

# ANDREA ZITTEL

## idiosyncratic design

Like Pardo, Andrea Zittel is an American artist whose work is an intriguing intersection of the conceptualism of avant-gardism with functional design. The result is idiosyncratic, eccentric and highly personal. She is a cottage industry in the postindustrial age. Unlike Pardo and Gillick, Zittel's work seems closer to a constructivist approach than a concern with style. Her work is not polished and stylish, pop, urban, funky or postmodern. But it does appear to be focused on function, although there is an element of dadaistic absurdity in her designs that is characteristically postmodern.

Her *Collectors Coat for Frank Kolodney*, 1993, is an example of how a focus on function without any reference to stylistic parameters results in a work of art more than a stylish article of clothing. The coat seems self-consciously unfashionable. Like most of Zittel's work its interest lies in its eccentric and oddball character. Imagine Marcel Duchamp as a product designer and you have Andrea Zittel. For example it is interesting to examine her description of the development of her living unit concept from its inception in 1991 to its incarnation in 1993.

Zittel's Management and Maintenance Units are remarkable in that they are dada-constructivist rationalizations of a particular living space beginning with Zittel's South 8<sup>th</sup> Street New York studio and extending into her analyses of the requirement of her collector-customers. She explains that





Zittel's design has a cardboard look akin to Thomas Demand's alienationist photographs of mass media images translated into craft card sculpture translated into photography. Both are typical of the new generation of artists acceptance of their ineluctable immersion in hyperreality.



he rationalization of her studio led to her first Management and Maintenance Unit:

This structure was the first attempt to satisfy the often conflicting needs of security, stability, freedom and autonomy. Owning a Living Unit created the security and permanence of a home which could then be set up inside of homes that other people owned. It provided freedom because whenever the owner wanted to move they could collapse it and move the unit to a new location.

Why one would want to build a living unit within a living unit is a moot point. In this sense Zittel's Living Units become a meditation on the postmodern condition in which mobility is paramount to the extent that we have to live in a device that is located somewhere between a house and a car as is evident when Zittle notes:

A-Z began producing Living Units for others. Because the original unit had jokingly referred to as a Winnebago [a US manufacturer of recreational vehicle/mobile homes] it seemed to make sense to aspire to make the VW Beetle of Living Units. It was also established that the new units would now be designed and produced like cars. Each year a new design would be featured, and as many produced as could be sold. In 1993 two A-Z Living Units were mass produced. {Zittel, 1993}

But what is particularly interesting is her self-critical commentary:

One desire behind the "Management and Maintenance Unit" was to create a habitat that solved all of one's prob-



lems. Instead, the final “pefection” of the unit resulted in loss of direction and a larger sense of general dissatisfaction. This led to a new awareness of how direction, or the idea of progress, can be far more exciting than any possible end ideal. {Zittel, 1993}

Her statement is significant because it suggests that an overwhelming focus on functionality can become an obsessive activity that eventually detracts from usability. It also resonates with Russian Constructivism of the early twentieth century which was primarily conceptual due to the lack of financial and technological resources to actually build anything in a pre-Stalinist, pre-industrialist context. Zittel's problem seems to be the reverse of the Constructivists. She lives in a hyper-industrialized nation with a plethora of resources at her disposal. Yet it is still the conceptual-creative dimension that drives her work. Her Escape Vehicles of 1996 are a case in point. Zittel explains:

During our travels with the A-Z Travel Trailers we observed that most of the trailers in RV [recreational vehicle] parks actually parked permanently on their sites and added elaborate landscaping or “skirts” to conceal the mobility of their vehicles. At first we were disappointed that this seemed to conflict with our romanticized idea of travel trailers were a means to greater freedom. Eventually however we came to realize that rather than finding freedom in mobility, the owners of these trailers actually found their freedom in the intimacy of the small and completely controllable universes that they constructed within their trailers. {Zittel, 2003}



The idea of living in a trailer does appear particularly pertinent to the nomadic trajectory of postmodern living in which one can lose one's job any day and be required to move on.

The A-Z Escape Vehicle is proposed as a new kind of recreational vehicle which can be used to **escape to one's "inner world"** as instead to travelling to a destination in the external world. When you want to escape all you have to do is climb in and close the hatch. Ten identical EVs were constructed at a Camper Company in Southern California. As each trailer was purchased, the new owner then constructed his or her ideal escape fantasy on the inside. Some escape fantasies range from the construction of a floating tank, to a Cinderella carriage crossed with a limousine, to a recreation of a Joseph Cornell environment. {Zittel, 2003}

In her Escape Vehicles Zittel produces a design in which fantasy and function intertwine. The closest correlation I can come up with is with a children's tree house or Wendy house.