

# Personal Panels

## Andrea Zittel

“To live within or without society?” This is the question Andrea Zittel (b. 1965, Escondido/CA, USA) asks billboard in front of Haus Esters, depicting her A-Z West estate in the Californian desert. Since the 1990s, nearly 100 years after Ludwig Mies von der Rohe and Sonia Delaunay, the artist has been questioning what role art and artists can play in our lives through works that combine art, interior and fashion design, as well as architecture. As one of the most important artists of her generation Zittel has redefined sculpture as part of everyday life. She uses the transdisciplinary freedom that Sonia Delaunay claimed for art to examine life on the basis of her own everyday experience. Her art takes place at the very heart of life, is being used—but differs in its conception as an experimental „test site“ from design that aims at mass production. Artist, private person, and entrepreneur merge.

In this exhibition that was conceived in close collaboration with the artist, Zittel’s objects occupy the former Esters family home designed by architect Mies von der Rohe. Created around 1927, the future Bauhaus director’s Lange and Esters houses were both an experiment and a vision of modern living. They championed a new kind of luxury offered by long ribbon windows and fluid spaces. *Personal Patterns* focuses on the flat panels, geometric forms, and modular patterns that Zittel adopts as minimal starting points for her experiments. This approach is deliberately mindful of the avant-garde and its successors. Zittel often operates as an entrepreneur or a scientist, processing in her own way the

functionalism found in Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus, and modern ideas for better living based on “form follows function,” modularity, and industrial mass production. Instead of promoting the utopian vision of social transformation through the fusion of art and design, Zittel’s practice addresses critical and even comical questions concerning modernism and its present-day legacy from a personal perspective. “My departure from these movements occurs when I work with the dilemmas and the contradictions that their work unearthed,” Zittel explains.<sup>1</sup> She has relocated from a cramped New York City to the vastness of the Californian desert. Paradoxically, she also creates freedom through reductions and restrictions. Choices oscillate between luxury or torment: it is not only Zittel’s personal patterns that leave a mark in her artworks, but also human psyche and its idiosyncrasies as a whole.

1 Andrea Zittel, “Andrea Zittel responds...,” *Art Monthly*, no. 181 [February 1994], pp. 20–22.



# HE Hall

## AZ Showroom

Like this hall, Andrea Zittel's exhibitions always bear some resemblance to commercial showrooms where different media, colors, and textual elements collide. They are installation-based *Gesamtkunstwerke*. In the early 1990s, Zittel ran her *A-Z Showroom* in Williamsburg, New York. It had a public area at the front comprising a 100 square-foot (30 square meter) room and a 100 square-foot (30 square meter) living area at the back. For the latter, she constructed the *A-Z Living and Maintenance Unit* using a metal armature, fitted with wood panels. This unit as well as the subsequent *Living Units and Comfort Units* mark the beginning of a series of standardized, spatially and formally pared-down portable living units that also mirror the spatial constraints of Zittel's New York home. While they are based on the Russian Constructivists' functionalist furniture designs, they also attempt to reconcile somewhat contradictory needs such as safety, stability, and freedom in the smallest possible space—which can be as little as 43 square-foot (4 square meter). The *Comfort Unit* enables a person to live in a mobile bed thanks to various modules, such as a desk box that can be folded into the bed. Zittel customizes them, individually tailoring them to meet customers' unique personalities and requirements as part of the *A-Z Administrative Services* brand she founded in 1991. With a wink she promises a better life with them in advertisement brochures. How would you like to live if you could only select a few functional elements? And what if you had unlimited choices?

What resembles abstractly patterned wallpaper from afar presents itself up close as kind of a almost scientific yet intimate documentation. Time intervals portrayed as fields of color and photographs record how Zittel spent a week isolating herself from all external time markers in a cellar in 1999. *Free Running Rhythms and Patterns* shows how Zittel's personal needs and scholarly curiosity intermingle in her practice. Her investigations into the complex interplay of free spaces versus constraints also have melancholic-satirical overtones—such as the *A-Z Timeless Chamber*, which reflects the commodification of experience that increased throughout the 1990s and 2000s.



