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Social Study: An Interview with Andrea Zittel

By CHERYL KAPLAN

*How one woman learned to live with others by moving out: In the 1990s, Andrea Zittel created her Living Units, which could be installed as capsules into private apartments. The artists wanted to use them to study how people organize their living spaces. In the meantime, her Units are now part of museum collections; and at the request of the Danish government, Andrea Zittel has created an artificial island off the coast of Denmark. For some time now, she's lived in Joshua Tree, in the California desert, removed from daily life in a large city. **Cheryl Kaplan** spoke with the artist about her work, the limitations of privacy, and medieval cities as an alternative to contemporary principles of organization.*



Andrea Zittel: *A-Z West*, Photo: Andrea Zittel

Her parents have been living on a 31-foot sailboat in the South Pacific for the last ten years. Don't worry, the Toyota van is parked nearby, and when they do venture

elsewhere, for instance to visit their daughter in California, a Dodge camper is within shouting distance. Since the early 90s, when Andrea Zittel created the *Office for A-Z Administrative Services*, an ersatz holding company that now contains two branches, *A-Z East* and *A-Z West*, she has been operating like a modern day city-state, dividing her life between New York and Joshua Tree, California.

A-Z, the manufacturing prefix to her works, includes *A-Z Living Units*, *A-Z Escape Vehicles*, *A-Z Cellular Compartments*, and *A-Z Deserted Islands*. Zittel's move to California at first appears decidedly anti-urban. But if you think that desert equals privacy, then you haven't heard about the amount of people that suddenly show up at *A-Z West*. Even the town, in its medieval configuration, was both a container and a magnet. Mobility, after all, underscores Zittel's practice, letting her and others gently destabilize the everyday. I talked with Andrea Zittel from her home at *A-Z West*.



Andrea Zittel: *A-Z Homestead Units #2*, 2001, Deutsche Bank Collection, © Andrea Zittel

Cheryl Kaplan: In 1992 you said: “Some artists make objects; my work is the organization of a life.” What is the connection between your choice of a corporate language and the organization of a city? How does the structure of *A-Z East*, *A-Z West*, and *Administrative Services* take urban planning systems to a private level?

Andrea Zittel: I never thought about the structure of cities much until recently, and that's because of living in Joshua Tree. We're part of a huge county, San Bernardino. They're re-writing a lot of the legislation, so they're letting us write our mission statement. I've been going to town meetings, learning how things work. We're talking about whether to become incorporated.

CK: Town planning systems seem to parallel the thinking behind your work.

AZ: I was interested in how an individual can become a whole corporation and how powerful corporations act like governments. The head of the corporation is a kind of ultimate monarch.

CK: Designers develop corporations to promote individual products that are branded and gain market share. What you're doing seems closer to the evolution of a town, focusing on access to people instead of products. The creation of your products becomes the vehicle to a relationship with the owner.

AZ: It was also a form of personal empowerment, having a company name.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z Six Month Seasonal Uniforms, 1992-95 installation view
Deichtorhallen Hamburg, (1999-2000) Courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York and Deichtorhallen Hamburg, © Andrea Zittel



Andrea Zittel: A-Z Uniforms: Summer 1999 (Berlin), 1999. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. © Andrea Zittel

Andrea Zittel: A-Z Uniforms: Fall 2001. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, © Andrea Zittel

CK: And later a company uniform. I think of public workers having uniforms. Is the uniform about frugality and economy of design, or a way of minimizing public difference?

AZ: The clothing was a reaction against excess and designer clothing. I come from a different class than the one I operated within in New York. I couldn't afford name brands. To fight back, it didn't matter which system you followed, as long as you had a system.

CK: Economy is an aesthetic decision as well as a social one.

AZ: I've successfully managed to make my garments as glamorous as a name brand — that's a small personal victory. The frugality relates to what you said, that some people should be forced to turn in their excess clothing. My mother was a discount shopper. She had an 18-foot closet crammed with clothes with price tags on. That felt more oppressive than having one steady garment. There was something liberating about one garment.

CK: Do you still have a steady garment?

AZ: I got carried away with the felt garments. Now, I have four dresses each season and I wear jeans when I work. I miss the ease of the uniform.

CK: How are the *Living Units* different from your recent work?

