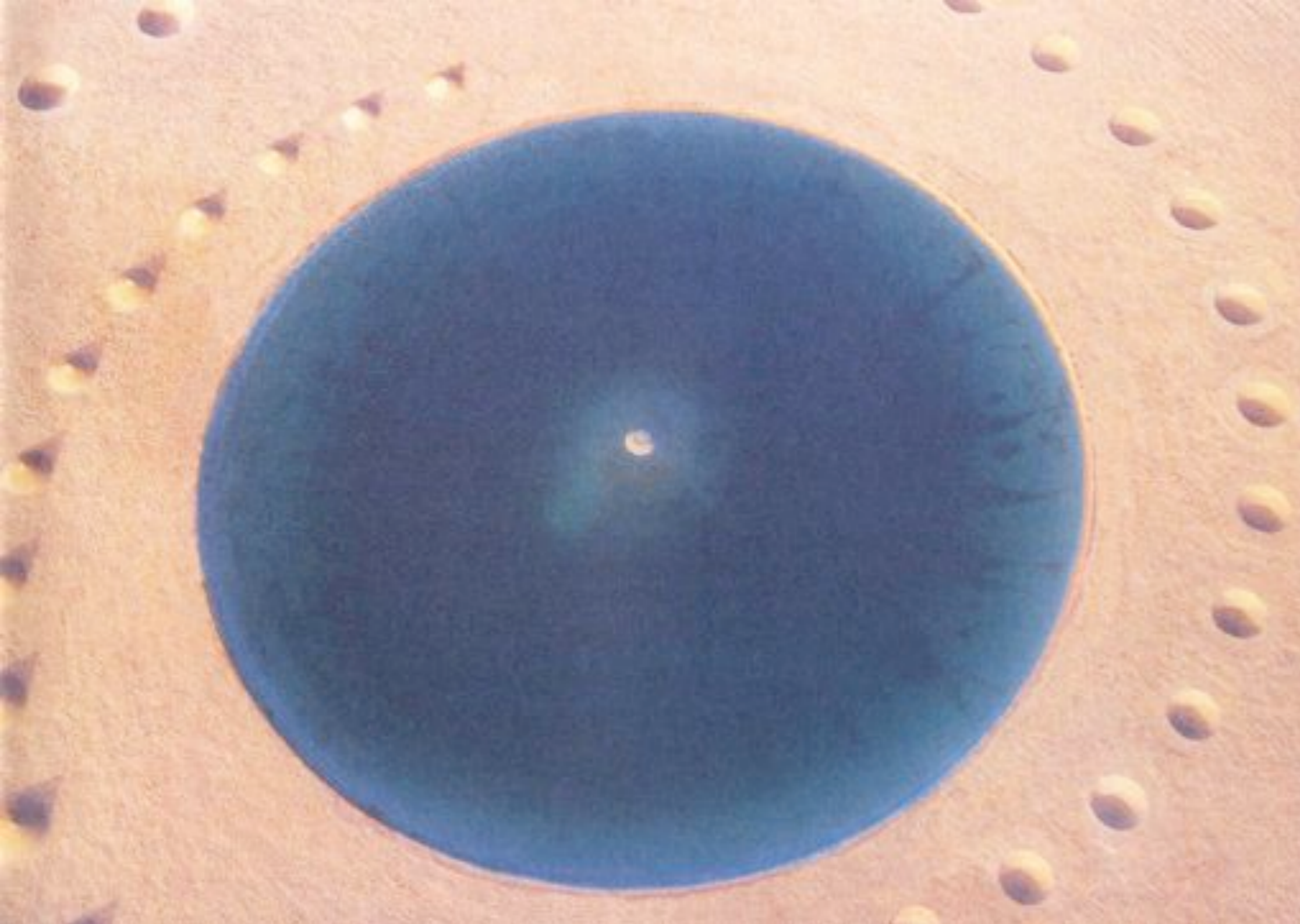


D E S E R T   B R E A T H



D   A   S T

A R T E A M



We dedicate this book

To Samih Sawiris who was the first  
to believe in us and never doubted.

To our families for their love and support  
throughout the two years of this adventure.

And to all those visionaries who support  
young artists in their first steps.

D.A.ST. Art Team

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# INTRODUCTION

by Efi Andreadi

The art of this century now coming to a close has been marked by a tendency towards self-analysis and a slow - for a «century of speed» - process that has stripped the body of notions supporting the work of art. This movement began in the first decade of the century and presumed to remove any «episode» - as brilliant and fascinating as it might be - capable of diverting the viewer's awareness from the work's internal structure and growth. The work's position in the space, its material substance, even the artist's physical presence and activity, became part of the «spectacle». Even the relationship between the viewer and the work was discovered and noted, the decisive role of one's movement around it, as well as one's automatic sensory - visual and otherwise - response to it.

In the late 60s and 70s, the notion of the natural environment, as opposed to «events» in closed galleries and studio, focused on open, outdoor activities and interventions in the landscape (Land Art or Earthworks). Naturally, these works were, albeit loosely, linked to Minimalism, and moved within the framework that pursued primal meanings and incidents concerning the planet Earth and the theories of Buckminster Fuller.

Earth Art, like any work man creates with his hands and mind, has deep roots. An ordinary airplane ride divulges mankind's age-old interventions to the earth's surface, which, though usually conditioned by utility, always have an aesthetic outcome. Ordered fields extend before our eyes, morphologically differentiated by the planted masses, distribution of color, dark ditches and shining bodies of water. Today's mechanical design by

farming equipment produces fascinating linear corridors and patterns.

During the centuries of aristocratic omnipotence, gardeners/designers did not confine themselves to the ordering of natural space for their lords' easy perambulation. Collaborating with artists and architects, they created huge parks with unique patterns and plantings calculated with complex perspectives and points of tension and outlet - works linked directly to the plastic issues of their times. Art's connection to Minimalism's depersonalized expression coincided with the arrival of the first photographs taken of Earth from outer space. These images automatically changed not only our perception of the scale of the world around us but our relation to the art object, opening the way to monumental interventions to the earth's surface which would exist as a minimum mark - a part of the whole - and would live for one moment upon the eternal earth.

Thus, Walter de Maria drew two straight lines in the desert (1968), Robert Smithson created a spiral of earth in the water (Spiral Jetty, 1970), while other artists piled stones into inaccessible peaks or created corridors visible only to themselves (Richard Long, 1974). Their very movement within these generally desolate and uninhabited landscapes gave them the impression that they were rediscovering, like ancient peoples, the relationship between art and the infinite time and space of the universe.

The three Greek artists who created Desert Breath in El Gouna, Egypt, set out on a comparable adventure, but with the maturity of their youth - that is, without the illusions of the 70s, with the religious acceptance and

adaptability of the 90s, and their own ease and sincerity in conceiving and executing their project. The choice of such an infinite and indifferent place where they could leave their marks undisturbed also defined the subsequent life of their work. The fact that the sand's «fluidity» might at any time betray their sculptural invention was what in turn ensured the principle, as they imagined, of its obliteration.

The work begins with a simple figure: a double spiral. Their conviction that the piece would become a part of the landscape was based on the fact that they used, molded and built the surrounding sand itself, but without forcing it into patterns alien to its actual nature. In fact, every intervention in the desert, natural like the wind, or artificial like the cutting of a road, ends in the accumulation of small or large cones. The total absence of other incidents in the desert landscape to give a special significance to this negation of the flat surface was surely the principle behind the pyramid: a manmade hill of sand that both concealed the dead and symbolized the victory over death's horizontal position. The D.A.S.T. group - sculptor Danae Stratou, industrial designer Alexandra Stratou, and architect Stella Constantinides - started out with difficulties and generally brutal working conditions to create the work they'd envisioned. Its only prerequisite was harmonious coexistence with the surrounding space.

To this basic framework they added complex possibilities and fascinating parameters with the increasing size and positive-negative sequence of the cones. They ingeniously calculated the viewer's movement into the center so

that each point along this route revealed unexpected patterns and fascinating images. The round lake, the «moist heart», awaited the pedestrian like a promise, but was also a perpetual, shining reminder of the sky's every changing hue, as were the small blue reflecting drips at the apex of each cone.

Nonetheless, the entire route inside this primal figure would not have been so satisfying if the work hadn't been so impeccably calculated and executed. To calculate the gradations and symmetry, the D.A.S.T. group used current computer technology which enabled them to mathematically realize a closed, autonomous work, as well as solve problems such as the factoring of scale in relation to mass or to the surrounding hills, etc. Still, this impeccable execution was founded on their own fanatical attention both to detail and to the overall image.

A stroll at dawn revealed the precise tension among the points and the remarkably structured play of shadows. As they predicted in their comprehensive text, the next day we too perceived dizzying small faint waves of sand licking the geometric shapes. Those of us fortunate enough to see this work will mentally follow its slow absorption by the surrounding desert. Photography, an integral part of this kind of work, will hopefully keep us informed as to the life of this piece which has dynamically entered our imaginary museum.

