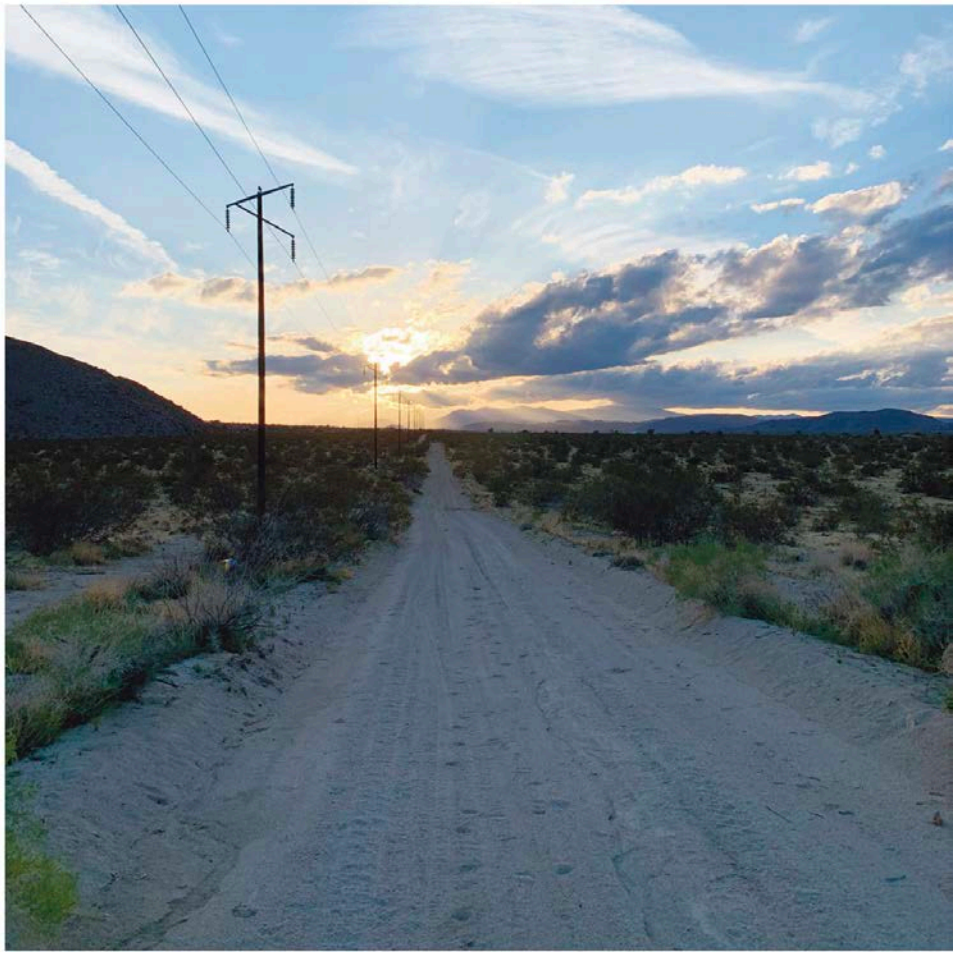
Zittel, Andrea. “Silent Spring.” Artforum (May/June 2020) [ill.] [online]

ARTFORUM

SILENT SPRING

Andrea Zittel



Andrea Zittel’s A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA, April 2020. Photo: Andrea Zittel.

ON MARCH 1, my partner, Katy, and I started gradually stocking up on food. Over the past two decades of living in the desert, I’ve developed a pretty deep prepper mentality. I have four thousand gallons of water on the property and enough food to last forty days. I only keep as many pets as I can fit in my truck if we need to evacuate on short notice (three dogs, two cats, a bunch of chickens and pigeons, three rescue tortoises). I have a camp kit in two black plastic milk crates all packed and ready to go. I’d always had a kit around for dry camping, but during the Fukushima nuclear-plant disaster in Japan, I upgraded it in the event that the reactors had a total meltdown. My plan in that case was to head east in my truck to avoid the brunt of the radiation hitting the west coast of California. And no, I don’t have guns—my super-neurotic blue heeler, Maggie, covers

that base. Admittedly, this all may sound a little insane, but I enjoy solving problems, maybe because it helps assuage my anxiety.

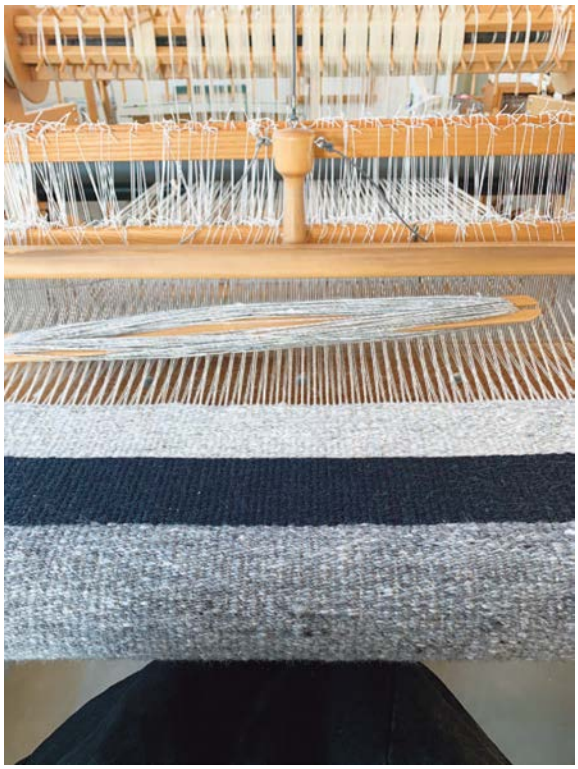
But, until last week, I hadn't actually considered an in-between scenario, one that wasn't imminently life-threatening but would involve a long period of isolation. My previous emergency food stash was shitty dehydrated food, the kind you would only eat if you were literally trying to avoid starvation. So Katy and I drove down to Palm Springs—the closest city to where we live—to stock up at Trader Joe's. We bought brown rice, cauliflower gnocchi, and cans of vegetarian chili. I somewhat jokingly wrote on Instagram that my primary impulse was to load up on rice and beans and Katy's to get wine, coffee, and dark chocolate (very indicative of our two personalities)—and was immediately shamed by someone who wrote, "This is insensitive, you live in the desert. . . . Y'all need to check yourself." Which is sort of true, but what good is the isolation of the desert if you have to run into town to get groceries every few days?

