proliferated across the globe.

Fuller’s signature design was undoubtedly the *Geodesic Dome*, a structure designed to maximise energy efficiency. The dome was a lightweight, yet very durable architectural structure, unique for its simplicity. The spherical form, which was created through a mixture of hexagons and pentagons, provided natural shelter and insulation from the elements, including extreme heat and hurricanes. Fuller’s design vision was unique in its ingenuity and practicality, and also in its sheer eccentricity. One version of the dome, for example, was made for space and included a 360-degree view of the stars at the same time as a swimming pool. Nevertheless, Fuller’s work was embraced seriously by engineers and designers world-wide, and in 1970 the American Institute of Architects described the geodesic dome as “the strongest, lightest and most efficient means of enclosing space yet known to man.”⁵ His romantically titled *Garden of Eden* was a domestic variation of the dome, and it encapsulates the idealistic nature of Fuller’s approach. The portable, affordable structure was designed to transform the lives of its inhabitants. With a transparent plastic surface, it was both home and greenhouse, where domestic waste was used as fertilizer, the structure recycled its own water and power was harnessed through solar energy.

One of the centrepieces of the first *High Desert Test Sites* event was an outdoor sculpture with an uncanny resemblance to the *Garden of Eden*. Constructed by the artist Marie Lorenz, the work consisted of a naturally engineered sauna. Just as Fuller’s dome harnessed its internal and external elements for sustenance, Lorenz’s sculpture used natural moisture to create the sauna effect. It too was constructed from clear plastic in a spherical, tent-like form. The shape of a desert rock was used as the basis for the structure, which was created by first winding reed around the rock and then gluing sheets of plastic to mould the sphere-shape. The plastic shell was then removed from the rock to create a freestanding structure. The result was not only “dome-like” in appearance, but similarly, it used its architectural surface to power the internal environment. The structure was filled with hot rocks, which inside the plastic shell generated steam, thereby producing enough heat and moisture to create a luxurious outdoor sauna.

⁴ Fuller, 2000, p. 243. More specifically, he argued, “Now the time has arrived for the artist to come out from behind his protective coloring of adopted abstractions and indirections.” (p. 245)

⁵ Cited in Gorman, 2005, p. 115

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In an instructional style reminiscent of Fuller’s “specialist in comprehensive design,” Lorenz writes, “The tent form is the sauna. I will fill it with steam by heating rocks in a fire, moving the hot rocks inside the tent and dousing the rocks with water.”⁶ The environmentally friendly design, merging seamlessly with the landscape, was complemented by a neighbouring project that also recalled the social idealism of Fuller’s *Eden*. Titled *Forcefield*, the work consisted of nothing more than a collective of artists who “find solace and contentment gardening and looking for nice stones.”⁷ Extending Lorenz’s architectural concerns to the practice of living, the artists revived a sense of social environmental awareness seemingly incongruous in the cynical landscape of contemporary culture.

When Fuller outlined his Garden of Eden, he described it with six key principles that provide a means for understanding the idealistic artistic enterprise of the High Desert Test Sites project. Like Fuller, the artists involved in High Desert Test Sites have a mission, and like Fuller, they fuse art and design in acts of critical thinking that aim to unite aesthetic practices with their physical and social environment.

1. Designing a Garden-of-Eden home is an exercise in comprehensive thinking.

High Desert Test Sites combines art, design, site-specificity and the spontaneity of the art event to critique contemporary culture. Individual works of art, design and sculpture are enfolded within this larger conceptual house. One of the collaborative groups involved in the first events, for example, called *Artists on Tour*, described their practice as encompassing both fictional propositions and material design. Like Fuller, they attempted to combine useful design with social critique. Their projects included, for example, a do-it-yourself telescope through which to view the stars at the same time as an entirely fictional conceptual scenario involving the creation of a law-free environment. The conceptual shell of *High Desert Test Sites* thus provides its artists with an Eden for their practice.

