

Joshua Tree

Dream-  
building  
in  
the  
American  
West

Andrea  
Zittel

Portraits by David Benjamin Sherry



Andrea

The rightly celebrated US artist Andrea Zittel, 49, wears the same clothes every day for weeks on end. It's part of her ongoing examination of our daily lives, aimed at discovering what we can live without. Her anti-consumerist project A-Z West lures all sorts of travellers and creatives to the tawny California desert to join in her pioneering study. Andrea's an enthusiastic blogger of her fully disclosed life: visit [Zittel.org](http://Zittel.org) to see what her newly bruised knees and this spring's skirt will look like, and to find out exactly what krok bragd is.

Text by Cristina Ruiz



One hundred and forty miles east of Los Angeles on the fringes of a vast national park, where two deserts meet and packs of coyotes roam free, an artist called Andrea Zittel has embarked on a unique experiment. In this landscape of ancient rounded boulders, she's examining every aspect of day-to-day living – from clothing, furniture, food and shelter to personal relationships and our interactions with the outdoors – in an effort to understand human nature and tackle the biggest question we can ask ourselves: Why are we here?

If this sounds overly ambitious, it may be because our notions of what art can be have become inextricably linked to the market and the commodification it imposes. Which means Andrea has pulled off a rare feat: she has dissociated herself from many of the art world's values and chosen to live far from its centres of power, yet she is acclaimed in those very same centres for her unwavering artistic vision. She's represented by top galleries in New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin and Milan. "Over the years, her work has never compromised itself in terms of the market or shifting public taste," says the London dealer Sadie Coles, who has collaborated with her for nearly two decades. "Andrea has remained extremely constant and authentic to

her own interests and investigations." Through her network of galleries, Andrea sells sculptures, installations, a variety of compact living units including customised trailers – which go for between \$60,000 and \$250,000 – and works on paper (\$15,000 to \$30,000). The funds she raises are pumped back into her artistic practice in the desert. She moved to the Joshua Tree National Park nearly 15 years ago and has built a compound called A-Z West at the foot of a hill of massive jumbled rocks on a slope overlooking a wide valley. There she lives with her 10-year-old son Emmett, runs a busy studio, and hosts students, artists and other like-minded guests. There are dogs, too.

The nearby town of Joshua Tree is home to nature lovers who want to live near the national park; Andrea goes there often. Less frequently, she goes to Twentynine Palms, the next town on, which is home to one of the largest military training areas in the United States, complete with a fabricated Middle Eastern village where troops train before deployment to Iraq. It also has a drug problem: local youths, struggling to find work, turn to selling crystal meth here, although the situation has improved in recent years with the arrival of people from Los Angeles looking for second homes. Andrea has friends in all these different groups. "I wanted to have friends who aren't artists," she says. "Over the years, I've dated a lot of local people here, like a radiator mechanic and a guy who worked at the local hardware store, and so I felt I was able to fit in really easily."

This March, the Palm Springs Art Museum, an hour's drive in the other direction, will exhibit new textiles made in a weaving workshop in Andrea's studio, along with others chosen by the artist from the museum's modern and Native American collections. Also on show will be her A-Z Aggregated Stacks: shelving and storage units built from assortments of cardboard boxes

covered in layers of white plaster. Like many of Andrea's works, these are both sculptures that play with the language of modernism and its ordered grids by introducing an organic quality, and functional objects intended to be used by the collectors who live with them.

I visit A-Z West on a perfect sunny winter's day. On arrival, I'm greeted by Andrea's pack of rescue dogs – Mona Winona, Maggie Peppercorn and Owlette – who dart in and out of her studio and patrol the compound. Two more dogs, whose owner works in the nearby community of Yucca Valley, come here during office hours. "It's so that they don't have to be alone all day," explains Andrea. There are long-haired cats – Mooncloud and Stripy Tigerwolf – and chickens and pigeons. Living with animals connects you to nature in an invaluable way, she says.

Andrea, who turns 50 this year, is a tall, willowy wisp of a woman whose long dark tresses are arranged in side-plaits that give her a girlish, Pippi Longstocking look. She speaks softly in measured tones. At first, she's careful, almost reticent, when answering my questions: "I think a lot of damage can be done by allowing one's identity to be shaped by other people. Sometimes it's better to have a low profile and have control over it."

She's sporting a floor-length A-line grey wool skirt sewn for her by a friend and based on a vintage black leather skirt Andrea found in a second-hand shop last year. "I really fell in love with it, so we copied the pattern." She's paired it with a dark grey wool vest, which she crocheted herself and which she wears over an off-the-shelf long-sleeved black wool top. This is her winter uniform, and she'll put on these same garments every day for several months until the weather changes and she sets them aside for cooler attire. At night, she simply removes the skirt and vest and sleeps in the long-sleeved top and the thermal

tights she wears underneath – she owns multiple versions of both. "I try to cut down the time I do unnecessary things," she explains. "I only wash my hair once a week; I only take a shower every other day. We don't sweat that much here because it's so dry."

Andrea started designing her own clothing and wearing a seasonal uniform more than two decades ago. "What makes us feel liberated is not total freedom, but rather living in a set of limitations that we have created and prescribed for ourselves," she writes in *These Things I Know for Sure*, a personal manifesto of sorts that she devised in 2005. Comfort and practicality dictate her designs. "In the fall I made a black skirt, and then I realised it was a total dog hair magnet, so now I only wear things that match the dog hair." Her uniform saves her time in other ways too. Packing for trips is easy, although she always travels with an emergency backup garment in case she spills red wine on her skirt.

Her choice of clothing exemplifies her journey as an artist, which she's spent examining what it is that we really need to survive and prosper – it's a one-woman protest against a contemporary culture predicated on shopping for useless objects, a culture which teaches us that we define ourselves by the products we buy rather than the way we live our lives. She's designed or made many of the items which decorate her home, a renovated and expanded cabin at the heart of A-Z West first erected under federal homesteading laws that gave free land to settlers who agreed to build on it – part of an effort to colonise the West. The floor and one wall of the kitchen and dining area are covered in gold, white and black patterned tiles she designed herself: "I'm really into patterns, because they're infinite in every direction," she says. Three of her Aggregated Stacks cover another wall, though she's hardly put anything on their shelves. "For me, clutter is a



# Andrea



A-Z West, which occupies 35 acres of California's high desert, is situated right next to Joshua Tree National Park, and Andrea has developed it with pioneering zeal. The Wagon Station encampment, pictured here, consists of 12 A-Z Wagon Stations, all designed by Andrea; guests are welcome to stay in them twice a year. The only payment is an hour's work every morning – known as the Hour of Power.

Zittel





Andrea



form of insanity, and I feel really good emotionally when there's not too many things out," she says as she makes me cinnamon-infused Bengal Spice tea, which she serves in a large bowl.

She chooses the objects that surround her carefully. "I've had relationships fail because I didn't like the contents of my boyfriend's medicine cabinet," she (sort of) jokes. In this respect, living with her 10-year-old son, Emmett, is challenging (Andrea is raising him with the boy's father, who lives in a nearby town). "Emmett likes having rows and rows of objects out, and he won't ever get rid of anything no matter how trivial it is. I tell him what I think, but children are really strong-willed, and I can't change the way he thinks. It's a lesson for me in letting go."

One of her first projects as an artist was an attempt to declutter the life of her friend Jon Tower. It was the early '90s, and she'd recently arrived in New York after completing a master's in fine art at the Rhode Island School of Design. Jon was also a young artist, struggling to survive and living in the basement of an apartment building in Manhattan. "Somehow he had access to this little storage area where people put their skis. And he had tons of stuff; he was definitely a hoarder. I felt like he was basically a very attractive guy, but there were tweaks he could do to enhance what he had going for him. We identified his goal, which was that he really wanted a girlfriend, but anyone he brought home would be really freaked out by his living situation. One of the main things we did was to photograph his things and then throw them out. And it worked. He found a girlfriend."

The Jon Tower Life Improvement Project, which lasted several months, was a pivotal moment for Andrea. "I was figuring out what my art is and what it isn't, and I decided that after Jon I was going to focus on using myself as the guinea pig for my experiments." In the early '90s, Andrea was

working in the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York when the recession hit, and she watched numerous mid-career artists "lose their galleries and have to go and get jobs. And it was almost impossible for a young artist to get taken on by a gallery; I realised how disposable artists were. So I think I always wanted to have autonomy, where I didn't need to wait for a gallery to show my art to make it public, to make it relevant." She ended up renting a small, cheap storefront in Brooklyn, living in the bathroom and making art in the front room. "The minute I had that space I felt really free. I didn't need anything from anyone," she says. In 1991 she came to the attention of Andrea Rosen, one of New York's most highly regarded art dealers, and though it took Zittel a long time to trust her, she's now been with the gallery for nearly two decades. "I have so much respect for her now," the artist says, "but I was really critical in the beginning."

The key to understanding how Andrea chooses to live lies in her formative childhood experiences. She grew up on the outskirts of Escondido, a small city north of San Diego, where her parents moved when she was a baby. They built a house on a plot of scrubland bought from the only other settler in the area, a man Andrea and her younger brother Wayne grew up calling Uncle Bud. "It was just his house and ours; it was like the suburban '70s frontier." But by the time she was a teenager, the area had been completely developed. "It had become a full-on suburb, a total urban sprawl. There was a beautiful park, and they built a big shopping mall on it. I used to run around in the hills alone as a kid, and then that all disappeared. Humanity felt like a virus or a parasite that was just taking over everything. I wanted to move to the desert because it's a much more severe landscape and I thought other people would be less inclined to move here." Today A-Z West sits on 35 acres

# Andrea

of contiguous land, and Andrea has no firm plans to expand it further. She also owns more land nearby, where she helps run a regular event called the High Desert Test Sites. Artists gather there to show their work, embark on road trips, and stage impromptu performances such as poetry readings.

Visiting A-Z West is a strangely seductive experience. Take the encampment she's built in the wash downhill from her house. Here, 12 of her Wagon Stations – sleek steel-and-aluminium sleeping pods – are positioned amid the boulders. There are also a communal outdoor kitchen, open-air showers and composting toilets. For several weeks every spring and autumn, anyone who feels an affinity with Andrea's mission in the desert can stay here for free. In exchange, visitors – an impromptu community of artists, writers and travellers – are asked to help maintain the site for one hour every morning. Last spring, they included the British photographer Jason Evans. "It was a special, magical experience," he says. "There's a complete absence of doctrine about the place. Art spaces often try to ram ideas down your throat, but the A-Z West encampment is a kind of tabula rasa, waiting to be filled by the spirit of the people staying there. They don't tell you what you should feel about sleeping in the desert; they let you have your own experience. Allowing people to stay there for free is a really magnanimous gesture. It really impressed me. Ever since I got back, I've been walking around looking at land. I used to think I needed plumbing to make staying somewhere viable. But actually I don't."

As well as the encampment, the A-Z West compound features three shipping containers that once served as Andrea's studio and have now been converted into sleeping areas and a chicken coop. A new, purpose-built studio completed three and a half years ago sits just up the hill from her home. Inside the studio, everything is pristine; nothing is out of place. Her assistants clean it every morning. "There's a certain quality which everyone has to have if they're going to fit in here." Andrea laughs. "Everybody is a little OCD."

After she bought her first plot of land here in 2000, she set about acquiring whatever surrounding land she could to isolate herself from nearby development and create a protective cocoon around the place. But the site was challenging: there was no permanent supply of water – it had to be trucked in and stored in tanks – until several years later, when she got a grant to build a well, which now supplies the entire site. The shipping-container studios were "freezing in

winter". But, as she explains, she comes from a family that's "much more hardcore than I am". Her parents were teachers whom Andrea describes as "products of their era": they conformed to society's expectations and "had kids and normal jobs". But at heart, they were adventurers. When they retired, they moved onto a boat and sailed it from San Diego to Australia. "They had some really extreme experiences doing the crossings," she says. "A boom broke, and on another the engine failed, and my dad almost lost his leg to some tropical infection. They've been an inspiration to me, or maybe a challenge as to how I should live my life." Today Andrea's parents, now in their late 70s, live in Joshua Tree. But once a year they travel to Mexico, where their boat is dry-docked, to sail it for a few months.

In fact, Andrea is the one family member who isn't in love with the ocean (Wayne, 47, runs a string of sailing schools in California and Mexico). She recalls sailing holidays on a tiny boat and the smell of diesel fuel permeating the bunk she slept in. "I think rejecting that life was my teenage rebellion," she says. Nevertheless, in 1999 she embarked on a month at sea, living on a 54-tonne floating concrete island she'd built as an "experimental living situation" and "a kind of tribute to my family." The island, named A-Z Pocket Property, was pulled by tugboats across the Baltic Sea between Denmark and Sweden. "It was really scary," she says. "And I'm not scared of much. It was really stormy and cold, and I wasn't really sure that this massive concrete structure was safe. That project was hard."

