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VOGUE

For the Artist Andrea Zittel, Three Decades of Liberation Through Uniforms



A-Z Personal Uniform, 3rd Decade: Spring 2014, 2014.
Linen button down shirt, leather belt, denim skirt.
Photo: © Andrea Zittel, Courtesy Regen Projects

In her work, the artist Andrea Zittel investigates ways to live. Live better, yes, live more efficiently, sure; but she also explores the places in which creativity and art can intersect with those directives. Her oeuvre is expansive; some might describe her as a conceptual artist, but there's something about that term that lacks the real-world foundations that ground what she does. Since the year 2000, for example, she has lived in a compound in California, near Joshua Tree, which both holds the studio in which she makes a lot of her sculptures and drawings, and has become one of her works itself. Known as "A-Z West," it is the site of her home, as well as other experiments in living, like the small 5 x 7 pods that make the "Wagon Station Encampment," or the 400-square-foot cabins that are part of the "Experimental Living Cabins." (People can stay for short periods, often in exchange for working on the property).

In 1991, she began her "Personal Uniform" series, when she decided to come up with parameters that would define a personal uniform, that she would make herself, and wear every day for a season. Although uniforms most readily bring to mind the idea of corporate conformity and the squashing of personal creative expression, there is a kind of freedom to be found within self-created parameters; something Zittel herself perfectly articulated in "These Things I Know For Sure," a manifesto of sorts she published in 2005:

- The creation of rules is more creative than the destruction of them. Creation demands a higher level of reasoning and draws connections between cause and effect. The best rules are never stable or permanent, but evolve naturally according to content or need.
- What makes us feel liberated is not total freedom, but rather living in a set of limitations that we have created and prescribed for ourselves.
- 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.

After a decade, she gathered the collection of garments for a show, *A-Z Uniform Series*, which opened at the Sprueth-Magers gallery in Munich in 2003. In the years since, Zittel has continued the project, sometimes adding additional parameters to how she makes her clothes (one season, it involved only making clothes from rectangles, another season she crocheted everything). In 2013 she showed *A-Z Personal Uniforms, 2nd Decade: Fall/Winter 2003–Spring/Summer 2013, 2003 - 2013*. Now the latest iteration of the project, *A-Z Personal Uniforms: Third Decade*, is on view at Regen Projects in Los Angeles.

Although the project was initially spurred, in part, by Zittel's desire to opt out of the fashion code inherent in the New York City art world (and the world at large), it happens to be in tune with many of the subjects that have been coming up here at Vogue Runway headquarters. There's the way "wardrobe" has become a new buzzword for designers, there's the fact that designers are now expanding within a specific aesthetic vocabulary that builds upon previous collections, effectively eliminating the idea of "that's out of style." And there's other things I've been thinking about as a fairly active participant in the fashion industry—beyond my professional duties, I mean. (Soon after starting at *Vogue* for example, I created a personal uniform of my own as a means to stop myself from buying things I don't actually need and won't wear—I'm exposed to so much!) Also, on a more superficial level, I thought Zittel's uniforms were quite elegant, so I reached out for an interview. Over two weeks, she answered my questions via email.



A-Z Personal Uniform, 3rd Decade: Summer 2014, 2014. Crocheted wool shawl, cotton tank, cotton skirt.
A-Z Personal Uniform, 3rd Decade: Winter 2016/2017, 2016. Crocheted wool top, brooch, wool skirt.
 Photo: © Andrea Zittel, Courtesy Regen Projects

Hi Andrea, how are you doing today? What are you wearing?

Hi Laia, I'm good! Happy to be back in the desert enjoying the warm weather after an incredibly long winter. The change in temperature also means that I've finally been able to transition into my spring uniform; so right now I'm wearing a $\frac{3}{4}$ -length black cotton a-line dress with elbow-length sleeves over black cotton pants.

Is this the beginning of your fourth decade of uniforms? How long in advance do you start to think about what you will be making and wearing next?

The Spring and Summer uniforms will conclude my third decade of Personal Uniforms, but I'm using these seasons to segue into the fourth decade. For instance, at the beginning of the third decade I found a vintage long black leather skirt that I got really excited about—I had a pattern made from that skirt and recreated it in various iterations throughout the decade. Now I'm working on a new format to experiment with throughout the fourth season. I often like to work like this—by inventing rules or parameters and then seeing how far I can explore or push within these.

I love that you remake pieces that you love and already know work well for you. In the '90s I remember that it was something freely mentioned in the pages of fashion magazines, people would talk about having their Chanel suits copied in different fabrics and I sort of miss that that's not part of the conversation anymore. What sort of rules or parameters are you looking to explore and expand into with these new iterations of designs?

