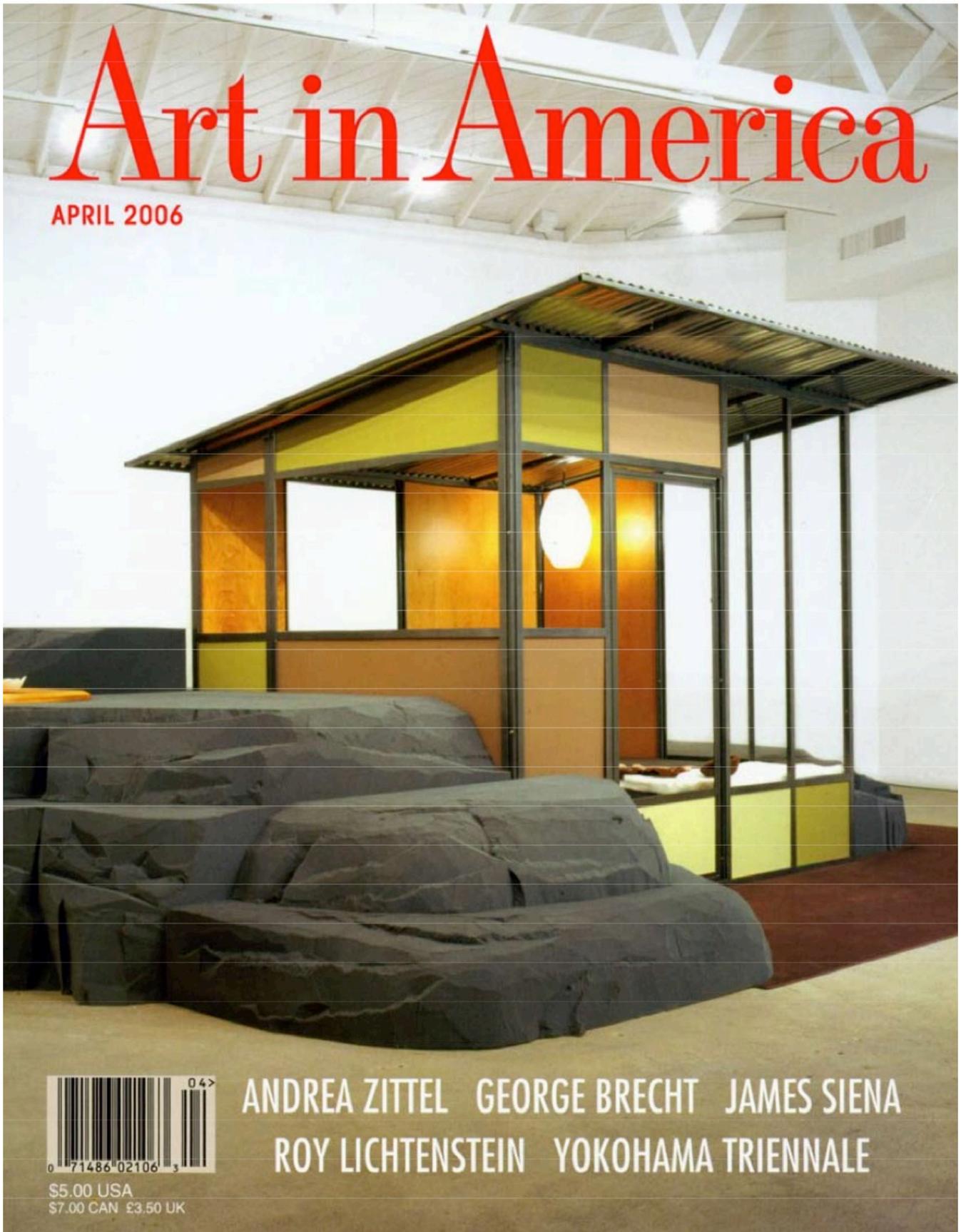


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Cash, Stephanie. "A-Z and Everything in Between." *Art In America* (April 2006) pp. 124 – 131 [ill., cover]



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A-Z and Everything in Between

Andrea Zittel has sought to redesign art and life in her experimental works, including handmade clothing, architectural "living unites," breeding projects and recycling systems. A traveling survey provides a coherent look at this innovative artist's diverse projects.



