

GRACE NDIRITU

KARRABING FILM COLLECTIVE

ANDREA ZITTEL



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THE COMING COMMUNITY



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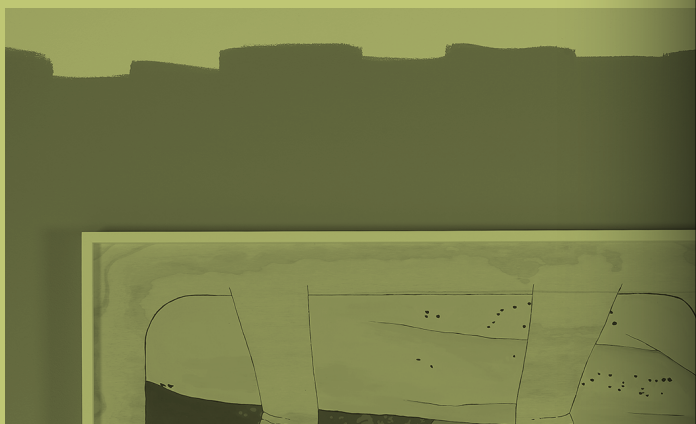
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## WHAT IS TO COME

Edward Ball

How do we want to be? As the climate change movement Extinction Rebellion's chorus of protest echoes ever louder around the globe, the question may already be obsolete. We are in a climate emergency, the planet irrevocably altered by human activity and extractive capitalism's depletion of natural resources. A concurrent sweep of populism in global politics adds complexity to the necessary task of reducing emissions. As novelist Margaret Atwood recently stated: 'Populism offers a vision of the past when we need to look at the now of climate change.'<sup>1</sup> Extinction Rebellion is that 'now', and is notable for its vision for a citizen's assembly – a grassroots global force in the face of emergency, aiming to compel governments into action. The questions we must formulate are those of adaptability – what is to come?

The exhibition title and concept, *The Coming Community*, draws from Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of community as one of singularities; one which continuously shifts and reforms itself; one which is not bound by fixed groupings of nationality, religion, geography; one which accommodates difference. Agamben developed this philosophical work in a collection of essays published in English in 1993, yet his text feels more vital than ever.<sup>2</sup> The present continuous implied by 'coming' keeps his work in the fluid near-present, acting as a call to keep working, to stay agile, to keep formulating and reformulating. How can we think

### Cover and inside cover images

- 1 Grace Ndiritu, *The Ark*, Installation View, The Bluecoat, 2019. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Rob Battersby
- 2 Andrea Zittel, *Wagon Station Encampment 2012 – current at A-Z West*. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Lance Brewer
- 3 Karrabing Film Collective, *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland*, 2018. Courtesy the artists
- 4 Andrea Zittel, *Native Experience and the three dynamic orders of its expression #1*, 2010. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London
- 5 Grace Ndiritu, *COVERSLUT@*. Courtesy the artist
- 6 Karrabing Film Collective, *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland*, 2018. Courtesy the artists
- 7 Andrea Zittel, *Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki

through Agamben's ideas in our contemporary context of the climate emergency?

This project brings together two artists and an artist collective – Grace Ndiritu, Andrea Zittel and the Karrabing Film Collective – artists who are all invested in imagining new ways of being together in the face of global political and ecological instability. The artists' projects draw from diverse geographies and each envisions community or collective strategies for living together in the face of change. The metaphor of the land recurs throughout the exhibition, this publication and each artist's practice more broadly – reinforcing that our planet is not a resource to be plundered, but is something we exist within. Rather than just critique the structures within which they operate, these artists propose embedded practices of adaptation to their ecologies and alongside this approach, author and theorist Donna Haraway's conception of 'situated knowledges' helps us here.<sup>5</sup> For Haraway, the perception of a situation is always a matter of an embodied, located subject and a geographically and historically specific perspective. This perspective, as for Agamben, constantly forms itself and is re-formed by those conditions. These artists ask us to consider – from our own vantage points as readers, as institutions, as citizens – how we can collectively rethink culture so that it is regenerative.

The British/Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu is profoundly invested in alternative ways of living – in 2012 the artist took the radical decision to be in a city only when absolutely necessary, choosing to live a nomadic life and staying in alternative, often spiritual, and rural communities around the

world. This experience led to the development of her research project *The Ark: Center for Interdisciplinary Experimentation* (2017). In 2014, Ndiritu put out a call for participants to join her in an 'experiential laboratory/closed seminar/performative experimental think-tank workshop/community/camp summit', focusing on the role of art, science, spirituality and politics. *The Ark* was designed as an intensive retreat, with no audience for the first six days to allow the participants to delve deeper into their topics and to encourage vulnerability and new, radical ways of thinking.<sup>4</sup> *The Coming Community* incorporates materials from the project archive, and elsewhere in this book Ndiritu reflects on the complex interpersonal dynamics she explored as part of this temporary community structure.

Ndiritu's research project *COVERSLUT@* reminds us that ecological and ethical issues are economic ones too. Founded by Ndiritu in 2018, it is the world's first 'pay what you can' clothing label. The project uses only ethically sourced materials, and focuses on dealing with issues of race, gender and class politics while working with and providing income for refugees, migrants and young artists. *COVERSLUT@* runs through the public programme, appearing as a pop-up during the course of the exhibition's run and acting as a catalyst for discussion on how to build a sustainable and ethical economic framework within the fashion industry.

