

# The A-Z of Life

## ANDREA ZITTEL: CRITICAL SPACE AT THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK

Given the sociable nature of much of Andrea Zittel's artwork it is little wonder that she has become a tourist attraction herself. Her investigations and inventions, which have her border crossing from living and work spaces, clothes and vehicles, reveal an artist whose life experience is not so much revealed by her art, but is her art.

Text by Jennifer Leonard

A-Z Time Trials (BSM Turbo Edition), 1999. Collection of Burton S. Minkoff

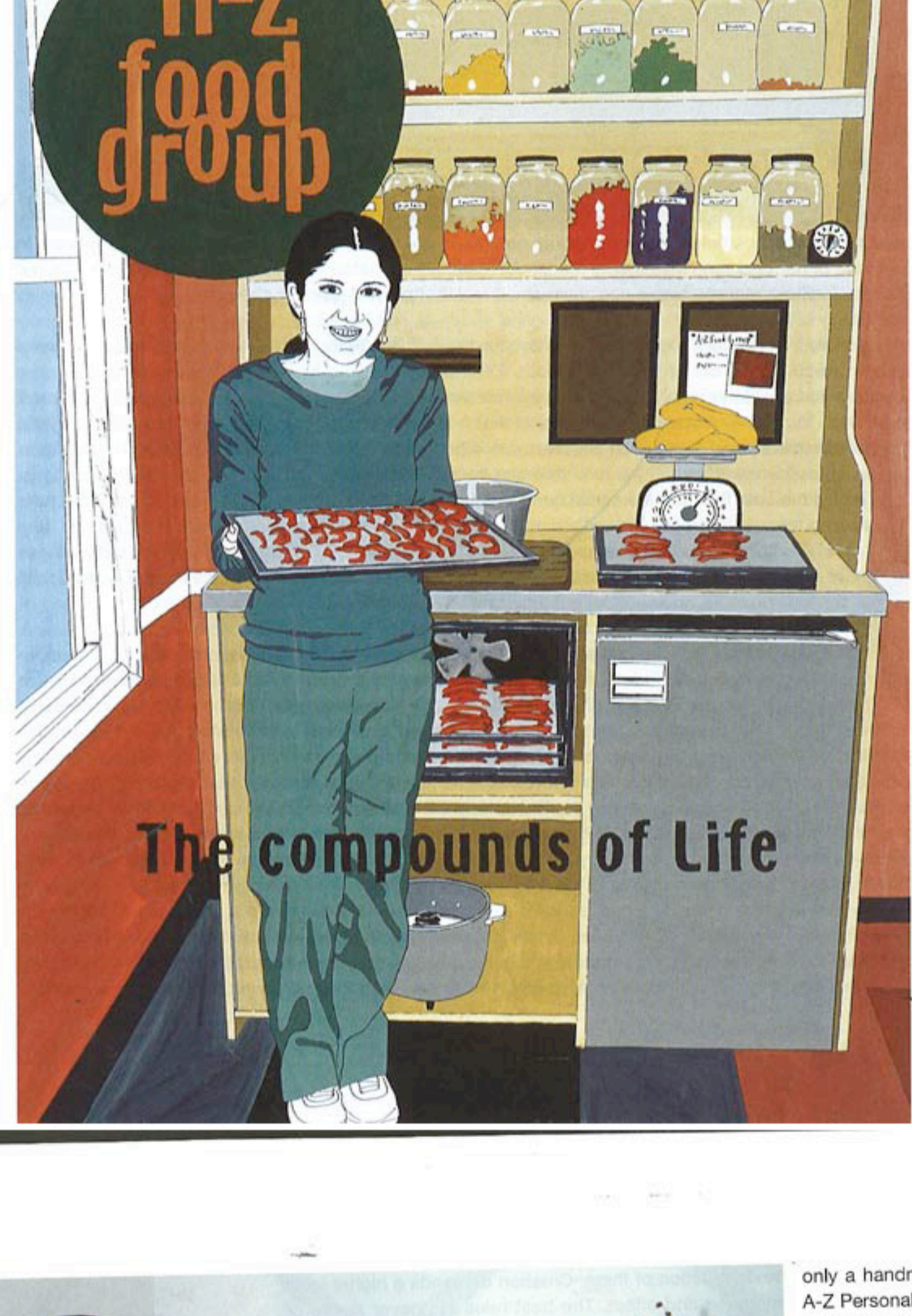
Upon entering Critical Space, Andrea Zittel's first comprehensive show in the United States, at New York's New Museum in Chelsea, you're greeted by glistening iceberg-like paddleboats; a wooden fort equipped with bed, books and kitchen; and manifesto-like wall text entitled 'These things I know for sure.' Eclectic and probing from the off-set, the visitor is suitably primed for the 75-piece undulating story that spans Zittel's past 15 years of creative exploration under the moniker A-Z Administrative Services. Although the overarching theme could very well be 'less is more', the content stretches from animal breeding and time experiments to re-made 'ready-mades' and the reinvention of food. With a sense of excitement and anticipation, before stepping inside the A-Z wonderland, you hold your gaze and slowly savour the fourteen statements Zittel scribed on the gallery wall. She believes, for example, that:

