

# BOMB

## Andrea Zittel

STEFANO BASILICO

**F**OR OVER A DECADE, Andrea Zittel's art has investigated the structures of life on every level, from the biological (selective breeding), to the social and domestic (furniture design and clothing), to the fantastic (self-designed escape vehicles). In her latest project, Zittel has moved away from the mundanity of daily life into the terrain of complete separation, in the form of a literal private island. What is apparent in all of her work, however, is that rather than offering definitive answers, Zittel's art continually poses questions not only to her viewers but, most importantly, to her self. Significantly, Zittel has set up her life so that she will live with the consequences. A visit to Zittel's home is like entering the cross between a research facility and an artist's studio. Experiments and projects are everywhere, and like a science laboratory, special equipment is necessary to conduct the work at hand. In Zittel's case this consists of the furniture she uses, the clothes she wears and the food she eats, all of which she has designed and made. While she does use some mass-produced items in her daily life, everything has been customized: from the early Macintosh computer she spray painted black (which looks great, by the way) to the RAUGH work station, a work-in-progress, where she and her assistants take care of correspondence and other administrative matters. Some times design decisions lead to unintended consequences. Instead of regretting those outcomes, Zittel relishes and incorporates the problematic and the unsuccessful into optimistic and productive activities which touch upon some of the major philosophical issues of our day.

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**stefano basilica** Your house is very clean! Although it might just be the way you organize things. While maintenance is a part of what you do with your projects, I wouldn't expect actual cleaning to be.

**andrea zittel** I'm organized, but I really hate cleaning; you spend all of your time doing something that will eventually just go back to its previous state. When I was living in a house with my ex in California, we both stopped cleaning, and our mess just got to a state of equilibrium after a while. But anyway, you clean and then it gets dirty again, but if you spent that time doing something creative, like building something, you'd actually have forward motion as opposed to the stasis of a repetitive act.

**sb** I was reading that one of the first things you did as an artist when you came to New York was to gather broken things and repair them. Which is a really interesting gesture, if you understand it not only in terms of art, but more importantly in terms of design and design authorship.

**az** Yeah. When I moved to New York from California I was overwhelmed by the decay here. That was just when the recession hit and people had the sense that everything was falling apart. In California everything had been all about progress and newness, but here in New York buildings were being abandoned and rents were going down and nothing was being repaired, everything was falling apart. I don't know if I thought much about authorship at that point. I do think about it a lot now, though, and how it isn't possible to abolish authorship because people feel so alienated that they're just starved for some sort of relationship, which is why people become obsessed with celebrities and the media. I think as we become more and more isolated, we look for our intimate relationships with products and name brands; and so identification with an author gets attached to the things that we bring into our lives and that we wear and consume.

**sb** It's a designer's job to package a product that a corporation is trying to sell. If there's little competition and the corporation is producing water, it doesn't matter what the packaging is, everyone is going to buy it. If there's lots of competition and the corporation

is producing water, then the packaging becomes immensely important because the products, as necessary as they are, are all alike. It's interesting to wonder if the designer might have a greater role as an interface with society than the artist.

**az** I think that's what drew me as well as a lot of other artists of my generation to design. We wanted to feel like we had some sort of relationship to our audience, and to the more general public - which is actually the audience that I'm part of, since I'm not really part of the audience that collects art.

**sb** Why do you say that?

**az** Well I really do like most of the people who collect my work, and I think that they face a lot more challenges buying the type of artworks that I make, but these people don't really represent where I come from.

**sb** Were you attracted to design as a way of potentially reinvigorating the role of the artist in society?

**az** Sometimes when I project forward to a hundred years from now I imagine an art historian trying to talk about our times and I think that they will look back more at changes in design than at developments in art.

**sb** I don't know if I agree.

**az** Look at art right now; artists take a topic and then they make art about it. But I find it is rare to look at an artwork and have a new take on the way that the world works. Good art, I think, creates this kind of experience. When I see a really good piece of art, I get goose bumps because I am experiencing an instant of altered perception. But before I make it sound like I'm promoting design over art I have to say that although I like design issues, a lot of design gets confused with corporate marketing. I guess that an example of this could be in how Artforum has been publishing a lot of fashion lately. The problem is that sometimes they're not really showing a person's creative vision, so much as advertising a corporation. I think it's important to make a distinction between a personal statement or vision and a product line.

