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## **ANDREA ZITTEL'S A-Z WEST: AN ARTIST'S COMMUNITY FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

In March of 2017, I accepted a full-time position at La Trobe University in Mildura, a remote regional town in far North-Western Victoria, Australia. Around the same time, I accepted the role I received notification of this paper's acceptance for publication. The way these events coalesced has affected the shaping of this paper. After several years researching and writing about American artist Andrea Zittel not until now has her decision to establish a life and fulltime studio practice in high desert country, hours from a major city centre shared a correlation with my own situation. This paper is written from an artist's perspective from the outside looking in at Zittel's all-encompassing desire to question "how to live." Zittel's approach is direct; her artistic practice poetically and systematically addresses the construction of human needs as they are directly felt within her immediate desert community. Conversely, my approach to practice is indirect and operates from the point-of-view of the daydreamer musing about what a radically different and



experimental way of living and learning might be like. In other words, if hers is a pragmatic methodology then by contrast mine is utopian and deeply speculative. Although in this regard we approach our artistic practices from diametrically opposed positions (direct versus indirect), our lines of questioning have revealed a shared understanding. That is, when faced with the question of what it means to be an artist in our experience of daily life under the late stages of global capitalism, we have each in our own way discovered that many of the standard regimes within neo-liberalism such as, individualism and the conventional family structure have become problematic. As Felix Guattari observed in *The Three Ecologies*, we will need to reinvent the ways in which we live, we will need to reconstruct the modalities of group being.<sup>1</sup> My analysis of Zittel's *A-Z West* community is problematized in light of the contention it be considered in the context of historical understandings of the commune model. I acknowledge it does not fit within a conventional or strict definition of communitarian practice due to the fact it is not built on the premise of shared possessions or income. Rather, Zittel's community has formed organically over a period of time in response to the demands of her artistic practice and has grown through the achievements of a single persona to develop into an economy requiring she employ a small workforce. For this reason, I propose an examination that highlights the points of intersection between *A-Z West* and the early back-to-the-land communards who established the first wave of North American communes. I will tease-out what I have come to describe as the neo-countercultural characteristics of Zittel's art and life. At the core of this shared pioneering spirit is what Guattari deemed a desire for the reinvention of the ways we live, to allow for new modalities of group being. In this way, I propose *A-Z West* might represent another layer within an expanded understanding of the existing models that have come to define communitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Guattari, F. (2005). *The Three Ecologies*. London-New York: Continuum, p. 24.

practice, particularly given the way her community has evolved from a highly individualistic project in its early life into the multi-faceted social experiment it is today. This paper will not simply summarise Zittel's long list of artistic achievements, instead it offers a specific account of aspects of her artistic practice and self-proclaimed "somewhat experimental life".<sup>2</sup> The paper focuses on what Zittel's art and life has come to represent amongst other contemporary artists living and working within the international community.

### **Inhabiting the Margins**

Recalling Leo Marx's notion of a "middle landscape", Zittel has established a relatively ecologically sensitive, technologically innovative and highly collective site responsive place to live and work.<sup>3</sup> Like the self-determined actions of the back-to-the-land communards of the 1960s and 70s, she has chosen to inhabit the margins, in this instance the area where the garden (high-desert wilderness near Joshua Tree National Park) sits at the edge of the machine (the extremely large-scale suburban sprawl of Los Angeles). When Zittel first moved to her property (referred to by the artist as *A-Z West*) in the Mojave Desert near Joshua Tree National Park (2000), she had already gained international recognition and an established art practice in New York City, with the support of a dynamic network of artists, gallerists, curators, and collectors behind her. Although she retains her association with the east (as well as the ownership of property), she claims her move to the west was driven by a need to return to the desert because of a lifelong connection. She says, "I knew I would end up in the desert living a somewhat experimental

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<sup>2</sup> Zittel, A. (2011). *Lay of my Land*. Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, L. (1964). *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 23.

life, more than I knew I would end up being an artist”.<sup>4</sup> Reportedly, Zittel’s initial intention to move to the desert was part of a fanciful desire to seek out an unencumbered lifestyle. In one of the catalogue essays for *Critical Space* titled ‘Live/Work Space’, Cornelia Butler refers to this “ultimately thwarted fantasy as hiding in plain sight complicated by her gathering of artists around her, creating a kind of collective compound from which she can create art”.<sup>5</sup>