AZ: The initial *Living Units* happened in the early 90s, in New York. I lived in contained spaces that weren't mine. I wanted to create a highly personalized space.

CK: Were these liners to rented apartments?

AZ: It was like owning a house that would fit inside a shell within a house other people owned. I would do all the modifications within the capsule of the *Living Unit*. That series ended when I bought a building in New York in 1994. I started to make furniture that addressed different issues. The *Wagon Stations* are the newest pieces. They're contained capsules you can live in outside, like a vacation home done in the smallest imaginable comfortable, livable space. A station wagon seemed the right size — that's why they're called *Wagon Stations*. They're seven feet long and four feet wide, the front is curved and hinged, opening to an awning. Inside there's a bed, shelf, and camp stove. I bought land half an hour from here in the middle of nowhere. It would be great to have something there I could have stocked, but I have problems with vandalism. If you do something small, it disappears into the landscape; it looks like a trunk or a chest.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z Cellular Compartment Units, 2001, installation view. IKON-Gallery, Birmingham, UK, Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York and IKON-Gallery, UK. ©Andrea Zittel

CK: In the 50s, the American home was a place of leisure for everyone except the woman, now the home is largely a place of work. How does your art pursue the conflict between leisure and work?

AZ: These divisions underscore my work. It's a mental division that's been reconstructed ever since the 12th century. That separation is folding over again because of communications work coming into the home. The *Cellular Compartment Unit* addresses the overlap and compartmentalization between time, function, and space.

CK: You pack functionality into a condensed space.

AZ: That varies from piece to piece. In *Raugh*, [pronounced "raw"] things become more functional when they're less functionally fixed. Ambiguous shapes and spaces serve more needs.



Andrea Zittel: *Raugh*, installation view 1998, Front - *Raugh* Furniture: Lucinda. Back - *Raugh* Furniture: Jack. Courtesy the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, © Andrea Zittel

CK: The *Living Units* promise escape or a better life through travel, yet they're stationary. How have you taken the "voyage elsewhere"?

AZ: The slogan for the *Escape Vehicles* was: whenever you wanted to

escape, climb in and close the hatch. When someone bought a silver capsule, we'd build their ultimate escape fantasy inside. People used to travel to exotic, unknown places to get away, now we pretty much know any place you can go, so people turn inwards.

CK: Is that because of globalization, or just being self-centered?

AZ: The personal is a construction people escape into. Configuring your environment in your home is supposed to reflect your personality. Everyone fantasizes that their experiences are unique, but they're not.

CK: What happens when a collector or museum acquires a *Living Unit* and uses it for display and not for living?

AZ: For the first four years of my career I worked hard to give the collector a real experience. I tried everything from customizing pieces and working with people when they bought a uniform to getting people to sign contracts that they'd wear them. These experiences were heavily mediated — they didn't work for other people the way they worked for me. There was something artificial. When somebody does an art experiment and someone tries living in it, it's a novelty. Someone will do it for a day or two, and then they'll use it as a guest room or an exotic experience, but it's not a life experiment, which is how they functioned for me. My own experiences are the only ones I can control.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z 1994 Living Unit
Customized for the Jedermann Collection,
1994 Courtesy the artist and Andrea rosen
Gallery, New York. © Andrea Zittel



Andrea Zittel: A-Z 1994 Living Unit II, 1994
Courtesy the artist and Andrea rosen Gallery, New
York. © Andrea Zittel

CK: In the 14th and 15th centuries, reputations were made through accomplishments in public life. Private life was expressed through the family, not the individual. How does your work use the split between public and private? The units are single dwelling places; although they appear as nests, there's little room for a mate —

AZ: That started to change with *A-Z East*. I had constant houseguests. I took advantage of that, making lots of prototypes, having people test them and write testimonials. It's ironic, I talk about needing to be alone, but it never works out. I

moved to the desert because I needed to have highly personalized exploration. In the last two months I had two nights alone. I have a 700-square foot house in California with one tiny bedroom, but people stay here and not in hotels. It's bizarrely social; there's a conflict. There's a huge tension within my work between being alone and being with others.



Andrea Zittel: Joshua Tree: Spaziergang auf den Salzfeldern bei Site 7, Photo: David Dodge



Andrea Zittel: Joshua Tree: Shawn Caley-Regen und Martha Otero betrachten Sarah Vanderlips Arbeit auf Site 5, Photo: David Dodge

CK: Your work feels public and accessible, but also highly private and intimate.

