

The Museum
of Contemporary Art
Los Angeles, CA

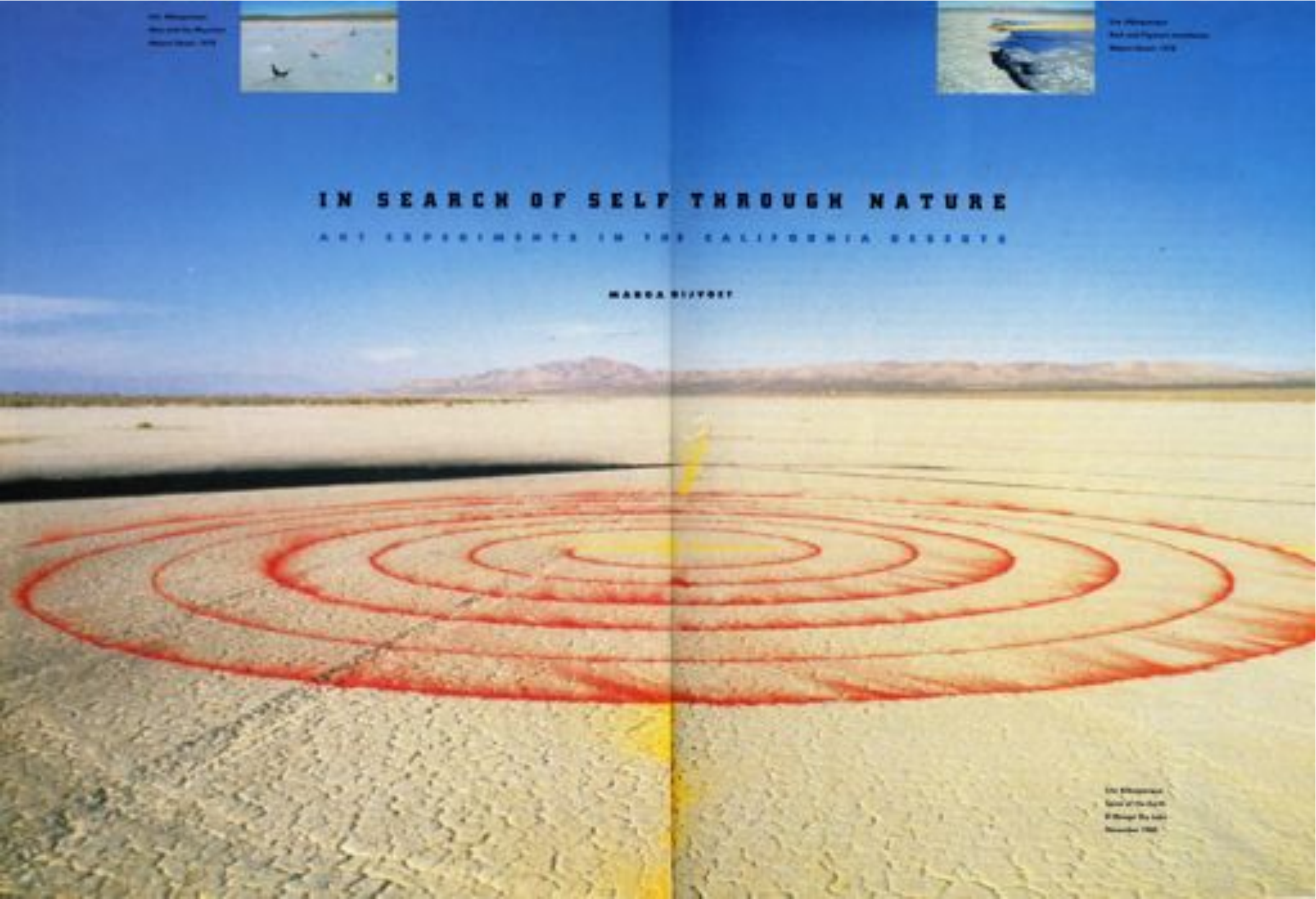


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IN SEARCH OF SELF THROUGH NATURE

ART EXPERIMENTS IN THE CALIFORNIA DESERTS

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Besides occasionally look the external world: the struggle between the material self and the formal world. In the 19th century, man is often in an alienated state caught up in a society where the conditions of life are ruled by economic structures and other artificial mechanisms. The insecurity and isolation resulting from these cold conditions leads to a certain extent, perpetuated arrangements of design levels of systems, new modes of thinking, abstractive life-styles, and ultimately, the nature of being.

