

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE OCTOBER 2016



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Installation View: *Andrea Zittel*. Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. September 9 - October 8, 2016. © Andrea Zittel. Photo: Pierre Le Hors. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.

*in*conversation

Andrea Zittel WITH LAILA PEDRO

The American sculptor Andrea Zittel has spent over three decades developing, refining, and expanding a multifaceted practice grounded in the details and actions of how life is lived. She has created works on paper, uniforms, habitable spaces, objects that are simultaneously abstract sculptural works and fully functional furniture, and a community for investigative living in the California desert. For her current exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery (*Andrea Zittel*, September 9 – October 8, 2016), Zittel has bridged the thousands of miles between the gallery space and her desert practice. On the evening of the show's opening, Zittel spoke with Laila Pedro about our relationship to objects, how writing helps her think, and merging seemingly divergent practices.

LAILA PEDRO (RAIL): I've been thinking about your work for a long time, and a lot of what is unique and compelling about your practice coalesces in this show. There are all these different—almost modular—elements circling and engaging each other. It's both geographically spacious and conceptually broad. When did you start thinking about this show in this expansive way, rather than as a self-contained gallery show?

ANDREA ZITTEL: I've had two very parallel practices for many years: the largely experiential works that I make at A-Z West, which deal directly with life and living, and works for gallery exhibitions that are generally philosophical or conceptual statements. I had accepted their separateness—while understanding the ways that these two kinds of work feed each other. But for this show I decided to merge



Portrait of Andrea Zittel. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Elena Ray.



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the gallery and A-Z West in a very literal sense. The works in the exhibition are doubled—half of the show is installed here in the gallery and the other half is installed in the desert. People can experience the works as abstract formal objects in the gallery, or they can go to the desert and actually live with them in the spaces that I have created there.

RAIL: The sculptural pieces from the gallery are present in the desert; these large-format photos of the cabins, placed high on the walls as part of this show, bring the desert into the gallery. You took these yourself, right?

ZITTEL: The sculptural works in the desert are installed in two identical homestead cabins that are represented in black-and-white photomurals in the gallery. I took the images; one is of the exterior of one of the cabins, and two were taken inside. I've had a long relationship with these places: first having discovered them while out on a drive exploring the desert, finally being able to purchase one cabin and then the second a few years later, and now I've been staying in them and living with the works. When the cabins were built they must have been identical, but they had been altered to the point where this wasn't immediately evident, so we stripped and refurbished them to turn them into "twins" again.

RAIL: In the desert, as you've said, these sculptural pieces are functionally activated, and their purpose can be determined and configured and lived with in different ways.

ZITTEL: I've been thinking a lot about this idea of "living in abstraction" lately—wanting to live in a way that's slightly disorienting so that anything can be anything. Many years ago I studied psychology, and have always been interested in the concept of functional fixedness: a situation where an object can potentially be used for many different things, but your brain latches onto one way of using it, and then that's the only way you're capable of perceiving its use. I often think about how things become functionally fixed in our lives, and about deeply

ingrained patterns of use. A living room configuration is a good example: it always seems to consist of a sofa, a coffee table, and a chair or two, but there are so many other possibilities—so many other ways that a central room could be configured and used.

When I go camping I've noticed that engaging directly with the landscape makes you think in such a clear way about what it is that you actually need. Ultimately, it boils down to a need for (mostly) horizontal surfaces at different heights. You need a flat surface big enough for the camp stove, a surface high enough for the water jug so the spigot will work, and a comfortable surface to sit on, which can often just be the ground if it isn't too dusty or rocky.

RAIL: So you are distilling these functional set-ups into the planes at which they best serve their purpose?

ZITTEL: Yes! Vertical planes are important because they create privacy, or divisions. These delineate different spaces and functions, like walls, or doors. Horizontal planes are all about gravity, about bearing weight and supporting things. Tables, chairs, benches, counters—these are horizontal planes fulfilling their potential.

