

Matter

Art in the Desert

As its title suggests, Richard Misrach's 1983 photograph *Waiting, Edwards Air Force Base, California* is a picture of a family of NASA enthusiasts, camped out on the floor of a dry lakebed in Southern California, in anticipation of the return of the space shuttle (fig. 42). Misrach, with an acute eye for the drama of composition, has placed the group just below center, the disposition of their bodies and belongings mimicking the outline of the brown mountain range in the distance. It is a picture of the many contradictions of the desert: of hope matched with danger, of innocence pressed up against power, of nature playing host to high tech. Purity and pollution are both at work here, too, and—as in much desert art of the period—the futuristic is intertwined with the prehistoric, as an ancient sea awaits the arrival of a computerized visitor from outer space. In the middle of all this, of course, are the plaid shirts and baseball caps of an American family on a two-day outing.

What is especially striking about the photograph, though, is the pure scenographic emptiness of it, the way it capitalizes on the desert as a naked stage for drama. The picture depends on the resulting power of the centrally placed American flag, breaking the horizon between two peaks. This is the sign at the center of the picture, the *vox clamantis in deserto*. Of course, this effect is not only visible to us, Misrach's viewers, but was also intended by the patriotic family, who—anticipating the emptiness of their destination—posted the flag high from the cab of their pickup. Like much desert art of the period, this photograph is about the intensity and foreignness of human signs when planted, freestanding, against the mute indifference of an apparent void.

In this chapter I want to make sense not of Misrach's photographic project of the 1980s, elegant and revealing as it is, but rather of the strange intensity of modernist artists making art in and about the desert in the years around 1968. It was the period of Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), which might be described as a periodic natural performance in western New Mexico—and of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), a utopic-tragic film of countercultural hope and violence, set largely in Death Valley. It was a period inaugurated, we might say, by Jean Tinguely's *Study*