2. The enclosing dome must perform structurally, and be energy and resource-efficient.

The second principle of the *Garden of Eden* emphasised functionality. The ambition to combine utilitarian design with the sphere of critical thought is evident across the *High Desert Test Sites* project, and raises the modernist dilemma regarding the relationship between artistic form and function, between critical autonomy and social use value. As Theodor Adorno lamented in “Functionalism Today,” “The obscure secret of art is the fetishistic character of goods and wares. Functionalism would like to break out of this entanglement; and yet, it can only rattle its chains in vain as long as it remains trapped in an entangled society.”⁸ In other words, as soon as function is incorporated into an artwork, its utility is abstracted. Are the functional works that feature in *High Desert Test Sites*, in this sense, merely sculptural works that *look* like design? At the other end of the

⁶ Marie Lorenz, cited in Auerbach et al., 2002, vol. 1, p. 8

⁷ See Auerbach et al., 2002, vol. 1, p. 9

⁸ Adorno, 1997, p. 17

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spectrum, when an artwork is turned into something functional, its critical autonomy is compromised.

The *High Desert Test Sites* project acknowledges modernism’s failure to resolve this dilemma through humour. As a result, it abounds with a tone of irony. This was evident, for example, in Lorenz’s rock-sauna. Despite its resource-efficiency and structural effectiveness, the design was presented as a slightly absurd, and not entirely serious experiment. This became evident in the work’s accompanying instructions, featured in the exhibition catalogue. Several free-hand sketches were used to illustrate the instructions, and they featured a comical looking human figure along with a large, seemingly irrelevant cactus. Fuller, by contrast, considered his Garden of Eden a realistic and useful domestic structure. In the context of such parody, the idealism of the *High Desert Test Sites* project becomes circumspect.

3. It must provide nurturing conditions for people and plants...

In one sense the project attempts to reinvigorate the local area of Joshua Tree, nurturing a community which is shown in the light of fond nostalgia. Each catalogue is presented as a mock travel-guide, presenting the local area as a time-warp. Accounts of local mythology, references to individual characters, such as “Ray of Ray’s Mufflers” and community groups like the KKK appear between descriptions of artistic works. At times the individuality of the local community is celebrated, while at others the tone leans toward condescension. This fine line is evident, for example, when one of the local restaurants is described as “this cottage-cheese ceiled diner, which looks like a cross between an old folks home and a Midwestern hotel lobby.” While appearing to embrace the particularity of the Californian desert context, the tone of these references suggests that the artists occupy a privileged position independent of the community in which they are engaged.

Such a self-mocking approach is a characteristic response to the current critical predicament, where idealism seems futile, yet resignation presumptuous, and it captures the ambivalent critical space that the project occupies – precariously balanced between sincere critique and resignation. In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, for example, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes the defining feature of the contemporary world as an enlightened false consciousness, characterised by cynicism.⁹ Irony, in this cynical context, is evacuated of its critical content. He observes, “It is rather the irony of a bashed ego who has got caught up in the clockwork.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, *High Desert Test Sites* has already spanned four years and shows no signs of obsolescence.

4. That means very tight control of the interior temperature, humidity, and air quality, independent of a variety of conditions outside. No substances that could pollute the indoor atmosphere or soil can be employed.

⁹ Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 546

¹⁰ Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 144

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This kind of controlled and autonomous space for artistic practice was espoused in the first event by the collaborative group *Artists on Tour*. One of their projects involved creating an isolated sphere of artistic observation. They proposed:

The people of this area recognize no standard unit of measurement, no standard unit of exchange, no official time, no official language, no religion, no boundaries marking the physical limits of the area, and no meaningless list of arbitrary agreements known to outsiders as ‘laws’, including this list.¹¹

The danger of this kind of autonomy, in the context of art, is the elevation of artistic privilege and the *isolation* of artistic practice from the wider social sphere. While such a position may seem to provide an alternative to a pervasive capitalism, its designation of outsiders points to a privileging of its “insiders.” Moreover, it is easy for such artistic isolation to turn into *elevation*.

