Domestic Space, Gendered Experience: Andrea Zittel’s Nomadic Living Units

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Abstract

Andrea Zittel, widely considered one of the most influential artists of the past fifteen years, emerged in 1991 with her “breeding unit” installations: compartmentalized living and breeding spaces for small animals. Since 2001, Zittel has largely produced prototypes of objects for everyday use, from wearable fashion to furniture, vehicles, and portable living structures. These living “units” are frequently either compact, portable dwellings, or modules designed to define an interior space and provide all the necessities of everyday living, including cooking, washing, and sleeping. In an analysis of Zittel’s austere yet consumerist living spaces, this paper examines the intimate link between domestic space and gendered experience. Her modular living units produced over the last six years heighten the confining, claustrophobic aspects of domestic spaces, and their hermetic quality underscores that these spaces frequently render women who inhabit them socially invisible. But Zittel’s mobile and customizable living units also foreground a comforting sense of corporeality and self-sufficiency in residential environments. While her living units develop to an extreme degree the sense of isolation in private dwellings, they recast that isolation as a source of autonomy and creative possibility. The minimalism of Zittel’s interior spaces radically reduces so-called women’s work (the work of caring for the objects inside the home), and her “escape vehicles” invite the viewer to relocate and make a life anywhere at all. My discussion of Zittel’s re-envisioning of the traditionally female sphere draws on Rosi Braidotti’s theories of the female nomadic subject, as well as Elizabeth Grosz’s and Deborah Fausch’s related analyses of how architectural space generates a sense of the gendered body and its powers.

Keywords: Art History, Contemporary Art, Gender

1. Introduction

I want to begin my analysis today of Andrea Zittel’s living structures—which are sometimes portable modules designed to be placed within pre-existing interior spaces and sometimes stand-alone units [Figures 1 and 2]—with the proposition that they can be most productively understood as “hypothetical spaces.” Zittel exhibits these living units in museums and galleries so that they invite the viewer to imagine him or herself inhabiting the spaces, but they are not, in fact, actually available for widespread purchase or use. Zittel will usually construct only one or two “prototypes” for each of her living units, although her promotional materials suggest that she intends the units to be mass-produced.
My analysis of these living units is interested first in Zittel’s imagining of the utopian possibilities of domestic spaces. Typically very small in size, Zittel’s living units celebrate domesticity’s potentiality for hermetic isolation. Emphasizing the insularity of these spaces, Zittel produces dwellings whose very compactness, she seems to assert, is a source of autonomy and independence. In her simulated advertising materials, Zittel articulates this possibility of attaining a personal freedom in her miniaturized living units, where “the ultimate luxury is not a limitless palette, but a small, intimate universe in which to explore the parameters of one’s own personal options.”

Although it is clear in her use of mock-ads and promotional materials that Zittel intends to resist the distinction between high art and commodity culture, her work sets in motion many other concerns as well. My consideration of Zittel’s work is interested in the way she chooses to reimagine the domestic space in a commodified register, and in this paper I will consider the significance of Zittel’s fusion of the domestic with consumerist desire.

2. Zittel’s Reimagining of the Domestic Space

Zittel’s reimagining of the domestic dwelling as a location of utopian possibility stands in contrast to artists of prior decades who have rendered the domestic interior as a site of claustrophobic entrapment, identifying the frightening potentiality of imprisonment within the confined space of the home. Louise Bourgeois is one such artist, as her *Femme Maison* drawings from the 1940s [Figure 3] bring into relief the feminist concern that the isolated domestic space can render its female subjects socially invisible. In the drawings, Bourgeois depicts houses that have contracted so drastically that their female inhabitants are physically imprisoned within them. Not only are the women in Bourgeois’ drawings isolated from the outside world, but the physical structure of the home has become so compressed that the female body becomes almost indistinguishable from the house itself—the domestic space is literally interpenetrating the body. Against a
backdrop of female artists like Louise Bourgeois who direct their artistic gaze at the confining potentiality of the domestic space, Andrea Zittel moves affirmatively toward this aspect as a way of opening up the creative possibilities of the isolated domestic dwelling. In Zittel’s work, a closing in of the physical boundaries of the home is closely tied to the possibility of a heightened self-awareness within that compacted space. Zittel’s series of *A-Z Wagon Stations*, 2003-ongoing [Figure 4], for example, are miniaturized, pod-like living units with extremely compact dimensions—they are only about five feet wide by six feet long. Their hatch-like openings and curved, capsule shape suggest the possibility of an insular retreat, inviting viewers to imagine themselves holing up within the enclosed space of the wagon station to escape the demands of the outside world. Literally drawing in the walls of the living space to offer protection and security, Zittel’s *Wagon Stations* propose that a dramatic reduction of the built space can, paradoxically, lead to an expansion of an intimate knowledge of the self.