Textiles and clothing are a key part of American artist Andrea Zittel's inquiry into how to live. Zittel began her ongoing *Seasonal Uniforms* in 1991. The artist designs an outfit which she then wears daily



for three months straight, radically simplifying one aspect of her daily life, while also reflecting on sustainability and rejecting the throwaway nature of consumer culture. This project is just one aspect of her *gesamtkunstwerk A-Z West*, an ongoing artwork begun almost 20 years ago, located on over 70 acres in the California high desert next to Joshua Tree National Park. Zittel describes *A-Z West* as ‘an evolving testing ground for living – a place in which spaces, objects and acts of living all intertwine into a single ongoing investigation [of] what it means to exist and participate in our culture today’.<sup>5</sup> Zittel’s own life is her art: her prototypes for living explore the ‘complex relationships between our need for freedom, security, autonomy, authority and control – observing how structure and limitations often have the capacity to generate feelings of freedom beyond open-ended choices’.<sup>6</sup> Her remarkably consistent and dedicated sphere of artistic activity asks: what other ways of living are there?

Where Zittel’s art explores how to live, Karrabing Film Collective use their aesthetic practices to reflect on modes of grassroots self-organisation. Most Karrabing are Indigenous and live in a rural community in the Northern Territory of Australia with low or no income. Formed around 2010 ‘in the shadow of the Australian state’s assault on Indigenous social worlds and lands, their films and artworks represent their lives, create bonds with their land, and intervene in global images of indigeneity’.<sup>7</sup> Their highly inventive cinematic language carves a unique space between artists’ film, activism, narrative cinema and ground-up self-representation. The

Collective’s most recent film *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland* (2018) is a surreal exploration of western toxic contamination, capitalism and human and non-human life. Set in a land and seascape poisoned by capitalism, where only Aboriginal peoples can survive for long periods outdoors, the film tells the story of ‘a young Indigenous man, Aiden, taken away when he was just a baby to be a part of a medical experiment to save the white race. He is then released back into the world to his family. As he travels with his father and brother across the landscape, he confronts two possible futures and pasts’,<sup>8</sup> which are embodied by his own tale and the timely narratives of multinational chemical and extractive industries.

The film is the most overt rebuke to government and to state mechanisms of control in the exhibition. Its apocalyptic, inhospitable scenes recall the hostile desert environment in which Andrea Zittel has made her home and reflects on the politics of the land. The film seems to foreground what could happen to our environment if we don’t rapidly begin to take action and adapt to a changing climate and febrile geopolitics. At the time of writing, US Democrats bring impeachment proceedings against their climate-change-denying president; the UK Supreme Court finds against its own prime minister; Anti-Extradition protests rage in Hong Kong; Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro sits back as the Amazon rainforest burns. Institutions will not save us. Yet, in Agamben, we find hope. From his theorisations of community came a ‘coming politics’ – a vision of the collapse of the border between politics and life. Agamben’s new politics would be a politics without any reference to



sovereignty or any of its associated concepts: such as nationhood, government, democracy.

The voices, texts and positions live here together in this book freed from the sovereignty of belonging: from theorist and filmmaker Elizabeth A Povinelli's eloquent requiem to late liberalism and analysis of biopolitics, to Grace Ndiritu's reflections on *The Ark* and Karrabing Film Collective's own words about actively using self-organisation in their aesthetic practices. Where these voices all come together, in this moment, is in investigation of how we might 'be' differently; how can we promote justice, equity, reparation and adaptation. The poet, the antagonist, the activist – *The Coming Community* is all of these singularities at once. In the words of Agamben:

At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 Margaret Atwood, Interview, *The Sunday Times Style* magazine, 8 September 2019.
- 2 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt, Brian Massumi (eds.), trans. Michael Hardt, *Theory Out of Bounds*, vol.1., University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- 3 See Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol.14, no.3, autumn 1988.
- 4 See Grace Ndiritu text in this publication.
- 5 <http://www.zittel.org/work/a-z-west> (all website links accessed 4 October 2019).
- 6 <http://www.zittel.org/work/a-z-west>.
- 7 See Karrabing Film Collective text in this publication.
- 8 Karrabing Film Collective, film synopsis, 2018.
- 9 Agamben, *op. cit.*, p.106.

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2 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Sandra Buckley,

Andrea Zittel  
*Planar Pavilions at A-Z West*, 2017  
cement blocks, paint  
Dimensions variable  
Copyright Andrea Zittel, courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles  
Photo: Sarah Lyon

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At the point  
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- 1 Margaret Atwood  
magazine, 8 S
- 2 Giorgio Agam

Andrea Zittel  
*A-Z Fiber Form: Pink and White Shirt,*  
2002  
signed, titled, dated on front  
Australian merino wool, 3 inch skirt pin  
45.7 × 38.1 cm / 18 × 15 in  
Copyright Andrea Zittel, courtesy Sadie  
Coles HQ, London

*Planar*  
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In the year 2000, the American artist Andrea Zittel left behind a burgeoning artistic career in New York and decamped to the Joshua Tree desert. She lives and works there to this day within *A-Z West* – the artist's ongoing inquiry into what it takes to sustain a life, both philosophically and practically. While still living in New York in the early 1990s, Zittel began creating her *Seasonal Uniforms* – a series which she continues to work on, and wear, to this day. Zittel designs an outfit every three months to reflect seasonal changes: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Alongside this project's exploration of functionality and design, Zittel's work also refuses our contemporary cultural impulses towards the new. We now rightly



see fast and throwaway fashion as economically and ecologically damaging, but Zittel long anticipated this.

Over the past almost 20 years, Zittel's remarkably consistent and committed artistic project *A-Z West* – her 'life's practice' as the artist has stated – has led to the development on site of guesthouses, informal classrooms, studios and workspaces, all in the context of the challenging desert environment. The ecology of *A-Z West* has also seen the development of an informal and constantly shifting community of local tradespeople, international artists, thinkers and makers. Whether passing through, working on a project with Zittel or visiting, Zittel's *A-Z West* ecosystem continually reforms itself.

