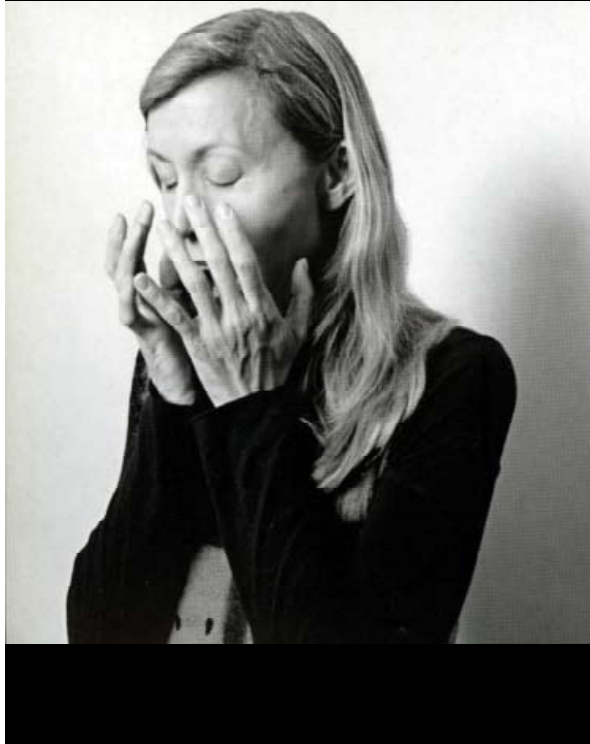


# REGEN PROJECTS

Khiu, Jacqueline. "Life's Work." *Surface* #59 (2006) pp. 104 – 106 [ill.]

## SURFACE

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## Life's Work

For American Artist Andrea Zittel, Who is the subject of two major exhibition in New York, life is an ongoing work of performance art

Story JACQUELINE KHIU Portrait FLOTP+WARNER

New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art has never looked so homey. Hybridized living systems fill one area of the exhibition space like fragments of a disembodied house. In another area, compact trailer-like units with surreal interiors mingle with a sprawling assemblage of chicken coops and a compact modular hut with faux rock landscape. Boxy forms, geometric patterns and graphic blocks of color proliferate. Welcome to Andrea Zittel's *Critical Space*, a retrospective featuring myriad objects, clothing, drawings and structures.

Many of these pieces began their lives in Zittel's home, produced under her pseudo trademark, A-Z Administration Services. After living in New York for several years (A-Z East), Zittel moved out to California to a sprawling property in Joshua Tree (A-Z West). Her life and work are rigorously linked: daily rituals like cooking, cleaning and deciding what to wear become fodder for contemplation and experimentation. She creates highly systematic, often portable domestic objects and structures that are part sculpture, part architecture. These test cases explore ideas about human nature and the social and psychological demands of everyday life - addressing notions of freedom, individualism, mobility and comfort. While *Critical Space* spans Zittel's 15-year career, revealing the depth and breadth of her practice, the Whitney Museum's concurrent show displays several pieces of just one series. *Small Liberties*, on view at the Whitney's Altria space, presents a line-up of "Wagon Stations," customized mobile units created at the Joshua Tree site. Here, Zittel provides some insights into her thought-provoking practice as a living artist.

### How did you decide to make your own life the subject or catalyst for your art?

It all happened somewhat organically. I remember thinking when I first started that if my work failed on the level of art, that it should at least function in some other way in my life, or I should learn something new from the process of making it or living with it. So starting in the early 1990s, I began to see my life and day-to-day activities as an arena for exploration and experimentation. My process was to use myself as my own guinea pig and to use my own experiences to try to construct an understanding of the world at large. I think that I'm generally a pretty good prototype of a "typical" citizen of my own cultural background, age and gender. I'm also a total "product" of the suburban southern California culture that I grew up in - critical of this ultra consumerist culture yet seduced by it.

The one other reason that I like to conduct experiments on myself is that I'm totally unafraid to impose adverse conditions on myself - things that I could never really ask anyone else to go through for the sake of my art.