The works that I made and installed in the cabins have two long vertical planes, which function as dividers between different areas that require varying degrees of privacy, and four horizontal planes that support activities like cooking, working on the computer, sleeping, etc. But I want to keep a sense of experimentation; it's not to say, "This is how it always has to be," but to allow people to explore different ways of how things could function. I can show you a photomural in the second room of the gallery that is an image of the space when I was living in it.

RAIL: So this image is a possibility rather than a directive. It takes a moment to orient and organize what's happening in the image on the wall in relation to the sculptural object in the center of the space. Because the relationship is somehow oblique rather than explicit, the gesture becomes suggestive rather than didactic.

ZITTEL: I wanted the viewer to be able to navigate the layers of information in the show and to be able to slowly build an understanding of the work in this space and how that relates to its presence in another space.

RAIL: This arrangement is also very somatically powerful: I physically want to stay in this space and sit in it. The level of the cushions in *Linear Sequence #1* [2016] feels very human-scaled, very inviting on a corporeally intuitive level.

ZITTEL: I'm glad you felt that—I want to show that it's possible to make structures that are functional or comfortable without resorting to typical conventions. Most seating and tables are supported by legs. And I kept thinking, "Legs are only one way of doing supporting a plane in space—How can I get away from legs?"

RAIL: From assuming you need them?

ZITTEL: Yeah. How can you get these surfaces up to different levels, where they are actually functional, without always using legs? I personally really like being close to the floor, so using horizontal steel beams as supports (or turning the legs on their side, so to speak) worked really well in terms of solving this problem.

RAIL: Something we've both been thinking about is this word or concept, "lifestyle," in relation to your work.

ZITTEL: Yes! I've been kind of obsessed with the issue of lifestyle because I think it's something that problematizes the ground that my practice is built on. I'm entirely committed to making work that functions within life and living. To me, life is the thing that matters most. I think life matters even more than art. But there is now an entire "lifestyle industry" that potentially co-opts this idea. The commodification of lifestyle is about creating the illusion of living, and it represses us by instilling a sense of inadequacy that our lives don't measure up to the displays in decorating magazines or Instagram feeds. How do I create an alternative to "lifestyle?" I think a better term for what I'm after is a life *ethic*, although that can also be problematic because the word *ethic* suggests a moral or ideological platform. But my personal life ethic is about having a life in which you pay attention and think about how and why things are the way they are, rather than just trying to have a sense of "style" or create "good design."

RAIL: It's interesting, because a word that goes along with "lifestyle" is "curate," which I feel is, for obvious reasons, particularly sensitive for artists. A few years ago in New York it became very trendy to talk about things like a brunch being "curated." So there's this sort of amorphous tendency to affect critical rigor, to imitate an artist's seriousness as though it were just another filter you could easily put over fairly unremarkable things. You're in a space, geographically, that happens to be very susceptible to that.

ZITTEL: A curatorial filter, or a kind of selectively imposed connoisseurship, is definitely a shadow that also touches the desert. There is this popular ideal of a romanticized desert lifestyle that focuses on landscape, nature, skies, and the "slow life"—and filters out the larger reality of our community, which is actually quite impoverished, and our physical environment, which is really quite difficult to live in. The desert is a mix of light and dark, and the darkness is more often than not selectively curated out of the picture.

RAIL: Now that you're saying it, I'm realizing that this happened to you on both coasts. It's happened at Joshua Tree and it happened in Williamsburg—you were on South 8th Street in 1991 and then Wythe

Street in 1994, when, for artists, it really was its own kind of frontier.

ZITTEL: [Laughter.] Right? But at A-Z West it's closer to home, because I'm a Californian. My great-grandparents were ranchers not too far from Joshua Tree. That's my culture. Here in Brooklyn I felt I was part of the problem, and that was one of the reasons I needed to leave. I didn't feel I could make as much of a contribution here. My practice is somewhat insular—I make my world and live in it. But High Desert Test Sites, the nonprofit that I help run, has been very focused on the challenge of integrating two very diverse groups of people. We try to engage a large sector of our community that tends to be overlooked because it doesn't neatly fit into the new identity for Joshua Tree that is being superimposed by the tourism economy.