BY STEPHANIE CASH

Something about Andrea Zittel's work always used to put me off. I could never quite put my finger on it. It might have been the hipster hype surrounding her shows, which often makes me suspicious, or my resistance to thinking that her works—supposedly inhabitable sculptures dubbed Living Units or Escape Vehicles, for example—were anything more than mere sculptural novelties or conceptual exercises (though many of them are). So it was something of an epiphany for me when I saw her piece, Sufficient Self, in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. A visual diary in the form of a

projected PowerPoint presentation, it documents Zittel's life and activities at A-Z West, her home and studio in Joshua Tree in the California desert. It all snapped into focus for me. Not only is she an artist's artist whose work is also eminently collectible and rife with references for critics to latch onto, but she has even become a skeptic's artist. Zittel lives her work—in fact, lives ill and wears her work. Somehow that makes its commodification okay. The ambitiousness of her project and her diligence in pursuing it to its ever-changing ends finally won me over.

Left to right, Andrea Zittel: A-Z Escape Vehicle Owned and Customized by Andrea Rosen. A-Z Escape Vehicle Customized by Andrea Zittel and A-Z Escape Vehicle Owned and Customized by Robert Schiffler, all 1996, 60 by 84 by 40 inches; at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Christopher Dawson, Courtesy the New Museum.

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The “A-Z Living Units” collapse into one self-contained unit on wheels for easy transport, like a pop-up camping trailer.

With her consolidated living structures Judd-like furniture constructions, handmade clothing, dehydrated food and organizational terms, Zittel certainly isn't the first artist to have an all-encompassing approach to art-making. The Russian Constructivists and the Bauhaus artists had similarly expansive utopian visions, and contemporary figures such as Allan Wexler, Jorge Pardo and Joop van Lieshout also blur the division between art and design, but few artists today so thoroughly inhabit their work-literally and metaphorically, physically and conceptually-as does Zittel. In addition to her art-historical predecessors and contemporary peers, she is equally inspired by such ordinary things as the campers and sailboats that her family took vacations in, or the cramped confines of her first tiny Brooklyn apartment. Zittel's work is often characterized by its utter practicality, sometimes tinged with a humorous touch of impracticality. Though ideas and self-imposed parameters are among her favorite “materials,” her willful dedication to living in built environments and clothing of her own design and manufacture goes beyond conceptual gimmickry.

Co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, its current venue, “Andrea Zittel:Critical pace” provides less a comprehensive overview than a sampling of her work to date. The complexity and scope of her oeuvre make it difficult to summarize in a museum exhibition. Through the 75 works on view, what viewers get is a taste of an alternative lifestyle, a methodology and a re-evaluation of some of our most basic assumptions about society and our daily routines. It's almost as if Zittel's life were on view for us to examine, minus the personal stuff.

Born and raised in California, Zittel moved to New York after receiving her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1990. Among her early projects were the Repair Works (1991), broken and discarded furniture or objects, such as crockery or statuettes, that she found on the streets and took home to fix. In 1991, Zittel began working under the rubric A-Z Administrative Services (originally A-Z Administrative Apparel) as something of a joke, but found the official-sounding name came in handy when manufacturers and fabricators didn't take her inquiries seriously. It's also apt for an artist whose work seem democratizing and somewhat socially minded. She has described A-Z as an “institute of investigative living,” encompassing furniture, clothing and food, that seeks to “better understand human nature and the social construction of needs.” She has turned down requests to mass-produce her various design , quietly resisting the great consumerist impulse of modern society. Yet her

View of “A-Z Personal Uniforms,” 1991-present, 45 handmade dresses, dimensions variable; at the New Museum. Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.



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Foreground, A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 03, 1992; background, A-Z 1994 Living Unit Customized for Eileen and Peter Norton, 1994; at the New Museum.

resistance ironically maintains the precious-objectness of her work and keeps it in the elite realm of the art world, allowing collectors to “play” at an alternative lifestyle.

