



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

Andrea 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 (felt 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. ★