

A conversation with Andrea Zittel

In relation to Andrea Zittel's participation in the exhibition *The Experimental Field* at Accelerator, Stockholm University 2020–2021, she and Richard Julin, one of the exhibitions two curators, had the following conversation. It's a continuation of a conversation that took place when the art work *Lay of My Land* (2011), which is shown as part of *The Experimental Field*, was originally created for an exhibition at Magasin III Museum of Contemporary Art. That conversation was published in the book *Lay of My Land* (Prestel Publishing, 2011).



Experimental living cabins and planar configuration, 2017.

Richard

The exhibition the *Experimental Field* has as its starting point the experimental agricultural science research activity that was established at the beginning of the 19th century at Frescati, which is the location of Stockholm University and Accelerator. How do you look upon experimentation in your life and work and has your relation to experimentation changed over the years?

Andrea

I recently re-read the conversation that we did back in 2011 and realized how it was essentially a roadmap for everything that has happened since at A-Z West. Our original project together at Magasin III was almost ten years, ago – exactly at the half-way point between the inception of A-Z West and the present moment that we now find ourselves in. In light of that I was thinking that this discussion could be a similar snapshot of where things are now and how some of the ideas that we discussed have played out over the last ten years.



Linear sequence, 2016.

So, in answer to your question about experimentation – this is a such an organic process and really has to do with opening up and taking a step back rather than any set methodology. When things become too structured or concrete it's hard to be truly experimental. It's that flux state that is most generative, right? Even in culture at large, the moments of innovation are usually in the wake of political, social or economic upheaval. I like to refer to those openings or gaps as a “frontier” mentality.

During the pandemic when everything else was shut down, I was able to spend a lot of time on a personal research project into the various structures of daily life throughout history. What I realized is that human life has evolved in so many different directions through the millennia. There is no single way of living or set of values or belief systems. Everything about us and our ways of living is constructed. And even when we do change and evolve, there is no such thing as linear evolution. So if there is any key trait that characterizes us as humans I think it is change and malleability and experimentation.

Richard

The *Lay of My Land* (2011) sculpture is in the shape of a model of A-Z West in 2011. What areas/parcels have been added since that time and what happens there?

Andrea

Sure – I hope you are ready because there is sort of a long list of additions. In 2011 A-Z West consisted of 35 acres. Since then it has grown to almost 80 acres here at the main compound, and

another 15 acres in a more remote location, about a 40-minute drive east of here.

This second wave of expansion began with ten acres between A–Z West and the highway that came up for sale in a tax auction. This piece of land is now the site of a newer work called the *Planar Pavilions* (2018) which consists of ten concrete block sculptures that are integrated into the landscape. This part of A–Z West has become important because it's the one site that is accessible to the public at all times.

Then there are two side by side five-acre parcels at the upper eastern edge of the property, each of these has a very early homestead cabin on it. One of the cabins is 160 square feet (15 square meters) and the other is 200 square feet (19 square meters). I've renovated one as my "secret spot" and the other one for my partner.



Planar pavilions, 2018.

Then I purchased eight and a half acres of land a little further to the east – this isn't connected to A–Z West but is a short walk from the main compound. I bought it primarily to protect the privacy and autonomy of the rest of my land, though it's an incredibly beautiful parcel with lots of large boulders and we sometimes talk about building a small house on it where we could live in more privacy than the main compound.

Then I was able to purchase a five-acre parcel directly on the highway which is envisioned as a future location for a more public interface for people wishing to visit A–Z West. Since the land is zoned for industrial use we could even eventually build a studio complex for the local arts community.

And most recently I was able to purchase yet another ten-acre parcel between my house and the highway that would be perfect



Linear Sequence, 2016.

for further art experimentation – either by myself or by other artists.

Also, I should mention that at some point during this time I also managed to purchase three small cabins out in Wonder Valley, a more remote area east of here. Two of the cabins have since been renovated and are furnished with artworks called *Linear Sequence* (2016). There is no power or water at these cabins and while they are totally functional, everything about them is very pared down which is a lifestyle that I've been interested in for years. We often book these cabins to people to stay in for periods of one week or longer.