In the process of creating and refining works, Zittel has come up with an ongoing list titled *These things I know for sure*, bits of Jenny Holzerlike text that are painted on the wall in the exhibition. Some are logical bits of wisdom that anyone familiar with pop psychology might recognize, such as “Sometimes if you can’t change a situation, you just have to change the way that you think about the situation,” and others reflect guiding themes in her work, including, “All materials ultimately deteriorate and show signs of wear. It is therefore important to create designs that will look better after years of distress.”

Zittel is well known for designing and wearing her own “uniforms,” a practice she began while working at Pat Hearn Gallery soon after moving to New York. Facing the common dilemma of gallery assistants expected to look polished and chic on a grubby salary, she devised a no-nonsense solution, creating a utilitarian dress—the first A-Z Six-Month Personal Uniform (1991)—that she wore every day for six months, a solution that flies in the face of societal expectations and the constantly changing whims of the fashion industry. Zittel has kept up this practice, more or less, in an ongoing collection. With variations for warm and cold weather, and for specific purposes or occasions, the dresses range from somewhat frumpy to downright elegant and fashionable in their sleek simplicity, contrived tattiness or ac-

cent embroidery. The first “A-Z Six-Month Personal Uniforms” (1991-94) were cut and sewn fabric, but, like the Russian Constructivists, Zittel soon became interested in preserving the flat and rectangular form of the fabric. Her “A-Z Rough Uniforms” (1998) are Issey Miyake-like designs of fabric cut directly from the bolt and wrapped and pinned to fit. When she grew tired of wearing rectangles, she began making garments crocheted from a single piece of yarn, and eventually taught herself to crochet without a hook, using only her fingers. Her most recent designs (since 2002) are fashionably asymmetrical, holey and ragged forms, a happy result of the process of hand-felting her own wool.

Zittel’s experiments in living also began in 1991. Ambitious early on, she attempted to redesign not only domestic SUITounds, but life itself in various animal breeding projects. A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Bight Breeds (1993), sort of modernist chicken coop, was designed to reverse the domestication of Bantam chickens that has made naturally recessive traits artificially dominant. Shaped like an inverted triangle, the unit contains 15 chambers, each accommodating all the needs of its inhabitants (except the freedom to roam). Two small architectural models on view in the exhibition describe unrealized breeding projects, including Ponds for Developing Amphibian Appendages (1991), which shows three pools for a hypothetically mutating species, each pool with more steps leading out than the last.

It seems only natural, then, that Zittel would become her own best sub-

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A-Z Breeding Unit ofr Averaging Eight Breeds, 1993, steel, glass, wood, wool, lightbulbs and electric wiring, 72 by 171 by 18 inches; at the New Museum. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

ject, conducting experiments on her own life. One of her first functional domestic environments, *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit*, Model 003 (1992) was fitted to her 200-square-foot apartment in Brooklyn. In a configuration familiar to space-challenged New Yorkers, it combines a sink, storage space, a cooking and dining area and sleeping loft in a compact, roughly 7-by-8-by-6-foot space. By 1994 Zittel had moved to larger quarters in Brooklyn (which would become known as A-Z East after her relocation to Joshua Tree in 2000), where she was able to spread out and set up a “personal presentation room” and a “testing ground” to further develop her living solutions.

Among the classic Zittel innovations from this time are her “A-Z Living nits” (1993-94), several of which are included in the show. The units typically provide a bed, closet and storage space, table and cooking area, all of which collapse into one self-contained unit on wheels for easy transport, like a pop-up camping trailer. One can’t help but notice that, in Zittel’s search for functionality, streamlined simplicity and efficiency, comfort often seems to be sacrificed. With a few exceptions, her austere designs—decidedly un-ergonomic backless seating and hard surfaces—don’t beckon the viewer with a bad back or bony ass.

She has also tried to do away with furniture altogether. Her “A-Z Carpet Furniture” (1992-93), striking carpets with geometric forms that indicate aerial views of a “bed,” “chair” or “table,” allows floorbound users to change a room’s function simply by switching the rug. Like the emperor’s new clothes or a children’s game of house, the virtual furniture takes a leap of faith, essentially bringing order to the air in a room.