### How has living and working in the desert affected your ideology?

Living in the desert has helped me live fully in my "own life" and to drop some of the nagging awareness of how my projects would play out in the context of an exhibition. Of course, later on I've had to figure out how to then re-contextualize these pieces for an audience, which isn't always easy. But it does feel like a healthy exercise to go through. Lately, I've become more interested in forms of narrative and representation, which has lead to new works such as the projected piece called "Sufficient Self" at the New Museum and *Small Liberties* at the Whitney Altria. >

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HOME GROWN: Andrea Zittel wearing one of her "Fiber Form" uniforms, which she felted from unprocessed wool to form a seamless dress

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Andrea Zittel: *Critical Space*, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, is on view until May 27, 2006.  
Andrea Zittel: *Small Liberties*, at the Whitney at Altria, ends June 18

## What led you to incorporate approaches of both craft and design in your art?

The most important thing for me is the way the work functions on a psychological level how it explores desires, fantasies or even fears. In some cases, having a piece that is highly produced feels right, and in other situations I opt for something more homegrown. For instance, I wanted the "Escape Vehicles" and "Deserted Islands" to look mass-produced in order to critique how situations of escape and leisure are so completely mediated by a recreation "industry." And my uniforms are, for the most part, quite organic and hand-made because I want to suggest a way that uniformity could still be intimate and expressive.

## Your "Living Units" test streamlined modes of living and ways of improving functionality.

One of the great misconceptions about my work is that I'm interested in improving functionality. In reality, I'm interested in the rhetoric of "improvement" because it expresses so much desire about the way we wish the world could function. It seems to me that there is little inherent purpose, order or justice in this world - yet we are always constructing either physical structures or ideologies to imbue lives with a sense of function and meaning, perhaps as a way of convincing ourselves of a greater order in the universe.

## What's been your most successful piece and what was your least successful?

I'll talk about success and failure through a piece that was possibly my most successful and least successful piece to date. It is called "Free Running Rhythms and Patterns" and was conducted in a basement apartment in Berlin back in 1999 or 2000. For this project I lived for one week without ever knowing what time it was - all sources of natural light or external sound had been blocked off and I removed all clocks, radios or other devices that could tell time. This was truly one of the most amazing experiences of my life. It was shocking how everything could be changed with such a subtle shift of conditions. In that sense, I consider it one of my most successful works.

But it is also one of the pieces that I am the least satisfied with because ultimately there was no way to translate this experience to a larger audience. I still struggle with the challenge that it presented in my work - and with the question of what exactly it is that makes something "art." Is art about having a "real" experience and learning from it - or does art emerge in the act of packaging and communicating that experience? **JK**

Clockwise from top left:

"A-Z Personal Uniforms" (1991-2002). As a gallery assistant in the early 90s, Zittel dealt with the financial and psychological burden of needing professional attire by creating a uniform that she would wear everyday for six months. Originally these were cut and sewn, but over the years, Zittel developed ways to create a garment from a single material source using only her hands. Recently, she has been felting unprocessed wool into a single, organic garment. (Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel. Installation view, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 2004)

"A-Z Breeding Unit for Averaging Eight Breeds" (1993). One of her *Breeding Works*, this piece questions the societal obsession with hierarchy, lineage and domestication by proposing a reverse order, in which eight rare breeds of chicken are interbred, eventually extracting the recessive genes that make them unique, culminating in a completely average - but "natural"-chicken. (The Museum of Contemporary Art, L.A.; Gift of Donatella and Jay Chiat)

"A-Z Homestead Unit with Rough Furniture" (2001-2005). Departing from earlier preoccupations with attaining order and efficiency, Zittel's line of Rough Furniture, customizable multi-purpose objects, addresses the natural human inclination toward disorder; these large soft pieces absorb or camouflage dirt rather than reveal it. (Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

"A-Z 1994 Living Unit Customized for Eileen and Peter Norton." Stemming from her time in New York and the various spaces she lived in, the 'Living Units' organize several domestic activities into one streamlined, foldable structure that expresses how confinement and limits can actually be liberating. The collectors of this work customized it with a microwave and icebox. (Collection of Eileen Harrison Norton and Peter Norton, Santa Monica)