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# SECOND



Two decades ago, the artist Andrea Zittel settled in the California desert to explore how little it really took to sustain a life. Now she's inviting others to join in her experiment: How much can you learn when there's nothing but you?

# LIFE

BY KATE BOLICK PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEFAN RUIZ

On my second evening alone in the California high desert, I realize how much I'm looking forward to lighting the glass oil lamp. My home for this scorchingly hot week in June is a one-room cabin without electricity or running water that my host, the artist Andrea Zittel, has purposefully left nearly bare, and I'm craving the flame's intricate shadow, the only baroque fillip in this spartan interior. As daylight drains from the wide, empty plain outside the uncurtained windows, and the darkness makes the uncanny quiet feel even more silent, I fall into a brief reverie about the human hunger for ornamentation and the expressionlessness of my electric lamps back home. Mundane revelations, perhaps, but insights into the ordinary are the point of living in this spare box tucked into a landscape as strange and sweltering as Venus, with little to occupy me but uninterrupted thoughts about how I conduct every bit of my life, down to the way I brush my teeth or wipe my hands on a dish towel.

The 400-square-foot structure, where I have come to try to understand Zittel's work — and, if her theories are correct, myself as well — is one of a pair she calls “Experimental Living Cabins.” They are the latest addition to her singular oeuvre, called A-Z West — a challenging sprawl of projects that has developed in the 17 years since she left an art career in New York for a lone stucco shack on the edge of ghostly Joshua Tree National Park, some 130 miles east of L.A., where she currently lives full time. What she

refers to as her “life practice” now comprises more than 60 acres, including permanent sculpture installations, informal classrooms, shipping container workspaces, dormlike guest quarters and a giant studio with rooms for weaving textiles and crafting rustic clay bowls. The bowls and textiles, collectively known as A-Z West Works, are sold to help keep the whole thing going.

Maintaining this small empire has required endless endurance, extreme physical exertion and an obsessive ambition of the sort we associate with the celebrated, largely male land artists of the 1970s who colonized the American desert, among them Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson. But while those protean figures are experiencing a renaissance in the public imagination, their works have, in fact, ossified or become commercialized — in New Mexico, De Maria's “The Lightning Field” (1977), consisting of 400 sharpened steel poles, is run by the Dia Art Foundation as a sleepover site; Heizer's “City,” begun in 1972 as a mile-and-a-half-long excavation set to be one of the largest sculptures ever made, won't be visitable or photographable until at least 2020; “Spiral Jetty,” the mammoth pinwheel of mud, salt and rock that Smithson finished in 1970, has spent most of its existence underwater — whereas Zittel's experiment has, since she conceived it, moved from the theoretical

Opposite: Zittel's “Wagon Station Encampment,” a series of tiny dwellings. Right: the artist in her season-long uniform, one of her ongoing projects.



to the vividly animated in a way that few utopian art projects ever do.

Like her predecessors, Zittel's material is also the Southwestern desert, but she isn't a land artist in the traditional mode: Instead of moving earth with giant machines, or leaving hulking, unpeopled abstractions amid the dust, she employs this vast landscape to explore and challenge the quotidian functions of our existence. She was trained as a sculptor and still considers herself one, but her art is really a kind of philosophical quest, one that involves an ongoing and intense examination of what it means to live: What do we really mean when we say we need shelter, community, clothes, tools, light? How elaborate a space — indeed, how much space, down to the millimeter — do we need to survive, to thrive? What structures best facilitate creativity, serenity, unity?

What makes Zittel's art seem so urgent at this moment is that the culture appears to have caught up to her at last: In our era of rapidly

shifting domestic arrangements, nearly everyone — young people living alone or aging couples in communal compounds — seems badly served by architecture designed for the increasingly vestigial nuclear family. The cultish Marie Kondo's admonitions to cast out the nonessential seems ripped from Zittel's playbook; the conceptual underpinnings for the swelling phalanx of tiny, modular dwellings that evade byzantine zoning regulations and create a more mobile society can be found in Zittel's experiments as well.

During her nearly two decades in the barren, windswept wasteland, her practice has gone from an isolated curiosity to a complete operational community constructed to outlive her, a "Through the Looking-Glass" laboratory that reflects our contemporary fascination with the spaces in which we live. From ur-furniture that makes even the concept of a chair seem quaint, to vessels that force us to question the notion of a drinking glass, Zittel's work reminds

us that the elemental building blocks of human society are ultimately domestic — and that revolution begins in private.