Andrea Zittel's A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA, April 2020. Photo: Andrea Zittel.

On March 12, Trump suspended flights into the US from Europe, and on March 16, we started canceling tours, upcoming residencies, and our big High Desert Test Sites 2020 event, which was originally scheduled for April. On March 19, all of California was told to shelter in place.

During the first week of California's lockdown, Joshua Tree National Park (which neighbors A-Z West, my compound and long-term art project) was inundated with people escaping Los Angeles and other nearby cities to camp. Thirty thousand visitors came on March 14, their arrival precipitating a backlash from local residents and, eventually, leading to a total shutdown of the park. There was deep mistrust, and concern that people from larger, more populated areas were bringing Covid-19 to a small, rural, low-income community that is severely medically underserved. By March 21, we had our first

reported case of the virus. The sole hospital in the high-desert area has only four beds in its ICU.



Andrea Zittel's A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA, April 2020. Photo: Andrea Zittel.

I have been getting a lot of messages from friends about how lucky I am to live in the desert. Basically, that is 100 percent true. It's been achingly beautiful here as we transition from winter into springtime. I go on a forty-minute hike at the end of each day and can spend time outside in almost total privacy. But A-Z West is also (usually) the hub of a much larger community that consists of staff and residents and visitors. We've lost commissions and tours and all the other things that keep us afloat. My office staff is now working from home. Three other members of our workforce come in separately on different days of the week, tending to the weaving studio and ceramics studios or maintaining the grounds. It's incredibly quiet, and the days have taken on a different kind of rhythm. A month or two ago, before the crisis, I had already started cutting back on communications. Fed up with the amount of time I was spending answering email, I stopped working to get my inbox down to ten or twenty messages by the end of each day; instead, I did email until I was sick of it (usually for about ninety minutes to two hours) and then moved on to personal forms of studio work (highly recommended attitude adjustment). As we've been sheltering in place, my studio focus has deepened, and I feel more excited to make things to keep than to show or sell. The art world feels like it's a zillion miles away.

Like pretty much everyone else in America, I worry about money and the economy almost all the time. My art income pays my staff, but I personally live mostly off the rental income from a small building that I bought in Brooklyn twenty-five years ago—and now my primary tenant, a bakery and café, is paying reduced rent. Home life is a mix of light

and dark. I love working alone and spending time in my head. The weather is cold and moody. I plant spinach seeds and harvest romaine and chard. We have insane sunsets, and I keep a fire burning in the woodstove most days. My animals are happy. The highway near my house is quiet, and frankly, with all this reduced human activity, the earth feels like it's heaving a big sigh of relief. But we also hear daily gunfire from one of the houses in the valley below A-Z West, where, it seems, someone is preparing for the apocalypse.

Andrea Zittel's A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA, April 2020. Photo: Andrea Zittel.

I've thought a lot this year about solitude—or rather, about being alone in one's head without a lot of outside input or external noise. (This is how the author Cal Newport described solitude on Ezra Klein's podcast, which I note that, ironically, I'm listening to with earbuds in as I take a walk to get some alone time.) I used to imagine that A-Z West was an island and wondered what it would be like if I could spend days, weeks, months, or even years without leaving the property. Now, not only am I living out this fantasy, so is the entire nation.

In this deep quiet, there is also a lot of fear and worry: You can sense it everywhere. And the primary response to fear is chatter.

I think about how rare this experience is. The art world has come to a grinding halt (the fairs, gallery shows, museum galas, and international flights), and we are all being forced to live almost entirely in the realm of the personal: in the interiors of our homes, with the people most intimate to us. Time has changed. Everything feels removed and surreal. But in this deep quiet, there is also a lot of fear and worry: You can sense it everywhere. And the primary response to fear is chatter. There is a rush to create content, to generate a tidal wave of "virtual experiences," both to maintain people's livelihoods and to ensure that we don't disappear while shut away from larger public awareness. How is it that our ability to perform introspection has become so limited? Or

is it just that in this economy of attention, the more attention we have, the more secure we feel?

I often think about the Dunbar number. Robin Dunbar is an anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist who theorizes that 150 is the maximum number of individuals with whom any one person can maintain stable relationships.

Andrea Zittel's A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA, April 2020. Photo: Andrea Zittel.

I have been having a dialogue with the writer and photographer Nich McElroy, who is preparing a text about my work, and we touch on Jenny Odell's book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019), which has gathered a huge following in the past six months. I observe that in the book, even when the author is doing nothing, she is still doing *something* (bird-watching, walking, reading), and I find myself noting that at no point does she describe that jangly nervous tension you feel when you truly do nothing. Nich and I talk about boredom, and I reveal my belief that boredom is the harrowing path to true creativity.

Am I bored yet? No. I'm mostly worried, concerned for health-care workers, exasperated with the bombardment of chatter, utterly astounded and amazed by the ineptitude of our government, titillated by all the bad TV I now let myself watch. So, as of this week, I am officially putting being bored on my to-do list.

Andrea Zittel is an artist based in Joshua Tree, CA.