In Zittel’s perhaps misguided wish to integrate spaces that are traditionally separate, the *A-Z Body Processing Unit* (1993), a tall vertical cabinet that combines “intake” and “outtake” functions, is seemingly logical though humorously impractical. The intake unit on top contains a sink and stove area for food preparation that, when slid out of the way, reveals the outtake function: a wooden “seat” over a bucket that can presumably be carted off for use elsewhere. (Most people prefer not to shit where they eat.)

Zittel initially conceived A-Z as a service to others, designing functional clothing on commission or whipping her clients into organizational shape. But, as she has said, “I realized that ultimately I was only able to design to serve my own needs.... Once a product departed from my own

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possession, it would need to be claimed by its new owner.... There are at least two authors of every object: one is the designer, the other is the owner (or user).”¹ This idea is a major theme in many of her works, such as the mini-trailers of the “A-Z Escape Vehicles” (1996), customized by collectors, whose interiors house such things as a sensory-deprivation tank, a Cornell-boxlike office, a blue velvet reading lounge and a grotto with rocks and trickling waterfall.

With her “A-Z Rough Furniture” (1998), dark gray foam rubber carved into rocklike formations, Zittel brings the desert topography indoors. The sprawling room-size arrangements or smaller individual pieces are suitable for sitting or reclining and also illustrate Zittel’s astute observation that “Surfaces that are ‘easy to clean’ also show dirt more. In reality a surface that camouflages dirt is much more practical than one that is easy to clean.” More recent constructions include *A-Z Homestead Unit* (2001-05), which in the exhibition is displayed surrounded by a “landscape” of “Rough Furniture.” Based on the various small dwellings that dot the doled-out plots of land around A-Z West (given by the government to people who made minimal “improvements” by building such structures), the shacklike house is a tentative foray into architecture, though because it is portable and measures less than 120 square feet, a building permit is not required. After the structure was picked up by the wind several times at A-Z West, Zittel says, she decided it would become a “gallery piece.” Recalling Zittel’s earlier *A-Z Management and Maintenance Unit, Model 003*, the *A-Z Cellular Compartment Units* (2001) are also intended to maximize space and efficiency. Much larger in size and scope, the modular dwelling on view also borders on architecture, dividing a single space into multifunctional,

Like the emperor’s new clothes or a children’s game of house, the virtual furniture of “A-Z Carpet Furniture” requires a leap of faith.

multilevel specialized chambers for reading, eating, sleeping, etc., not unlike a fancy hamster’s habitat.

If the instruments that we surround ourselves with and the manner in which we use them come under Zittel’s scrutiny, it stands to reason that he would investigate an even more basic construct: the organization of time. *Free Running Rhythms and Patterns* (1999) consists of 27 large mixed-medium panels, lined up along several walls, that track the 168 hours Zittel spent during a residency in Berlin, where she deprived herself of access to “external” time by blocking out natural light and sound and living without a TV, radio or time settings on her computer. Working from a video recording of the activities that filled this weeklong experiment, still images from which are interspersed on the panels, she used differently colored horizontal bars to indicate the amount of time she spent working, sleeping, cooking, cleaning, walking brushing her teeth, etc. As the days pass, the breakdown in circadian time and her daily routine becomes apparent. For example, her sleeping pattern becomes erratic, with spurts of activity at 5 a.m. or mid-afternoon naps (which should be the norm in any sane society, if you ask me). Interestingly, instead of feeling liber-

Foreground, A-Z Carpet Furniture (Bed), 1995, 96 inches square; back wall, A-Z Carpet Furniture (Drop-left Dining Room Table), 1997, 102 by 72 inches; at the Contemporary Art Museums, Houston. Photo Stephanie Cash.



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With *The Regenerating Field*, Zittel recycles pulped paper waste by drying it on steel frames arranged like a Minimalist garden in front of her house.

A-Z Body Processing Unit, 1993, stove top, sink, lighting fixture and mixed mediums, 72 inches high open (36 inches high closed); at the Contemporary Arts Museum. Private collection, Turin. Photo Stephanie Cash.



ated by the lack of structured time, Zittel says she felt the pressure to constantly work (she was preparing for another show) because, unable to track her progress, she was afraid that she was running out of time. Which illustrates another example of something she knows for sure: “Things that we think are liberating can ultimately become restrictive, and things that we initially think are controlling can sometimes give us a sense of comfort and security.”

