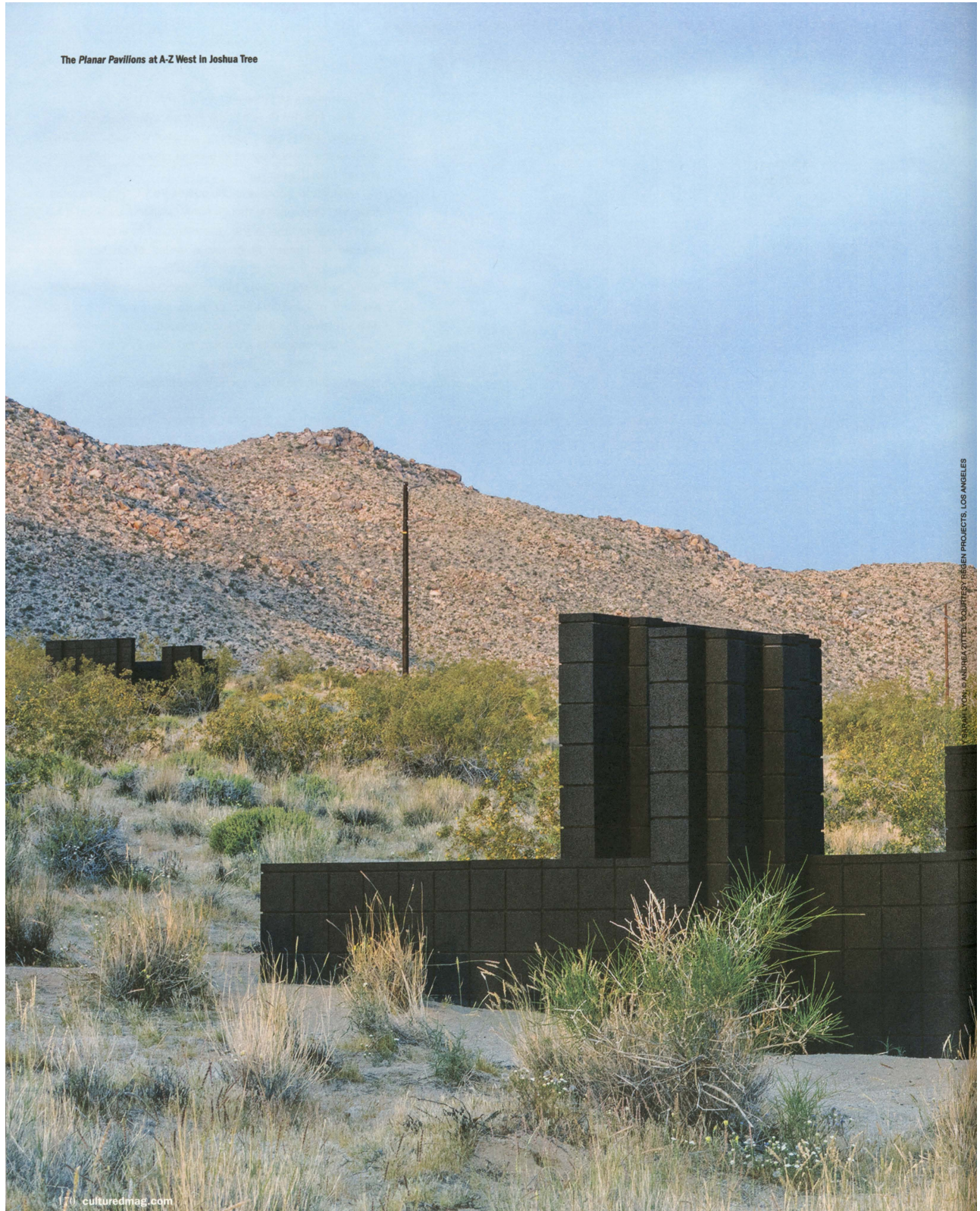


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## CULTURED



The Planar Pavilions at A-Z West in Joshua Tree

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL O'NEILL FOR CULTURED MAGAZINE



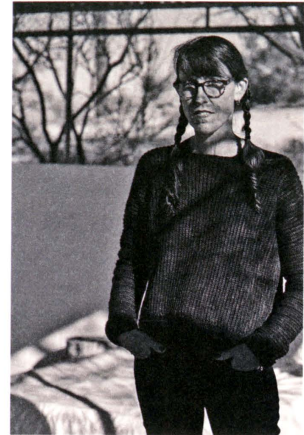
# IN HER ELEMENT

In the Californian desert, artist **Andrea Zittel** is testing the boundaries of extreme living. Jonathan Griffin heads to Joshua Tree for an immersive experience.

**PORTRAIT BY MANFREDI GIOACCHINI**







**D**espite first appearances, the southern Mojave Desert is neither empty, nor still, nor quiet. I spent 24 hours in one of artist Andrea Zittel's off-the-grid *Experimental Living Cabins*, in remote Wonder Valley east of Twentynine Palms, and I came to realize that the more you remove, the more the world brims with incident and activity.

