



‘I WANT TO CREATE A WORLD AND LIVE IN IT COMPLETELY’

Andrea Zittel’s home, clothing, and even her junk mail are part of the project she calls “performing life”

BY SUSAN FREUDENHEIM

THE DUSTY TOWN OF JOSHUA Tree, California, rests high in the heart of the Mojave Desert between two barren mountain ranges. From the main drag, it shows no signs of becoming a cultural center. But if you turn south at a bail bondsman’s storefront and head up a half-mile drive you’ll reach the home of Andrea Zittel. Here, on 25 acres of rocky land hugging the base of the mountains, Zittel has created “A-Z West,” the compound where she makes and displays her own work and, on occasion, exhibits that of friends from all over the world.

On a day when the desert air is cooled by a brisk breeze, Zittel is sitting on a concrete slab

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just outside her 700-square-foot mid-century house, which she has renovated and filled with the sculptural furniture that has become her signature art over the course of 15 years. She is holding her nine-month-old son, Emmet, on her lap and is feeding him lunch—he’s smiling, and so is she. “I’m so happy,” she says. “I feel like I’ve been saved from myself.”

Zittel is tall and thin, with a long face, a mane of sandy-colored hair, and a wry, toothy grin that breaks out regularly, warming her otherwise somewhat wary presence. Turing 40 this month, the artist finds herself at a crossroads between work and life—motherhood and ambition. To a sculptor who has focused on rethinking and reinventing living spaces and everyday objects, adding a child would seem a likely catalyst. “When I had Emmet, everyone thought I’d make baby furniture,” she laughs. “But that’s not what I’m thinking about at all.”

For one thing, she is in the midst of preparing for a mid-career survey opening on the 1st of next month at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, organized by CAM curator Paola Morsiani, and Trevor Smith, curator at the New Museum in New York, where the show will open in late January (it travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, and the Vancouver Art Gallery in Canada). And Zittel has been busy showing elsewhere as well; in the past year she’s had solo exhibitions at two of her longtime galleries, Regen Projects in Los Angeles and Andrea Rosen in New York. (She is also represented in London by Sadie Coles HQ, in Milan by Galena Massimo de Carlo, and in Munich by Sprueth Magers.) Currently, Zittel’s work, which is in both public and private collections, sells for about \$4,500 for small objects and \$150,000 for large installations.

What Zittel says she’s really thinking about these days is how to realign the intersection between her art and her life. “I want to create a



- Opposite** Zittel at A-Z West, her home and studio in Joshua Tree, California, wearing her Merino wool A-Z Fiber Form Uniform, 2002.
- Top** A circle of “Wagon Stations,” 2003, 35-square-foot capsules that Zittel allows friends and visitors to customize when they stay on her compound.
- Center** Raugh Furniture at A-Z West, 2005, is a multipurpose seating and eating area carved from dark foam.
- Bottom** A-Z Food Prep Station, 2001, Zittel’s ultra-practical kitchen.

Once on an airplane she noticed some men staring at

world and live in it completely," she says. "I don't think that's totally unique, but I'm in a position where I get to do it." For an artist whose primary focus has been to make functional objects, this is not really a stretch. Zittel's home is a work of art itself. There is the amorphous, stratified form at the center of the living room which she has carved from dark foam to echo the mountains outside and which serves as a multipurpose seating and work area. Her coffee table, too, is an irregular, carved shape. She calls these pieces "rough furniture"; pronounced "raw," the name intentionally implies unfinishedness and roughness, characteristic of her signature products.

As the baby starts to bite at the foam, she lifts him up, deftly cleans out his mouth, and then takes a knife and cuts into the



Rough Furniture: Jack, 1998, left, and Rough Furniture: Lucinda, 1998, foam rubber sculptures installed at Andrea Rosen Gallery.

piece she's sitting on to eliminate the damage. She says that her adjustment to motherhood has made her want to reduce the boundaries between her artwork and life even more. "I think a lot about the idea of what Allan Kaprow calls 'performing life,'" she says in her lilting, Southern California voice.