This text was initially published in ARTI Magazine, Volume 34 May-June '97



IN OUR MIND'S EYE THE DESERT WAS A PLACE WHERE ONE EXPERIENCES INFINITY,  
A CONTINUOUS DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE INFINITELY SMALL AND THE INFINITELY LARGE.





ONCE THE SPIRAL ESTABLISHES A GROWTH PATTERN, IT KEEPS GENERATING ITSELF INWARD AND OUTWARD, BOTH PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY INTO ETERNITY.



OVERFLOWING INTO THE IMPLIED VERTICAL AXIS, THUS CREATING A PHYSICAL BOND BETWEEN THE EARTH AND THE SKY.





## DESERT BREATH

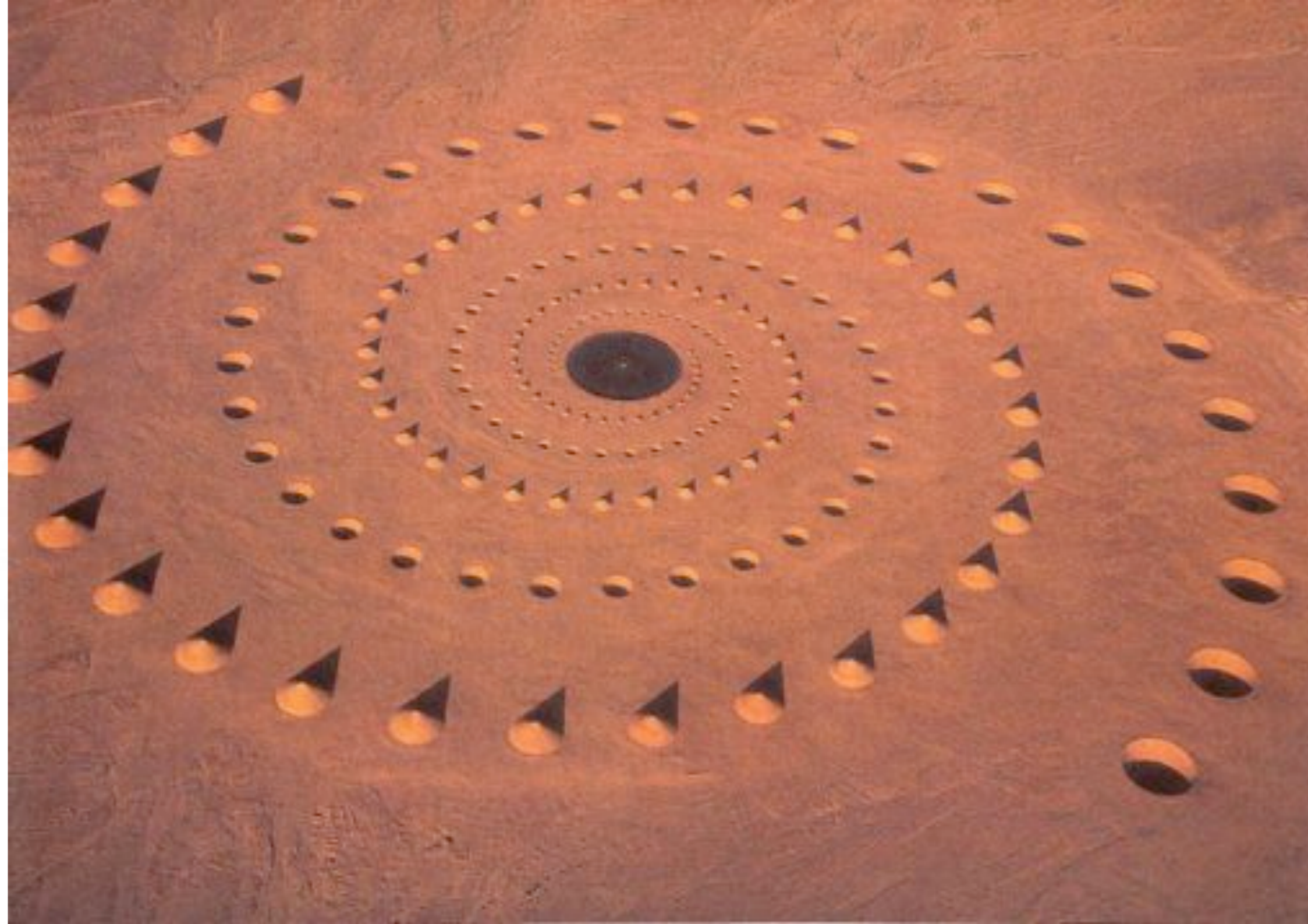
■ The project is rooted in our common desire to work in the desert. The lack of objects in the surrounding area renders one unable to rely on customary means in order to determine scale, distance and orientation, so that these acquired senses have to be relearned based upon experience with earth (gravity), sky (motion), light (change), water (level). Simultaneously, one experiences a feeling of isolation and completeness. One can physically feel time go by yet provides no resistance. The vastness of the horizon becomes the only visual reference to equilibrium.

■ The site that was chosen is a flat expanse of sand that lies between the Red Sea and a body of mountains. The work covers an area of one hundred thousand square meters and involves the displacement of eight thousand cubic meters of sand. One hundred and seventy eight conical volumes form two interlocking logarithmic spirals that move out from a common center with a phase difference of one hundred and eighty degrees in the same direction of rotation. One spiral consists of incised cones, while the other of protruding ones; the incised cones are the result of the displacement of sand to create the protruding cones. The center, a one thousand two hundred cubic meters earthen vessel with a W section is the union of the positive and negative cone. It is filled with water to its rim so that the protruding cone in the center forms a tiny island at the level of the horizon.

■ The conical volume is a familiar form in the language of the desert. It becomes a point of reference in the endless procession of horizons. By creating conical volumes that are precise geometrical forms, their origin moves into the realm of the mysterious and the moment they are completed, they become an instrument to measure the passage of time. This instant, the moment of completion and absolute geometrical precision, marks time zero before the installation begins its gradual transformation by the forces of nature.

■ The experience of walking within the installation was central to its conception. The goal was to create a reality which would be experienced through time and become part of ones physical memory. The spiral, begins from a very precise focal point and expands into infinity, creating a course that grows into ones consciousness. The rhythm that builds up while walking inside the spiral pathway compels one to escape ones' earthbound condition in order to view it from above. These two points of view are complementary, in constant dialogue, in terms of conception as well as perception. On the one hand an energy field that lives by and imposes its own codes of perception, on the other a living organism that absorbs outside stimuli to either reinforce them - as a shadows cast by the sun during its daily rituals - or to be permanently transformed by them - like the constant displacement of sand by the wind.

■ D.A.S.T.