**I** don't want people to be uncomfortable, but I don't want them to feel comfortable, either," Zittel tells me. "You know when you're alone with yourself and you feel jangly and on edge? But in a way that's the most cathartic thing in the world? Almost painful, but so good?"

We are discussing my stay in the "Experimental Living Cabins" — I'm on day four of seven — in the kitchen of Zittel's home, which is in the center of A-Z West and has, over the years, been expanded from a shack into a chic, colorful oasis filled with her own designs, including 2011's "Aggregated Stacks" (wall shelves made from plaster-covered cardboard shipping boxes from Amazon) and "Linear Sequence" (2016), a low-to-the-ground sculpture of tabletops and floor cushions that functions as a living room. She shares it with her 13-year-old son, Emmett, and a menagerie that includes three dogs, a cat, six chickens, four rescue pigeons, three rescue tortoises and three fish.

Zittel is 52, 5-foot-6, and lanky, with shoulder-length reddish-brown hair she often pulls back in a long braid. For decades, she's worn the same outfit every day for a predetermined

period — she's been wearing her current one for about three months — an extension of "A-Z Uniforms," a work she began back in Brooklyn.

When I visited, she'd been too busy to finish assembling that summer's ensemble, so was still in her spring getup — a black sleeveless muscle tee, a

floor-length black denim A-line skirt and black Birkenstocks. There were thin black onyx rings on all of her fingers; her bare arms were those of someone who regularly lifts heavy objects. Based on her minimalist, cerebral aesthetic, I'd expected her to be austere and aloof. But as I watched her make the rounds of the property, conferring with assistants and checking on the artists bent over the kiln, she projected a regal serenity, asking questions and waiting patiently for the answer before responding in a cadence she once conceded has a bit of Valley Girl in it. The Brooklyn-based artist Rachel Harrison, who has known Zittel for 20 years, since they both lived in Williamsburg, calls her "legendarily generous," especially to young artists, several hundred of whom have spent time at A-Z West over the years.

But Zittel's own work is always the soul of the machine. In 2004 she started the "Wagon Station Encampment," 12 domed aluminum-clad units around a central outdoor kitchen that marry the proportions of a frontier-era covered wagon with the modernity of a Subaru Outback; there is just enough space for one person to sleep or sit up, and a few hooks for personal

'I don't want people to be uncomfortable, but I don't want them to feel comfortable, either,' Zittel tells me.

One of the 10 cinder-block sculptures in "Planar Pavilions," Zittel's latest site-specific installation.





items. Over the years, during which dozens of artists have stayed in them for weeks at a time, she has assiduously maintained the wagons, two early versions of which are owned by the Guggenheim; from a distance, they gleam like fallen satellites in a lunar terrain. Several months ago, she opened her latest permanent site-specific work, “Planar Pavilions,” a loose grid of 10 configurations of black-painted cinder-block walls of varying heights — some low enough to sit on, others as tall and imposing as linebackers — along a gentle slope, which calls to mind the crumbled foundations of a future civilization as well as the constellation of concrete boxes Donald Judd installed in the early 1980s on his own property in Marfa, Tex.

I have driven west to see her from the “Experimental Living Cabins,” set on 15 acres a 40-minute drive away in Wonder Valley, a desolate, unincorporated corner of the Mojave Desert, near the

joyless sprawl of Twentynine Palms, home to one of the largest military training areas in the country. Zittel started buying up acreage to add to her holdings several years ago, attracted by the site’s remoteness and the several ramshackle “jackrabbit homesteads” on the property (really, little more than a dusty patch of desert), relics of the Small Tract Act of 1938, which lured pioneers to “prove up” five acres. (The terrain is so inhospitable that few actually stayed.) She now owns three of the cabins, though only two are renovated: simple board-and-batten structures, painted gray with white trim, that stand alone amid the scrub brush, 600 feet apart in the wide, flat basin rimmed in the distance by purpled mountains. She originally intended to use them for herself — ironically, between occasional afternoon visitors and the residents who come for longer stays in exchange for help with site maintenance, A-Z West is such a hive these days that Zittel rarely has the alone time she craves — but like most elements in her life, the cabins have become part of her work,

perhaps even the ultimate expression of it.

