

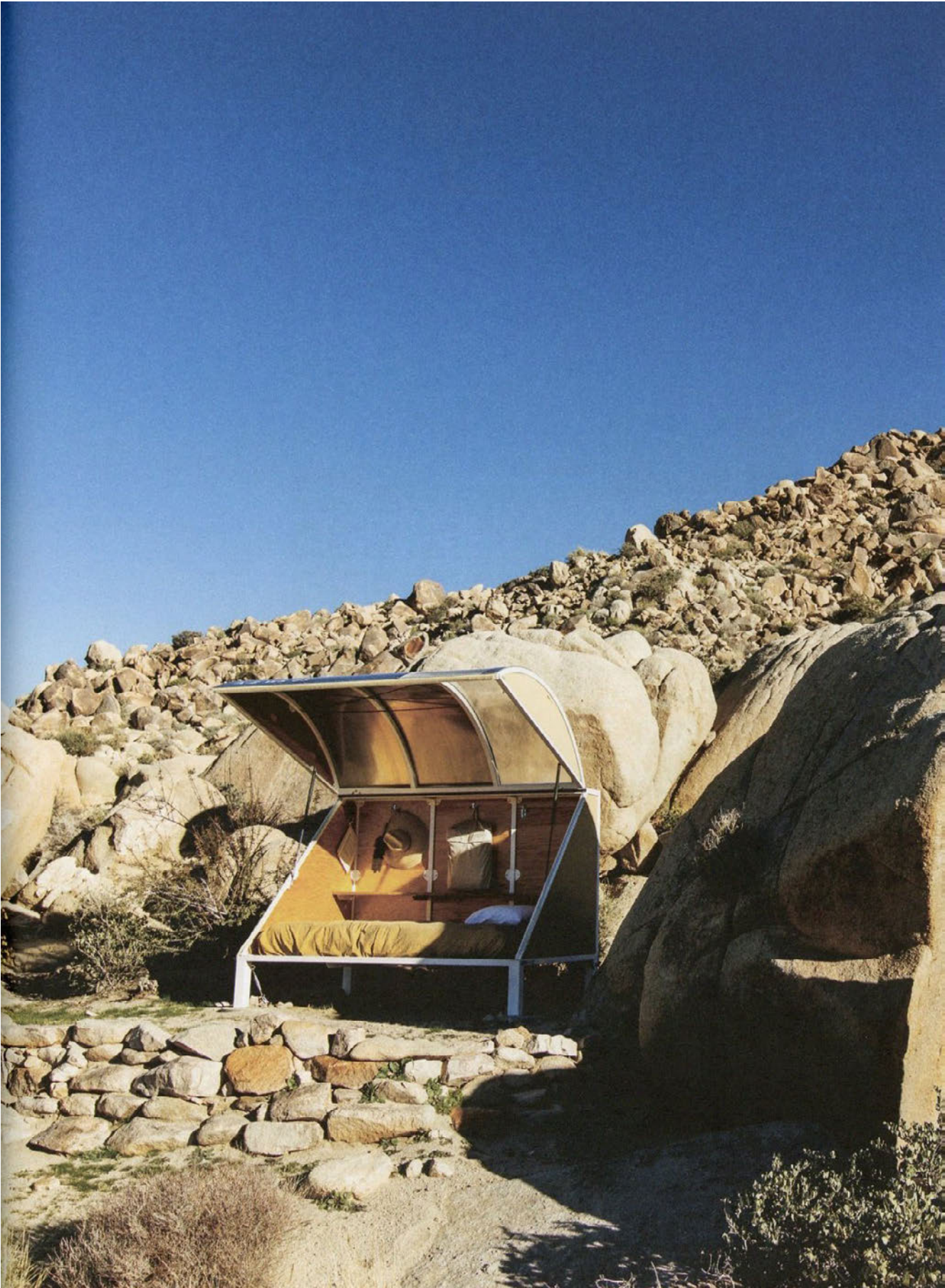
Visser, Forde. "Invitation at Desert's Edge." Openhouse Issue 11 (2019) pp. 108 – 120 [ill.]

## Openhouse

Written by FORDE VISSER [fordevisserarchive.art](http://fordevisserarchive.art) Photographed by LAURE JOLIET [laurejoliet.com](http://laurejoliet.com)  
Andrea Zittel [zittel.org](http://zittel.org)

# INVITATION AT DESERT'S EDGE

With the descriptor "experimental," Andrea Zittel inserts a question into one's visit to the Wonder Valley Experimental Living Cabins. Although far off the beaten track, and also completely off the grid, staying in a one-room cabin at the edge of the Mojave Desert in California is not a retreat, not a weekend get-away. Instead it is an opportunity to reconsider assumptions about how to live—with what resources, relationships, responsibilities.