'The creation of rules is more creative than the destruction of them. Creation demands a higher level of reasoning and draws connections between cause and effect. The best rules are never stable or permanent, but evolve naturally according to context or need.'

'It is a human trait to want to organize things into categories. Inventing categories creates an illusion that there's an overriding rationale in the way that the world works.'

In retrospect, having wandered through the show, you can see how her highly experiential sculptural work coalesces the truth of these statements. It's as though her habitats, installations and drawings combine to cumulatively reveal her questions and processes of going from uncertainty to some sort of clarity. Her written words derive from what she's learned by way of her working methods: that is, putting her own life – body, mind and spirit – at the heart of her art. In this sense, she knows (for sure) of what she writes.

For starters, with limited resources and boundless creativity and drive, Zittel set forth on a fashion experiment wherein everyday, from 1991 to 2005, she limited her outfit options by permitting herself to wear



A-Z Food Group: The Compounds of Life, 2001. Goetz Collection, Munich



only a handmade dress, also known as an A-Z Personal Uniform. Her reason for doing so was to rise to the challenge of maximizing her wardrobe – for all occasions – without succumbing to the price and pull of seasonal changes in fashion. Responding with raw material, thread and self-directed restraint, Zittel discovered that uniformity actually clears the mind of the clutter of constant variety. Why wait for trends to inform you, when you can inform yourself by trying out something unique (albeit initially uncomfortable)? In the end, she made 45 dresses of an array of colours and materials: one-piece felt tunics with hand-made holes; multi-functional black-and-white slip dresses with simple ribbon sashes; woven patchwork jumpers inspired by the Russian Constructivists; crocheted, knitted and hand-knotted sweaters that drooped down to the knees. Together on display (on dress forms at New York's New Museum), the past fifteen years of Zittel's wardrobe hangs together like a couture show. And perhaps that's the ironic point she was trying to make.