When she bought the land in Wonder Valley, she was in the midst of making a series of sculptures called “Planar Configurations,” based on her longstanding fascination with the “planar panel” — basically, anything that is rectangular, whether a 4-by-8 piece of plywood, a 8½-by-11 sheet of printer paper or a table top. Each sculpture, made of wood, red fiberglass and black-matte aluminum or steel, is a set of interconnected rectangles, like a 3D Mondrian, that function as a table, bed, counter and room divider. Last year, Zittel, always frustrated by how few people actually get to interact with her work, and ever on the lookout for ways to finance her many projects, had a revelation: She could put a “Planar Configuration” inside each of the cabins, and allow people to stay in them, for rates comparable to a nearby Airbnb. It would be the first time that a stranger could reside in Zittel’s universe full time, in utter privacy, in contrast to the “Wagon Station Encampment” with its communal ethos and group activities.

The “Experimental Living Cabins,” at which I am one of the first guests, are intended for solo visitors who stay anywhere from two days to three weeks, and though a smattering of boxy one-story houses dot the area, they are so low, and so distant, that it’s easy to forget they exist at all. One can go for days without human interaction, or one can hop in the car and drive down the dirt road to the Palms Restaurant for a beer. The point of the cabins isn’t to enact the now-clichéd off-the-grid adventure, but to exist just a few steps outside real life, in a stripped-down but completely functional environment — to re-examine, even relearn, everyday activities. A welcome disorientation, even an epiphany or two, might arise from doing without conventional touchstones like, say, a mirror, or a refrigerator. (Visitors are given a supply of bottled water, but bring in their own food and ice to stock the cooler.)

And there is plenty of furniture in the literal sense, just not anything that reads easily as such. “I do believe in a certain amount of comfort,” Zittel says. “I believe in having a good spot to position your body so you can relax and do things. But I want people to find their own comfort without being catered to. It’s not just waiting there for you.”

She is intimately familiar with the comfortable-uncomfortable sensation that the cabins can evoke; it characterized her early years in the desert. When Zittel left Brooklyn in 2000, many in the art world viewed it as a surprising retrenchment or even the end of her career. She had spent almost a decade represented by the acclaimed Andrea Rosen Gallery, showing such apparently urban-inflected works as the 1994 “A-Z Living Units,” a precursor to the “Planar Configurations” — portable pods that seemed inspired by cramped studios: Barbie’s-Dreamhouse-by-way-of-Bauhaus.

Although she had grown up north of San

The interior of an  
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Diego and spent time at her grandparents' ranch in California's Imperial Valley, she didn't yearn for the wilderness in her 10 years in New York. There were no signs in her work of the organic monumentalism synonymous with the sculptors and conceptualists who first decamped for the desert, and she didn't seem the type to erect a permanent museum of her art, as did the assemblage artist Noah Purifoy, a pioneer when he left L.A. for Joshua Tree in the 1980s. Nor did she give indications of wanting to create a conventional home and burrow into a solitary relationship with two-dimensional work, as had the female artists who famously forsook New York City for the Southwest, Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin. She was social, hosting weekly cocktail parties in her Williamsburg townhouse.

But as others began discovering Brooklyn, she began feeling a pull toward the sun-blasted, desolate terrain of her childhood. Zittel sees herself as part of the 20th-century tradition of American artists leaving cities for the open spaces of the Southwest, but she is aware of her deviations. O'Keeffe and Martin chose the desert as a form of retreat, but Zittel saw it as liberation. As for the parallels often drawn

between her and the largely male artists who came to make their massive, macho marks on the desert, she gently notes that she is not interested in "grand interventions," only in finding meaning in intimate, everyday gestures. "The act of inhabiting and having an evolving relationship with a space or place is inherently different from the act of installing works like 'Spiral Jetty' or 'Double Negative,'" she says.