Why has it taken this long for contemporary ecological thinking to catch up with Zittel? In the context of our climate emergency, some people now look for ways to travel less, to create less waste, to extract fewer resources. Zittel has been doing this for almost 25 years, driven as much by philosophical questions of how to live as by ecological activism, though in the end the two are closely bound. The artist's life at *A-Z West* is no abstract utopia; it is a functional community, albeit one rooted through a committed, ongoing inquiry into how we can live differently, better and more sustainably. Choosing to move to and live in the desert isn't a rejection of the urban, but is instead a creative project – one that explores what can emerge through the limitations of a hostile environment. Zittel continually adapts to her surroundings – a life's work.

1 <http://www.zittel.org/work/a-z-west>

## GEONTOLOGIES: THE FIGURES AND THE TACTICS

Elizabeth A Povinelli

For a long time many have believed that Western Europe spawned and then spread globally a regime of power best described as biopolitics. Biopolitics was thought to consist of a 'set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.'<sup>1</sup> Many believe that this regime was inaugurated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then consolidated during the 1970s. Prior to this, in the age of European kings, a very different formation of power, namely, sovereign power, reigned. Sovereign power was defined by the spectacular, public performance of the right to kill, to subtract life, and, in moments of regal generosity, to let live. It was a regime of sovereign thumbs, up or down, and enacted over the tortured,



Do you believe in your mother's Dreaming?

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Karrabing Film Collective, *When the Dogs Talked* (still), 2014  
Courtesy the artists





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Karrabing Film Collective, *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams* (still), 2016  
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How different does that formation of power seem to how we conceive of legitimate power now, what we ask of it, and, in asking, what it creates? And how different do the figures seem through which the contemporary formation of power entails its power? We do not see kings and their subjects, or bodies hacked into pieces, but states and their populations, individuals and their management of health, the Malthusian couple, the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child. Sure, some social formations seem to indicate a return to sovereign power, such as the US and European security states and their secret rendition centres created in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, 11-M (the Madrid train bombings), Charlie Hebdo ... But these manifestations of a new hard sovereign power are deeply

insinuated in operations of biopower – through the stochastic rhythms of specific algorithms and experiments in social media – something Foucault anticipated in his lectures on security, territory and population.<sup>3</sup> Is it such a wonder, then, that some believe a great divide separates the current regime of biopolitics from the ancient order of sovereignty? Or that some think that disciplinary power (with its figures of camps, barracks and schools, and its regularisation of life) and biopolitics (with) its four figures of sexuality, its technological tracking of desire at the level of the individual and population, and its normation of life) arch their backs against this ancient savage sovereign *dispositif*?

Foucault was hardly the first to notice the transformation of the form and rationale of power in the long history of Western Europe – and, insofar as it shaped the destinies of its imperial and colonial reach, power writ globally. Perhaps most famously, Hannah Arendt, writing nearly 20 years before Foucault would begin his lectures on biopower, bewailed the emergence of the ‘Social’ as the referent and purpose of political activity.<sup>4</sup> Arendt did not contrast the era of European kings and courts to the modern focus on the social body, but rather she contrasted the latter to the classical Greek division between public and private realms. For Arendt the public was the space of political deliberation and action carved out of and defined by its freedom from and antagonism to the realm of necessity. The public was the active exclusion of the realm of necessity – everything having to do with the physical life of the body – and this exclusion constituted the public realm as such. For Arendt, the space of necessity began leaking into the public during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, creating a new topology of the public and private. She termed this new spacing ‘the Social’. Rather than excluding bodily needs, wants, and desires from political thought, the liberal ‘Social’ state embraced them, letting loose *homo economicus* to sack the public forum and establish itself as the *raison d’être* of the political. Ever since, the liberal state gains its legitimacy by demonstrating that it anticipates, protects, and enhances the biological and psychological needs, wants, and desires of its citizens.

If Foucault was not the first word on the subject of biopolitics he was also not the last. As lighthearted as his famous quip might have been that this century would bear the name ‘Deleuze’, he would no doubt have been pleased to see the good race that his concept of the biopolitical has run, spawning numerous neologisms (biopower, biopolitics, thanatopolitical, necropolitics, positive and negative forms of biopower, neuropolitics) and spreading into anthropology, cultural and literary studies, political theory, critical philosophy, and history. Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway would explore the concept of auto-immunity from the point of view of the biopolitical.<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben would put Arendt and Foucault in conversation in order to stretch the origins of the emergence of the biopolitical back to Greek and Roman law.<sup>6</sup> Roberto Esposito would counter the negative readings of Agamben by arguing that a positive form of biopolitics could be found in innovative readings of Martin Heidegger, Georges Canguilhem, and Baruch Spinoza.<sup>7</sup> Foucault’s concept of biopolitics has also been battered by accusations of a narcissistic provinciality.<sup>8</sup> This provinciality becomes apparent when biopolitics is read from a different global history – when biopolitics is given a different social geography. Thus many authors across the global south have insisted that it is impossible to write a history of the biopolitical that starts and ends in European history, *even when* Western Europe is the frame of reference. Achille Mbembe, for instance, argued that the sadistic expressions of German Nazism were genealogically related to the sadisms of European colonialism. In the colonial space ‘the generalised instrumentalisation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations’ were the experimental precursor for the extermination camps in Europe.<sup>9</sup> And before Mbembe, W E B Du Bois argued that the material and discursive origins of European monumentalism, such as the gleaming boulevards of Brussels, were found in the brutal colonial regimes of the Congo.<sup>10</sup> This global genealogy of both the extraction and production of materiality and life has led Rosi Braidotti to conclude, ‘Bio-power and necro-politics are two sides of the same coin.’<sup>11</sup>

