

A-Z Drive-Thru Conversation *Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, and Andrea Zittel*

from Andrea Zittel: Critical Space

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This conversation among Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, and Andrea Zittel took place while they were driving through Joshua Tree National Park in Andrea's pickup truck, January 29, 2005.

Beatriz Colomina: It feels like we are at the end of the world. Even the seven-hour drive from LA in heavy Friday afternoon traffic contributes to this feeling of being very far away.

Andrea Zittel: The park is the easiest drive to do while we talk. We can see a few man-made things later.

Mark Wigley: I think we should remain within the space of the park until we are done. I like the idea that the interview lasts as long as a scenic drive.

B: What do you consider your first work?

A: When I lived in San Diego, I did a totally different kind of work. I did sculptures and pastel drawings that were influenced by technology in the desert, but they were very regional and much more about a visual language. I never even talk about them; it's like they don't really exist now.

B: Yet it is interesting that they were already about the desert.

A: Well, I've always been really influenced by this area, by driving through here, which is why I wanted to come back ultimately.

B: Where did this interest in the desert come from?

A: My grandparents had a ranch in the desert just south of here, and I spent a lot of time there when I was growing up. My great-grandparents had been farmers who settled in this area. My grandfather would fly to his fields in an airplane when he had to irrigate them. They also introduced a sprinkler system to the area and did some speculative farming, which didn't quite work out. I think this whole idea of creating a universe, and then living in the middle of it always attracted me.

B: What is the difference between what your grandparents did and what you are doing?

A: Well, I think I always wanted to have a similar kind of lifestyle. And I also felt it was a limitation of my work that I would make it in one place and then it was displayed in a

totally different context. So I wanted to create a world where the process was complete. I used to joke that I felt like I was always traveling for my career, but I wanted everyone else to have to travel instead of me. So instead of being the tourist, I'd be the tourist attraction.

B: I am still curious about your grandparents. What is the difference in your mind between this form of art practice as farming and the inventions of ordinary people?

A: Well, I would like to say that I don't think that there is such a difference, but I guess that the thing that bothers me about southern California suburban culture is that we seem to be caught in such a cycle of endless consumption. I was listening to Jerry Brown on the radio once, and he was describing the difference between a citizen and a consumer. And he said a consumer is only able to pick from a few selections that are offered to them, and a citizen is somebody who can come up with creative solutions outside of those few options.

B: In your work art is imitating a certain form of life that seems to have disappeared, the kind of life exemplified in the inventions of your grandparents.

M: Isn't everything you're doing here a kind of a farm? Farming art?

A: Sometimes. Though it's become much more social than I originally thought it would be.

M: Have you become a tourist attraction?

A: Definitely.

B: And is that part of your artwork?

A: Well, there's always this idea of what you think you want, and then what you really want. I thought I wanted to be in one place and have everyone come and view my work in that situation. I thought that would be the ultimate freedom, but it's actually become another form of oppression because sometimes I have no personal life. I think that I wanted the most literal kind of representation, or nonrepresentation: to use things exactly the way they were and to not illustrate in any way. But the more direct I become, the less distinction I feel between what is real and what is not real. In the last few months, I've started to think about how representation in art or in life might be necessary to have anything feel natural again.



M: So now the difference between your personal and your public works seems like a pretty hard line to draw.

A: Yes.

M: Your house has become a gallery?

A: Yes. Everyone knows how to find my house [fig. 24] I'm in my pajamas in the morning and people are looking in my windows. But, you know, I suppose I asked for it.

B: What is the earliest work that is going to be in the exhibition in Houston?

A: Probably the *Repair Work* [1991, fig. 36 and p. 109]. When I moved to New York from southern California, I did work as a way of thinking to generate ideas. Since the whole city felt like it was decaying, I just started fix-ing things. Every time I'd see something broken in the street, I would take it home and repair it.

B: What kind of things?

A: Little statues, bumpers, cups, dishes. I found a floor once, tiles somebody had ripped from a bathroom, so I tried to put it back together. And while I was doing that, I actually started to think a lot about the difference between a creative gesture and a noncreative gesture. I decided that all gestures were creative, because you always have to make a decision at some point.

B: Did you repair them so you could use them? Did they become part of your life?

A: It was more about the act of repairing them. I just had a big stack of them in my studio, which was this tiny office, about a hundred square feet, which functioned as a thinking cubicle.

M: How did you know it was a hundred square feet?