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a, b The second A-Z East Showroom and residence of Andrea Zittel in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York, 1994 © Andrea Zittel

c Andrea Zittel in her A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, 1992, © Andrea Zittel

d The prototype of all "units": A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, 1992, Steel, wood, carpet, plastic sink, glass, mirror, 86 × 94 × 68 inches (218.4 × 238.8 × 172.7 cm), © Andrea Zittel

e, f Vacation from time: A-Z Timeless Chamber: Model 004, 2000 Birch, steel, carpet, aluminum, paint, vinyl, 41 × 83 × 51 1/4 inches (104.1 × 210.8 × 130.2 cm), © Andrea Zittel, Regen Projects

# HE Men's sitting room

## AZ Wardrobe

Surrounded by the 1990s mass fashion overload, Andrea Zittel developed an extremely pared-down wardrobe. By exclusively wearing the same outfit for six months, not only did she find new freedom in not having to choose her garments every day, but ultimately also a special form of individuality. The *A-Z Personal Panel Uniforms* are entirely based on rectangular pieces of fabric that can be cut straight from the fabric roll without any waste. They are reminiscent of abstract compositions. These minimal uniforms facilitate a close exploration of the effects of color, materiality, and detail in the field of fashion, which is intimately connected to our bodies and identities.

The design for a billboard proposes a diagram of modern human needs that recalls Maslow's hierarchical pyramid. However, Zittel's version is her personal one, that tends to shape irregular, layout-like fields around "well-being" at its center.

### A-Z SIX MONTH UNIFORMS

Most of us do own a favorite garment that makes us look and feel good, but social etiquette dictates that we wear a different change of clothes every day. Sometimes this multitude of options can actually feel more restrictive than a self-imposed constant. Because I was tired of the tyranny of constant variety, I began a six-month uniform project. Starting in 1991 I would design and make one perfect dress for each season, and would then wear that dress every day for six months. Although utilitarian in principle, I found that there was often a strong element of fantasy or emotional need invested in each season's design. The experiment as a whole worked quite well, especially since dreaming up the next season's design helped relieve any monotony that might have occurred from wearing the same dress every day.

### A-Z PERSONAL PANEL UNIFORMS

After four years of making uniforms I began to find more and more difficult to come up with a

new style of dress each season, so I decided to create some guidelines to make the decision a little easier. I looked around at the numerous rules that had already been made by other designers, particularly by the Russian Constructivists. Their principle that "geometric patterns maintained the integrity of the fabric (which was woven in rectangles)" was arbitrary in one way, lucid and sensible in another. As a way to push this rule to its absurd yet logical conclusion, I decided to take the position that all dresses should only be made from rectangles ... almost as if the fabric had been sliced from the bolt. The most interesting thing about the rectangular format is that the creative variations within it become almost limitless and it was possible to achieve the effect of either a prom dress or a blacksmith's apron, with only a few suggestive details.

Andrea Zittel, 2003



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a Zittels *A-Z Six Month Uniforms* are produced using different techniques, exhibited at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, 2011  
© Andrea Zittel, Regen Projects

b Andrea Zittel and friend wearing her *Personal Panel Uniforms*, 1990s, © Andrea Zittel



## HE Dining room

## AZ Multifunctional living room

Decorative, patterned arrases are often regarded as the origin of abstract painting. Zittel's *A-Z Carpet Furniture* series combines them once again with literal functionality and are meant to be used instead of typical three-dimensional furniture. Geometric patterns on wool carpets suggest furniture ensembles in the form of abstracted layouts that can be rearranged in a matter of minutes. The double bed with two bedside cabinets or the long dining table are also imbued with stereotypical role model connotations. Representation, the image and the idea of furniture, converges upon a plain surface that marks a physical, multifunctional space. This reduction to a surface promises comfort and an unfettered scope of development. The concept echoes a sharpening of Mies von der Rohe's idea of a flowing, multifunctional living space. In Haus Esters, the fluid floor plan is fundamentally present; however, the rooms are still quite conservatively allocated to individual living functions. Through her carpets, Zittel recreates the concept of nomadic living in the present-day scarcity of urban living spaces.