The next morning, we eat spinach wraps at a vegetarian cafe after dropping Emmett off at school. "I hate cooking with such a passion," says Andrea. "It's like the most boring, horrible thing. I've been working on food production, looking at ways you can feed yourself without cooking by making food from dehydrated elements that you could eat, like animal food. It's hard when you have a child, though, because you have to cook. I was trying to cook Emmett scrambled eggs and he would critique me every morning until I could make them right – somebody had to show me how." Emmett, it seems, represents the only area of her life in which she can bear to compromise, and it's hard to imagine what she'd be doing were she not an artist. What if she'd never built A-Z West? "I think I'd be a psychologist. I want to understand human nature and unpack human happiness."

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#### Endnote:

Cristina Ruiz is editor at large of *The Art Newspaper*. Her writing has also appeared in the UK edition of *Vanity Fair*, the *Financial Times*, *The Times*, and *The Sunday Times Magazine*. Cristina lives in London.

**“What makes us feel liberated is not total freedom, but rather living in a set of limitations that we have created and prescribed for ourselves.”**



## Newsmaker: Andrea Zittel

BY THEA BALLARD, MODERN PAINTERS | JANUARY 06, 2016



Andrea Zittel  
(Photo by Elena Ray)

Since the early 1990s, Andrea Zittel has merged an insistent sense of functionality with a flair for the imaginary: the chicken-and quail-breeding units, minimalist uniforms intended to be worn for six months straight, compact living units, and floor-bound “furniture” comprising different-size swaths of carpet that characterized her early career conjured an elsewhere through their odd—but always intentional—reorganization of day-to-day norms. Following a relocation from New York to California’s Mojave Desert in 2000, she opened A-Z West in Joshua Tree, a studio compound where visitors can stay in encampments of Zittel’s own creation and otherwise engage with the artist’s designs. Recent works move between abstraction and utility, adopting, too, a dusty desert palette; an exhibition of new works at Sprüth Magers in Berlin is on view until January 18, and another solo opens in September at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. Modern Painters senior editor Thea Ballard spoke to Zittel about living outside the art world and negotiating function within a gallery space.

**Thea Ballard:** *What are you working on for your two latest shows?*

**Andrea Zittel:** I’ve been making works based on the simple format of a plane or a panel. These planar elements actually go all the way back to some of my early pieces from the ’90s, with projects

like the A-Z Cover (a blanket that can have any function) and A-Z Personal Panels (garments made entirely out of rectangles). The idea of a plane or a panel bridges so many different classifications and ways of perceiving things—both in terms of function and social roles. It's also interesting that on some base level, anything that is flat and has straight edges is man-made. So the rectangular form speaks to a certain kind of human production; it allows you to take on the entire built world through a single elemental shape.

**TB:** *Tell me about some of the applications you see for the panel.*

**AZ:** An example that's in front of me right now is a sheet of plywood. A table is also an example of a planar element that has been given a function, or a bench or a sheet of printer paper. One of the things I've been interested in is how these panels can also represent different realities. A game board is an example of that—most game boards are flat and rectangular and roughly the same size. But the rules are totally different, depending on the particular game's "reality field."

**TB:** Do you find that there's an architectural element to how you're using it?

**AZ:** It has allowed me to go back to working on a more architectural scale, which has been one of my core interests since the early '90s. I'm working on plans for a new large-scale sculpture out here in the desert. The work will eventually consist of concrete wall sections scattered over about 25 acres of A-Z West. The part of the desert where I live is a weird place, and everything is in a state of transition right now. Parts of it are completely wild and natural, but there are also a lot of houses and developments moving in. I'm interested in making structures that, when you're inside them, shift or alter your perception of the surrounding landscape.

**TB:** What materials are you using?

**AZ:** For the outdoor architectural works, I use materials that will hold up, such as steel, concrete, and wood. I'm also working on pieces for interior domestic spaces that are made from textiles. As panels, these handwoven pieces are inherently two-dimensional, but if you fold or drape or use them in any way, they transcend two dimensions to become three-dimensional.

**TB:** Tell me about living in Joshua Tree.

**AZ:** It's such an interesting and complicated place. I originally moved here because I wanted to be in a community that was, for the most part, separate from the art world. My mother's side of the family is from the desert, so I'm also sort of hard-wired for this environment. I've heard people talk about the desert using these romanticized terms, like landscape, isolation, or nature. But it's also a very politicized landscape. Right now there is a massive rush to use our area for large solar and wind farm developments. I can see the largest Marine base in the country from my studio—when they run their artillery target practice it shakes the entire house, sometimes for days on end. And then on the other side of A-Z West is an incredibly beautiful national park.

**TB:** Have you seen significant changes to the landscape you're living in?

**AZ:** It has changed a lot in the time that I've been living here. I find myself getting very emotional, wanting to fight for a certain way that I believe people should live and respect land, but at the same time, in order not to go completely crazy, you have to learn to accept the inevitability of change. I'm at a point in my life where I'm trying to wrap my head around the idea of change and be OK with it, so it's feeling like a very existential moment.

TB: How is that sense of change emerging specifically in your art practice?

AZ: There's part of me that believes there's a right way to do everything, a right way to live. And then, following this impulse, my next realization is that each person's right way is different. These are ideas that I try to address in my works as well. My early work in the 1990s really confused people, because I would embody a position completely, and I would treat these positions as moral truths. For instance, I believe that you need to have only one garment per season, and you don't need any dishes other than bowls, and a 30-inch-wide bed is the perfect width—anything more just takes up room and is unnecessary. People would get upset because they couldn't tell if I was being critical or not. But I was fascinated by ideology and wanted to explore how it felt to be unquestioningly immersed in a position. At this point in my life, though, it's impossible for me to believe in anything so fully anymore. My work has gotten a lot more philosophical as a result: Instead of making idealized products to live with, I'm making more abstract and open-ended living environments, though these are still things people can use in day-to-day living.

TB: How does an object express this philosophical quality?

AZ: Lately I've been thinking about the notion of living in abstraction. An example of this would be a piece of furniture to which you can't assign any single role. Essentially, we live on all these different horizontal surfaces (chairs, tables, beds, counters, desks), and the materials from which they're made—or things like height or other subtle material clues—generally indicate their function. A philosophical object disorients you, but in a subtle way. I'm not interested in deconstructing function so much as disrupting some of the quick assumptions that we make when we assign roles to things that we think we may already know well.

TB: How do you feel your objects operate in a gallery space?

AZ: Oh, man. The gallery has been one of the most challenging spaces for my work. I'm so much more interested in making things that function in daily life or in the larger world. I'm not opposed to the gallery as a site of exchange or commerce, since this is how all products enter the world. And I support my larger endeavor and noncommercial projects by selling works through galleries. But I have struggled with the context of the gallery for years. A lot of my earlier works, such as the Living Units, really felt like caricatures of themselves when I saw them in gallery spaces. This is a big part of the reason that I wanted to make spaces like A-Z West in the California desert, or A-Z East in Brooklyn.

TB: Have you been wrestling with that context recently as you prepare for these two shows?

AZ: This morning I oriented a new group of residents who will be staying in our Wagon Station Encampment here at A-Z West for the next several weeks. After we finished talking about the structure of the camp, we spent an hour shoveling and moving dirt (our morning "power hour" is one of the criteria for being allowed to stay here). Half of my practice takes place totally outside the market and gallery system, and involves active, lived experiences. The other part of my practice is becoming increasingly object oriented and contemplative. I wonder if I should have a problem with this split, if I should attempt to make these two parts align. But I feel that the duality is working for me right now—it allows two opposites to create a larger whole in which each side accomplishes something that the other can't.

TB: The work that can live in a gallery, that's a form of multifunctionality, too.

AZ: Yes, though it's funny that the works that are clearly functional and meant to be lived with actually feel the most commercial in a gallery, because there, you're made aware of the fact that you can't actually use them unless you buy them. But the works that are maybe a little more theoretical or cerebral, they work for everyone—you don't have to own them to get something from them.

TB: Do you think your project and your living situation are part of your attempt to create a different economy?

AZ: I've thought about different economies a lot over the years, and running A-Z West takes this thinking to a whole new level, because it's expensive to maintain and to make available to people. Right now the project is funded entirely by my commercial practice, and I'm so lucky I can do that, but I worry about what will happen if I'm not here someday. It needs to become financially self-sustaining. Figuring this out will allow me to focus on projects that aren't always linked to a need to generate income. I think that right now, finding other economic models is probably more important than finding other formal models. That will open things up for artists more than anything.



# CULTURE

Two podlike structures from the **WAGON STATION ENCAMPMENT**. Visitors work on communal projects like digging out a garden in exchange for the experience.



**Outliers** In not-so-desolate JOSHUA TREE, Andrea Zittel's unique A to Z art practice BLOOMS in the desert and beyond

Written and edited by ELIZABETH KHURICHANDLER  
Photography by DANIEL HENNESSY



Andrea Zittel and her dog Owlette in front of converted trailers that have hosted the occasional working artist. The interior of a Wagon Station Encampment.

> Traveling from Palm Springs on Highway 62 toward Joshua Tree, the road ascends through hills and into the high Mojave Desert, past those famous namesake trees, scattered across the scrubby plains, their hairy arms akimbo like windblown scarecrows. Keep cruising, past Cactus Mari, past Pie for the People, past Crossroads Café, and before you hit Twenty-nine Palms and the largest military base in the U.S., you'll find yourself at Andrea Zittel's art-life practice, A-Z West ("an institute of investigative living").

The 50-year-old Escondido native behind the endeavor has been based in Joshua Tree since 2000, when she jettisoned 10 years of city life in Brooklyn for an experiment in bringing contemporary art away from traditional epicenters. In the city, her work quickly found an engaged audience: *The New York Times* and *Artforum* spilled flattering ink on projects such as her (still ongoing) handmade A-Z Uniforms series, utilitarian garments that she wears for months at a time, and her multipurpose "Living Units," structures designed to compress life necessi-



ties into a simple, compact system.

"It was a real shock coming from a very suburban, lower middle class, rural community," Zittel notes of her initiation into the New York art world as she strides through the living room of her 1940s homesteader cabin. Today, surrounded by dogs, cats, fellow artists and her 11-year-old son, Emmett, Zittel's work continues to be wide-ranging and collaborative, yet specific. Projects explore everything from isolationism (think: an inhabitable floating island on a lake in Indianapolis), to community, as in her interactive Wagon Station Encampment, where she invites guests to live in Sputnik-like pods planted behind her home in exchange for working one hour a day at the compound. Or, in the case of her A-Z Aggregated Stacks work (recently shown at the Palm Springs Art Museum and born from her dependence on online ordering thanks to her remote geography), social constructs: "These beautiful boxes would come and I would end up saving them," she explains of the project's impetus. She encased the cardboard boxes in plaster like a cast. "It clearly relates to



Above: A collection of A-Z Aggregated Stacks in Zittel's kitchen. The tiles are an artwork that Zittel fabricated in Mexico. Left: A view of Zittel's multipurpose large flat platform, which is influenced by Donald Judd's "Bench," currently in the living room of her cabin. "I love this idea that maybe it would be the only piece of furniture that you would have in your house," Zittel says.

the idea of a grid—how the grid is representative of this kind of idealism that we create, but the reality of human perfection is that the grid always shifts."

Artists, visitors and participants in her projects are always passing through. On her compound, when she's not using her looms for her own work, she opens them up to local weavers. MFA students stay on the property for an eight-day seminar based on Life Practice. "It's for students who are on the fast track to have big fancy careers in the gallery system," she says. "Some are fixed on this one end point, and they miss the opportunity to figure out what relevance art would have just within day-to-day living." She struggles to define exactly what she wants to teach these newbies. Finally she settles on critical thinking: "You need to be able to see one's life with a kind of perspective; to understand how society works and how your decisions fit into that. We want autonomy, but we also need to be part of a community—it's how you engage life."

Perched on a chair in her kitchen, she talks about one of her more well-known endeavors, High Desert Test Sites (HDTS): a group founded in 2002 by Zittel, Lisa Ann Auerbach, John Connelly, Shaun Caley Regen and Andy Stillpass. Every other year, the marquee event begins with artists and art lovers downloading an often out-of-scale map and schedule, and meanderingly following



From above: Zittel and her head weaver Kelly Gazlay. Zittel's woven work follows a series of "rulesets." Some metal scrap found near the encampment. "I think people used to go out there to camp and shoot guns before I moved in," she says.



the itinerary of installations and points of interest across the desert. "A lot is left up to chance and circumstance," Zittel says. They might get lost in a row of pinwheels spinning at night, admire the guerrilla takeover of a billboard, attend a poetry reading, or behold the glow of a solar-powered light installation. Throughout the year, the loose network of creatives in the HDTS community also run local events at swap meets, book clubs and postcard fundraisers.