**sb** Speaking of corporations, you operate under the corporate guise of A to Z Administrative Services.

**az** The beauty of doing that was that

when I was younger, I felt very, very small. With A to Z, I was able to create an illusion of being an entity much larger than myself. Now I have more of a support network, more of a voice, and I feel more powerful, so I've let up on the corporate guise. It doesn't always feel so necessary anymore.

**sb** There's a totality to it.

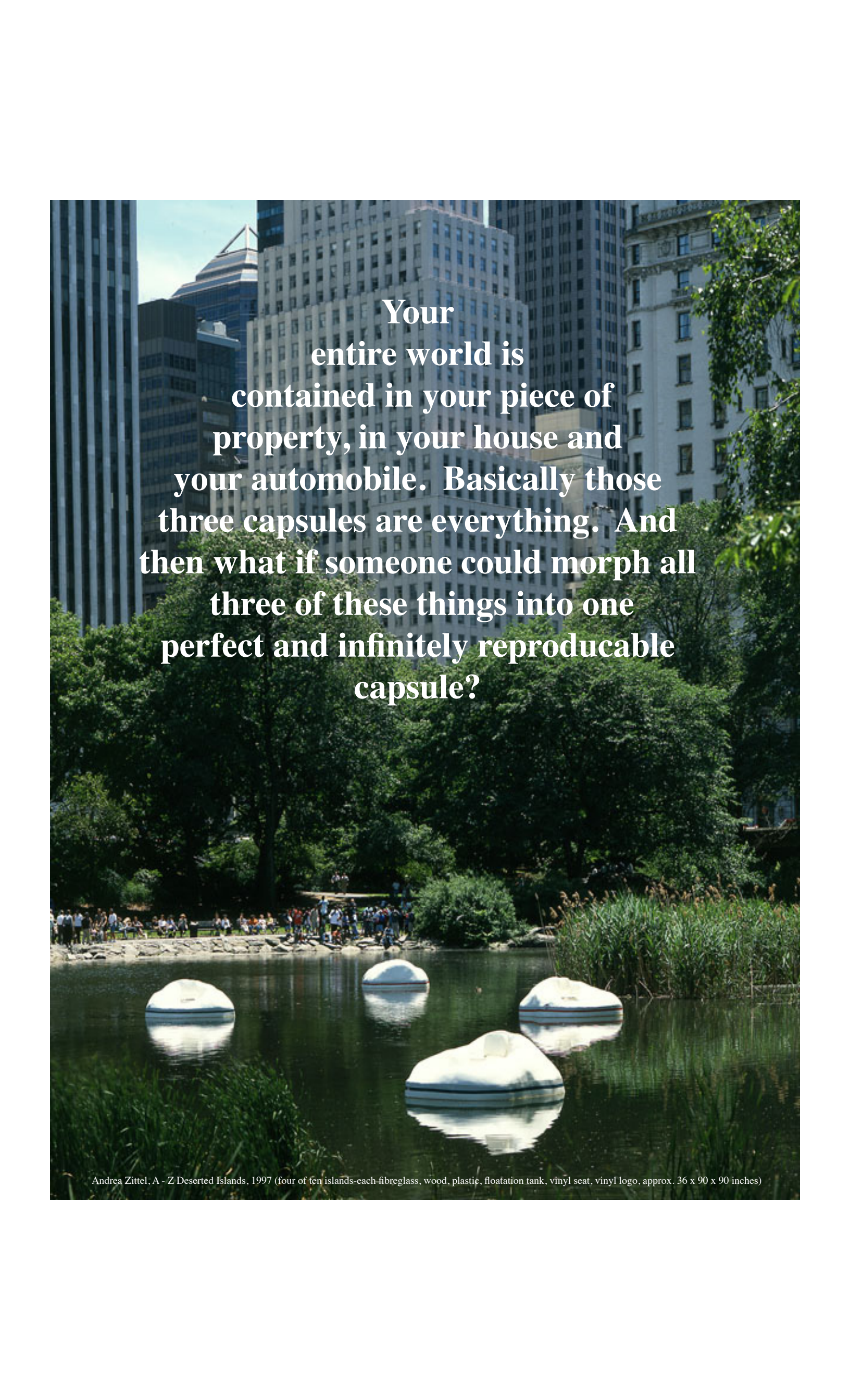
**az** Yeah, actually the whole A to Z identity began when I was trying to fabricate the chicken breeding units, and no one would help me. I have a sort of young, Southern California mall-girl accent that really doesn't help me get things done. Even now, when I talk to people on the phone they'll ask me if my parents are home. So, I had an official letterhead made up - it really worked. It wasn't so much a statement as much as it was something functional to who and where I was at that time in my life.

