

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN:  
*ANDREA ZITTEL*  
*DIARY #01*,  
Tema Celeste Editions,  
Gabrius Spa, Milan, Italy, 2002.



Andrea Zittel, *Warm and Cool Chambers*, 1993

## Andrea Zittel in conversation with Allan McCollum

December 5, 2001 Brooklyn, New York

### SYSTEMS FOR LIVING

**Allan McCollum:** I've been thinking about all of the roles you've had to play to do the art you want to do: painter, sculptor, architect, photographer, carpenter, building contractor, seamstress, evolutionary biologist, graphic designer, fashion designer, anthropologist, lifestyle consultant, market researcher, business manager, inventor, professional hostess, poultry breeder, social scientist, educator, advertising copywriter, merchandiser, research psychologist, and nutritionist. In addition to these roles, you also seem to use yourself as a walking test subject, a model for tracking the desires, and the needs, and even the dysfunctions of society.

**Andrea Zittel:** I've often thought that by examining myself, I try to comprehend the world... I'm sort of a sample citizen of culture at large.

**AM:** I think making art in this way demands a new way of looking at art. Modern artists have always been described as working from within themselves, but for an artist to look to oneself as an example of a larger, more complex system, this is another story. You look to yourself as a handy example of a human being – a person who just *happens* to be named Andrea Zittel. And in doing things this way, your work comes to represent a personal symptom, a societal symptom and a possible solution to a problem, all at the same time.

**AZ:** Yes, exactly. I really think that making art is just another form of investigation. But I also find that within every area of research there is a tendency for people to read information through the filter of "themselves," often without acknowledging how subjective their interpretations really are.

**AM:** So by doing something consciously instead of doing it unconsciously, you can change the meaning of what you're doing?

**AZ:** I find that I often tend to embody ideas *as* a form of critique... This is a way to understand something from two perspectives at the same time: On the one hand to critique it objectively, from an outside view, and on the other hand to try to understand it subjectively; what it feels like to be the thing that I am trying to examine.

**AM:** So you're not rejecting anything – you're just enlarging the view.

**AZ:** Yes.

**AM:** You always present your work along with a very upbeat text that describes how a person could use your systems and objects to change their lives for the better.

**AZ:** Well, when I write those blurbs, I have to confess, often I really do believe that the product does contain some sort of perfect potential!

**AM:** I'm interested to know if you typically believe that a particular product of yours can really solve a life problem while at the same time knowing that your product couldn't *possibly* solve anything. Take your *Raugh* project, for instance. In this project you propose a system of living that matches a person's own habits, however odd, instead of following a system of living designed by others. You suggest that we might live naked on large foam-rubber rocks, that this would make us happier and better adjusted, more in harmony with our actual simian natures. Sometimes you come up with life solutions that seem only to accommodate the seriously dysfunctional, as if you're aware that a lot of your solutions are a bit off the wall and extreme.



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Rough Furniture*, 1998

**AZ:** I guess that the best way to understand this is by examining the difference between belief and knowledge. I have always been really interested in how people can believe in something even though some deeper, more rational part of themselves is telling them that it may not exactly be true. One of the reasons that I am so fascinated by modernism is that it was the last era of great faith... people still really *believed*. Faith seems to be a natural human trait, and although I don't want to embarrass myself or be overly naive, I still like to try to indulge the act of belief now and then.

**AM:** You mean you really believe that someone is going to want to use a *Body Processing Unit*? That someone would want to sit on a toilet, eat from a shelf, and take a shower all in the same little booth? It's like they way they do things in jail!

**AZ:** Usually those pieces were made for a specific situation where I believed that they functioned perfectly! But you have to understand that all of my projects are experiments more than they are "products." Each "what if" scenario is made up of both a physical prototype and a corresponding set of beliefs, systems or values that enable that model to work. I really believe that every successful system works because it is exactly the right combination of both physical and psychological invention.