**D**uring my stay in the cabin, I established a routine determined by the movements of the sun: After daylight nudged me awake around five, I rose from the bed portion of the "Planar Configuration" and unlocked both doors to let in the early cross-breeze. Then I scooped ant corpses from the ice cooler and retrieved my sack of ground coffee. I checked my shoes for scorpions/tarantulas, and stepped outside to the composting toilet. I'd save the outdoor shower — a water tank modified with a hand pump — for later in the day, when the heat was unbearable. Then it was off to assess the dwindling freshwater reserve and to conduct frugal ablutions over a steel

sink that drained through a black hose into a bucket below. I filled the kettle. Ignited the propane stove. Set out French press, bowl and spoon. (In keeping with Zittel's catechism, there are only bowls, never glasses or plates, which she deems unnecessarily use-specific.) Carried two black wooden vintage stools out to the patio, one for sitting, the other for my breakfast and books. Every time a bead of perspiration rolled down my leg, I'd assume it was an ant and tried to flick it off, never learning.

In the afternoon, the hot wind in my face like a blow dryer on high, I drove to the air-conditioned local library, with Zittel's blessing; the cabin stay is meant to be challenging but not life-threatening. Back home around 6:00 p.m., I cooked a meal of spiced beans, avocado and tortillas and washed up in the final sliver of sun. After lighting the oil lanterns, I watched their flickering patterns, then sat outside to read. By 9:30 p.m. I was asleep, atop white sheets, enveloped in unbroken darkness.

Before my trip, I'd been thinking about Zittel in relation to the social-utopia-makers of the 19th century, the "material feminists" who sought liberation by transforming the domestic sphere. In 1868, Melusina Fay Peirce, an organizer and

The cabins, which have no electricity or running water, sit alone in the desolate landscape of Wonder Valley on the edge of the Mojave Desert.





The entry to one of the shipping containers, where Zittel holds meetings. She grows vegetables in the metal bins out front.

author, spearheaded the “cooperative housekeeping movement,” proposing that wives charge their husbands for their domestic labor. The writer and reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued for taking the kitchen out of the house, making it communal and hiring cooks to lessen the burden of “women’s work.” Could Zittel’s heady innovations be postmodern descendants of these ideas?

But perched on a stool with the oil lamp and a book, the night astonishingly silent save for a lone coyote in the distance, I realized that Zittel isn’t interested in changing society or achieving political or social perfection, but is instead seeking liberation of a more private sort. Because here’s the strange thing: I never did get bored, or lonely, or restless during my stint in Zittel’s world. For all my physical discomfort throughout the week, I felt deeply, supremely calm. Existing alone in an unfamiliar space in which every detail has been considered and honed to its ultimate function was simultaneously soothing and stimulating. Engaged so closely with my immediate

surroundings, I was able to drown out my ever-present anxieties. Bowls were no longer just bowls: They were the sole necessary vessel. Without a chair back, I sat up taller and lay down on the ground to watch the stars. I began to see the cabins as performance art, but with the artist herself absent — or, maybe, with the viewer taking the artist’s role. There was a kind of generosity, or trust, in that gesture.

Among the materials Zittel had left me — an idiosyncratic mix that included Viktor E. Frankl’s “Man’s Search for Meaning,” back issues of “Lapham’s Quarterly” and local travel guides — was an ancient paperback, “Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions.” First published in 1884 by Edwin A. Abbott, an English theologian who wrote the novel under the pseudonym A. Square, it is an Euclidean sci-fi fantasy about a civilization of polygons who inhabit an alternate two-dimensional reality — not my usual genre, but during the long nights, I gave myself over to the barely sublimated satire of Victorian values.

In the days and weeks following, long after I

returned home, I saw rectangles everywhere — counter, bed, ceiling, blanket, book, cover, page. Even a line of text is a long, narrow rectangle. Viewed like this, through Zittel’s eyes, the material world seemed endlessly malleable, little more than a sequence of man-made conventions we’ve all agreed to preserve, whether or not they have outlived their usefulness, that were now merely burying — or distracting — us with infinite variety.

I also came to see “Flatland” as more than a brainy curiosity or even a nod to Zittel’s obsession with geometry. Perhaps it was best read as a primer for the alternate reality she has single-handedly engineered, one that rejects society while remaining in rapt conversation with it. I didn’t get a chance to ask Zittel about the book before I returned to New York — the cacophonous, often disconnected city she abandoned long ago. I will never know why she left it out for me. What I *did* know, without her having to utter a word, was this: She is always thinking about everything, about every detail that adds up to a life, and that includes you. ▀

The scorched road leading up to A-Z West, on the border of Joshua Tree National Park.