A: I didn't know, but it was about a ten-foot by ten-foot room. My second studio was two hundred square feet.

M: Then you made the calculation?

A: There were twelve-inch tiles on the floor and you could count them.

M: So you did!

A: That's what I do, even in other people's houses.

M: But even that calculation of how much territory you are occupying is a decision: it's a creative act to declare to yourself that you occupy a hundred square feet.

B: Were you always so sensitive to space?

A: Yes. But the limited space also defined the kind of work that I thought I would be making. It wasn't a studio that you could cut a piece of wood in. So I decided, "This is where I'm going to go to think."

M: An architect would do the same: look at the space and say, oh, a hundred square feet. It's the first act of design.

B: I agree, the space is part of your work.

A: But the space defined the activities.

M: Yes, but you also redefined the space by declaring its size.

A: I guess. But as a sculptor, you think, "I can't move a piece of plywood around there, so I'm probably never going to build anything in that space."

B: You say "sculptor" and Mark says "architect." Do you think of yourself as an architect?

A: No, I'm more of a fan of architecture. I've consciously never designed a building.

B: Regardless of this beautiful space you have made for yourself here?

A: I've always moved into spaces that exist. I respond to Archizoom saying they were designers, as opposed to architects, because they felt that architecture was inherently controlling, and they wanted their work to react against that. As a non-architect, and as a consumer, I'm always having to react against the spaces that architects have built.

M: Would you now resist the word designer for other reasons?

A: Because of what it's turned into?

M: Yeah.

A: Actually I've always loved the word designer because it is such a creation of modernity. It didn't exist at first, it appeared out of nowhere. I also love the ambiguity of the word, I mean, it's sort of a catchall term. I don't really consider myself a designer, but I think my work is about design, because its concerns interest me almost more than art issues. They're so symptomatic of the time that we live in, I'm not a designer because I don't design for the masses. I don't make products. I design experiments for myself.

B: An inventor perhaps?



A: Maybe that's one thing that an artist has become in our culture?

B: An inventor invents the need as well, and does the design for the need she has invented. Most of your objects are not for an identifiable need. You start by inventing the need.

A: Right. With the *A-Z Chamber Pot* [1993, p. 107], for example, I decided that bathrooms were tyrannical, so I was going to invent things that would liberate your body from the necessity of that

M: You invent a constraint, and then you invent the release from the constraint.

A: Well, I always think it is more like I'm becoming aware of the constraint, not inventing it. But perhaps...it's somewhat invented.

B: You also have some attraction to rules. I agree that you react against a constraint, as you said, but only to invent (or so it seems to me) other constraints. I am curious about how you invent those constraints. What are the rules?

A: Oh! This is getting into my favorite topic. (Laughter) I love rules, but not because they're controlling. There are so many rules in our culture. Anything from how you build a space to what you can inject into your body is dictated by rules. And the only way that I think you can be free from external rules is to create your own personal set of rules that are even more rigid, but because they are your own, you feel like you're completely free. So rules are actually a way of liberating oneself, I've also been thinking too about the creation of rules. The progression of art until the seventies was all about breaking boundaries or rules, but creating rules is almost more difficult and more creative, because it is a more complex level of reasoning, instead of blindly trying to break them down.

B: But it's an unending process because you identify a constraint, resist it by creating another rule, but then you end up feeling constrained by your own rules. As you were saying about your house, your rules are making you feel constrained.

A: But I break my rules a lot. Because it's my rule, I can break it, whereas if the rule was the law or a building code, I couldn't. I'm very conscientious, But it's a good rule as long as it works.

M: So, freedom through increased rules?

A: As long as they're my rules. In the early nineties, I got a lot of reviews saying that my work was fascist or controlling, but my point was never to impose those rules on other people, unless they willingly availed themselves. I always use myself as a guinea pig. I'm not interested in oppressing anyone.

B: You are your own test case?

A: Yes.

M: If the rules are your rules, and if the work is somehow driven by the rules, the work is also personal in that way not because people look at the work and see you, but because they feel the rule-making, the decisions being taken.

A: It's personal but not that unique. It's pretty standard. I think I'm a pretty typical representative of what somebody in my age, gender, and economic background would do. And I think that's an important part of it, too. Even though some of my designs may seem very strange, when I lecture for a general audience, I'll have people coming up afterwards saying that they have the same ideas, too, and I really like that.

