Don’t Fence Me In
by James Trainor

Andrea Zittel’s projects include the best way to cook eggs, design clothes or build a ranch; an approach to art that evolves from the demands of everyday living.

“They’re bombing again,” Andrea Zittel glimpses up briefly as the low thud of another shock wave passes over the house like a rogue gust of wind, gently shaking the front door and rattling the windows in their frames. “It hasn’t been this bad since just before they invaded Iraq.” “They” are the US military, conducting live-fire training exercises with another batch of Baghdad-bound soldiers at the 29 Palms US Marine Corps Air–Ground Combat Center, 15 miles across the Mojave Desert from where Zittel now sits cross-legged on the carpeted floor of her house. She says this matter-of-factly, as if the military–industrial complex were on her growing mental list of things to take care of, while not losing track of the task at hand, which happens to be felting: creating stiff little woolly objects that could be bowls or hats or what in an earlier era were called ‘conversation pieces.’

She hasn’t yet worked out what they are, but she is busy making them, rapidly jabbing her serrated felting pin into raw matted wool clumped over grey wedges of foam. They sit around the room – one of them is drying on the wood-burning stove – like quiet, droopy, house-bound pets, emitting a comforting, sound-absorbing presence. These are in-between, time-killing experiments for Zittel, one of the many big and small projects she’s got running concurrently at A–Z West, her home, studio compound and self-styled ‘institute of investigative living’ near Joshua Tree.

The moment is an incongruous one, combining the threat of ‘shock and awe’ warfare just over the next ridge with a scene of domestic ingenuity and sociable tranquillity. But this is an odd, if breathtakingly beautiful, place to call home and an oddly perfect place to site your own personal testing ground for models of safety and security and theories about self-sufficiency, isolation, mobility and community. When Zittel relocated her ‘A–Z Operations’ from a Brooklyn storefront to this isolated area east of Los Angeles in late 1999, she was moving to what was already an untidy, contradictory landscape. It was here that the government re-instituted the Homestead Act after World War II, offering free five-acre lots to anyone willing to ‘improve’ the arid land by erecting a nominal structure on it.

The inevitable result was an ‘un-wilderness’ strewn with a vernacular architecture of haste, poverty and unrealistic or diminishing expectations, dirt tracks criss-crossing at right angles, and a stock of improvised shanties abandoned to the elements like memorials to lives that never got off the ground.

Today Zittel’s neighbours include an unlikely cross-section of people living in various degrees of off-the-gridness: LA exiles, neo-hippies, crystal meth lab rats and ‘tweakers’ (reclaiming shacks for illicit fly-by-night drug factories), career military with families, all manner of eccentric...
‘outsider’ artists and people who just want to be left alone to watch whatever everyday tragedies they ran away from disappear in the rear-
view mirror.

In a way Zittel is a kind of tweaker herself, but she doesn’t need so much as a sugar pill to get her that way. She is patiently brimming with projects and theories and the ancillary desire to share the processes in which they are tested, prototyped, judged, customized and lived with. Communicating her attempts to remake the world from herself outwards is critical to her investigative way of working; every project arises from the quandaries of real-life need and is developed in a reciprocal social atmosphere.

When she created the artistic corporate identity of ‘A–Z’ in Brooklyn in the early 1990s, one such need emerged directly from the cold, hard facts of property. In a city where space is a premium commodity, her first A–Z Management and Maintenance Unit (1992) and the rapid evolution of other experimental living situations, modular retreats and cellular nests all stemmed to the need to condense life down to its essentials and to hybridize everyday behaviour. They also amounted to an unfold- ing blueprint for Zittel’s palpable sense of longing for safe spaces that squeezed every ounce of functionality, refuge and aesthetic pleasure out of the little she had. This she took the artist to the extremes of her own par- ticular logic in ways that seemed simultaneously clinically authoritative, absurd and rational: why have just a bed when you can have a compa-

mentalized bed/workstation (A–Z Comfort Unit, 1994)? Why bother with dishes and bowls when you can simply eat straight out of concave indentations scooped out of the table-top (A–Z Dishless Dining Table, 1993)? Her three-storey Williamsburg shopfront became a home that was a distinctly un-private house, serving as test centre, showroom and salon. During regular Thursday night open houses friends and neighbours were invited to check out and critique her latest designs for living, her newest quintessential plans for the ultra-efficient life.

