

REGEN PROJECTS

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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 Borcherdt



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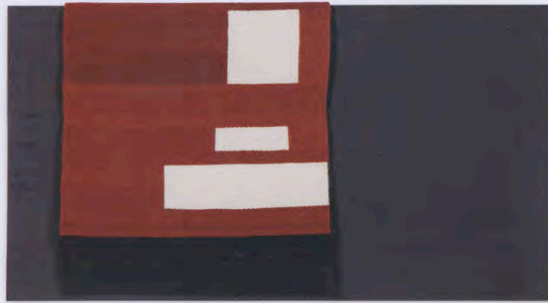
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above Aggregated Stacks, A-Z West, 2010. Photo: Giovanni Jance

preceding pages A-Z Wagon Station, 2003-15

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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 sand-scape, 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

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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

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

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and Crime' (written 1908, published 1913) – against the indiscriminate adornment of everything and everyone, Foster attacked the design atrocity of our time: the conflation of art with commerce, marketing and the culture of spectacle. What was once considered a total work of art, the critic suggested, is now becoming a commercial product. And, for sure, Zittel's approach of designing every detail of life, and thus serving the rhetoric of product design – she does, in fact, conduct her work under the brand name 'A-Z, an Institute of Investigative Living' – can easily tangle in the web of such criticism.

In actuality, Zittel's understanding of her work is more humble than that of many of her colleagues, who illustrate Foster's theories perfectly. Her approach resembles the elementary pragmatism of the Bauhaus. Her clothing, sofas and shelves are made from simple materials – felt, foam, wool, cardboard. The shapes and colours are sober, without seeming cold or technical. On the contrary: the synthetic lounge art of the 1990s, which today looks soulless and oddly sophomoric, is alien to her. For Zittel it all comes down to basic human needs. The central question is how one can live well with as little as possible. In an age in which not only art but also the daily routines of late-capitalist society are defined by profusion and consumerism, hers is an approach that could hardly be more apt – and an interesting proposal especially since, following the banking crisis that began in 2008, many people are forced to live with less. Nevertheless, Zittel does not claim any moral high ground. For someone who lived in Brooklyn in an 19sqm storage space, slept there, built furniture there, sewed and raised chickens there, such that the street often became part of her workspace, modesty is simply an obsession. This was already the case when Zittel, upon finishing her studies at Rhode Island School of Design, moved to New York in 1990; when she got a job at the Pat Hearn Gallery, she chose not to buy a trendy gallerina wardrobe, opting instead to sew her own clothes – one outfit for summer and one for winter.

However, this all sounds more spartan than it feels when you're in Joshua Tree National Park. A-Z West is a dream factory somewhere between a minimalist microcosm and a hippy utopia. Of course Zittel is not the first person to do this. Since the 1960s there have been esoteric experiments such as 'sound baths' – round architectures that capture the sounds of the Mojave Desert that borders Joshua Tree. The area was a famous hippy destination, attracting people seeking a chilled-out natural lifestyle; Antonioni shot his legendary movie *Zabriskie Point* (1970), in which Death Valley becomes the land of free expression, nearby; today, LA businessmen use

the Mojave for real-estate investment and build artificial villas for exhausted people from the city.

Zittel's work touches on all of these contexts. But despite the less-is-more mission, an undogmatic, experimental lightness persists, which is rarely a matter of course in large-scale artistic-production locations. "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 with people from the village or friends from LA," explains Zittel, while the sun sinks behind a hill and the air turns abruptly cold.

A life apart from the art metropolises and institutions is hardly something new. In the 1960s above all, artists fled the institutions and galleries for open terrain, and in the US this usually meant one thing: the desert. Yet, while Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson carved their rugged monuments directly into the 'expanded field' of raw landscape and Donald Judd deployed his cubes in Texan no-man's-land, Zittel's approach harks back to something that could not be further removed from such grand gestures: camper-van holidays, the endless roadtrips with her parents when it was of utmost importance to consider what was essential to bring along, and what was not.

Some obvious catchwords come to mind: escapism, seclusion. Indeed, one could argue that a person who chooses to live at a remove from the centres of urban or social life should not be making art about it. But long ago Joshua Tree and the Mojave developed into an oasis that – after the hippy years – has attracted artists, intellectuals and aficionados who conceive of the desert as a giant laboratory. Every year Zittel invites them to present their projects at her art festival, High Desert Test Sites, a nonprofit organisation she founded with a few other people from the artworld that offers workshops, excursions and residencies for artists, critics and the public. All of these are invited to come to the desert and propose new ideas beyond the commercial artworld, thinking about alternative ways of life. The general idea behind this, as Zittel puts it, is "learning from what we are not": a fine motto for art as well as life – particularly if you aren't quite part of either. **ar**

Translated from the German by Jonathan Lutes

Eye on Design: Andrea Zittel's Aggregated Stacks and the Collection of the Palm Springs Art Museum is on view at the Palm Springs Art Museum through 12 July; Andrea Zittel: The Flat Field Works can be seen at Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, from 13 June through 27 September



A-Z Wagon Station, 2003-15

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