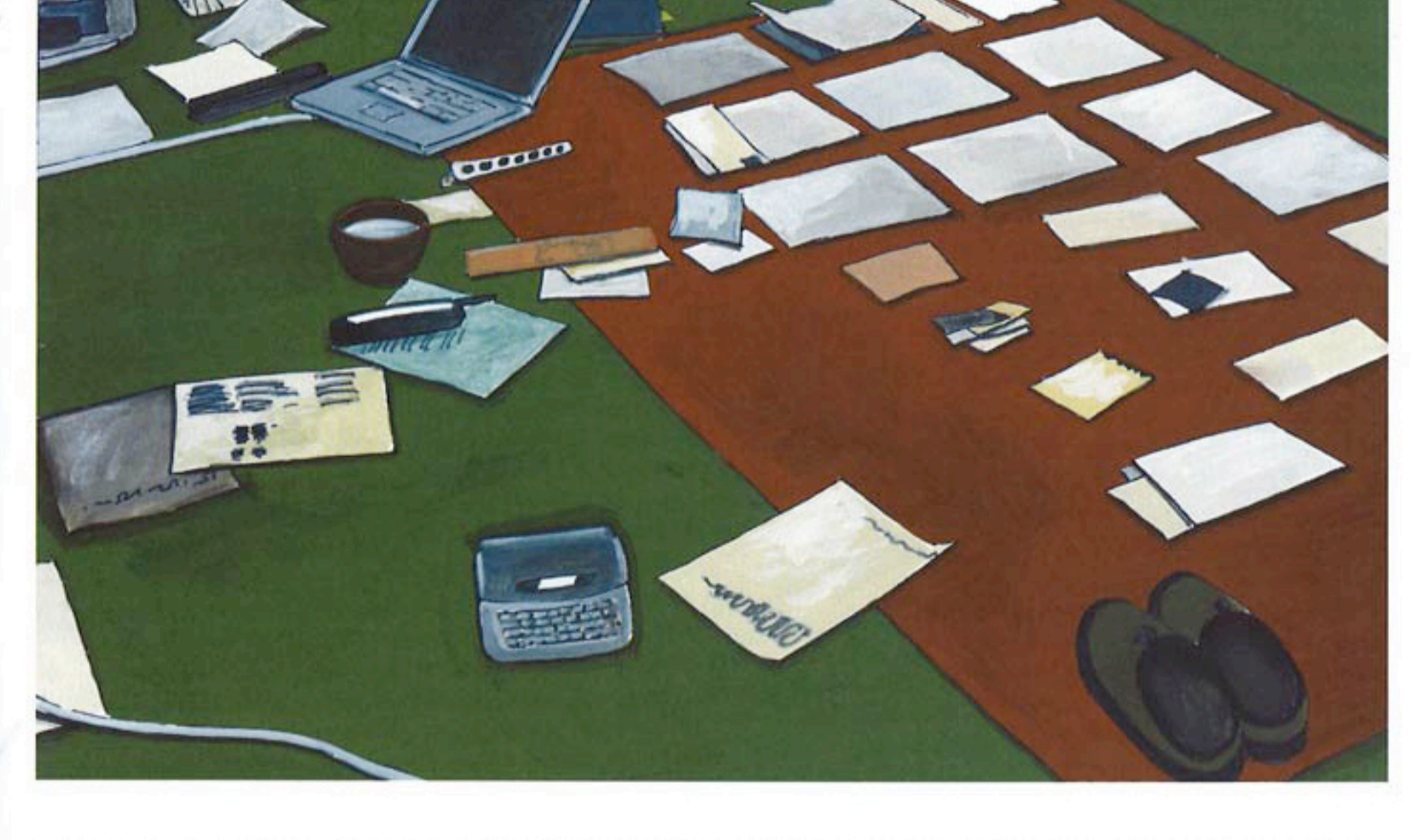
Top image: A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 003, 1992. Collection of Andrea Rosen, New York  
Above: A-Z Escape Vehicle Owned and Customized by Andrea Rosen (Interior), 1995. Collection of Andrea Rosen, New York

Zittel coined the term *Raugh* (pronounced 'raw') in relation to her use of simple materials and elemental design strategies to make objects that will look better as they become naturally worn or undone, as a result of lived experience. In fact, one of her operating statements reads, 'All materials ultimately deteriorate and show signs of wear. It's therefore important to create designs that will look better after years of distress.'

It's certainly true for the uniforms. It's also true for the A-Z *Raugh* Furniture that she haphazardly carved with an electric knife out of foam. With both, Zittel challenges the never-ending pressure to consume what's brand spanking new. Again, why buy into the illusion of perfection when, first of all, it doesn't exist (even in nature), and, second of all, if at first it looks indestructible, it will eventually crumble? So she's practical, and funny, with her response. She figuratively, and literally, cuts through mass-market hype to reveal something new that she herself has created through self-imposed restrictions. The clothes and furniture are certainly not perfect. But they do emerge from recognition of the passage of time and a deep understanding of human behaviours in relation to consumer culture. She says, 'Surfaces that are "easy to clean" also show dirt more. In reality a surface that camouflages dirt is much more practical than one that's easy to clean.' Et voila! The natural human inclination is towards disorder, and so Zittel gallantly celebrates this.

A native of Southern California, Zittel moved to New York in 1990 and was so struck by the contrast in cleanliness – modern suburbanism versus gritty urbanism – that she began an initiative named *Repair Works*. Because she felt helpless in the face of New York's urban decay and personal trash that littered the streets, from her 200 sq foot storefront operation, known as A-Z Administrative Services in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, she would gather found objects and, with small gestures, change what she could to bring them back to life. Old ceramic mugs, lamps, cracked plates, photographs, and souvenirs – whatever she was drawn to. She was unsure initially, with this project, whether or not her efforts were creative. In reflection, she decided that all decisions are, in fact, creative. And that 'sometimes, if you can't change a situation, you just have to change the way that you think about the situation. Zittel's *Repair Works* were cathartic in this way.