Zittel’s ‘workforce’ has brought to life a dynamic mix of local community and visiting artists and it represents one characteristic that underpins the unique functioning of *A-Z West*. First, the payed employees consist of local community members who seem to have little to no prior connection with the artistic community but through their labour have become integrated participants of the local arts ecology. Second, a recent community of local artists have come together through a desire to utilize the *A-Z West Weaving Studio*, the weavers also assist Zittel in the production of her woven works. Third, a proposal based (and therefore competitive) artist in residency program requires selected visiting artist residents contribute a couple of hours labour each day in return for the experience of staying in the *A-Z Encampment*. The encampment is a communal camping facility complete with communal kitchen facilities and a cluster of *A-Z Wagon Stations* (an actual series of well-known and widely exhibited Zittel artworks). Finally, Zittel invites artists from across the globe to apply as interns, the recipients work closely with and for the artist while staying at her property. Sitting outside of this amalgamation but adding to the flow of people engaged with *A-Z West*, is the popular and periodically organised payed tours allowing interested members of the public to witness Zittel’s art and life in its ‘native’ context. In addition to all of this is the *High Desert Test Sites (HDTs)* event

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<sup>4</sup> Zittel, A. (2011). [*op. cit.*], p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, C. H. (2005). Live/Work Space. In Morsiani, P. A. *Critical Space*. Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, p. 60.

which Zittel and a group of like-minded artist friends, curators and collectors founded in 2002. Since then, the group has hosted the event almost every year. Zittel explains that *HDTS* came out of their shared interest in putting art into the world at large. She became interested in exploring other ways she could facilitate this by sharing her experience of life as an artist in the desert with others. On the *HDTS* website one of the aims of the program is outlined as follows:

To create a ‘center’ outside of any pre-existing centers. We are inspired by individuals and groups working outside of existing cultural capitals, who are able to make intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant work in whatever location they happen to be in.<sup>6</sup>

The pressures associated with the professionalization of the artist today are often a source of anxiety, much of what artists do has nothing to do with the making of art. Artists are just as engaged in public relations, social media networking and administration as most people running a small business. It is clear part of the collectivism that has come to characterise *A-Z West* comes with Zittel’s dual critical awareness and perceptive ability to work with the structure of contemporary artist as highly professional and entrepreneurial. Her early decision to adopt the semi-corporate branding *A-Z* for almost all of her projects stemmed from her inability to have fabricators take her seriously when trying to order elements for artworks. Once she adopted a brand, namely *A-Z Enterprises* people started to take her requests seriously. The *A-Z* brand possesses a self-reflexive almost comic critical awareness of the demands for overt professionalization placed on the artist today, in this way

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<sup>6</sup> Zittel, A. (2012, October 7). *Andrea Zittel*. Retrieved from Andrea Zittel: <[www.zittel.org](http://www.zittel.org)>

it reads as an institutional critique that speaks to Zittel's ability to manipulate the system while also finding a way to make it work in her favour.

All of this begs a number of questions: is Zittel in fact a highly astute business woman who foresaw the potential for substantial professional advancement and commodification in developing and diversifying the cultural capital that flows from the nuanced collective social structure she has constructed around her practice and the *A-Z West* community? Is Zittel aware of this point of difference and has she capitalised on the fact these factors set her apart from other contemporary artists operating on the same global stage? On the other hand, a case could be made for this distinction between the way Zittel operates in comparison to most contemporary artists working at her level who simply choose to pay assistants and forgo the many levels of community engagement she appears to be invested in. What is distinctive about the way Zittel works and the model she has developed is that it does not only support her practice and its labour demands. Through her willingness to open her door to strangers and let the outside world not only witness but play a part in her practice, in a number of ways, she demonstrates a range of meaningful social impacts for the local community as well as the international art community.

### **New Modalities of Group Being**

The aspects of Zittel's art and life I want to highlight owe to her self-determination, enthusiasm for simple human-scale technologies and experimentation with alternative ways of living. As previously mentioned, these qualities share points of intersection with early countercultural environmentalism from the late 60s and early 70s. Furthermore, my previous research has situated some of Felix Guattari's theories from *The Three Ecologies* concerning modalities of group-being in relation to this early

countercultural history.<sup>7</sup> In this light, Zittel's practice also bears a distinct relationship to Guattari's project. Instructive here is a consideration of Guattari's proposed "reconstructing modalities of group-being", through practices of experimentation, instead of clinging to general recommendations, such as the predetermined homogeneity and standardised behaviour characteristic of consumer society.<sup>8</sup> Keeping in mind the first wave of modern countercultural communes occurred in the mid-twentieth century, at this time the accepted definition of communal living was understood as a group of people living together and sharing all possessions and day-to-day responsibilities. I am proposing a loosening of the strict terms in which we define a commune in order to propose a Guattarian reconstruction of another form of group-being. The aim is not to replace the historically established model of the counterculture commune nor to suggest *A-Z West* is a commune, but to accept multiple understandings and examine another form of artist's community and position it alongside its historical commune precedents as one of the many ways people experiment with other ways of living in contrast to the status quo – understood as the pervasive behaviour characteristic of consumer society. For Zittel, who often uses the phrase 'how to live', the search for radical reconstructions forms a central tenet of her practice. In this light, Zittel's experimental testing ground at *A-Z West* can be understood through a Guattarian lens as searching for new modalities of group-being.