The 3-hour drive from Los Angeles provides a transitional space, albeit fast-forward; even at 5:00 am, the route is throbbing with traffic. Six eastbound lanes of Interstate 10 become a metaphor for what ties me here—the energetic mesh of family, the routine of work; at 70 mph, there is an almost visceral sense of those connections stretching and then relaxing. Two hours into the trip, I turn onto the Morongo Valley Highway; the change of direction is also a change of orientation, announced by a ranging crease of wind turbines standing like the Gates of Argonath in *Lord of the Rings*. The highway settles into a valley and then passes ruler-straight into the broad expanse of desert, interlarded by desert towns. In Joshua Tree, I stop for breakfast at the Crossroads Café (Al Stewart is singing “Year of the Cat”) and for provisions at the local health food store (which is actually a health foods store and not an Amazon Whole Foods).

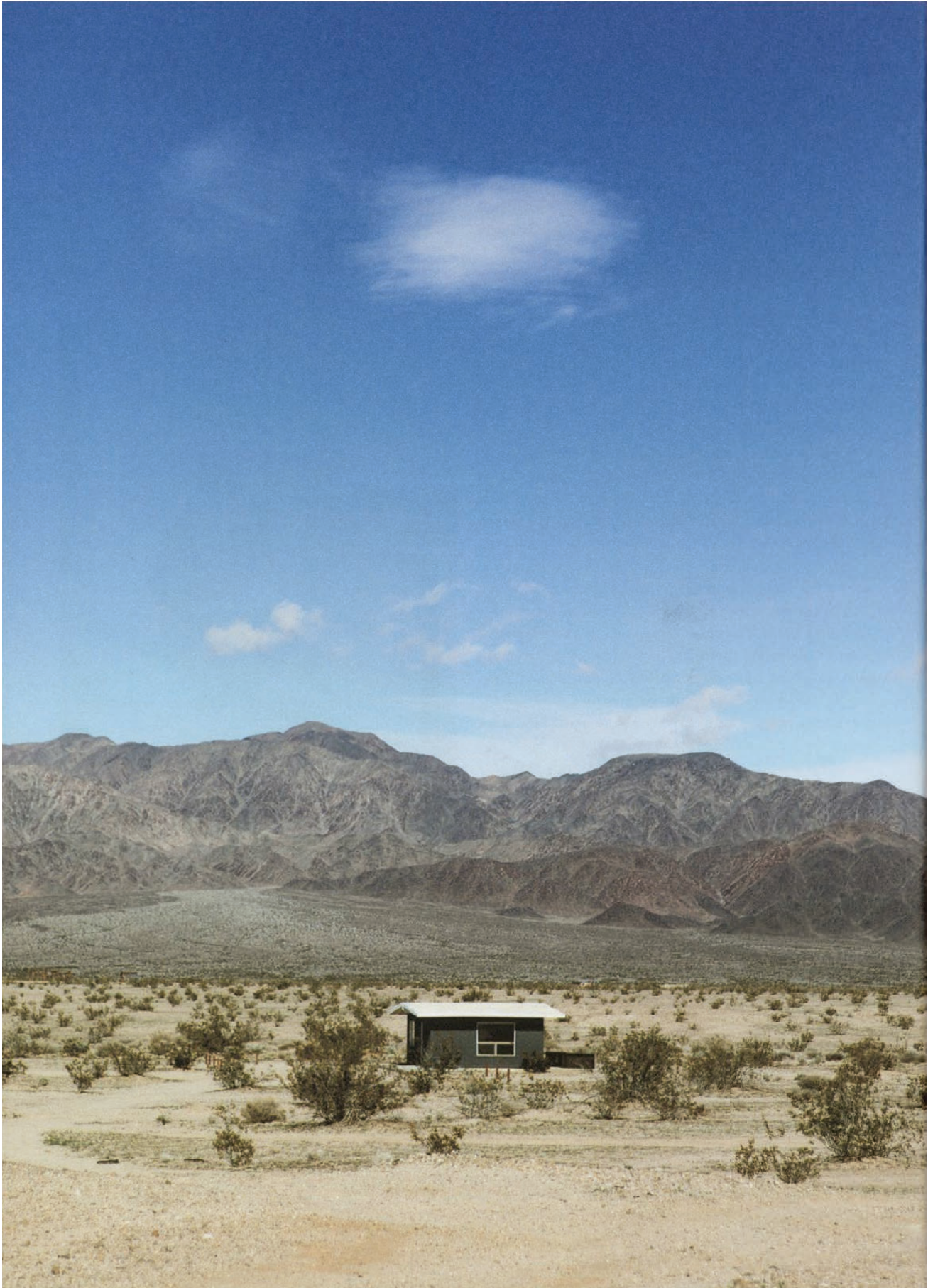
Checking in at A-Z West, I meet Andrea Zittel and her staff and get a tour of the studio and grounds, which include the iconic *Wagon Station Encampment*, *Regenerating Field*, and *Planar Pavilions*. Zittel’s practice has for over 25 years explored questions of “how to live,” constructing objects, spaces and situations in which participants can literally perform or inhabit those questions. In 2000 she moved her practice from Brooklyn to Joshua Tree, with which she has both a personal/familial history and an aspirational connection: “I loved how each ranch or homestead in the valley felt like an ‘island’ surrounded by acres of open land. This model of a self-contained universe, and the resourcefulness that is required to live this way, remains one of my personal ideals.” This is the gesture Zittel extends. Whether we accept by cupping an *A-Z Container* (bowls that share eating and drinking functions) in our hands, or by staying alone at the edge of the desert, Zittel generously invites us to begin at our own level.