M: So, there is a community of people who would make rules in the same way. If the rules have to be your rules, counter rules to the official rules, yet they are shared with a large group of people who can imagine that these are also their rules, then there is an implied mass production aspect to the work, or at least mass reception.

A: True. But it's also how people can identify with ideas. You can only really comprehend something through identification with an individual. Each issue needs to be pared down to that.

B: It seems that the narrative aspect is a crucial aspect of your work.

A: I've thought about it on the level of creating a story that people can identify with.

B: Each one of your pieces has a story. Even the way you started describing your work to us had a clear narrative to it: "I came to New York, New York was in such a state of decay, this is what happened, I started collecting and repairing things."

A: And I love stories.

B: And the story seems to be part of the work.

A: I agree. But the stories happen naturally. I love lecturing to art students because I have a message, which is basically that you can do everything wrong and still end up totally fine. I'll tell them all the stories of everything I did that was wrong, and how in some way it ended up being right again.

B: That's my favorite topic: failure. Success is so boring, in a way, because if everything turns out right, what do you learn? Failure and the frustration that comes from it is a lot more productive.

A: All my favorite pieces, even the ceiling of my house in Joshua Tree, happened partly because of a failure. Every really interesting twist in my work has happened because I fucked up on something, and then we had to compensate somewhere else. I think that you make much larger advancements through failures.

B: Inventions come after repeated failure.

A: The missteps are crucial.

M: A scientist would say something similar, and the word experimental is used a lot in the context of your work. What's your feeling about that word?

A: Well, it's the default word. It's not really radical. Exploratory might be better. I want to come up with a word that talks about looking at something and trying to explore it and understand it. Learn from it and then grow. An experiment is like a process. It's messier for me. Because I think that one thing will happen, but actually something else happens.

M: The desert is a famous place for experiments. If you have to make mistakes to progress, you should make a mistake in the desert where it's not going to hurt anyone. So we've got to keep our artists in the desert. (Laughter)

A: The desert seems to be the breeding ground of big, fabulous, beautiful mistakes. All of these people come out here with these crazy dreams.

B: So in that sense you fit perfectly.

A: I love the tradition of artists who have been working here decade after decade. I am in awe of them.

B: When I think about the desert, I also think about the military installations.

A: Did you hear the bombing this morning?

B: No.

A: Really, really heavy bombing this morning. If you were at my house, you would have felt it. The whole house was shaking.

B: What do you think they are doing there?

A: They're getting ready to go back to Iraq. They're getting the next troops ready.

B: What does it mean to be doing your work in the backyard of the military?

A: The whole desert is the backyard of the military [fig. 26]. If you look at a map of the Southwest, a huge proportion of it is owned by the government.

M: You were talking about your grandparents making everything out of nothing, yet now we're talking about the desert as full of ...

A: Layers.



M: But you have zoomed in on the architectural layer of the desert.

A: It's not even architectural; it's just marks that people make. Way out here, it's just the traces that people leave. Maybe in a denser urban center, they would just get erased by the next person.

B: Getting back to the question of mass production, your ... pieces seem to be unique prototypes, but you always do multiples. How many do you do of each?

A: Usually as many as I'm physically able to make. With the *A-Z Escape Vehicle* [1996, pp. 200-205], I had to stop at ten. With the *A-Z Wagon Station* [2002-present, pp. 214-17]...I think there are eighteen. That is the most I have ever made of a single piece.

B: So this at least resembles mass production.

A: Right. But because they are customized, ultimately every one ends up being different. Allan McCollum once said that two things being identical is much rarer than everything being unique. So he suggested it was odd that people would value a unique object over a multiple.

M: Our culture is one of mass customization. The computer means it's no cheaper to produce many objects that are identical than many objects that are different, so there's a generic desire for the unique.

A: We're using the word customization, but what I'm really interested in is when another person takes control of the piece away from me. That doesn't happen to artists very often. Sometimes people do things that I hate, which is even better. It creates this tension, which makes it a better artwork.

M: What about the intermediate zone between the work and the exhibition of the work? What are your feelings about the curator of an exhibition - how much control do you allow them?

A: It depends. Again, with the *A-Z Pit Bed* [1996, p. 139], a lot of the curators redesigned them. The curator is just another person. In the pieces that were my prototypes, though, I'm pretty controlling about how I want them exhibited, because they represent my decisions, not theirs.