But the desert is changing. Thanks to innovations such as Airbnb, Joshua Tree has become more and more accessible to visitors. Zittel decided "to make HDTS, slated for early October, more challenging this year," she says. The team is focusing on a remote community in Utah that sits

## CULTURE



at the edge of the longest portion of interstate highway in the lower 48 states without services. Explorers will mine the art found and embedded in and around the town of Green River by the nonprofit Epicenter, a collective of architects and urban planners who curate everything from affordable housing to magazines.

As for her own latest work, Zittel recently crafted a platform that also serves as a seat. The term “functionally fixed” is a word she’s playing around with. Her objects attempt to break free from the idea that you assign a function to a thing and then fixate on that function rather than seeing its alternative potential. “I like the idea that it could be the only piece in your house and you could use it for everything,” she explains. “All of these different planes—they almost become different planes of reality!”

So what’s next? Zittel wonders a bit if she created a monster through her experiments in living. Joshua Tree is no longer a remote outpost, she says. “It’s an interesting moment when artists can no longer afford to live in typical urban areas. And what happens to contemporary art when it goes further into the world?” she posits thoughtfully, before concluding, “It doesn’t matter where you are. It’s what you bring to it.” [zittel.org](http://zittel.org) •



From top: Interior of Zittel's studio. Gouache paints. Zittel speaking with Gazlay. The Zittel piece she is working on will be a part of an exhibit at Sprüth Magers gallery in Berlin this November.



## Desert Attractions



**ULTRA SOUND** After an alleged nighttime visit from an extraterrestrial in 1953, engineer George Van Tassel was inspired to build a time travel machine in Landers. The acoustically perfect Integratron, now a relic of 1950 UFO culture, offers healing sound baths. [integratron.com](http://integratron.com).



**PURE ART** Just off the main drag of Joshua Tree, Noah Purifoy’s dreamscape of assemblage and large-scale environmental sculpture lives. The postwar American artist spent his last 15 years in the desert after working in Los Angeles and founding the Watts Towers Art Center. [noahpurifoy.com](http://noahpurifoy.com).

## High MARKS

“When I first started doing High Desert Test Sites, the thing I really loved was that it was such alien and new ground for people,” says Zittel. “There was a total collapsing of hierarchies.” This year at Green River, UT, people can experience the work of more than a dozen artists from all stages in their careers, spanning contemporary artist Allan McCollum, to emerging Angelenos Alyse Emdur and Michael Parker, to output from the roaming creative residency Cabin-Time. Oct. 9-12; [highdeserttestsites.com](http://highdeserttestsites.com).

# Wallpaper\*

## Elemental living: Andrea Zittel displays her furniture art in Berlin

Design / 6 Nov 2015 / By Nick Compton



The latest of Andrea Zittel's investigations are now on show at the Sprüth Magers gallery in Berlin. In previous works, she kept things largely functional; for 'Parallel Planar Panels' though, she has created abstractions of functional spaces. Pictured: 'Parallel Planar Panels' (installation view), by Andrea Zittel

Andrea Zittel is at once an artist and a self-proclaimed one-woman 'institute of investigative living'. Or rather, these investigations – of clothes (she has worn one summer and one winter outfit alone for the last 20 years) spaces and objects – are her art. Zittel, who spends most of her time on 35 acres of Californian desert, near the Joshua Tree National Park, is also a committed modernist of sorts. If her art is thinking about the way we live, can live, should live, then it is the American modernist ideal that she seems to spend the most time thinking about. (She runs an encampment here in sharp-lined steel- and aluminium pods. Visitors can stay for free as long as they help with the upkeep of the land).

The latest of her investigations are now on show at the Sprüth Magers gallery in Berlin. In previous works, Zittel has kept things largely functional (previous works include fully functioning trailers which collectors can haul across the country, should they wish); for 'Parallel Planar Panels' though, she has created abstractions of functional spaces. 'My newest works are still grounded in this examination of life and living,' says Zittel. 'However they are less traditionally functional and instead explore the nature of reality and human perception. As my interests become more fundamental – and existential – the forms themselves have likewise become more simple and elemental.'

The show is mostly compositions of panels. And Zittel suggests that the many and various 'panels' with which we construct our world – at Sprüth Magers these are sometimes aluminium coated in high-gloss automotive paint or upholstered in rather lovely textiles – have psychic parallels. Our mental space has walls, tables, flat surfaces, slicing through and chopping up and making rooms for whatever it is our brain makes of experience.

Essentially 'Parallel Planar Panels' consists of two sculptures: Bench (after Judd) is, as the name suggests, an homage to Donald Judd's Bench, a piece made for his home and studio on Spring Street in New York. 'I've continued working out variations on this furniture work,' say Zittel, 'as I've been fascinated by the way that Judd's Bench conflates (and confuses) the surfaces of the ground, the sitting surface, and the table.'

Planar Partition meanwhile, is a seemingly random – though of course not – mix of upright and flat out planes, in various materials, domestic and architectural. They are constructed worlds, of impeccable modernist taste, taken apart and put back together again.

# domus



## The Flat Field Works

The Antwerp Middelheim Museum hosts the American artist Andrea Zittel's first solo exhibition in Belgium, with a site specific installation in the Hortiflora area.

Andrea Zittel's work often traverses the boundaries between art and architecture.

In the Hortiflora area at the Middelheim Museum, Zittel's newest work consists of an installation that examines the roles and potential of flat "panels", or "fields" – in reference to the horizontal and vertical panels that comprise the most basic elements of our domestic and urban environments.

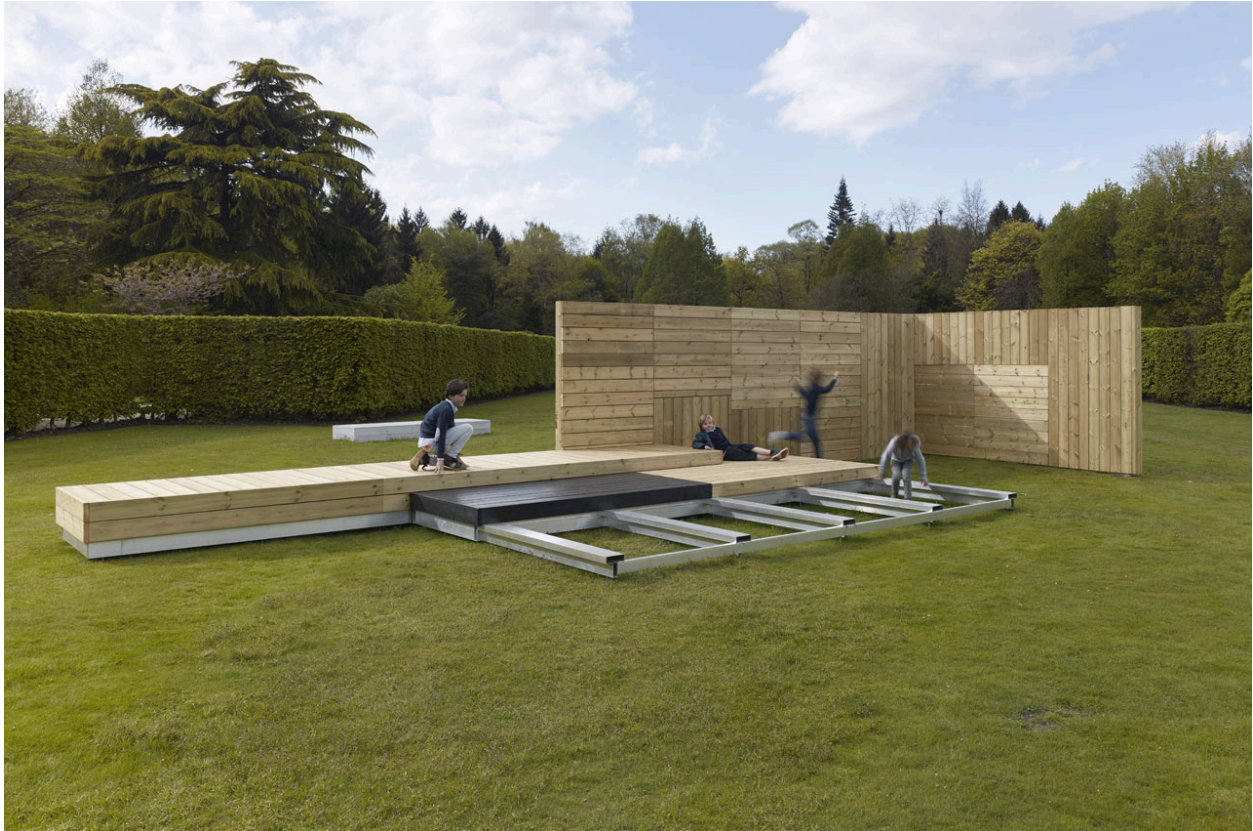


**Top:** Andrea Zittel, *Flat Field Works (Middelheim Variant #1 and #2)*, 2015 Middelheim Museum, Antwerp . Courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Andrea Rosen. **Above:** Andrea Zittel, *Flat Field Works (Middelheim Variant #2)*, 2015 Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. Courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Zittel believes that our surrounding realities are made up of panels that exist both as literal and in a psychological field of reality: *The Dynamic Essay about a Panel* explains how we attribute meaning and use to these surfaces depending on their position or orientation in space. Panels can be rigid or flexible, they can provide shelter or divide rooms, and they can delineate certain areas.

Horizontal panels naturally function as platforms for actions and behaviour – these are the sites where life happens (floors, tables, benches, fields, streets). She terms these: “energetic accumulators”. Vertical panels privilege the eye and are the carriers of messages and ideologies (walls, screens, paintings, billboards). Zittel calls these “ideological resonators”.

Sometimes, panels traverse both dimensions and become three-dimensional (e.g. cloth draped over an object or on the body). She now more frequently exchanges the word panel with the terms 'field' or 'plane' as these words suggest both physical and psychological dimensions.



Andrea Zittel, *Flat Field Works (Middelheim Variant #1)*, 2015. Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. Courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Ultimately however, Zittel's interest lies not so much in the architecture or structures themselves, so much as in how they are experienced both physically and psychologically. In a culture where we are increasingly being fed an endless stream of stimuli that we are never able to fully process or utilize, she hopes that these platforms, boundaries and divisions will create moments of pause, and a heightened attention to the sometimes fleeing nature of the realities that we construct around ourselves.



Rather than being functional in a ‘literal’ sense – these structures reflect on issues of space, context, and the physicality of how we experience things in the world: Why do we attribute the role of ‘seat’ to a horizontal plane at a height of 45 cm, and the role of ‘table’ to a horizontal plane at a height of 75 cm? Does every vertical plane function as a separator or boundary? Why shouldn’t we be allowed to stand on these ‘table planes’ or eat on the ‘seating surface’? These spatial contexts can be interpreted objectively in an unlimited number of ways. The artist quietly undermines our assumptions.



Andrea Zittel, *Dynamic Essay About the Panel*, 2014 (powerpoint presentation on screen), Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. Courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

This delicate push and pull, titillation and hesitation, is felt throughout the exhibition, not only amidst the installation but also in the connection between the Hortiflora area and the Braem Pavilion. This two-part exhibition traverses from the extraversion of the open field to the introversion of the biomorphic pavilion.

The works installed in the Braem Pavilion represent a selection of pieces executed over the last several years. Similar to the *Flat Field* works – these also explore the format of a rectilinear 'panel'. Hand woven textiles, carpets, steel and sculptural works point to the distinctions that we make between art (a conceptual object) and design (a functional object), painting (two-dimensional) and sculpture (three-dimensional), and representation (illusion) and reality (the actual object).



