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NEW FRONTIERS
ARTIST ANDREA ZITTEL GOES BACK TO NATURE

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ENLIGHTENING FIELD

Artist Andrea Zittel is best-known for making sculptural 'living units' in New York and Europe. For the latest installment of her 'A-Z' series she has swapped urban life of the Mojave Desert. Terry Myers visited her.

Photography by Dan Holdsworth



Right: A-Z West, Andrea Zittel's homestead on the edge of the Mojave Desert, California.
 Below: *The A-Z Regenerating Field* (detail), 2002. Twenty-five stainless-steel trays hold sculptural panels, made from paper pulp, which dry in the desert sun.
 Opposite: Andrea Zittel surveying the desert near A-Z West.
 Overleaf: Zittel's drive to customize her environment extends to making her own clothes.



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continuing to attract well-deserved international attention with an increasingly ambitious array of homebuilt, customised multi-purpose 'living units' (from furniture to mobile trailers to a man-made island that she lived on for a month off the coast of Denmark) it now looks like her part-time move back west (Zittel was born in California) has enabled her to stake out new territory for her work. More concretely, she now has a lot of real space in which to make it. It might be going too far to suggest that her situation mirrors a common myth about the Los Angeles/New York axis of the art world (in the west everything revolves around production; in the east, distribution), but it isn't wrong at all to suggest that for her

After making the celebrated drive from Los Angeles to 'the desert' to see Andrea Zittel's new digs, I am convinced that her decision to go bicoastal is one of the best things she has ever done for her art or her life. To borrow a phrase from daytime television, this move 'completes' her work, and to my amateurpsychologist yet professional-art-critic eye it doesn't look like adding a major change of venue has hurt her life one bit.

Of course with Zittel we are reminded in everything that she does that, for her, it has always been art and life, or art as life, or vice versa. All her art-making activities embody and ultimately extend the well-known philosophy of Robert Rauschenberg, who suggested that since neither art nor life can be made, one always works in the space between them.

By transforming a 1940s homesteader's cabin, on the outskirts of the Mojave Desert town of Joshua Tree, into a second home and headquarters a couple of years ago, and calling it 'A-Z West' to complement her well-established 'A-Z East' in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Zittel has given herself both the physical space and the conceptual framework to diversify her practice, literally and symbolically. Having made a name for herself in the early 1990s with a project in the window of New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art that involved building a structure for the breeding and conditioning of chickens, and

overall practice such a bifurcation has not only opened up the range of possibilities in that space between art and life, but also given it a stable home. Zittel's desert cabin is much more than a metaphorical 'west side' that bookends an 'east side' with no consideration for anything in between (more on that below).

Having a name that sparks analogies between her and a dictionary or encyclopaedia (or, for that matter, a street atlas of London), Zittel seems well on her way to extending vastly the inclusive nature of her enterprise. In other words, she may start and end with an A and a Z, but in her work she makes sure that we're always given more than enough to find the rest of the alphabet for our own purposes. And now, by incorporating elements of the desert into the processes and techniques of making her most recent works, Zittel has given the nomadic and portable nature of her projects (see NOTES, on page 44) just the kind of literal grounding that will entice many to travel from far and wide to see where they are made.

Speaking of distances, I am certain that my two-and-a-half hour drive to the desert to view Zittel's latest addition to her compound - a site-specific installation that she has called *The A-Z Regenerating Field* - would have been a much less expansive experience had I not just the month before taken the most highly symbolic, rite-of-passage drive that you can >

NOTES

Andrea Zittel was born in 1965, in Escondido, California. She studied painting and sculpture at nearby San Diego State University, receiving her BFA in 1988. She then earned her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1992, Zittel set up her studio in a Brooklyn, New York, storefront, a 200-square-foot space in which she slept, worked with ideas for architecture and interior design and experimented with breeding animals. She once told *Interview* magazine that she was 'trying to cross a chicken with a quail'. Her interest in human interaction with space and objects developed when a friend asked her to evaluate his lifestyle in every detail. She did not take the assignment lightly, and made exhaustive interviews and analyses of his habits, appearance and living space. She cut his hair, chose new clothes for him and made him throwaway exactly 100 items. She applied these experiences to creating and micro-managing living systems, creating a corporate identity for this operation: Office A-Z Administrative Services. Aiming for function within form, her sculpture and installation work is branded with the logo A-Z and productlike titles, from A-Z Platform Bed (1995) to A-Z Travel and Trailer Units (1995).

The latter pieces, actual customised caravans, engage American 'RV' culture, in which the individual remains in a cocoon of 'home' despite travelling to the 'frontier'. Most RVers, however, keep their vehicles in a trailer park, and with this in mind Zittel created the A-Z Escape Vehicle, caravans of the future without the immobility of real-life RVs. Zittel's creations have been shown around the globe in solo exhibitions at venues including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1995). Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York 120021. and Sadie Coles HQ, London (2001). Andrea Zittel continues the work of the A-Z brand, dividing her time between A-Z West in California and A-Z East in a Brooklyn store-fronted house with more space than its predecessor.