![Figure 4. Andrea Zittel, A-Z Wagon Station, 2003-ongoing.](image)

In Zittel’s particular vision of utopian domesticity, the private dwelling is pared down to its most essential elements, as Zittel proposes that we can reach personal harmony most effectively by streamlining and simplifying the places we live. With her focus on minimalist design, Zittel emphasizes the mass-produced, manufactured quality of her living units. Celebrating the imposition on nature that her highly constructed living units seem to pose, Zittel is in contradistinction to other artists who have attempted to merge the domestic space with nature. Alice Aycock and Harriet Feigenbaum are two such artists whose works from the 1970s—a collection of sculptural constructions that have been termed “shelter sculptures”—attempt to integrate the built space of the home with its natural environment. Moving away from the notion of the home as a cultural product, Aycock and Feigenbaum produced dwellings that are deeply rooted in nature, both in their materials and their method of construction. Alice Aycock’s *Williams College Project*, 1974 [Figure 5], is a mound-like shelter with stone walls and a sod roof that seems almost to have risen up out of the earth. Literally embedded in the landscape, Aycock’s sculpture integrated so well with its natural environment that it was accidentally bulldozed in 1983 by a construction crew who mistook it for a pile of dirt.2 Though Harriet Feigenbaum’s series of openwork shelters [Figure 6] are not as deeply enmeshed in their physical surroundings, they still foreground a close fusion with nature. Constructing her dwellings out of logs and branches, Feigenbaum leaves large open spaces between the layers of stacked logs. Emphasizing a sense of permeability, Feigenbaum’s structures allow an open flow between the dwelling and its environment. In this way, both Feigenbaum and Aycock conceive of the home in its most idealized form as emerging from nature rather than existing separate from it as an artificial construction.
Andrea Zittel, on the other hand, embraces this manufactured imposition of culture on nature with her mass-produced living units. While she shares with Aycock and Feigenbaum an attempt to efface the traditional markers of domestic space, Zittel is unlike her earlier counterparts in that she fully embraces the constructedness of the home. In her *A-Z Homestead Unit*, 2003 [Figure 7]—a small, lightweight dwelling that can be disassembled, transported, and relocated relatively quickly and easily—Zittel utilizes synthetic, industrial materials to emphasize that the unit has been manufactured. Constructed of monochromatic, aluminum-framed fiberglass panels, Zittel includes no superfluous decorations or structural embellishments in the *Homestead Unit* design. Rather, in its pristine, fabricated uniformity, the dwelling seems to suggest that personal freedom can be achieved through a sloughing off of all attachments to extraneous material objects. In this way, Zittel’s minimalist living units advance the idea that in reducing all clutter and effectively starting over with a blank slate, her imagined inhabitants can exercise an intimate control over their own personal piece of the universe.

3. Portability and Freedom

For Zittel, this promise of open-ended personal freedom is highly dependent on the portability of her living structures. Unlike the site-specific “shelter sculptures” of previous decades, Zittel’s living units are not contingent on any particular natural environment. Instead, they offer a promise of portability, affirmatively severing a dependency on the land and encouraging Zittel’s imagined users to move and relocate often. In
the photograph of the Homestead Unit, which she has posted on her website as part of her pseudo-advertising campaign, Zittel celebrates what Aycock and Feigenbaum would surely have seen as a loss of a sense of place. Although the dwelling is tucked between boulders and seems almost embedded in nature, the materials and design actively deny any possibility of the unit truly integrating with its natural setting. Seeming to lift away from its physical environment, the Homestead Unit in its industrial design almost projects itself into the near future, to a time when it will no longer be there at all. In this way, Zittel’s promise of a “positive” isolation is enabled by the transportable quality of the units. Not only can Zittel’s hypothetical inhabitants achieve autonomy by living in the confined space of the Homestead Unit and removing themselves from a larger community—they can further exercise their personal freedom by choosing to pick up and move whenever they see fit. Easily transportable from place to place, there is a marked absence in Zittel’s dwellings of a commitment to any particular place. In this way, Zittel’s living units foreground a nomadic sensibility.