Andrea Zittel, *Hard Carpet #1* and *Hard Carpet #2*, 2014. Middelheim Museum, Antwerp. Courtesy of the artist, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

until 27 September 2015

**Andrea Zittel**

**The Flat Field Works**

Middelheim Museum

Middelheimlaan 61, Antwerp

Andrea Zittel

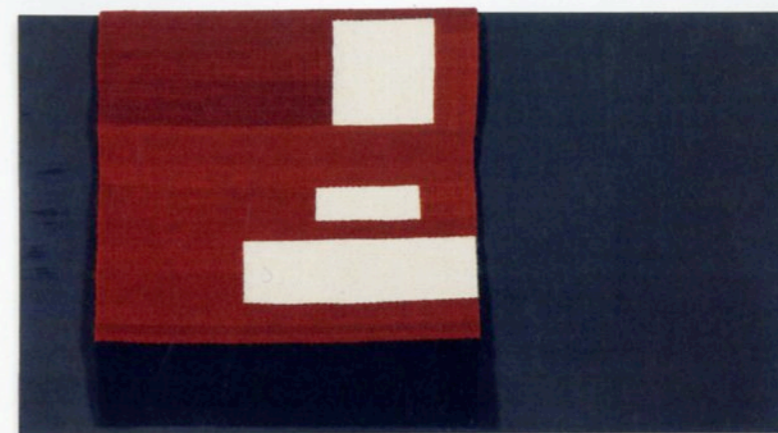
“Anyone can learn something here, entirely on their own.  
Oftentimes people learn to protect something  
that they previously didn’t care for at all. We live in  
an unconstrained community”

*by Gesine Borchardt*





above Aggregated Stacks, A-Z West, 2010. Photo: Giovanni Jance  
preceding pages A-Z Wagon Station, 2003-15



The desert is alive. Especially the region between Death Valley and Palm Springs, where, not three hours from Los Angeles, lies Joshua Tree. This is actually just a typical one-street town from the 1930s, with gas stations, coffee shops and supermarkets. What gives the place its name, however, rises up behind it, on rounded hills: a futuristic landscape, with nodular bushes and trees that look otherworldly against the violet tones of the late-afternoon sky. Without a doubt, this is not the centre of the artworld. But at the edge of the park, behind the first of the larger hills, lives an artist: Andrea Zittel.

Fifteen years ago Zittel, who was born in Southern California in 1965, moved here from New York and established herself in a small settler house – a flat, functional style of architecture that is fairly typical for this area. Before long a glass container construction was installed next door, with space for an office, a carpentry workshop and looms. Then came a chicken coop, a guest cabin, a small warehouse and a camping area. Zittel has since expanded her property to cover 14 hectares: quite a big patch of land for someone whose work is about modesty and small-scale living. A

short stroll around the hill ultimately gives you the feeling of having landed on a space station, with its glistening silver ‘Wagon Stations’ (in Zittel’s terminology) perched here in the dust: ten human-size, semicircular metal capsules, each with a mattress and minimal shelf space, just large enough for sleeping, reading or simply gazing at the sky. For someone who migrated from the Big Apple because she couldn’t see the horizon, it’s as simple as that.

“My work is about escaping the institutions,” says Zittel, whistling her wandering dog – the type that looks like a coyote – back to her side. “The Wagon Stations are not conceived as exhibition spaces, they’re meant to stand under the open sky. I’d like it if people lived with my works.” Those interested can make a reservation to stay in one for a night, or even for a few weeks. The ‘Escape Vehicles’ are also meant for living, not for museums: individually designed live-in trailers

with an interior of artificial rocks or wraparound padding. Zittel was famous for these during the 1990s. It was the time when Tobias Rehberger, Jorge Pardo and Carsten Höller began producing interactive art at the margins of design, to which the curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud ascribed the term ‘relational aesthetics’. In his book, which was translated into English in 2002, he attested to such art’s potential to create ‘micro-utopian situations’ and promote ‘social interaction’ in which people grow closer to one another and reevaluate their everyday lives; Zittel was mentioned as one of the artists who was proposing new situations for living. Looking back at these works today, one thing stands out above all: many of these artists – mostly male, by the way – operate their very large studios with the help of innumerable employees, producing spatially expansive art to be shown in huge museums. Something begun as ‘micro-utopian’ and ‘interactive’ has diffused – seamlessly – into the power gestures and small-talk credo of global art gigantomania.

Not so with Andrea Zittel. Out here in the vast countryside, everything has the dimensions of a garage, container or chicken coop. Her employees are more like friends from the town. Hardly any of them have connections to the artworld; many are musicians. A while back there were a few that came straight from prison. Right now, two hardy young men are plastering cardboard boxes that will later be plugged into shelving systems. The next room across has walls hung with abstract wool tapestries woven here on the premises; while these serve no direct purpose, others are used for designing Zittel’s carpets and clothes. If you didn’t know better, you might think the whole place was a craft workshop producing items destined for organic markets.

“When Hal Foster wrote his 2003 essay ‘Design and Crime’, I thought: Oh no! That’s aimed at the generation I grew up with,” says Zittel, laughing. Redirecting the criticism that architect Adolf Loos had levied almost a hundred years earlier – in his essay ‘Ornament

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Parallel Planar Panel (black, rust, off-white), 2014,  
woven wool textile mounted  
on enamel coated plywood, 56 × 99 cm



abstractions. Among these were the works Flexner showed in the 2010 Whitney Biennial.

For his latest drawings, Flexner has changed his technique once more. About half the show consisted of works on the quite small scale (five and a half by seven inches) that has been typical for him and that he made by pouring violet or gold calligraphy ink directly onto the paper and then manipulating it in indirect ways—no brush, no pen. Instead, he controls the flow of the ink by tilting the paper, spraying water on it, blotting the ink, or blowing through straws, thereby obtaining images that we recognize as landscapes, though they resemble none we have ever seen before. The other works on view, somewhat larger (nine by twelve inches) and resembling the earlier sumi drawings, were made with liquid graphite on synthetic waterproof paper. Again, the medium is applied directly to the paper, but since the paper does not absorb it and the ink dries slowly, the extemporaneity that has been central to Flexner's practice for two decades now is no longer a factor. Yet the imagery still suggests turbulent worlds of Heraclitean flux, full of powerful yet ephemeral effects. These are worlds in which we seem to witness places being born out of formlessness, with light and dark being apportioned as on the day of creation. Yes, some of these images seem eerily still, but the eeriness is that in which one senses a process at work that is about to manifest itself. Although Flexner can now work on his drawings at leisure, they are still landscapes of a moment.

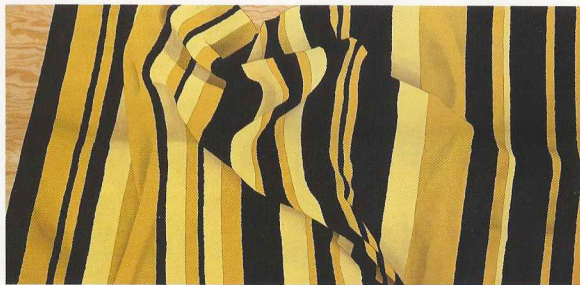
—Barry Schwabsky

## Andrea Zittel

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Andrea Zittel's signature works usually integrate into quotidian routines and address basic needs such as shelter and clothing (a fact that feels particularly significant as I write in the wake of Hurricane Sandy). Exemplary in this regard are her "A-Z Living Units," 1991–96, and "A-Z Escape Vehicles," 1996, compact structures custom-made to efficiently house everything her clients would need to survive (and in the latter case, to retreat). But since viewers are rarely granted direct use of these functional art objects, it's always been hard to grasp how they are experienced, how they "work" on a daily basis. Perhaps for this reason, Zittel's exhibitions have at times felt somewhat pedagogical. Her recent show "Fluid Panel State" absorbed this didactic dimension: Zittel wrote an artist's statement and an accompanying "corporate" PowerPoint presentation, *Dynamic Essay About the Panel* (all works, 2012), a textual tutorial that helped viewers make sense of the numerous textiles—and drawings and paintings of textiles—on view.

The sixteen-minute slide show theorized the textiles' most basic form—the panel. This is not a new focus for Zittel, but a concept she's kicked around over the past two decades for its various subtleties, mining the ways in which panels can be literal, abstract, representational, and laden with ideological values. The slow PowerPoint presentation describes the panel as an "energetic accumulator" (when horizontal, as in a table or desktop) or as an "ideological resonator" (when vertical, as in signs, paintings, and pictures). A textile fluctuates between these modes depending on how it is displayed, and it can also be "fluid" when it is worn as clothing, as, for example, a poncho, a scarf, or Zittel's "Personal Panel Uniforms," 1995–98: garments made from sewn-together rectangles that were inspired by the Russian Constructivist injunction against altering the "true" nature of the fabric. (They were not on view here.) In this show, numerous weavings, mostly made in Zittel's typical desert palette and geometric-design motifs, were hung on the walls like paintings, assuming the status of "high" art (thus recalling the display of historic Navajo rugs or Persian carpets in museums),



Andrea Zittel, Prototype for Billboard: A-Z Cover Series 1 (Gold and Black Stripes), 2012, enamel on plywood, 36 3/8 x 72 x 2".

and suggesting Conceptualist ties to language, pattern, and seriality. At the same time, their display in the gallery made the space resemble a "low" craft showroom or shop.

In the small side room that contained the PowerPoint display, Zittel installed textiles that could be described as "fluid," works that fold over the divide between fine art and functional design object. These included a lone cover draped from a nail, like a sagging flag or a coat, and several pieces from the "A-Z Cover Series 1," 2012, gold, black, and light-ochre striped "covers" that were here arranged into a three-dimensional sculpture that zigzagged along a wall (with semiclosed spaces that I saw visitors entering). In the larger main gallery, she presented a twelve-by-sixteen-foot plush nylon carpet designed with a layout that resembles a one-room house (the latest in her ongoing "A-Z Carpet Furniture" series, 1993–) amid small gouaches of figures interacting with the covers and a plywood "billboard" painting of a crumpled cover as abstract marketing object.

To produce most of the textile works in the show, Zittel enlisted the help of ten weavers from around the US, asking each to adhere to an unconventional set of instructions—switching thread colors with each session, for example, or marking the beginning of each day with a gold stripe. This brought to mind a statement she published in these pages in 2007 regarding her very first "A-Z Living Units" and the challenges she faced when hiring a company to produce them. As a young artist, she noted, she expected complete control over her sculptures, and she had to learn to relinquish that control when fabrication was outsourced. Today, however, she evidently embraces the indeterminacy that comes with working with others, going so far as to build in mechanisms that allow the temporal rhythms of labor to impact the final result. This is perhaps Zittel's way of letting go, her small act of surrender.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler

## Kiki Kogelnik

SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

"I'm not involved with Coca-Cola," Kiki Kogelnik avowed in 1966, marking her distance from Pop art, or at least its consumerist strains. But making the association was sensible enough. After moving to New York in 1961 (encouraged by Sam Francis, whom she'd met in Venice), the Austrian artist befriended Claes Oldenbourg and Roy Lichtenstein, and visited Warhol's Factory; her early stateside output—in painting, drawing, prints, and sculpture—admits Benday dots and spray paint, flattened forms and jazzed-up surfaces. Kogelnik, who died in 1997, is having a belated moment. She was recently the focus of a retrospective at the Hamburger Kunstverein (another is slated for later this year

500 WORDS

## Andrea Zittel

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Left: View of living space inside Indianapolis Island. Right: **Andrea Zittel**, *Indianapolis Island*, 2010, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Indianapolis Museum of Art.

*Andrea Zittel has received international acclaim for nearly two decades. Concurrent with exhibitions of her work in Florence at the Palazzo Pitti and Sadie Coles HQ in London, the Joshua Tree, California–based artist recently debuted her latest installation, Indianapolis Island, a makeshift island in 100 Acres, the new “art & nature park” at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.*

**THE ISLAND** is iconographic for conditions of autonomy, independence, and individualism in our culture. It represents our greatest fears and greatest fantasies; everybody wants to be an individual and to have autonomy—but we also want to feel like we are part of a community. The desire for individualization is linked inextricably to consumer culture: People consume to individualize themselves and they also consume to combat the resulting feelings of isolation or loneliness. This facilitates fascinating oppositional forces of desire, repulsion, and impulsion simultaneously.

I grew up in suburban Southern California. My parents built our house in what was originally a very rural and undeveloped area in dry scrubby rolling hills a little north of San Diego. At the time, the area was becoming completely developed. I don't think that people from cities can understand how parasitic that kind of rapid growth can feel. Each family that moved into our neighborhood built a large home on a freshly surveyed piece of land. I remember feeling very aware of how the resulting yards were then landscaped. Each was thematized as if it were its own country; one yard was a jungle, the next a forest, and perhaps the next parcel would be a desert. People lived as if they were isolated in self-contained estates that were wholly separate from the larger community.

If you look at the larger historical evolution of architecture and domestic spaces, our homes are increasingly segregated and compartmentalized. It was the norm when I was growing up for each child to have his own bedroom. This is something that is historically quite new. I often wonder if it is the reason why it's so difficult for adults of my generation, and those since, to cohabitate or have close interpersonal relationships. I believe that we have become so successfully individualized that it is difficult for us to live collectively.

When beginning to travel to Europe in the early 1990s for shows like Documenta and Münster, I became highly aware of the differences between European and American conceptions of personal space. My series of small deserted islands, which were first made for Münster, comes out of this consciousness. The Indianapolis project is an evolution of a larger idea for a habitable island. The first habitable island I made in Scandinavia was so large that it had to be destroyed, and since then I have been looking for an opportunity to make an island that would be a permanent piece.

My use of a natural landform in Indianapolis is also influenced by *Point of Interest*, which I made for Central Park in 1999. After researching different representations of nature and understanding how strongly Central Park was influenced by a nineteenth-century perception of “pastoral” nature, I wanted to present a late-twentieth-century conception of nature with action, adventure, and eco-sports.

