



ANDREA ZITTEL

INTERVIEW BY ALIX BROWNE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN LOWRY

The artist Andrea Zittel lives in the desert in Joshua Tree, California, with a trio of dogs (Maggie Peppercorn, Mona Winona, Owlette), a pair of cats (Mood Cloud, Stripy Tiger Wolf), assorted fish, a burgeoning family of rescue tortoises, and her son, Emmett. She started out, in 2000, with a five-acre parcel of land and a homestead cabin, a relic of the *Small Tract Act* of 1938, which granted plots to anyone who would improve them by constructing a small 'liveable' structure. Zittel, a pioneering spirit, has more than lived up to that promise: over the years, A-Z West, as her homestead is known, has expanded to include a guest cabin, which is exactly what it sounds like; the Wagon Station Encampment, a series of 5x7 portable shelters clustered around an elegant communal kitchen (the name, Zittel points out, is a nod both to covered wagons and station wagons); a Shipping Container Compound, with two small apartments and a large chicken coop centred on a lovely courtyard; and a generous indoor studio with spaces dedicated to weaving, pottery, and the various forms of fabrication that go into making the sculptures and furniture that largely constitute her commercial artwork. (Parallel Planar Configuration, a platform for living she designed for an additional trio of cabins she recently acquired in nearby Wonder Valley, provided the anchor for her solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York in September.) But more to the point, Zittel has dedicated herself to figuring out how to improve the way we live in ways both extremely ambitious and extremely modest. Her list of 'things I know for sure' serves as a sort of organising manifesto. Among the 16 principles are:

the creation of rules is more creative than the destruction of them.

Things that we think are liberating can ultimately become restrictive, and things that we initially think are controlling can sometimes give us a sense of comfort and security.

People are most happy when moving towards something not quite yet attained.





When you were in art school did you have any preconceived idea of what sort of artist you would ultimately become? Or an idea of what the lifestyle of an artist was about?

No. For undergrad I didn't go to art school, I just wound up in the art department. Originally I thought I was going to study business or psychology. I wasn't even allowed to take art classes in high school because my parents didn't consider them college prep. It wasn't until college that I was exposed to contemporary art for the first time. It was just a fluke that I took an art class, but the complete disorientation of that experience was really exciting. So I had no idea about art. I didn't know about the lifestyle of an artist, and I've never been particularly attached to that identity—I'm even a little embarrassed of being an artist. But it's the one thing that allows me to live in a way that makes me feel excited and alive.

At what point did things cohere for you?

I am trying to think of a way to say this, because there was never a clear vision; most of the time I didn't even understand what art was. And now when I look back I realise I'm doing everything that I've always done anyway. I've always done it, I just never realised what it was, or what it could be. In my opinion art is anything that is relevant and interesting and changes the way people think. That's my personal definition, but it's just made up, you know? The definition of art is something that we superimpose upon this thing that we do.

So how did you end up in Joshua Tree?

I moved to the desert in 2000. Right after finishing grad school in 1990 I moved to New York and lived there for almost a decade. But I always knew that I wanted my work to function in the everyday world—more so than in the art world. And ultimately New York was not my culture. I was living in Williamsburg at the time. I loved it there so much, but I would walk around and think, 'This place is so different from where I come from, from everything that I know, and I'll never be able to participate in a way that really matters here'. The Southern California desert is a culture that I'm really comfortable with. My grandparents are from an area just south of where I now live, and I spent a lot of time on their ranch when I was a kid. The place where I grew up wasn't too far away, either—it was a rural community that has since become totally

suburbanised. Joshua Tree feels like a place where I can function. Culturally I feel similar to most of the people here. And it is affordable, which is important when you want to live half in and half out of the art world.

The fact that this place is so beautiful and that it's in the desert is almost a secondary consideration. It's funny because that's the thing people talk about the most. But I think these other factors are what actually drew me here.

What was the house like that you grew up in?

My dad built our house with his friends when I was a baby. We always felt it was special that we had our own house. But when you looked at it, it was pretty much like everyone else's house.

I was always a little embarrassed of my parents growing up, because in the '70s in California the things that were cool were sunken conversation pits or shag furniture or mirrored bars or trash compactors, and we didn't have any of that. My parents were into Danish furniture and we spent our family vacations camping in Europe, so we had European knickknacks around. I think they actually had really nice taste, but I never really appreciated that growing up. And I always thought it was funny that they would go through the extra effort to be different, but everything ended up being just the same.

This property had a homestead cabin on it when you bought it?