But are the concepts of biopolitics, positive or negative, or necropolitics, colonial or postcolonial, the formation of power



in which late liberalism now operates – or has been operating? If, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, concepts open understanding to what is all around us but not in our field of vision, does biopolitics any longer gather together under its conceptual wings what needs to be thought if we are to understand contemporary late liberalism?<sup>12</sup> Have we been so entranced by the image of power working through life that we haven't noticed the new problems, figures, strategies and concepts emerging all around us, suggesting another formation of late liberal power – or the revelation of a formation that is fundamental to but hidden by the concept of biopower? Have we been so focused on exploring each and every wrinkle in the biopolitical fold – biosecurity, biospectrality, thanatopoliticality – that we forgot to notice that the figures of biopower (the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, the perverse adult and the masturbating child; the camps and barracks, the panopticon and solitary confinement), once so central to our understanding of contemporary power, now seem not as decisive, to be inflected by or giving way to new figures: the Desert, the Animist, the Virus? And is a return to sovereignty our only option for understanding contemporary late liberal power? This text attempts to elaborate how our allegiance to the concept of biopower is hiding and revealing another problematic – a formation for want of a better term I am calling *geontological power*, or *geontopower*.

So let me say a few words about what I mean by geontological power, or geontopower, although its scope and import can only be known in the immanent worlds in which it continues to be made and unmade – one of which this text engages. The simplest way of sketching the difference between geontopower and biopower is that the former does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife.<sup>13</sup> This text argues that as the previously stable ordering divisions of Life and Nonlife shake, new figures, tactics and discourses of power are displacing the biopolitical quartet. But why use these terms rather than others? Why not use meteorontological power, which might more tightly reference

the concept of climate change? Why not coin the ill-sounding term 'gexistent', given that throughout my work I use the term 'existent' to reference what might elsewhere be described as life, thing, organism, and being? Wouldn't gexistence better semanticise my claim, elaborated below, that western ontologies are covert biontologies – western metaphysics as a measure of all forms of existence by the qualities of one form of existence (*bios, zoe*) – and that biopolitics depends on this metaphysics being kept firmly in place? In the end I decided to retain the term *geontology* and its cognates, such as *geontopower*, because I want to intensify the contrasting components of nonlife (*geos*) and being (ontology) currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets. Thus, geontology is intended to highlight, on the one hand, the biontological enclosure of existence (to characterise all existents as endowed with the qualities associated with Life). And, on the other hand, it is intended to highlight the difficulty of finding a critical language to account for the moment in which a form of power long self-evident in certain regimes of settler late liberalism is becoming visible globally.

Let me emphasise this last point. Geontopower is not a power that is only now emerging to replace biopolitics – biopower (the governance through life and death) has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the lively and the inert). And, similarly to how necropolitics operated openly in colonial Africa only later to reveal its shape in Europe, so geontopower has long operated openly in settler late liberalism and been insinuated in the ordinary operations of its governance of difference and markets. The attribution of an *inability* of various colonised people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life has been the grounds of casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference. Thus the point of the concepts of geontology and geontopower is not to found a new ontology of objects, nor to establish a new metaphysics of power, nor to adjudicate the possibility or impossibility of the human ability to know the truth of the world of things. Rather they are concepts meant to help make visible the figural

tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing *biontological orientation and distribution* of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason. And, more specifically, they are meant to illuminate the cramped space in which my Indigenous colleagues are forced to manoeuvre as they attempt to keep relevant their critical analytics and practices of existence.<sup>14</sup> In short, geontopower is not a concept first and an application to my friends' worlds second, but a concept that emerges from what late liberal governance looks like from this cramped space.

To begin to understand the work of the concept of geontopower relative to biopower, let me return to Foucault's three formations of power and ask two simple questions, the answers to which might have seemed long settled. First: Are the relations among sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower ones of implication, distinction, determination or set membership? And, second: Did Foucault intend these modes of power to be historical periodisations, quasi-transcendent metaphysics of power, or variations within a more encompassing historical and social framework? Let's remember that for all our contemporary certainty that a gulf separates sovereignty from discipline power and biopower, Foucault seemed unsure of whether he was seeing a shared concept traversing all three formations of power or seeing three specific formations of power, each with their own specific conceptual unity. On the one hand, he writes that the eighteenth century witnessed 'the appearance (*l'apparition*) – one might say the invention – of a new mechanism of power which had very specific procedures, completely new instruments, and very different equipment.'<sup>15</sup> And yet Foucault also states that the formations of power do not follow each other like beads on a rosary. Nor do they conform to a model of Hegelian *aufhebung*; sovereignty does not dialectically unfold into disciplinary power and disciplinary power into biopolitics. Rather, all three formations of power are always co-present, although how they are arranged and expressed relative to each other vary across social time and space.<sup>16</sup> For example, German fascism deployed all three formations of power in its Holocaust – the figure of Hitler exemplified the right of the sovereign to

decide who was enemy or friend and thus could be killed or allowed to live; the gas chambers exemplified the regularity of disciplinary power; and the Aryan exemplified governance through the imaginary of population and hygiene.