This problem emerged in the third catalogue, which included the following poetic description of artist Andrea Zittel:

The door closes behind her and she stands like tall desert grass with the sunlight flickering in her Merlot hair. It seemed evident even in the way she walked towards us that the serene house was easily an extension of her.¹²

This semi-mythic status contradicts the original mission of the project, which involved a disavowal of artistic authorship. Similarly, the project claimed to turn away from mainstream gallery systems, relocating to the wild expanse of the desert. Apparently, however, nothing was to prevent mainstream galleries from following the artists there. Commercial gallery Regan Projects, for example, became closely involved with the project after the first successful event. As a direct result of this collaboration, conspicuously well-known artists emerged across the various sites. The work of Elizabeth Peyton, Richard Prince, Jack Pierson and Raymond Pettibon, all well known for their work in traditional media such as painting and photography, was somewhat incongruous in the context of the experimental design project. The organisers also began to sell artworks and t-shirts, established a shop-front and began sponsoring selected artists. It would seem that the organisers, in conjunction with Regan Projects, discovered a pragmatic value in certain kinds of ownership.

5. Of course, the structure will have to be affordable to buy and to operate. It must last indefinitely, or at least until a superior model appears.

Fuller espoused long-term sustainability in his outline for the *Garden of Eden*. Certain key aspects of the original *High Desert Test Sites* artistic Eden, however, have proven to be unsustainable, including the disavowal of artistic authorship and commercial interests. The same issue is at stake in the project’s emphasis on the art event. It is important to note that the first catalogue contained original photographs, markers of the ephemeral and site-specific nature of the project. In the subsequent catalogues, however, these unique

¹¹ See Auerbach et al., 2002, vol. 1, p. 16

¹² Kristin Ellison & Mari Hernandez in Auerbach et al., 2002, vol.3, p. 12

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and individual markers vanished. The disappearance of these photographs points to a fundamental contradiction in the project’s claims. The concept of the “event” is suggestive of impermanence, temporality and instability. While *High Desert Test Sites* claims to configure a series of such events, they are contained within an organised structure that undermines this premise.

The art event has a long history, and has been an integral part of subversive artistic practices from Dada to Fluxus. It aims to escape the controls of the art institution at the same time as destabilizing various systems of meaning and importantly, it signals a sense of idealism. Art historian Michael Erlhoff describes the art event as “the projection of a concrete utopia.”¹³ Recently, the concept has had increasing tenancy as a generator of political transformation. Elizabeth Grosz writes “Events erupt onto the systems which aim to contain them, inciting change, upheaval, and asystematicity into their order.” The very attempt to construct an event, however, contradicts this unexpected and unpredictable nature. The problem, it would seem, is that an event can’t be anticipated, let alone organized in advance. The events of *High Desert Test Sites*, in other words, are contained within an artistic Garden of Eden. The more this structure is “entangled,” to use Adorno’s phrase, the less likely that disruptive events can flourish. Moreover, artworks that rely on a harmonious engagement from the viewer tend to eliminate the *critical space* needed to consider and reflect upon the work. This forms the basis of Claire Bishop’s critique of relational aesthetics, where she argues that artistic enfranchisement results in the loss of democratic debate. Bishop writes, “a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased.”¹⁴ Like Huyssen, she argues that artwork should maintain a *tension* between engaging with culture and reflecting upon it.

6. *Its lifetime energy use must be as low as possible. It should be recyclable.*¹⁵

The *Garden of Eden*’s final principle stresses the concept of recycling. It is the re-cycled nature of the *High Desert Test Sites* project that sets it apart from both its historical predecessors and the contemporary market. Yet there is a clear danger in the way that this recycling operates. While reviving the hopes of modernist design, the project retains little trace of the sincere idealism on which it was premised. It maintains, if subconsciously, the very structure of cynicism that it was trying to escape. Like the effect of greenhouse gases on the ozone layer, cynicism ruptures the fragile surface of the Garden of Eden concept, exposing it to the atmosphere of a late capitalist economy. The result, I suggest, is a closed sphere of artistic practice, all the more entangled for this enclosure, and circulating within the commercial and institutional systems of contemporary capital.

¹³ Erlhoff, 1988, p. 289

¹⁴ Bishop, 2004, p. 66. Bishop puts forward a model based on antagonism rather than enfranchisement, arguing: “This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other.” (‘Antagonism and relational aesthetics,’ p. 79)

¹⁵ Baldwin, 1996, p. 154

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