Her office is a laptop propped on the foam mountain; her studio—three white shipping containers filled with stations for various activities—is a quick walk down the hill. This allows her to work on her writing (she records all aspects of her life and thoughts), make her own clothes, and continue a three-year quest to turn her voluminous mounds of junk mail into papier-mâché panels that she intends to be at once decorative and utilitarian, replacing drywall or wood paneling. Her "Paper Pulp Panels" are fabricated in the studio using a kitchen blender, then left out to dry on a grid of frames exposed to the hot sun just outside her kitchen. Seen easily from the road, these drying stanchions look like a repetitive minimalist artwork worthy of Donald Judd.

"A lot of people have been interested in the 'Paper Pulp Panels' because they're involved with recycling," Zittel says, "but I want to move away from making them sound too correct because I feel that's not interesting as art, though maybe it's interesting as design. Maybe what I like about them is that I'm selling my garbage."

BORN IN ESCONDIDO, ABOUT 130 MILES SOUTH OF where she now lives, Zittel is the daughter of schoolteachers who spent their free time traveling on boats and in recreational vehicles, sometimes leaving Zittel alone at home to fend for herself. She says she was "pretty wild" as a teenager, and she had no idea she was going to be an artist until she landed at San Diego State University, where she took a few art classes and ended up majoring in both painting and sculpture. She went on to earn an M.F.A. in sculpture from Rhode Island School of Design in 1990 and then moved to New York.

Making art, she says, "was the first thing that I had done that really seemed to come naturally to me."

She started her career by "fixing" broken things she found on the streets of her Brooklyn neighborhood. She'd do things like put a new head on a religious figurine or glue a broken plate back together. She was invited to show early on at Artists Space and other small venues, and by 1992 she had her first show in the then emerging Andrea Rosen Gallery.

Zittel pursued her fascination with the intersection between art and ordinary objects throughout the 1990s, experimenting with new kinds of living spaces. She made two-dimensional carpets, for example, whose woven designs include colored areas to indicate sleeping, working, and eating spaces; she carved wooden tables with deep indentations, built-in bowls that eliminate the need for dishes. She also invented portable living units contained in wooden boxes or fancy trunks that unfold to create tables, beds, small dining surfaces, even rudimentary toilets and sinks—minus any modern plumbing—uncomfortable and curious.

She continued showing regularly and turned a three-story storefront building in Brooklyn into "A-Z Enterprise," or "A-Z East," playing off her own initials. The building was her living space and studio, where she made furnishings that she dubbed "prototypes," implying her unrealized ambition for larger distribution—but she also ran it as a gathering place, with regular Thursday evening open houses.

Simultaneously, Zittel was doing everything from crocheting her own smocks to building wall units for efficient office space, working large and small, in solitude and collaboration. The A-Z Comfort Unit includes a large bed enclosed in a wooden cabinet, with openings on its sides. Rolling carts can be inserted into these openings to serve as desks or tables, so that, Zittel explains, "one can perform all of the day's tasks without ever leaving the security and comfort of bed."

As for the clothing, she felted, crocheted, and sewed her dresses, but limited herself to wearing only one for an entire season, calling them "personal uniforms." The uniforms tend to be simple in form—basic jumpers or gathered skirts that can be worn over slacks and a shirt or other layers—and are beautifully crafted. Often Zittel intentionally leaves or creates large holes in the fabrics to reveal the clothing underneath. This es

her dress. Finally one said, ‘Did a giant moth get you?’

thetic is her nod to high fashion, but it can also seem pretty goofy, and this delights her. “One time I was on an airplane,” she recalls, “and these guys were staring at me. Finally one said ‘What happened? Did a giant moth get you?’”