Zittel bought her first Wonder Valley cabin in 2014 with the hope of creating a retreat for herself from her busy home and studio, an extensive hillside property in Joshua Tree which she calls A-Z West. What began as a five-acre parcel with a two-room cabin on it has grown over the years to 68 acres that include Zittel's home, her studio, office and workshop, a guest cabin, two shipping-container apartments and a chicken coop, a semi-permanent campground and outdoor classroom, and since spring of this year, a large-scale outdoor public sculpture. Depending on the season, there might be up to sixteen people in residence around the property, as well as Zittel herself.

The one-room Wonder Valley cabin, built in the 1950s as one of the many jackrabbit homestead cabins in the region, was little more than a wooden frame when Zittel found it. There are thousands of such structures in the desert; after the 1938 Small Tract Homestead Act was signed, parcels of land were sold at nominal rates by the government to anyone prepared to "improve" them by building a simple dwelling. Though beautiful, the High Desert can be an unforgiving environment, and many shacks were since abandoned. Just as Zittel began to renovate her cabin, the two tumbledown neighboring cabins came onto the market, and in order to secure her privacy, she bought them too. With three cabins, she says, she realized that she had "a project" on her hands.

Since the early 1990s, Zittel has conceived her work as an artist as what she calls a "life practice." Every part of Zittel's environment, from the home she lives in to the clothes she wears and the bowls she eats from, is intentionally designed to align with a unique mode of existence that draws on Modernist utopianism, contemporary environmentalism and progressive self-sufficiency. It was inevitable that the Wonder Valley cabins would follow

as a continuation of this practice.

Zittel's first ever studio, which she moved into in New York in 1990, was also her apartment. And, because it was a storefront with a glass window, she could choose to make it public, turning it into an occasional gallery. Her next live-work space was a Williamsburg loft without heat or running water, so much of her work became about making it tolerably habitable. (She built a sculpture called *A-Z Warm and Cool Chambers*, which were essentially boxes inside which a person could get respite from hot or cold weather.) In 1994, she established A-Z East, a showroom/testing ground for her work in a Brooklyn row house.

Zittel tells me that her move, in 2000, to Joshua Tree was absolutely not a retreat. "I was looking for a community that was a non-art community where I could engage with people in a very real way. If I'd stayed in New York I'd have always been an artist in the art-world. I wanted to escape that bubble." She appreciated the diversity of the rural area, where everybody seems to be from somewhere else. In addition to which, she says, in the High Desert she felt like she fitted in. She grew up in Southern California—in Escondido, where her parents worked as teachers—and her grandparents ranched in El Centro, south of the Salton Sea near the Mexican border. Zittel's grandmother, a college-educated horsewoman who read poetry and painted, was especially influential. "It was something about their self-sufficiency," she says of her grandparents. "They were making a world, literally."

Stepping through the door of one of Zittel's *Experimental Living Cabins*, as she titled them, it is palpable that you are entering a world in which every aspect of your habitual behavior has been considered and retooled. Two cabins—almost identical in structure and contents—are now complete and rented to visitors; the third awaits renovation. Although the other remote buildings were just visible from my cabin, what I mostly saw through the large windows on all sides was empty space.

The mesa here stretches far in all directions, before mauve mountains rise on the horizon. Creosote bushes and spindly desert sunflowers





The Wagon Station Encampment at A-Z West



somehow root in the hard yellow dirt, and lizards dart from rock to rock. The wind whistles through the fly-screens, and dull thuds, like doors slamming, are the sounds of artillery exercises on the nearby Marine base. I heard silence—profound, stunning silence—only once, when I woke, at dawn.

Inside, on the bare concrete floor, stands *Planar Configuration*, one of four identical sculptures Zittel has made, two of which were exhibited at her 2016 Andrea Rosen show in New York and two of which are installed in Wonder Valley. In New York, they evoked Russian Constructivist or De Stijl abstract sculptures; here, they are functional furniture. On the red fiberglass tabletop is a propane camping stove. A bed is tucked behind a tall black panel. Over a low powder-coated steel wall is draped a saddle-blanket that once belonged to Zittel's grandmother. The room is austere—no sofas here, just two stools and a low wooden platform with two cushions—but it is not unwelcoming, just uncompromising. Outside are a compost toilet and a hand-pumped shower. "It's not necessarily meant to be comfortable experience," says Zittel. "That's not what it's about."