How to interface with the public is an ongoing problem in my work. I am always looking for a function that my work can play. There has to be a reason for it. I did not want the *Indianapolis Island* to be an inert sculpture in the park. The project needed an integrated social function. Originally, we were going to make the structure very big. But when the economy tanked, we had to shrink it to stay within our budget. It actually became a much more interesting project under the new constraints. The island’s revised size was just large enough for two people to live in. Then “Indy Island” became a really interesting experiment. We chose two island residents who would be mediators between the public and the work. So much of my output is about personal experience, and the island inhabitants will act as instruments of interface between their own experiences and those of the public; they will be rowing people and facilitating visits to the island. I am generally a private person and could never interact so successfully with people myself, but the island residents [Mike Runge and Jessica Dunn] are charming, charismatic, and comfortable with the public—they are writing a blog to document their experiences.

Really good art simultaneously reveals both good and evil. It brings up complicated questions rather than proposing smug answers. “Indy Island” brings into focus fundamental issues of need, comfort, security, and privacy. (I noticed that many of the park visitors were very interested in where the island residents would poop). It is an interesting exercise for people to examine their own day-to-day lifestyles and consider what they could live without, or live with. I am, however, hesitant to jump on the eco-bandwagon, because I feel that its moralistic point of view is not very interesting. Much of the movement for sustainable living is just another form of commoditization, which simply creates new levels of desire. I see many advertisements for people to get new and expensive eco-friendly products, but little of the current mentality has to do with thinking about actual needs. Do you really need a car? Do you need all the clothes? Do you need a new computer every two or three years? Without being moralistic or preachy, I hope that these are the questions my work will inspire.

— As told to James Eischen





## ANDREA ZITTEL

[ARTIST]

“I AM STILL PERPLEXED ABOUT THIS THING CALLED ART AND WHY IT EVEN EXISTS AND WHAT SORT OF FUNCTION IT SERVES IN OUR LIVES.”

Ways to explore creativity and authorship:

*Repair a table-leg*

*Hatch a chick*

*Settle a Frontier*

**A**ndrea Zittel's art is lifestyle. She designs uniforms—spartan, felt clothing created to be worn for three consecutive months, and builds Living Units, which consolidate kitchens, bathrooms, and workstations into a single, sleek piece of furniture. A rare combination of object-maker and conceptual artist, Andrea Zittel investigates the connection between systemic order and individual freedom by transforming seemingly restrictive, humdrum circumstances into templates for creative fantasy.

Zittel wears her uniforms daily, and tests the effects of her innovations on herself by uniting home, gallery, and studio under one roof. This began in 1994 with the creation of A-Z East, a three-story open-to-the-public Brooklyn storefront in which people could share in the experience of her latest work. A surreal space, where beds were exchanged for pits, and sofas for undulat-

ing mounds of foam, A-Z East investigated art as a way of life. In 1999 Zittel left A-Z East and spent the entire summer living off the coast of Denmark on her handmade fifty-four-ton floating island, A-Z Pocket Property. Functioning as both ultimate freedom and solitary confinement, A-Z Pocket Property was a prelude to the formation of A-Z West, Zittel's minimalist compound located at the far reaches of the Mojave Desert.

I interviewed Zittel at her A-Z West live-work space. Though nestled between sun-bleached boulders and spiky green plant life, A-Z West's serenity is anything but luxurious. Enduring extreme temperatures of up to 110 degrees during the day and 32 degrees at night, Zittel's desert abode puts ingenuity and self-reliance to the test. On the side of the house, in a pile of dry dusty rubble sat the Wagon Station (a.k.a. guest house) and the cold tub, an amusing antidote to the desert heat. Inside, I was handed a bowl of water, which I happily gulped while taking in Zittel's

constructed wonderland. With more space than anyone could have asked for, Zittel still preserves her aesthetic of simplicity. Even her *Escape Vehicles*, designed exclusively for the purpose of fantasy, confine one to a small, capsulized interior. Similar to her sculptures made for daily living, Zittel's desert creations are scaled to the imagination of the individual. If only to prompt one's active participation, Zittel toys with the notion of what is essential by making it a matter of what one chooses it to be.

—Katie Bachner

## I. "THERE IS REALLY NO SUCH THING AS A NON-CREATIVE GESTURE."

**THE BELIEVER:** When you moved to New York City, you found yourself living in tight quarters. Did you always intend on directing your art towards architecture and design, or did you just start making functional art as a response to your limited circumstances?

**ANDREA ZITTEL:** I never really intended to get into design and architecture. I feel like I have a love-hate relationship with both fields. But perhaps having such a conflicted relationship with my eventual source of inspiration actually makes the work more interesting. The way I originally became interested in design was because I was breeding animals.

When I left graduate school I was totally stumped by the fact that I had been in school studying art for seven years and still didn't know what art was. So I set up different kinds of experiments to figure it out—one experiment was to take things off the street and repair them in order to figure out if there is such a thing as a non-creative gesture. My theory was that when you make something from scratch there is always a creative gesture involved, but I was thinking that perhaps if I repaired a broken object, that second-hand decision making wouldn't entail a creative decision-making process. I would take a broken table, for instance, and then replace a piece to make it stand up again. If this went according to plan, the task would have been a non-

creative gesture, which would be good because it would help me figure out the difference between the creative act and the non-creative act. But then I ultimately realized that there is really no such thing as a non-creative gesture.

**BLVR:** Even if you restrict it to a limited amount of possibilities, there are still all these permutations to be played out.

**AZ:** Exactly. Is it going to be raw? Is it going to be painted? Is the leg going to be turned on a wood lathe so that it matches the others? There are so many decisions that go into everything. My ultimate conclusion was that even the second-hand decisions were creative. I think that this idea influenced my later work, when I began to explore how a single work could have layered levels of authorship.

**BLVR:** So how did breeding animals fit into this logic?

**AZ:** The domestic animal breeds are another example of a conscious decision-making process that at first appears to be "natural" or "non-creative" until one really gets into the mechanics of it. When I first started working with animals, I wanted to hatch a chick using an incubator to see if I could become the author of that chick. This was one of those rudimentary crisis-in-sculpture moments—something I had to work through within the broader frame of questioning art. But the "Is it art?" question quickly became boring, and what became more interesting was a growing understanding of how breeds in domestic animals are finely honed representations of human desires. Our attempts to carefully control breeding partners and the resulting looks and shapes of their offspring say so much about human desires for a categorizable and visually identifiable social order. I was fascinated by all the breeds that had been made by individual breeders, much like designers who carefully shaped entirely new animals through the intensely controlled time-based process.



*Andrea Zittel, A to Z Breeding Unit For Averaging Eight Breeds, 1993. Steel, glass, wood, light bulbs. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo by Paula Goldman.*

BLVR: Why do you think it was so important for you to pin down a definition for art?

AZ: My feelings these days are that if something is both interesting and relevant, that's good enough. In fact, the slippery areas are often the richest areas to be working in. But nineteen years ago, I wanted to understand the fundamental groundwork that I had taken on when I decided to become an artist. Perhaps because I didn't come from an art background I was particularly concerned with understanding the role of art. Actually, as I try to explain this I realize that I still think about this a lot. I am still perplexed about this thing called art and why it even exists and what sort of function it serves in our lives.

BLVR: People can use your work in their day-to-day lives; nevertheless, it's still categorized as art and often put under the heading of conceptual sculpture.

AZ: I think that on a fundamental level my work will always be treated as art simply because it is in that system (i.e., sold in a gallery, validated through its acquisition into museum collections). The tag "conceptual" has been overused and abused for the last twenty years to the extent that almost all art that isn't formal is seen as conceptual. I like to think of the word *experiential* as a good stand-in for the word *conceptual* when it comes to my own work. Yet the shortcoming with the word *experiential* is that it doesn't adequately explain my mission, which has more to do with exploring and understanding the set of norms, values and psychologies that surround use of objects, rather than simply making objects of use.

BLVR: Your Living Unit, for example, is a piece of furniture from which one is able to cook, eat, sleep and work. I feel like this piece really demonstrates that you don't need all that much to get by.

AZ: The Living Unit was literally the first piece I ever made to live with, so that particular piece was more a reaction to being young and having nothing. I wanted to glamorize having nothing and use modernism to seem sort of cool and possibly luxurious even though the reality of my lifestyle was very bare bones. As life becomes

more and more complicated, being able to "essentialize" and pare down to one or two givens seems like the ultimate luxury, if not freedom. Sort of like that fear/ fantasy that your house will burn down with everything in it—you will lose all of your worldly possessions. But other than the hard drive on your computer, how important is any of this stuff anyway?

I'm often interested in how things that seem restrictive can in the right context also be hugely liberating. Of course the disclaimer is that consolidation and simplification are always a much more arduous and ongoing process than growth and accumulation. So in order for the liberation to be lasting, it takes an ongoing amount of resolve and work.

## II. "OUR SOCIETAL DICTATE FOR CONSTANT VARIETY IS ACTUALLY MUCH MORE OPPRESSIVE THAN UNIFORMITY."

BLVR: When you are living with a piece, do you ever change it so that it becomes more suitable for your everyday needs?

AZ: Well, I'm breaking the rules today. I am not wearing my uniform.

BLVR: Why not?

AZ: My spring outfit is very warm, so I would be burning up right now. It would be ridiculous. I just haven't finished the summer one. It's in a bag and I have about two more inches to do.

BLVR: What does it feel like to wear the same thing every day for months on end?

AZ: Oh, that's fine. I mean, now I wear them for three months. It feels really normal. You wouldn't know I'd worn them yesterday and the day before. I hate the word *purity*, but there is a kind of purity to it that I love. I can invest a huge amount of time making each garment because I know I am going to wear it for so long. You probably have something you like that you wish that you could

wear every day, but you just don't give yourself permission to do it. The project works in real life, but as an art project I think there is also a conceptual angle. To me it really talks about how our societal dictate for constant variety is actually much more oppressive than uniformity. I feel like I've almost been brainwashed by the culture that I live in to want to have all these different outfits as a means to be an individual, as a form of self-expression, or freedom, when in reality it isn't. It's just making me a better consumer.

When I moved to New York, there was this whole sort of fashion code. I came from this small town in Escondido where in high school we'd drive an hour to go to a shopping mall with a store something like the Wet Seal. Then I moved to New York and people were wearing actual designer clothes. Not only could I not afford them, I didn't understand that code of dressing and I wasn't going to learn it overnight. So rather than learn and conform, I chose to make up my own code that would somehow exempt me from having to know the original one.

BLVR: How did people react to you?

AZ: I think that the dresses passed the test, but it took the longest time for people to notice that I was wearing it every day.

BLVR: What were your motivations for moving out to Joshua Tree?

AZ: One reason was because I was interested in figuring out what role contemporary art could play in the world at large, not in a society that was completely indoctrinated in it. I had been making my art and living with it in New York and that was fine, but I was curious to find out what would happen if I actually went a step further and just did it in a normal community where all the participants weren't artists.

Being slightly out of the art world really opens me up to possibilities. I feel much freer creatively. I also like being within such a small community. I've been here ten years and know a lot of people and I feel like I can pull off things here that I couldn't realize in a larger community. Like if I were to do something and say, hey, I want to do this or that, I feel like everyone would be excited and want to help out.

BLVR: Is this in any way similar to New York City?

AZ: New York City is really different from other places. There's this tightness in the community. Maybe it's changed since I was there, but I used to say how it felt like a college campus because everybody is compressed together and the minute you go on to the street you run into someone you know. It's very similar here in terms of the intensity of the community, but in the desert this happens simply because the pool is so small. I think the difference is just that here you end up becoming friends with people who are really different from yourself. Friends who have very different political opinions and come from very different backgrounds, socially and professionally. Although it is very diverse as a city, in New York one generally tends to end up with friends who are in the same age group, roughly the same occupation, the same education. As the result of such a large population—that you can gravitate towards people who are like you.

### **III. "I TEND TO RESERVE THE PROJECTS THAT ARE POTENTIALLY SCARY, UNCOMFORTABLE, OR LONG-TERM FOR MYSELF."**

BLVR: Your most recent show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery seems to be a departure from your object-based work. The ideas appeared to be less about prompting people to think about specific ways of living and more about contemplating systems in general.

AZ: The show I did at Rosen's may be my one and only blatant reference to art history. I did it because I felt a need to reconcile with artists who I had at one time ignored and who I later discovered are hugely important to my practice and way of thinking. In the works of Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, and Frank Stella, mental structures manifest themselves as physical structures. I've been specifically looking at the way in which they created rules or logic, which then result in a visually specific end-project.