**AM:** But it seems like you favor being way too well adjusted to some kind of nightmarish life – it seems so *sad*. It's like the science fiction fantasies about how in the future we wouldn't actually have to eat; we'd just take a pill three times a day. But if we really tried this, then all of our culture would evaporate. There would be no farmers, restaurants, or supermarkets; there would be no holiday dinners, festivals, meals with the family, nothing. It would be like all the classic nightmare dystopias that we read about in science fiction and cyberpunk novels. And the moral of these stories is usually that you can't just change one little part of a system, you'd have to rework everything if you want to change the world. So I think you've taken on an interesting challenge. You can't just

make one object and say that's your new work – you virtually have to create the entire system of meaning and a whole range of objects that goes with it.

**AZ:** Well, I certainly never think that my solutions are sad! Usually they seem quite playful to me – like things I used to think up when I was a kid but was never allowed to try out. But it is true that I fall into that scenario of trying to remake the world... why is that, I wonder? On some level I think that I feel totally uninspired to make an object, unless it is part of some grand scheme. I like cooking up scenarios for ways the world could exist.

**AM:** But on the other hand, you've mentioned in this book that people will always fall through the cracks, no matter what the system. There will always be people who don't fit into the particular system they live in.



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Cellular Compartment Units*, 2001

**AZ:** One of the main things that I have been wondering about is how one can actually live a "liberated" life, or if this is even possible. My idea right now is that perhaps the only real way to liberate oneself is to slip in between the cracks of larger authoritative systems. It interests me how often we do this by making smaller, more enclosed systems

that are even more restrictive than those in the outside world. You can become so cocooned in these little self-invented structures that you almost believe the larger systems don't actually exist anymore.

(Both laugh.)

**AM:** Unfortunately, I don't know if that is a good thing.

**AZ:** I don't know if it's good or not either, but I found myself doing this sort of self-systematizing long before I started to make art, and I always thought that it was sort of interesting. I think that my most controlling impulses often came when I was feeling the most vulnerable and the least powerful. I really like that quote from *The Virgin Suicides* when the young girl explains her attempted suicide to a mystified doctor: "Obviously, doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."

**AM:** A lot of your solutions seem to be rooted in what we might call "shame-based" living.

**AZ:** I really appreciate the fact that you have come up with this in relation to my work, I think that my work is the result of wanting to come up with some sort of solution to either eliminate or reconcile the sources of this shame.

**AM:** I was wondering if what we experience as shame is really just the instinctive impulse to hide when we feel weakened and vulnerable. To be ashamed, on some level, is to be afraid for one's life. In the process of designing your *Living Units* and some of the other things you make, do you think about shame and the urge to hide?

**AZ:** Definitely the urge to hide! But I'm not sure about the part of being afraid for my life... of course I worry about death a lot, but I don't think that my units have ever been built as a protection from that.

**AM:** Your work's implicit wrestling with shame is one of the things I find so moving. You always describe what you do as being about progress and hope, but there's so much in there about loneliness and shame. I don't mean to say that the optimistic parts are not there, it's just that there is always an uneasy, underlying assumption of a pervasive shame, a sort of Kafkaesque helplessness that you hope to alleviate somehow with your work.

**AZ:** But I also feel that although loneliness and shame are to some extent irreconcilable, there is still somehow a possibility to work with them and be happy and fulfilled. I am sometimes intensely lonely and feel embarrassed about stuff all the time, but at the same time I'm really an incredibly happy person.



Andrea Zittel, *A to Z 1995 Travel Trailer Unit*. Customized by Andrea Zittel and Charlie White, 1995

## **FREEDOM**

**AM:** You often talk about a person's need to feel "freedom." In our culture, art is typically thought of as a "free" area. You go to work and spend the day doing bookkeeping and selling products and making money, but when you come home, you might go to the theater or an art gallery. Conventional wisdom has it that art is what you experience when you are "free" from all of these other mundane concerns. And then people are always having dialogues about what is considered free and what is considered *too* free – like whether or not "abstract" art is more anarchistic than "representational" art, for example.

**AZ:** I tried doing abstract paintings in school. My whole problem with that was that there was too much freedom how do you know if it is good or not? Who invented the rules that say what is good in an abstract painting and what isn't? It seems too arbitrary to me.

(Both laugh.)

What is the deal with artistic freedom? Why do people think that there is more freedom in art than in other places?