M: It makes sense, because you refuse any distinction

between living your life and your studio, and in the exhibition the studio somehow gets brought into the gallery. So the studio and the gallery get confused.

A: Or the life in the gallery. Like my living room gets brought into the gallery.

M: But your living room is also ...

B: the gallery itself.

M: It's the place where you produce or at least test your products, so when you exhibit, you exhibit not your life (in the sense of feelings, dreams, history, and all that), but the architectural condition of your studio and your domestic situation.. So it makes total sense that you'd be absolutely controlling about that because you want to have turned the gallery into a domestic space with domestic rules. People literally walk into your space, your rules.

A: Another symptom of the twentieth century was that it was the first time in history that people became acutely aware of their interior spaces and began to think those spaces in some way represented the interior of their souls. For the first time ever, I think we had that kind of self-consciousness about our homes and domestic interiors.

B: In Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, there's already at the beginning of the century this idea that the way your house looks is a symptom of your character. And he's mocking that.

A: People thought this was a liberation, to be able to express yourself. But in reality it's also very oppressive: you can't ever just have people over.

B: And not have everything judged.

A: Exactly.

M: But if there's this back-and-forth between domesticity, studio, exhibition, and reproduction, the labeling devices in a museum now find their way into the domestic. There's a blurring between labels given to works of art and labels given to products, like this is my "Epson" printer.

A: With branding.

M: I think you as an artist are just as controlling, if not more so, with your branding labels. It goes all the way back to that brilliant decision, the "A-Z Administrative Services." That's a sort of narrative, but a design decision, too. It's all about design.

A: It's also playing with the division between being an individual and being something more authoritative. Like that fine line between the oppressor and the oppressed.

B: Funny that an agency that someone invents is more authoritative than its author, right?

A: Well, as an artist I certainly felt like that.

B: But in our culture the artist has become a kind of authority.

A: I was interested in that interplay between corporate and personal identity. For example, Liz Claiborne is obviously a corporation, not a person. A lot of corporations have used the guise of an individual, so it's flipping it where an individual assumes the guise of a corporation.

B: In the sequence of events, when did the A-Z Administrative Services originate?

A: I was doing the *Uniforms* [1991-present, pp. 70-81], I think. My friends would always comment on how I was really good at organizing my life, and one of them wanted me to organize his life and to help him dress. I wrote him these very official letters with the letterhead of "A-Z Administrative Apparel" [*A-Z Jon Tower Life Improvement Project*, 1991-92, p. 69].

B: Apparel?

A: Originally. It expanded into "Services" later on. I said, well, I'm going to help you change your look, and we started this correspondence. Then I went into his house and started really bossing him around, like making him throw everything out and reorganize his storage area.

B: There are people that are doing that professionally now. They come and do your life.

A: I know. For him the ultimate luxury of freedom was being organized by somebody else. He had no responsibility.

M: You gave him the rules?

A: I did and it was fun.

M: Every rule was obeyed?

A: No. But I made charts that he had to fill out every day. And of course he would revolt sometimes.

M: Bad boy.

A: Yeah.

M: You were designing the life of an artist, the everyday life of an artist.

A: His goal was to get a boyfriend and to be more attractive. He wanted to find love, and he did.

M: This is the "Straight Artist for the Queer Guy." (Laughter)

A: When I first adopted the title "A-Z Administrative Services," I was just joking around. Then I started to use it more consciously. Later I would have to contract with the fabricators or larger companies, and they wouldn't work with me because I was an unknown artist with no money. When I called them, they would ask, "What company are you calling from?" So I'd say "A-Z Administrative Services."

B: You created a need. That's design.

M: You design the problem and the way out.

A: Right.

B: And the name, "A-Z"? We both thought it meant A to Z, like A, B, C, and then of course we realized that it is also in your name. So what were you thinking?

A: Oh, both. Because it's my initials, but it is also a very standard business name. And it's all-encompassing, it was just kind of perfect in every way.

M: A generic name for the generic.

A: It worked on every level because you see it and you know immediately that it is a business, that it could be any business.

M: Is there anything you would not work on? In the domestic situation, for example, do you do everything or are there limits?

A: The only thing I've struggled with on an ideological level is whether or not to do architecture, I often think it's almost taking a position not to do it.

A: The only thing I've struggled with on an ideological level is whether or not to do architecture, I often think it's almost taking a position not to do it.