We can find more recent examples. President George W Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, steadfastly and publicly claimed the right to extrajudicial killing (a right the subsequent president also claims). But they did not enact their authority in public festivals where victims were drawn and quartered, but rather through secret human and drone-based special operations or in hidden rendition centres. And less explicit, and thus potentially more productive, new media technologies like Google and Facebook mobilise algorithms to track population trends across individual decisions, creating new opportunities for capital and new means of securitising the intersection of individual pleasure and the well-being of certain populations, what Franco Berardi has called 'semicapitalism'.<sup>17</sup> These modern tactics and aesthetics of sovereign power exist alongside what Henry Giroux, building on Angela Davis's crucial work on the prison industrial complex, has argued are the central features of contemporary US power: biosecurity with its panoply of ordinary incarceration blocks and severe forms of isolation.<sup>18</sup> But even here, where US sovereignty seems to manifest its sharpest edge – state-sanctioned, prison-based killing – the killings are heavily orchestrated with an altogether different aesthetic and affective ordering from the days of kings. This form of state killing has witnesses, but rather than hawking wares these witnesses sit behind a glass wall where a curtain is discreetly drawn while the victim is prepared for death – or if 'complications' arise, it is quickly pulled shut. The boisterous crowds are kept outside: those celebrating kept on one side of a police barrier, those holding prayer vigils on the other side. Other examples of the co-presence of all three formations of power float up in less obvious places – such as in the changing public announcements to passengers as Qantas flights approach Australian soil. Whereas staff once announced that passengers should be aware of the country's strict animal and plant quarantine regulations, they now announce the country's strict 'biosecurity laws'.



And yet across these very different entanglements of power we continue to use the language of sovereignty, disciplinary power and biopolitics as if these formations were independent of each other and of history. It is as if, when we step into their streams, the currents of these various formations pull us in different directions. On the one hand, each formation of power seems to express a distinct relation, aesthetic and tactic even as, on the other hand, we are left with a lingering feeling that some unnamed shared conceptual matrix underpins all three – or at least sovereign power on the one side and disciplinary and biopower on the other. I am hardly the first to notice this. Alain Badiou notes that, as Foucault moved from an archaeological approach to a genealogical one, 'a doctrine of "fields"' began to substitute for a sequence of 'epistemological singularities' in such a way that Foucault was brought back 'to the concept and to philosophy'.<sup>19</sup> In other words, while Badiou insists that Foucault was 'neither a philosopher nor a historian nor a bastardised combination of the two', he also posits that something like a metaphysical concept begins to emerge in his late work, especially in his thinking about biopolitics and the hermeneutics of the self and other. For Badiou this concept was power. And it is exactly here that the difference between biopolitics and geontopower is staked.

Rather than power, I would propose that what draws the three formations together is a common but once unmarked ontological assertion, namely, that there is a distinction between Life and Nonlife that makes a difference. Now, and ever more globally, this assertion is marked. For example, the once unremarkable observation that all three formations of power (sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower) work only 'insofar as man is a living being' (*une prise de pouvoir sur l'homme en tant qu'être vivant*) today trips over the space between *en tant que* and *tant que*, between the 'insofar as' and the 'as long as.' This once perhaps not terribly belaboured phrasing is now hard to avoid hearing as an epistemological and ontological conditional: all three formations work as long as we continue to conceptualise humans as *living things* and *as long as humans continue to exist*. Yes, sovereignty, discipline and biopolitics stage, aestheticise,

and publicise the dramas of life and death differently. And, yes, starting from the eighteenth century, the anthropological and physical sciences came to conceptualise humans as a single species subject to a natural law governing the life and death of individuals and species. And, yes, these new discourses opened a new relationship between the way that sovereign law organised its powers around life and death and the way that biopolitics did. And, yes, Foucault's quick summary of this transformation as a kind of inversion from the right to kill and let live to the power of making live and letting die should be modified in the light of the fact that contemporary states make live, let die and kill. And, yes, all sorts of liberalism seem to evidence a biopolitical stain, from settler colonialism to developmental liberalism to full-on neoliberalism.<sup>20</sup> But something is causing these statements to be irrevocably read and experienced through a new drama, not the drama of life and death, but a form of death that begins and ends in Nonlife – namely the extinction of humans, biological life, and, as it is often put, the planet itself – which takes us to a time before the life and death of individuals and species, a time of the *geos*, of soulessness. The modifying phrase 'insofar as' now foregrounds the *anthropos* as just one element in the larger set of not merely animal life but all Life as opposed to the state of original and radical Nonlife, the vital in relation to the inert, the extinct in relation to the barren. In other words, it is increasingly clear that the *anthropos* remains an element in the set of life only insofar as Life can maintain its distinction from Death/Extinction and Nonlife. It is also clear that late liberal strategies for governing difference and markets also only work insofar as these distinctions are maintained. And it is exactly because we can hear 'insofar' that we know that these brackets are now visible, debatable, fraught and anxious. It is certainly the case that the statement 'clearly, x humans are more important than y rocks' continues to be made, persuade, stop political discourse. But what interests me is the slight hesitation, the pause, the intake of breath that now can interrupt an immediate assent.

This is the formula that is now unraveling: Life (Life(birth, growth, reproduction)v. Death) v. Nonlife.

This text is excerpted from the first chapter of *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* by Elizabeth A Povinelli, Copyright Duke University Press, 2016.

- 1 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*, trans. Graham Burchell, Picador, 2009, p.1.
- 2 Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, Basic Books, 2009.
- 3 See, for example, Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*, Duke University Press, 2014.
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *On the Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- 5 See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey Benjamin, University of Chicago Press, 2009; and Donna Haraway, 'The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol.1, no.1, 1989, pp.3–43.
- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- 7 See Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, University of Minneapolis Press, 2008; and Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- 8 See, for comparative purposes, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2007.
- 9 Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, vol.15, no.1, 2003, p.14. See also Rosi Braidotti, 'Bio-Power and Necro-Politics: Reflections on an Ethics of Sustainability', *Springer*, vol.2, no.7, 2007.
- 10 David Levering Lewis, *W E B Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919–1963*, Henry Holt, 2000, especially pp.394–96.
- 11 Braidotti, *op. cit.*
- 12 I understand 'concept' in the broad sense in which Deleuze and William James approached the work of conceptualisation, namely to actualise a series of quasi-events into a threshold. See William James, *Pragmatism*, Dover, 1995; Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, 1996; and Isabelle Stengers, 'Gilles Deleuze's Last Message'.
- 13 Thus the concepts of geontology (Nonlife being) and geontopower (the power of and over Nonlife beings) are meant to indicate the current phase of thought and practice that define late liberalism – a phase that is simultaneously reconsolidating this distinction and witnessing its unravelling.