**AM:** That's a good question. What do you think?

**AZ:** I think that there should be freedom everywhere. On the other hand, I question that everyone thinks freedom is a pervasive element of democratic society. I think that true freedom is rare and that you have to hunt for it.

**AM:** You mean that you see artistic freedom as a kind of mythical state that has no real existence outside of the constrictions that artists have to deal with?

**AZ:** We could talk for hours about freedom and art. The first thing that I would like to mention, though, is the economic factor of freedom. How the margin of what people are willing to buy is so narrow that unless an artist is fortunate enough either consciously or unconsciously to fit within that narrow, narrow corridor, there is no freedom in art. Even if we worked regular full-time jobs doing something else besides making our art, most of us could never afford to finance our own projects. We are totally dependent on collectors or institutions to invest in our work in order to continue our practice. I feel that you and I share many similarities, and one of them is that we both blatantly make products because we are aware of how contingent our existence as artists is on this exchange. Instead of pretending that we are secretly making them, we are just like, fuck it, I am making a product now, let's get on with it.

## **PRODUCT PLACEMENT**

**AM:** Historically, one of the problems that emerged with the development of mass-production was that when manufacturers began to "mass-produce" goods there was no such thing as "mass demand" or a "mass market." So specialists in marketing and advertising were needed to develop new ways of selling goods to the masses. "Need" for these new products also had to be produced. There was a time, so the story goes, when people didn't have bad breath. The notion of bad breath was an invention of the people who marketed toothpaste. This story always reminds me of Oscar Wilde saying that "sunsets" never existed before Turner – the chief example in his argument that "life" imitates "art." I wonder if you are ever conscious of inventing a need that you know is bogus or suspect?

**AZ:** I don't think that I invent needs, but I sometimes imagine that I don't have needs that I really do!

**AM:** You can't think of one case when you designed something that addressed a problem that didn't really exist? Or when you knew your solution was preposterous?

**AZ:** I knew that using the chamber pot was not going to be a long-term life solution. It was interesting to use it for a year, but more than a year and I probably would have gone out of my mind. There are things like that. Like living without running water. Sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn't. But I actually see my work is a response to the kind of product placement that you were just talking about. I always have these sort of fear/fantasy curiosities about what it would be like to live without something, and then I make an experiment to find out if it would work. For instance, "living without time" would obviously be preposterous – however, there was a point in history before the invention of the clock when people really did lead productive lives sequenced by some other sort of rhythm... And of course I was also thinking about people who live on submarines and wondering what it felt like to live without day/night patterns... and then wondering how they divide up their days.



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Chamber Pots*, 1993

**AM:** I've always thought your optimistic enthusiasm for some of your products came partly from an invented persona you've developed, a fictitious "marketing" voice. You always write as if you're trying to *sell* something – a product or an idea.

**AZ:** I think that I am trying all of these different things to see if they will work, and I have to say that some of the least expected things really do work. I know that you have seen me promote things before they are even really complete, but I believe that the success or failure of objects in the world is probably 99 percent contingent on how one perceives them. The copywriting has to come first sometimes. Maybe even write the copy to sell myself!

But I also first started making "ads" for my work because that kind of language allowed me to say things about the work that I couldn't say in an artist's statement. This goes back to that distinction between belief and knowledge. Ads allow me to say what I believe or hope that the products will do, and since everybody understands the language of advertising as one of fantasy, I don't feel like I am leading people on or lying to them.



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Six Month Personal Uniforms*, 1991-94

**AM:** One of the things I truly enjoy about your work is that you always create these experimental, dubious solutions that sometimes read like Rube Goldberg cartoons. For example, I remember when you figured that you might not need extra heating in your apartment if you built that little fake fireplace with the fan and the red light bulb inside, so that it *looked* like heat was coming out. I find your work to be really poignant in this sense, in its wishfulness. You imagine these ideal, hopeful, upbeat solutions to things, even in the darkest and most dubious circumstances. But this is where it's complicated for me. I think that you are both utopian and dystopian at the same time, which is a lot different than saying you're one or the other. You know that you're not going to solve the world's problems by having each person's clothes fit into their own special *Perfect Pillow*. That would be a rather imperfect solution.