In her Brooklyn nest known as A-Z East, a small three-story building where she made furniture prototypes and held social events for people in the community, Zittel went about living her personal life while simultaneously exposing her work to the public. It was inevitable, then, that her own basic needs – like eating,

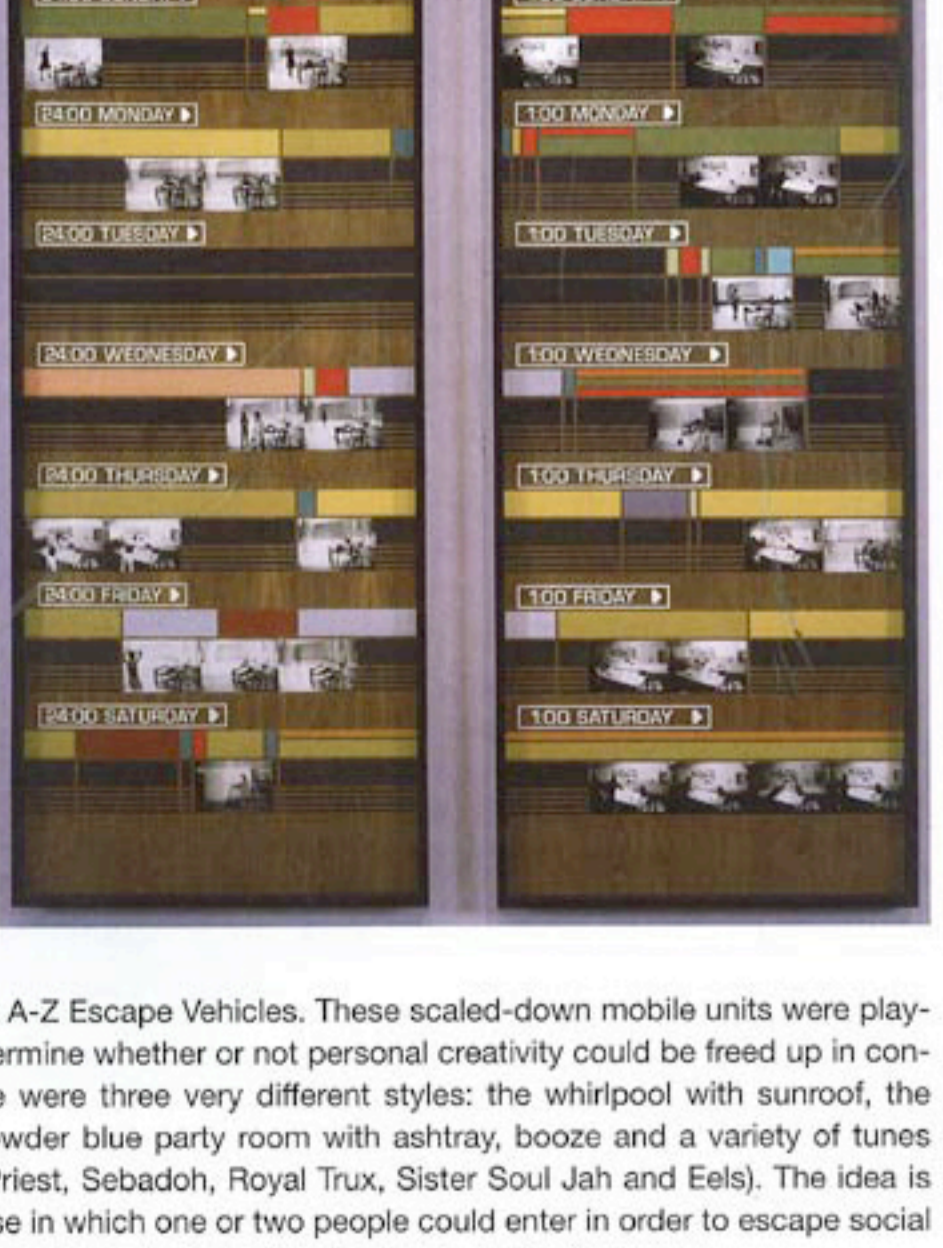


drinking, sleeping – entwined with artwork that creatively responded to urban constraints. The cramped quarters were the push she needed to design all-in-one living units (eating, cleaning, socialising, storage) and maximize her space with clever ways of considering existing objects. Like area rugs, for instance.