AZ: People will read about my work and drive up to the yard. I have lots of pieces outside, but then I get really upset. Either I'm going to be a hermit and I make work that goes in museums, or I'm going to have my personal life and I have to be willing to open it up to people.

CK: The invasion is a dilemma.

AZ: It's the opposite of what I want.

CK: Your practice might also be read as a series of satellite cities that combines a self-replicating process with the medieval format of the workshop as a form of collaboration and work. Each unit is not only independent, but it references a larger modular government that's both social and practical. Both the products you create and their method of creation seem dependent on a highly organized de-centralized system that references the organization of the city.

AZ: Do you see the satellite cities as *A-Z West* or *A-Z East*?

CK: In a way, they're satellite cities of each other.

AZ: The medieval format has been quite strong, but not necessarily intentional. In NY, my assistants lived in my house. We were together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I had no privacy. In California, one assistant lived in my house, another was a local kid I had dated, another was a 21 year-old ex-felon I mothered. Now my assistant lives elsewhere, though we're talking about starting a business together: combining a gallery, an art store, and the Chamber of Commerce.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z West, both photos: Andrea Zittel

CK: What kinds of transformations have happened in the furniture? Superficially, your work connects to minimalism and cleanliness.

AZ: The ideology has changed. In the early 90s, my work was about compensating for human imperfection, finding ways to make us more efficient and organized. Around 1997, I said screw it, people are always going to make messes. You spend so much time on maintenance that you never live. We've become obsessed with cleanliness as a moral standard. A paranoia results. *Raugh* was an attempt to loosen up. That work was a critique and exploration. I've been working on the rules of *raugh*. One is when you're buying a kitchen counter, look for easy-to-clean surfaces. I had this epiphany: if it camouflages dirt, that's better.

CK: You sold "registered" licenses of your work, enabling people to make a "registered copy." Did that reduce production costs and create greater "brand" recognition? Was it similar to do-it-yourself homes?

AZ: Lots of institutions did copies, but more takers wanted real pieces. There were six or seven versions of the *pit bed*, some exact copies, others did radical take-offs. I was interested in production issues. A furniture company offered to mass-produce objects if I designed them, but then I'd lose its experimental nature. Students would say: "I'd love to live in a piece, but I can't afford it," so I'd say: "copy it." People

with a lot of money bought official pieces and a student could do a copy. The idea of value was important.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z West: Food Processing Station (kitchen), Photo: Andrea Zittel

Andrea Zittel: Detail. Food Processing Station, Photo: Andrea Zittel

CK: Value has a trickle down effect, from Madison Avenue to Canal Street, in terms of brand recognition.

AZ: It was a social study, like social research, seeing how people work and choose.

CK: In the Middle Ages, a retreat was located on a mountain, though Dante, “in the Vita Nuova, retreated to a private room so he could cry without being seen.” Does the retreat concept extend to *A-Z West* as an operating system?

AZ: I’ve often thought about this intense need for privacy. When you said Dante had a room he could cry in, I can definitely relate to that. When I first moved to New York, I’d walk out my door and two blocks away I’d have this anxiety attack and go home. Ever since, I’ve wanted to make spaces that were private, where I could breathe. One system works well for me, but it screws me up when people stay here. The way I clean my house and get dressed every morning is that I get out of the shower naked; for every five objects I pick up, I put one garment on, by the time I’m ready to walk outside, the house is clean. It works well, but you can’t do it when people are around.

CK: Your work uses that line between escape, as a voluntary removal from society, and exile, as a removal that terminates communal participation. *Pocket Property*, a 44-ton floating island off the coast of Denmark commissioned by the Danish government, fused an extreme escape with an exile.

AZ: With *Pocket Property*, I was thinking about suburbia. There’s always a tropical yard and an Alpine yard. You want a house with a big lawn and you have this illusion that you don’t have neighbors, but you do. We crave our own isolated kingdom.

CK: Escape offers pleasure. Exile is quite the opposite. Are your *Units* prototypes for an ideal city that’s neither urban nor suburban?

AZ: They're markers or indicators of a condition. I wonder what would happen if we lived in Van Capsules and traveled everywhere; if you wanted to live with somebody you could dock together. That's a viable extension of the *Unit* idea, but I'm not sure that would be healthy, either.