**AZ:** If only I could solve all the world's problems like that...

(Both laugh)

## THE RULES OF A NEW SOCIETY

**AZ:** I really feel that this kind of critical optimism is a point from which we can start working to move forward, if we are going to carve out a new place, redefine the social function of art.

**AM:** This is not the kind of thing that I hear other artists saying very often anymore. You heard this a lot in the sixties. But slowly, little by little, many artists came to feel that everything gets co-opted eventually, that everything winds up being for sale to art collectors, that you can't outrun the reactionary forces of the art market. So you have to take these forces into account from the beginning.

**AZ:** I wanted to try to remember an Allan Kaprow quote that I read last summer that really stuck with me. It was about how you take art, figure out that rules that make it art, and slowly eliminate them one by one. He was talking about the non art object. It was so interesting to me – I think about what a normal human reaction would be to the eventual creation of non art.

I think that the irony is that Allan Kaprow took art to the non art status to such an extreme that he almost eliminated art itself. Ultimately, by eliminating rules he brought up the importance of rules as a form of social consensus. It made me think how rules and structures are ways that we create bonds with other people. They help define communities and identities. Perhaps we should see rules to some extent as creative gestures and not purely as limiting forces. I wonder if instead of creating dogmatic rules, we could create more interesting and flexible ones? Perhaps this could even extend into the market itself? I think that to some extent art will always be market driven, but how that market is structured is always open to reinvention.

**AM:** This interests me a lot, because a lot of contemporary art is never going to mean much unless *other* things change. It seems to me that the conventions of selling art should reflect at least *some* of the inventiveness of the art itself! The commercial side of the art community could open up a lot of new avenues for making meaning, if it really tried. I think that in your work you not only take the responsibility for producing a huge range of objects, but you also work hard to make sure that those objects mean what you want them to mean. You take on the additional responsibility for describing the objects in your own terms and for articulating what kind of world they would fit into.

It seems to me that you have framed art in a less important position with regards to the wider system of culture. As if you don't think that an 'artwork' alone could ever mean very much by itself. So while your chief concern may be to make art, it seems that you want to construct a holistic view that includes the total field and all its aspects. You've accepted it that art has to play a secondary role to that expanded view – you think about art, but only to the degree that it is a part of everything else.

## DISPLAY

**AM:** In the sixties and seventies, there were certain artists who made "installation art" and "participatory environments." Your work has the look of this kind of art, but it isn't the same thing at all. There are always photographs of your gallery shows, with people lounging in the *Pit Beds* and *Living Units* or hanging out in the *Escape Vehicles* and the *Raugh* furniture, but they were either staged or...



Andrea Zittel, *Carpet Furniture*

**AZ:** People really do hang out in them in the shows.

**AM:** I know, yes. But people also lounge in mattress stores and furniture stores, and this doesn't really make these places "participatory environments," or "performance sites"—they are simply stores. I want to ask you about the tradition of participatory environments. There is a history of this. You make books and sales brochures in which there is this appearance of participation, just like a furniture catalogue that shows people using the products, to humanize the sales pitch. I have often thought of this in the context of those kinds of artists who did participatory environments – like Hélio Oiticica, for instance. Your "product shots" have that look. But your work isn't really like that.

**AZ:** You're saying that my work has the appearance of a certain genre of art but you're wondering...

**AM:** If you do it ironically. I guess I want to understand how much ironic play you mean to put in your work. Do you consciously make metaphorical references to other art styles, mannerisms, and art history? I'm always finding these references, but maybe I'm reading in something that isn't there. You do make jokes. You make *Personal Panels* dresses based on Kasimir Malevich's theories, and sometimes you hang them on the wall, like paintings. You recently made a "three-paneled" triptych of gouaches for your *Personal Panels* exhibition in London, a pun that further complicated the Malevich reference. Your *Carpet Furniture* pieces mysteriously look like "hard-edge" abstract paintings, your *Raugh* exhibit had that "scatter art" type of look, and there was a playful reference to Vito Acconci's islands in your *Deserted Islands* project. There is a true archness in what you do, as if you're giving a sly wink to art sometimes. And if you didn't want your work to be read metaphorically, you wouldn't show it in an art gallery – you'd show it in a design showroom or a department store, right?