- 14 I will argue that a crucial part of what is forming this cramped space is a homology between natural life and critical life as techniques, vocabularies, and effective means for creating forms of existence – a scarred homology between the drama of natural life of birth, growth, and reproduction, and the death and drama of the critical life events conatus and affectus and finitude. This cramping is not happening in the abstract but through late liberal ways of governance of difference and markets.
- 15 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey, Picador, 2003, p.35.
- 16 See Esposito, *op. cit.*, p.57.
- 17 See Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, Automedia, 2009. See also Andre de Macedo Duarte, 'Hannah Arendt, Biopolitics and the Problem of Violence: From Animal Laborans to Homo Sacer', in Dan Stone and Richard King (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race and Genocide*, Berghahn, 2007, pp.191–204; and Claire Blencowe, 'Foucault's and Arendt's 'Insider View' of Biopolitics: A Critique of Agamben,' *History of the Human Sciences*, vol.23, no.5, 2010, pp.113–30.
- 18 Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 83; Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire*, Seven Stories Press, 2005. See also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, University of California Press, 2007; and Masco, *Theater of Operations*.
- 19 Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, Verso, 2012, pp.87, 93, 97.
- 20 See, for example, Scott Lauria Morgenson, 'The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now,' *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol.1, no.1, 2011, pp.52–76; and Sandro Mezzadra, Julian Reid and Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biopolitics of Development: Reading Michel Foucault in the Postcolonial Present*, Springer, 2013.

## KARRABING FILM COLLECTIVE

The Karrabing Film Collective began to form in 2010, in the shadow of the Australian state's assault on Indigenous social worlds and lands. The collective is a grassroots arts and film group who use their aesthetic practices as a means of self-organisation and social analysis. Most Karrabing are Indigenous, and live in a rural community in the Northern Territory with low or no income. Their films and artworks represent their lives, create bonds with their land, and intervene in global images of indigeneity. They develop local artistic languages and forms, while allowing audiences to understand new modes of collective Indigenous agency. Their medium is a form of survivance – a refusal to relinquish their country



rural and remote Indigenous communities, forcing them into low wage jobs or more typically did not care about what happened to them after they left their lands. This tactic assumes that, once removed from one's country or place, 'land' increasingly becomes an abstraction rather than an embodied relation. Consequently, the need for a 'means of life' increases. As an abstraction, the seductions of capital and the capitalisation of land become more seductive.

Karrabing filmmaking refuses both forms of state disconnection – the disconnection of families and the disconnection of families and generations from their memories and lands. Karrabing does not refer to a single family's land or totem but to a condition of the saltwater tides. Karrabing is the saltwater that connects across family lands and is the condition of their existence. And Karrabing filmmaking provides the practices of memory that continually re-embodiment people and place.

Karrabing Film Collective members: Trevor Bianamu, Gavin Bianamu, Sheree Bianamu, Ricky Bianamu, Taleesh Bianamu, Danielle Bigfoot, Kelvin Bigfoot, Rex Edmunds, Chloe Gordon, Claudette Gordon, Ryan Gordon, Claude Holtze, Ethan Jorroch, Marcus Jorroch, Reggie Jorroch, Patsy-Anne Jorroch, Daryl Lane, Lorraine Lane, Robyn Lane, Sharon Lane, Tess Lea, Cecilia Lewis, Angelina Lewis, Marcia Bigfoot Lewis, Natasha Lewis, Serina Lippo, Joslyn McDonald, Elizabeth A Povinelli, Quentin Shields, Rex Sing, Kerin Sing, Shannon Sing, Claude Yarrowin, Daphne Yarrowin, Linda Yarrowin, Roger Yarrowin, Sandra Yarrowin.



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Karrabing Film Collective, *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland*, 2018  
Courtesy the artists

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Karrabing filmmaking began in the wake of a vicious state intervention in Indigenous governance – the governance of Indigenous people in the north of Australia. In the 1970s the Australian state 'recognised' the rights of Indigenous people to their lands but operationalised this right by dividing people based on reductive anthropological theories of 'clan' and 'totem'. In practice, state-based land recognition pitted Indigenous groups against each other, setting up the settler courts as purportedly neutral arbiters. By the 2000s a longstanding conservative federal government, which was backed by large mining interests, slowly tried to overturn land-rights legislation by 'starving' people off their land. This process also denied financial and social support for

rural and remote Indigenous communities, forcing them into low wage jobs or more typically did not care about what happened to them after they left their lands. This tactic assumes that, once removed from one's country or place, 'land' increasingly becomes an abstraction rather than an embodied relation. Consequently, the need for a 'means of life' increases. As an abstraction, the seductions of capital and the capitalisation of land become more seductive.

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## NOAH'S CHOICE

Grace Ndiritu

In 2014, Grace Ndiritu put out a call for participants to join the world's first experiential laboratory/closed seminar/performative experimental think-tank workshop/community/camp summit, focusing on the role of art, science, s

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Ark participant. Out of this conversation a simple premise was conceived by both of us: How could we use *The Ark* as a platform to demonstrate the fact that, when given the choice, human beings nearly always abdicate to leaders rather than use their own power for themselves? After all, the terrifying question for all of us remains: What to do with power once you have it and are the one in charge?

This experimental idea, which was unknown to the other participants, was to examine why Occupy, Nuit debout and many alternative movements and communities that start out with good intentions often lack practical application in the longer-term. What hinders these leaderless movements' ability to make real world change?