B: What is the difference in your mind between the design of your minimum *Living Unit* and the design of minimum dwellings that in the twenties and thirties was so much part of architectural thinking?

A: I think a lot about the early modernists in California and how revolutionary their buildings must have seemed back then. Especially if you look at some of the houses that [Rudolf] Schindler and [Richard] Neutra were designing for the first fifteen years of their careers. So I often wonder, what could possibly seem that challenging or that radical now? When I think about designing a house, it always comes down to something that's pretty standard: it's all kind of rehashing modernism. In the last ten years especially, I have the feeling that modernism has become the new country kitchen. It's become the standard for good taste - but it just doesn't challenge notions of beauty or functionalism anymore. Not to name names, but I really don't like the phenomenon of Design Within Reach [mail-order designer furniture].

B: IKEA?

A: IKEA interests me a little bit more because it's truly for the masses. Design Within Reach is a really sanitized kind of elitism. But the problem is, I like the style. I like modernist architecture. I just hate what it's turned into, what it represents. That's why I liked Frank Gehry's own house [1978, Santa Monica, California]. I really felt like his house pushed out in an interesting direction.

B: Using all these materials that were rejected: the chain link, the plywood, and...

A: the way he exposed the framing. I've only seen it in images, but it always seemed like a really provocative space. It seems like a space that you would see and think it's really ugly. And I love that.

M: If you took your *A-Z Body Processing Unit* [1993, p. 118], the one that has the kitchen and the toilet together, and put it into a Design Within Reach catalogue, it would fit in there, with its Charles and Ray Eames Storage Unit quality, wouldn't it?

A: Yeah, it would.

M: So what makes your work different?

A: Besides the scatological reference? You know, that's my own question about my own work right now, too. I took time



fig. 27
Highway near the Salton Sea,
California, 2003

off about a year and a half ago, and I feel like I'm still in this holding pattern, just kind of circling and thinking, processing ideas.

M: With the Design Within Reach catalogue, everything has to do with visual comfort.

A: Don't you think it's status, though?

M: Yet associated with words like freedom, lightness, mobility. All the stuff is light, mobile, airy, Californian. Whereas there's a neurotic thing going on in your work. I don't mean personally. I mean that if you collapse together the toilet and the kitchen in one unit, you're really forcing people to confront their stuff.

A: I always thought of it as a kind of dark humor.

M: I love that piece where the food is at the top and the toilet is at the bottom. You could say, as any good modernist would, it's "efficiency and standardization," because the intake and outlet occupy exactly the same modular unit. And yet forcing the two things together defies a century of social convention that has kept them apart architecturally. Simply removing architecture, removing the usual division between the kitchen and the bathroom, would produce anxiety for a lot of people. You force people to live without the limits.

A: Right.

M: So there would be a language of freedom and liberation, but also a language of fear.

A: I guess because the user doesn't have the guidelines of the separation.

M: Maybe a lot of your work involves removing divisions, rather than constructing them. So what you are left with is not so much a brilliant innovation as a condensation. You

provide a really dense combination of things that are normally separated.

A: Right, switching them around. One of my favorite pieces that works like that is the *A-Z Comfort Unit* [1994, pp. 134-35], which is based on the idea that you can do everything you have to do without ever leaving the comfort and security of your own bed. But I love that because, on the one hand, it sounds truly liberating, and on the other hand, it's like the most horrifying feeling I could imagine. Like being an invalid. I think, especially in my first decade of making work, I was interested in that fine line between freedom and control, and how people often felt liberated by parameters.

B: How about the breeding project? Is that the next thing you did after the repair work?

A: That was the first official public work that people saw.

B: How does it feel now in relationship to breeding yourself? (Laughter)

A: Oh, I know, it's so funny, because when I was really interested in breeding and genetics and clones and stuff, I used to always think that it would be the ultimate art project to reproduce myself, making a baby. But back then I saw breeding animals as actually a masculine thing, because it's the male way of building something, of creating a biological entity. I'd always thought if I had children, they would come more into my work, but now that I have a baby, it's such an alien experience to me. I can't even process it. And I think I have to process it before I can make work out of it. It's so strange to "make" another being.

M: And the rules are now coming from the baby.

A: When I was pregnant, I kept thinking about *Alien* and Sigourney Weaver. You have this alien who has commandeered your body and you can't get it

out of you. And you know that when you give birth, it's going to be horrible - it's going to break you - and yet there is nothing you can do to stop it from coming out. It's really a bit like a horror flick.