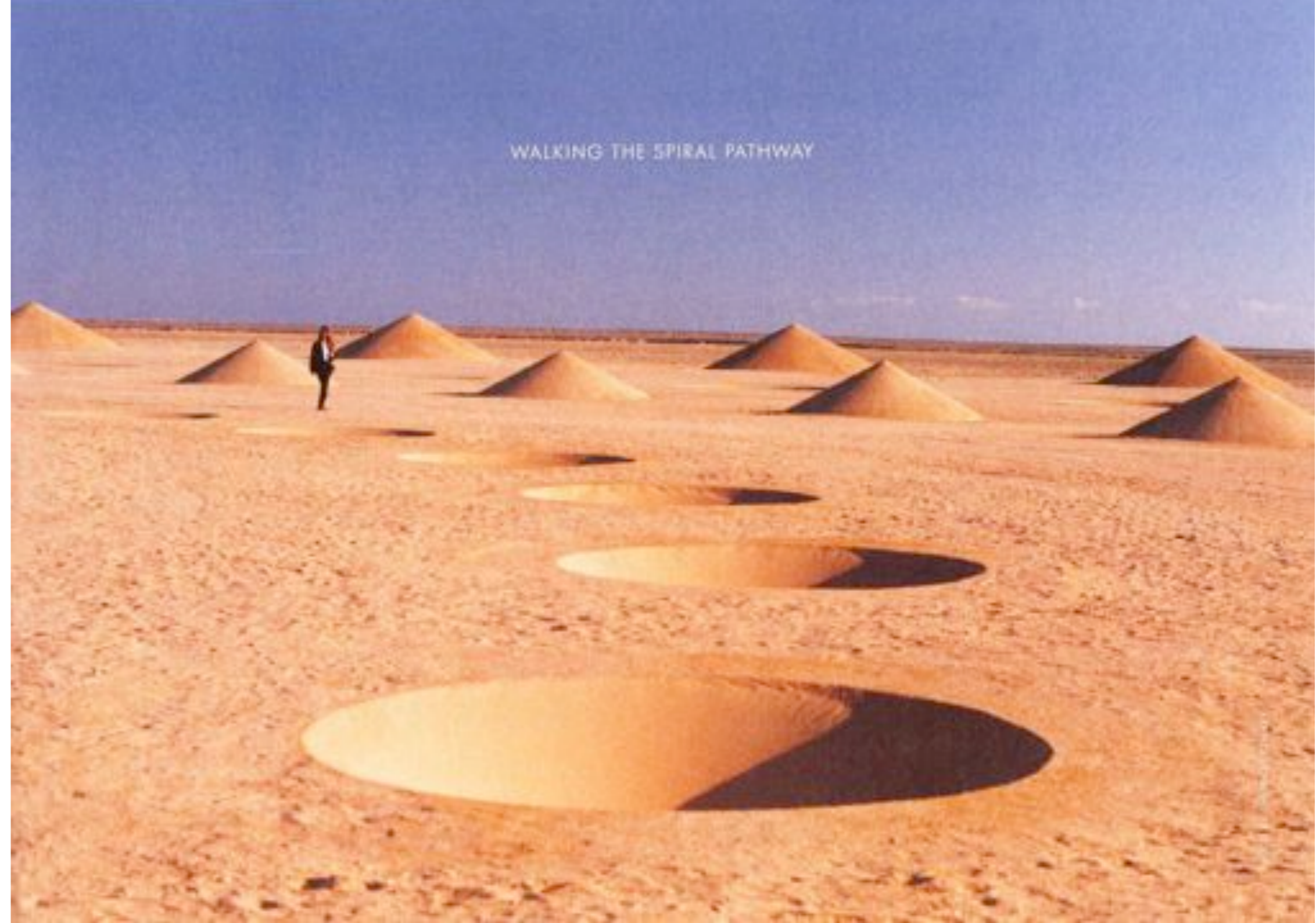
THERE ARE TIMES

WHEN A MOMENT

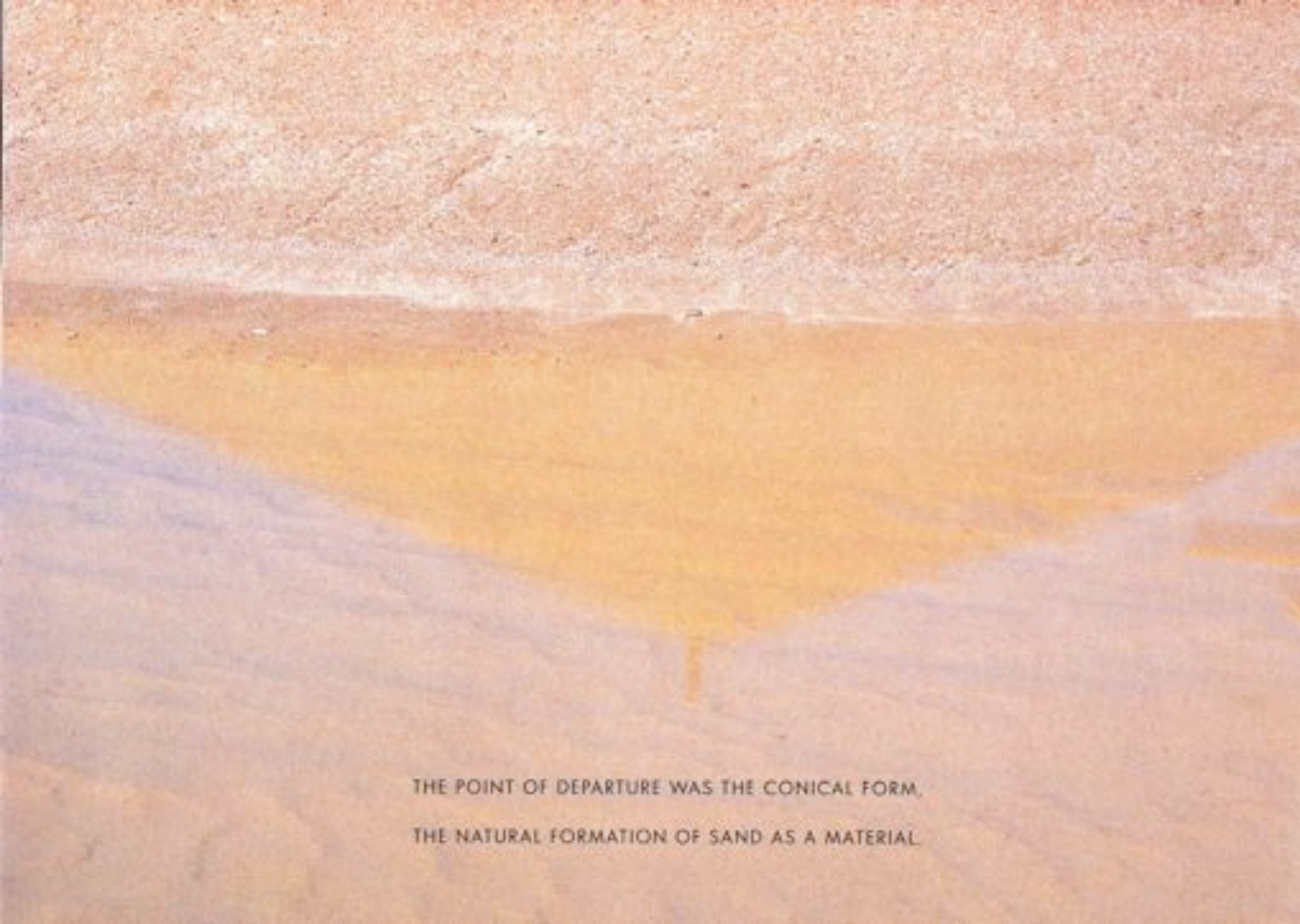
ACHIEVES A GLIMPSE

OF THE ETERNAL.