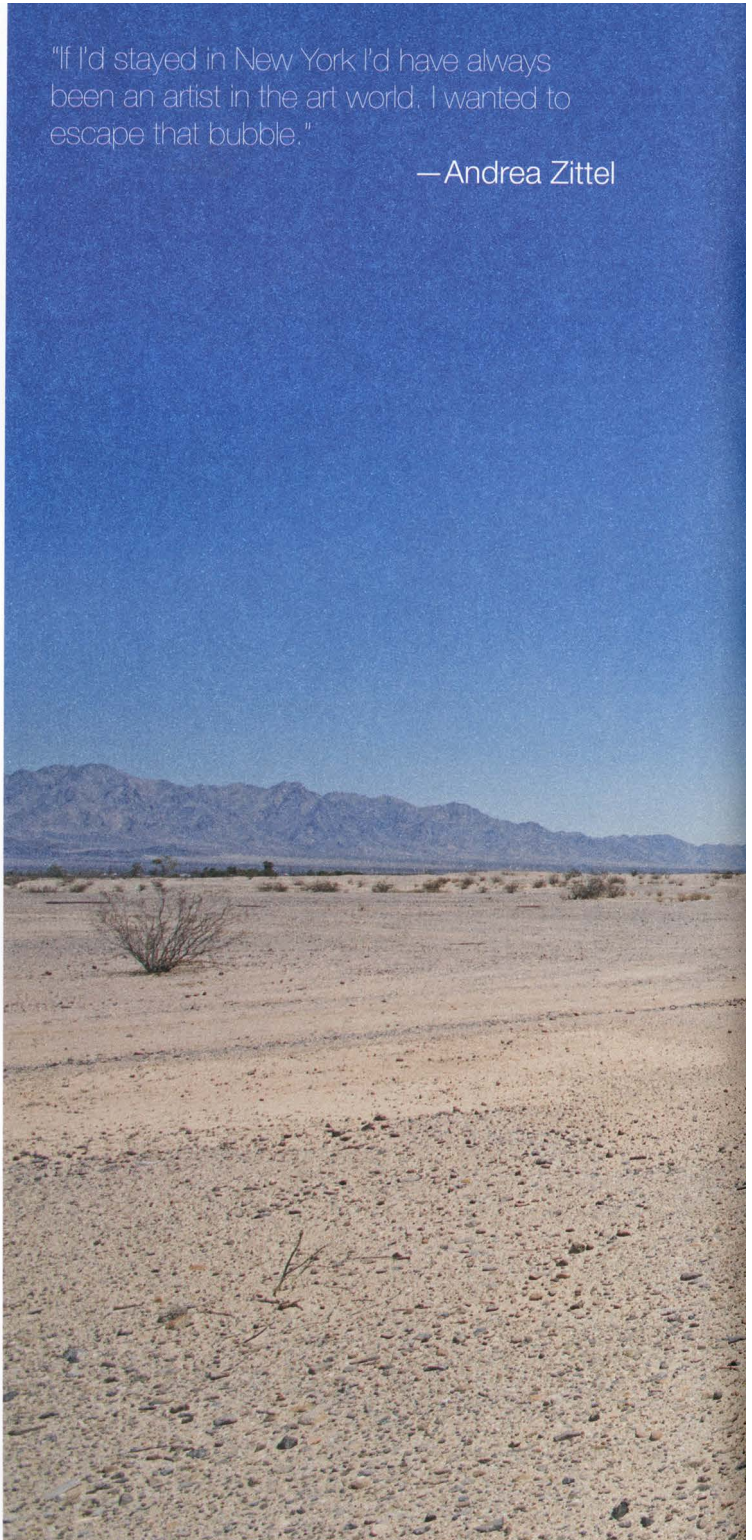
It would likely take days, or weeks, for Zittel's cabin to do its fullest work on you. But after only a few hours, I become pleasurably aware of my body and its participation in the fundamentals of living: the feeling of the thick rugs on my bare feet; the careful activity of boiling water; the cooling breeze through the windows; the light fading on the mesa and the preparation of the glass oil lamps. It feels elemental.

Back at A-Z West the following day, I reacclimatize to company and conversation. Zittel, wearing a long denim skirt of her own design, walks me down the hill from her studio to her new outdoor installation, *Planar Pavilions* at A-Z West. She tells me about the works currently being finished for her June exhibition at Regen Projects, Los Angeles: nine more *Planar Configuration* sculptures, which she will arrange in rows in the gallery, evoking something between a furniture showroom and a Donald Judd installation. (Judd, of course, designed and made furniture—a major influence for Zittel.)

The *Planar Pavilions* at A-Z West are visible from the road that runs past Zittel's land, although at speed, the ten black-painted cinder-block constructions look more like ruins than completed shelters. (In the desert, that distinction is sometimes hazy.) People pulling off the road to investigate will discover that the structures are all different and, like the *Planar Configurations*, they are more open than enclosed. They do not have roofs—"From living out here, I discovered roofs aren't as important as walls," Zittel says—but she hopes that people will use them as rest stops, places to picnic out of the wind and to absorb the vastness of the landscape. "Being in them affirms everything that I feel about architecture, and about how it makes us feel physically and psychologically," she says. "We can't not gravitate towards them."

"If I'd stayed in New York I'd have always been an artist in the art world. I wanted to escape that bubble."

—Andrea Zittel





One of the Experimental Living Cabins in Wonder Valley