BLVR: I think that one of the great ways your art inter-

acts with the “real world” is by offering the buyer/user the chance to customize the work to fit her wants, needs, or fantasies. With the Escape Vehicle, for instance, one is given a small interior space for the sole purpose of designing a fantasy.

AZ: Most of my early works were intended to be lived with—for instance, the different series of the Living Units all served practical functions in relationship to day-to-day living. A few years into my practice, I started offering people the option to customize these works, either with “aftermarket” additions, or during the process of production.

The customization was in part a way to try to get people to engage more directly with the work. My thinking was that if a collector began to work out the specifics of how they would use an object, they would be more inclined to actually live with it, rather than putting it in storage for safekeeping. A few times we had some really incredible results but in other situations it was difficult to find art collectors who would really engage on this level.

Unlike the first sculptures which served basic needs, the Escape Vehicles were then offered as a sort of fantasy retreat. Each Escape Vehicle was identical on the exterior, but the interior was meant to be built out with the specifics of their own personal escape fantasy. In these works I found that I could get collectors to push boundaries further, because they didn’t necessarily have to live with [the work]. The third permutation of customized works were the Wagon Stations, which are semi-functional; they’re small, enclosed shelters parked in the desert at A-Z West which are meant to be lived in for short periods of time. Rather than selling the Wagon Stations to collectors, I kept them in the desert, eventually giving them to friends to occupy and customize. Where the collectors often try to retain the original essence of my work or my aesthetic, it is interesting to see how much freer my friends are about cutting them up and totally modifying them to serve their own needs or reflect their own identities.



*Andrea Zittel, A-Z 2001 Homestead Unit II from A-Z West with Rough Furniture, 2001-2004. Powder-coated steel, birch paneling with paint and polyurethane, corrugated metal roof, sculpted foam furniture, fleece blanket, pillows with pillowcases, A-Z Fiber Form. Containers (felted wool), camp-stove with tea. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo by Joshua White.*

I’ve always been really interested in this idea of having multiple layers of authorship—it seems that in our culture there can only be one legitimate “originator”—designer, artist—and I would like to suggest that using an object is actually another way to be an author.

BLVR: Before customizing works for other people, you start out as the primary test subject for your art. One of the more extreme experiments was living off the coast of Denmark on a concrete island that you created called A-Z Pocket Property.

AZ: Some of my works are intended for others and some are designed with myself as the primary occupant. I tend to reserve the projects that are potentially scary, uncomfortable, or long-term for myself.

Living on the Pocket Property was scary, boring, and uncomfortable, but also interesting because I’d never done anything like that before. The fifty-four-ton concrete island was partially a prototype for a new kind of habitat, a personal island with a built-in house that could go anywhere and also at the same time a critique of “capsulized” living in my homeland of suburban California. As is often the case with my work, it was one of those fantasy / fear scenarios. It seemed to me that my living on it would probably be enough for that particular project. I never want to prescribe solutions for people, so much as provoke them to create solutions for themselves. I’m not a terribly strong, rich, or brave person—so if I can do these things, I suppose anyone can.

#### IV. ZEROING OUT

BLVR: How would you compare today’s art market to the one you started out in? Do you think there are any similarities?

AZ: No. It might become similar, but it isn’t yet.

BLVR: What's the difference?

AZ: The economic climate that we're in now is probably much worse than the one in the tail of the 1980s. But for some reason the one back then actually felt a lot worse in terms of the art market. When I moved to New York in 1990, many of the big galleries were going out of business and there was a sense—among young artists, at least—that the art market was really ending. I think that we were all looking for alternatives to that gallery market system, and it was actually a very creative time. I don't get the feeling that artists are really looking for alternatives in the same way now. Perhaps one difference between the early '90s and 2009 is that at that time so many people in our community were dying from AIDS—the epidemic was going. It just seemed like everyone I knew was affected on a personal level by that. Not just by the economy, but by a much larger fallout and a sort of hangover from the energy and the decadence of the 1980s.

BLVR: The decadence of the '80s followed by the AIDS epidemic and recession brought up a lot of questions concerning the values that our society is founded upon. The line between art and social activism seemed to blur, creating, like you said, the sense that the market was really ending. But perhaps what really ended was art's insularity.

AZ: I keep thinking about 2009 and the words that keep coming up in my mind are *zeroing out*. I don't know if I'm remembering this correctly, but years ago when I was in high school I was working at a Hallmark shop and at the end of the day you have the cash register and I think it's called zeroing out—or “z-ing out”—when you take all the money out of the register, zero out the tape, and roll it all up to take to the bank to see if you lost money or not. It's getting everything back to zero, and I think, for a lot of people, it's like that now. Everybody's re-evaluating what they have, what they need, and trying to take it all back down to this base point. I've put a lot of things on hold in order to re-evaluate my life and my practice and restructure it so it makes more sense. I don't want to blindly start making more objects until I have a chance to assess everything. So instead, I'm shooting a video about 2009 which is giving me a chance to

actually think about and process everything that is going on right now.

BLVR: It sounds like a time capsule.

AZ: A few days ago I watched the video of *Mono Lake* by Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, thinking how interesting it was to see those artists in their own time, before art history had turned them into icons for their generation. Michael Heizer was also with them—the three took turns filming each other as they explored Mono Lake and its surrounding environs. James Trainor spoke really eloquently about this film. He argues that it depicts them falling in love with the landscape and with each other. Heizer was from the West Coast and is very comfortable with his environment. Holt and Smithson are new to the land in that awkward teenage-love kind of way. There's a really wonderful part where either Smithson or Heizer rolls pell-mell down the side of a gravel-covered hill for the sheer sensation of tumbling down to the edge of the lake. Seeing this film is incredibly revealing both about the context of their work and the reaction of the East Coast art scene to the then-exoticized West.

BLVR: Do you think there's such a thing as a contemporary frontier?

AZ: I think that frontiers are moments when everything opens up. It's a very intense module of creativity. I think that I have always been drawn to the West because it definitely was a frontier—it was one of the last areas settled by European culture. But there are other contemporary frontiers, like Europe post-WWI, when there was a huge burst of creativity, in part because the existing social structures, which had been really rigid, were eliminated. That's when Bauhaus really developed, and Russian Constructivism, and these new movements fortified by the idea that anything could be built anew. It's always these moments that happen within a breakdown of old values or old systems. This economy could be opening up a new frontier. I wonder if there will ever be a kind of holistic understanding of what art is, where it is just “everything.” Maybe when art is everything all at once it will allow people to see beyond art. ★

# Art in America

APRIL 2006



ANDREA ZITTEL GEORGE BRECHT JAMES SIENA  
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# A-Z and Everything in Between

*Andrea Zittel has sought to redesign art and life in her experimental works, including handmade clothing, architectural "living units," breeding projects and recycling systems. A traveling survey provides a coherent look at this innovative artist's diverse projects.*



**BY STEPHANIE CASH**

Something about Andrea Zittel's work always used to put me off. I could never quite put my finger on it. It might have been the hipster hype surrounding her shows, which often makes me suspicious, or my resistance to thinking that her works - supposedly inhabitable sculptures dubbed Living Units or Escape Vehicles, for example - were anything more than mere sculptural novelties or conceptual exercises (though many of them are). So it was something of an epiphany for me when I saw her piece, *Sufficient Self*, in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. A visual diary in the

form of a projected PowerPoint presentation, it documents Zittel's life and activities at A-Z West, her home and studio in Joshua Tree in the California desert. It all snapped into focus for me. Not only is she an artist's artist whose work is also eminently collectible and rife with references for critics to latch onto, but she has even become a skeptic's artist. Zittel lives her work - in fact, lives *in* and *wears* her work. Somehow that makes its commodification okay. The ambitiousness of her project and her diligence in pursuing it to its ever-changing ends finally won me over.

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*Left to right, Andrea Zittel: A-Z Escape Vehicle Owned and Customized by Andrea Rosen, A-Z Escape Vehicle Customized by Andrea Zittel and A-Z Escape Vehicle Owned and Customized by Robert Schiffler, all 1996, 60 by 84 by 40 inches; at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Christopher Dawson, Courtesy the New Museum.*





## The “A-Z Living Units” collapse into one self-contained unit on wheels for easy transport, like a pop-up camping trailer.

With her consolidated living structures, Judd-like furniture constructions, handmade clothing, dehydrated food and organizational systems, Zittel certainly isn't the first artist to have an all-encompassing approach to art-making. The Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus artists had similarly expansive utopian visions, and contemporary figures such as Allan Wexler, Jorge Pardo and Joop van Lieshout also blur the division between art and design, but few artists today so thoroughly inhabit their work—literally and metaphorically, physically and conceptually - as does Zittel. In addition to her art-historical predecessors and contemporary peers, she is equally inspired by such ordinary things as the campers and sailboats that her family took vacations in, or the cramped confines of her first tiny Brooklyn apartment. Zittel's work is often characterized by its utter practicality, sometimes tinged with a humorous touch of impracticality. Though ideas and self-imposed parameters are among her favorite “materials,” her willful dedication to living in built environments and clothing of her own design and manufacture goes beyond conceptual gimmickry.

Co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, its current venue, “Andrea Zittel: Critical Space” provides less a comprehensive overview than a sampling of her work to date. The complexity and scope of her oeuvre make it difficult to summarize in a museum exhibition. Through the 75 works on view, what viewers get is a taste of an alternative lifestyle, a methodology and a re-evaluation of some of our most basic assumptions about society and our daily routines. It's almost as if Zittel's life were on view for us to examine, minus the personal stuff.

**B**orn and raised in California, Zittel moved to New York after receiving her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1990. Among her early projects were the Repair Works (1991), broken and discarded furniture or objects, such as crockery or statuettes, that she found on the streets and took home to fix. In 1991, Zittel began working under the rubric A-Z Administrative Services (originally A-Z Administrative Apparel) as something of a joke, but found the official-sounding name came in handy when manufacturers and fabricators didn't take her inquiries seriously. It's also apt for an artist whose work seem democratizing and somewhat socially minded. She has described A-Z as an “institute of investigative living,” encompassing furniture, clothing and food, that seeks to “better understand human nature and the social construction of needs.” She has turned down requests to mass-produce her various designs, quietly resisting the great consumerist impulse of modern society. Yet her resistance

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*View of “A-Z Personal Uniforms,” 1991-present, 45 handmade dresses, dimensions variable; at the New Museum. Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.*





*Foreground, A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 03, 1992; background, A-Z 1994 Living Unit Customized for Eileen and Peter Norton, 1994; at the New Museum.*

ironically maintains the precious-objectness of her work and keeps it in the elite realm of the art world, allowing collectors to “play” at an alternative lifestyle.

In the process of creating and refining works, Zittel has come up with an ongoing list titled *These things I know for sure*, bits of Jenny Holzer-like text that are painted on the wall in the exhibition. Some are logical bits of wisdom that anyone familiar with pop psychology might recognize, such as “Sometimes if you can’t change a situation, you just have to change the way that you think about the situation,” and others reflect guiding themes in her work, including, “All materials ultimately deteriorate and show signs of wear. It is therefore important to create designs that will look better after years of distress.”

Zittel is well known for designing and wearing her own “uniforms,” a practice she began while working at Pat Hearn Gallery soon after moving to New York. Facing the common dilemma of gallery assistants expected to look polished and chic on a grubby salary, she devised a no-nonsense solution, creating a utilitarian dress - the first *A-Z Six-Month Personal Uniform* (1991) - that she wore every day for six months, a solution that flies in the face of societal expectations and the constantly changing whims of the fashion industry. Zittel has kept up this practice, more or less, in an ongoing collection. With variations for warm and cold weather, and for specific purposes or occasions, the dresses range from somewhat frumpy to downright elegant and fashionable in their sleek simplicity, contrived

tattiness or accent embroidery. The first “A-Z Six-Month Personal Uniforms” (1991-94) were cut and sewn fabric, but, like the Russian Constructivists, Zittel soon became interested in preserving the flat and rectangular form of the fabric. Her “A-Z Rough Uniforms” (1998) are Issey Miyake-like designs of fabric cut directly from the bolt and wrapped and pinned to fit. When she grew tired of wearing rectangles, she began making garments crocheted from a single piece of yarn, and eventually taught herself to crochet without a hook, using only her fingers. Her most recent designs (since 2002) are fashionably asymmetrical, holey and ragged forms, a happy result of the process of hand-felting her own wool.

Zittel’s experiments in living also began in 1991. Ambitious early on, she attempted to redesign not only domestic surrounds, but life itself in various animal breeding projects. *A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight Breeds* (1993), a sort of modernist chicken coop, was designed to reverse the domestication of Bantam chickens that has made naturally recessive traits artificially dominant. Shaped like an inverted triangle, the unit contains 15 chambers, each accommodating all the needs of its inhabitants (except the freedom to roam). Two small architectural models on view in the exhibition describe unrealized breeding projects, including *Ponds for Developing Amphibian Appendages* (1991), which shows three pools for a hypothetically mutating species, each pool with more steps leading out than the last.