Since moving to the desert Zittel has become, in her relative isolation, a diarist and writer of dispatches from the front. Keeping a journal of her life is an elaboration on the sociability of the Brooklyn studio and soirées, a way of keeping everyone posted on how things are progress-
ing. Her published Diary (2001), a photo/text record of Year 1 at Joshua Tree and the trial-and-error manner by which she brought the original cabin up to ‘A–Z codes’ and expanded the grounds into an art-making station, is notable not only for how it chronicles her first project there, the Homestead Units (2001), but also for the way in which it integrates into the drama all the people – friends and locals – who were involved. As the hot, sunny days go by, she makes a point of bringing on-stage all the workers, contractors, handy neighbours and temporary assistants who were collectively part of this phase of a life lived as a form of experi-

mentation. There’s Jim the welder from Yucca Valley, Mike the plumber/ electrician, who insists on driving his Toyota 4x4 onto a boulder just to prove that he can, Bill the concrete pourer and Ron the water delivery guy – all of them witnesses, collaborators and participants. So too are the curious friends and colleagues – Giovanni, Justin, Annie, Jay, Austin and others, named with such casual familiarity that they’re like our friends too – who stop by to see what is going on and join in to help fabricate a homestead or are coaxed into canyoneering parties, with the rule that everybody wear special hiking costumes. The idea of this running commentary on the day-to-day struggles, successes and failures of one initiative or another becoming part of the work is extended in Sufficient Self (2004), a DVD slide-show whose inter-titles bring the vicarious experience of A–Z West up to date.

During the 1990s Zittel perfected the art of writing about her ‘prod-

ucts’ in the voice of her A–Z corporate identity, giving the gloss of tested, quality-controlled commercial authority to every enterprise and hypothesis. It not only deflected attention from her isolation as an indi-

vidual (in a business-to-business world the corporate ‘we’ is as comfort-

ing a hiding place as the editorial one) but also allowed her to critique commodity culture. It’s the attempt to write an aura and hive convectus
celusive in her that now make her an effective diarist; you want to believe that the worldview she pitches from one project to the next may just have legs. Thumbing through her diary and glancing around her cosy cabin – the dishless A–Z Food Prep Station (2002) – she crocheted bed, the organi-


Zittel’s great-grandparents were pioneers, but she grew up in the suburbs of San Diego:
everything she does seems to bear the stamp of these contradictory inheritances.

Invisible, to circumvent regulations and restrictions and to be compact
and nomadic. Intentionally built just short of the dimensions that
would require building permits and applicable safety codes, they are
modest hermitages that can’t be picked up on the radar of conven-
tional ideas of private property. (Zittel once cut out an article from the
LA Times that claimed that inalienable property rights extend from
a person’s home right down to the centre of the Earth; one wonders
if this applies to a migrating homestead.) The units can be disas-
sembled, slid into the bed of a pick-up and reconstructed somewhere
else in four hours; theoretically to live in one is to be camping, to slip
between the cracks of officialdom and exist independently of codes,
taxes and infrastructures.

Joining these and her stationary camper-van-as-home-office Yard
Yacht: Work Station (2001) are Zittel’s latest habitats, the Wagon
Stations (2003–ongoing), tiny sleeping pods that are part futuristic
pioneer wagon, part suburban station wagon and part space capsule.
More aerodynamically weather-resistant than the Homestead Units,
they sport escape hatches and enough room for a sleeping bag and a
perch to put a book, a toothbrush and a night-light. Several prototypes
now dot the hillsides and dry wash below A–Z West like stranded
landing craft dropped silently from the clear blue sky. (Zittel, enam-
oured of NASA, points out that the National Jet Propulsion Labora-
tory is busy close by using the harsh terrain to test interplanetary
equipment for future Mars missions.) Like the Homestead Units, some of
these cocoons of hermetic safety have been customized by their
users; bricoleur Hal McFeely replaced the smooth aluminium sides
of his with scrap wood – including ammo boxes – salvaged from the
bombing range, while Russell Whitten tricked his out like a hot rod,
adding high-gloss red flames to the brushed metallic surfaces.