Zittel’s two-dimensional work often seems to function primarily as an accompaniment for her sculptural pieces (certain drawings being made after the sculptures). But drawing is also a practical way of conveying some of her conceptual ideas or actions, including the Berlin experiment, or projects that were never realized. She has arguably put as much effort into the production of the paintings and drawings, as well as her product brochures and newsletters, as she has into her sculptural work. Included in the show are framed copies of *A-Z Personal Profiles Newsletters* (1996-97) that show Zittel’s early designs in use by the artist, her friends and collector, along with testimonials, anecdotes and Zittel’s accounts of the works’ conception and manufacture. One of my favorite drawings, *Filing System, Joshua Tree, March 2004*, shows orderly stacks of papers arranged on the floor around a laptop, not unlike the scene in my living room; it reflects her surety that “A perfected filing system can sometimes decrease efficiency. For instance, when letters and bills are filed away too quickly, it is easy to forget to respond to them.” Various other drawings and paintings seem little more than vehicles for pithy texts, though a multipanel, gridded study for the large *A-Z Cellular Compartment Unit Communities #5* (2002) is a strikingly bold geometric composition that is pleasing enough on its own.

After establishing A-Z West in Joshua Tree in 2000, Zittel continued to expand her work in new directions. She has set up various customized trailers and storage containers for use as living and work spaces. She has also invited friends and artists to customize their own ‘A-Z Wagon Stations’—one-person shelters inspired by covered wagons and station wagons—and to site them on her land. A sampling of the Wagon Stations is concurrently on view in New York at the Whitney Museum at Altria. At A-Z West, Zittel has recently been focusing on “A-Z Advanced Technologies,” in order to develop new materials and fabrication techniques. In addition to creating her hand-felted “A-Z Fiber Form Uniforms,” she built *The Regenerating Field* (2002), in which she recycles paper waste into decorative or functional panels by pulping it and letting it dry in the sun on 24 steel frames arranged like a Minimalist garden in front of her house. Since she had hoped to recycle her garbage



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View of The Regenerating Field, 2002, a grid of 25 steel trays for recycling paper; in front of the A-Z West Homestead, Joshua Tree. Photo courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

into something useful, like furniture, this advanced technology has yet to live up to its name. .

Ever enterprising, Zittel also co-organizes a (roughly) annual event called High Desert Test Sites, for which artists, mostly friends and invited guests, place experimental works in the desert landscape. The next one is set to take place May 6-7. Zittel, of course, also has one of the better organized, better designed and more efficient artist's Web sites out there: www.zittel.org. ot surprisingly, her work inspires a do-it-yourself spirit in others, if not a bit of cultishness. At the New Museum, Zittel fans have been able to attend the Andrea Zittel Book Club, which has examined books related to the artist's work, including *The Bathroom.*, *the Kitchen*, and *the Aesthetics of Waste* by Abbott Miller and Ellen Lupton, and the creepily dystopian *High Rise* by J.G. Ballard. The museum even held special workshops so visitors could learn to design their own living unit or make their own clothes.

So what more is an artist like Zittel to do? Can she possibly bridge the

gap between the art world and the "real" world? It's a nice idea.

1. Quoted in Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith, *Andrea Zittel: Critical Space*, 2005, Prestel Verlag, Munich, p. 68, from an article by Benjamin Weil, "Home Is Where the Art Is: Andrea Zittel," *Art Monthly*, November 1994, p. 22.

"Andrea Zittel: Critical Spacen was cumted ay Paola Morsiani and Trevor Smith, and organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, where it debuted [Oct. 1, 2005-Jan. 1, 2006], and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, where it is currently on view [Jan. 26-May 27]. The show travels to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo [Oct. 6, 2006-Jan. 7, 2007], the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles [Mar. 4-May 21, 2007], and the Vancouver Art Gallery [June 9-Sept. 16, 2007]. It is accompanied by Morsiani and Smith's 245-page catalogue. A selection of the "A-Z Wagon Stations" can be seen in "Andrea Zittel: Small Liberties" at the Whitney Museum at Altria, Manhattan [Feb. 9-June 18].