It seems only natural, then, that Zittel would become her own best sub-



*A-Z Breeding Unit ofr Averaging Eight Breeds, 1993, steel, glass, wood, wool, lightbulbs and electric wiring, 72 by 171 by 18 inches; at the New Museum. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.*

ject, conducting experiments on her own life. One of her first functional domestic environments, *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 003* (1992) was fitted to her 200-square-foot apartment in Brooklyn. In a configuration familiar to space-challenged New Yorkers, it combines a sink, storage space, a cooking and dining area and sleeping loft in a compact, roughly 7-by-8-by-6-foot space. By 1994 Zittel had moved to larger quarters in Brooklyn (which would become known as A-Z East after her relocation to Joshua Tree in 2000), where she was able to spread out and set up a “personal presentation room” and a “testing ground” to further develop her living solutions.

Among the classic Zittel innovations from this time are her “A-Z Living Units” (1993-94), several of which are included in the show. The units typically provide a bed, closet and storage space, table and cooking area, all of which collapse into one self-contained unit on wheels for easy transport, like a pop-up camping trailer. One can’t help but notice that, in Zittel’s search for functionality, streamlined simplicity and efficiency, comfort often seems to be sacrificed. With a few exceptions, her austere designs - decidedly un-ergonomic backless seating and hard surfaces - don’t beckon the viewer with a bad back or bony ass.

She has also tried to do away with furniture altogether. Her “A-Z Carpet Furniture” (1992-93), striking carpets with geometric forms that indicate aerial views of a “bed,” “chair” or “table,” allows floorbound users to change a room’s function simply by switching the rug. Like the emperor’s new clothes or a children’s game of house, the virtual furniture takes a leap of faith, essentially bringing order to the air in a room.

In Zittel’s perhaps misguided wish to integrate spaces that are traditionally separate, the *A-Z Body Processing Unit* (1993), a tall vertical cabinet that combines “intake” and “outtake” functions, is seemingly logical though humorously impractical. The intake unit on top contains a sink and stove area for food preparation that, when slid out of the way, reveals the outtake function: a wooden “seat” over a bucket that can presumably be carted off for use elsewhere. (Most people prefer not to shit where they eat.)

Zittel initially conceived A-Z as a service to others, designing functional clothing on commission or whipping her clients into organizational shape. But, as she has said, “I realized that ultimately I was only able to design to serve my own needs...once a product departed from my own

possession, it would need to be claimed by its new owner...there are at least two authors of every object: one is the designer, the other is the owner (or user).”<sup>1</sup> This idea is a major theme in many of her works, such as the mini-trailers of the “A-Z Escape Vehicles” (1996), customized by collectors, whose interiors house such things as a sensory-deprivation tank, a Cornell-boxlike office, a blue velvet reading lounge and a grotto with rocks and trickling waterfall.

With her “A-Z Rough Furniture” (1998), dark gray foam rubber carved into rocklike formations, Zittel brings the desert topography indoors. The sprawling room-size arrangements or smaller individual pieces are suitable for sitting or reclining and also illustrate Zittel’s astute observation that “Surfaces that are ‘easy to clean’ also show dirt more. In reality a surface that camouflages dirt is much more practical than one that is easy to clean.” More recent constructions include *A-Z Homestead Unit* (2001-05), which in the exhibition is displayed surrounded by a “landscape” of “Rough Furniture.” Based on the various small dwellings that dot the doled-out plots of land around A-Z West (given by the government to people who made minimal “improvements” by building such structures), the shacklike house is a tentative foray into architecture, though because it is portable and measures less than 120 square feet, a building permit is not required. After the structure was picked up by the wind several times at A-Z West, Zittel says, she decided it would become a “gallery piece.” Recalling Zittel’s earlier *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 003*, the *A-Z Cellular Compartment Units* (2001) are also intended to maximize space and efficiency. Much larger in size and scope, the modular dwelling on view also borders on architecture, dividing a single space

## Like the emperor’s new clothes or a children’s game of house, the virtual furniture of “A-Z Carpet Furniture” requires a leap of faith.

into multifunctional, multilevel specialized chambers for reading, eating, sleeping, etc., not unlike a fancy hamster’s habitat.

If the instruments that we surround ourselves with and the manner in which we use them come under Zittel’s scrutiny, it stands to reason that she would investigate an even more basic construct: the organization of time. *Free Running Rhythms and Patterns* (1999) consists of 27 large mixed-medium panels, lined up along several walls, that track the 168 hours Zittel spent during a residency in Berlin, where she deprived herself of access to “external” time by blocking out natural light and sound and living without a TV, radio or time settings on her computer. Working from a video recording of the activities that filled this weeklong experiment, still images from which are interspersed on the panels, she used differently colored horizontal bars to indicate the amount of time she spent working, sleeping, cooking, cleaning, walking brushing her teeth, etc. As the days pass, the breakdown in circadian time and her daily routine becomes apparent. For example, her sleeping pattern becomes erratic, with spurts of activity at 5 a.m. or mid-afternoon naps (which should be the norm in any sane society, if you ask me). Interestingly, instead of feeling liber-

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*Foreground, A-Z Carpet Furniture (Bed), 1995, 96 inches square; back wall, A-Z Carpet Furniture (Drop-left Dining Room Table), 1997, 102 by 72 inches; at the Contemporary Art Museums, Houston. Photo Stephanie Cash.*



**With *The Regenerating Field*, Zittel recycles pulped paper waste by drying it on steel frames arranged like a Minimalist garden in front of her house.**

*A-Z Body Processing Unit, 1993, stove top, sink, lighting fixture and mixed mediums, 72 inches high open (36 inches high closed); at the Contemporary Arts Museum. Private collection, Turin. Photo Stephanie Cash.*



ated by the lack of structured time, Zittel says she felt the pressure to constantly work (she was preparing for another show) because, unable to track her progress, she was afraid that she was running out of time. Which illustrates another example of something she knows for sure: “Things that we think are liberating can ultimately become restrictive, and things that we initially think are controlling can sometimes give us a sense of comfort and security.”

Zittel’s two-dimensional work often seems to function primarily as an accompaniment for her sculptural pieces (certain drawings being made after the sculptures). But drawing is also a practical way of conveying some of her conceptual ideas or actions, including the Berlin experiment, or projects that were never realized. She has arguably put as much effort into the production of the paintings and drawings, as well as her product brochures and newsletters, as she has into her sculptural work. Included in the show are framed copies of *A-Z Personal Profiles Newsletters* (1996-97) that show Zittel’s early designs in use by the artist, her friends and collectors, along with testimonials, anecdotes and Zittel’s accounts of the works’ conception and manufacture. One of my favorite drawings, *Filing System, Joshua Tree, March 2004*, shows orderly stacks of papers arranged on the floor around a laptop, not unlike the scene in my living room; it reflects her surety that “A perfected filing system can sometimes decrease efficiency. For instance, when letters and bills are filed away too quickly, it is easy to forget to respond to them.” Various other drawings and paintings seem little more than vehicles for pithy texts, though a multipanel, gridded study for the large *A-Z Cellular Compartment Unit Communities #5* (2002) is a strikingly bold geometric composition that is pleasing enough on its own.

**A**fter establishing A-Z West in Joshua Tree in 2000, Zittel continued to expand her work in new directions. She has set up various customized trailers and storage containers for use as living and work spaces. She has also invited friends and artists to customize their own “A-Z Wagon Stations” - one-person shelters inspired by covered wagons and station wagons - and to site them on her land. A sampling of the Wagon Stations is concurrently on view in New York at the Whitney Museum at Altria. At A-Z West, Zittel has recently been focusing on “A-Z Advanced Technologies,” in order to develop new materials and fabrication techniques. In addition to creating her hand-felted “A-Z Fiber Form Uniforms,” she built *The Regenerating Field* (2002), in which she recycles paper waste into decorative or functional panels by pulping it and letting it dry in the sun on 24 steel frames arranged like a Minimalist garden in front of her house. Since she had hoped to recycle her garbage





View of *The Regenerating Field*, 2002, a grid of 25 steel trays for recycling paper; in front of the A-Z West Homestead, Joshua Tree. Photo courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

into something useful, like furniture, this advanced technology has yet to live up to its name.

Ever enterprising, Zittel also co-organizes a (roughly) annual event called High Desert Test Sites, for which artists, mostly friends and invited guests, place experimental works in the desert landscape. The next one is set to take place May 6-7. Zittel, of course, also has one of the better organized, better designed and more efficient artist's Web sites out there: [www.zittel.org](http://www.zittel.org). Not surprisingly, her work inspires a do-it-yourself spirit in others, if not a bit of cultishness. At the New Museum, Zittel fans have been able to attend the Andrea Zittel Book Club, which has examined books related to the artist's work, including *The Bathroom*, *the Kitchen*, and *the Aesthetics of Waste* by Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton, and the creepily dystopian *High Rise* by J.G. Ballard. The museum even held special workshops so visitors could learn to design their own living unit or make their own clothes.

So what more is an artist like Zittel to do? Can she possibly bridge the

gap between the art world and the "real" world? It's a nice idea.

1. Quoted in Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith, *Andrea Zittel: Critical Space*, 2005, Prestel Verlag, Munich, p. 68, from an article by Benjamin Weil, "Home Is Where the Art Is: Andrea Zittel," *Art Monthly*, November 1994, p. 22.

*"Andrea Zittel: Critical Space"* was curated by Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith, and organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, where it debuted [Oct. 1, 2005-Jan. 1, 2006], and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, where it is currently on view [Jan. 26-May 27]. The show travels to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo [Oct. 6, 2006-Jan. 7, 2007], the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles [Mar. 4-May 21, 2007], and the Vancouver Art Gallery [June 9-Sept. 16, 2007]. It is accompanied by Morsiani and Smith's 245-page catalogue. A selection of the "A-Z Wagon Stations" can be seen in "Andrea Zittel: Small Liberties" at the Whitney Museum at Altria, Manhattan [Feb. 9-June 18].

# frieze

frieze April 2005 Issue 90



This page and opposite: *Sufficient Self*, 2004 DVD stills  
Courtesy: The artist

## Don't Fence Me In

by James Trainor

Andrea Zittel's projects include the best way to cook eggs, design clothes or build a ranch; an approach to art that evolves from the demands of everyday living

'They're bombing again.' Andrea Zittel glances up briefly as the low thud of another shock wave passes over the house like a rogue gust of wind, gently shaking the front door and rattling the windows in their frames. 'It hasn't been this bad since just before they invaded Iraq.' 'They' are the US military, conducting live-fire training exercises with another batch of Baghdad-bound soldiers at the 29 Palms US Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center, 15 miles across the Mojave Desert from where Zittel now sits cross-legged on the carpeted floor of her house. She says this matter-of-factly, as if the military-industrial complex were on her growing mental list of things to take care of, while not losing track of the task at hand, which happens to be felting: creating stiff little woolly objects that could be bowls or hats or what in an earlier era were called 'conversation pieces.'

She hasn't yet worked out what they are, but she is busy making them, rapidly jabbing her serrated felting pin into raw matted wool clumped over grey wedges of foam. They sit around the room – one of them is drying on the wood-burning stove – like quiet, droopy, house-bound pets, emitting a comforting, sound-absorbing presence. These are in-between, time-killing experiments for Zittel, one of the many big and small projects she's got running concurrently at A-Z West, her home, studio compound and self-styled 'institute of investigative living' near

Joshua Tree.

The moment is an incongruous one, combining the threat of 'shock and awe' warfare just over the next ridge with a scene of domestic ingenuity and sociable tranquillity. But this is an odd, if breathtakingly beautiful, place to call home and an oddly perfect place to site your own personal testing ground for models of safety and security and theories about self-sufficiency, isolation, mobility and community. When Zittel relocated her 'A-Z Operations' from a Brooklyn storefront to this isolated area east of Los Angeles in late 1999, she was moving to what was already an untidy, contradictory landscape. It was here that the government re-instituted the Homestead Act after World War II, offering free five-acre lots to anyone willing to 'improve' the arid land by erecting a nominal structure on it. The inevitable result was an 'un-wilderness' strewn with a vernacular architecture of haste, poverty and unrealistic or diminishing expectations, dirt tracks criss-crossing at right angles, and a stock of improvised shanties abandoned to the elements like memorials to lives that never got off the ground.

Today Zittel's neighbours include an unlikely cross-section of people living in various degrees of off-the-gridness: LA exiles, neo-hippies, crystal meth lab rats and 'tweakers' (reclaiming shacks for illicit fly-by-night drug factories), career military with families, all manner of eccentric



'outsider' artists and people who just want to be left alone to watch whatever everyday tragedies they ran away from disappear in the rear-view mirror.