Thus, *The Ark* was conceived as a mixture of leaderless community and one in which all the participants would have a chance to be in control, with each participant taking charge of a specific activity or workshop. Participants were asked to choose on a daily basis to either to wear the green 'WORKING TOGETHER TOWARDS A PLANT-BASED FUTURE' badge that highlighted cooperation with others, or the purple 'CHARISMATIC CULT LEADER' badge that cheekily highlighted one's individual power – a self-selected group from which a number of different leaders would emerge throughout the week.

Whilst most participants could let go and fully embrace the situation, some could not. Surprisingly it was the academics that had an easier time than some of artists in switching off their mind chatter and trusting the flow.





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Grace Ndiritu, *The Ark*  
Installation view, The Bluecoat, 2019

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In 2014, Grace Ndiritu put out a call for participants to join the world's first experiential laboratory/closed seminar/performative experimental think-tank workshop/community/camp summit, focusing on the role of art, science, spirituality and politics.

*The Ark: Center for Interdisciplinary Experimentation* (2017) is a post-internet living research/live art project – part scientific experiment, part spiritual experience. It is inspired by Ndiritu's own experiences during the last decade, of living on and off in New Age communities. *The Ark* had no audience for the first six days, so that the participants could go deep into this process. Instead, it was 'closed' to encourage creativity and vulnerability, in order for the participants to come up with radical, new ways of thinking about life and the problems of today's world. Discussions covered a multiplicity of themes including Plants, Biology, Shamanism, Meditation, Food, Philosophy, Communities, Education, Architecture, the Future of Cities, Democracy and Activism.

Late one night in March 2014, while living in a rural community near Oxford, I introduced the idea of *The Ark* to Petra Carman, sociologist and future

Ark participant. Out of this conversation a simple premise was conceived by both of us: How could we use *The Ark* as a platform to demonstrate the fact that, when given the choice, human beings nearly always abdicate to leaders rather than use their own power for themselves? After all, the terrifying question for all of us remains: What to do with power once you have it and are the one in charge?

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Installation view, The Bluecoat, 2019

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These trust issues were also intensified as the process of *The Ark* involved human beings moving in time and space with many different personalities and their own specific needs and wants. Some of these needs I could fulfil, and some I could not, simply because of time, budget or lack of support from the staff of Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, which was hosting the project, or the fact that it was impossible to explain every single thing to every participant, all of the time and also enjoy the process of *The Ark* myself.

Because of this I became a figure of mystery who was at once simultaneously inside and outside of the process, as it was being formed and experienced in real time. Concurrently, the question of why it was important to do such a project in an art space and not just in a regular commune was repeatedly asked by the curators.

The staff had kindly lent their building for the project and most of them were enthusiastic about the guidelines that were given to them and the participants, i.e. both parties to not speak to each other for the first six days, in order to create a retreat-type atmosphere so that the participants could go deeper into the process. This of course brought up some logistical problems, such as how to live in a working building, i.e. when could and couldn't the staff use the kitchen? In the end, a solution was found in the form of a permanent coffee station situated outside of the kitchen, so that staff could get coffee at certain times, which meant that The Ark Food Team working in the kitchen could also be without the noise and busy atmosphere of the

staff talking about their external lives and infiltrating into the calm and peaceful environment that was trying to be created by *The Ark* process.

Some of the staff had a harder time than others with this, which left me torn between both parties in a uncomfortable position of trying to fulfil the needs of the staff – who had strict rules about how we could and could not use the building. For instance, we had to keep the safety and cleanliness standards of the building high, while the participants wanted to feel free to express themselves within this unique context.

Not exactly Sophie's choice, but still.

Other questions arose including: How to create a dynamic, safe experience for the participants? How to create an ambitious artwork for the institution? How to find an answer to Petra's and my hidden experiment? And how to have an enjoyable experience and new learning situation for myself?

Sometimes I was able to satisfy all parties, and sometimes none.

Sometimes the pressure was so immense, especially as participants had been asked to entrust their wallets, phones, passports, keys and their lives [to the process] for eight days. At times they became demanding.

I began to wonder, however did Noah cope on his own Ark, with all those different animals?

As a contemporary artist this posed an interesting set of circumstances for me.

In my own life I had become accustomed to living in communities and making art using non-rational



methodologies like shamanism and meditation, and I had naively thought that every participant, especially the artists, would be open to this way of working. My methodologies and the way I approached things had led to a series of wonderful synchronicities before *The Ark* in how I met each individual participant. However, now it had led to some confusion between the participants and myself, in me not necessarily being able to communicate fully the making of *The Ark* while I was in the process of simultaneously being in it and creating it at the same time.

As I have tried to explain, I am a very intuitive artist and don't necessarily strategise everything and therefore cannot control all the outcomes. Thus, *The Ark* sometimes reflected my dark cheeky sense of surreal 'BONKERS!' humour and not necessarily the expectations of all of the participants or Labo's staff.

I had initially designed *The Ark* project so that the role of charismatic cult leader was sometimes projected on to me (sometimes out of necessity and sometimes out of sexist attitudes that reflect the demonisation of women in power) regardless of the choice of badges selected. Thus, it was sometimes easier for some participants to criticise from the outside rather than to step fully on to the stage and lead.

Furthermore, participants were chosen in order to have enough differences in their personal and educational backgrounds to prompt debate, without repeating the group's skill sets. The participants also had to have enough similarities and knowledge in common to be able to join together to build an actual community.