RAIL: That touches on another question—your teaching practice. You're not terribly didactic—in fact, as you mentioned earlier, you're quite careful *not* to be. Rather, the teaching elements tend to be very hands-on, and about offering opportunities to learn through doing things.

ZITTEL: It is true. I have issues with pedagogy. Art institutions basically shape students to fit pre-determined models, rather than using the framework of learning to look at the problematic or unknown in a more open-ended exploratory way. Who is to say we have the right answers? Art history has proven that all answers are only correct for the short period in which they exist as a favored consensus. But my favorite thing about teaching is that it forces me to keep learning. Life itself is a learning experience, and I want to bring others along on it.

RAIL: But you ask the right questions. You're very particular about what you zero in on.

ZITTEL: It's interesting. As you get older, it's really easy to stop seeing things. I was reading Nato Thompson's book [*Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st*

Century (Penguin: 2016)], and his phrase "seeing power" really stuck with me. Over time you lose the ability, or the power, to see; and it's important to not let that happen.

RAIL: There's often been a historical or conceptual opposition between the visual and the physical. I feel like you're working as much on a physically intuitive plane as a conceptual, cerebral one.

ZITTEL: I think about the body a lot, because I live in it. I think a lot about how things feel in a physical way. When something in a work is not right, it's often a physical thing; it makes me feel uneasy. I lived with a work in my home that resonated intellectually, but never felt right physically.

RAIL: Were you able, eventually, to put your finger on what felt off about it?

ZITTEL: I think that it had to do with the scale and height and the lack of a vertical element that could function as support. When I had parties at my house everyone would just stand around the work—no one would sit on it, which I think was sort of telling. I'm feeling good about this newer work in that it has a strong conceptual framework but also functions in a very real physical way.

RAIL: The way you move around this work [*Planar Configuration #1*, (2016)] feels very organic. It feels very body-scaled, which makes me think of your uniforms. These are an ongoing part of your practice that you not only show in museum and gallery contexts, but also live in.

ZITTEL: I'm in the third decade of uniforms. I gave myself permission to discontinue wearing them if I ever wanted, but it's easier to do it than to not do it. Though instead of reinventing the wheel every season, I am now working on a series of repeating designs. These days I like knowing what it's going to be next ahead of time.

RAIL: Circling back to the sculptural works, Donald Judd is a big influence for you as a sculptor. Does his practice as a writer influence you as well? I feel when I read your writing that it is hyper precise.

ZITTEL: Judd's writing is very precise, and he is a formidable intellect. But I also find his thinking somewhat dogmatic: he spent most of his career championing positions rather than trying to synthesize a larger understanding. I admire his practice, but don't aspire to the same end goal. When I speak, I tend to say whatever comes into my head, and I know I compensate for that by trying to be precise with my writing. For me, also, writing is like thinking. If I'm trying to figure something out, I usually have to write about it. The process of writing makes it clear in my brain. Words are specific; a word carries so much weight. I always intended my work to be very open, very democratic, not elitist. But that doesn't mean that there isn't an underlying certainty. This is particularly becoming clear now that A-Z West is starting to have a larger audience. It's the first time I've felt a necessity to use language to clarify that it is an *art project* and not simply an interesting travel experience. I know that by using specific words you can craft a certain kind of experience. It's funny that after feeling so nonchalant about calling my work art for all of these years, I'm finally finding a time when this classification actually feels important.

RAIL: Speaking of naming things, it's interesting how precisely and unambiguously you name your own practice, your own sense of yourself as an artist.

ZITTEL: I'm a sculptor. I identify as a sculptor.

RAIL: Is that strong identification something new?

ZITTEL: No. That's my core. When I was in school I studied photography and then painting and then finally sculpture. When I landed there, I knew that's what I was. ☺

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LAILA PEDRO is Managing Editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.

Curated by
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