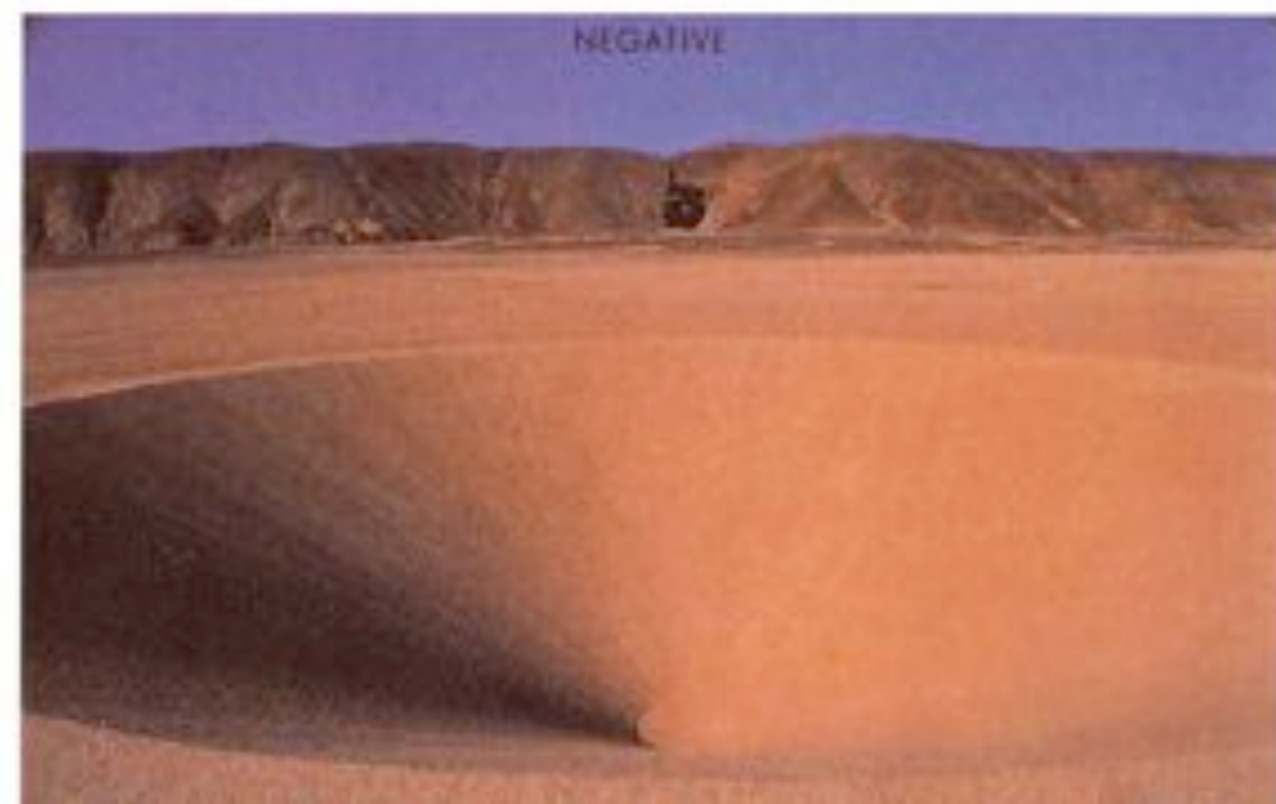
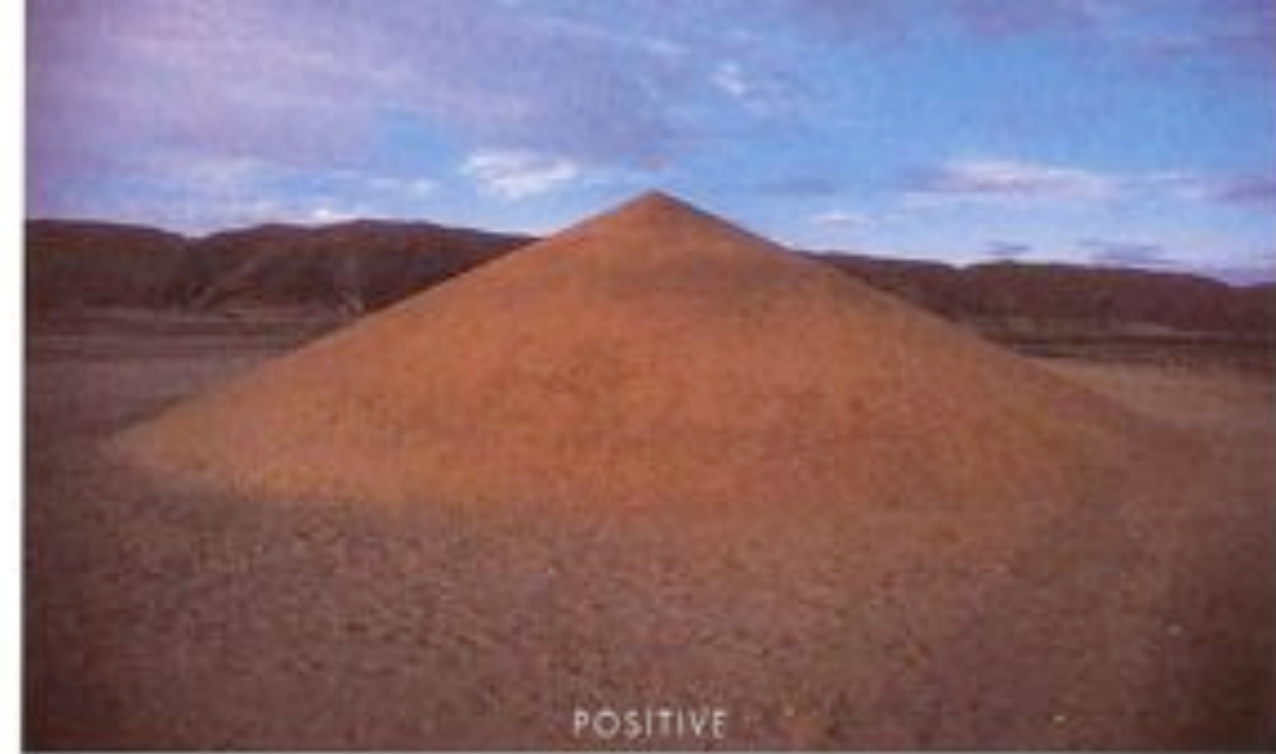
WALKING THE SPIRAL PATHWAY







THE POINT OF DEPARTURE WAS THE CONICAL FORM,  
THE NATURAL FORMATION OF SAND AS A MATERIAL.





THE POSITIVE CONES SEEM TO BE GROWING OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN.



BREATHING-IN, BREATHING-OUT, REACHING FOR EQUILIBRIUM.





WE WERE ADDRESSING THE DESERT AS A STATE OF MIND, A LANDSCAPE OF THE MIND.



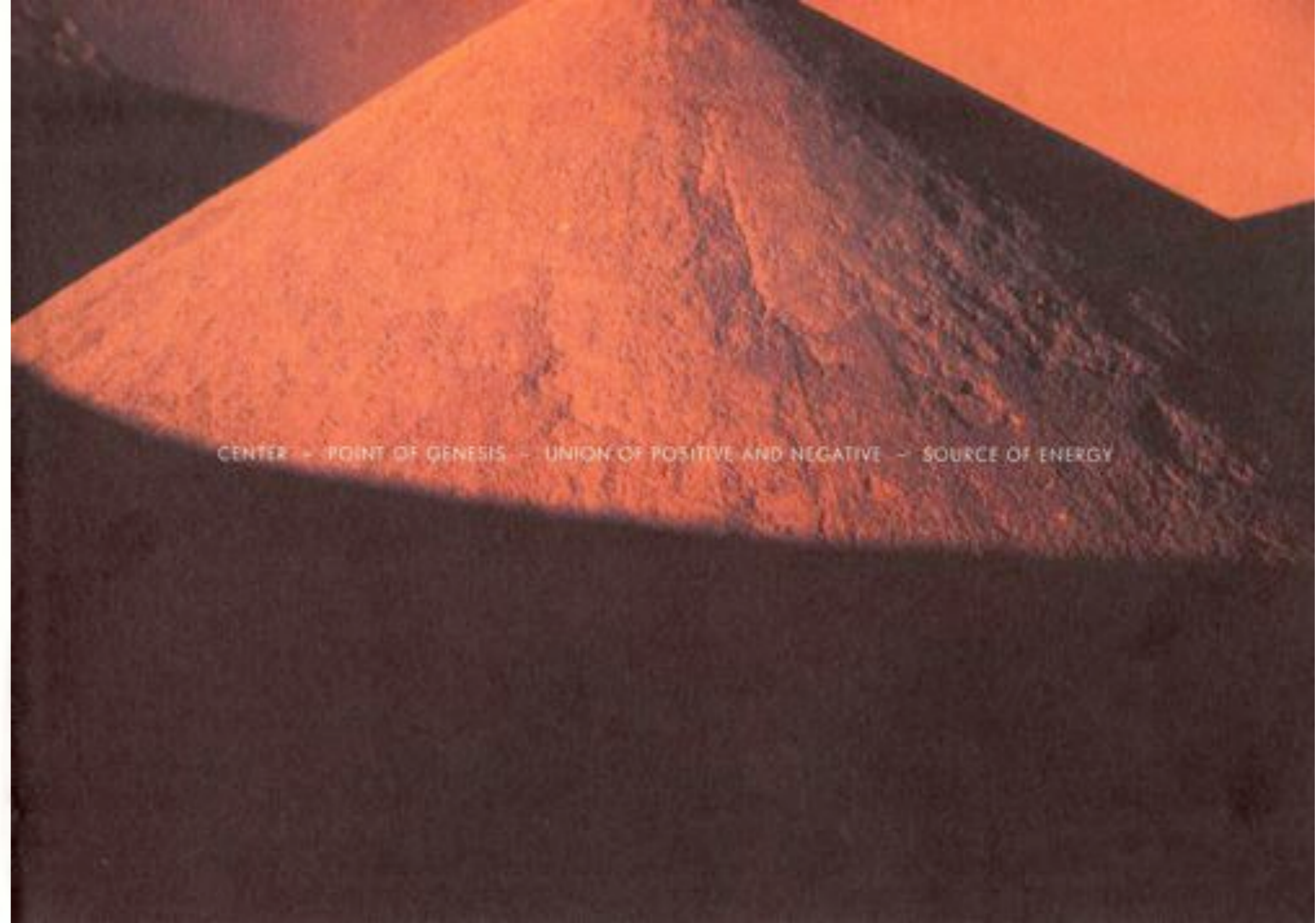
THE VOLUMES APPEAR ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE, RYTHMICAL ACCENTUATIONS OF THE HORIZON LINE.