Richard

A-Z Wagon Station Customized by Guy Green (2003) and A-Z Wagon Station customized by Jennifer Nocon (2003) are both shown in the exhibition. They were both part of the original Wagon station encampment at A-Z West. What are the future plans for that area?

Andrea

After we sent all of the customized *Wagon Stations* to Sweden for *Lay of my Land* we replaced them with new versions that were not customized. Instead of inviting specific people to individualize them, we started a residency where people could apply to come spend time in them as an intimate community of artists, writers, researchers, or people just interested in the ethos of experimental living. I think we ran the residency for about five years and over that time honed a system that worked both in terms of efficiency and as a social experience. We had so many really amazing people come through here during that period.

But during this same time period Joshua Tree itself was beginning to change and there was a lot of increased tourism and Airbnb rentals which created conflict within the full-time community here. In response, the county enacted new regulations for vacation rentals and the *Wagon Station Encampment* also fell within the jurisdiction of these new rules. Eventually the county determined that I would need more extensive infrastructure for what would basically be a commercial campground. We explored this option but it just wasn't financially feasible for us and it also contradicted the ethos of maintaining a light footprint on the land, so instead we worked with them to get the permits necessary to maintain the *Wagon Stations* as artworks (without the residency



A-Z West Wagon Stations, 2015.



Experimental living cabins and planar configuration (2017).

program). It is my hope someday that an institution with more resources will eventually take over A–Z West and will work with the county to open it up to artists and residents again.

“I still love the desert. I love that it is difficult and that it doesn’t cater to humanity. It’s so beautiful here but at the same time it’s very harsh, and I have to admit that sometimes I feel beaten down by it. ”

Andrea Zittel

Richard ***The Wagon Stations* and many other artworks you’ve created develop out of a concept in which others get to live with your creation and develop it in relation to their needs, taste and reactions to your original creation. Is that concept still part of your current practice and if so has it changed since you started working that way?**

Andrea *The Wonder Valley Experimental Living Cabins (2017)* which I mentioned before are also part of that approach. My work often feels at a disadvantage in the context of an exhibition – so I wanted to create situations where people can come live with and in the artworks. The furnishings in the *Experimental Living Cabins* are two sculptures called *Linear Sequence (2016)* – they are highly abstract and yet fully functional living structures. They function as a living room, a surface for eating or writing on, a place for cooking, and a sleeping area.

Richard **Another artwork in the exhibition is *Sufficient Self* from 2004. How do you see the desert and desert living at present and its impact on your art? How is Joshua Tree as a town and community present in your current practice?**

Andrea I still love the desert. I love that it is difficult and that it doesn’t cater to humanity. It’s so beautiful here but at the same time it’s very harsh, and I have to admit that sometimes I feel beaten down by it. The relentless heat and fires and smoke this past summer were so rough. Also, in the face of climate change it feels like we are on

the frontier of an environmental future that hasn't reached other locations to quite the same degree.

But I think that the community here may be my favorite thing about this place – unlike many rural areas in the US, the community here is always changing and composed of people who are strong individuals and desire independent and highly original lifestyles. It's also a mix of people who are both politically liberal and conservative. And at a time when our country is so deeply polarized, I think it's unique and special to have a community where people with differing viewpoints manage to get along, and for the most part respect each other despite our differences.

Richard **We are streaming an image live from AZ West into the exhibition space in Stockholm. What view have you chosen to share with the audience and what can you say about it?**

Andrea I'm hoping we will be able to show people a view from the top of the rocky hill behind A–Z West. Ever since moving to this property I've loved to scramble up there for a bird's eye view on the valley below. Since there is a nine hour time difference between California and Stockholm I think that the image will be dark most of the time that the exhibition space is open, and I loved the idea of seeing lights from people's homes in the valley floor below juxtaposed with headlights of the cars on the highway as they silently glide by A–Z West in the night.