M: The clock is ticking. (Laughter)

A: But the baby's so great.

M: A baby changes the sense of time, and one of your projects was all about losing official time in favor of the time generated by activities. How would you describe it?

A: Well, it was about not having access to any method of knowing what time it is. Like losing an overriding structure and then trying to figure out what rhythm your body naturally falls into and simultaneously what it feels like not to have that temporal structure.

M: Which a child would also do to you. It's the same project in a way.

A: A bit, but as a parent, I'm still more conscious of time than Emmett is. Having him also makes me remember a lot of my own earlier reactions to structures. I think I first thought of the *Time Trials* project [1999-2000, pp. 152-59] when I was probably eight or nine. My parents had these encyclopedias, and I was reading in them about time tests where people lived in caves. And I always wanted to do that. The encyclopedias wrote about circadian rhythms and what their findings were, but they never wrote anything about the subjective experience of people who were the subjects of the test. I always wanted to see what it was like.

M: In a way that was your first project then?

A: Yes.

M: It just took a while to ...

A: realize. That's probably one of my favorite projects.

M: It has something of the character of a diary.

A: But the hardest thing with that-and the thing that raises more questions about the nature of art-is that I thought it was successful as an experiment, attached to an unpredictable and extreme experience. But then it was unsuccess-

ful as an artwork, because there was no way to present that experience to an audience. So I became caught up in this web. Where does the art actually exist? Is the art in my own subjective experience of this thing or in what the audience perceives? So the diaristic aspect to it evolved into the panels describing the timeline of living through in this week [*Free Running Rhythms and Patterns*, 2000, pp. 157 and 159].

B: I did some work on bomb shelters in the Cold War, and a developer promoting bomb shelters in Florida chooses this couple and invites them to spend their honeymoon in a bomb shelter for fifteen days. The story was illustrated in *Ufe* magazine. They kept a diary and I always wondered about that diary.

A: What did *Ufe* show? Did it show different experiences?

B: There were photographs of the couple inside the shelter spending their day. They talk about how they are feeling and everything, but it cannot be that everything that they will have thought about ends up in the magazine. The photographs are astonishing. You first have the couple on the lawn with all their wedding gifts around them, mostly food supplies like Campbell's soup, and underneath them is this shelter. It seems to me that much of your work features very extreme environments, too, whether it be in the desert or deprived of time, or very hot or very cold.

A: But there's always a fear of insanity because what you are talking about reminds me, too, that I used to be very curious about what it was like to live on a submarine or oil derrick, or to be an astronomer. These situations where you're completely taken outside of ordinary life. And yet it's ordinary because it's the way that you live.

B: Extreme situations, that's why I think the word capsule is good for all your works.

A: Yeah. I don't know if there's any structure that epitomizes our culture better than the capsule. This truck, for example - I mean, we're riding in one right now.

M: In a hostile environment.

A: Everything about being in a car - you just feel so protected and safe. And you can go anywhere in this car. It's like a prosthesis, And then in southern California it extends to the home and your property. I think that it's always about having that sort of capsule around you.

In New York when I get home and I have a hard time leaving.

B: Right, we all do. The apartment is your armor. Like clothing is your armor.

A: And sometimes I think, in one form or another, there's a shape to describe every sort of emotional state or quality.

B: How did you come to making clothing?

A: I've always made clothing.

B: Since you were a kid?

A: When I was six, I would cut up my clothing. For example, I figured out (and I still like this idea) that I could cut the crotch out of my stockings and wear them like a shirt. I put the bottoms and the tops on so that they were perfectly symmetrical.

M: Another input-output project.

A: Exactly.

B: So you were experimenting with clothing since you were little.

A: I used to sew a lot.

B: Whom did you learn to sew from?

A: My grandmother. Actually I should add that I always think about clothing as being a form of public art. Because when you wear your clothing, it's one of the most practical ways to display something.

B: That's related to what you were saying before about the interior.

A: Well, the domestic interior is like your soul, but that's inside, and the clothing you can express outwardly. And clothing is so expressive. You can say so much with clothing, although that's not why I started making it as sculpture.

B: Why did you?

A: Well, this is another one of those stories. When I

moved to New York, I worked at the Pat Hearn Gallery, and I had to look good, but I didn't have that much money. I started thinking of how complicated it was to have different outfits every day, so I came up with the *Uniform*. You know, having a uniform would be much more liberating than having constant variety.