I started out buying five acres with a homestead cabin on it. That's pretty much what exists out here—most rural pieces of land are about five acres. The homestead cabin had been, I think, a vacation home for an older couple. It had a lot of rain damage because the roof had gone, but it was very Liberace inside: pink enamel walls, shag carpeting, and these gold- and white-striped valences around where the bed had been.

In this little house? Amazing.

The ceiling had these plaster, hand-formed little stalactites. Really amazing. It was almost like a museum piece. I probably would have kept it as it was had it not been so damaged. I had to take out the entire interior and redo all of the surfaces. After that I started buying more pieces of land adjacent to the original parcel. I bought the piece around the corner where the Wagon Station Encampment is now—I've bought several pieces going to-



wards the highway. I have over 50 acres now. When my son was born, I ended up building a 499ft2 addition to the house. If you add more than 500ft2 you have to bring everything in your house up to code, so a lot of people out here will do additions that are just under 500ft2—they'll keep adding on one section after another, so many houses are completely cobbled together.

Did you have a vision for what ultimately became A-Z West?

I had a loose plan in mind. I'd already done a similar thing in New York, where my house also functioned as a showroom or test site for

artists out here and helping them make pieces that would seamlessly work their way into the local community.

I started buying more land to use for HDTS projects, and Andy Stillpass, who is a cofounder, also bought land for artists to use. Then I needed places for the artists to stay, and that's how the Wagon Station Encampment started. In the early years I thought this would be a test for a bigger project I would do further out in the desert, on a larger piece of land with more money. And after 10 years of doing this I realised that I had sunk so much of my life and my resources into A-Z West, and I was so far along, that this was actually going to



living. I would make prototypes and live with them, and then later, after that, send them out to exhibitions.

Were these furniture prototypes?

Sculpture, furniture—in my head they're the same thing. I was really interested in this idea of art just existing in the world. I had shown work in Skulptur Projekte in Münster, Germany, and I'd done a large project with the Public Art Fund in New York, but I kept thinking that public art is so different from art that's just out there in the world. I was interested in fostering a different kind of conversation about art that just exists in the world, so I started High Desert Test Sites, which has since become a nonprofit. Originally HDTS was a forum for inviting other

be it—I should just go for it and make it 'the thing', because there was no way I could do all of this over again. And now that I'm here I understand all the difficulties in taking on something like this, which I don't think I ever could have imagined in the beginning.

What were some of the more successful experiments?

I think even the failed ones are really successful. One of my favourite things that I sometimes lament having got rid of, even though it was really beaten up, was the original kitchen in this house. I hate cooking, which gives me total performance anxiety, so I tried to make a kitchen to deal with that. I was carving a lot of plywood at that time, with a chainsaw exten-





Top: A to Z Comfort Unit, 1994.
 Bottom: A to Z Management and Maintenance Unit: Model 003, 1992.



Top: A to Z 1994 Living Unit, 1994.
 Bottom: A to Z Comfort Unit Customized for the Cincinnati Art Museum, 1994.

All images courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery. © Andrea Zittel.

sion on an angle grinder—I built the kitchen mostly out of carved plywood. There was a small table with a grill built into the middle of it, and there were indentations on either side of the grill so we would eat right off the table. I really like repetition and consistency, and I think the first year I just cooked veggie burgers, and then later I started making tacos, because tacos are really easy and you can vary the ingredients more. After my son was born things became more complicated. Two people couldn't really use the kitchen at the same time, and my son liked different meals every day, which was kind of a shock! I can't feed him just like one of my animals!

making a meal is always this ordeal, and I always seem to get lost halfway through it. When I know what I'm going to do, and there is a routine and all the parts are there, I feel so much happier. So, that's the personal part.

And when I take that into the realm of an art practice, I think my work deals with this double-edged sword of freedom and liberation and restriction and security—how things that make you feel free are often limiting. For instance, on that level I'm liberating myself from the dictates passed on to us by consumer culture by being able to make a uniform that I'm proud of and get to wear every day.



Consistency comes up a lot in your practice. You have a seasonal uniform—you regularly wear the same thing for extended periods of time. You mention you like to eat the same foods. You prefer to cook things that can be eaten out of a bowl. What role does that play in the bigger picture for you?