I'll answer this question in parts. I've used a lot of different rules in the past. For the first and second decades they were often technical expressions of a kind of "logic" or "ideology." For many years, for instance, I made all of my garments out of fabric rectangles (my *Personal Panel Uniforms*), and later, only by crocheting them (*Single Strand Uniforms*). Both of these techniques allowed me to make garments in one step and without any of the waste that gets created when you cut and sew fabric into a garment. Later, I hand-felted all my garments (*Fiber Form Uniforms*) because I liked that the technology of felting (rubbing wool covered with hot soapy water with my hands) meant that I was literally using my body to make a covering for my body.

By the third decade I was a lot more interested in honing a practical formula that worked for all occasions, from digging trenches on my land to going to an art opening. During the third decade, I was also raising my son and running a non-profit in addition to my own art career. I was incredibly busy, so my goal wasn't to reinvent my uniform each season so much as it was to hone it so it became increasingly functional and could respond to any situation.



Installation view of Andrea Zittel *A-Z Personal Uniforms: Third Decade* at Regen Projects, Los Angeles. April 22 – May 20, 2023 Photo: © Andrea Zittel, Courtesy Regen Projects

Do these uniforms serve as time markers for you? Are you able to carry on wearing them once they become too heavily associated with a specific memory?

I'm definitely ready to explore beyond the long black skirt, which dominated the third decade. I loved the skirt—but it emerged during a time when life felt really complicated. I want my new uniform to feel more effortless. For instance, the other day I was thinking that my ultimate goal would be to make a garment that I could both sleep in and then wear into the day (while still looking good and put together).

A garment to wear literally all day *does* feel like the ultimate liberation from the question of “what do I wear today?” In what ways did you first feel liberated when you began the uniform project? And has that feeling of freedom—or the search for it—changed or morphed since then?

The story I usually tell about the uniforms is about how I moved to New York in 1990 and had just finished grad school. With my exorbitant student loan payments there was very little left for monthly necessities. I lived in a 300-square-foot storefront and took baths in my plastic utility sink and had no telephone. But I worked in a gallery and had to look presentable every day, and it became increasingly repressive to have to come up with appropriate clothing to wear.

Eventually I started fantasizing about having a single (really nice) garment that I could just wear every day. I made my first personal uniform (a simple linen dress that felt very chic at the time) and never looked back.

But there are other ways that the uniforms liberated me that I don't usually talk about. For instance, moving to New York after growing up in a rural area in Southern California resulted in some major culture shock. I had never been exposed to the social and subtle cultural codes and class signifiers that I think are more dominant on the East Coast, especially in the art world. In particular, I felt completely illiterate when it came to fashion, so inventing my own personal uniforms along with their inherent rules was also a way to exempt myself from those cultural codes.

If you fast forward to today, I think both these reasons still motivate me, but I also find it increasingly liberating to be able to invent my own visual identity without having to buy into any particular brand or product. I love trying to invent clothing that is neither in or out of fashion, that sits somewhere in the margins.



A-Z Personal Uniforms: Third Decade at Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: © Andrea Zittel, Courtesy Regen Projects

What is your approach to color when you are working on your uniforms? Is there ever a time where you are moved by an arresting desire to wear something specific and you make it more or less on the spot or is doing away with those desires part of the point of the project?

I think the entire project is about fulfilling desire! But if I'm honest, I'm not an incredibly spontaneous person—if I get a craving for a particular look or garment or color, I'll obsess over it and do drawings and try endless fabrics and test patterns. Recently, I decided to make a garment out of lightweight plaid suit fabric and spent weeks sending away for 31 fabric swatches before finding the right one. Or if I discover a new color that I love, I will like it so much that I want to use it over and over, and then the new challenge is how to over-dye similar fabrics or yarns to get that exact same tone.



A-Z Personal Uniform, 3rd Decade: Summer 2017. Woven cotton shirt, silver brooch, cotton skirt.
Photo: © Andrea Zittel, Courtesy Regen Projects

Ah you are right—it is about fulfilling desire! It's funny how easy it is to conflate “desire” with the sort of excesses of capitalism—even when you don't necessarily subscribe to such a belief. As the end of the decade starts approaching, do you ever look back at your wardrobe as you will eventually see it once it's installed in a gallery and create pieces based around this? Meaning, is there ever a time when they stop being just your clothes and start to become “part of the installation”? I wonder also what it's like to see a decade

of your life gathered in a room, does it evoke different emotions in you at different times you visit?

It's definitely an intense experience to walk into a room of the uniforms and remember different events, relationships, and experiences that they were a part of. Each uniform was created for a certain situation or a certain time in my life and because of that they are also a record of the events in my personal life.

But when I'm making them I really don't think about the gallery installation at all. This is probably because the lifespan of the uniforms in "real life" so vastly outweighs the fleeting amount of time that they could ever be on view in a gallery type situation. I think a lot of my work functions like that. When it's officially "on view" is actually not when it's in an exhibition space—it's when it's performing its function in the world.