Located a 40-minute drive east of A-Z West, at the edge of the Mojave Desert, the two *Wonder Valley Experimental Living Cabins* are in sight-line, and (perhaps) ear-shot of each other, but not of much else. They were originally built as part of the Small Tract Homestead Act of 1938; Zittel has remade them both for her own use and “to allow others to experience my works in their original context—something that is generally impossible in ordinary museum or gallery settings.” A-Z West staff member Elena has driven with me out here, orients me to off-grid protocols and leaves me with water, linens, cooler, gas lamps, camp stove and sawdust for the composting toilet.

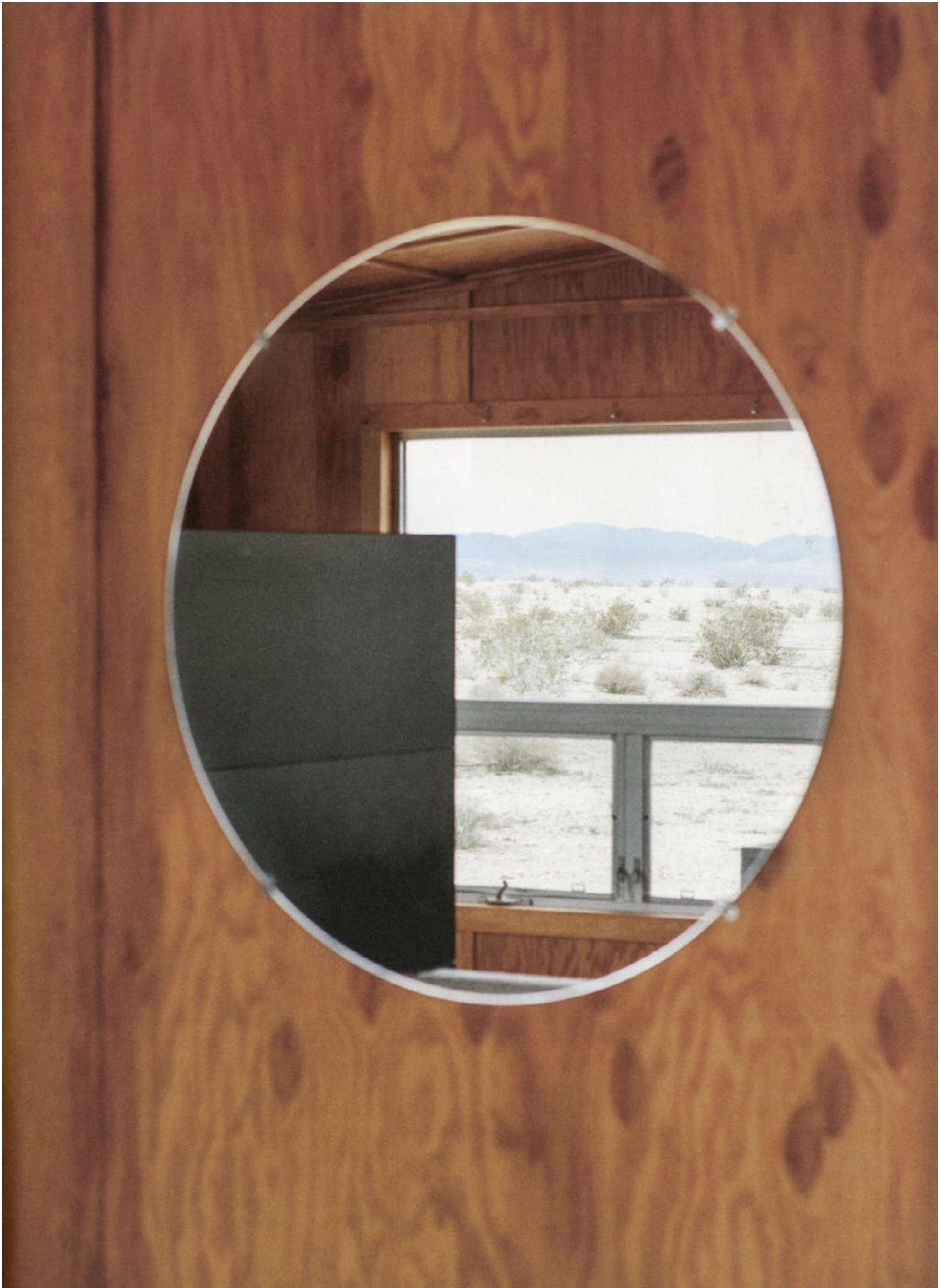


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My cabin is 400 square feet. Large windows face each direction, with a counter/shelf and sink/water dispenser against the north wall. The rest of the space is activated by Zittel's sculpture *Planar Configuration*, which is an arrangement of planar surfaces that suggest, but with a low enough profile not to insist on, uses or divisions for the spaces. As I negotiated the few tasks of the day, the *Configuration* sorted my activities, making me more aware of them individually and also as parts of a domestic sequence. And, as if the vast landscape outside acted to magnify the small acts inside the cabin, I found myself philosophically considering what (re)configuration in "sorting" life might mean. Although the accommodations were minimal, the *Configuration* exponentially expanded experience and satisfaction.

Because the cabin is a kind of container for a personal experience, it resists any common promotional description.

My time there was reflective and curious, tedious and profound, and always sensory: the noisiness of "dead" silence or the distant howling of coyotes at 3:00 am, the dome of the star-soaked night sky revealing both the glint off the point of Orion's sword and the smudge of the Milky Way, the smell of the oil lamp and the scanty pooled illumination it provides, the time-shifted color subtleties of the mountains, the bodily experience of walking *towards* but never getting closer to a distance. My "neighbor" from the other cabin, whom I met on the dirt road one day, summed up her week's stay: "Everyday tasks feel really spacious...so I found myself brushing my hair for a *long* time." Imagine.

For those who come not only to experience the site-generated DNA of Zittel's works, but also to experience the desert wilderness ecosystems and their persistent human interface, there are local sites (Joshua Tree National Park, Amboy and the Salt Trenches), hospitalities