There's the personal side and there is the critical side. On the personal side I just feel really comfortable with consistency or continuity. I like wearing the uniforms, and I like having patterns for things like cooking or work routines—as long as I get to make them up myself. And sometimes I feel that I have a harder timing 'being' than most people. I look at other people and they seem to be able to make dinner seamlessly, and for me

But it also eliminates decision making that might sap energy you can focus elsewhere. I don't have to think about what I'm going to wear or what I'm going to eat, but I'm going to think about—

Absolutely. I have that conversation about food with people all the time because so many people I know love to cook, but I really like to be in the studio making things. I think it is the same creative energy, and I'd rather put that energy into something that sticks around, instead of something I'm just going to eat and will then have to repeat the next day.

You have spoken about your attempt to figure out if there are any actions or gestures that could be considered not creative. For example,



designing a piece of furniture (creative) versus repairing a piece of furniture (not creative). For some people, cooking is creative. What ultimately did you figure out?

That experiment was one of the first things I did after I got out of art school, so I hadn't really even figured out what my practice was, or what art was for that matter. People use this word 'creativity' in relation to art, but I still struggle with that word. I don't really know what creativity means, coming back to that question of what is not a creative gesture. What I realised from the experiment is that even when you are repairing something you still make all these decisions. So, yes, I think



every gesture is creative. I don't really like the way people isolate certain gestures and call them creative, when everything is.

I think the way you live is the ultimate example of that, insofar as your work and your life are so intertwined. But is it hard having your work so present all the time, or is that exciting?

It's super exciting. I love thinking about everything. The only part that's hard is the publicness of it. If I could be in my own world doing it, I think I would be completely happy.

And yet, you invite people into your practice and your life throughout most of the year.

The weird thing is that I'm actually a really pri-

vate person. I'm not social at all. So it can be a little excruciating to let people into my life. We host six tours of A-Z West a year. So six days a year I have to go through the agonising task of getting my house ready for people to look at. And then during our open seasons we have so many residents coming through A-Z West, but they don't really see the house—they mostly have access to the greater compound, which at least is a little more neutral. And then there are people like you who come out to do interviews or visits like this.

Is the social aspect of what you do important to the work though?



People bring up the term 'relational aesthetics' a lot, and 'social practice' is a term that gets thrown around. I think the social aspect is a byproduct. The structure itself is my work—making these meticulous structures that are organisms, where everything works together. But the social part isn't the work. It grows into the organism or grows into the structure.

So there is no evangelical part of you that wants to convince people to live the way you do?

No, I've never done that. In fact, I've worked by myself mostly because I'm comfortable putting these demands on myself that I'm not comfortable putting on anyone else, even my son. There's a very limited scope in terms





Indy Island, 2009.

Top: Installation view. The Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park:
100 Acres Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana. Bottom: View of interior.
Commissioned by the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

apartamento - Andrea Zittel



A-Z Prototype for Pocket Property, 1999.

Top and bottom: Installation views, Malmö, Sweden.
Concrete, steel, wood, dirt, plants.

apartamento - Andrea Zittel

of who I'm willing to preach to. It makes me happy if my ideas challenge people, but I would imagine people taking those ideas and making their own versions of those things for themselves. It would actually be pretty weird if everyone followed my programs.

You have a very strong aesthetic sense. We're sitting in your kitchen, which you've tiled in this graphic pattern you designed. You also designed the kitchen, and I can see this piece of furniture in the living room, which is a couch and a seating area and an organising force and a piece of sculpture.

It's true there's a strong overriding aesthetic

particular body of work is to make an environment that is neutral enough to feel disorienting—you're not quite sure how to use it, but you see potential in it. So in the gallery I want the works to feel like formal abstract sculptures—and then for these same works to have a parallel life outside the gallery, where they are functional environments for living. In the second situation I can see how other elements could be introduced to adapt them to this role. I mentioned already how I think the piece in the living room needs a small carpet, and some sort of throw across the steel back to make it softer when you're leaning against it. It will be interesting to see what people do to these.



here—but I feel that all of this work is in conversation with other designers or artists or architects that I admire. We were talking earlier about a piece of mine that was based on a piece of furniture by Donald Judd, and many of my works reference De Stijl or the Bauhaus. It's not just on its own. So my overriding aesthetic is distinct, but I think its lineage is also very clear.

The piece in the living room is about to be shipped off to New York to be part of your show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery?

I made three of them. This one is staying here.

How do you think the context of the gallery changes its psyche?

One of the things I'm working towards with this

But do you think people might be too intimidated to take the liberty of throwing a fur pelt over the back, having first encountered the piece as a sculpture in a gallery? The assumption is that anything you see in a gallery is a finished, coherent work that you're not supposed to add to, even if you own it and can technically do with it whatever you want.

