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Two podlike structures from the **WAGON STATION ENCAMPMENT**. Visitors work on communal projects like digging out a garden in exchange for the experience.



Outliers In not-so-desolate JOSHUA TREE, Andrea Zittel's unique A to Z art practice BLOOMS in the desert and beyond

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Andrea Zittel and her dog Owlette in front of converted trailers that have hosted the occasional working artist. The interior of a Wagon Station Encampment.

> Traveling from Palm Springs on Highway 62 toward Joshua Tree, the road ascends through hills and into the high Mojave Desert, past those famous namesake trees, scattered across the scrubby plains, their hairy arms akimbo like windblown scarecrows. Keep cruising, past Cactus Mari, past Pie for the People, past Crossroads Café, and before you hit Twenty-nine Palms and the largest military base in the U.S., you'll find yourself at Andrea Zittel's art-life practice, A-Z West ("an institute of investigative living").

The 50-year-old Escondido native behind the endeavor has been based in Joshua Tree since 2000, when she jettisoned 10 years of city life in Brooklyn for an experiment in bringing contemporary art away from traditional epicenters. In the city, her work quickly found an engaged audience: *The New York Times* and *Artforum* spilled flattering ink on projects such as her (still ongoing) handmade A-Z Uniforms series, utilitarian garments that she wears for months at a time, and her multipurpose "Living Units," structures designed to compress life necessi-



ties into a simple, compact system.

"It was a real shock coming from a very suburban, lower middle class, rural community," Zittel notes of her initiation into the New York art world as she strides through the living room of her 1940s homesteader cabin. Today, surrounded by dogs, cats, fellow artists and her 11-year-old son, Emmett, Zittel's work continues to be wide-ranging and collaborative, yet specific. Projects explore everything from isolationism (think: an inhabitable floating island on a lake in Indianapolis), to community, as in her interactive Wagon Station Encampment, where she invites guests to live in Sputnik-like pods planted behind her home in exchange for working one hour a day at the compound. Or, in the case of her A-Z Aggregated Stacks work (recently shown at the Palm Springs Art Museum and born from her dependence on online ordering thanks to her remote geography), social constructs: "These beautiful boxes would come and I would end up saving them," she explains of the project's impetus. She encased the cardboard boxes in plaster like a cast. "It clearly relates to

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Above: A collection of A-Z Aggregated Stacks in Zittel's kitchen. The tiles are an artwork that Zittel fabricated in Mexico. *Left:* A view of Zittel's multipurpose large flat platform, which is influenced by Donald Judd's "Bench," currently in the living room of her cabin. "I love this idea that maybe it would be the only piece of furniture that you would have in your house," Zittel says.

the idea of a grid—how the grid is representative of this kind of idealism that we create, but the reality of human perfection is that the grid always shifts."

Artists, visitors and participants in her projects are always passing through. On her compound, when she's not using her looms for her own work, she opens them up to local weavers. MFA students stay on the property for an eight-day seminar based on Life Practice. "It's for students who are on the fast track to have big fancy careers in the gallery system," she says. "Some are fixed on this one end point, and they miss the opportunity to figure out what relevance art would have just within day-to-day living." She struggles to define exactly what she wants to teach these newbies. Finally she settles on critical thinking: "You need to be able to see one's life with a kind of perspective; to understand how society works and how your decisions fit into that. We want autonomy, but we also need to be part of a community—it's how you engage life."

Perched on a chair in her kitchen, she talks about one of her more well-known endeavors, High Desert Test Sites (HDTS): a group founded in 2002 by Zittel, Lisa Ann Auerbach, John Connelly, Shaun Caley Regen and Andy Stillpass. Every other year, the marquee event begins with artists and art lovers downloading an often out-of-scale map and schedule, and meanderingly following



From above: Zittel and her head weaver Kelly Gazlay. Zittel's woven work follows a series of "rulesets." Some metal scrap found near the encampment. "I think people used to go out there to camp and shoot guns before I moved in," she says.



the itinerary of installations and points of interest across the desert. "A lot is left up to chance and circumstance," Zittel says. They might get lost in a row of pinwheels spinning at night, admire the guerrilla takeover of a billboard, attend a poetry reading, or behold the glow of a solar-powered light installation. Throughout the year, the loose network of creatives in the HDTS community also run local events at swap meets, book clubs and postcard fundraisers.

But the desert is changing. Thanks to innovations such as Airbnb, Joshua Tree has become more and more accessible to visitors. Zittel decided "to make HDTS, slated for early October, more challenging this year," she says. The team is focusing on a remote community in Utah that sits

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at the edge of the longest portion of interstate highway in the lower 48 states without services. Explorers will mine the art found and embedded in and around the town of Green River by the nonprofit Epicenter, a collective of architects and urban planners who curate everything from affordable housing to magazines.

As for her own latest work, Zittel recently crafted a platform that also serves as a seat. The term “functionally fixed” is a word she’s playing around with. Her objects attempt to break free from the idea that you assign a function to a thing and then fixate on that function rather than seeing its alternative potential. “I like the idea that it could be the only piece in your house and you could use it for everything,” she explains. “All of these different planes—they almost become different planes of reality!”

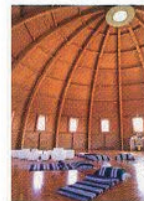
So what’s next? Zittel wonders a bit if she created a monster through her experiments in living. Joshua Tree is no longer a remote outpost, she says. “It’s an interesting moment when artists can no longer afford to live in typical urban areas. And what happens to contemporary art when it goes further into the world?” she posits thoughtfully, before concluding, “It doesn’t matter where you are. It’s what you bring to it.” zittel.org. •



From top: Interior of Zittel’s studio. Gouache paints. Zittel speaking with Gazlay. The Zittel piece she is working on will be a part of an exhibit at Sprüth Magers gallery in Berlin this November.



Desert Attractions



ULTRA SOUND After an alleged nighttime visit from an extraterrestrial in 1953, engineer George Van Tassel was inspired to build a time travel machine in Landers. The acoustically perfect Integratron, now a relic of 1950 UFO culture, offers healing sound baths. integratron.com.



PURE ART Just off the main drag of Joshua Tree, Noah Purifoy’s dreamscape of assemblage and large-scale environmental sculpture lives. The postwar American artist spent his last 15 years in the desert after working in Los Angeles and founding the Watts Towers Art Center. noahpurifoy.com.

High MARKS

“When I first started doing High Desert Test Sites, the thing I really loved was that it was such alien and new ground for people,” says Zittel. “There was a total collapsing of hierarchies.” This year at Green River, UT, people can experience the work of more than a dozen artists from all stages in their careers, spanning contemporary artist Allan McCollum, to emerging Angelenos Alyse Emdur and Michael Parker, to output from the roaming creative residency Cabin-Time. Oct. 9-12; highdeserttestsites.com.

INTEGRATRON: DANIEL HENNESSY; PURIFOY: SUSAN HALLER