

AN INSTITUTE OF INVESTIGATIVE LIVING

ANDREA ZITTEL

&
ELIZABETH
CHODOS

The Miller Institute for Contemporary Art hosted an exhibition that surveyed 15 years of Andrea Zittel's work from January 24th–March 8th, 2020, titled An Institute of Investigative Living. Recently, Curator and Director Elizabeth Chodos interviewed Zittel about her work and making the exhibition.



Andrea Zittel

PHOTO BY KATY DAVIDSON



A-Z West main house, 2012



PHOTO COURTESY ANDREA ZITTEL

EC — *How do you distinguish the acts of making and living from each other? In what ways do they overlap?*

AZ — Although I have an object-based art practice (and enjoy making things), I don't really equate "making" with making art. My practice has more to do with generating ideas, structures, habits, routines, experiments, etc. Having clarified that, I would say that in my world there isn't really that much separation between making art and living—but, art is part of the arena of life during those moments of higher living. Not necessarily "better" living—but, more like "more aware, clear, or conscious living." And, in that way, the acts of making and living totally overlap.

EC — *In a related sense, do you distinguish between the products of your making and living—is there a difference between your life and your work?*

AZ — If you are asking about the physical objects that I call my "artworks"—I am actually fairly discriminating about what is elevated to that status. So, much of my life is lived as an experiment or examination with the end goal being to test out a theory or satisfy my curiosity. The outcome of this experimentation becomes an artwork when it feels resonant on both a personal and larger cultural level.

EC — *How would you describe your ethos for living?*

AZ — I'm invested in continuing to grow, learn, and develop as a human, as well as figuring out this weird world that we live in. I want to understand how we create things like values, hierarchies, social norms, and belief systems—and to understand culture and society by observing and interpreting my own experiences and reactions. It's also so important to continually question what we perceive as "reality." For instance, in our day-to-day lives, we actually need so much less than we think we do. And values such as freedom are incredibly complex—for instance, what makes us feel free can often be a form of limitation or restriction.

EC — *How do you obtain knowledge? In other words, when and how do you know that you know something for sure?*

AZ — Well, in reality, you can never really know anything for sure—so the title of my collection of beliefs, "These things I know for sure," is a little tongue-in-cheek, or maybe even ironically romantic. But all the same, there are certain beliefs that I'm willing to stand behind even though I know they may be arguable. My generation of artists came of age during postmodernism, and we were the first generation that had to come to terms with the loss of the overarching narratives or ideologies that had fueled the creative output of artists of previous generations. I felt (and still feel) a longing for this kind of deeper meaning. Starting in the 1990s, I decided to write down the small trivial things that I could stand behind . . . thinking that if I had enough of these, they would finally add up to something bigger.

EC — *In thinking about the maxim, “the personal is political,” I wonder about the political in your work—since so much of it touches on the personal. Do you locate politics in the process and production of your life and work?*

AZ — You are touching on something that I ask myself all the time. But in my gut, I always pause at the word “political”—on the one hand, it’s so crucial that we inform ourselves and take a stand on issues that we believe in—our survival literally depends on this. But, politics are similar to religion in the way they stand for something well-intentioned but can end up doing so much harm and damage. Politics have become a form of entertainment or theater even. I’ve adopted the word ethical in place of political. I have a strong personal sense of values that I live by and am deeply committed to . . . but, within my work, I am also willing to question these values—as history has taught us how easy it is to have blind spots when it comes to areas of values and personal beliefs.

EC — *When we were planning the exhibition, you mentioned—only half-joking—that this might be your last show, primarily because the context of the gallery can be so challenging for your work. Can you talk more about that? Can your work be understood properly outside of A-Z West?*

AZ — My practice centers around the act of making and living with art within the context of everyday life. And, because of this, I’m often troubled by how much context is lost when this work enters the gallery or institution. It becomes an artifact, or hopefully (in a best-case scenario), something to inspire people to try similar experiments in their own lives. But, it loses the experiential nature that I’m always striving for. This is why I wonder if it makes sense to do exhibitions at all. My way of reconciling this has been by focusing, for the last few years, almost exclusively on working at A-Z West. And, more recently, I’ve also been experimenting with ways that people can live with works without having to own them. We have been doing this by slowly accumulating small cabins in the desert and installing them with artworks. People can spend periods of time living with the works—truly experiencing them in the way that they are intended. This fulfills a huge purpose of



A-Z West, Summer 2015

A-Z West and is a way to truly share the work as experience as opposed to commodity.



PHOTO BY LANCE BREWER



Andrea Zittel, An Institute of Investigative Living, installation views, 2020



PHOTOS: TOM LITTLE