Filing System, Joshua Tree, 2004. Private Collection

With A-Z Carpet Furniture (Drop-leaf Dining Room Table), Zittel suggests that we look anew at the rectangular patterns in plush area rugs. They need not simply be decorative. By switching the floor covering, a user is at liberty to alter a room's function in a minute. Squares and rectangles, when viewed schematically, assume the place of chairs, beds, tables, and place mats for dining. She shows us again that new perspectives emerge by way of organising space and life functions within a controlled area. That, and that 'ambiguity in visual design ultimately leads to a greater variety of functions than designs that are functionally fixed.' Later, Zittel took space design to a whole new level, with A-Z Cellular Compartment Units. Here she challenged the so-thought ideal of suburban compartmentalisation by way of designing her own modular home unit of interconnected wood boxes that together approximated the size of a small studio apartment. Remarkably, Zittel lived within it in order to understand it. Again, through her work, she explores the meanings of larger social issues in order to better understand them from a personal level. What effect does suburban compartmentalisation have on us? What meaning do we collectively derive from the artificial chopping up of daily functions, time and space?

Among an outstanding repertoire of works, one of Zittel's most compelling pieces in the Critical Space show is a time experiment entitled *Free Running Rhythms and Patterns*. Rather than building a unit that physically divided behavioural functions, as in the cellular compartments, here she put herself in an environment devoid of anything to mark the passing of time. For one week, she isolated herself in the confines of her apartment, while self-monitoring with time-lapse video, in order to observe her own physical motion in space. She wanted no external cues to prompt her actions; she sought only to be free to move, be, feel, operate, etc. When her week was up, she reviewed the video and made detailed notes of what she did when. Did she successfully escape the external force of time? Interestingly, she discovered that the 'invisible format of time regulates us more completely than any physical structure.' More completely than her living units. And more completely than her escape vehicles.



From left to right: A-Z Personal Uniform, 1991-present, 45 handmade dresses. Einarneel Hoffmann Foundation, permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel, Switzerland  
Free Running Rhythms and Patterns, Version II [documentary panels], 2000. Olbricht Collection

In 1996 Zittel created a series of sleek A-Z Escape Vehicles. These scaled-down mobile units were playfully, but seriously, constructed to determine whether or not personal creativity could be freed up in confined quarters. In this exhibition there were three very different styles: the whirlpool with sunroof, the cave with coloured lights, and the powder blue party room with ashtray, booze and a variety of tunes (Blonde Redhead, Bach, Pulp, Maxi Priest, Sebadoh, Royal Trux, Sister Soul Jah and Eels). The idea is that each would be an intimate universe in which one or two people could enter in order to escape social convention and tap into the source of personal creativity. Zittel believes, in this instance:

'Ideas seem to gravitate best in a void. When that void is filled, it is more difficult to access them. In our consumption-driven society all voids are filled, blocking moments of greater clarity and creativity. Things that block voids are called 'voids.'

'What makes us feel liberated is not total freedom, but rather living in a set of limitations that we have created and prescribed for ourselves.'

This latter credo can also be directed to design: to design a world did around food and purity. A-Z Food Group, from 1993, was her attempt to create a minimalist food system that contained maximum nutrition. She pared back all food choices to elemental needs: essential, dehydrated foodstuffs that could be eaten either dry or cooked. She separated these into their own glass jars with lids and labeled them: carrot, pumpkin seed, pepper, bean, squash, corn, mushroom, onion, banana, apple, brown rice, peas, sweet potato, tomato, green bean, red cabbage, spinach, and broccoli. As with her uniforms, living units, and more, this sort of self-directed limitation appeared at first to be controlling, over time, however, it gave her a sense of comfort and security.

In all, Zittel's work comments on individual experience in a world shaped by ubiquitous external forces, patterns and trends – so many of which go for too long unthought, unquestioned and unchecked. Zittel pushes up against conventional wisdom, thankfully, and creates disruptive moments that have great potential to stir the renege spirit within, if we're open to it, and snap us back into a place that profoundly matters today. A critical space indeed. #

Andrea Zittel: Critical Space is at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York until 27 May  
www.newmuseum.org  
An accompanying book, of the same name, is published by Prestel Publishing, www.prestel.com