PHOTO BY JUREN EL DEKAKI



CENTER → POINT OF GENESIS → UNION OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE → SOURCE OF ENERGY



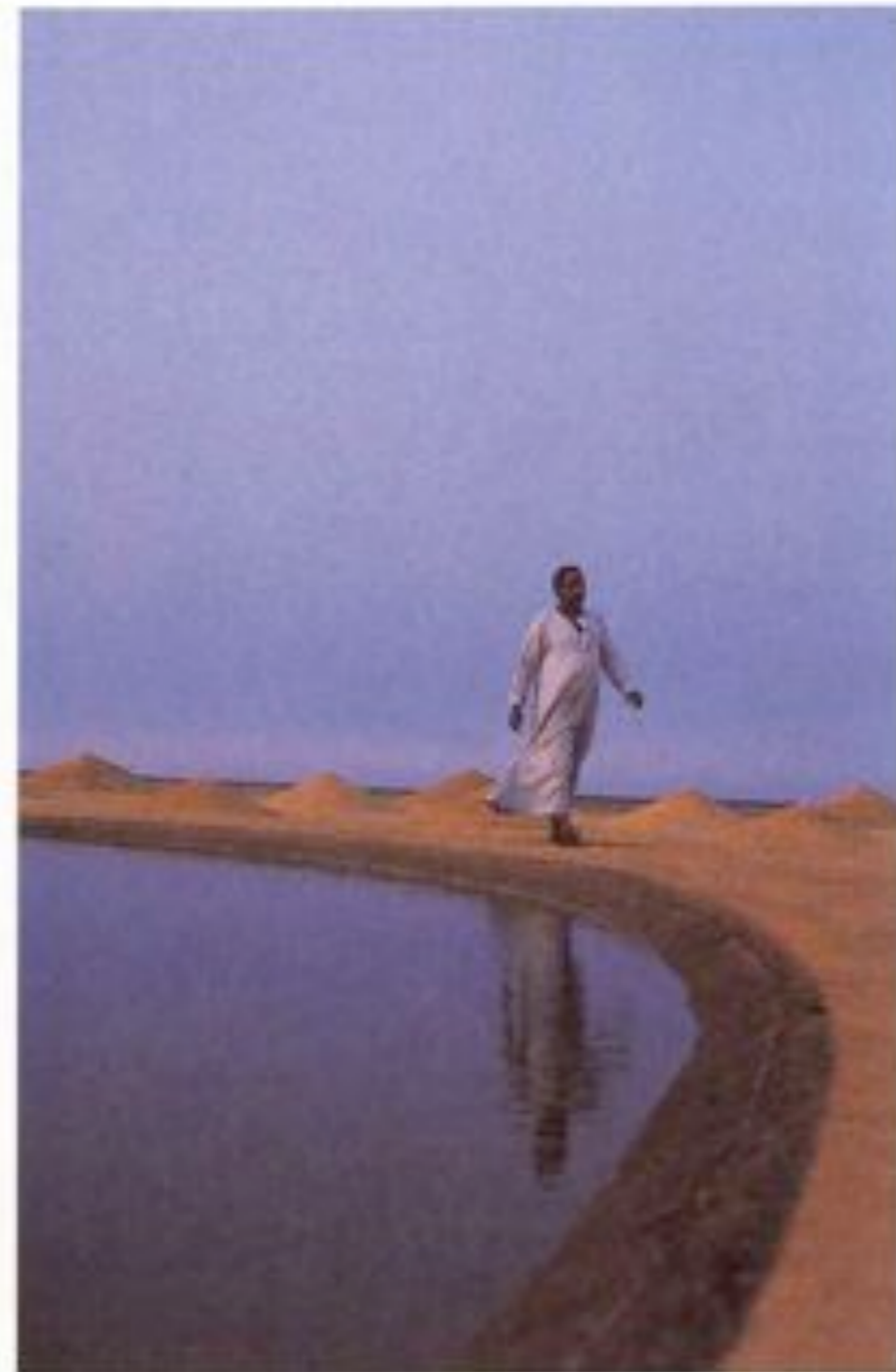


A SITE SPECIFIC WORK THAT GROWS OUT OF OUR PERCEPTION OF THE SITE ITSELF.

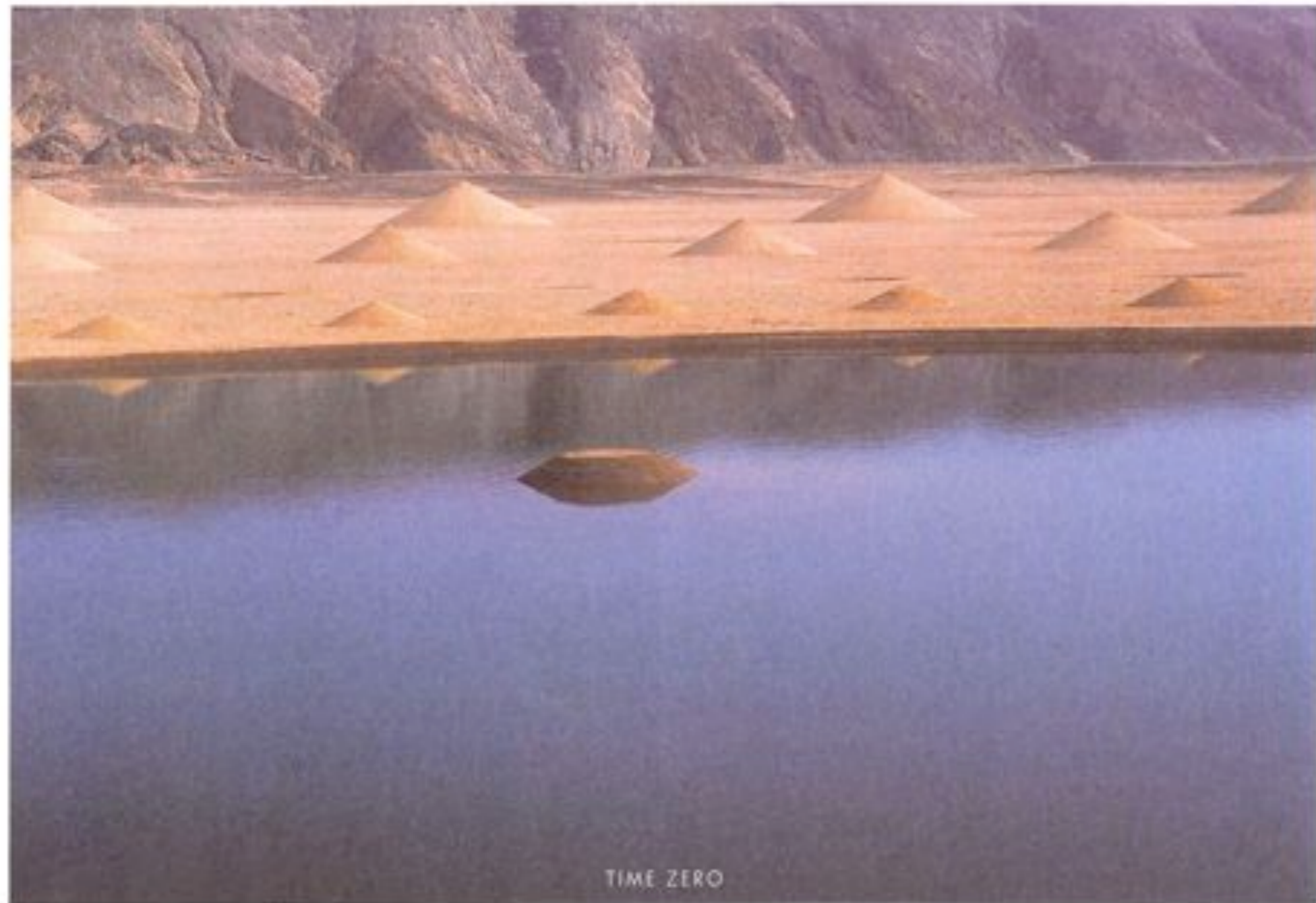
LOCATED BETWEEN THE SEA AND A BODY OF MOUNTAINS, AT THE POINT WHERE THE IMMENSITY OF THE DESERT MEETS THE IMMENSITY OF THE SEA.

THE WORK FUNCTIONS ON TWO DIFFERENT LEVELS IN TERMS OF VIEWPOINT: FROM ABOVE, AS A VISUAL IMAGE, AND FROM THE GROUND, A PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE.