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(The Palms, Pappy and Harriet's) and unique attractions (World Famous Crochet Museum, The Glass Outhouse Art Gallery, Noah Purifoy Foundation). Since A-Z West recommends a minimum one-week stay in order to "settle into the rhythms of being alone in the desert," there is time to develop one's own interior/exterior schedule.

As I was leaving A-Z West, Andrea related that they had found photography of the cabins to be extremely difficult. On the traffic-congested drive back to Los Angeles, it occurred to me that it might be because the cabins themselves function as a kind of camera (of course the word "camera" comes from the device *camera obscura*, dark chamber) and are more an image-apparatus than image-subject. Inside the cabin, with the apertures wide open (window coverings are meant to be left removed both day and night for unobstructed views) the strong shadows project sharply and play slowly across surfaces. Floors, walls, the Planar Configuration—all fleetingly register these shadow-shapes; in this way, the vastness of what is outside is translated to human scale. One's stay is an exposure inside of a "box" whose function is outward facing/inward collecting. From any point within the cabin, the spaciousness outside pulls; the cabin walls, fenestrated as they are, barely keep one from leaking outside.

It is one of the challenges of staying in the cabins: managing a landscape spaciousness that is more dynamic inside the cabin than when you are outside, because it is focused inwards, like a lens collecting rays of the sun. Zittel helps us to negotiate this threshold experience while maintaining minimal influence. Her strong aesthetic choices within the cabin—proportion, materials, finish, reflect a deliberateness that reassures we are precisely/exactly where we need to be and invites us to equally consider our situation. Meanwhile, the protocols nudge us past the familiar to a more intimate awareness of water (usage), waste (production and removal), and light (adaptability and management).

As I (re)installed the grommeted canvas window covers meant only to be used between visits, I essentially "performed" removing my "film," my durational exposure, my experience, in preparation for those of the next visitor. For more information on Andrea Zittel's work, current projects and to make reservations at the Wonder Valley Experimental Living Cabins, please visit [zittel.org](http://zittel.org). ○