She describes what she has dubbed “the rough dresses,” which feature pieces of fabric that were torn and safety-pinned together. “Those were pretty weird, but definitely interesting,” she comments. “You’d look at them a while, trying to figure out how it was turned into a dress. Versace was also doing dresses with safety pins; he was appropriating a ‘low look,’ and I remember people trying to figure out if mine was a designer dress or really a rag. And one time a woman from the Prada foundation was trying to determine what designer it was, and I was just laughing, because it was a scrap of fabric that I’d safety-pinned together. It was not anything.”

WHEN ZITTEL MOVED FROM NEW YORK TO JOSHUA Tree in late 1999, she said she wanted to extract herself from the density and intensity of working in the center of the art world, to return to her California roots. Ironically, her acreage in Joshua Tree gives her full view of a Marine base which, especially since 9/11, has been conducting regular training missions, complete with bombs. Further, the road to the national park runs in front of her property and offers every genre of fast food and trashy commodity.

These days, she shares her home, as well as one in Los Angeles, with artist and graphic designer David Dodge, her partner and baby’s father. In the fall, she will begin teaching a couple of days a week at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and although she used to regularly work 12 hours without stopping, her day is now regulated by Emmet’s sleep schedule. Though she owns a horse, she rarely has time to ride.

Even as she was creating her desert refuge, Zittel was developing a community and organizing annual collaborative exhibitions on her property, which she called “High Desert Test Sites.” Her hikes with friends have evolved into documented art events, and she’s also in the process of building a series of ten “Wagon Stations”—small capsules that resemble cartowed camping trailers—a collaboration with friends that allows them to customize 35-square-foot shells so that they can regularly camp out in artworks on her property. Veronica Fernandez, an assistant at Palm Desert’s Imago Galleries and a former architecture student working with local architect Peter Blackburn, will add to the “Wagon Stations” a slatted awning to expand one wagon’s usable space, which holds a bed and a bookshelf. Another friend has designed his exterior to look like a low-rider car. The “Wagon Stations” dot the grounds in front of Zittel’s house.

They recall earlier collaborations, particularly the “A-Z Escape Vehicles” of 1996, which consist of a series of machine-made cabinets resembling a detached camping trailer, each customized by Zittel at the direction of a collector. Dean Valentine, a Los Angeles-based media executive, was among those who acquired one, a human-size homage to a Joseph Cornell box. Valentine says the reference to Cornell was his idea, worked out with Zittel through conversations and correspondence. Zittel also included references to the story of

Valentine’s immigrant family. The work, he says, exceeded his expectations, explaining, “This piece symbolizes for me the realization that art is a voyage of the imagination.”

For the past decade, Zittel has often returned to issues of personal isolation, including removing herself from all sensory experiences for days and documenting her loss of any sense of time, living on a fabricated concrete “desert island,” in Scandinavia, creating escape capsules, moving to the desert. Whenever she withdraws, however, she admits it is a test of will, and she is ultimately drawn back by her need for community. Rather than seeing this as inconsistent, she believes that accepting contradictions is key to understanding.

Houston curator Morsiani sees Zittel’s embrace of personal



Rough Desk #2, 2001, was shown at that year’s Whitney Biennial, and then installed in Zittel’s home.

narrative and collaboration as a reaction to the ironic voice of many artists of the 1980s. “She is part of a group of artists in the ‘90s who went back to personal narrative and transformed what is history into something personal,” Morsiani says, also citing Robert Gober and Janine Antoni.

Although artists have long been engaged in designing furniture, Morsiani believes Zittel has helped advance the interaction between sculpture and design as well: “The way we think of these disciplines as looking at each other, it was pushed ahead with her. The way that life has become the issue and the focus, she’s been very influential. She looks in a critical way at the world around us.”

Zittel explains, “For me, making objects is as fundamental as eating and breathing—and so is theorizing about the way that the world works, or at least how it could be better. There is probably some part of me which still thinks that by finding a better system of order for the kitchen junk drawer, I’ll also figure out how to stop pain and suffering in the world at large.”