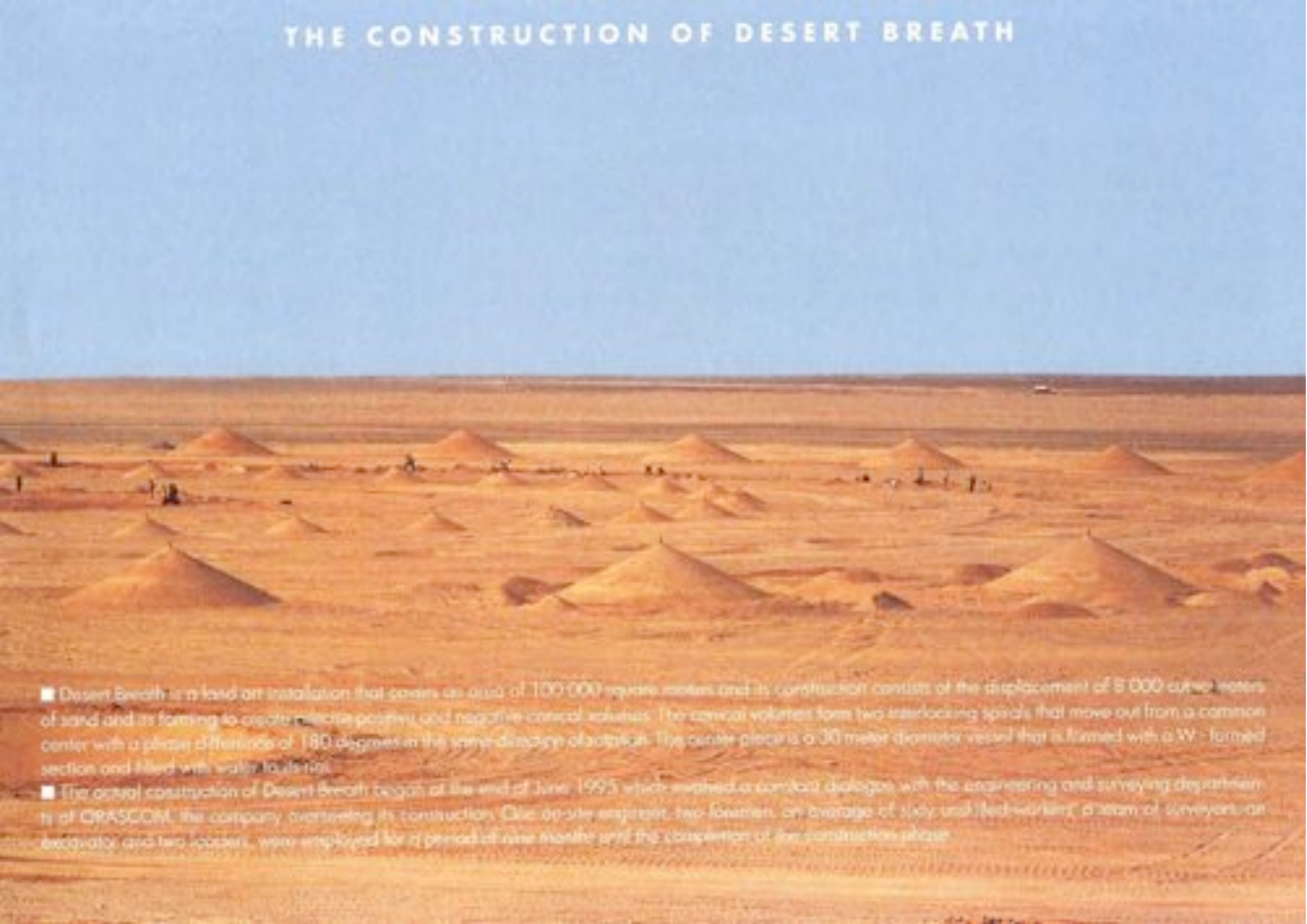
AN ENERGY FIELD THAT TRANSMITS ITS OWN CODES OF PERCEPTION INTO OUR PHYSICAL MEMORY.











- Desert Breath is a land art installation that covers an area of 100,000 square meters and its construction consists of the displacement of 8,000 cubic meters of sand and its forming to create positive and negative conical volumes. The conical volumes form two interlocking spirals that move out from a common center with a phase difference of 180 degrees in the same direction of rotation. The center piece is a 30 meter diameter vessel that is formed with a VV - formed section and filled with water to absorb.
- The actual construction of Desert Breath began at the end of June 1995 which involved a constant dialogue with the engineering and surveying departments of GRASCOM, the company overseeing its construction. On-site engineer, two foremen, an average of sixty unskilled workers, a team of surveyors, an excavator and two loaders, were employed for a period of nine months until the completion of the construction phase.





■ During the first month we were involved in the general surveying of the area, the orientation and positioning of the work within the site and the installation of 1,5 kilometer pipeline which served to transport the vital element, water, from the nearby oasis. Simultaneously, we conducted final tests for the application of the construction method.





■ On site excavation began in the beginning of August 1996, while the soil was being displaced to create the positive volumes. Soil compaction for both positive and negative volumes was achieved using mechanical or manual means where applicable, and with a constant necessity for water in the environment were it is most scarce.



■ Ensuring the desired precision was a task which demanded unfailing supervision, a constant flow of inventions and on-site solutions, and the presence of a surveying team on a daily basis. We designed devices necessary to ensure the minimal tolerance that the work required both for the positioning of the center of each cone, and for the forming of the volumes, and re-examined the performance of these methods every step of the way.





■ The time-planning for the construction was a very important issue, considering that it was designed with one goal in mind: the simultaneous completion of all the elements to converge upon one single moment in time, the moment of geometrical precision, which marks time zero before the work is turned over to the forces of nature to begin its gradual transformation.



■ The forces of nature became, through their sculptural activity, part of the work immediately after its completion. These same forces intervened in a very dramatic way 13 days prior to the originally scheduled date for the completion. On the 16th of November 1996, an unprecedented rainstorm flooded the area causing great damage to the construction, and postponing the inauguration date. This awe-inspiring baptism, as we saw it, could have been incorporated in the disintegration phase had it happened after the completion of the construction phase.



## THE TIME ELEMENT

■ Desert Breath was constructed out of sand and water. Transient elements, elements which were offered from the site itself. The parameters that we had set initially, to create a site specific work that would be experienced through walking, suggested a work which would be of monumental scale. The materials however, did not. We were inspired by the ability of the desert to continuously transform itself through the activity of natural forces and yet to always display the traces of this transformation. It was as if one was able to read through the passage of the millenia or just the past fortnight, only by looking at the formations of the sand. This was an element, the element of time, that we would not overlook in the process of conceiving the work.

■ Geometrical precision within the context of the fluid landscape of the desert was the element that was used in order to dematerialise the elements without depriving them of their archetypal qualities. The sand cones, the sand spirals, became the vehicles through which the energy that we felt in the site was revealed. And yet this precision is to remain, after many years and many sandstorms only an imprint that keeps track of the passage of time. The spiral and the cone, immediately traced back to their original form, keeping a physical track of the activities of nature within the site of the area. The formal consistency of the installation becoming the probe for the active consistency of nature.

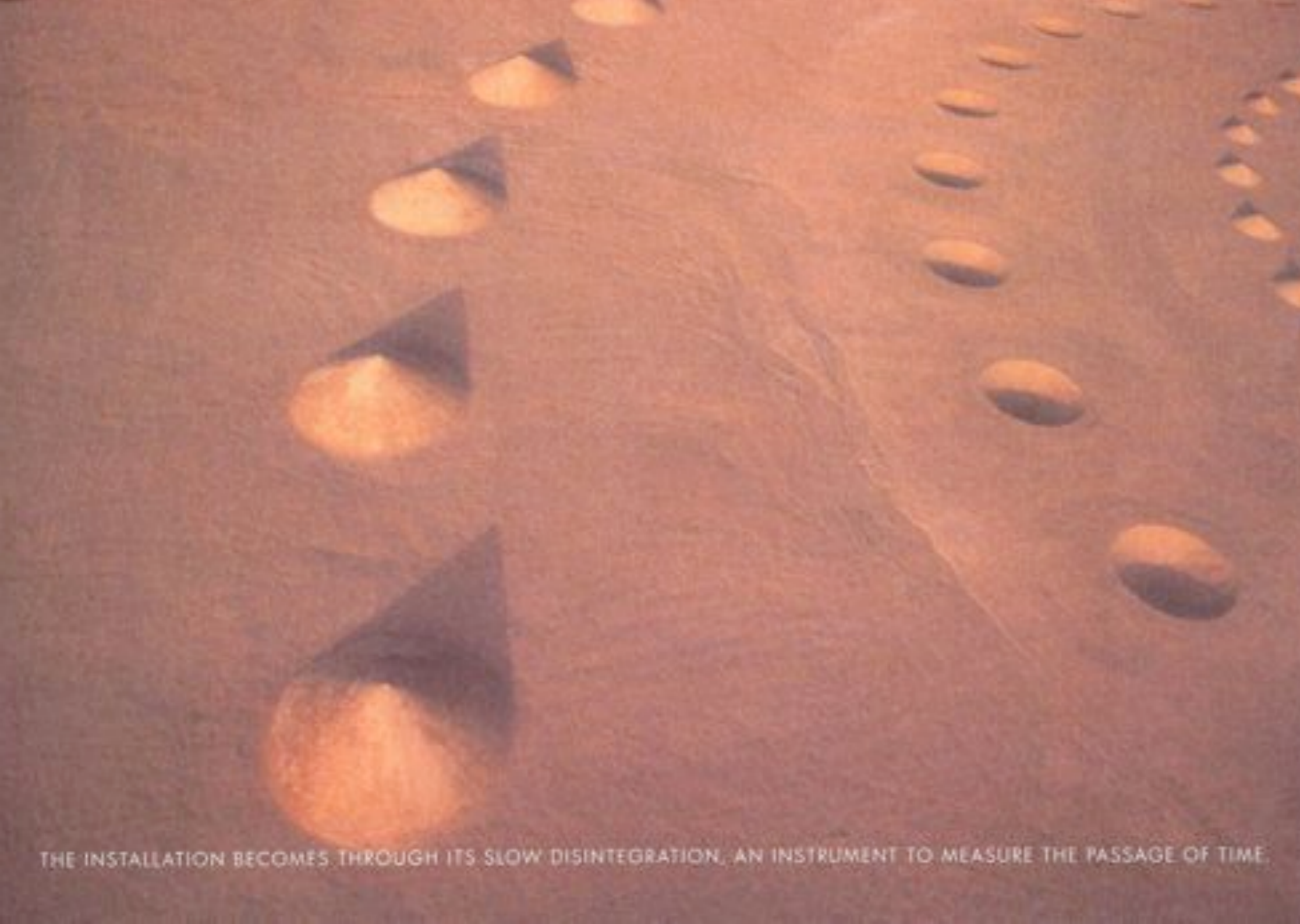
■ On March 7th 1997, the construction of Desert Breath was completed. At the same moment the work was turned over to the forces of nature to begin the slow process of the absorption of the work by the landscape that gave birth to it. The systematic documentation of this process is as important to Desert Breath as the displacement of sand that was used to create it.

