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This page and opposite: *Sufficient Self*, 2004 DVD stills
Courtesy: The artist

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 glances 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 responded to the need to condense life down to its essentials and to hybridize everyday behaviour. They also amounted to an unfolding 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 the artist took to the extremes of her own particular logic in ways that seemed simultaneously clinically authoritative, absurd and rational: why have just a bed when you can have a compartmentalized 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 quixotic 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 progressing. 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 experimentation. 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 'products' 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 comforting a hiding place as the editorial one) but also allowed her to critique commodity culture. It's the ad copywriter and affable conversationalist 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), the crocheted bed, the organically shaped, slate-coloured 'Rough' workstation that seems to erupt geologically into the house in the same way the bedrock enters Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater* (a reminder that only humans choose to live amid right-angles) – put me in mind of those now out-of-print how-to and what-if classics from the 1970s. The subtext of books such as *Shelter* (1973), *Woodstock Handmade Houses* (1976) or *Nomadic Furniture* (1973) always seemed to be a recognition that the Revolution may be sputtering and dying out in the streets, but that it could still be achieved on a personal scale at home, perhaps through the simple act of building a tiny, non-compliant bubble of safety in the woods. Each page of these poignantly idealistic publications was full of friends banding together to raise a roof beam, people happily living in trees or neo-wattle domes, quietly advancing a counterculture of radicalized domesticity. (Why do Americans carry in their cultural genes the idea that building a house is rebuilding the world?)

But while she jokes that, with the growing local market in New-Agey art (yarn dream-catchers and earnest ceramics are on sale in nearby stores), she could always fall back on being a hippie artist, Zittel herself is no one's idea of a pie-in-the-sky Pollyanna or a back-to-the-land communitard. The belief that the absence of rules and boundaries equals total freedom is anathema to her, and her own sense of autonomy is based on following self-invented systems and restrictions. One of the first rigorous limitations she gave herself as an artist was to wear only four self-designed outfits a year (one for each season) – uniforms for fighting the 'tyranny of constant variety', the false choices that consumer products promise.¹ Recently she devised a whimsical system for cleaning the house based on the principle that when she gets up in the morning she is allowed to put on one article of clothing for every five stray objects she picks up off the floor. It's a form of reverse strip poker she plays with herself to get a job done.

To hike around A-Z West (Zittel's answer to Taliesin West, Lloyd Wright's Arizona winter base camp, workshop and locus for a creative sociability driven by the maestro's personality) is to tour her own multilateral cottage industry. In one area she is experimenting with ways of turning rubbish into decorative modular wall panels, shredding and pulping her junk mail, waste paper, packing materials and old art magazines into a lumpy oatmeal-like paste quickly hardened by the desert sun in the *Regeneration Field* (2002). Running down a scrubby slope from the house, the field is a Minimalist grid of steel pole-mounted moulds that suggests a miniaturized play version of Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), reassigned the task of socially responsible garbage farming rather than the invocation of the Sublime. Elsewhere Zittel is fabricating the new line of adaptable 'Rough' work environments based on her newest theory, that messiness – letting the things you use and work with lie where they will 'naturally' – may not be antithetical to efficiency after all. Sculpted from dense foam using an electric kitchen knife, and perhaps inspired by the raw, harsh conditions of her new surroundings, they are ruggedly irrefutable and, like the fallible humans for whom they are intended, prone to soiling, decay and eventual disintegration. They embody Zittel's ideology that 'decline is a simultaneous condition to growth'.²

Zittel based the Homestead Units on the barebones shacks peppering her expansive neighbourhood. But unlike those government-mandated structures, they are deliberately designed to be bureaucratically



A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit: *Model 003, 1992, Steel, wood, carpet, mirror, plastic sink, stove top, glass, mirror, 218x239x173cm*
 Photograph: Peter Muscato Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

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.

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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 conventional 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 disassembled, 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, enamoured of NASA, points out that the National Jet Propulsion Laboratory 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 homesteading 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 contradictory 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 conflation of consumer comforts, dreams of restless communion 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 human 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

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 assuage 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 mediation, 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 neutron bomb of sprawl. (Developers 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.'³

But for now she is living in a particular kind of conspicuous isolation: autonomy in 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-invented 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.

¹ Andrea Zittel, *Diary*, Tema Celeste Editions, Milan, 2003, p. 76

² *Ibid.*, p. 85

³ Andrea Zittel, *Sufficient Self*, 2004, DVD

-James Trainor



Sufficient Self, 2004 DVD still
Courtesy: The artist