**sb** It's interesting that you needed - or at least perceived yourself to need a corporate identity to enter into the art world and be accepted.

**az** I needed it to get things fabricated, to get people to send me product manuals. I was trying to get stuff from commercial hatcheries and chicken supply manufacturers. And of course they are very suspicious of anyone who doesn't sound like they are from the industry. I registered myself as a hatchery and when I went to order cages or incubators or breeder units or asked for some customized feature, it was easier with my company identity.

**sb** The breeding pieces are the first ones in which you try, in essence, to use Darwinian principles to breed out or breed in certain traits in a species. The next project was "living units" for people. They were more liberating, more functional spaces that would open up possibilities for living experiences. And then the next body of works, as I see it, are the Escape Vehicles, identically manufactured containers whose interiors would be customized by their owners.

**az** You've brought up like eight issues already.



**Your  
entire world is  
contained in your piece of  
property, in your house and  
your automobile. Basically those  
three capsules are everything. And  
then what if someone could morph all  
three of these things into one  
perfect and infinitely reproducible  
capsule?**

Andrea Zittel, A - Z Deserted Islands, 1997 (four of ten islands-each fiberglass, wood, plastic, floatation tank, vinyl seat, vinyl logo, approx. 36 x 90 x 90 inches)

**sb** (laughter) I know, I know. I'll give you equal time. At a certain point in your work you started talking more about America and the American credo or spirit. You've been creating actual islands that you call Pocket Properties - no longer figurative islands such as the Escape Vehicles, but literal islands for people to inhabit and to, in essence, remove themselves from society.

**az** Yeah. Capsulation.

**sb** I can't help but go from that point and end up back at the early breeding pieces.

**az** Oh, I'm so happy that you made these connections. I think that this interpretation of capsulation is so broad that it compares our mental constructs to biological categories, and then to social communities and finally to architectural structures. The breeding work was about human desire to create the defined identity of a "breed." I was really interested in the fact that breeds in domestic chickens or dogs are not natural. We assume that the categories have existed for much longer than they really have. It's only been about 120 years since the idea of breeds came about. They're totally artificial categories and it's so odd how we cling to them, and how easy it is to make new ones. I was just trying to make new breeds to show what pure fabrication it all is. I was never interested in design until I started doing the breeding and then I started to think, "Oh, these animals are just like designs, like car models," and then I started to think, "if these designs upset or reflect people's patterns of thinking, what other designs will show people's basic assumptions about how the world works?"

**sb** So then are the Pocket Properties, which you've described as "a portable and habitable property - a special area on the earth's surface which has the potential to create the sensations of security, stability and belonging," new breeding units for humans?

**az** Sort of - in the sense that, like breeding animals, they reflect our desires about the way we want the world to exist. People like animal breeds because they simplify life into categorizable and predictable elements. A Pocket Property could do the same thing by creating a safe and

predictable environment to shape our lives and interactions.

**sb** It strikes me that in our present time, there are increasing indications that American individualism has gone berserk, and people have become more de-socialized and anti-social, and thus ultimately self-destructive. Whereas once upon a time individualism was a good trait because men and women could go off and "expand" new frontiers which ultimately brought improvement back to the old world.

**az** It's that whole rhetoric of freedom again. We think we are liberated by individualism, but in reality we've given up so much power. People are so caught up in the nuances of their own personal realm that they've lost real civic relationships with one another. We've lost the collective power. In that same sense, I am interested in how design is reflective, and how we have become so capsulated - especially in suburban areas such as where I come from in California, that's what the Pocket Properties are about - that experience where the frontier isolationist mentality has gone so far that your entire world is contained in your piece of property, in your house and your automobile. Basically those three capsules are everything. And then what if someone could morph all three of those things in to one perfect and infinitely reproducible capsule? With a lot of my work I have been trying to show how these concepts of individualism are reflected in our homes and possessions. A few hundred years ago, the private individual realm didn't exist in people's homes. Business and private lives all happened within the same space. Since most possessions and furniture were passed down, the way that interiors looked wasn't supposed to reflect personal taste or choice. Now we're so obsessed with the details of our homes and how they reflect our personalities and our characters. And this seems to coincide perfectly with a new emphasis on peoples' inner selves. The two go hand in hand so that in some ways our interiors have actually become externalized reflections of our soul.