■ The area in which the work was created belongs to the highest windzone in the world. The wind blows constantly from the north bringing with it fine sand that accumulates around the obstacles it encounters, while at the same time taking away with it anything that doesn't have the strength to resist it. The earth itself in this area used to be the bottom of the sea; it is very compact and contains a large percentage of silt and salt. When sprayed with water and compacted (which is the method we used for the construction of the work) it becomes very hard and creates a strong dry layer on the surface that is subject to wind erosion. The earth under this crust retains humidity for an extended period of time because of its high consistency in silt and does not dry immediately after being exposed to the sun.

■ On September 10th 1997, we made our first trip to observe and document this process of gradual transformation. The winds during the summer had been unusually weak. The changes that had occurred were very subtle and visible mostly on the texture of the positive cones. The crust on the surface of the cones had dried and cracked and small pieces of it were carried away by the wind, revealing the humid sand underneath, and creating a rough surface with color differences according to the humidity level. This erosion happened all around the cones and more prominently closer to their tips. Some fine sand had accumulated in the negative cones forming physical shadows on the north side of each cone. It seemed as though the same amount of sand had accumulated in each cone, because as the cones became smaller their form became more and more altered; the tips of the smallest cones near the center had become curved. The sand that is deposited inside the negative cones, is of a different quality than the soil; it consists mostly of silt and it is much finer and lighter.





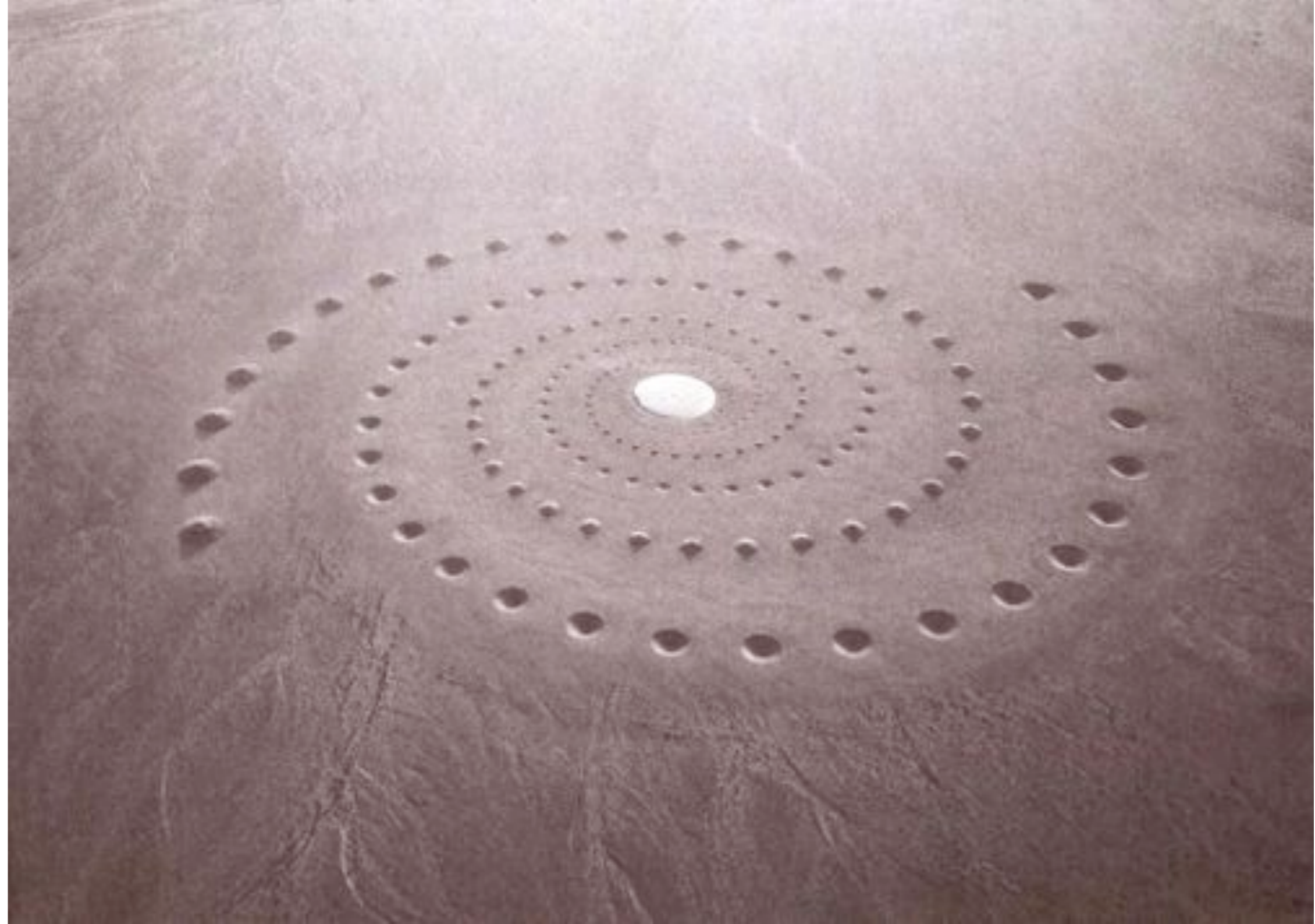


THE INSTALLATION BECOMES THROUGH ITS SLOW DISINTEGRATION, AN INSTRUMENT TO MEASURE THE PASSAGE OF TIME.





■ Observing the very slow rhythm of Desert Breath's transformation by the natural forces, one has the lingering feeling that, years from now, or perhaps even centuries, when the work has been absorbed by its natural environment, the energy which created it will always be traced. What remains the most important element of Desert Breath's journey through time, is that whichever moment one choses to visit the work one will always be referred to the moment of completion. Simultaneously one will be able to mentally follow its gradual transformation. The harmonic cohabitation of the precision of human geometry with that of nature.





## REALISATION OF DESERT BREATH

III The group D.A.S.T. is an interdisciplinary collaboration between three artists: Danae Stratou, Sculptor, Alexandra Stratou, Industrial Designer, and Stella Constantinides, Architect. The group was formed in May 1995, based on our common desire to create an installation in the desert. The parameters that we had set for this project described a site specific work of such a scale that it would be experienced through walking.

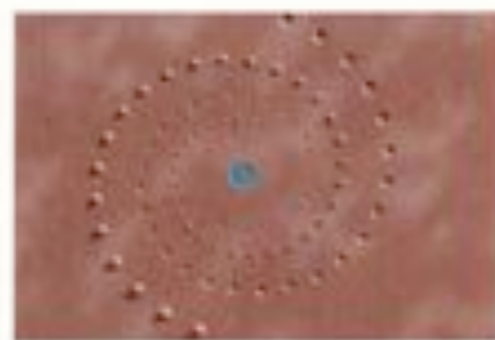
III In June 1995 we made our first trip to Egypt in search of a site. The site that was chosen was a flat expanse of desert land that lies between the Red sea and a body of mountains which runs parallel to the coastline known as the Eastern Mountains. During this visit to the site, the fundamental idea for Desert Breath was conceived in what can be described as a moment of unanimous inspiration.

III Our energy as a group and faith in the project carried us through a summer of intensive experimenting in our studio and outdoor locations in Greece. Gradually the idea for Desert Breath started crystallizing while all superfluous elements were removed to reveal the essential. In September 1995 we presented the project to Mr. Samih Sawiris, President of Orascom P.T.D., a Cairo based construction and development company, who embraced the project and agreed to sponsor its realization as part of the development of the area.

