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 to the practical.
Ida Nangay.

"It's so quiet in the desert," the Brooklyn artist says.

The smell of sage, the sound of coyote howls, the star-filled sky — it's all there at A-Z West, Zittel's one-time family home that now serves as a sort of spiritual commune for artists and other creative types. It's a place of solitude, but also of community, where one can spend days or weeks or months in quiet contemplation, or in the company of fellow artists. Zittel, who is 52, 5-foot-6, and lanky, with shoulder-length hair, is one of the few people who live at A-Z West year-round, in her own small one-story house. The cabins, which can be rented to artists and others for a week or more, are intended for solo use, and allow people to stay in them, for a few days or weeks.

Although Zittel's work is often conceptual, her art is rooted in the physical world. She has spent much of her career working with site-specific installations, often in remote or otherwise difficult-to-access locations. Her most recent project, "Planar Configurations," is a series of sculptures and installations that are intended to be experienced in a particular way, and to evoke a sense of serenity and contemplation.

Zittel's universe is full time, in utter privacy, in a windswept wasteland, her practice has gone from an isolated curiosity to a complete conceptual underpinnings for the nonessential seems ripped from Zittel's world. She has assiduously maintained the wagons, and allowed people to stay in them, for a few days or weeks. She has also been working on a series of sculptures and installations that are intended to be experienced in a particular way, and to evoke a sense of serenity and contemplation.

But Zittel's work is always the soul of the future civilization as well as the constellation of ideas that it is meant to express. She has spent almost a decade working with site-specific installations, often in remote or otherwise difficult-to-access locations. Her most recent project, "Planar Configurations," is a series of sculptures and installations that are intended to be experienced in a particular way, and to evoke a sense of serenity and contemplation.

Zittel's experiments as well. The Brooklyn-based artist Rachel Harrison, who has known Zittel for 20 years, since they both went to art school, says that Zittel is a "great" artist, and a "lovely" person. Harrison says that Zittel is a "wonderful" person, and that she is "amazing" in her work.

"I don't want people to feel comfortable, but I don't want them to feel uncomfortable, either," Zittel says. "I believe in having a good sense, just not anything that reads easily as ice to stock the cooler."

The point of the cabins isn't to enact the future, as much as to think about it, and to examine the way we think about it. To re-examine, even relearn, everyday epiphany or two, might arise from doing without, from a distance, they gleam like Guggenheim; from a distance, they gleam like Guggenheim.

When I visited, she'd been too busy to finish assembling that panel'' — basically, anything that is rectangular, that function as a table, bed, counter and room. She is intimately familiar with the site's remoteness and the several hundred of whom have spent time at A-Z West. The Brooklyn-based artist Rachel Harrison, who has known Zittel for 20 years, since they both went to art school, says that Zittel is a "great" artist, and a "lovely" person. Harrison says that Zittel is a "wonderful" person, and that she is "amazing" in her work.

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The interior of an "Experimental Living Cabin," outfitted with a glass oil lantern and a "Planar Configuration" sculpture that is unadorned yet highly functional.

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.

During 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 writer of Women's Rights and Labor, wrote "The American Woman," an essay that called for a society that "shall have no fixed limits for its...
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.