In a way Zittel is a kind of tweeker herself, but she doesn't need so much as a sugar pill to get her that way. She is patiently brimming with projects and theories and the ancillary desire to share the processes in which they are tested, prototyped, judged, customized and lived with. Communicating her attempts to remake the world from herself outwards is critical to her investigative way of working; every project arises from the quandaries of real-life need and is developed in a reciprocal social atmosphere.

When she created the artistic corporate identity of 'A-Z' in Brooklyn in the early 1990s, one such need emerged directly from the cold, hard facts of property. In a city where space is a premium commodity, her first *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit* (1992) and the rapid evolution of other experimental living situations, modular retreats and cellular nests all responded to the need to condense life down to its essentials and to hybridize everyday behaviour. They also amounted to an unfolding blueprint for Zittel's palpable sense of longing for safe spaces that squeezed every ounce of functionality, refuge and aesthetic pleasure out of the little she had. This the artist took to the extremes of her own particular logic in ways that seemed simultaneously clinically authoritative, absurd and rational: why have just a bed when you can have a compartmentalized bed/workstation (*A-Z Comfort Unit*, 1994)? Why bother with dishes and bowls when you can simply eat straight out of concave indentations scooped out of the table-top (*A-Z Dishless Dining Table*, 1993)? Her three-storey Williamsburg shopfront became a home that was a distinctly un-private house, serving as test centre, showroom and salon. During regular Thursday night open houses friends and neighbours were invited to check out and critique her latest designs for living, her newest quixotic plans for the ultra-efficient life.

Since moving to the desert Zittel has become, in her relative isolation, a diarist and writer of dispatches from the front. Keeping a journal of her life is an elaboration on the sociability of the Brooklyn studio and soirées, a way of keeping everyone posted on how things are progressing. Her published *Diary* (2001), a photo/text record of Year 1 at Joshua Tree and the trial-and-error manner by which she brought the original cabin up to 'A-Z codes' and expanded the grounds into an art-making station, is notable not only for how it chronicles her first project there, the *Homestead Units* (2001), but also for the way in which it integrates into the drama all the people – friends and locals – who were involved. As the hot, sunny days go by, she makes a point of bringing on-stage all the workers, contractors, handy neighbours and temporary assistants who were collectively part of this phase of a life lived as a form of experimentation. There's Jim the welder from Yucca Valley, Mike the plumber/electrician, who insists on driving his Toyota 4x4 onto a boulder just to prove that he can, Bill the concrete pourer and Ron the water delivery guy – all of them witnesses, collaborators and participants. So too are the curious friends and colleagues – Giovanni, Justin, Annie, Jay, Austin and others, named with such casual familiarity that they're like our friends too – who stop by to see what is going on and join in to help fabricate a homestead or are coaxed into canyoneering parties, with the rule that everybody wear special hiking costumes. The idea of this running commentary on the day-to-day struggles, successes and failures of one initiative or another becoming part of the work is extended in *Sufficient Self* (2004), a DVD slide-show whose inter-titles bring the vicarious experience of A-Z West up to date.

During the 1990s Zittel perfected the art of writing about her 'products' in the voice of her A-Z corporate identity, giving the gloss of tested, quality-controlled commercial authority to every enterprise and hypothesis. It not only deflected attention from her isolation as an indi-

vidual (in a business-to-business world the corporate 'we' is as comforting a hiding place as the editorial one) but also allowed her to critique commodity culture. It's the ad copywriter and affable conversationalist in her that now make her an effective diarist; you want to believe that the worldview she pitches from one project to the next may just have legs.

Thumbing through her diary and glancing around her cosy cabin – the dishless *A-Z Food Prep Station* (2002), the crocheted bed, the organically shaped, slate-coloured 'Rough' workstation that seems to erupt geologically into the house in the same way the bedrock enters Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* (a reminder that only humans choose to live amid right-angles) – put me in mind of those now out-of-print how-to and what-if classics from the 1970s. The subtext of books such as *Shelter* (1973), *Woodstock Handmade Houses* (1976) or *Nomadic Furniture* (1973) always seemed to be a recognition that the Revolution may be sputtering and dying out in the streets, but that it could still be achieved on a personal scale at home, perhaps through the simple act of building a tiny, non-compliant bubble of safety in the woods. Each page of these poignantly idealistic publications was full of friends banding together to raise a roof beam, people happily living in trees or neo-wattle domes, quietly advancing a counterculture of radicalized domesticity. (Why do Americans carry in their cultural genes the idea that building a house is rebuilding the world?)

But while she jokes that, with the growing local market in New-Agey art (yarn dream-catchers and earnest ceramics are on sale in nearby stores), she could always fall back on being a hippie artist, Zittel herself is no one's idea of a pie-in-the-sky Pollyanna or a back-to-the-land communard. The belief that the absence of rules and boundaries equals total freedom is anathema to her, and her own sense of autonomy is based on following self-invented systems and restrictions. One of the first rigorous limitations she gave herself as an artist was to wear only four self-designed outfits a year (one for each season) – uniforms for fighting the 'tyranny of constant variety', the false choices that consumer products promise.<sup>1</sup> Recently she devised a whimsical system for cleaning the house based on the principle that when she gets up in the morning she is allowed to put on one article of clothing for every five stray objects she picks up off the floor. It's a form of reverse strip poker she plays with herself to get a job done.

To hike around A-Z West (Zittel's answer to Taliesin West, Lloyd Wright's Arizona winter base camp, workshop and locus for a creative sociability driven by the maestro's personality) is to tour her own multilateral cottage industry. In one area she is experimenting with ways of turning rubbish into decorative modular wall panels, shredding and pulping her junk mail, waste paper, packing materials and old art magazines into a lumpy oatmeal-like paste quickly hardened by the desert sun in the *Regeneration Field* (2002). Running down a scrubby slope from the house, the field is a Minimalist grid of steel pole-mounted moulds that suggests a miniaturized play version of Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), reassigned the task of socially responsible garbage farming rather than the invocation of the Sublime. Elsewhere Zittel is fabricating the new line of adaptable 'Rough' work environments based on her newest theory, that messiness – letting the things you use and work with lie where they will 'naturally' – may not be antithetical to efficiency after all. Sculpted from dense foam using an electric kitchen knife, and perhaps inspired by the raw, harsh conditions of her new surroundings, they are ruggedly irrefutable and, like the fallible humans for whom they are intended, prone to soiling, decay and eventual disintegration. They embody Zittel's ideology that 'decline is a simultaneous condition to growth'.<sup>2</sup>

Zittel based the Homestead Units on the barebones shacks peppering her expansive neighbourhood. But unlike those government-mandated structures, they are deliberately designed to be bureaucratically



A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit: *Model 003, 1992, Steel, wood, carpet, mirror, plastic sink, stove top, glass, mirror, 218x239x173cm*  
 Photograph: Peter Muscato Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Zittel's great-grandparents were pioneers, but she grew up in the suburbs of San Diego: everything she does seems to bear the stamp of these contradictory inheritances.

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invisible, to circumvent regulations and restrictions and to be compact and nomadic. Intentionally built just short of the dimensions that would require building permits and applicable safety codes, they are modest hermitages that can't be picked up on the radar of conventional ideas of private property. (Zittel once cut out an article from the *LA Times* that claimed that inalienable property rights extend from a person's home right down to the centre of the Earth; one wonders if this applies to a migrating homestead.) The units can be disassembled, slid into the bed of a pick-up and reconstructed somewhere else in four hours; theoretically to live in one is to be camping, to slip between the cracks of officialdom and exist independently of codes, taxes and infrastructures.

Joining these and her stationary camper-van-as-home-office *Yard Yacht: Work Station* (2001) are Zittel's latest habitats, the *Wagon Stations* (2003–ongoing), tiny sleeping pods that are part futuristic pioneer wagon, part suburban station wagon and part space capsule. More aerodynamically weather-resistant than the Homestead Units, they sport escape hatches and enough room for a sleeping bag and a perch to put a book, a toothbrush and a night-light. Several prototypes now dot the hillsides and dry wash below A-Z West like stranded landing craft dropped silently from the clear blue sky. (Zittel, enamoured of NASA, points out that the National Jet Propulsion Laboratory is busy close by using the harsh terrain to test interplanetary equipment for future Mars missions.) Like the Homestead Units, some of these cocoons of hermetic safety have been customized by their

users: bricoleur Hal McFeely replaced the smooth aluminium sides of his with scrap wood – including ammo boxes – salvaged from the bombing range, while Russell Whitten tricked his out like a hot rod, adding high-gloss red flames to the brushed metallic surfaces.

Zittel's great-grandparents were actual pioneers, farmers homesteading in the hammering heat of the nearby Imperial Valley. But she herself grew up in the spreading suburbs outside San Diego, and everything she does seems to bear the formative stamp of these contradictory inheritances: a fealty to a bootstraps, do-it-yourself work ethic, a self-sufficient thrift (she talks about the freedom of living not just within but below one's means) and a critical fascination with how the pioneer mentality was co-opted by the suburbs right from the start, when fantasies of mobility and individualism were retooled into a template for sameness and mass-reproducible products such as the tract house and the trailer. The mobile home provides the perfect model for this linkage (when she was growing up, there was always a camper van sitting in the Zittel driveway), being the suburban covered wagon, the conflation of consumer comforts, dreams of restless communion with the land, and the ship-shape asceticism of pared-down living that Zittel fetishizes. But isolation is a condition experienced both at the edges and at the dense centres of human habitation, and staking her claim in the desert of her forebears wasn't the first time Zittel had chosen to deal with it.

For two months in 2000 she inhabited her own desert island, the *A-Z Pocket Property*, a 54-ton floating concrete oasis anchored in the

waters between Denmark and Sweden. Cave dwelling, islet and vehicle in one, it was as bite-sized and manageable a chunk of property as the Little Prince's asteroid for one. Using herself as a guinea pig, Zittel found she was able to shrink her needs and wants and contact with the outside world to those of Robinson Crusoe, all within a stone's throw of lively Copenhagen. Limited horizons and narrowed options became liberating and her castaway status an event, making the experience much less lonely.

'Alone together' could be either nightmarishly alienating or a hopeful solution for a culture hooked on the illusions of independence; in the ideal world you could anchor your own sense of drift next to those of others. Zittel's smaller, personalized *Deserted Islands* (1999), bobbing for a season in the Central Park lake, drove the point home; with their comfy vinyl seating and lawn furniture styling they were like buoyant recliners for those who want their adventurous seclusion safe and neatly packaged and nature's capricious indifference somewhat mitigated. The desert seems a natural progression of this confrontation with isolation conducted on its home turf, where myths about rugged individualism and the messier realities of mutual interdependence have always existed uneasily and unresolved.

Testing models of collaboration and community (and perhaps to assuage an initial sense of 'what-have-I-got-myself-into?' solitude), Zittel instituted in 2000 the now annual ritual of the High Desert Test Sites, an outdoor invitational exhibition of commissioned art works situated in far-flung locales in the surrounding desert. (For opening weekends the participating artists bunk in the Wagon Stations like a team of astronauts in training.) The event is run, like everything else, as a broad experiment with controls – with a zero budget, no institutional or commercial mediation, and the aim of finding common ground between contemporary art

(usually originating in LA) and the local community.

Zittel, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell and were all name-checked in a recent *LA Times* Lifestyle spread about the 'new bohemia' hopscotching eastward into the desert. And, as the locals here are aware, after bohemia and horizontal gentrification comes the neutron bomb of sprawl. (Developers are already planning a frontier-clearing subdivision of 2,000 'units' – and they don't mean A-Z Homestead Units – with a ready-made infrastructure including a mega-Wal-Mart waiting in the wings.) It may be soccer moms and mini-vans and drive-thru Starbucks that ultimately stop the F-16s from dropping their payloads in the desert. If things get ugly, Zittel has an escape fantasy up her sleeve: retrofitting her Vanagon and hitting the road, 'living in the world-at-large.'<sup>3</sup>

But for now she is living in a particular kind of conspicuous isolation: autonomy in full view. This is not only the condition that the artist has constructed for herself and her work and its relationship with the outside world. It is a model for individuality and living on your own self-invented grid that almost anyone can identify with, perhaps run with, or at least remember the stirrings of. It could start very simply. It could start with a memory of a snug tree house or a clubhouse made out of old boards that your dad helped you build in the backyard, or a small tent erected for a camping trip in the family attic, in which you stocked only the bare essentials for 'survival'. It could begin with the tangible fantasy that you possess the energy and skill unshakable sense of purpose to start a world from scratch. It could start there and move outwards.

1 Andrea Zittel, *Diary*, Tema Celeste Editions, Milan, 2003, p. 76

2 *Ibid.*, p. 85

3 Andrea Zittel, *Sufficient Self*, 2004, DVD

-James Trainor



*Sufficient Self*, 2004 DVD still  
Courtesy: The artist