The artist is interested in how her objects' users interact with them and the changes they make. She documents them in her *A-Z Personal Profiles Newsletters* or makes gouache drawings that are reminiscent of advertising images. They show the carpets being used, including the present example depicting her neighbour Charles. In the large wall panels you can look into Zittel's *A-Z Cellular Compartment Units* by means of a minimally illusionist depiction. In this work she divides large

spaces into small boxes made of steel, plywood and glass stacked on top of each other. The painting is a 1:2 scale representation of a living environment which she constructed and then spent time living in. Each box is intended for a specific purpose, such as sleeping, eating, or working. In later versions, Zittel always considers and involves the people who will use them in the way she furnishes each unit. This work resembles happenings as well as behavioral experiments conducted under laboratory conditions.



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a *A-Z Carpet Furniture* is made to be used: *A-Z Carpet Cabin*, 2012, © Andrea Zittel, Regen Projects

b *A-Z Cellular Compartment Units*, 2001, Stainless steel, plywood, glass, different materials, variable dimensions, 39 x 39 x 78 inches (100 x 100 x 200 cm) each, © Andrea Zittel

c, d *A-Z Cellular Compartment Units* in Benutzung, © Andrea Zittel



# HE Living room

## AZ Bedroom

Andrea Zittel's *Planar Panels* works which include her installation in the garden are based on the worldview that everything man-made consists of rectangular panels. In them, Zittel's constant interest in space with its psychological, social and historical dimensions shows. While her objects always bear an architectural resemblance, they are less self-contained and more closely connected to the site where they are installed and the people who use them. Similar to works by Richard Serra or Bruce Nauman, which Rosalind Krauss<sup>2</sup> describes as "axiomatic structures" in the "expanded field" of postwar sculpture, they explore architectural experiences like those of finitude and openness. However, Zittel's more recent structures in particular explore precisely the boundary between furniture and sculpture.

In these rooms designed by Mies von der Rohe, Zittel's treatment of the lofty ideals of modernism becomes apparent. The architect was influenced by Kasimir Malevich's and El Lissitzky's Suprematism, which aspired to the highest degree of human knowledge through pure geometry. His architectural creations in no way pursued solely a practical function. They are intended to satisfy complex human needs such as representation, reflection, and a connection to nature. This is achieved in part by elucidating a vast universal space through the connection of interior and exterior realms. Mies's influence on postwar architecture is extensive, but ultimately his idealistic approach to materials and space—like many Bauhaus products—remained a luxury for the few. Comprising different surfaces,

Zittel's slick, modernist-looking "living corner" makes a comment on modern aspirations as well as on their aftermath, including Minimalist art by the likes of Donald Judd. In their early days, these works were persistently viewed in a purely contemplative way, which ignored their concrete reality of steel and other industrial materials. Zittel's post-minimalist variations appear as functional bodies. In this way, they prove that art is inseparable from the physical space of social reality. Based on decorative pavilions, *Planar Partition* defines a protected, intimate space within a space. Zittel's *planar* gouache drawings use surfaces to design variations of similar constructed spaces, which trigger different reactions even when just looked at.

2 Rosalind Krauss: "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in: *October*, Vol. 8. [Spring 1979], pp. 30–44.



a Down in the garden you can visit a section of the exhibition that is part of the collection of the Kunstmuseen Krefeld: Andrea Zittel's site-specific installation in the Hellerau Garden House opened in 2019 on the occasion of the Bauhaus anniversary. In 2022, it was expanded to include bench sculptures in the outdoor space. It extends the spectrum of sculptures in the garden of Haus Lange Haus Esters by a usable work and is the first contribution of a female artist. (We ask for your understanding that the opening of the garden house depends on the weather conditions).