Hence, participants had been chosen by their (formal and informal) knowledge base and what they could bring to *The Ark*. They were not chosen for their gender, race, age or class in order to falsely diversify the pool of participants or tick boxes, so that *The Ark* wouldn't have the appearance of a false multiculturalism that is so often seen in democracies and in advertising billboards today. Instead, their accumulated knowledge covered a wide variety of topics, i.e. Plants, Biology, Shamanism, Meditation, Food, Philosophy, Communities, Education, Architecture, the Future of Cities, Democracy and Activism; topics to be explored in the lead up to the public weekend performance.

The protest performance entitled *Party for the Animals*, which highlighted our 'Reverse Darwinism' campaign, took place on a summer afternoon on the rough streets of Aubervilliers in north-east Paris, paradoxically located within a socialist communist neighbourhood.

After a short while of walking together as a group shouting nonsensical slogans in French and in English on our megaphone – 'Dodo Dudu, Dodo Dudu' and 'Resist! Exist! Resist! Exist!' – we had attracted a crowd that was following us.

After six days of living in a protected environment we were thrust on to the gritty nearby streets with only our bright-coloured costumes for protection.

Yet a miracle began to occur. The men in the local cafés started filming us, children began running up and hugging us and parents seemed delighted with this colourful distraction on a mundane Saturday afternoon. The parade then became a powerful

transformative experience for the collective and I began to relax and enjoy myself.

We spent one hour in a park playing with children, before marching towards the busy Metro station where we stopped the traffic in all directions so that our oversize noisy band of 'animal hooligans' could be allowed to cross.

Only then did an unsavory incident happen. One local resident from the nearby mental health live-in unit snatched the mask off one participant who was wearing a dog mask. This upset the participant who was abruptly taken from Alice In Wonderland into the harsh reality of living in an urban jungle.

That night a much-needed cathartic release was given.

The participants, Labo's staff and myself danced the night away under the stars. Nationalities from five continents joined us from the local residents and friends of the Labo's space. And we swayed into the night to the sounds of tropical bass, hip-hop, electro and gospel; all in front of a ghostly silent video projection of a recent documentary on globalisation – *A Quest For Meaning*, directed by Nathanaël Coste and Marc de la Ménardière.

A beautiful spectacle to behold.

The next day a more serious but necessary tone was set, as the academics were asked to debate the topics: Ecology and Capitalism, Peace and Security, Spirituality and Economics, Community and Culture.

And finally, the hidden experiment that was conceived by Petra and I in 2014 and the holistic circle of Mind, Body, Spirit that I envisioned all those years ago in a shamanic dream was complete.

## B I O G R A P H I E S

KARRABING FILM COLLECTIVE (est. c 2010, Australia) is a grassroots Indigenous media group consisting of over 20 members. They approach filmmaking as a mode of self-organisation and a means of investigating contemporary social conditions of inequality. Screenings and publications allow the Karrabing to develop local artistic languages which allows audiences to understand new forms of collective Indigenous agency. Their films represent their lives, creates bonds with their land and enables them to intervene in global images of Indigeneity. Their films and installations have been exhibited at Contour Biennale, Mechelen, Belgium; Berlin International Film Festival Forum Expanded; Hallucinations, Athens at documenta 14; Sydney Biennale; vdrome.org; e-flux Supercommunity at the 56th Venice Biennale; Doc's Kingdom, Lisbon; and Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, among others.

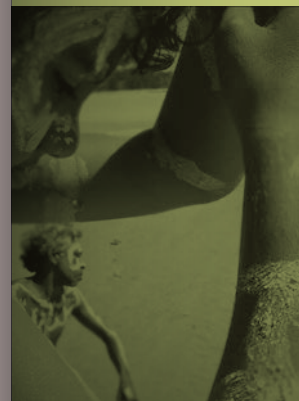
GRACE NDIRITU (b.1976, Birmingham, UK) studied Textile Art at Winchester School of Art and attended De Ateliers, Amsterdam between 1998–2000, where guest tutors included artists Marlene Dumas, Steve McQueen, Tacita Dean and Stan Douglas. Ndiritu has undertaken residencies at Delfina Studio Trust, London (2004–06), International Residency, Récollets, Paris (2013), MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) & L'appartement 22, Rabat, international residency (2014), Galveston Artists Residency, Texas (2014–15), Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Paris (2016–17) and Thalie Art Foundation, Brussels (2017–18).

Ndiritu took the radical decision in 2012 to only spend time in the city when necessary, and to otherwise live in rural, alternative and often spiritual communities. This was to expand her research into nomadic lifestyles and training in esoteric studies such as shamanism, which she began over 18 years ago. Her research so far has taken her to

both Thai and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, permaculture communities in New Zealand, forest tree dwellers in Argentina, neo-tribal festivals such Burning Man in the Nevada desert, a Hare Krishna ashram and the Findhorn New Age community in Scotland. Her research into community life has so far resulted in the founding of *The Ark: Center for Interdisciplinary Experimentation* in 2017.

ELIZABETH A POVINELLI (b.1962, Buffalo, New York, USA) is Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University. Her books include *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (2016), *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011) and *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002). She is also a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

ANDREA ZITTEL (b.1965, Escondido, California, USA) received her BFA in Painting and Sculpture from San Diego State University (1988) and MFA in Sculpture from Rhode Island School of Design (1990). In the early 1990s she first established her practice in New York. One of her most visible projects in New York was *A-Z East*, a small row house in Brooklyn that was turned into a showroom and testing ground for her prototypes for living. In 2000 she moved back to the West Coast, eventually settling in the high desert region next to Joshua Tree National Park where she founded *A-Z West*. *A-Z West* is the current site of her studio practice, as well as other ongoing living experiments including the Wagon Station Encampment and the Institute of Investigative Living. In 2002 Zittel co-founded High Desert Test Sites, a series of experimental art sites in the high desert that supports works by both emerging and established artists. She continues to serve as the director of this non-profit organisation.



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