**AZ:** Now I know what you are asking. I guess I do play with other art "systems," but it is mostly because the interchange of different forms of logic somehow intrigues me. For instance, I like the way that the *Carpet Furniture* spins around a painterly dispute between representation and literalism. But I don't really like to emphasize this aspect of the work too much because it could come off as a one-liner. Usually when I do this it is just for my own personal enjoyment – and the issues that I really want the audience to catch stem from broader arenas of social and or cultural content.

**AM:** But sometimes these complexities of reference really enrich the experience of your work.

**AZ:** Ultimately I want my work to delve more into the functions of the world at large, not just the insular issues of art history.

But I should backtrack. You just brought up the topic of "participatory" artworks, and I want to go into that because I struggle with the idea of a participatory environment a lot. I've been in the art community for a pretty long time, and I know a lot of the people in it, but I am still always pretty uncomfortable in galleries. No matter how an artwork is set up for me to interact with it, I always end up feeling controlled. When I have to take my shoes off or climb into an installation I feel weird about other people looking at me doing that. I think because of this I don't want to set up situations where other people likewise feel controlled and manipulated in the act of viewing my pieces.

So I consciously make my work for personal experience. Of course there is a flaw in this because not everyone can have a personal experience with my work while viewing it in a public place. It's an argument that some people have against my work that I think is valid, but I'd still so much rather put my energy into making the work function somewhere else than in the gallery. If I spend all my time trying to make my work function in galleries, it is never really going to do anything in the world, and I'm more interested in the world. The gallery is like one little pinpoint, one place where you market your work. It's not where the work can really exist.

## ART AND LIFE

**AM:** People usually speak about art imitating life or life imitating art as if the two were somehow never resolvable into a single system. I remember you saying to me five or six years ago, "I get so tired of hearing about all this art and life stuff. Why don't people just *do it?*"



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Sorting Trays*, 1996

Artists all seem to have their own little solutions for how art and life might be combined. But usually the solution is only a symbolic one, and it only lasts for the five weeks that their exhibition is up. You don't get a lot of artists turning around and becoming social engineers – they're happy just making commentary. I feel you work in a contrary way. It seems that you're aware of these so-called boundaries, but you just don't pay any attention to them. It's not about breaking them or creating them. It's as if you say, "Boundaries? What's that?"

**AZ:** Those boundaries were broken so long ago that it is almost embarrassing that people still worry about them.

**AM:** You seem to act as if the boundaries between art and life are dialectically integrated, that there can't be one without the other. So you don't seem to think about breaking boundaries at all, the way previous generations did. You just think about moving ahead.

**AZ:** Well, you can say that about the boundaries between art and life. But I still think about distinctions and definitions a lot. Where I live in the desert everyone thinks that any kind of handmade craft is "art" and in the art world there is a tendency to blur boundaries between architecture and product design and art. And in some ways maybe all these things *are* art... but I still think a lot about my own personal criteria for what makes something "art" and I believe that this really should change the way that somebody experiences something. Art, to me, is all about perception. Historically it was usually a form of visual perception, but now this has expanded to a more cognitive kind of perception. An artwork allows you to understand something in a new way.

Maybe we just need some new definitions... I think that the word "art" creates a lot of unnecessary frustration because it can mean about ten different things. I'm also not proposing that we should create a hierarchy like the distinction that some people make between art and craft – which always somehow pains me. There could be a series of definitions that simply describe the intentions behind objects. For instance, terms to denote an object made with the intent to communicate something, an object made to instill visual pleasure, an object made to serve a practical need, an object made purely to market. It is not like I'm only saying, "Let's get on with life and art." But I really do think that people get hung up on obsolete distinctions, and it would be so great if we could move forward and start working on more meaningful dilemmas.

## **HABITATS AND INTERIOR LIFE**

**AM:** You build so many habitats. You must feel there is a human urge to create a home, a nesting instinct. Obviously, all animals have this. If there is an instinct to inhabit, have you noticed in your own life, as I have in mine, that you are capable of looking at every enclosure as a possible habitat? In other words, do you think it is human nature to see a space behind a fence or under a freeway overpass and think, "I could live there if I had a battery pack and a flashlight and a sleeping bag?"