CK: The edge between function, restraint, and pleasure is part of your work, especially as it relates to social order. Is restraint an urban or an anti-urban trait?

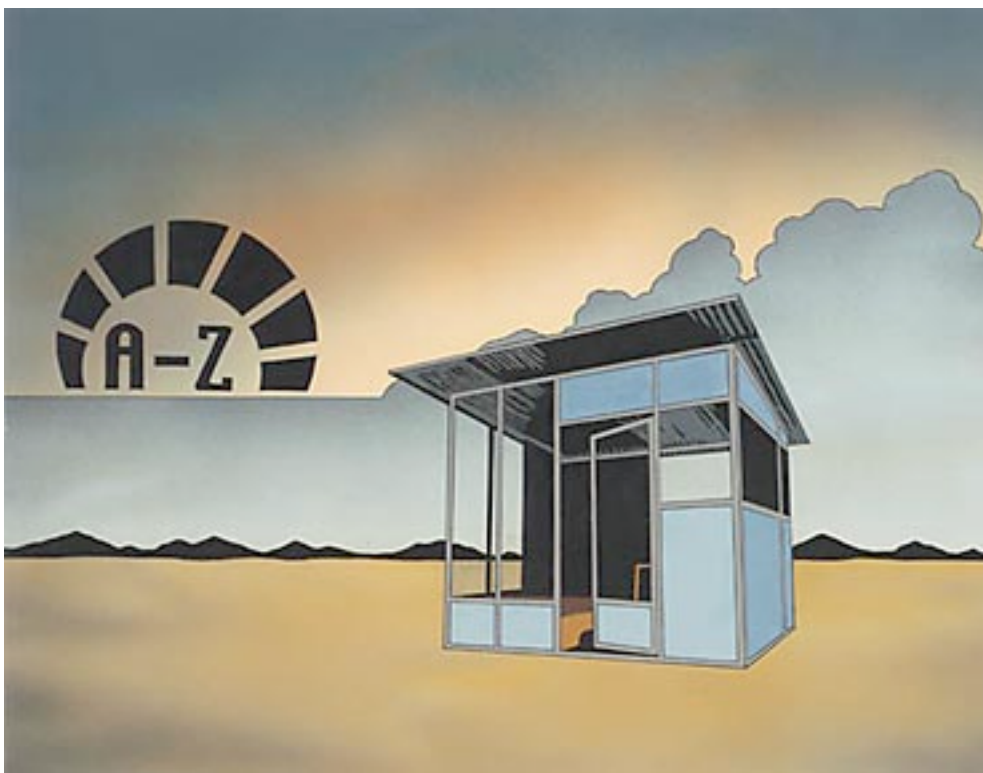
AZ: It's a capitalist trait, which makes it urban. When you're working within a large population, you need parameters for everything to function. In an anti-urban environment, you don't need everyone to clock-work. There's room for deviation.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z Cellular Compartment Units, 2001, installation view IKON-Gallery, Birmingham, UK. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery New York and IKON-Gallery, U.K., © Andrea Zittel



Andrea Zittel: Wallens, 2002, inside and outside view. Courtesy the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, © Andrea Zittel, Photo: Oren Slower



Andrea Zittel: A-Z Homestead Units #2, 2001, Deutsche Bank Collection, © Andrea Zittel

CK: Social order is a self-policing mechanism. That also applies to your original *breeding units*, when you lived in 200 square feet with 200 or so chickens and other animals in the early 90s.

AZ: The rules fall apart all the time as much as they work.

CK: In what way does the choreography between movement and settlement provide the organizing architecture for your work in all its forms?

AZ: I feel pulled through two dynamics. One is freedom and movement, the other is security and comfort. There's a tension where one wins out, but sometimes it's the other that wins for a while, then the other takes over out of necessity. One goes too far being mobile or exposed for too long, and then you react by getting a house in the desert.

CK: Even Jack Kerouac might have settled down eventually.

AZ: I imagine one of these values is the correct one, I just can't figure out which one.



Andrea Zittel: A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight Breeds, 1993, Courtesy the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery New York, © Andrea Zittel, Photo: Paula Goldman

Visit Andrea Zittel's website at: <http://zittel.org>