Richard **Tell me about *West Works!***

Andrea One important goal over the last ten years has been to make A–Z West economically self-sufficient. I noticed that I spoke to you a lot about this plan in the interview that we did in 2011, so clearly, it's been a long-term pursuit! While most of A–Z West has been supported by my art practice, my goal has been to loosen its dependence on the art market and to start to create a more independent financial platform (in the US we don't really have grants to fund projects like this the way that I think a lot of European artists might be accustomed to). In the past I tried art experiments like the *Regenerating Field* (2002) in which I turned my paper waste into decorative wall panels – though that project was time consuming to make and challenging to sell. But over the last five years we have started producing ceramic bowls in the studio that we call *A–Z West Containers*. We suggest that people use these for all eating and drinking functions (I've been using bowls for everything in my own day to day life since the early



A–Z West Containers.



A-Z West Studios.

1990s). The bowls are really beautiful and they sell for an affordable price.

We have been quite successful selling them out of the studio as well as at various pop-ups and museum shops. Also, in the last year I have added a furniture work and two different types of hand-woven pieces that we make here in the weaving studio to the repertoire of *A-Z West Works*.

Richard

You mention the weaving studio. Your work in textiles is a large part of your practice and not least your experimentation with clothing has gone on for decades. I remember talking to you about crocheting and how you've explored its possibilities in numerous ways. You've used felt a lot also. How is your relationship to clothing and textiles at present?



A-Z West Uniform Project, Second Decade (2004–2014) .

Andrea

The most long-term project that I have done with clothing/textiles is my personal uniform series. For almost thirty years I've been making and wearing personal uniforms continuously for a season at a time. At this point it's become so ingrained! I used to develop more experimental designs that changed every season, but by now I have developed a fairly standard design that involves a long black skirt that gets reinterpreted in more subtle ways each year.



A-Z West Studios.

My primary other textile practice right now is weaving – lately I’ve been weaving less for my art practice and more for personal exploration as I try different techniques and hone my skill level. I’ve also been spending a lot of time reading and thinking about these various types of practices and considering how we categorize and create psychological divisions between craft, design and fine art.

Richard

I know you’ve worked with animals in your art and also that you live together with several animals at A-Z West. How have animals influenced your art in general and what is your relationship to animals right now?

Andrea

Ha! This is a hard question to answer because in the early 1990s when I first started working with animals as artwork my interest was much more critical or sociological. These days my animals are pets rather than art projects, but it’s true that we have a lot of them at A-Z West. All of my animals except the chickens are rescues so they all have complex and interesting personalities. Right now we have three rescue dogs, two cats from the local shelter, three pigeons from a pigeon rescue in San Francisco, and three desert tortoises from the local tortoise rescue.



Planar pavilions, 2018.

- Richard** Several of your projects have dealt with food, both for humans and animals, like the “A-Z Food group processing unit” and the “A-Z Food Group”. What is your current relationship to growing food, preparing food and the activity of eating it?
- Andrea** It’s funny because I’ve never been that interested in food. I mean I clearly have to eat to keep functioning – but cooking has generally felt like such a burden and that is why I ended up doing so many experiments with food preparation. These days I also have a small garden – mostly because I’m curious to see exactly how sustainable life is out here in the desert (though I’ll tell you a secret: it probably isn’t as sustainable as people would like to believe). Anyway, I feel a lot of conflict about gardening here because it also feels wrong to disturb the ancient native desert for something as alien and temporary as a vegetable garden, I just can’t bring myself to do it so I’m growing in raised metal beds which are typically used for watering livestock and that of course limits to some degree how much I’m able to grow.
- Richard** Finally, I want to tell you that working so intensely with the *Lay of My Land* exhibition back in 2011, visiting A-Z West and getting to know what I would describe as your universe has influenced my life. One of many ways has been that I’ve since then strived to find a way of living away from a big city and getting closer to nature, which has been rewarding. How do you see your way of life as a model to others? And how do you feel about the influence your life and art without a doubt has?
- Andrea** I feel so grateful to hear this. This is such a special place and I’ve learned so much from the twenty years that I’ve lived here. I’ve learned from my mistakes probably even more than from my successes. And while I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished – I also think that it’s important to keep things flexible and to continually be open to new experiences and explorations. I hope I get to keep having new and incredible experiences like this going into the future.

All images courtesy of Andrea Zittel.

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