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Newsmaker: Andrea Zittel

BY THEA BALLARD, MODERN PAINTERS | JANUARY 06, 2016



Andrea Zittel
(Photo by Elena Ray)

Since the early 1990s, Andrea Zittel has merged an insistent sense of functionality with a flair for the imaginary: the chicken-and quail-breeding units, minimalist uniforms intended to be worn for six months straight, compact living units, and floor-bound “furniture” comprising different-size swaths of carpet that characterized her early career conjured an elsewhere through their odd—but always intentional—reorganization of day-to-day norms. Following a relocation from New York to California’s Mojave Desert in 2000, she opened A-Z West in Joshua Tree, a studio compound where visitors can stay in encampments of Zittel’s own creation and otherwise engage with the artist’s designs. Recent works move between abstraction and utility, adopting, too, a dusty desert palette; an exhibition of new works at Sprüth Magers in Berlin is on view until January 18, and another solo opens in September at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York. Modern Painters senior editor Thea Ballard spoke to Zittel about living outside the art world and negotiating function within a gallery space.

Thea Ballard: *What are you working on for your two latest shows?*

Andrea Zittel: I’ve been making works based on the simple format of a plane or a panel. These planar elements actually go all the way back to some of my early pieces from the ’90s, with projects

like the A-Z Cover (a blanket that can have any function) and A-Z Personal Panels (garments made entirely out of rectangles). The idea of a plane or a panel bridges so many different classifications and ways of perceiving things—both in terms of function and social roles. It's also interesting that on some base level, anything that is flat and has straight edges is man-made. So the rectangular form speaks to a certain kind of human production; it allows you to take on the entire built world through a single elemental shape.

TB: *Tell me about some of the applications you see for the panel.*

AZ: An example that's in front of me right now is a sheet of plywood. A table is also an example of a planar element that has been given a function, or a bench or a sheet of printer paper. One of the things I've been interested in is how these panels can also represent different realities. A game board is an example of that—most game boards are flat and rectangular and roughly the same size. But the rules are totally different, depending on the particular game's "reality field."

TB: Do you find that there's an architectural element to how you're using it?

AZ: It has allowed me to go back to working on a more architectural scale, which has been one of my core interests since the early '90s. I'm working on plans for a new large-scale sculpture out here in the desert. The work will eventually consist of concrete wall sections scattered over about 25 acres of A-Z West. The part of the desert where I live is a weird place, and everything is in a state of transition right now. Parts of it are completely wild and natural, but there are also a lot of houses and developments moving in. I'm interested in making structures that, when you're inside them, shift or alter your perception of the surrounding landscape.

TB: What materials are you using?

AZ: For the outdoor architectural works, I use materials that will hold up, such as steel, concrete, and wood. I'm also working on pieces for interior domestic spaces that are made from textiles. As panels, these handwoven pieces are inherently two-dimensional, but if you fold or drape or use them in any way, they transcend two dimensions to become three-dimensional.

TB: Tell me about living in Joshua Tree.

AZ: It's such an interesting and complicated place. I originally moved here because I wanted to be in a community that was, for the most part, separate from the art world. My mother's side of the family is from the desert, so I'm also sort of hard-wired for this environment. I've heard people talk about the desert using these romanticized terms, like landscape, isolation, or nature. But it's also a very politicized landscape. Right now there is a massive rush to use our area for large solar and wind farm developments. I can see the largest Marine base in the country from my studio—when they run their artillery target practice it shakes the entire house, sometimes for days on end. And then on the other side of A-Z West is an incredibly beautiful national park.

TB: Have you seen significant changes to the landscape you're living in?

AZ: It has changed a lot in the time that I've been living here. I find myself getting very emotional, wanting to fight for a certain way that I believe people should live and respect land, but at the same time, in order not to go completely crazy, you have to learn to accept the inevitability of change. I'm at a point in my life where I'm trying to wrap my head around the idea of change and be OK with it, so it's feeling like a very existential moment.

TB: How is that sense of change emerging specifically in your art practice?

AZ: There's part of me that believes there's a right way to do everything, a right way to live. And then, following this impulse, my next realization is that each person's right way is different. These are ideas that I try to address in my works as well. My early work in the 1990s really confused people, because I would embody a position completely, and I would treat these positions as moral truths. For instance, I believe that you need to have only one garment per season, and you don't need any dishes other than bowls, and a 30-inch-wide bed is the perfect width—anything more just takes up room and is unnecessary. People would get upset because they couldn't tell if I was being critical or not. But I was fascinated by ideology and wanted to explore how it felt to be unquestioningly immersed in a position. At this point in my life, though, it's impossible for me to believe in anything so fully anymore. My work has gotten a lot more philosophical as a result: Instead of making idealized products to live with, I'm making more abstract and open-ended living environments, though these are still things people can use in day-to-day living.

TB: How does an object express this philosophical quality?

AZ: Lately I've been thinking about the notion of living in abstraction. An example of this would be a piece of furniture to which you can't assign any single role. Essentially, we live on all these different horizontal surfaces (chairs, tables, beds, counters, desks), and the materials from which they're made—or things like height or other subtle material clues—generally indicate their function. A philosophical object disorients you, but in a subtle way. I'm not interested in deconstructing function so much as disrupting some of the quick assumptions that we make when we assign roles to things that we think we may already know well.

TB: How do you feel your objects operate in a gallery space?

AZ: Oh, man. The gallery has been one of the most challenging spaces for my work. I'm so much more interested in making things that function in daily life or in the larger world. I'm not opposed to the gallery as a site of exchange or commerce, since this is how all products enter the world. And I support my larger endeavor and noncommercial projects by selling works through galleries. But I have struggled with the context of the gallery for years. A lot of my earlier works, such as the Living Units, really felt like caricatures of themselves when I saw them in gallery spaces. This is a big part of the reason that I wanted to make spaces like A-Z West in the California desert, or A-Z East in Brooklyn.

TB: Have you been wrestling with that context recently as you prepare for these two shows?

AZ: This morning I oriented a new group of residents who will be staying in our Wagon Station Encampment here at A-Z West for the next several weeks. After we finished talking about the structure of the camp, we spent an hour shoveling and moving dirt (our morning "power hour" is one of the criteria for being allowed to stay here). Half of my practice takes place totally outside the market and gallery system, and involves active, lived experiences. The other part of my practice is becoming increasingly object oriented and contemplative. I wonder if I should have a problem with this split, if I should attempt to make these two parts align. But I feel that the duality is working for me right now—it allows two opposites to create a larger whole in which each side accomplishes something that the other can't.

TB: The work that can live in a gallery, that's a form of multifunctionality, too.

AZ: Yes, though it's funny that the works that are clearly functional and meant to be lived with actually feel the most commercial in a gallery, because there, you're made aware of the fact that you can't actually use them unless you buy them. But the works that are maybe a little more theoretical or cerebral, they work for everyone—you don't have to own them to get something from them.

TB: Do you think your project and your living situation are part of your attempt to create a different economy?

AZ: I've thought about different economies a lot over the years, and running A-Z West takes this thinking to a whole new level, because it's expensive to maintain and to make available to people. Right now the project is funded entirely by my commercial practice, and I'm so lucky I can do that, but I worry about what will happen if I'm not here someday. It needs to become financially self-sustaining. Figuring this out will allow me to focus on projects that aren't always linked to a need to generate income. I think that right now, finding other economic models is probably more important than finding other formal models. That will open things up for artists more than anything.