According to Guattari, social ecosophy consists of developing specific practices that will modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family in an urban context or at work. He states:

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<sup>7</sup> Banyard, K. (2014). *Imagining alternatives: gazing at the contemporary world through figurations of the outmoded*. Australia: University of New South Wales, p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> Guattari, F. (2005). [*op. cit.*] p. 24.

Obviously it would be inconceivable to try to go back to old formulas, which relate to periods when the planet was far less densely populated and when social relations were much stronger than they are today. But it will be a question of literally reconstructing the modalities of group-being [l'êtreengroupe], not only through communicational interventions but through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity. Instead of clinging to general recommendations we would be implementing effective practices of experimentation, as much on a micro-social level as on a larger institutional scale.<sup>9</sup>

The *A-Z West* community has “develop[ed] specific practices that modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family in an urban context or at work, etc.”<sup>10</sup> Zittel has facilitated an alternative family structure through the professional demands of her practice. Her intensely productive ‘art farm’ attracts younger artists who, whilst working with and for her, often spend time living with her. Zittel appears to be a private person who craves isolation, yet paradoxically her daily rituals are a central component of her practice and thus has become an object of public display. Moreover, Zittel’s way of living and working construct a unique environment, partly driven by her position within the contemporary art world and partly inspired by her connection to the desert. Despite herself, and possibly as a counterbalance to her need for solitude, Zittel and the network of friends and family that surround her experiment with a very open and public way of living – providing a unique example of Guattari’s new modality of “group-being”. It is precisely in this regard that Zittel’s experimental community offers another

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

alternative and different perspective to those previously described as communitarian in relation to Guattari's ideas about "social ecosophy".<sup>11</sup>

For example, The *A-Z Wagon Stations* (2003 to the present) function as personal shelters, with just enough room for one or two people to eat, sleep and contemplate. Inspired by camping, station wagon cars and old-fashioned Wild West covered wagons, each structure has the same exterior shell shape with a curved powder-coated steel front hatch, which doubles as a large door and opening. Zittel describes her *A-Z Wagon Stations* as a project that encourages people to engage with her works in an active way once they own them. She was worried people were buying her works and not using them as functional art objects, so when it came to the wagons, rather than sell them, she give them to friends to own and customise. They also became somewhere to stay when they came to visit her. The customisation resulted in a scatter of similar shaped structures across the land adorned with idiosyncratic decorations – one wagon has even been customised to look like a hot-rod car, with red and yellow flames licking the outside of the structure, another has been customised for meditation. All of the wagon's interiors start minimal, with a small set of corner shelves prompting owners to fill them with objects of their choosing. It is also up to the owner to introduce simple comforts, such as seating mats and sleeping surfaces. The ongoing development of the wagon project has given rise to an incredible looking camping ground where Zittel's friends and collaborators spend time. In recent years, a second generation of wagon stations has become the designated shelters in the camping ground known as *A-Z Encampment* for invited artist's in residence.

In many ways, the wagon stations along with other dwellings and structures the artist has scattered across the landscape at *A-Z West* are reminiscent of the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

configuration of a community of artists who moved to Colorado in the 1970s to establish the commune *Drop City*. However, instead of ad-hoc geodesic domes spread across the rugged landscape, at *A-Z West* a fleet of beautifully designed wagons provide collective shelter. *A-Z West* differs in many ways to *Drop City*, the most obvious being Zittel as the figurehead at the helm of *A-Z West*, by contrast *Drop City* developed as a holistically collective experiment with no leader and all possessions and land shared. It is precisely because Zittel owns the land and her highly successful art practice sustains the running and growth of *A-Z West* that I propose it might offer a glimpse into how a reconfiguring of communal styles of living has evolved over time towards another model with a long-term sustainable potential. *A-Z West* is just one of the many ways people are living collectively. When compared to earlier communal models like *Drop City*, *A-Z West* possesses an increased chance for a long and sustainable future (unlike *Drop City's* short life) because of Zittel's strength at its core. Additionally, because of the social collectivism that has naturally evolved over time at *A-Z West*, Zittel often talks about the future of the property becoming more of an arts-based educational and community facility or foundation, at which stage she sees herself moving-on to another homestead. This shift will lead to the communities' structure changing again and will perhaps see it become less hierarchical and fall in-line with the total collectivism of a traditional commune; it might however shift in the opposite direction towards a highly regulated bureaucratic structure – time will tell.