**sb** Yes, instead of your eyes, your carpeting and wall treatments are the windows to your soul.

**az** With the A-Z Escape Vehicles I also tried to get at that, but I don't think very many people picked up on it. Now when you travel, it seems as if every where you go it's exactly the same restaurants, the same hotels.

The sights of interest are mostly packaged in the same way. Maybe that's why people are turning more and more inward towards their dark mysterious inner selves.

**sb** We have "discovered" all the terrain of the world and in that sense consumed it, yet there area whole set of experiences that are unusual to us. I went sailing for about ten days, delivering a boat from Annapolis to Tortola. And I was out of sight of land, on a forty-five-foot boat, but it's miniscule when you're in the middle of the ocean. I had been sailing as a child, but for a day. The duration of this trip changed the experience of it. For instance, when a sailboat heels, it literally changes the plane on which you live.

**az** You throw up when you're on land again.

**sb** And more importantly, just standing up or sitting down, which we think of as essentially easy activities, become complex or unnatural or subject to conditions that make them new and different and to be discovered. The other thing was the issue of time; whether it was midnight or daybreak, if it was your turn to go and steer the boat, you would. Daylight, or I should say, the normal time that we live by, no longer could have it's traditional effects. You had to break your habits and get into this peculiar rhythm of working, eating and sleeping, working, eating and sleeping. It created a new possibility of experiencing traditional, everyday, normal activities. Which is what I saw in another one of your pieces, called *Time Trial*.

**az** Being lifted out of your normal routine completely changes your perception of everything. I often think that this time twist is like taking a drug, it alters your consciousness. Talking about this reminds me of my parents, who didn't have much money but did these really crazy travel things when I was growing up. We had a thirty-two-foot sailboat - four people on it! No privacy. Once



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Time Tunnel: Time To Read Every Book I Ever Wanted To Read*, 2000, Walnut wood, steel, carpet, paint, vinyl adhesive, MOF, electrical lighting, sound machine, 39 x 48 1/4 x 80 1/2 11 (closed without ladder), 46 3/4 x 38 1/4 x 94 1/4" (open with ladder).

my dad got hit in the head with the main boom, he was bleeding everywhere and it took us a whole day to get to land. Another time a whale kept diving back and forth under our boat and we all thought it was going to knock us over. All I wanted was to feel safe and secure when I grew up, because I never felt like that when I was a kid. Everything was so precarious, all the time. But I guess the thrill-seeking gene is still there, and since I now know how these experiences can shift my consciousness it has become sort of addictive. The *Time Trials* was an attempt to shift perception through the smallest, most minute change: by not doing anything different and

by not going anywhere different, to create an extraordinary experience simply by eliminating the one single reference point of time. I have to say the only problem with that project was that it was absolutely impossible to translate into an artwork. I hit the wall with that piece because there was no way to share the experience of living without time with an audience.

**sb** You lived on one of your islands, one of the Pocket Properties. What was that like?

**az** I stayed on the Pocket Property island for part of last summer. I actually planned on staying a lot longer, but there were some problems. Originally I had thought of this as

being a very idyllic situation - staying on a wonderful warm sunny island all on my own. But probably three-quarters of the time that I was in Denmark (where the island was built) it was storming. At one point we made a hole in the floor inside the island so that I could keep perishable food cold by dropping it into the water, and then when these a got rough it turned into a blowhole. No matter what I used to cover it, the water would break it open and a geyser would come up right next to my bed.

**sb** Was it anchored?

**az** Oh, yeah. Another problem was that I had fantasized about being completely alone on it in order to recover from a really hectic year. Instead, when I got out to the island, it seemed like every single boat owner in Denmark came out to circle my island while drinking a six-pack of Danish beer. Every time I came out, they would all wave and ask what I was doing. After a while I just felt so overexposed that for the next project I've chosen a piece of land out in the desert, where no one will see me and I can finally be completely alone.