The critical consciousness of artists takes on a particular weight, many directing themselves towards an examination of the self in relation to the surrounding reality. Many of these works aspire to recover man's bond with the earth. Here artists represent the divine, the unattainable, indeed, it is the only realm in which man can realize himself.

In the latter half of the 60s, Michael Davis, Robert Rauschenberg, Walter de Maria and Nancy Holt returned into the Nevada and Utah deserts, engaging the land itself and natural phenomena in the process. "Sand Jet" and "Earthworks" are only introduced new materials, forms and concepts of space, place and time to sculpture, but, in adapting nature's laws as their own, fostered a new awareness of the natural environment. Michael Rauschenberg: "In the desert, I can feel that kind of unshared, powerful, and religious space artists have always tried to put in their work." The desert's powerful attraction may be its impossibility, its extreme quality.

During the '60s, natural settings were often creatively used for sculptural projects in an attempt to bridge the gap between man and the environment. By working with nature, the artist must confront and realize the dichotomy between both ground and personal. The objective is to change man's awareness of nature within himself through art, and thus come to a more complete understanding of the self and the world.

The desert areas around Los Angeles make their existence known safely, breathing upon the city continuously, inspiring various artists to explore their unique potential. In the Mojave Desert, during 1969 and 1970, Michael Berman constructed nine light installations called "Configurations" which developed out of his fascination with the perception of light in relation to space and time. Small, unconnected floating lights were placed on the desert floor in various arrangements based on a grid. The flashes occurred every second and generated unpredictable patterns of light which appeared to move across the desert. The interaction with the environment was an equally important element of the "Configurations". The installations were activated by the sunsets and moonsets as well as the consciousness of the site.

"Configurations III" took place near Baker, California on November 16, 1969 from 4:30 PM and 8:30 PM—the time between sunset and moonset. During the first three hours, viewers experienced a continuously changing view of the site. As twilight descended, one begins to discern the lights flickering in close interaction with each other. During the 30 minutes of complete darkness, the flashes seemed to last longer, their intervals diminished and the space defined by the lights appeared to enlarge. With the appearance of the moon, the activity seemed to slow down and the space to contract again. These Mojave pieces were shaped by the dynamic effects of coincidence and coincidence which Berman continues to investigate in terms of phasing and convergence of sound.

James Turrell developed the idea for a "sky piece" in 1972. He spent many hours driving over the country looking for a suitable location for the work. Finally, he settled upon the Badger Center in northern Arizona. Turrell has since been working with astronomers and astrophysicists to obtain information about the atmosphere and the geography of the landscape

that is pertinent to his project. A tunnel will be constructed across the crater and the ropes leading through it will be only sky-light. The artist says, "I am totally involved in the physicality of light itself and the space it fills." The "Badger Center Project," Turrell's first permanent outdoor piece, attempts to assist the viewer to fight or bring the nature of life, the conflicting laws between man and nature.

Sculptor George Geese is intrigued by the power of water; specifically, water in streams. Geese's "White Water Reflection" (San Geronimo Mountains, 1978) consists of four jetties in part of a river where the stream was divided into two and narrow sections by a sandbar. Built with rock from the surroundings, the jetties were placed equidistant from each other and successively diminished in length, creating a distinctly non-natural geometric structure. The stream was successfully diverted. Later, after the spring floods, the force of the current eroded the jetties and in due time they disappeared completely, the river returning to original course.

Pat Patterson's work examines the shifting of shadows as a method of time-keeping and defining space. His first desert piece, "East West" was installed at El Mirage Dry Lake on the day of the equinox in September, 1975. Thirteen poles were placed concentrically at the ends of their shadows. Starting at sunrise, by the end of the day a line of shadows had been created in the shape of a horizontal, reflection of the Earth's movement around the sun.