## Zittel and creative pedagogy

In an interview with Laila Pedro for the Brooklyn Rail Zittel explains her experiences and opinions surrounding the ‘lifestyle industry’. She says:

I’ve been kind of obsessed with the issue of lifestyle because I think it’s something that problematizes the ground that my practice is built on. I’m entirely committed to making work that functions within life and living. To me, life is the thing that matters most. I think life matters even more than art. But there is now an entire “lifestyle industry” that potentially co-opts this idea. The commodification of lifestyle is about creating the illusion of living, and it represses us by instilling a sense of inadequacy that our lives don’t measure up to the displays in decorating magazines or Instagram feeds. How do I create an alternative to “lifestyle?” I think a better term for what I’m after is a life *ethic*, although that can also be problematic because the word ethic suggests a moral or ideological platform. But my personal life ethic is about having a life in which you pay attention and think about how and why things are the way they are, rather than just trying to have a sense of “style” or create “good design”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Pedro, L. (2016, October 4). *Andrea Zittel: In Conversation*. Retrieved from The Brooklyn Rail, Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics and Culture: <<http://brooklynrail.org/2016/10/art/andrea-zittel-with-laila-pedro>>

Zittel's thoughts on the repressive aspect of the 'lifestyle industry' and the role Instagram plays in perpetuating a sense of inadequacy to fuel further consumption of goods to give the illusion of a better life bares an interesting relationship to my own experience of Zittel's very active and intimate Instagram feed. Like many artists today Instagram has become a useful promotional tool, it also allows artists to stay connected to the artistic community no matter where they are. Given Zittel's remote location at *A-Z West*, Instagram keeps us (the public) in-touch with the daily rituals Zittel undertakes in a very casual and immediate way. For me, as one of thousands of artists and members of the general public who follow Zittel – and importantly in stark contrast to her critical commentary on the way the 'lifestyle industry' co-opts ideas surrounding *how to live* – hers is a richly inspiring and empowering feed to follow. In many ways, Instagram helps to keep the utopian imaginary associated with Zittel's community alive. Although we are located on opposite sides of the world, Zittel is one of few established figures within the international art community who self-initiates and provides opportunities for artists like myself to experience valuable time within her community, not as a tourist but potentially as an active contributor – as a potential artist in residence.

It is well documented that Zittel has issues with conventional institutional forms of pedagogy and although she may have never intended it she has become a key figure within the international artistic community for developing an alternative and experiential educational model. In an essay titled 'Academy: The Production of Subjectivity', Simon O'Sullivan refers to the importance of understanding political art practice as not just being about institutional and ideological critique, but as also involving the active

production of our own subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> The collectivism Zittel's practice perpetuates and depends upon enfold others into the subjective realm of her artistic practice, pointing to larger questions about the agency of art and the social. O'Sullivan highlights the importance of "creative pedagogy", methods that involve student participation through workshops or laboratories, models that do not mimic top-down structures in "existence elsewhere".<sup>14</sup> Zittel's carefully constructed community fosters this model of creative pedagogy – of skills and experiential sharing. Whilst she requires many hands to help produce her artworks, she incorporates artist interns and residents into the *A-Z West* working and living environment, unlike many other artists of her generation who simply solely employ paid staff. The stream of enthusiastic artists coming into the community at *A-Z West* provides an atmosphere that reflects Guattari's conception of "processual creativity".<sup>15</sup> O'Sullivan states, "to become involved in our own production of subjectivity, to move from passive spectator to become active participants, to take what we need... in our own project of 'processual creativity'; [is] precisely to treat our lives as a work of art".<sup>16</sup> Andrea Zittel's art and life appears to have managed to achieve her own take on 'processual creativity'. This element of creative pedagogy and Zittel's unique brand of unconventional mentorship contributes to the unique structure of *A-Z West*. Although it cannot be described as a commune in the traditional sense, *A-Z West* possesses a neo-countercultural quality through its echoing of some of the most potent characteristics attributed to the early counterculture communes, such as, self-determination, enthusiasm for simple human-scale technologies and collective experimentation with alternative ways of living. It is precisely in

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<sup>13</sup> O'Sullivan, S. (2006). The Production of Subjectivity. In *Academy*. Frankfurt: Revolver, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Guattari, F. (1995). *Chaomosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*. USA: Indiana Press, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> O'Sullivan, S. (2006). The Production of Subjectivity. [*op. cit.*]

this way and through an expanded and reconfigured lens that I propose *A-Z West* represents a new style of communalism. *A-Z West* is aspirational, it symbolises just one of the many potential contemporary examples of what an artist's community can look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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