M: Yet it's not an entirely believable story.

A: It is super believable.

B: It is.

M: Well, the thought that you had resources for only one good garment is entirely believable, but when it grows into the *Uniform* and the rule of wearing it every day. .. If it were really driven by resources, you would get more clothes as you get more resources.

A: But I liked the Uniform dress and it freed me up psychologically.

M: What I like so much is that you find a way of taking a problem or a need, and turning it into a rule, and then going all the way with the rule. So after a while, the story only explains the creation of the need and the beginning of the rule, but the rule seems to extend way beyond the problem.

A: Okay, that's true. But I've also felt that we deal with a lot of social codes, especially in New York. And when I first entered the art world, I really felt like a fish out of water, both culturally and socially. It was a world that I was never prepared for. Just getting dressed became so complicated what you wear and what that means. I could not possibly compete. But eventually I realized it doesn't matter what you wear, or what fashion rules you know to follow, as long as you have something, some structure, that you use. Since I could never figure out what it meant to wear any particular label or designer, I made up my own designer, which is me, which provided a built-in equal status.

B: Again it is a question of constraint. Men wear the same thing and nobody notices, but for you as a woman, the continuity stood out. It fits all the characteristics of your work, which is finding a constraint and undermining it by creating another set of constraints. The constraint becomes itself a work of art.

M: It's also a perfect image for this quality of your work: this transcendence of the personal/public boundary. Because you make the clothing in your house and you wear it to work, but since you work in an art gallery, you are bringing your private show there. With the *Uniform* you had a one-woman show for six months, right?

A: Right. You're absolutely right.

M: So, that's your first exhibited work, but it had no label at that time.

A: No, actually it did.

M: What did you say if somebody said: "What's that you're wearing?"

A: This my uniform, my *A-Z Personal Uniform*.

B: "A-Z" already.

B: The name is absolutely crucial. Even the label is a capsule to contain a series of works. You are the capsule queen. You are a classifier-constrainer-encapsulator-organizer.

A: I just laugh, because to some extent I try not to do that. Because I used to waste a lot of time classifying and organizing.

M: What if it's not really a personal issue, since one of the crucial effects of the work is to create confusion about the personal/public distinction. Just because your own life is somehow built into the project doesn't mean that we necessarily really see or know anything about your personal life, right? It's just somehow the question is raised but not answered. Another synonym for architect is organizer. So instead of saying I need to do this, you could just say you are an architect and that's what we do. We make space for things and organize them. I'm circling back again to this word architecture not because you make inhabitable spaces like building but because each of your projects provides a organizational system, which also means a set of constraints.

A: But how do you define an architect?

M: For me, an architect is not somebody who makes buildings but someone who makes you think about them, makes you hesitate and see things differently, interrupting everyday rhythms to produce a sort of hesitation, which acts as the opportunity of thinking or seeing or living differently.

It's a kind of process that creates doubt. So a chair is just a chair, but there's something about the angle of it, which is not like other chairs, so you might see a chair, or feel it for the first time.

A: I always thought of an architect as a specialist, and I felt like I wasn't a specialist. But based on your description, then I suppose my work would qualify as an architectural gesture.

M: I think the architect is an intellectual, and the intellectual aspect of your work is very important and needs to be thought through. That aspect is easily overlooked because so much of the work has to do with craft, the actual production of these objects, the materials and even the particular attachment on your electric drill, or whether you're only going to use your hands for a certain garment, or the effect of the sun...there is a great attention to the construction of the thing.

B: I think fabrication is more important for you than construction because construction implies a lot of other people involved in the process, and in your case, even if you sometimes have to bring people into it, it has more of the quality of fabrication, even in the making of the fabric itself.

A: I think there's a trilogy: the way that something is made, the way it functions, and the way it looks. In a complete object or entity or building or anything, all three of these elements come into play, though I think that in the art world this triad has somehow been broken apart. I prefer to use the word technology in relationship to construction because sometimes the term craft implies that something is handmade. If you inspect the history of architecture, all significant breakthroughs were connected to technology.

M: That's a theory, right? So again you're really operating as an intellectual. I mean, you think, you label, you write, you lecture, you teach at Columbia, Yale, USC. You're describing thinking as much as making. Because there is so much in the work about making, the kind of intellectual position being taken is less obvious yet always there.

