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Art in America

Andrea Zittel Left the Art World for a Few Years. Now, She's Back with New Rules.



Detail from Andrea Zittel's *Public Performance of the Self* (9-9-2024 Erewhon with Justine), 2025. ©Andrea Zittel/Courtesy the artist and Sprüth Magers

Nearly all artists, at some point in their career, stop and ask themselves: *what am I doing?* The existential question can be daunting, but for those who stay with the discomfort, it can also be the first step toward a big breakthrough.

Few artists are more equipped to confront that question than **Andrea Zittel**, whose work has long explored what it means to live, transforming the routines of everyday life into art. She's perhaps best known for *A-Z West*, a sprawling land art project in the Mojave Desert. Spread across 80 acres, *A-Z West* serves as a testing ground for new ways of living, featuring experimental sleeping pods and communal kitchens. All its food, textiles, and furniture are produced on site.

Zittel's *A-Z Uniform Series* reimagines daily life on a more personal scale. In 1991, she handmade an outfit that she wore every day for 6 months—a process she has repeated ever since, changing outfits with the California seasons.

Her work—grounded in intentionality, sustainability, and the art of slowing down—can chafe against the art world's relentless drive for growth. So, a few years ago, Zittel decided to step back—taking time away from exhibiting to reflect on what it means to sustain a creative life midcareer. Now, she's reemerging with a renewed perspective and a new body of work, debuting at Sprüth Magers in Berlin.

Below, she discusses her time reflecting—and the new rules she came up with to guide her return.



View of Andrea Zittel's 2025 exhibition "Public Performance of the Self" at Sprüth Magers, Berlin. Timo Ohler

I'm always curious how people navigate art world burnout. Breaks can be conducive to creativity, yet hard to come by! Did something in particular prompt you to take time off from public life?

Yes, absolutely. I loved my life at *A-Z West*, but as the project grew and became larger and more complex, it started to become unsustainable for me as an individual artist to

support it. I was burnt out and exhausted.... I remember telling my friends that I felt like I was running in front of a speeding freight train.

A-Z West was financially supported by my personal art practice, which created a situation where I felt like I was unable to make work that was really experimental. I could only take on projects that I knew would generate enough income to support *A-Z West*, and as we know, having finances dictate art is no way to be an artist.

Also, I'm a pretty extreme introvert, and as *A-Z West* became more and more public, it was just hard to live in the middle of all of that.

Tell me about your time in the “hermit hole,” as you called it. What did you do? What did you learn?

The last few years have actually been pretty intense. When I left *A-Z West*, I wanted to leave all possibilities open—including the option to stop making art. I've done versions of this kind of clearing out before, but nothing quite as extreme or prolonged.

The thing I did most during this period was write and read. I spent a lot of time thinking about art and life and the relationship between the two. My mother passed away, and I thought a lot about what an individual life means: what we are doing in this world and what we leave behind. Also my mother had Alzheimer's, so I reflected a lot on the “self”—who we are individually, or at least, what is this “self” that we spend who whole of our lives constructing. Because in her situation it was like her self disappeared before her physical body did.

This was also all happening as I neared my 60th birthday, so obviously it was a time of big shifts in life perspective. My earlier practice was about how to live, how to get by in life, and how to be relatively content and okay in the world. But when you are later in life and live in a world that is also starting to come apart, you start to ask some big picture questions about the meaning of everything.

That sounds intense, but also like a meaningful way to think about it all. You have often merged art and life. Did that maybe feel harder to do in a more difficult time?

I've taken breaks before, but what I end up realizing every time is that art is how I make sense of the world. It's through my work that I'm able to explore or unpack things that matter to me. So merging art and life has always felt natural, even in difficult times.

But it's making work public that presents a bigger problem. When I realized that I was going to reenter the “conversation of art,” I wanted to figure out a better or at least different way to manifest my ideas. The previous iteration of my practice generally relied on fabricated structures—experimental living structures—that I would create, live with, and then eventually ship out to shows. But lately, I've been wanting to move toward a kind of work that is more direct. I essentially wanted the act of living or things that I do