That's exactly the tension I want. It was like that with the Living Units or the plaster stacks pieces. Originally I would exhibit them accessorised with books or some knickknacks that I would get in a thrift shop, to show people they could be used as shelves. And people would buy them and keep exactly the same stuff in them, and I thought, 'No! You're supposed to throw that away and add your own stuff!' So



now I show the pieces without anything in them.

But does that make the shelves seem even more like sculpture, then?

Yes, but I think that challenge is really good for people. You buy something and then you have to decide what you value. Do you want to keep the authority of the art object, which also in some ways renders the object impotent, or do you actually want to have a relationship with it—even at the risk of undermining its value? The struggle or question this brings up for the owner is a deliberate part of the work.

Does that living room piece have a name?



I've been using these ridiculous formal names. I think this is going to be Linear Sequence. And in the front space of the gallery there will be two pieces called Planar Configuration. For the last four years I've been working with the idea of a plane or a panel. So the other piece of furniture is a whole configuration of different planes. Another seemingly formal object that becomes really practical when you live with it.

What are the elements of that piece?

It has three vertical planes: two of them divide the space like walls, and one supports a plane that is table height. There is another lower horizontal plane that you could choose

to sleep on, and there's a very low wood platform that looks like a flat painting. Out in the cabin in Wonder Valley I throw pillows on the lowest wood platform and use it like a living room.

And you conceived it for the three cabins you are refurbishing in Wonder Valley?

That's right. All of the works in the gallery are identical to ones being used in the desert.

When you say experimental, what do you mean exactly? What is the experiment out in Wonder Valley?

I wasn't originally going to title them that, but



in my head I kept calling them experimental living cabins because I really wanted to use them as an opportunity to play with ideas that I'm not always able to explore in my home at A-Z West. For instance, I always wanted to know what it would be like to live without electricity or water. How hard would that be? Would it be horrible or would it be OK? What about no air conditioning in the summer heat? Or what if there was no furniture and just a bunch of platforms that you live on top of. And because they are not full-time residences, I can take more liberties. For instance, I considered the option of digging a well and doing solar for these cabins, but I decided not to because I'm curious to know how badly we really need





these things. I've been staying there a few nights at a time over the summer. Next month we are going to open them up to other people to visit. I think a week would be a good amount of time for someone to get into the rhythm of living that way. So they are more like spaces where I can do these 'what if' experiments.

Looking around, are there any 'what if' experiments that you've contended with in this space? The plaster stacks were a big technical 'what if', but not a functional one. For the work that I'm calling Linear Sequence I was trying to make something that didn't have legs—actually, the legs are on the side.

When I commented how much I liked your bathroom, with the big row of plants above the tub, you were like, 'Ugh!'

Yeah. I think my bathroom is actually pretty bourgeois! I've always wondered if bathtubs and sinks could be made out of some sort of rubberised canvas. I know that for camping they used to have these canvas sinks, so why are they always made of porcelain or metal now?

But if it didn't have to be portable?

I know. I know concrete sinks exist; it would be so fun to do a bathroom out of cast concrete, too. Though if that didn't work out it would be



It's lying down. It looks like it's reclining on the floor.

I feel like there could be more 'what if' situations in my life right now. I'm craving a situation where I can try things like that. About 80 percent of the time these scenarios are really impractical and don't work that well—but even so, it's such an indulgence to be able to test these things out. There are actually a lot of 'what ifs' that I want to do here in the kitchen.

Like what?

Like the whole way that we cook seems so conventional. Why can't the gas be connected to a burner that you can move around on the counter, like a bunsen burner in a science lab?

a permanent disaster to live with. But maybe there is some really great sink design out there waiting to be realised. The platforms I made for the Wonder Valley cabins are only marginally comfortable. I've been thinking a lot about some sort of abstract, minimal piece of furniture that would be comfortable. I mean, a beanbag chair isn't exactly my aesthetic taste, but you have to admit it's a pretty brilliant idea. Who thought of that? It's so smart. Every so often you see something so completely new and fresh that totally works. It would be such a major coup to be able to come up with something like that. But getting anywhere seems to take a lot of failures. Another piece that was a failure, even though I love it, is the one I did out of carved foam.



Top: Carpet Furniture: Bed w/2 Night Stands, 1993.
Bottom: Carpet Furniture: Living Room, 1993.



Top: Prototype for A to Z Pit Bed, 1995.
Bottom: A-Z Comfort Room (Bofa), 1997.