Lita Albuquerque searches for elements in the desert, the mountains and the areas that might establish man's relationship with the earth. "I try to respond directly to the quality of each place I see it, not to change it wholesale into a new idea or environment, but to attend directly to the nature of how it already was. The figures in the 'Man and the Mountain Pass II' (El Mirage, 1978) both

with finding the right placement and alignment and then making a connection toward the mountain. I went into the desert, I looked for a spot that would talk about the mountain. I like those figures to see them, and all I did was bring them out." The work consisted of a line of human figures in blue, black, white and yellow pigments which were blown into indistinguishable configurations by the breeze, ultimately in the visible again. Albuquerque was eventually directed from the north—pigments, rocks, sand—also in geometric formations. In "Spirit of the Earth" (El Mirage, 1980), for example, she created an intricate network of lines, circles and squares which were fastened from above, in its total relationship with the earth.

"My work," says Kathleen Berman, "explores the specific character and qualities intrinsic to certain locations and seeks to express their function as fluid, natural determinants of human response. My work is an expression of the experience of a place, of my perception of its particular presence, its drama, and movement, its magic." Berman studied American Indian culture and discovered that the Hopi people in the Grand Canyon had constructed petroglyphs and heaves directed upon the site for a project. The area, however, was closed to the public because of military activities, and she decided to go through water by means of a canoe to receive permission to enter the canyon area for one day. "It was my intent to make the lasting experience of these people who, perhaps 10,000 years ago, hid in the rocks of the canyon waiting for their gods to come to the watering holes in the sandy craters, as even today will horses and mules dig for water to survive in the desert environment." The eight lines extending from the various watering spots toward the watering holes are "as if parts of responses" she described the time of the holes with each the color of long grasses on the rocks. Both Albuquerque's and Berman's

works result from their intuitive response to characteristics inherent in the site, and strive to revive a lost connection with the earth.

In John Gorton's "El Mirage Project" the viewer-participant was asked to form a circle around himself to create, as it were, a closed, personal space for meditation and rest that was in opposition to the surrounding environment. The project, staged at El Mirage Dry Lake in 1978, recreates the uncolonized desert landscape with the urban environment. Gorton installed perforated walls and a blow-up television image in the desert. "The installation was intended to visually challenge certainty and stability in the open-space like setting of the desert... The photo blow-up from commercial TV of a hand grasping a capsule of liquid into a basin was an ironic juxtaposition to the dry lake bed, a reference to the viewer's everyday 'dry' context. The piece 'worked' by a viewer locating the yellow position within the corner of the secondary established by the perforated walls and the photo... the viewer was instructed to mark that location by spraying a hemisphere over the desert floor with a spray can."

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in primitive cultures, their art forms, their rituals and other cultural practices. Marisa Alexander and Michael Davis examine these cultures in an attempt to connect the past with the present.

Michael Davis places structures in the desert to age and weather, eventually restoring the appearance of abandoned ruins. "Morley's W" (Tucson Valley, 1978) was a small house-like construction made of mud, wood and cloth. The entire process almost to history: who built it, and when? For what purpose? And under what circumstances did it decay? Davis is concerned with the effects of time in the material world, and in turn its effect on our perceptions.

Marisa Alexander's fragile, shoddy sculptures recall axonitic, primitive

structures. Developed within the conditions of the studio, they exist in a frozen state until they are brought outdoors. "In solitude and isolation with the space" The two forms parallel the mental functions of (space) memory and (action) observation. "The Desert Pass" (Palmdale, 1980), a walk-through environment, consisted of reflections, T-trees, earthshakes and pathways. "The reflections were a way of picking up information about the environment... it was more the idea of reflection rather than actual reflection. The earthshakes dealt with the possibility of walking down into the earth, into the underworld, so to speak." Alexander tested El participants for a fleeting visualized experience of the desert, the environment, the earth and the self. She hoped that the people involved would transcend the physicality of the event and achieve a new psychological point-of-view which implanted the role of memory.

In all these artworks, there is a unique spirituality generated by the juxtaposition of elements of artificiality and naturalness: a feeling of hallowed tranquility, a quiet feeling, that compels the viewer to reflect not just on the obvious forms of the concrete, but on the more subtle nature of the soil, as well.

The desert—set as hostile as the money-grabs, one is forced and blind as the man's surface, it lies open—given adequate preparation—its liberality explains, its extended periods of habitation. For it can hardly be called a human environment: what little human life there is will be clustered around the water, mineral or man-made, the desert waits silent, motionless, still and strange.

Edward Kibler,
Bakers Institute

Mirage is in Los Angeles working on her thesis on environmental art for the State University at Groningen, the Netherlands.