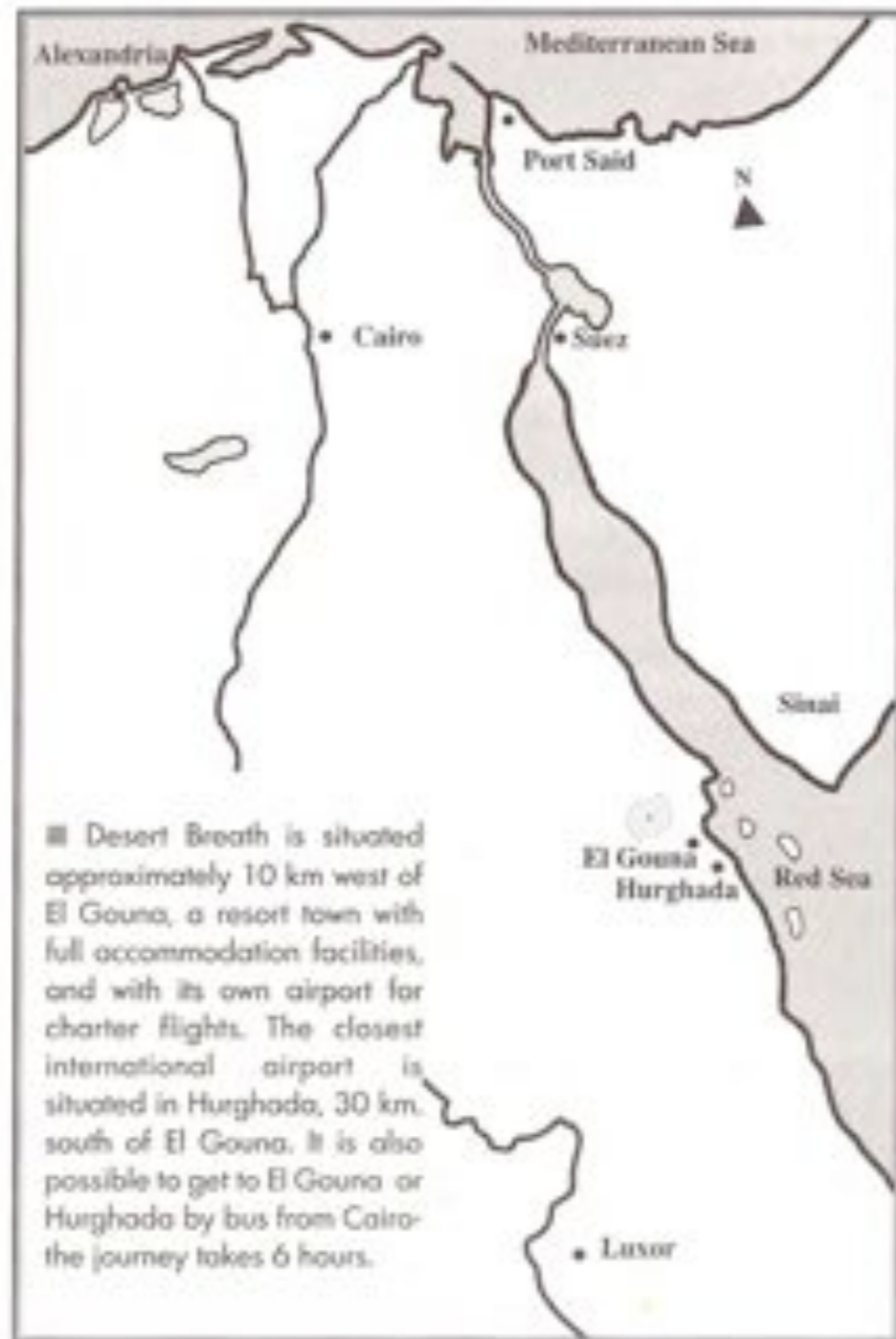
III Between September and June 1996 we collaborated with a group of architects, engineers, mathematicians and geologists, in order to resolve the construction of the project. Several trips to the site helped determine applicable methods for construction as well as issues of exact site selection. During these months, we worked on final detailing and the presentation of the work and pursued another vital issue concerning the project: its documentation.

III Desert Breath has been documented both through the medium of photography and professional broadcast quality video, since the beginning of its construction. It was our goal to be able to include the whole work and its journey through time (the three consecutive phases of construction, completion and disintegration) in two separate entries: a photographic book and a video documentary. We are also planning to use this material as part of multi media exhibitions in gallery or museum spaces.

III Desert Breath exists in the desert, witnessing the passage of time, living the rituals of nature. After nine months, which were devoted entirely to its construction, we are detached from its physical and temporal aspect, free to experience it in its own rhythms. The obstacles that we encountered during the two years of its realization seem to have vanished before the serenity of its existence. The faith that went into creating this work, has emerged as a focused energy.







## SPONSORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

### SPONSORS:

- **ORASCOM P.T.D.** a construction and development company based in Cairo, Egypt, sponsored entirely the construction of Desert Breath and the full accommodation of the artists and their collaborators.
- **STUDIO ATA** a production company based in Athens, Greece, sponsored the video documentation of the project.
- **GENERAL PRESS PUBLICATIONS S.A.** a printing company based in Athens, Greece, sponsored the production of all printed material used for the communication of the project.

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- **EGYPT AIR**
- **HELANEK S.A.**
- **PYRAMIS INTERNATIONAL**
- **EL GOUNA MOVENPICK HOTEL**
- **DAWAR EL OMDA HOTEL**
- **EL GOUNA PARADISIO HOTEL**

### CONTRIBUTORS:

- **NAGUIB SAWIRIS**
- **PHILIP STRATOS**
- **NICOS VERNICOS**



## SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to all those that contributed in the realisation of Desert Breath, out of sheer faith and respect for the collective effort which was put into it. Without their help it would not have been possible:

- Cinematographer: TASOS ZAFIROPOULOS
- Photographer: SHERIN EL SEMARY
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SAMEH ABU TAR  
ZACHAREIA SAAD LAWANDE  
ANTONIS MITZALIS
- Computer specialists: LEFTERIS VIRIRAKIS  
COSTAS KIRIAZOPOULOS
- Inaugural event coordinators: DMITRI COROMILAS  
KARIM MOSTAFA

■ Hag Ahmed, the Bedouin living in this area, who embraced our project and offered his hospitality to us as if we were his own sons!

■ We would also like to thank everyone in El Gouna for their support and the workers who worked in the realization of this project.

■ Special Thanks to the art critics and journalists who discovered or became interested in Desert Breath and helped communicate its existence to a wider audience through different media.

Also we thank:

- |                              |                                        |                             |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ■ George Anthopoulos         | ■ Aris Georgiadis                      | ■ George Mameferratos       | ■ Frosso Ralli             |
| ■ Sherif El Bidewi           | ■ Akis Georgiou                        | ■ Costis Moskof             | ■ Spiros Repoulis          |
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| ■ Stefanos Elthimiadis       | ■ Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs | ■ ORASCOM Surveying Dept    | ■ Christiana Sofianopoulou |
| ■ Stella Filipopoulou        | ■ Zoe Kosmidou                         | ■ Antonis Papaconstantinou  | ■ Spiros Trifonopoulos     |
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| ■ Virginia Freeman           | ■ Maher Maksoud                        | ■ Pose Magazine             | ■ Marina Tzannetakis       |
| ■ Goya Gallagher             | ■ Wayne Merlano                        | ■ Power Station in El Gouna | ■ George Vardinoyiannis    |

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## D.A.ST. BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

■ **D.A.ST** is an acronym resulting from putting together the initials of our first names **Danae, Alexandra, Stella**.

■ Danae Stratou, born 1964, is a sculptor. She studied sculpture at Central St. Martins School of art in London and graduated with a BA Hons in Fine Arts in 1987.

■ Alexandra Stratou, born 1970, is an Industrial Designer. She studied Industrial design at Rhode Island School of Design in the U.S.A. and graduated with a BA in Fine Arts in 1992

■ Stella Coratantinides, born 1969, is an Architect. She studies Architecture at the Architectural Association in London. She gets her Diploma in 1998.

■ In May 1995 the three of us joined our forces to form a team, based on our common desire to create a land Art installation in the Egyptian Desert. We all knew and respected each other's work, and felt that the project would have a lot to benefit from the different, complementary, qualities each one of us possessed, just as it would be strengthened by the diversity of focus in our ideas which were however springing from the same roots. Each of us had in the past adressed in one way or another the archetype of the desert in our work.

■ This collaboration, a form not so often encountered in the visual Arts, has proven to be very successful. The roots of its success lie in the way the relationships were established. Each of us relate directly to the core of the project, which we have reached in common, on all levels (conceptual, technical, representational), and all decisions were taken with this core in mind.

■ After the completion of Desert Breath, we continue to collaborate on team projects of variable scale and duration, while independently pursuing our own directions. The underlying concept in the projects that we work on as a team, is the Site Specific element. We endeavor to expose, rather than impose, our perception of the prevailing energy of the site.