There is one in the cabin where I'm staying. Yes, and conceptually I am in love with the idea that you can carve foam into whatever shape you like and plop down on that. But the foam isn't super durable, it's hard to clean, and it isn't particularly cheap either, so it's like a success and a failure at the same time. The foam furniture that I used to live with here in my house was super comfortable, but when Emmett was little he would take big bites out of it and we had to constantly dig the foam out of his mouth. It wasn't exactly baby proof. Also I learned through experience that when mice pee on foam it erodes the entire area, leaving a crater. Now I have cats, so the

It's this funny thing; I'm also very conflicted because I want everything to be nice. I'm a little OCD. But I also like things that have flaws and are worn or used and old.

A little messy?

The right kind of mess!

The right kind of mess can be hard to achieve.

We should add that the process of photographing my home for this piece has involved continually moving crap around to keep it out of the camera frame.

Which is so not *Apartamento*. I'm looking at



mouse problem is solved, but the cats use it as a scratching pad, and then the dogs would dig into it before lying down. It's like \$700 or \$800 every time I have to replace the foam, which is expensive—for me, in my world.

Any time you have to replace something it can be frustrating because you want things to last. Everything deteriorates, but you want it to look good while it deteriorates.

That's one of my biggest peeves: the thing that only looks good when it's brand new and is ruined once it gets scratched. You want things that age well. But I think our culture in general is so afraid of this idea of ageing—in things as well as in people.

the vacuum cleaner in the kitchen, which probably wouldn't be a problem for them because it shows you were attempting to keep the desert at bay. But you can only control so much. You said when you had your son you had to learn to compromise, because he doesn't necessarily want to live the way you do.

Right. He has his own ideas.

Has that changed the way you approach your work? Or, on the other hand, has it given you more conviction?

We share this house, so his desires are equal. The word 'compromise' popped up in my mind, and I kept trying to think of a better word—but I haven't thought of one yet, so I'll just put that out. It's always a bit of a com-



promise with him, and that's the price I pay for cohabitating with this other person who I really care about. I've been trying to talk him into doing an experiment where we live without artificial light for a really long time, and he won't do it. So then I have to find other outlets for that curiosity.

Because that would mean going to bed when it gets dark and waking up with the sun?

Yeah, I'm so curious.

But people used to live like that.

Right? And I wonder what it would do to your brain, because your whole brain chemistry is altered by nighttime light.

It sounds very healthy!

I don't know if it's realistic to live like that long term, but what about just trying it for a month and seeing what it feels like.

In the winter you'd be going to bed at four in the afternoon.

The power was out a couple of months ago, and so I had this really wonderful evening without any light. I had candles set up in the kitchen and managed to cook a really nice dinner on the propane stove. Once I reconciled myself with the fact I couldn't use the computer or check emails I started to feel an overwhelming sense of peace and calm. And right then the power came back on again, of course.

No candles either?

Candles are OK. Just no electrical light. I think the hard thing for Emmett is that it would have to extend to the computer and other screens. He's not having that. The thing is, my son really wants to be normal. We have a lot of conversations about what's normal and what's not normal.

It will be interesting to see what he rebels against and what he's actually been absorbing all this time.

It's funny, he's really into design for a 12 year old. He's obsessed with how things look, and he's always giving me critical feedback. He told me that my new furniture was a little too stark, too minimal. He said I should put a carpet under it, which is true, but he is talking about a big carpet and I just want a little carpet.

The heart of your compound here is this homestead cabin. How does the idea—or the myth—of the frontier play into your work?

I've always thought about the idea of the frontier and how, in essence, the frontier is actually a state of being. It's interesting to look at different moments when frontiers emerged that weren't necessarily geographical. I've referenced Europe between the wars; I think the state of frontier happened there because a lot of political and economic structures had been erased and social hierarchies were completely altered. There was an idea that people could restructure things in a way that would change society forever.

I don't think that sense of optimism or enthusiasm has existed there in the same way since. The same thing happened here in America, with this long, expanded feeling of frontier that ended in the '70s on the West Coast. Now when figuring out where frontiers still exist it could be argued that there's a small sense of that in Joshua Tree, but I think it has more to do with the economy than the fact that we're in the West. I think it's about the elimination of structures that existed before, that opens things up to the possibility of making new ones.

So Joshua Tree is good for that?

I think a lot of stuff is being superimposed on Joshua Tree right now, so I would hesitate to say Joshua Tree is the new frontier—but I think cheap housing is. Places where you have a kind of latitude to do things you can't normally do, where certain things can still be reinvented.