**sb** You thought you were hiding, or going away to be alone, and all of a sudden you were on display and less alone than had you just stayed at home.

**az** I was like a freak show out there! Also, when I made the Property, I had this idea I was making my own private world and I'd be totally autonomous and outside the jurisdiction of other people's rules and laws.

**sb** And you wouldn't have George W. Bush as your president.

**az** Oh my God! But the problem is that when you make something on the water you have to follow even more stringent codes and regulations than on land. That was really frustrating. Now I'm not sure what will happen to the island. At first, my proposal was to turn it loose out in the ocean, and to just let it drift off, but that's illegal. As my parents said to me, I'd be littering. (laughter)

**sb** Well, it's illegal just to leave it unattended. How large is the Pocket Property?

**az** No one's measured it, but we know it's over 40 tons because we had to lift it with a crane a few times. And I think it's 54 feet long and 20 something feet wide.



Andrea Zittel,  
"A-Z Escape Vehicles," 1996.

(Left to right)  
*A-Z Escape Vehicle*,  
customized by Andrea Zittel.

*A-Z Escape Vehicle*,  
owned and customized by Andrea Rosen.

*A-Z Escape Vehicle*,  
owned and customized by Robert Shiffler.

Shells: steel, insulation, wood, glass;  
interiors: mixed media; 60 x 40 X 84 in each,  
without wheels. Wheels approx. 2 in.

**sb** And an irregular shape, an island shape?

**az** Yes.

**sb** It seems as if you've even incorporated the expectation for those sorts of unforeseen consequences into your work, which is perhaps what makes what you produce distinct from the realm of design.

**az** I think what makes my work art is that it's a very personal form of exploration. I thought about becoming a designer but a designer has the responsibility to make products that best serve the greatest number of people, and I don't think that's so liberating. I'm much more interested in doing experiments to find out what happens if I do this, what happens if I do that. And obviously there are flaws. When I do my slide lecture, it's basically a discussion from one flaw to the next. Every single piece is flawed in some way, and it's that flaw that I work off of for the next piece. So making mistakes is a very optimistic process because it's like, oh yeah, I can fix this in the next piece. Only once did I make a piece that I felt pretty satisfied with, which was the A-Z Escape Vehicles, and everything stopped dead for about a year after that. I hope I never make a successful piece that I like again.

**sb** That's extraordinary! So the Escape Vehicles, in their closeness to perfection or success, were not actually inspirational for you. The value of the incompleteness of an idea, and even of

failure, is really very important and not very often thought about these days, because the things that are most often considered "successful" and "valuable" in our society are those that don't fail.

**az** But the irony is that in any given time period, if you look back at whatever people thought was successful in that period, those things have generally been proven as failures anyway. So you have to learn to feel confident about the prospect of failing, because it's so inevitable.

**sb** And you said the experience of living on the island led you to buying a house in the desert. And you've encouraged other friends to come out to that desert. In essence you're trying to create a community. In other words, the move to the desert wasn't about isolation, it was just about going to a pristine territory that can be built upon.

**az** It's about a realistic kind of isolation. It's not like I want everyone who I convince to move there to go hang out with me at the bar every night. It's that I want to be able to live and make my work some place without disappearing from the face of the earth. I think there should be some place where it is easier for artists to function and to get work made. But in order to be a viable alternative there also has to be some sort of supportive community. It's more logistical than ideological.

**sb** So what are the functional needs of an artist today, and are they different from the past?

**az** Well, now it seems that most artists have to be primarily concerned with how to stay alive and functioning. I love the New York art community, and out of any city that I've experienced this has been the most supportive group, and the quality of the dialogue here is great. But it is just so difficult to function here that most artists have to make compromises within their work in order to conform to the necessities of survival. I actually think that I am better off than most artists here, but in my perfect world there ought to be some place with the same sort of dialogue and where existence isn't quite so difficult and where more experimental artworks could actually happen. The first step is defining what needs to happen within our community and the second is taking the responsibility to make that happen.

**sb** Do you think one can reengineer the situation without moving? Do you think enough space can be created so that adventurousness, experimentation, mistakes, failures, promising experiments can all take place in the communities that already exist, or is the only option to create new communities?

**az** What I'm interested in is that each person examines his own goals, talents and options, and then based on these begins to invent new models or roles to fulfill his or her needs.