Lightning Field that is permanently installed in New Mexico. There are, however, significant differences. De Maria's *Field* is huge: 400 stainless steel poles with solid pointed tips that are precisely positioned in a one mile by one kilometre grid. Zittel's *Field* fits into what can be called her front yard: a grid of 25 steel trays on short poles that cascade down a hill. Both fields take advantage of the energy that is abundant in their natural surroundings, but to very different ends: the former ensures a daily display of spectacular lightning strikes that from all firsthand accounts are visually amazing (I haven't been yet), while the latter at first glance just seems to sit there and do nothing. Appearances are deceiving: Zittel's trays harness energy that's less dramatic yet no less productive, for her at least. Having learned quickly while working on earlier projects that the desert environment of 'A-Z West' was powerful and unforgiving, Zittel decided to use these conditions



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> attempt in the United States: the coast-to-coast trek. This journey gave me a better sense of the vast range of activities which take place in parts of the US I had become so casual about while flying over. (In other words, even though I was born in the Midwest, I now know just how large this country really is.) Moreover, my cross-country drive underscored the conceptual distance that is part of the physical isolation of many well known earthworks made by artists in the 1960s and 70s, a clear source for Zittel.

The A-Z Regenerating Field directly acknowledges in its title and in its configuration Walter De Maria's 1977

to their full advantage. As she stated in the press release for her most recent exhibition at Regen Projects in Los Angeles: 'This past year the primary focus has been on production and how to develop new material and new kinds of fabrication techniques. After working outdoors in the 110-degree temperatures, and contending with seemingly infinite budget problems, I believed that there must be a way to make interesting and significant art for less money, and less physical toll.'

Continuing her interest in developing new building materials for her projects, Zittel began to experiment with paper pulp compacted into plastic moulds and set into the steel trays to harden. From there the desert sun takes over, like ions to De Maria's lightning poles, transforming much of her waste paper into panels that take on the appearance of fibreglass, concrete or even travertine stone. (Artist Matej A Vogrinic also harnessed sunlight in his work *Rainforest for an Australian Desert*, a field of 1800 half-filled watering cans placed in the desert until the heat had evaporated them dry.) For the moment, these panels have primarily a cosmetic or decorative application: 'something that could camouflage bad walls and add softness and texture to a room'. But Zittel is continuing her experiments in order to make this material strong enough, and durable enough, to build actual structures with it.

This is where Zittel's enterprise departs dramatically from that of De Maria's or any of the other minimalist earthwork artists. Her 'regenerating' field is also an 'enlightening' field, one in which we are encouraged - as is the case in all her work - to take the results of her experimentation and come up with our own ideas about what to do with them. Looking is not enough. Zittel has always taken a 'maximalist position, giving us as viewers (and users) enough information to incorporate the practical and aesthetic aspects of our lives into her structures and living units (her 'personal programmes'). This spirit of inclusiveness was reinforced by the manner in which Zittel introduced her *Field* to the world: she facilitated a series of projects by others, located at what were named the 'High Desert Test Sites'. Over the course of a weekend in late November, the Test Sites event took place at four locations, in Joshua Tree, Pioneer Town, Yucca Valley and 29 Palms. A wide range of artists produced temporary installations or events, from Jim Drain of Forcefield (an art/design/music/fashion collective based in Rhode Island which was included in the last Whitney Biennial) to local sculptor Noah Purifoy (who has been making his totemic assemblage sculptures since the 1950s). Other weekend highlights included versions of 'classic' desert comforts. Marie Lorenz created a sauna made to look like an oversized Noguchi lamp by winding rattan around a rock 'bigger than a car but smaller than a room', gluing sheets of clear plastic to the rattan and then removing it from the rock as a free-standing tent-like form. Joel Ottersen, best known for his over-the-top sculptures including such things as rocking beds, disco balls and hand-made ceramic figurines of the heavy-metal band KISS, installed a welcoming pig roast. All of the weekend antics are documented in a highly entertaining fanzine/catalogue (edited by artist/writer/curator Lisa Auerbach) that also includes pages on local lore, places to eat, horoscopes and the instructions for how to do a line dance called the Electric Slide.

The ultimate achievement here is that Zittel has found a novel way to add genuine accessibility to the idea of an art pilgrimage - even if the contribution of another participating Test Site artist, Chris Kaspar, directly poked fun at the drive out from Los Angeles and the substantial hiking required to see everything: a casually painted wooden sign, high up on Zittel's hill, that simply says "I'M SORRY." T