Zittel’s great-grandparents were actual pioneers, farmers home-
stead in the hammering heat of the nearby Imperial Valley. But she
herself grew up in the spreading suburbs outside San Diego, and
everything she does seems to bear the formative stamp of these con-
tradictory inheritances: a fealty to a bootstraps, do-it-yourself work
ethic, a self-sufficient thrift (she talks about the freedom of living
not just within but below one’s means) and a critical fascination with
how the pioneer mentality was co-opted by the suburbs right from
the start, when fantasies of mobility and individualism were retooled
into a template for sameness and mass-reproducible products such as
the tract house and the trailer. The mobile home provides the perfect
model for this linkage (when she was growing up, there was always a
camper van sitting in the Zittel driveway), being the suburban covered
wagon, the confinement of consumer comforts, dreams of restless com-
munion with the land, and the ship-shape asceticism of pared-down
living that Zittel fetishizes. But isolation is a condition experienced
both at the edges and at the dense centres of urban habitation, and
staking her claim in the desert of her forebears wasn’t the first time
Zittel had chosen to deal with it.

For two months in 2000 she inhabited her own desert island, the
A–Z Pocket Property, a 54-ton floating concrete oasis anchored in the

A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit: Model 003, 1992. Steel, wood, carpet, mirror, plastic sink, stove top, glass, mirror, 216x239x173cm
Photograph: Peter Muscato Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
waters between Denmark and Sweden. Cave dwelling, islet and vehicle
in one, it was as bite-sized and manageable a chunk of property as the
Little Prince’s asteroid for one. Using herself as a guinea pig, Zittel
found she was able to shrink her needs and wants and contact with the
outside world to those of Robinson Crusoe, all within a stone’s throw
of lively Copenhagen. Limited horizons and narrowed options became
liberating and her castaway status an event, making the experience much
less lonely.

‘Alone together’ could be either nightmarishly alienating or a hopeful
solution for a culture hooked on the illusions of independence; in the
ideal world you could anchor your own sense of drift next to those of
others. Zittel’s smaller, personalized Deserted Islands (1999), bobbing
for a season in the Central Park lake, drove the point home; with their
comfy vinyl seating and lawn furniture styling they were like buoyant
recliners for those who want their adventurous seclusion safe and neatly
packaged and nature’s capricious indifference somewhat mitigated. The
desert seems a natural progression of this confrontation with isolation
conducted on its home turf, where myths about rugged individualism
and the messier realities of mutual interdependence have always existed
uneasily and unresolved.

Testing models of collaboration and community (and perhaps to as-
suage an initial sense of “what-have-I-got-myself-into?” solitude), Zittel
instituted in 2000 the now annual ritual of the High Desert Test Sites, an
outdoor invitational exhibition of commissioned art works situated in
far-flung locales in the surrounding desert. (For opening weekends the
participating artists bunk in the Wagon Stations like a team of astronauts
in training.) The event is run, like everything else, as a broad experiment
with controls – with a zero budget, no institutional or commercial media-
tion, and the aim of finding common ground between contemporary art
(usually originating in LA) and the local community.

Zittel, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell and were all name-checked in a
recent LA Times Lifestyle spread about the ‘new bohemia’ hopscotching
eastward into the desert. And, as the locals here are aware, after bohemia
and horizontal gentrification comes the neuron bomb of sprawl. (De-
velopers are already planning a frontier-clearing subdivision of 2,000
‘units’ – and they don’t mean A-Z Homestead Units – with a ready-made
infrastructure including a mega-Wal-Mart waiting in the wings.) It may
be soccer moms and mini-vans and drive-thru Starbucks that ultimately
stop the F-16s from dropping their payloads in the desert. If things get
ugly, Zittel has an escape fantasy up her sleeve: retrofitting her Vanagon
and hitting the road, ‘living in the world-at-large.’

But for now she is living in a particular kind of conspicuous isolation:
avoiding full view. This is not only the condition that the artist has
constructed for herself and her work and its relationship with the outside
world. It is a model for individuality and living on your own self-invent-
ed grid that almost anyone can identify with, perhaps run with, or at least
remember the stirrings of. It could start very simply. It could start with
a memory of a snug tree house or a clubhouse made out of old boards
that your dad helped you build in the backyard, or a small tent erected
for a camping trip in the family attic, in which you stocked only the bare
essentials for ‘survival’. It could begin with the tangible fantasy that you
possess the energy and skill unshakable sense of purpose to start a world
from scratch. It could start there and move outwards.

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1 Andrea Zittel. Diary. Terra Celeste Editions, Milan, 2005, p. 76
2 Ibid., p. 85
3 Andrea Zittel. Sufficient Self. 2004, DVD