



ART

The Non-Manhattan Project Andrea Zittel bolted New York for the California scrub—and now the art world comes to her desert home.

BY KAREN ROSENBERG

MY BOYFRIEND AND I have a secret house in L.A.," says Andrea Zittel, conspiratorially. "He complains that in the desert it's all me, it's not us. So I'm trying to make a place that's not my testing ground." Zittel's desert house, in Joshua Tree, is known as A-Z West, and it's all about her in the way that Turkey Hill is all about Martha: It's a homesteader's cabin turned into a studio and lab for the playful, thoughtful, radical art-and-life experiments for which she's becoming widely known. At A-Z West (there's a defunct Brooklyn branch, A-Z East), she wears the same self-designed uniform for months. She recycles junk mail into a grayish pulp. Her mission statement says, "Home furniture, clothing, food all become the sites of investigation . . . to better understand human nature and the social construction of needs." It's not hard to understand how these things can strain a relationship.

Her relationship with the art world, meanwhile, is thriving. With a traveling survey about to open at the New Museum and the Whitney, the

40-year-old joins those artists who escaped to the margins—Donald Judd, Michael Heizer—only to find themselves at the center. In Zittel's universe, it's okay to show at the cutting-edge Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea while incubating radical ideas amid the hippie squats of Joshua Tree. Zittel has become a self-described "tourist attraction," hosting a parade of art pilgrims—a version of the cocktail parties she held weekly during her time in Williamsburg. She's definitely out of the way, rationing water when the delivery truck doesn't show, but she's not off the grid.

Zittel is, essentially, a one-woman corporation; under the moniker "A-Z Administrative Services," she acts as industrial designer, copywriter, and tester. Some of her inventions, like the Living Units (trunks that unfold into kitchens, bathrooms, and the like) are meant to make daily routines easy and efficient. Others, such as the podlike Escape Vehicles, appeal to fantasies of isolation and security. As an archivist at Pat Hearn, in the early nineties, she was flummoxed by the fashion codes of the trust-fund set, so she had one black dress made and wore it every day for six months. It's a classic Zittel strategy, circumventing rules by inventing new ones, and it inspired a series called A-Z Personal Uniforms. Now, she quips, "I can wear a \$6,000 dress to an opening, but it's \$6,000 because it's mine."

Shelter magazines have a tendency to confuse Zittel's work with architecture and industrial design—careers she rejected. "As a designer, you have such an obligation to people. As an artist, you have a lot more freedom," she says. When an innovation proves less than useful (say, the A-Z Chamber Pot), Zittel simply moves on. Critics don't quite know how to categorize her; some call her a Conceptualist, others an object-maker. A few of Zittel's collectors actually live with her creations, but most show and store them like sculpture.

She wants to make A-Z West a place where she and other artists can escape the pressures of the Art Basel herd. "I wanted to show that there could be a viable arts community outside a cultural capital like New York or Los Angeles, somewhere more affordable," she says. As it happens, the housing market in the Coachella Valley has exploded, and an artist can no longer snap up a piece of land for \$20,000. But life at A-Z was never purely Utopian. "I think there's a dark side to everything good—for instance, the minute you have a prefab house with alternative energy sources, people are going to build everywhere." If all goes well, A-Z West will one day become a foundation, with Zittel, her boyfriend, and their 17-month-old son settled in their L.A. abode, where "we just bought a sofa," she says. "It took us a year to find one I liked." ■

ANDREA ZITTEL:
WAGON STATIONS
WHITNEY MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART.
FEBRUARY 9
THROUGH MAY 7.

ANDREA ZITTEL:
CRITICAL SPACE
NEW MUSEUM.
JANUARY 26
THROUGH MAY 27.