A: I guess the thing that I struggle with in my work is that it's more a way of understanding something. For instance, Dan Graham's work is so brilliant because he already knows what he's trying to say, and then he expresses it so succinctly within the sculptures.

B: Isn't that the way things always appear to others? I can imagine people saying that you and your work.

A: I'd say maybe a quarter of my pieces really express something worthwhile, and a quarter of them are purely floundering in the dark. And about fifty percent are in the middle. I love making my work because I'm always working towards something, always trying to figure something out, but I often also feel thwarted at various phases of this process.

M: Yet that just sounds like the necessarily self-critical attitude that increases your concentration. When you write about Minimalism in that short essay, even if it's presented in the form of an informal reflection on how a group of artists represented themselves in a particular moment in time, it is actually a full-fledged theoretical analysis of the relationship between work today and the work of that period. And I think the same is true of each of your projects, including the clothes. From the moment you used that word "uniform," the work was fully theorized.

A: Or hypothesized ...

M: That's the experimental attitude: "I only have a hypothesis. I'm still working on it. I'm still in the lab. I'll get back to you."

A: Right now I have been compiling a list, These things I know for sure [pp 14]. There's fourteen of them. They're stupid things.

B: Like what?

A: Like design principles, this one of them: "Good design, rather than being easy to clean, should just camouflage dirt." That makes something a better design, I'm absolutely sure of that. And the idea of forward motion, that we are always happy when we are moving towards something. These kinds of things. They are really abstract and kind of ridiculous.

B: You have finished the list?

A: It changes every year. Because I'm almost forty and I've been working on this project since I was twenty. What do I actually know for sure? Even if it's a stupid thing, this is something that I've discovered that I'm pretty sure about.

M: What if you are simply a theorist, and these are the results after years of experimentation.

A: I don't have any big ideas.

M: So you keep saying. But any idea is big.

A: I think you start with the little things. As you keep putting them together, eventually it gets to be a big idea.

M: Is it possible that the only reason for all of this work, from the first *Repair Work*, the childhood dreams, even through all of the various projects, was simply to generate these fourteen things?

A: (Laughter) Oh, no, don't say that.

M: Yet it is very striking that all of your works are unified under the one "A-Z Administrative Services" label. In other words, it is actually a single work. So, if you end up with a list of fourteen conclusions, the first thing to say is that it is part of the work, not simply a result. It's the thing that gets updated from all the moves. Everything suggests that you are working from first principles, like a philosopher, starting with nothing (whether it be a hundred square feet of space in Brooklyn or the emptiness of the desert) in order to determine the secret laws of the universe-the rules-working twenty years on it.

A: Well, if I retitled it "The Secret Laws of the Universe A-Z." (Laughter)

B: Because we were both confused and intrigued by the A-Z label, I had the idea to try to do an A-Z dictionary. This will be the rule of this game: we go from A to Z, and you name what goes for each letter.

A: Oh, my God. I'm not a spontaneous thinker.

M: But I don't think it will be spontaneous. With you everything has been figured out.

B: So what would "A" be?

A: Artist, I guess.

M: And you're an artist?

A: Yes. (Laughter)



fig. 28
 Highway sign for Zzyzx Road, Mohave Desert ,
 California, 2004

A- ARBITRARY

W- WAGON

B- BREEDING

X- X-RAY

C- CAPSULE

Y- YARN

D- DOGMA

Z- ZZYZX

E- EXPLORATORY

F- FAILURE

A: What was F?

G- GARBAGE

M: "Failure."

H- HIERARCHY

B: You also said "Forward."

I- INCREMENTAL

M: "Forward" and "Failure." Maybe they are the same thing?

J- JOSHUA TREE

B: Yes, because a failure makes you move forward.

K- KEY

A: Failure fuels you forward.

L- LIFESTYLE

M: D was?

M- MACHINE

A: "Dogma?"

N- NOISE

M: Ooh, that's good.

O- ON-DEMAND

A: Yes. I also like the reference to Dogma Films.¹

P- PANEL

M: Doesn't surprise me because they are into constraining rules.

Q- QUARANTINE

A: Brilliant.

R- REPAIR

NOTE

S- STRAND

T- TRAJECTORY NOTE

1. Dogma Films are produced by Dogma 95, a Danish film collective devoted to a rigid type of cinema verite governed by a strict set of ten guidelines that eschew Hollywoodlike cinematic artifice.

U- UGLY

V- VOLATILE