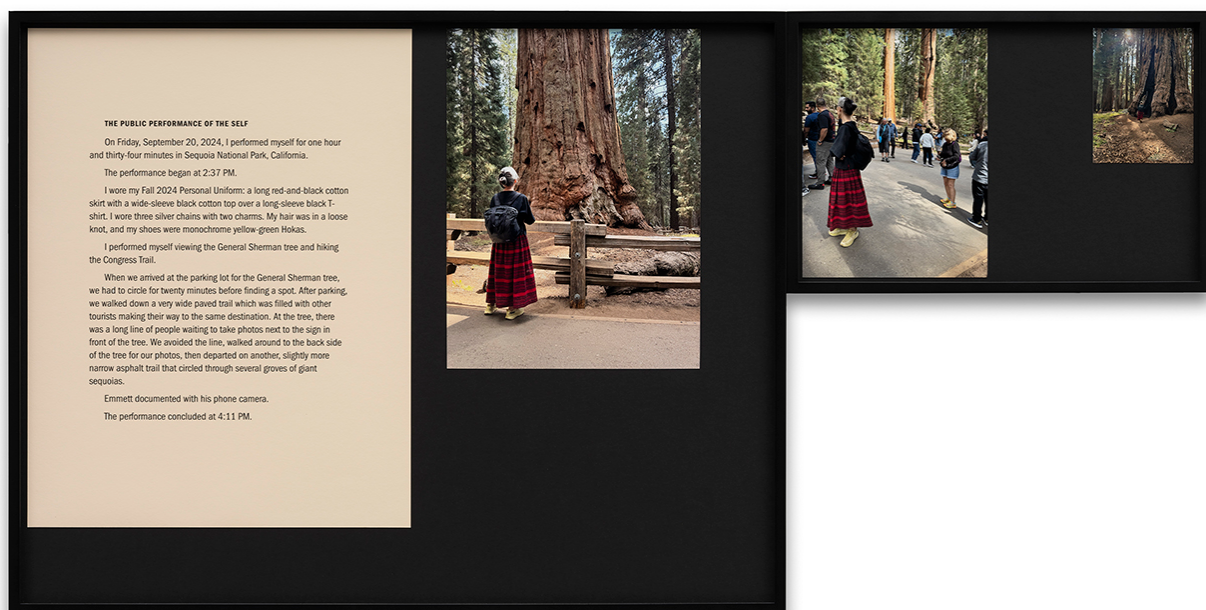
within life to become the work itself.

I should add that this was in part for personal reasons. For instance, if I didn't need a large studio and a staff, it would free me up financially and geographically. But I'm also haunted by how wasteful the current model for making and showing art is. I keep thinking that there has to be a better way.

How did you find a way to move forward with artmaking?

I made some rules for myself, and then challenged myself to come up with a body of work that fit within this framework. The rules are:

- Work that emerges directly from everyday life.
- Work that can be made anywhere—at the kitchen table or in a hotel room.
- Work that is efficient to produce.
- Work that requires little space to store and is easy to transport.
- Work that embodies what it means to exist and participate in our culture today



Andrea Zittel: *Public Performance of the Self* (9-20-2024 General Sherman tree, Sequoia), 2025.
Photo Timo Ohler

Those are great rules. I like that they are both clear expansive at the same time. How did they play out in your show?

For my new work *Public Performance of the Self*, I conceptualized that I was performing myself whenever I was in situations around other people. I've always been influenced by Allan Kaprow's definition of performance as performing a function or task, rather than

performing for an audience, and this new work hinges on that double meaning. When I'm out, I ask whoever I'm with to take a few photos with their phone cameras. I started writing up reports after each performance using language that is a hybrid between the dry descriptive language used for 1960s and '70s conceptual art and some of the more descriptive language used in social media posts. For instance, I wrote that I'm performing myself while wearing my personal uniform (an ongoing project since the early 1990s). And in that text, I describe the uniform, how I'm wearing my hair, my lip gloss, and my shoes. And then I talk a little about what I'm doing.... They end up having a kind of dry humor, which I think is nice.

Later, when I decided to present the works in a gallery, I chose a format that also was a nod to early conceptual performance work. The text and images are mounted on black mat board with black frames in geometric configurations.

When I studied art, I actually started out with an emphasis in photography, back when everything was analog. Returning to the medium now, the efficiency and fluidity of digital photography still feels like marvel. All the work lives in a file on my computer and can be printed out anywhere at any time.

Can you tell me about one of these performances?

The performances are all from everyday life, so they describe grocery shopping, visiting national parks or museums with my partner or son, and in one of the performances, I visit *Spiral Jetty* for the first time.

It's hard to select one performance to talk about, but there is one when my partner Katy, my son Emmett, and I took the tram from Palm Springs up to the Idyllwild mountains to escape the summer heat. There were so many people at the top that we had to take turns at the viewpoints—and my son was looking his phone the whole time even though there wasn't reception. But even so, the views were incredible, and there was something transcendent about the experience, which I think you get a little glimpse of from the images.