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Planar Pavilions at A-Z West is a permanent public work sited on the land between Zittel's residence and the adjacent highway. Each of the ten Planar Pavilions consists of a series of vertical planes that function as walls, boundaries, and divisions. They frame the surrounding landscape, isolate inside from outside, and provide physical and psychological forms of shelter. As the desert becomes increasingly developed, the pavilions will function similar to ruins or structures still in a state of construction, as an interstitial zone that is neither fully domesticated nor completely wild. Zittel.org

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a Andrea Zittel, *Planar Composition for Esters Garden House*, 2019–2022, Sculpture Garden, Collection Kunstmuseen Krefeld & Freunde der Kunstmuseen Krefeld e.V., Funded by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and the Melcher Family © Andrea Zittel, photo: Dirk Rose

b, c *A-Z Planar Pavilions at A-Z West*, 2018  
© Andrea Zittel, photo: Sarah Lyon

# HE Women's sitting room

## AZ Study

Since its inception A-Z West has functioned as an evolving testing ground for living—a place in which spaces, objects, and acts of living all intertwine into a single ongoing investigation into what it means to exist and participate in our culture today. ‘How to live?’ and ‘What gives life meaning?’” This is how Zittel describes her life project on her website.

In 2000, Andrea Zittel moved from New York back to the American West Coast, swapping urban crowding for the endless expanse of the desert near Joshua Tree National Park. A-Z West would begin with the purchase of a parcel of land, which in the US always has rectangular boundaries irrespective of the land's singularities. This affordable space offers the potential to bring groups of people together for collaborative projects. Both the ten-day seminar *Institute for Investigative Living* and the 2022 High Desert Test Site, which welcome other artists, have been developed as a result.

Zittel gradually acquired additional adjoining plots of land simultaneously adding more artworks and accommodations. On the site, which now covers 80 acres, she has built her home, studios (including ceramic and weaving facilities), *Wagon Station Encampments*, outdoor sculptural works and further guest accommodations. This demonstrates how Zittel's art reflects not only European modernism, but especially North American culture: frontiers, independence, the American Dream, endless landscapes, billboards, the Homestead Act, nature reserves, folklore, camper vans, mobile homes, DIY, and mass-produced plastic products. Consequently, the issues of freedom,

individuality, living conditions, as well as analog techniques and sustainable reduction in everyday life crystallize even more strongly as her main concerns.

In this room, the wall covering is made of newsprint, whose characteristic layout creates a rhythm of surfaces. The *Aggregated Stacks* are usable sculptures made from old shipping boxes (which accumulate when you live in the desert) and plaster. Adapted for Haus Esters, the desk with stools is an example of A-Z West's signature multifunctional furniture created using simple shapes. They resemble the planar sculptures—but now you can take a seat and learn more about A-Z West by looking at original documents.

A-Z West enabled the artist to create her own world. It is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that started to attract more and more people, which is why Zittel decided to open its doors for public guided tours. As a consequence, the public and the artist's persona eventually absorbed her entire life, turning private daily affairs into a perpetual presentation. Earlier this year, Zittel moved to a new private home at Joshua Tree, transforming her practice once more. The HDTS Foundation currently runs A-Z West.





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a Andrea Zittel's Gesamtkunstwerk A-Z West near Joshua Tree National Park, CA, USA, since 2000, consisting of her home, studios, several guest accommodations and other artworks, as well as the *Institute for Investigative Living* and the non-profit organisation High Desert Test Sites, © Andrea Zittel

b, c A-Z Wagon Station Encampments, 2011–2017, © Andrea Zittel, photo: Lance Brewer, The Wagon Stations are individually artworks, as is the Encampment as a whole—a constructed experience—which is activated by visitors. From 2011 until 2017 the Wagon Station Encampment Residency hosted people for stays as short as one week or as long as six weeks during Spring and Fall.