**AZ:** I actually often fantasize about the relation of my body to a space. I sort of do what you are talking about, but when I look at those corners, I think about the physical experience of being in that place rather than the practicalities of day-to-day life in that space. I think that this must seem weird, given the seemingly functional nature of my work.

**AM:** Have you ever been without a home for a period of time?

**AZ:** Well, my life as an artist always seems to put me in a lot of experimental living situations. About once a year I'll be completely dislocated to a totally alien place for a month or two. Sometimes I'll be staying in a hotel, sometimes in somebody's house, once on an island I built. Recently, I spent a month in Britain sleeping on the floor of a shop



Andrea Zittel, *Escape Vehicles*, 1996-98

space. It's not really homelessness since I do have a place to go – but it is not my own space. In this experience of floating in the world I've noticed that I get sort of existential. Instead of feeling vulnerable, I almost feel kind of high, but I am also sure that if I were to live that way for a long period of time, it would be very wearing.

**AM:** I remember that as a child I wasn't always so happy in my home, and I would visit friends' houses and feel that the circumstances were happier there. Without consciously intending to, I would start to think about where I could sleep in my friends' homes. There were other times when, for short periods, I actually didn't have a place to live – when I used to travel in the sixties, for instance. Three times I hitchhiked across the United States and once I hitchhiked through Morocco. I never had money for a hotel, and often I'd have to find places to sleep. When you get used to hunting for something, you wind up hunting for it all your life.

So I find that I project myself into other places and imagine sleeping there. It's the kind of thing a child might do. I suppose that the first thing any creature has to do is find a place to live. We all feel homeless sometimes – it's easy to fantasize about building a tree house, or an underground fort, or finding a cave...

**AZ:** This connects to one of the things that amazes me about human beings. Almost any other animal that you can think of is already biologically equipped for survival in the world. We are so fragile that without architecture and clothing, our bodies could not

survive. Maybe we are like hermit crabs that are always looking for their shells. Maybe there is a human instinct to be always searching for an extension of one's body.

**AM:** Yes, exactly. But after experiencing your work, it's easier to see that "empty space" itself is *already* a representation. It feels habitable, shapeable as soon as one looks at it and therefore already a projection of one's inner emotional life. And the spaces we make to live in already represent longing to be safe and protected and preoccupied *inside* of something, separate from the outside world. Your *Escape Vehicles*, for instance, exaggerate this feature of life and illustrate it in an almost frightening way.

It seems to me that your containers and enclosures are always being shaped by some specific sense of *lack*, some kind of existential dilemma of your own. I've never really understood why some people refer to you as a "designer," considering the extremely personal revelations in your work. And to my way of thinking, when people describe a painting or a sculpture as a projection of some kind of "interiority," who's to say that that interiority itself isn't constructed by the society as a whole? So what's the difference, really? Why aren't artworks and furniture and automobiles considered to exist within one single continuum?

**AZ:** I love thinking about interiority that way... I have usually examined it as a social/cultural phenomenon. I am fascinated by how people see the interiors of their homes as the one place where they are free to be whoever they "really are" and also how the way they decorate their interior can somehow reveal their soul or character. I mean what makes all of this so interesting to me is that this is so symptomatic of our particular moment in history. In the past people led much more communal public lives, and there was never this sort of attachment to personal spaces. I guess all of this turning inward also has a lot to do with how "individualized" and isolated we are becoming socially.

As you said, being inside of something satisfies all of our fantasies and longings to be safe – but safe from what? And is all of this safeness and being inside also one of the reasons that we are so lonely? I find that I am always struggling with variations of this question both in my personal life and my work. On the one hand I really desire to be part of something greater than myself, to reach *outward* to share, nurture, and develop the common goal of a larger community. But an equal desire to expand inward, to build a complex and self-sustaining private universe, always complicates this impulse. My inner world makes me feel safe and in control, but it is also limited to a very strict set of parameters.

I guess that this also defines a larger set of issues that we are currently grappling with both in the art community and the world at large. As our focus on individualism and private life intensifies, it seems important that we ask ourselves how we can continue to feel empowered and part of a group effort that is still somehow meaningful.