4. Nomadism

Zittel’s particular brand of nomadism emerges not only out of a detachment from the natural environment, but her units are also nomadic in a temporal sense. In traditional notions of the domestic space, the home is immovable, linked irrevocably to a particular place and therefore imbued with a certain ability to accrue layers of memory and personal history. Zittel’s living units, however, in their austere and transportable configurations, seem to actively sever all ties with the past, both historical and personal. Among contemporary installation artists who are also working to figure the domestic space, Zittel’s living units stand alone in that they neither produce nor celebrate memories. Zittel’s a-nostalgic relationship to the past diverges quite markedly from the concerns of Tracy Emin, a contemporary artist working in the U.K. who also creates living unit installations. In her tent installation entitled Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995 [Figure 8], Emin uses the built environment as a repository for her own personal memories. Emin lines the walls of her tent with quilted names of all the people she has ever shared a bed with, using the sheltered space to stockpile mementos of intimate relations. In a slightly different register, German artist Gregor Schneider constructs a simulated domestic space to memorialize his childhood home in Haus Ur, 1985-ongoing [Figure 9]. Building nearly identical reproductions of the interior rooms and corridors of his home within the actual house itself, Schneider’s sculptural environment attempts to recreate the memory of his original childhood home through a painstaking process of replicating its built space. Zittel’s living units, on the other hand, appear calculated to erase all historical references to the past, instead asserting the liberating possibility of projecting oneself into the future. Zittel suggests just such an ahistorical possibility in her A-Z Carpet Furniture series, 1992-1993 [Figure 10]. These rugs outline the functions of a room by
gesturing towards beds, chairs, and tables, but these “furniture items” are in fact just designs on the rug. Reducing all the places and objects of the home down to a flat, two-dimensional structure, the Carpet Furniture rugs can be used either by hanging them on the wall as art, or placing them on the floor to generate a living space in virtually any location. Minimalizing the living space by dramatic proportions, Zittel moves purposefully away from the idea proposed by Gregor Schneider that the built environment of the home can serve to accumulate reserves of personal memory.

5. Conclusion

Andrea Zittel’s innovations in her reimaginings of the domestic space are, as I have suggested earlier, particularly evocative because she poses the promise of personal freedom within a commodified register. These utopian possibilities that Zittel mines from the domestic dwelling are very different from the ways in which other artists of her time and of similar concerns have figured the domestic space. One of the reasons why Zittel has garnered so much attention in the past fifteen years is not only because of her revisioning of the site of domesticity, but also because of the way in which her work defies traditional boundaries between high art and commodity culture. But, how are we to understand the utopian possibilities Zittel offers if, in fact, the promises of her mock-advertising materials can’t actually be fulfilled? Zittel markets and designs her living units as though she intends them to be mass-produced, but their status as one-of-a-kind art objects ultimately frustrates this promise of widespread availability. What are we to make, then, of this fact that the desire Zittel generates for her “products” exists purely within a virtual circuit: desire is incited, but can never really be fulfilled? Is she on the one hand offering the possibility of personal freedom, but on the other recognizing the impossibility of ever attaining freedom within a consumer register? Does she recognize, as Deleuze and Guattari do in their discussion of the nomadic subject, that desire in commodity culture is always generated outside of the self? I would suggest not, as I believe that Zittel’s work on the whole proposes a utopian possibility that is unironic and stands only at face value. Ultimately, although Zittel may not be recognizing that there are limits to a vision of freedom that exists solely within a commodified realm, she nevertheless offers an innovative take on the liberating possibilities of the domestic space.

6. Endnotes

7. References


